

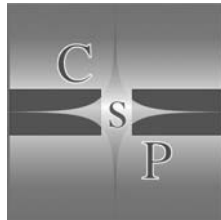
# Psychology and Indigenous Australians



# Psychology and Indigenous Australians: Effective Teaching and Practice

Edited by

Rob Ranzijn, Keith McConnochie  
and Wendy Nolan



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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Edited by Rob Ranzijn, Keith McConnochie and Wendy Nolan

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## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

ROB RANZI, KEITH MCCONNOCHIE  
AND WENDY NOLAN

This volume contains the edited proceedings of the inaugural Psychology and Indigenous Australians annual conference, held in Adelaide, South Australia, on July 12-13 2007. In keeping with Indigenous protocol, the conference participants were welcomed to Kurna country (where Adelaide is located) by Uncle Lewis Warritja Yerloburka O'Brien, an Elder of the Kurna people, and most of the speakers commenced their presentations with an acknowledgment of country, of being on Kurna land. Also in keeping with tradition, most of the speakers mentioned their own country, where their own people had come from.

The conference was held soon after the Australian Commonwealth Government initiated its controversial intervention into Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, sparking a lively media debate, with strong passions on all sides. Many of the informal conversations at the conference, as well as audience discussions in the formal sessions, were focused on the intervention and its implications, and many of the presenters referred to it in their presentations.

The *Bringing Them Home* Report, the report of the Royal Commission into the Removal of Aboriginal Children from their Parents (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) called for an apology to the Stolen Generations. While all of the State and Territory governments had apologised in the meantime, it took eleven years for an apology from the Commonwealth Government. On February 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, the first day of the first parliament of the incoming Labour Government which replaced the Liberal/National Party coalition which had governed Australia for those eleven years, the first piece of business was to endorse the public apology by the Parliament of Australia to the Stolen Generations, delivered by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The apology has been widely welcomed as an essential step in the healing of Indigenous Australians and in improving relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. However, a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures, non-

Indigenous cultures, and cultural competence is required in order to keep moving forward as effective practitioners and responsible citizens. The papers presented at the conference addressed many of the important current issues in these areas: theory, effective teaching, and effective practice.

These proceedings are not in the chronological order in which they were presented at the conference, but have been arranged to provide a sequence beginning with racism, a central factor in all areas of Indigenous disadvantage, and ending with a discussion of cultural competence, which all practitioners require in order to work effectively with Indigenous people or anyone from a culture different from their own. The chapters have been edited where required to give non-Australian readers an understanding about places and concepts with which they may not be familiar. Reflecting the diversity of presentations, some of the chapters are theoretical and academic, with extensive referencing and footnotes, while others are more narrative or discursive, telling stories of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The atmosphere of the conference was one of generosity and sharing, so the academics and the practitioners all gained a lot from listening to each other.

The first chapter was written for this volume in order to explain the context of the conference. The story of relations between psychology and Indigenous Australians has not always been a happy one, but there seems to be a growing goodwill to repair historical injustices and work together to make psychology more effective in Indigenous affairs in the future. This chapter briefly relates some of the past history and tells the story of how the conference came to be held.

Next are two papers on racism. Racism has plagued Australia since the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay on January 26<sup>th</sup> 1788, and continues to be one of the key factors in perpetuating Indigenous disadvantage (Paradies, Harris, & Anderson, 2008). There is growing recognition that racism will not be reduced unless it is understood and challenged from both sides: understanding the psychology of racism and its effect on those who are disadvantaged by it (Australian Psychological Society, 1997; McDermott, 2006), and reflecting on and challenging the many subtle ways in which the perpetrators perpetuate racism (see, for example, (Green, Sonn, & Matsebula, 2007; Kessar, 2006; Liu & Mills, 2006). These papers illustrate both sides of the story and the nature of the challenges to overcoming racism.

The first is by Dennis McDermott, an Aboriginal psychologist and one of the three keynote speakers at the conference. In a very personal account, he outlines current thinking about racism, and in particular about how

racism is experienced on a daily basis by Indigenous people as ‘wounds that break their stitches every morning’. Dennis makes many powerful points in his paper, including a remark which may point to a new way forward in resolving some of the emotional turmoil and discomfort around racism: acknowledging that Australia is *both* a tolerant *and* a racist society. Damien Riggs and Martha Augoustinos then explore racism from the other side, by analysing ‘everyday’ conversations of non-Indigenous students and how they reinforce white privilege, thereby perpetuating racist discourse.

