

Honoring Dr. Carolyn Lewis Attneave

Insights

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HLB honors [Dr. Carolyn Lewis Attneave \(1920-1992\)](#), the first Native American woman to earn a Ph.D. in psychology, for her foundational research into culturally competent mental health care, as well as her development of Native American psychological professional associations. Dr. Attneave is renowned for her development of the “social network therapy” approach, which emphasizes the importance of family and community in a collective healing process.

Born in 1920, Dr. Attneave was of Lenni-Lenape and Scandinavian heritage. She spent childhood summers visiting her grandparents on Oklahoma tribal lands, where her grandfather taught her the tribal customs and traditions, and where she would later return to provide mental health services.

Dr. Attneave attended Chico State College for her undergraduate degree, then Stanford University for her master’s and Ph.D. in clinical psychology, becoming the first Native American woman to obtain her Ph.D. in psychology in 1952.

In 1962, Dr. Attneave moved to Oklahoma to work for the state Department of Health, where she collaborated with a diverse group of professionals, including doctors, federal and tribal agencies, civic organizations, tribal leaders and medicine men, to provide mental health services for seven Native American tribes.

In 1968, she moved to the east coast to work for the Philadelphia [Child Guidance Clinic](#), working with Black communities using network therapy, a method through which mental health support went beyond health professionals and nuclear families, including extended families, neighbors and community members. Her visionary approach challenged mainstream western models of clinical treatment. She later situated patients with schizophrenia within their tribal communities instead of being isolated in hospitals. With Ross Speck, she co-authored an award-winning book in network therapy, “Family Networks,” which detailed a six-step process: Retribalization, Polarization, Mobilization, Depression, Breakthrough, and Exhaustion and Elation.

In 1973, Dr. Attneave began working as a research associate and lecturer at Harvard’s School of Public Health. There, she helped run a vital study into the mental health needs, services and utilization patterns of areas served by the Indian Health Service.

In her commitment to DEI, Dr. Attneave also worked to institutionalize change. Throughout her career, Dr. Attneave played important, foundational roles in multiple psychological groups, including the Society of Indian Psychologists and the American Psychological Association’s Division 45, also known as The Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity and Race. Division 45 psychologists perform research and apply psychological knowledge and techniques to minority issues.

Aside from her work, Dr. Attneave had two children, and enjoyed many hobbies, including folk music, nature and her church community.

As we celebrate [National Native American Heritage Month](#), we honor Dr. Attneave’s contributions to the field of mental health and the importance for healthcare systems to be responsive to the unique needs and experiences of Native American communities. By centering community, cultural wisdom, and networked relationships in her therapeutic models, she offered a powerful alternative to Western psychology. Her leadership also opened doors for future generations of Native American psychologists, and her legacy endures: the American Psychological Association awards the Carolyn Attneave Diversity Award, and in 2019, a Stanford University academic building was renamed the [Carolyn Lewis Attneave House](#).