



Cultural Misappropriation in Integrative Health

A statement by the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee of Integrative Medicine for the Underserved (IM4US).

Dedication

With respect and gratitude, we dedicate our efforts to all humans throughout time who have searched and learned ways to heal - from the Heavens, the Earth, and one another, and who passed on their knowledge to future generations.

With appreciation and love, we dedicate our hearts to all humans who have sought individually and collectively to be healed in body, mind, and soul.

With admiration and support, we dedicate this statement to all humans now who come together to shift a currently accepted paradigm in medicine away from separation, individualism, greed, and competition - to connection, compassion, and mutual support with all Life.

May we lead with humility and courage, conscious of our own vulnerabilities and need to heal, committed to our imperiled planet, rooted in relationship to all life on Earth, and aware that we serve the Healing Power inherent in Life.

Purpose

Through this document, we aspire to raise awareness of both historical and current injustices wrought by colonization and by misappropriation in the field of integrative healthcare. We offer definitions, references, and share our emerging ideas about how individual practitioners and groups working in integrative health can commit to repairing these injustices. The ultimate goal for this document is to light a path to acknowledge, include, support, and honor diverse practices and voices of practitioners of traditional and other non-biomedical healing systems in respectful and compassionate ways.

The Academic Consortium of Integrative Medicine and Health has the following definition of integrative healthcare: "Integrative medicine and health reaffirms the importance of the relationship between practitioner and patient, focuses on the whole person, is informed by evidence, and makes use of all appropriate therapeutic and lifestyle approaches, healthcare professionals and disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing." ¹

We recognize however, that many of the invaluable forms of integrative healing are traditions shared, borrowed, or stolen from various cultures - many of which are Indigenous cultures adversely impacted by

¹ Academic Consortium for Integrative Medicine and Health, 'Introduction', 2022
<<https://imconsortium.org/about/introduction/>>.

colonization. In nearly all cases, traditions have been suppressed, altered, or exploited through various acts of colonization. Further alteration and exploitation have occurred with the efforts to spread these traditions to other countries, by integrating variations of them into societies with exploitative or repressive economic systems and dominant biomedical systems.

We offer the following adapted definition as a vision: “Integrative Health focuses on the whole person - body, mind, and soul; affirms the importance of connection and relationship with self, family, community, and environment, as well as with the practitioner; is informed by knowledge from various sources; and makes culturally respectful use of various therapeutic and lifestyle approaches, practitioners, disciplines, and traditions, especially those meaningful to the patient, to achieve optimal health and healing.”

This statement is a project of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion committee of IM4US. The authors of this statement are both members of IM4US as well as guest editors. Because most of us are living on unceded native land in what is called the United States (US), and many of us work in biomedical institutions, we are primarily writing about the conditions present in the US.

This is a living document to be reevaluated regularly as our understanding and practice evolves, and as we encourage more IM4US members and other people to join the conversation.

Definitions

Cultural Misappropriation

From Fatimah Ashgar, “Cultural Appropriation occurs when members of a dominant group take elements and symbols of another culture for their own economic or social gain, while simultaneously devaluing and silencing the bodies, opinions, and voices of the oppressed culture.”²

From Lisa Brock, this occurs “...often without just compensation being given to those to whom it belongs.” and “...with little understanding or acknowledgement of the latter’s history, experience, or tradition.”³ Practical and spiritual wisdom may be erased entirely.

Appropriation and Misappropriation

We noted in our research for this statement, that the words “Cultural Appropriation” and “Cultural Misappropriation” have both been used - at times interchangeably. Because “Appropriation” is a word that can also be used in a neutral or positive way, depending on context, we chose to use the term “Misappropriation.” It cannot be confused with a positive action - it is a strong signal to “Stop!” It is our intention in writing this statement to encourage people to stop - to consider this issue. This is not a signal to “Stop and do not use any traditional practices nor one that is not from one’s own culture”. This would ignore the global history of appreciative cultural exchanges and would be counter to our IM4US mission of promoting healing traditions. But misappropriation is unjust to the people of the culture of origin, even while healing benefits may be occurring for those receiving the tradition or an aspect of it. We wish to act with cultural humility and appreciation, and we do not wish to cause harm.