The section on teaching how to work with Indigenous Australians contains four papers. Educating for anti-racism and pedagogical strategies for teaching cultural competence are areas of great theoretical and applied interest at present (see for example American Association of Medical Colleges, 2005; Betancourt, 2004; Ranzijn, McConnochie, Day, Nolan, & Wharton, 2008; Wells, 2000). These papers go beyond the theory and rhetoric to illustrate how the pedagogy works in practice.

First, Michelle Dickson discusses the head/heart dichotomy that tends to characterise contemporary Western psychology. She makes a strong case that teaching in this area needs to involve the heart as well as the head, and indeed ‘guts’ as well, and shows how to integrate these three elements in teaching practice. Her approach is centred around Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, and both her Indigenous and non-Indigenous students respond extremely well to this form of pedagogy. Diane Gabb and Dennis McDermott, in their paper about training health professionals, make a distinction between cross-cultural and trans-cultural communication, trans-cultural interaction requiring the ‘professional’ to be self-disclosing and self-reflective in order to avoid the common trap of ‘othering’ the ‘client’. They argue that the Indigenous concept of Dadirri (‘deep listening’) can be a powerful tool in creating a trans-cultural conversational space. Hence, both of these two papers are revolutionary in that they apply Indigenous pedagogical tools to what is normally a non-Indigenous context, and thereby contribute to the development of what may become a truly Australian form of psychology.

The third paper in this section is by Tracey Powis, who takes the theme of ‘doing our own work’ (as non-Indigenous people) to a deep personal level in a reflective presentation which makes pertinent points about contemporary psychology, reinforcing Michelle’s points about psychology’s tendency to disconnect ‘the heart’ from ‘the head’, in contrast to the Indigenous understanding in which the heart and the head are inseparable. Danielle Every then elaborates on the theme of self-reflection, emphasising that understanding racist discourse is important,

but not enough – we need to challenge it in order to change the way people discuss Indigenous issues, and furthermore work to transform the discourse into action to overcome oppression.

Next comes the powerful second keynote address, by the Aboriginal academic and author Judy Atkinson, who outlines a model of healing which builds on traditional healing practices centred on stories of relatedness – relationships with ‘people, land, animals, plants, skies, waterways and climate’ – and indicates ways for psychologists and Indigenous healers to work together. This is followed by the third keynote presentation, by Aboriginal psychologist Tracy Westerman, whose wide-ranging paper discusses a host of practical guidelines for psychological practice, including her development of psychological assessment strategies and interventions appropriate for specific Indigenous cultural contexts. She emphasises the importance of ‘starting from scratch’ by getting to know the people and understanding culture. She provides many insights into Indigenous understandings of mental health and the primacy of cultural understandings of psychological phenomena. She also discusses the need to ‘be growled’ by Indigenous elders, to test whether the psychologist has the personal qualities required to work collaboratively. These two papers show that it is possible for non-Indigenous psychologists to work in Indigenous contexts, especially if they are able to utilise Indigenous methods to increase the effectiveness of their own practices.

The next four papers are case studies of working with Indigenous Australians in specific contexts, papers which illustrate many of the principles discussed in the earlier papers. There have been numerous publications with advice on how to work effectively (for instance, Australian Psychological Society, 2003; Bishop, Vicary, Andrews, & Pearson, 2006; Dudgeon, Garvey, & Pickett, 2000; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003; Sheldon, 2001; Vicary & Bishop, 2005; Westerman, 2004) but, as with pedagogy, there is a dearth of practical worked examples of how to apply the principles in diverse contexts. These papers make a valuable contribution to the literature by providing specific examples of how to work effectively in particular, local, contexts.

The first in the series, by Sarah Sutton and Kathryn Stone, is about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers collaborating in the treatment of Aboriginal male sexual offenders. Kathryn and Sarah show how effective it can be for Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners to work together in partnership, using Indigenous methods of developing trust and communication. They raise a number of issues which often concern non-Indigenous practitioners, including being afraid to ask questions so as not to offend: They maintain that “I don’t think I could ever offend someone

by asking a question: it's all about the way that the question is asked.” Joylene Warren, Lisa White and Trish Hickey then describe their work of reuniting Aboriginal families with children who have been removed from their care. This is a particularly challenging task for them since they work for the same welfare system that removed the children in the first place. It takes great persistence and cultural sensitivity to enable the families and agencies to work together in a system governed by Western ways of delivering services.

