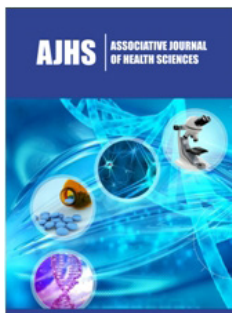


The Power of Our Word

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Opinion

In our publication, The Wisdom of and Science behind Indigenous Cultural Practices [1], we addressed the inherent wisdom of cultural practices transmitted across generations in Indigenous communities whose roots are steeped in the American continent. While modern science has confirmed that traditional Indigenous beliefs and customs such as storytelling, music, and dance promote physical and mental health and well-being, the historical devaluation of Indigenous worldview undermines the validation of these practices.

Yet, these practices are beneficial not only for Indigenous people but also for all of those who have lost connection to their own cultural traditions due to the impact and consequences of colonization and diasporic events. Colonizing orientations continue to emphasize domination over others, both in the United States and in some other nations in the Americas; yet such orientations contrast sharply against a worldview that promotes collectivism, harmony, and inclusion. In this way, colonization has undermined the capacity to embrace ways of being that ensure their own physical and mental health and well-being.

In the manifestation of various forms of violence to maintain power over others rather than harmony, the colonizer has not only given birth to white supremacy but has also, through the use of demeaning and negative words and actions, disabled the neurological networks that connect human beings with one another. Yet, in the wake of colonization of the Americas and the forces of genocide and culturicide, many Indigenous communities and other ethnic groups still observe or seek to restore their practices that sustain a sense of community. In retelling their own narratives and dances and singing their own songs, the power of the word continues to create a sense of connectedness and community. In contrast, those subsets of diasporic populations that adhere to white supremacy continue to invest in multiple ways to devalue others in order to substantiate a false sense of superiority.

This is most evident in the use of words used to attack or denigrate others, which not only maims but fractures interpersonal connection. Locust [2] convey the impact of our words, “Words are sacred, not just secular things, and they build the reality in which we live. To speak harshly or in anger, not only damages the one who heard, but it damages the spirit of the one who spoke. Once said, the words can’t be unheard. The damage is done and even if forgiven, it remains a part of those who spoke and those who heard. Remaking the negative energy created by bad words is a long process and can’t always be done. Sometimes the damage is too great” (p. 154).

In addition to this Indigenous understanding of the power of language, Vander Kolk [3] shares the neurological impact of our words: “We remember insults and injuries best: The adrenaline that we secrete to defend against potential threats helps to engrave those incidents into our minds. Even if the content of the remark fades, our dislike for the person who made it usually persists” (p. 176). We live in an era in which thousands of U.S. citizens were convinced that a presidential election was not only stolen but many were compelled to overthrow our democratic system by violently attacking the nation’s capitol. Additionally, a rise in hate crimes, such as those recently enacted in Buffalo, NY and even horizontal violence as that which we witnessed in Uvalde, Texas, all started

with damage done by irresponsible use of the word. As this relates to physical and mental health, forensics teams can easily count the aftermath of the bloodshed but further examination of the impact of our words requires further examination and positioning by those in the sciences.

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