Examples of Misappropriation / Exploitation

- Commodification - turning a cultural item or practice into a product for profit
- Extracting or regulating items or healing practices while erasing their culture, history, spiritual, life philosophy, or meaning

² Fatimah Ashgar, ‘Can People of Color Culturally Appropriate? Yes. BUT...’, *BGD*, 2015
<<https://www.bgdblog.org/2015/09/can-people-of-color-culturally-appropriate-yes-but/>>

³ Lisa Brock, ‘Social Justice 101: Understanding the Language of Racial Oppression 2021’.
<<https://asalh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ASALH-Social-Justice-101-Curriculum.pdf>>

- Not supporting nor giving back to the people in the culture of origin
- Not asking members of a culture or community if they are comfortable with their practice(s) being shared. Not supporting their right to choose to share or not
- Taking knowledge, items, and healing practices without asking permission
- Making it impossible or difficult for people in the culture of origin to practice their traditions
- Excluding practitioners from the culture of origin or limiting their ability to practice
- Perpetuating unjust labor practices and unfair wage compensation

Examples of Traditions and Practices Commonly Misappropriated

- Traditional Native Healers ⁴
- Curanderismo ⁵
- Yoga ^{6 7}
- Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine ⁸
- Herbalism ⁹
- Mindfulness Meditation ^{10 11}

(See Additional Resources)

Complexities of Cultural Misappropriation and Appropriation

● Different Perspectives

The issues of Cultural Appropriation and Misappropriation are complex. There are many levels of consciousness about it, many perspectives, many kinds of harm perpetrated, and many approaches for remedy and reparations. People have different relationships to this issue due to their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, ancestry, patients they serve, personal and professional identities, and personal experiences. Even among people with similar backgrounds, experience and perspectives vary.

● Different Use of Terms

Terms such as “indigenous” are themselves complex or may be defined differently in different regions of the world. The term “indigenous” is embraced and used by some people who are descendants of the original people(s) of some regions but is not welcomed nor accepted by all peoples. The term “Native American” or “Native American traditions” can imply a monoculture which does not exist.

⁴ A.T. Still University, 'Dr. Still's Heritage Reflects American Indian Ties' | The Museum of Osteopathic Medicine, n.d. <<https://www.atsu.edu/museum-of-osteopathic-medicine/dr-stills-heritage-reflects-american-indian-ties>>

⁵ Crystal Hoshaw, 'Decolonizing Alternative Medicine: Healing Communities with Indigenous Wisdom', 2021 <[https://www.healthline.com/health/decolonizing-alternative-medicine-healing-communities-with-indigenous-wisdom - What-decolonizing-really-means](https://www.healthline.com/health/decolonizing-alternative-medicine-healing-communities-with-indigenous-wisdom-What-decolonizing-really-means)>

⁶ Rina Deshpande, 'Yoga in America Often Exploits My Indian Culture—But You May Not Even Realize It', *SELF*, 2017 <<https://www.self.com/story/yoga-indian-cultural-appropriation>>

⁷ Rina Deshpande, 'I Wish Yoga in America Didn't So Often Involve Cultural Appropriation | SELF' 2017 <<https://www.self.com/story/yoga-indian-cultural-appropriation>>

⁸ Amber Gibson, 'Why Traditional Chinese Medicine Is More Than Just the Sum of Its Parts', *Healthline*, 2021 <<https://www.healthline.com/health/mind-body/decolonizing-alternative-medicine-honoring-the-legacy-of-chinese-medicine>>

⁹ Gayle Highpine, 'Is It Cultural Appropriation for White People to Drink Ayahuasca?', 2018 <<https://kahpi.net/cultural-appropriation-ayahuasca-tourism/>>. Gayle Highpine lived for several years in the Amazon and was introduced to ayahuasca by indigenous people with whom she was working to support their fight against oil companies and to help develop bilingual and culturally relevant materials for local schools. She is of Ktunaxa heritage. This article describes the historical effects of colonization and the complexities of misappropriation.

¹⁰ Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'Too Early to Tell: The Potential Impact and Challenges—Ethical and Otherwise—Inherent in the Mainstreaming of Dharma in an Increasingly Dystopian World.' (Center for Mindfulness, University of Massachusetts Medical School) 2017. <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-017-0758-2>>

¹¹ Charlotte Grace Starling, 'Experience of Shame, Exclusion, & Appropriation in Mindfulness-Based Wellness Culture' <<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honorsthesis/968>>

The word “culture” too has various interpretations, and no one person can speak for everyone with a shared culture, and no one outside a particular culture has the experience nor right to define that culture in any simplistic or all-encompassing way. Adding to complexity - in our globalized world, many people experience themselves as being part of more than one culture.