In the third paper, Rachel Reilly, Joyce Doyle and colleagues describe a health promotion program in the Goulburn Valley in rural Victoria, the success of which is due to the fact that it was designed, controlled and directed by local Indigenous communities. The authors emphasise that non-Indigenous academics and organisations do have a useful role, but have to be prepared to be true partners and not ‘leaders in the process’ as has tended to be the case in interventions of non-Indigenous professionals into Indigenous affairs. The final paper in this series, by Harold Stewart, Kerry Dix and Jennene Greenhill, outlines a program of suicide prevention in rural South Australian communities. They refer to the potential barrier of ‘cultural dyslexia’, which takes time and patience to overcome. Kerry and Jennene, young white women, were able to work effectively with male Indigenous Elders and other members of Indigenous communities because of their respectful attitude and willingness to learn. The paper illustrates that it is the personal qualities of non-Indigenous people that are most important in interactions with Indigenous people. Taken as whole, and reflecting the thrust of the keynote addresses by Judy Atkinson and Tracy Westerman, the four papers reinforce the point that non-Indigenous service providers can be effective as long as they are willing to work in real partnership and to learn from Indigenous communities.

The final paper in the book summarises a panel discussion by three practitioners working in the area of cultural competence – Keith McConnochie, David Egege and Dennis McDermott. Cultural competence is a contested term, and many people are not convinced about how useful a concept it is. A number of important issues are raised in this panel conversation, including: ensuring that cultural competence training is not just a matter of ‘ticking a box’; the need to involve all levels of an organisation in training; and the usefulness of including cultural safety and cultural ease in the concept of cultural competence.

As conference organisers and participants, we learnt a lot from the 2007 conference, and we look forward to future conferences. Another very exciting recent development is the inaugural meeting of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association which was held in April 2008. This

is likely to give a great boost to the development of a critical mass of Indigenous psychologists, which may have a major effect on the evolution of Australian psychology into the future.

A note on terminology: While the most appropriate terms and labels are continually contested, the current consensus seems to be that 'Indigenous Australians' is the most appropriate term for the Indigenous inhabitants as a whole. However, many Indigenous Australians prefer to refer to themselves as 'Aboriginal Australians' or 'Torres Strait Islanders', Islanders having different cultures and ways of life to people on the mainland. There is huge diversity within Indigenous Australia, with over 270 distinct original language groups, most with a number of dialects such that there were over 500 distinct groups throughout Australia in 1788, each with its own defined geographical boundaries, and many of these groups have retained some or most of their unique cultures. Where possible and appropriate, Indigenous groups are referred to in this book by connections to country (traditional land), and footnotes and other explanatory terms are used to explain where country is located.

We hope that you find this book interesting and informative and that it helps you in understanding a little better the culture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We hope that it will provide some useful indications about how to work effectively with people from diverse cultural groups

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# STEPS ALONG A JOURNEY – THE GROWTH OF INTEREST IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

ROB RANZIEN, KEITH McCONNOCHIE  
AND WENDY NOLAN

## **Abstract**

The discipline and practice of psychology have historically had a fraught relationship with Indigenous Australians. The colonisers brought with them the prevailing Western worldview of their day, that the Indigenous people were inferior and, according to the principles of social Darwinism, would die out within a few generations. As psychology emerged as a profession in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, psychological research was used to confirm the prevailing stereotypes of inferiority in multiple domains, and as agents of the state psychologists were instrumental in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Even today psychology is viewed with suspicion and mistrust by many if not most Indigenous Australians. However, the situation is slowly changing. Better relations between Indigenous Australians and psychology have been largely initiated by Indigenous Australians themselves, especially Indigenous psychologists, in collaboration with non-Indigenous psychologists. Since about 1990 there has been growing interest in improving these relations, and this movement has accelerated in recent years. This chapter briefly summarises the history of relationships between psychology and Indigenous Australians which has led to the conference whose proceedings form the content of this book. The conference and other events are encouraging signs that psychology may have a useful role to play in the future in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and contributing to social and emotional well-being.

Until 1788 the inhabitants of Australia had lived for 60,000 years or more in peace and harmony with the environment of this beautiful land. The invasion (as Indigenous Australians call it – many non-Indigenous Australians prefer to call it settlement), which began in Sydney on January

26<sup>th</sup> 1788, was an unmitigated disaster for the Indigenous peoples. Within two generations around 95% of the original population had been wiped out, the majority from introduced diseases but many also from starvation, resulting from lack of access to the land which provided their essential resources, poisoning of waterholes and food, and outright slaughter and massacres of the few who tried to resist the white invaders. Since then, a constantly changing series of government policies have had disastrous effects on the lives of most Indigenous Australians – arbitrary relocation to missions and reserves, restrictive legislation which kept the Indigenous people away from white society except as virtual slaves, and the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, to name just a few. The Indigenous peoples have never had the opportunity to recover from the cultural trauma (Halloran, 2004) resulting from the actions of the colonisers, and the negative psychological and social effects have been cumulative, cascading and intergenerational. As a consequence, on any social or health indicator, the traditional owners of this land are the most disadvantaged of any group of people in the country.

