

## ESSAY

# Decolonising psychology

Why voice matters

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IN NOVEMBER 2020, the long-awaited *Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Mental Health* in Australia was released publicly. Among its many recommendations, it highlighted the concept that health is more than the absence of illness and that a holistic understanding of the social, political and economic impacts on people and communities plays a significant role in health (including mental health) outcomes. It also emphasised the need for greater attention on prevention and early intervention, making explicit reference to social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) in this role.

Little in the report is new to those working in health, and particularly to those working in Indigenous mental health spaces. Work by Pat Dudgeon, Maddie Boe and Roz Walker had been published in *Research in Health Science* earlier that year exploring the possibility of addressing inequities in Indigenous mental health and wellbeing through transformative and decolonising research and practice. This work called for exactly these same changes across the definitions, policies, service provision and education of health professionals, arguing for SEWB to become the foundational knowledge through which these analyses are conducted.

Social and emotional wellbeing is an Indigenous theoretical framework that offers a significant contribution to understanding the intersectionality of health. It provides a lens through which practitioners, researchers, educators and policymakers can conceptualise, analyse, develop and deliver effective

responses that situate health within the complexities that are too frequently ignored. Its important collective elements include culturally defined family and kin relationships, community relationships and acknowledgement of the role of Elders, cultural practice, and connection to country, spirituality and ancestors.

It's important to note that these elements are sources of resilience and represent protective factors against mental health problems and suicide; in this way, they provide the exact focus the Productivity Commission recommended. That many health professionals are not receiving training in this aspect of prevention is a cause for concern.

Further evidence of the utility of a prevention approach founded on SEWB comes from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention and Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP), which was based at the University of Western Australia from June 2014 to March 2017. That project's research findings confirmed the need for interventions focused on strengthening all domains of social and emotional wellbeing, including culturally based healing programs that connect people with cultural traditions; education and early interventions to address alcohol and substance misuse; and prevention efforts that are evidence-based, relevant and address the range of systemic issues that reduce people's capacity to make positive choices to enhance their mental health and wellbeing. They also call for a greater focus on supporting and restoring protective factors, such as connecting communities, strengthening individuals and rebuilding families.

The centrality of social determinants and cultural considerations has been recognised in a plethora of reports and peer-reviewed research findings in recent years, including work published by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, The Healing Foundation and *The Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing: Te Mauri – Pimatisiwi*. ATSISPEP's findings also identified the need for a systems approach – involving all aspects of community life – in suicide prevention solutions, and this approach is also applicable to other health issues. Strategies that build on strengths, resilience and endurance within Indigenous communities and that recognise the important historical and cultural diversity within these communities are essential components if service providers and policymakers are to have any real chance of addressing the adverse impacts of colonisation. There is also a demonstrated need to increase Indigenous community and mainstream workforce capacity to

understand, cope with and respond to people experiencing trauma, loss and grief. As the Healing Foundation suggested in *Bringing Them Home 20 Years On* (2017), developing skills such as conflict mediation, suicide prevention, mental health, first aid and lateral violence prevention is required to build a trauma-informed workforce.

APPLYING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES – and Indigenous psychologies in particular – to complex social phenomena is a global trend that has grown steadily over the past few decades, and it's now being acknowledged by the seats of power. The benefits of listening to and acting on the knowledge base of societies that are tens of thousands of years older than Western knowledge systems are profound; the fact that this knowledge has been ignored until recently speaks to the pervasive power of whiteness and entrenched racism. Nonetheless, change is finally happening, and psychology is among the disciplines attempting to shift the dominance of Western knowledge paradigms. In this way, psychology can be at the forefront of a global movement recognising the central role Indigenous knowledges can play in addressing a range of social issues – a role that is already emerging in response to the climate crisis and agricultural management, and one that is equally important in the areas of wellbeing and prevention. This represents a seismic paradigm shift in the discipline – it recognises that the intrinsic connection between the existential and political condition impacts both how we approach, educate and train practitioners, and how policy and intervention are conceptualised and implemented.