- **Cultures / Traditions Evolve and Vary**

The historical context of each tradition is different, some over thirty thousands of years old. Some were carefully passed on orally, generation after generation, evolving in this way. There was evolution too, over time as people experimented and learned, and exchanged. And many different traditions arose within the same global region. For example, there is no one “Chinese Medicine,” nor any one “Native American tradition.” Acupuncture has been framed as “Traditional Chinese Medicine,” but there are acupuncture traditions from many countries in Asia as well from Mayan and other Native American cultures (for example: Cherokee “thorn-puncture”¹²).

- **Colonization and Exploitative Economic Systems**

Colonization included and still includes brutality and causes intergenerational trauma to people. It also villainizes and criminalizes Indigenous healing traditions. These impacts are compounded by capitalism and structural racism in the US and by other forms of repression and economic exploitation around the world.

Healing practices currently offer a beneficial way for people to make a living - which we all must do. By contrast, in some Indigenous cultures, monetary exchange for healing is not permitted, for example: “gift economy” is used by Eastern band Cherokee.^{13 14} In the US, impediments to affordable traditional healing practices are structural. Capitalist economic conditions dictate costly training programs, practitioner income expectations, costly private settings for practice, and class or workshop fees that are not affordable to many people. This highlights the need for Integrative Universal Healthcare which is not dominated by biomedicine.

- **Biomedical Dominance**

Despite the advances of biomedicine - which we wish to be available to all - biomedicine is influenced by profit-driven economic systems and by oppressive paradigms of hierarchy. Biomedical research has its limitations and built-in biases. Cultural misappropriation often comes about through the reductive methodology and the researchers themselves being unaware of the cultural significance and scope of the practice systems studied. The broad impact of cultural erasure goes undiscussed. Funding plays a role in how research questions are developed, what projects are designed, which results are discussed, what conclusions are drawn, and what final studies are done.

In the history of the US, it has often been dangerous or even illegal to practice traditions from one’s own culture. Such use had to be hidden, for example, the Code of Indian Offenses 1883-1978.¹⁵ And, with the rise of biomedicine, particularly in the last century, it has often been a radical step to introduce or promote healing practices from other cultures or non-biomedical practices. There was and continues to be considerable hostility

¹² Clarke, Patricia Standtal, MD, DMin, Rev, Didanawisgi, trained in Eastern Band Cherokee medicine, Thorn Puncture. *Native Ground: Toes in the Soil*, Plenary at IM4US 12th Annual Conference Decolonizing Centering and Rebuilding Grounded Approaches to Healthcare.

¹³ Patricia Standtal Clarke MD, DMin, Rev, Didanawisgi, trained in Eastern Band Cherokee medicine, Gift Economy. *Native Ground: Toes in the Soil*, Plenary at IM4US 12th Annual Conference Decolonizing Centering and Rebuilding Grounded Approaches to Healthcare.

¹⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. (Milkweed Edition) PP 26-28, 2013

¹⁵ Hiram Price, ‘Rules Governing the Court of Indian Offenses’, *US Government Documents Related to Indigenous Nations*, 1883 <<https://commons.und.edu/indigenous-gov-docs/131>>

by biomedicine, especially since the 1910 Flexner Report.¹⁶ At the same time, there was and continues to be great public interest in receiving healing benefits, among those for whom the tradition is ancestral as well as those not of the culture. So, for those individuals (both from the culture of origin as well as others) interested in offering and promoting these traditions, there was and still exist opportunities - both to offer cultural wisdom and healing traditions, economic opportunity for their community, as well as for personal economic or social gain.

Moving Forward with HEAR: Humility, Exchange, Appreciation, and Respect

Humans have a long history of adopting and exchanging customs, traditions, and items from another culture. As we move forward, we wish to keep in mind our aspiration to raise awareness of the issues of misappropriation in the field of integrative healthcare, and our goal to respect, include, support, and honor diverse practices and voices of practitioners of traditional and non-biomedical healing systems. We offer the following definitions, reflective questions and ideas.

Definitions

Cultural Humility

From Melanie Tervalon MD MPH and Jann Murray-García MD MPH, Cultural Humility involves “a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique and commitment to mitigation of power imbalances and institutional accountability.”^{17 18} This requires recognition of history and of the complexity of issues, understanding our own local communities, and commitment to be respectful and appreciative in our choices as we move forward.