The colonisation of Australia occurred at a time when many of the nations of Europe were establishing their empires around the globe, and the colonisers brought with them the worldview that Western ways were superior to all others and that people in other lands were inferior, generally regarding them as savages at a more primitive stage of evolution. There was an unquestioned assumption that the ‘superior’ Western powers had the right to take over other peoples’ lands and ‘claim’ them in the name of their various kings and queens. The rest of the world was viewed as a vast resource to be mined for the benefit of the conquerors – including the people, who were commonly enslaved to serve the invaders. In Australia this attitude was taken to an extreme. The land was declared to be empty of human habitation (the principle of *Terra Nullius*) (Chamarette, 2000). The original inhabitants were regarded as animals, not people, and hence had no right to resist the spread of white settlement. Until after the referendum of 1967 Indigenous Australians were not included in the five-yearly population census, rather being counted, if at all, among the flora and fauna.

The early psychologists in Britain and Europe were fascinated by the ‘native’ peoples in the colonies, since they were thought to be relics or vestiges of earlier stages in human development and hence to give insights into the prehistory of Western people, who of course were at the pinnacle of evolution. This zeitgeist dominated research into Indigenous peoples, including Australians, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Psychology in Australia emerged as a separate discipline towards the end

of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and grew slowly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> (O'Neill, 1987). As was the case with Western psychology generally, the First and particularly the Second World War accelerated the development of Australian psychology, sparked primarily by the growth in psychological testing to classify soldiers for different war duties and, towards the end of the Second World War, to rehabilitate the soldiers and fit them for civilian life. The testing movement dominated psychological research into Indigenous Australians until the 1970s. With few exceptions, the research 'showed' that the cognitive and other skills of Indigenous Australians were deficient to those of other Australians, and the few areas in which Indigenous Australians appeared to excel were those regarded as relatively unimportant by mainstream society, such as visuo-spatial orientation (Kearins, 2000).

Children were removed from their parents from the earliest days of white settlement. It is estimated that up to 100,000 children were removed between 1814 and 1975 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), removal reaching its height in the Protective Legislation era (1920s – 1960s). All the Australian states passed legislation to establish 'Protectors' of 'Aborigines' who had unlimited power over all Aboriginal people. The extent of the forced removal of Indigenous children has been widely reported and discussed following the publication of the Bringing Them Home report in 1997 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). As many as 1 in 5 Indigenous children were removed from their families, with the majority of these removals (about 80%) being girls. These statistics suggest that almost one third of all girls (16/50 or 32%) were removed from their families over this period.

If a young mother, say aged 25 at the time, whose five-year-old child was removed in 1975 is still alive today, she would now be about 58 years old, and her child would now be about 38 years old. If the young mother was herself taken from her family as a young child, as often happened, her mother would be about 78 if she is still alive. The Stolen Generations are not just a historical event for Indigenous Australians, they are still with us, and the grief and loss are still very real for all Indigenous Australians, since in the kinship system, which is still strong, every Indigenous Australian is closely related to all the members of their communities, not just their 'immediate' family members as in the Western system (Clark, 2000; Koolmatric & Williams, 2000).

What was psychology doing during the time of the Stolen Generations? This removal was widespread during the two decades between 1950 and 1970 and psychologists were actively involved in

aspects of this process, although the extent of this involvement remains poorly documented. Over the same two decades there was a major debate within psychology over the impact of maternal deprivation on children, initiated by the publication of Bowlby's *Maternal Care and Mental Health* in 1951 and culminating with Michael Rutter's *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* in 1981.

While psychologists in Australia were actively involved in this debate they failed to link the evidence or the theoretical models relating to maternal deprivation to the removal of Indigenous children from their mothers. As Bretherton and Mellor (2006, pp. 92 - 93) comment:

“Few white psychologists challenged the idea that taking Aboriginal children away from their families was in their best interests and, indeed, practising psychologists working for welfare agencies after 1950 probably had a complicit role in many such cases..... Given the prominence of the debates on maternal deprivation during the 1950s to the 1970s, and psychologists' awareness of the complexity of psychosocial sequelae that tend to follow the breaking of bonds with primary caregivers, it is salutary to note psychologists' lack of concern for Aboriginal mothers and their children. ....Psychology and psychologists could have used their disciplinary knowledge and social standing to act as advocates for Aboriginal children, but did not do so.”

