

Professor develops tool to identify Indigenous values

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UO professor Michelle Jacob believes one of the keys to working toward better equity and justice is to turn to Indigenous values and cultural teachings to rethink the way organizations, institutions and individuals operate.

Settler colonialism left a damaging legacy that positioned Indigenous communities and the environment as "less than" and disposable, she said, and adopting Indigenous values could help address that harm. To help guide the effort, Jacob teamed up with researchers from other institutions to develop a [tool](#) that uses Indigenous values to offer different ways of thinking and being.

"The idea is to interrogate our core values and ask what it would look like to center Indigenous values in the way we do things," said Jacob, a professor of education studies in the College of Education.

The group published its work in the journal *Environmental Sociology*, and Jacob received support from the UO's Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation for the project.

Jacob contends that settler colonialism, capitalism and patriarchal forces have sculpted a landscape of racial superiority, ownership and possession where Native people have been cast as lesser beings, the earth is being destroyed, and resources and people are exploited.

Jacob points to health care and the educational system as examples of institutions that are being problematically driven by white, male, Western, heteronormative culture. In Western education, she highlights how competitiveness is integral to the system and grades have been

turned into a commodity.

"Some of these ways of operating are so deeply ingrained that they may seem natural or inevitable," Jacob said. "But if [public schools](#), [health care](#), [environmental groups](#) and other entities don't interrogate their values, it allows the damages to continue unchecked."

The researchers collaborated with local Native communities through the UO's Many Nations Longhouse to develop a pilot version of the tool.

The tool is based on a psychological process known as "values affirmation," which helps individuals strengthen their sense of self-worth and reduce the production of stress hormones like cortisol. Studies have shown that this process has helped marginalized groups threatened by stereotypes.

While no research has been focused on the Native community specifically, Jacob and her collaborators believe the tool has the potential to build emotional wellness and empower Native people to heal from the internalized damages of colonialism, which cast Native people as unworthy and inferior.

Jacob and her collaborators invited Indigenous people to share their [core values](#), which included things like sense of humor, relationship to the environment, and gratitude, and they integrated the main themes and highly ranked values into the tool.

Jacob believes American society would look very different if Indigenous values took precedence.

"By emphasizing Indigenous values that restore relatedness and balance, we may be able to find new directions to address our most pressing social and environmental problems and create spaces and opportunities

for healing the damage of white settler colonialism."

The researchers hope the tool can be applied in arenas like curriculum development, [public health](#) and environmental activism, and they believe it can be used by anyone trying to understand and dismantle the legacy of settler colonialism.

"Engaging Indigenous cultural values can counter the settler colonial violence that plagues all people," Jacob said, "and allow for healing our relationship with the environment, and with each other."

More information: Michelle M. Jacob et al, Indigenous cultural values counter the damages of white settler colonialism, *Environmental Sociology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/23251042.2020.1841370](https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2020.1841370)

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