Cultural Exchange means there is a mutual relationship with respectful and reciprocal giving and receiving between the cultures involved

Cultural Appreciation “...is when you earnestly seek to learn about or explore a different culture. You learn. You listen. You strive to understand.”¹⁹ You learn in an open and non-judgmental way. You adopt customs, traditions, or items from another culture, aware of their history and depth of meaning, while including and honoring the voices and practices of people from the culture of origin. Over time, you remain responsive to learning of any harmful impact, despite the best of intentions, so you can make appropriate changes.

Respect in this context highlights one of it’s meanings – “to look at” – to pull out from invisibility the origins of traditions and practices – thereby giving due recognition to the brilliant contributions of Native peoples

Reflective Questions and Ideas

Giving Acknowledgement

1. How can we meaningfully acknowledge the origins, broad scope, spiritual context, history, and evolution of the healing practices we offer?²⁰

- Acknowledge ourselves or our ancestry as colonizer, colonized or both
- Prepare ourselves for painful truth telling of colonization, genocide, and intergenerational trauma.

¹⁶ Frank W. Stahnisch and Marja Verhoef, ‘The Flexner Report of 1910 and Its Impact on Complementary and Alternative Medicine and Psychiatry in North America in the 20th Century’, *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine : ECAM*, 647896, 2012 <<https://doi.org/10.1155/2012/647896>>

¹⁷ Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia, ‘Cultural Humility Versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction In Defining Physician Training Outcomes In Multicultural Education’, *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 117,1998 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/268076/summary>>

¹⁸ Vivian Chavez, ‘Cultural Humility: People Principles and Practices’ 2012 <<https://youtu.be/SaSHLbS1V4w>>

¹⁹ *Preemptive Love*, ‘What Is Cultural Appreciation (And How It’s Different from Cultural Appropriation)?’, 2020 <<https://preemptivelove.org/blog/what-is-cultural-appreciation/>>

²⁰ Shelley Reys, *Deliver an Acknowledgement of Country That Really Means Something* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxo18_7BDt4>

- Be sincere and use our own words. Avoid rote performance.

Respect, Inclusion, and Being Responsive to the People of Our Locality

2. How can we welcome and uplift the voices and practices of local traditional practitioners?
 - Support the powerful work in which many people (patients and practitioners) are now engaged to reconnect with and reclaim their ancestral healing traditions.
 - Invite local stakeholders to participate or consult.
 - Find out what can be offered in exchange.
 - Keep in mind that no one can speak for everyone with a shared cultural experience
 - Protect the right of indigenous people to choose to share or NOT share their healing traditions
3. Who are the people affected (positively and negatively) by our use of a traditional practice?
4. How can diverse approaches to family, community, environment and spirituality be included?
 - Be aware that some cultures emphasize the community and collective healing while others emphasize the individual and personal healing.

Respect and Compassion in Groups Working Together

5. How do we compassionately “call in” our colleagues and friends or, if needed, “call out,” when there are differences of opinion and practice? ^{21 22}
 - Train to dialog respectfully and to give and receive real feedback non-defensively and with compassion.

Alignment

6. Does our intention and the original purpose of the healing practice or tradition align?
 - Know your relationship to, benefit from, and understanding of the practices or items being used.
 - Reconcile differences.
 - Create avenues for learning about and being responsive to harmful or potentially harmful impacts even with positive intention.

Making Policy in Organizations and Institutions

7. What policies and protocols can be established to safeguard commitment to respectful and responsible engagement with practices from other cultures?
 - Include voices from the culture in determining what is appropriate / respectful.
 - Encourage “living” policies that can be adapted over time, so they do not introduce new biases as knowledge evolves
 - Consider what reparations are in order when misappropriation has occurred
8. What avenues are available to us to advocate for such policy changes?
9. What avenues are available to advocate for societal structural changes that support this?

IM4US, a project of the Tides Center is a collaborative, multidisciplinary member organization committed to affordable, accessible integrative health care for all. As integrative health professionals and advocates from diverse personal and professional traditions, we are committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion as healing and unifying forces in our practices, organization, and society.

²¹ Harvard Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging, ‘Calling in and Calling out Guide’
n.d..<https://edib.harvard.edu/files/dib/files/calling_in_and_calling_out_guide_v4.pdf?m=1625683246>

²² Seed the Way, ‘Interrupting-Bias_-Calling-Out-vs.-Calling-In’
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