That is, psychological research, including Australian research, was demonstrating the importance of maternal attachment to subsequent child development, and yet, as far as we know, no psychologist spoke out on behalf of the Aboriginal children who were being taken away. Instead, many psychologists were actively working on behalf of the state, as part of the welfare system, to remove children from their families and place them in institutions where they were commonly neglected, not fed properly, denied access to their families, in many instance told lies such as that their mothers did not want to see them, punished for speaking their language or wanting to retain any element of their culture, and in many case physically and sexually abused, after which they were farmed out as servants and labourers to pastoralists and rich white people in the cities, and even the pittance to which they were entitled was held in trust by the white authorities and often never paid to them. The enormous fear and distrust of ‘the Welfare’, that took the children away (and is still taking Indigenous children away at far higher rates than non-Indigenous children) has become generalised to psychologists, who are regarded by many Indigenous Australians as part of ‘The Welfare’ (Ranzijn et al., 2008). Many Indigenous Australians are fearful of going to a psychologist because they may be labelled ‘crazy’, hence incompetent to look after

their children, and liable be taken away themselves or have their children taken from them.

Psychology was silent about the Stolen Generations, yet at the same time it was growing fast as a profession. For instance, up to World War Two there were only two departments of psychology in Australia (the Universities of Sydney and Western Australia). By 1956 there were seven more, by 1977 there were ten more, and currently there are 38. The membership of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) has grown from 893 in its founding year of 1966, to about 1700 in 1974, to 4321 in 1985 (O'Neill, 1987), to close to 16,000 in 2008, an exponential increase from its founding. The influence of psychology has grown greatly over the past 50 years, and increasingly psychology is taking a leading role in the mental health arena. In 2006, after many years of lobbying, clients of registered psychologists received the right to claim Medicare benefits (the Commonwealth Government-funded universal health care system). Yet, in spite of its increasing prominence, the profession and discipline of psychology have been almost entirely silent on social justice in relation to Indigenous Australians until quite recently (Gridley, Davidson, Dudgeon, Pickett, & Sanson, 2000).

The impetus for change started at the International Conference of Applied Psychology held in Sydney in 1988 at which an Indigenous delegate stood up in the final plenary session and pointed out that, even though the conference was held in Australia, there were no Indigenous Australian presenters or delegates (Dudgeon, 2003). This shamed and spurred the Board of the College of [Australian] Community Psychologists to action, resulting in the first symposium on the Psychology of Indigenous People at the APS National Conference in Perth in 1990, at which for the first time Indigenous Australians spoke at an APS conference. In the late 1990s university courses containing Indigenous content and addressing issues such as racism were developed by Indigenous academics working in collaboration with non-Indigenous colleagues, most notably at Curtin University of Technology in Perth (Sonn, Garvey, Bishop, & Smith, 2000). Two important developments occurred in the year 2000. The first was the publication by *Australian Psychologist*, one of the two main academic journals of the APS, of a special edition on Psychology and Australia's Indigenous Peoples. The second was the publication by Pat Dudgeon, Darren Garvey and Harry Pickett, all Indigenous academics, of *Working with Indigenous Australians: A Handbook for Psychologists* (Dudgeon, Garvey, & Pickett, 2000). There was also a flurry of academic publications in other journals

on Indigenous-related matters, written by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors, often in collaboration.

The late 1990s also saw the commencement of university psychology courses<sup>1</sup> that taught some elements of what is now commonly referred to as cultural competence. However, this work was being undertaken by only a few individuals working in isolation from each other. Australia is a large continent, and it is often difficult and expensive for colleagues from different parts to meet together to develop new ideas and teaching practices, especially if they are as far away from each other as Perth and Melbourne, or Darwin and Adelaide. Also, they were also working in relative academic isolation, since teaching in this area was, and still largely is, regarded by most academics as interesting work but a fringe activity, of lesser importance than the 'core business' of psychology such as teaching about research methods, learning theory, or cognition and perception. Hence, when financial and other resources became scarce, it was the Indigenous-related courses that tended to be cut back or watered down by incorporating them into other courses or reducing the proportion of the courses that addressed Indigenous issues. Added to this were the emotional and intellectual demands on the teachers, especially Indigenous teachers, of delivering what is often very emotional content and dealing with student reactions which can range from grief and sorrow through to possible guilt and shame and even to aggressive racist resistance to what is being taught. Therefore, the few teachers active in this area started to become burnt out and the impetus was starting to falter.

