

Integrative Social Work: New Pathways to Holistic Healing

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Introduction: Integrative social work is a healing-oriented approach that recognizes that the well-being of the entire person depends upon the incorporation and balance of three areas: (1) an individual's lifestyle, experience, culture, belief and values systems; (2) the access and interactions one has with human-designed structures, systems and processes; and (3) the access and interactions one has with the natural environment, traditional knowledge, and decolonized western and non-western science. Integrative social work is inherently transdisciplinary and draws from traditional Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and other decolonized systems of knowledge. Integrative social work recognizes that all healing and helping systems are based on evidence-guided practice.

Background: The art of healing and helping is tens of thousands of years old and it extends far beyond human cultures and time – and, of course, contemporary social work. Many Indigenous beliefs reveal that healing is transcendent and can be found in the plant and animal world, and learned through cultural and ceremonial interactions with Mother Earth. Indeed, there is a saying among the Arikara people of the Northern Great Plains: “Humans were the last to know that all things in the world encompass the potential for healing.”

Methods: To situate integrative helping and healing within social work education and theory, we rely upon an interdisciplinary approach, which draws from contemporary neuroscience, contemplative traditions, narrative theory, healing literatures, integrative medicine, and the Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) of Indigenous Peoples. Within these frameworks, holism and decolonization methodologies serve as guideposts to analyze the various topics we cover in this book. Holism is a theory that all parts of a system (physical, biological, social, economic, spiritual, mental, etc), exist in an intimate interconnection, cannot exist independently of the whole, and cannot be understood without reference to the whole. While social work has often claimed to function through a holistic/systems approach, one soon discovers that the natural environment (animals, plants, trees, landforms, waters, air, and wind) — nearly universal in Indigenous cultural approaches — have been completely disregarded. In fact, western settler social work, for most of its inception, has only privileged the structures of settler colonialism.

Decolonization is a major academic framework in Native American/American Indian and Indigenous Peoples studies. It refers to undoing and overcoming the myriad, negative, and disabling effects of

colonialism. Colonialism is the subjugation of one group by another. Colonialism celebrates the ideas, stories, history, beliefs, and values of the colonizer (the oppressor); at the same time it trivializes, ignores, and subjugates those of the colonized (the oppressed, Indigenous Peoples). Decolonization is not a metaphor but is intended to “bring about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life, and is “distinct from other civil and human rights-based social projects” (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decolonization is an interrogatory methodology that is used to critique colonialism and settler colonialism.

Results: This book explores the application of decolonization in Integrative Social Work through healing practices documented in neuroscience and social science: the importance and healing power of movement, play, and contemplative practices; the importance and science of creativity; the significance of ancestral foods and nutrition; and knowledge of, and engagement with, our natural environment (including Indigenous Peoples’ concept of Mother Earth and Water).