

At The Intersection of Culture and Mental Health

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Joseph P. Gone is concerned about what the differences between indigenous and Western systems of knowledge mean for mental health care.

When it comes to mental health issues, Joseph P. Gone of the University of Michigan says that many American Indians prefer traditional therapies over therapies with European roots. This is a concern because US tribes rely on federal funding to meet community health needs — and as things stand, funding agencies favor scientifically vetted treatments (i.e., treatments with European roots). In his Invited Address at the 24th APS Annual Convention, Gone explained why scientific evaluation remains a sensitive and complicated issue among American Indians.

Gone says that Native American traditions emphasize knowledge that is “personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and narratively conveyed.” Within this framework, personal experience is especially important. “There’s no higher authority for knowing something than the fact that you yourself experienced it,” Gone explained. This contrasts with Western scientific traditions in which personal experiences are viewed with what Gone characterizes as skepticism.

As a behavioral scientist who studies the intersection of culture and mental health, Gone believes that it’s his responsibility to address the apparent contradictions between indigenous and western systems of knowledge. Gone is interested in developing alternative grassroots therapies that start with indigenous healing practices and then apply scientific methods, as opposed to the conventional practice of serving

American Indian communities through mainstream western therapies administered by culturally competent practitioners.

Currently, he is collaborating with the Blackfeet Nation in Montana to design a community-based substance abuse treatment approach that relies on traditional cultural practices. Gone acknowledges that scientific evaluation of small-scale programs that promote “culture as treatment” is complicated. However, he hopes to scientifically demonstrate the efficacy of culturally local mental health interventions in ways that will engender future support by funding agencies.