In 2004 we started work at the University of South Australia (UniSA) to more comprehensively help our undergraduate psychology students to learn what we thought was important for them to know about Indigenous history and culture and psychology's role in redressing Indigenous disadvantage. We developed two new courses, a compulsory first-year course 'Indigenous Australians: Culture and Colonisation' and an elective third-year course 'Psychology and Indigenous Australians.' The first-year course has around 200 students each year and the third-year course around 30. Both courses are extremely well-received by the students (Ranzijn et al., 2008), and we believe we have developed effective teaching strategies to overcome student resistance and deal with some of the emotional issues that arise in the course of such teaching.

Soon after starting work on developing the courses we received two small internal grants from UniSA to generalise the curriculum work

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<sup>1</sup> A course (may also be called a unit, subject or topic) is a 13-week sequence of instruction comprising a quarter of a full-time student's workload during that period

beyond the discipline of psychology and to extend the psychology work within UniSA more broadly throughout Australia. The grants enabled us to travel to meet some of the 'pioneers' referred to above, to develop curriculum guidelines to advise other academics, and to present two interactive workshops, in 2005 and 2006 (Ranzijn & Severino, 2006, 2007), aimed primarily at testing and refining the curriculum guidelines. However, while we aimed the first workshop primarily at psychology academics, the majority of participants were not in this category but included psychology practitioners, other mental health or welfare practitioners and academics, Indigenous community members and field workers, and students. We realised that there is a huge thirst for knowledge across the board about not only teaching in this area but also about how to practise and intervene effectively and appropriately with Indigenous peoples. While we thought that our commencing students would have a low knowledge base to start with, we soon realised that most practitioners are also quite ignorant about Indigenous history and culture and their role in either perpetuating or overcoming racism. Therefore, the 2006 workshop was a two-day event, with one day devoted to teaching issues and the other to practice. We also recognised early on the need to build a critical mass of academics and practitioners working in this area, for moral, practical, and informational support. Hence we initiated an email distribution list which continues to grow rapidly, with over 500 email addresses in 2008, including a growing number of interested persons outside Australia, from South Africa, Aotearoa (New Zealand), the United States, and Canada. The last three countries in particular have similar histories and issues with Indigenous peoples to Australia (with important differences of course).

With our limited resources we were starting to progress this work quite well, but we felt that with extra support we would be able to do more work more quickly. Therefore, we applied for and received a grant from what was at that time called the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Inc, a Commonwealth Government - funded organisation. This enabled us to do a number of things: to travel around Australia to deliver seminars on 'Indigenising the Curriculum' to schools of psychology, to undertake site visits by invitation to particular schools of psychology, to establish a website ([www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/pia](http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/pia)) with a large range of teaching and other resources, and to present national conferences in 2007 and 2008. The edited proceedings of the 2007 conference make up the content of this book.

What does the future hold for psychology in relation to Indigenous Australians? Increasingly, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous

psychologists and other professionals are saying that psychology can have a major role in redressing Indigenous disadvantage and promoting social justice and well-being (Dudgeon, 2003; Ranzijn, McConnochie, Clarke, & Nolan, 2007). However, this will require some major changes in the way that psychology is practised. First, psychologists need to work in true partnership with Indigenous peoples and communities. Secondly, they need to have an expanded view of their role to go beyond the individualistic one-on-one therapeutic relationship and become advocates for social and political change, since it is not possible to separate the well-being of individual Indigenous Australians from the broader social and political contexts of their lives. Thirdly, they need to become culturally competent, since without this any work they do with Indigenous Australians is likely to be ineffective at best and destructive at worst. Much work has been done in recent years on developing detailed guidelines for working effectively with Indigenous Australians and people from diverse cultural groups, and increasingly the professional bodies and government regulators are encouraging and requiring professionals to become culturally competent (Australian Psychological Society, 2003; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003). Psychology in Australia is well behind other countries in this regard (for instance, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Canada), but is trying to catch up fast. Many of the papers in this volume address some of the complex issues in effective practice, with practical suggestions that show that the task is not impossible, but requires patience, humility and goodwill.

