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Introducing Psychology's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report - Part 3

Tamara Austin M.A. R.Psych, Joanna Card M.Ed R.Psych, Shandra De Clerck MSc, MA. R.Psych, Krista Forand M.Ed R.Psych, Andrew Nicholson M.Sc R.Psych

This is article three in a series by members of the Social Justice, Equity and Diversity Community of Practice (on [PAA Collaborate](#)) reflecting on [Psychology's Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Report](#) (2018).

The first article ([2021 Sept](#), p.15) acknowledged our unethical conduct towards Indigenous Peoples, past and present. The second article ([2022 June](#), p. 19) summarized six guiding principles for the practice of psychology in general, as outlined in the report.

This article will focus on the following broad topics outlined in the Task Force report in relation to education in the profession of psychology and Indigenous Peoples in Canada:

1. Barriers for Indigenous students
2. Key training elements for undergraduate students and graduate students
3. Need for those currently in the field to obtain cultural literacy training

Barriers for Indigenous Students

The report outlines there are estimated to be fewer than 12 Indigenous psychologists in Canada, an alarmingly low number. Potential barriers to Indigenous students pursuing studies in psychology likely include financial challenges and a sole focus by higher education on Western epistemologies. The report recommends the creation of more post-secondary funding opportunities for Indigenous students that can support them directly with tuition, as well as indirectly with factors that impact their ability to pursue education, such as childcare. Equally as important is psychology's role in advocating for improved access to early childhood, primary and secondary education for Indigenous and First Nations persons. In 2012 it was reported that 63% of Indigenous and First Nations adults did not have a high school diploma, highlighting that there are systemic failures to support lifelong, linguistically and culturally appropriate education, even prior to entry into the post-secondary education systems. The lack of appropriate educational opportunities places Indigenous students at further disadvantage when they transition to post-secondary learning ([Chiefs Assembly on Education](#)).

Should the Indigenous student successfully complete their secondary education and apply to post-secondary schools, the data shows that funding is insufficient. In 2010, [it was noted](#) that Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) had a budget of \$400 million for 27,000 students. This has not improved as ISC funding is reported to be \$320 million over a [5-year period](#). The number of applicants exceeds the budget. One suggestion made by the task force was for 1% of professional psychology registration fees to be put towards bursaries. To address the distrust of Western ways of knowing, the task force emphasized the obligation of university psychology programs to include and validate diverse perspectives and epistemologies, invite Elders as guest speakers, and explore opportunities to create relevant academic positions. Additionally, there is a need for the profession to advocate that the government appropriately fund these programs and ensure they are accessible in rural communities.

Post-Secondary Training and Education

There is a need to provide specific courses on Indigenous cultural literacy apart from general cultural diversity courses. This specific focus will help teach undergraduate students the longstanding impact of Canadian policies and history, residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and the subsequent responsibility to understand and respect Indigenous ways of knowing.

Currently there are many graduates of master's and PhD level psychology programs who have little to no knowledge of the residential school system or the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Recommendations to begin to bridge this gap include: mandatory graduate level training offered by culturally competent instructors partnered and advised by community-approved Indigenous leaders and Elders, and a doctorate level program integrating Indigenous cultural, linguistic, and spiritual knowledge, approaches to health and mental health, and ways to empower, facilitate and support this rich knowledge and healing potential within Indigenous communities. Ideally upon graduating, students would be able to show an in-depth understanding and respect of Indigenous traditional knowledge and be able to integrate two-eyed seeing in their practice.

Cultural Literacy Training

The College of Alberta Psychologists has recently taken a small and important step by including two hours of mandatory Indigenous knowledge and cultural literacy as a yearly part of continuing competency for all psychologists. Broadly focused Indigenous cultural literacy training approaches, however, whether online or in-person, are not good enough. There is a recommendation that psychologists participate in mandatory continuing education both online and in person, including opportunities for on-land experiences like sweat lodges and talking circles to facilitate connections with community members, Elders, and knowledge keepers. It is critically important to be aware and respectful of not burdening these communities with the responsibility to educate psychologists when seeking to connect with local Indigenous communities to develop, approve, and facilitate cultural competency training and knowledge sharing with psychologists.

Additional Issues Related to Training and Practice

The Task Force recommends a few other important points to consider. First, an invitation to psychologists to advocate for programs that support the preservation of Indigenous languages. Second, to grow the number of Indigenous clinicians, and clinicians trained in traditional ways of knowing, a challenge is issued for psychology to reconsider the training which currently necessitates Indigenous youth leaving their communities and cultures to train as psychologists at Western institutions, and instead support initiatives to provide education within communities, and incentives to return or stay within Indigenous communities to provide psychological services. Additionally, whereas there is support within the profession to move towards stricter registration requirements (e.g., PhD or PsyD), these authors invite critical reflection about the potential for barriers and discrimination against Indigenous people to be unintentionally exacerbated.

Psychological Research

The TRC Report highlighted the responsibility of researchers to abide by specific guiding principles, including the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists*, when conducting

research with Indigenous communities. To avoid potential harm and to respect the dignity of persons, researchers should ensure that research data is under the control of the Indigenous communities with whom they work. Research should be a collaborative process that includes the building of trust and the acknowledgement of issues related to power, privilege, and justice. Research outcomes should enhance the community's identity and reflect their culture, scientific practices, and interventions. Lastly, research can be enhanced through the understanding and use of Indigenous research methodologies.

In closing, it can be seen from the brief discussion above that there is a concerning lack of cultural literacy and development of culturally appropriate interventions, not only by those practicing within the profession, but also in the education and training of new practitioners. As a whole, little attention has been paid to supporting the development and access of Indigenous and First Nations students to post-secondary education, and education in general, which continues to present as one of the barriers to Indigenous individuals who may wish to enter the profession. More needs to be done to further the cultural competency of those currently involved in the field at all levels, and greater efforts need to be made to advance the linguistic and culturally appropriate education to Indigenous individuals to better support the development of culturally appropriate testing, therapeutic interventions and engagement of Indigenous persons in the profession.

Future articles in this series will explore further guiding principles relating to specific areas of psychological practice.