

# Native American Mental Health, Spirituality, and Ethics

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My wife and I lived and worked in New Mexico (NM) for 15 years. New Mexico is home to 23 Indian tribes. People have lived in NM for some 25,000 years based on finds in the Sandia Mountains. Many villages existed by 400 CE.

Today, there are 19 Pueblos, 3 Apache tribes, and the Navajo nation. According to NM IAD (Indian Affairs Department), each of these tribes is a sovereign nation. You can read more about these people at [newmexico.org](http://newmexico.org) and [iad.state.nm.us](http://iad.state.nm.us). Here's [a link to a colorful map](#) showing the location of the tribes.

As a psychologist, I was required to demonstrate cultural competence (e.g., [NMPA](#)). I had used nonlanguage tests and had some experience with people from diverse cultures but each person and each culture is different so workshops and consulting with colleagues was important to working as a psychologist in New Mexico—a land with many cultures.

Applied psychology requires an understanding of neuroscience, psychopharmacology, and psychological science as well as the ability to relate to people. A major ingredient in effective assessment or psychotherapy is the doctor-patient relationship, which relies on the capacity for empathy, cultural humility, respect, and acceptance. Skilled psychotherapists build trust and respect boundaries. Treatment skills matter but contribute less than does the relationship to successful outcomes.

Spirituality is a part of culture. Shared spiritual values and goals may contribute to a quality relationship. Most New Mexicans believe in God and most identify as Christian. The dominant Christian group is Catholic (34%; [pewforum](#)).

Language is a door to understanding culture. More Native American children in New Mexico are bilingual compared to other children in NM. Some of the native languages do not have a written form.

Native Americans are only a small percentage of the US population (close to 2%) but in New Mexico, about 11% of the population are Native American citizens.

I suggest that many of the components of a therapeutic relationship can help anyone attempting to build a relationship with any other person. Given this short introduction, I would like to suggest a few topics for our discussion that overlap with psychology and spirituality, including Christian spirituality in the form of ministries. I also hope a few questions encourage you to think about your theology.

## What's normal?

What is an American?

What is American culture?

Do you view Native Americans as like other Americans or different in some specific way?

What is your view on assimilation?

How tolerant are you of Americans celebrating traditions that are a part of where they or their families come from?

### **Focal Question**

Should a person's functioning be compared to how most Americans function or compared to the functioning of people in their own nation or tribe?

Psychologists are often distinguished from other behavioral health care providers by skills in clinical and neuropsychological testing. American psychologists have created and published some of the best tests in the world. I did not realize it as a student, but I am pleased to report that my degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia prepared me well for becoming a psychologist in New Mexico.

As a matter of ethics, psychologists ought to select appropriate tests. The scores on American tests are usually based on a representative sample of Americans; however, there are only a small percentage of Native Americans in the US population. Thus, even a test database that included Native Americans may not be the best one to use with Navajos who only speak their native language or a child on an Apache reservation who has less acculturation than a similar aged child living off the reservation. In addition, a Catholic teen from [St Anne's](#) at Acoma Pueblo may have different experiences than a teen at [Jemez Valley Baptist Church](#) in Jemez Pueblo.

Scores make a life-difference. Children receive special services based on test scores and other data. People of all ages may obtain Social Security Disability benefits depending on test scores. Lawsuits may be won based on documentation of extensive neuropsychological brain impairments in intelligence or memory. Veterans may receive compensation for PTSD.

### **What's the Risk?**

It is important to be aware of how often a condition occurs in a population. If I enter a large assembly of people in college or church, knowing national figures allows me to be sensitive to the audience. For example, if there are 2,000 Americans in an audience with approximately an equal number of women and men I can assume about 400 women will have experienced some form of sexual violence (40% of women). Similarly, I can estimate that about 400 people in the audience have a learning disability (LD), which is probably difficulty in reading (LD 20% with 80% having dyslexia).

When it comes to Native Americans, I learned that the rates of alcohol abuse or dependence are very high as are the rates of depression and suicide compared to the national averages. In a related matter, the rate of poverty is generally higher than the national average for Native Americans in New Mexico. Also, the rate of teens

who are neither in school or employed can be higher than in the rest of the state (e.g., 69% in Nambé Pueblo). All caring persons should know the signs, symptoms, and resources to minimize the risk of failure to meet people's needs.

### **What do you think about nontraditional treatments?**

#### **Thinking about effective treatments and respecting culture**

Ethically, psychologists should use evidence-based treatments. These are treatments that have been found to be effective in reducing symptoms based on highly controlled experiments. There is some flexibility when it comes to being sensitive to cultural values, which includes spirituality. Sometimes the decisions are challenging when a particular individual or culture rejects a recommended plan of psychotherapy with or without psychoactive medication (some psychologists in New Mexico prescribe medication and provide psychotherapy).

**Sweat Lodges.** One of the hospitals where I worked added a sweat lodge in their courtyard. Several Indian nations or tribes include the sweat lodge as part of the healing process. Some data suggest the use of a sweat lodge can be helpful in the treatment of mental health conditions. Following is a quote from Little Bear Maestas of Taos.

Little Bear Maestas of Taos went to his first sweat lodge not knowing what to expect. He had heard about it from a friend. Raised as a Catholic, he was not familiar with Native practices.

He says, "I didn't want to be there, it was hot and dark. Then I saw something in the pitch black. There was an image of a buffalo right in front of me." From that time on, he knew there was something special about the sweat lodge.

He began to attend sweat lodges on a regular basis. During one experience, he had a vision that inspired him to help people and give back to the community, especially women and children. He decided to start a gym that would be welcoming to all people, especially kids.

Little Bear Maestas, [Taos News, 23 March 2022](#)

**Christian diversity.** Many Native Americans identify with one of the Christian groups. For example, many were converted by the Spanish to Catholicism. Others worship with Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostals. In some cases, faith based programs like Teen Challenge could be a good fit.

**Entheogens.** Perhaps most controversial for American Christians is the freedom to take mind altering substances as a part of religious ceremonies, to relieve pain without consulting a licensed physician, or just because it feels good. Holiness groups in particular insist on abstinence from alcohol and drugs and harshly denounce people who use such substances. American culture is generally proud of conducting major drug busts. About 65% of the people in our prisons have Substance Use Disorder and another 20% were judged under the influence when their crime was committed ([see NIH](#)). Ethics and worldviews clash. And scientists

are often ignored if they advocate behavioral medicine approaches to substance use disorders.

**Peyote.** Some Native Americans have used peyote, a hallucinogen, in religious ceremonies for perhaps thousands of years. It is illegal in the US; however, members of the Native American Church may use peyote. The priest-like guide functions as a healer or “roadman.” Peyote functions to assist in communication with the Great Spirit. Peyote has also been used to treat health problems.

Psychological scientists have explored the use of peyote in the treatment of mental disorders such as schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, and dementia.

**Marijuana** has been used as a sacred herb by some but not all tribes. In addition to its spiritual use, it has been used in healing. Some states have legalized marijuana use but the federal government enforces laws with respect to Native American nations and tribes. In 2021, the BIA confiscated nine cannabis plants from a home garden in Picuris Pueblo ([Lee, 2021](#)). Recreational use of marijuana is legal in New Mexico.