With regards to research, the discipline of psychology is in a good position to increase understanding of the dynamics of racism, cultural and trans-generational trauma, identity, social and emotional wellbeing, community wellbeing, self-determination and empowerment, healing practices, and other concepts particularly relevant to Indigenous lives. While there has been some good research conducted in recent years, much remains to be done. There is an increasing need to address issues of diversity within Indigenous Australia, since Indigenous Australians are not homogeneous but extremely diverse – at the time of the invasion there were somewhere between 500 and 600 distinct dialect groups within over 250 distinct language groups, each with its own unique culture. Add to this that there has been much intermarriage between the groups, largely as a result of forced relocation, that at present the majority of Indigenous relationships are with non-Indigenous partners, and that there are big differences in the lives and experiences of people living in the big cities, rural centres, and smaller non-urban communities, and it is clear that it is



unrealistic and unhelpful to categorise Indigenous Australians as all having the same culture and the same needs.

It is an exciting time to be involved in this area. The formation of the Indigenous Australian Psychologists Association in April 2008 has the potential to bring about a major change in Australian psychology, which may finally become a truly 'Australian' psychology relevant to Australian needs rather than a product imported virtually unchanged from the United Kingdom and the United States. We look forward to the next few years with great interest.

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS:  
WHAT CURE FOR TAMWORTH SYNDROME?  
THE ACCUMULATIVE EXPERIENCE OF RACISM,  
BLACKFELLA WELL-BEING AND  
PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE

DENNIS MCDERMOTT

**Abstract**

It's difficult for an Indigenous Australian to write dispassionately on racism. There is an unavoidable tension between the demands of academic rigour and the demands of community for 'truth-telling' about past and present Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in this country (McDermott et al., 2008). The lesson from professional development for mental health practitioners, that Indigenous perspectives are satisfactorily served only when affective learning is privileged as much as cognitive (Gabb & McDermott, 2008), may, fortunately, prove as valid in relation to scholarship. This paper combines a narrative of 'official' Australian racism in operation in my home town of Tamworth<sup>1</sup>, NSW, with an examination of the consequences of continually attracting racialised projection - here characterised as Tamworth Syndrome - and what that means for psychology in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: how differently it may need to be construed, practised and taught. In good blackfella fashion, I combine insights from both the peer-reviewed and Indigenous 'grey' literature with a story from my family's experience (Garvey 2007, p.3). From an Indigenous perspective, neither the personal nor the emotional need be shied away from, as long as they chime with, and enhance, the scholarly.

The last ten years have seen a surge of interest in the links between racism and ill health: of over 100 studies now in existence that attest to

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<sup>1</sup> Tamworth is a regional centre in inland NSW, lying roughly half-way between Sydney and Brisbane. The district population is around 50,000 people.

the health consequences of racism, the majority have been published since 2000 (Drexler, 2007). A 2006 meta-analysis of 138 studies, each examining the impact of racism on health, found that the strongest and most consistent findings were for negative mental health outcomes and health-related behaviour (Paradies, 2006). Yet, in terms of informing praxis in relation to Indigenous mental health / well-being in both the Australian and New Zealand context, racism is an under-researched area - one described in a discussion paper arising from a recent trans-Tasman Indigenous forum as in need of a cohesive research agenda (Paradies, Harris & Anderson, 2008). In relation to how psychology might better engage with these concerns, this paper takes up that challenge. In particular, it addresses three areas deemed important by that discussion paper: Indigenous “experience” of racism, the “impact” of racism on Indigenous peoples, with particular reference to the life course, and the “best ways to address systemic racism in Indigenous peoples” (Paradies et al., 2008, p.16). As we shall see, not only are the ways racism operates in such a first-world, allegedly-postcolonial society as Australia neither straightforward nor monolithic, but also neither are the best means to address them. Indeed, amongst other things, this paper aims to complexify the relationships between Indigenous and settler Australia. Tamworth Syndrome, then, becomes a handy rubric under which to gather the consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians of living within a matrix of ease, ambivalence and hostility, where the last two are comprehensive enough for many blackfellas to feel besieged, and potent enough for serious psychological impact. Exploration of this complexity, at times confusing and paradoxical, and its import for current projects to Indigenise psychological praxis and training (Ranzijn & Severino, 2007) requires a nuanced approach, a consideration of ‘grey’ areas that are yet incompletely addressed by peer-reviewed research.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians share a country that has changed markedly since the official abandonment of policies of assimilation (Haebich, 2008a), yet racism has not only persisted, but resists attempts at satisfactory public discourse. In fact, such is the force of racism’s tenacity and mutability over the decades since then that Haebich argues that the current period is one of “retro-assimilation” (Haebich, 2008b). Contemporary manifestations of racism are not necessarily overt, operating through opaque modalities, such as ‘structural’ or ‘systemic’ racism/discrimination (Davis, 2008), and internalised racism (Paradies et al., 2008, p.16). Racism, however, may also operate through less-obvious derivatives; measures tagged as rational, beneficent responses to intractable crisis, such as the recent, bi-

partisan re-deployment of paternalism (ABC News Online, 2008; Gratton, 2006). This paper asks whether continual experiences of racism - 'Ground-Hog Day' experiences - accrete to critical mass, and how such a charged accumulation of racialised experience, in all its forms, intersects with blackfella well-being.

