AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

APA Policy Statement on Reconciling Traditional Wisdom and Psychological Science

AUGUST 2025

Introduction

The mission of the American Psychological Association (APA) is to promote the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives. This mission is advanced through a number of operating principles, including:

- Embrace cultural humility and reflexivity. Commit to organizational self-reflection while partnering with and learning from the people, communities, and systems with which APA interacts.
- Embrace a global perspective. Advance psychology through global engagement, association programs, and meaningful collaborations with psychological associations and other relevant groups from around the world.

APA recognizes that human behavior varies based on cultural norms and influences. Accordingly, this policy statement encourages the reconciliation of traditional wisdom (e.g., safe and restorative traditional healing practices supported by a body of knowledge) from around the world (e.g., spirituality among Native Americans, Confucian philosophy among some Asian cultures, Indigenous ways of knowing, and African traditional medicine) with knowledge derived from psychological research to enable a more inclusive, culturally relevant approach to understanding human behavior and wellbeing. Supporting the parity of traditional wisdom derived from non-dominant worldviews, (e.g., Blume, 2022), with dominant paradigms (typically drawn from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic population assumptions; Henrich et al., 2010) within psychological research would be a step toward fulfilling the commitment that APA has made to retire hierarchical and racist perspectives in psychology.

Historically, psychological science has been guided by positivism and empiricism without adequately recognizing the depth, validity, and contribution of traditional wisdom from around the world and committing "epistemological violence" that assumes the methods and interpretations of the dominant science are superior to traditional Indigenous wisdom (APA, 2021; APA Presidential Task Force on Psychology and Health Equity, 2023; Blume & Diop, in press; Teo, 2010). However, multiple epistemological frameworks, including Indigenous knowledge or traditional wisdom from other cultural-philosophical lineages, should complement and be respected alongside dominant knowledge (APA, 2023). It is necessary to integrate diverse ways of knowing to create a more inclusive and holistic understanding of human behavior and wellbeing (Kirmayer & Paul, 2009) and provide a richer toolkit for psychology.

Psychologists are subjected to colonial impacts, meaning that traditional wisdom has not been given equal power and weight as compared to mainstream epistemologies (Misra et al., 2025). Although historically some psychological theories were inspired by traditional wisdom, there were no proper credits or acknowledgements in the discipline and concepts were often misinterpreted through reductionist lenses (Bear et al., 2022). For instance, the well-known theory of the hierarchical structure of needs, as outlined by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, was found to have been a reference, without acknowledgement, of concepts from the Indigenous knowledge of communities from the Blackfeet Nation (Michel, 2014).

It is necessary to critique the colonial legacy embedded in research, education, and professional structures which led to "self-colonization" – an internalization of colonial ideologies and values which sometimes led to feelings of inferiority, self-hatred, and a preference for the colonizer's culture, often resulting in a rejection of one's own identity and culture (Gergen, 2007). Systems and power structures that stifle traditional wisdom should be addressed and traditional wisdom itself (e.g., language) should be protected and preserved whenever possible. It is necessary to implement systemic changes to eliminate self-colonization in psychological funding, accreditation, publications, and training.

Understanding diverse ways of knowing across cultures

APA encourages psychologists to reflect on positionality with cultural humility and reflexivity when attempting to understand traditional wisdom and dominant views within psychological research. Although some concepts overlap in both ways of knowing, historical ignorance and dismissal of traditional wisdom should be addressed with mutual reciprocity at the communal level (Adams et al., 2015; Sundararajan, 2020).

Supporting and promoting respect for and complementarity of Indigenous knowledge and other paradigms in the conduct of psychological research

APA recognizes multiple valid research methodologies, including practice-based evidence (Green, 2006) and Indigenous research methodologies (Smith, 2021). The research methods used in a particular research setting or context should be informed by and integrate the appropriate cultural knowledge. Moreover, it is necessary to provide institutional support and funding for collaborative,

community-driven approaches when studying psychological topics involving Indigenous groups or other traditional wisdom holders (Blume & Diop, in press). The convergence of evidence from diverse methodologies will help to inform and advance the understanding of human behavior, physical health, and mental health.

Addressing the colonial legacy on the language of psychological science and the accessibility of traditional wisdom

Language is crucial in shaping what is valued in psychology. Thus, English-based psychological literature can marginalize non-English users' perspectives. Concrete strategies such as multilingual publication and dissemination and the expansion of journal review boards to include experts in traditional knowledge would be beneficial.

Balancing global and regional considerations in psychological research

APA supports the fostering of global partnerships that respect and value local psychologies. This may be advanced by supporting and incentivizing global platforms for traditional wisdom scholars to share knowledge, thereby increasing the representation of diverse traditional wisdom in mainstream psychological literature (Adams et al., 2015).

Recognizing pragmatic healing and holistic well-being in mental health services

APA recognizes that healing practices and the promotion of well-being vary across cultures, potentially incorporating spirituality (Mansouri & Pourghane, 2023), traditional healing, and relationality, and encourages the incorporation of diverse approaches into psychological practice and mental health interventions (Dudgeon et al., 2017). When possible, partnerships should be pursued with local communities (Koç & Kafa, 2018). It is vital to move beyond individualistic models of healing to incorporate Indigenous and community-based approaches (Ting et al., 2025a).

Decolonizing psychology

APA encourages educators to re-examine the pedagogical structure for colonial impacts in psychology, including curricula, staff and student recruitment, and measures of learning and success. Methods to measure the impact of scholarship can benefit by moving beyond citation to incorporate other outcomes, particularly related to social impact on traditionally marginalized groups (Teo, 2010). Indigenous and global psychologists deserve increased voice to ensure traditional wisdom is included in policymaking, accreditation, and training bodies. Developing guidelines for integrating traditional wisdom into psychological education and practice would be beneficial (Ting et al., 2025b). APA also has addressed issues related to promotion and tenure for faculty of color, highlighting systemic barriers for faculty in their pursuit of promotion and tenure, including financial constraints, workplace complexities, and issues of retention (APA Task Force on Inequities in Academic Tenure and Promotion, 2023).

Building on the commitments expressed in APA's 2023 *Offer of Apology to First Peoples in the United States*, this policy statement serves as a foundation for reconciling traditional wisdom and dominant knowledges within psychological science, nurturing a more inclusive and holistic understanding of human experience. Indigenous ways of knowing typically result from a relational kinship model that tends not to be dualistic or binary in interpretation but rather aligned with intersectional and equitable interpretations of the world (Blume & Diop, in press; Tynan, 2021). It remains necessary to critically examine the intersectional power dynamics embedded within each traditional knowledge system to ensure it affirms human rights and well-being (Bah & Barasa, 2022). Through acknowledging colonial impacts, diversifying psychological epistemologies, fostering global and community-based collaborations, broadening methodologies, and redefining measures of success, the integration of traditional wisdom from around the world with the conduct of psychological science can lead to a more equitable and culturally responsive discipline.

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