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Book Review: Danto & Zangeneh (Eds.), Indigenous Knowledge and Mental Health: A Global Perspective

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Citation: Laubscher, L. (2021). Book Review: Danto & Zangeneh (Eds.), Indigenous Knowledge and Mental Health: A Global Perspective. Journal of Concurrent Disorders.

Editor-in-Chief: Mona Nouroozifar

Received: 08/02/2021

Accepted: 08/3/2021

Published: 08/4/2021

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Abstract: *None*

Keywords: Indigenous; Global; Mental Health



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The stories of Indigenous and displaced peoples, more often than not, read like a compendium of horror, hardship, and heartbreak. This is to say if those stories are heard at all – the marginalization of such groups’ lived experience and history within the mainstream everyday extends to the academy and the scholarly, where the “out of sight, out of mind” descriptive compounds and perpetuates a colonial, cultural, and economic violence. Even where, on occasion, such groups are “brought to mind,” they are actually no less “out of sight,” as in controversies around mascots and names of professional or college sports teams, where mainstream arrogance and condescension barely deigns to ask or listen to the very people whose identities and experiences are at stake. Again, the academy is not entirely immune to similar patronizing conceit, “knowledgeably” parachuting into the fringes of such communities, survey pencil and test in hand, quickly to leave and write the tenure granting paper, or to deliver the conference paper, experts that we now are on the “psychological traumas” and any litany of ills besetting these souls. Even if we stay longer, run “interventions” and “mental health programs,” or are somewhat reflexive about our well-meaning intentions, we are nonetheless and all too easily caught within the very blinders of our training and the “gifts” of our expertise and knowledge. We are not shaken and disturbed enough, challenged and provoked enough, or our epistemological and praxis assumptions dislodged enough from its universalist pretensions such that we can stand disarmed enough to admit a certain ignorance and, as and more importantly, to submit to being taught. Anew, and ever again.

A new text, edited by David Danto and Masood Zangeneh, *Indigenous Knowledge and Mental Health: A Global Perspective*, represents a wholly refreshing, important, challenging, and creative contribution to the literature on Indigenous Peoples in general, but also more specifically with respect to the impacts of colonization on the wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples and the role of indigenous knowledge(s) in healing and well wellbeing. It is altogether shameful that the text is important, firstly, for the simplest of reasons – that it exists, and that it adds to a woefully skimpy scholarly ledger. But that embarrassment is the rest of ours to bear and take responsibility for, and not least because this new entry, this collection of papers, is such a substantial and generous deposit. Its contributions span the globe, rather literally, such that it can truly claim the global perspective of its title. However, if the breadth of representation loads the bases, the scholarly depth of these contributions hits the ball out of the park for a walk-off home run. This, in no small measure by who speaks, by who tells these stories and tales of indigenous life experience and mental health. The global voices, the global perspective, we hear are of Indigenous Peoples themselves, and of health workers, activists, and allies embedded within those communities by the suffering of a passion, and a commitment of understanding unafraid to be taught. As such, the book can also claim the all-important promise of its title, of indigenous knowledge(s) by which our predominantly Western and positivistic understanding of

mental health, inclusive of its praxis implications, can and must be challenged, refigured, adapted, and sometimes even abandoned. A radical teaching, this.

Perhaps this teaching can be characterized in three moments, or three epistles even (the Greek unconscious of this word being deliberately implied). First, we are taken on a journey "... around the world, meeting with Indigenous scholars and allies," who tell us about genocide and exile (e.g. chapters on the genocide of the Yazidi people, the exile of Cambodian Khmer peoples in Norway, or Uruguayan cycles of exile), mental health challenges (e.g. among the Kondha and Rabha communities of India, first nation communities in Canada, the San of Southern Africa, Adat communities of Indonesia, Andean Indigenous communities of Peru), cultural identity, colonialism, and psychotherapy (e.g. among the Tuvinians of Siberia, Alaskan Indigenous communities, Maori's of Aotearoa, Torres Strait Islander peoples), and so much more. We learn how fundamental socio-historical and political contexts are to any presumption of understanding, and we do so by the honesty of narrators who cannot be anything less, the story testifying as it does to whom they are.

But even as we learn of challenges, the book also does not succumb to the oft noted psychological seduction to litanize long inventories of ills and traumas (to justify its benefit, perhaps, but also sometimes uncomfortably voyeuristically and fetishistically so, quite frankly). Even as it presents, with gut wrenching directness, the very breadth and depth of suffering, the second moment of its teaching is to privilege and emphasize resilience and the resources these communities have and employed themselves and from "within" to address such pain and mental health challenges. The editors say so unequivocally, that the book proceeds from "a strength and resilience-oriented approach," exploring in so doing "the challenges, cultural values and traditions that inform how these communities facilitate mental health among their members". There is a peculiar vanity to the good intentions of our interventions when they are imposed from our knowing "best," when they are shrouded in the "science" of a superiority that deems anything other as superstition, backwardness, or "less than" and "inferior". Yet, for all its emphasis on resilience and strength, the book never suggests any nostalgia for some essentialized and nativist "before the white man" past, or to imply some Rousseuain noble savage who'd come like a modern-day Yoda (presumably to also speak like him!) to teach humanity about its timeless nature; No, the emphasis is always and unequivocally on dialogue, conversation, and an openness to grow, and be better, together.

And thus, the third lesson, if you will, which is actually dispersed throughout the book, within almost every single chapter. Many of us in psychology or the helping professions more broadly have long known or suspected that individualistic therapies are often inappropriate in certain settings, or that history "matters," that patients come to therapy with different expectations, that "certain" cultures have a particular view of

illness that may be different from a dominant, Western view, or that trauma is experienced differently, as in the body, for example, but for as many of us such knowledge remains at the level of the theoretical, or in practice nothing more than the appropriate response to licensing questions on “cultural diversity”. What this book does is move us away from such abstractions and platitudes to showing us just how, just what, it might mean in practice to be “sensitive” to the other, to be “responsive,” and to be open to creative invention and respectful collaboration. As such, for example, we learn how health is not the absence of symptoms, but involves the whole of being, and this being so, how healing is a cultural act, embedded in community and environment, and necessitating an understanding of history, culture, religion. We learn to rethink the concepts of our trade – like suicide or alcohol abuse – as a cultural phenomenon, and about the fundamental importance of place and space, not as some jingoistic nationalism, or as something to be tilled and worked over, but as home, as something holy and transcendent, and as dwelling fundamental to health and well-being. And if that place, that land, that holy space is lost, as in the many displaced groups represented in this text, we learn about the mental health costs of living liminally, and in an “indeterminate threshold”. Or, if we represent the very people to whom that holy land was lost, we learn about humility and apology, maybe even truth and reconciliation. We learn about innovative therapies, interventions, and research methodologies – land based interventions, anti-oppressive therapy, body work, using dance and rituals in therapy, conducting clinical ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, or performance ethnographic research, analyzing songs and folk tales, and what it means to be allies and companions in research and therapy ... that is, to be bound together (ally as from the Latin *ad-* + *ligare*, to bind) and break bread together (companion as from the Latin *com-* + *panis*, together with bread). We learn of a therapy and research of the heart, of a therapy and research for, from, and of the other.

In the end, this book does everything it sets itself to, and exceptionally so. Now it is our turn. Having spoken, and spoken so eloquently and powerfully, the test of our listening is in our response, which is also to say our responsibility.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Availability of data and materials

N/A.

Funding source

None.