The need for specific work on the range of possible interaction effects is interrogated through an exploration of the likely connections between racism and colonisation-related impacts on well-being - including 'traumatic' grief (Paradies et al., 2008) and trans-generational trauma (Raphael, Swan & Martinek, 1998). Finally, this paper examines the potentially significant implications, thus raised, for psychological practice and training.

## **Racism and Blackfella Well-Being**

Indigenous Australia contends that racism is central to Indigenous mental distress. Racism is perceived as more than the 'behavioural problem' to which it was reduced by former Prime Minister John Howard (Howard, 2006; Sydney Morning Herald, 2005), in the wake of the 2005 Cronulla Riots<sup>2</sup>. Not only are there cognitive implications - that repeated exposure to racist treatment may build to the debilitating belief that there is no escape, that this is one's lot - but racism also affects how one emotionally, and thus physiologically, responds to the wider world (Mays, Cochran & Barnes, 2007). When one repeatedly absorbs negativity - at various times, simple hatred - the zeitgeist itself appears to change. Many Indigenous Australians perceive themselves as moving through a corrosive affective world that many non-Indigenous Australians would find hard to recognise as the same country they live in. Coming to grips, then, with Indigenous trauma requires models that help us track the dynamic interplay of population level factors and unique individual experience. For conceptual ease, some existing models emphasise that factors with potential, negative impact on Indigenous well-being tend to fall into one of two groups (Cripps, 2007; Memmott, Stacy, Chambers & Keys, 2001). These groups can also be conceived of as layers, with individualised interactions between layers (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2007): to facilitate comprehension of the dynamic constitution of Indigenous mental distress, one schema proposes

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<sup>2</sup> The Cronulla riots were an outbreak, over some weeks during the Southern hemisphere summer of 2005-6, of serious, racialised urban unrest - centred on beach-side incidents involving Australians of middle-eastern and Anglo-Celtic heritage - in the NSW capital city, Sydney

a core of colonisation-related factors, surrounded by a range of contemporary determinants, all mediated by a variable exposure to trans-generational trauma (McDermott et al., 2008). Racism, thus, may oxygenate ‘historic’ (Duran & Duran, 2005) or ‘collective trauma’ (Atkinson, 1997). The contemporary damage from colonial dispossession, violence, child removal and social exclusion plays out in the number and severity of stressful life events routinely carried by significant numbers of Indigenous Australian families (Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (WAACHS), 2007). A family might already be saddled, but coping, with a burden of premature deaths, or chronic illness, high levels of mental distress, or community discord or violence – some unwanted legacy of colonisation – when an additional scenario starts playing out: one child starts skipping school to avoid abusive playground interactions; or store security continually targets a parent, following them from display rack to display rack; or Ku Klux Klan-styled leaflets start circulating in their home town.

Yet, whilst the literature on racism-related health outcomes now reflects a deeper understanding of the visceral power of racism’s effects (Drexler, 2007; Tull, Sheu, Butler & Cornelious, 2005), the complexity of the processes involved, the consequences of accumulative experience and the indirect, political/structural aspect of much Indigenous experience of racism are satisfactorily addressed in neither the scientific literature nor public discourse (Davis, 2008; Paradies et al., 2008). A key enabler here, then, would be improved recognition of the pervasiveness of sometimes ‘invisible’, sometimes disguised, racism. In the process of making recommendations on Indigenous social and emotional well-being, the national and New South Wales peak Aboriginal community-controlled health bodies stated, in effect, that as a nation Australia doesn’t really comprehend how racism affects Aboriginal people – neither the repetitive nature of exposure, nor the depth of the effects engendered. In their terms, racism “*permeat[es]*” Indigenous Australian experience (NACCHO/AHMRC Aboriginal and Islander Social and Emotional Well-Being Forum, 2003). I’ve described this elsewhere as “wounds that break their stitches every morning” (McDermott, 2003).

The peak bodies further note that the discourse around Indigenous health and well-being needs to reflect what is actually happening, every day, on an individual and institutional level. This call reflects the manner in which the Indigenous holistic perspective of health and well-being is applied, not only to service delivery, but also to theoretical frameworks and disease/disorder aetiology. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia perceives the commonplace, conceptual and service delivery