Psychologists represent the largest workforce in the mental health sector, and consequently play a significant part in providing services to Australia's diverse population. The knowledge base that underpins their training and resultant practice thus becomes critical if they are to meet the needs of that population, or if a more holistic and preventive approach is to be enacted. But while there is significant support among policymakers and academics to include Indigenous knowledges in psychology education and training, there is also resistance, uncertainty and, in some cases, paralysis due to a lack of knowledge and skill on the part of educators in the discipline. Such responses are unsurprising when you consider that these educators are a product of the system and process that they themselves are replicating in their practice. Not only that, most educators in psychology also represent the dominant cultural

group of white Anglo ancestry in which the knowledge base of psychology was incubated.

Because psychology emerged as a discipline somewhere between the subjectivity of philosophy and the objectivity of physical science, it grappled with both orientations. This dualism between what constitutes evidence and values as well as adherence to an unrealistic conviction of value neutrality can be conceived as ideological hegemony that serves only to maintain the status quo and reinforce the power of the dominant group. Voices that pointed out that the *how* and *why* of human behaviour could not adequately be addressed within a narrow view of science were dismissed as unscientific. In this way, psychological research has created and maintained a power base of theory – and interpretation based on theory – that protects its position as ‘expert’. Alternative ways of knowing are devalued or dismissed and in doing this, psychology can distance itself from the realities of the persons, groups and issues it seeks to objectify. As Henry A Giroux – the pioneer of critical pedagogy and current Professor of Public Scholarship at McMaster University – has argued, in adhering to a form of science that legitimises or validates certain types of knowledge over others, there exists a danger of ignoring or overlooking essential aspects of existence as it is experienced by different peoples. In reinforcing a Western hegemonic understanding of what constitutes knowledge and human functioning, we ignore the evidence of the peoples and groups who successfully navigate these global complexities without referring to those dominant knowledge systems.

AS OUR EARLIER work has demonstrated, this silencing of alternative epistemologies and methodologies through a narrative that psychology is objective, neutral and universal has limited our understanding of the human condition and all its complexities. It has effectively suppressed alternative and legitimate perspectives from the scope of current teachings by promoting the myth of universality and by restricting the knowledges to which students are exposed. This becomes particularly relevant in a settler context where students are taught about Indigenous issues through a Western, colonial lens. Such a standpoint is usually deficit-focused and fails to consider the effects of colonisation and the resulting intergenerational trauma on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. It also fails to consider the inherent power associated with the legacy of the coloniser and the legitimacy

of determining which knowledge is to be transmitted and which is to be ignored.

This monocultural approach to psychology education is problematic for several reasons. First, not only does it mean that psychology students often graduate with a deficit-focused view of Indigenous peoples, communities and issues, including mental health, but also – and potentially more importantly – that they fail to understand the effects of colonisation. These same graduates may later work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and yet may know little about how to do so in a culturally safe, responsive and respectful way. Secondly, current psychology curricula can be difficult to translate across other cultural contexts and peoples. In turn, this can lead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students from other cultural backgrounds, to feel excluded from the content and left to grapple alone to work out how it is relevant to their own cultural context. This has consequences for recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in psychology, and evidence consistently demonstrates that the absence and scarcity of cultural visibility in the curriculum remains a significant barrier to minority group participation.

At a broader level, there is a need to decolonise psychology as a discipline and as a profession. Not only must the knowledge base be deconstructed and rebuilt to incorporate Indigenous psychologies, but the pedagogical practices must also be contested. In addition, non-Indigenous educators and students need to decolonise their cultural identities and develop critical reflexivity relating to the history, context and privilege associated with being a member of the dominant cultural group. This requires a far more extensive reconstruction of the entire educational journey and an acknowledgement of Australia's history – including the dark and discomfiting realities associated with colonisation processes and their contemporary realities. Unfortunately, despite several attempts to provide a more historically accurate understanding of the nation's evolution and the harms accrued to Indigenous peoples along the way, the dominant perspective remains entrenched, and with it a white/non-Indigenous identity grounded in supremacy that is reinforced through the educational systems and knowledges transmitted. The complexities of identity are at the heart of decolonisation. Understanding where one 'sits' as a descendant of the First Fleet or as a migrant in a settler context requires an honest unpacking of self that includes the historical ideological/philosophical

language that shaped the understandings of the time as well as how these understandings manifest in contemporary practice. It necessitates an often brutal recognition of one's inherited racism as a product of socialisations and the cultural context one is born into, and it demands analysis of who each of us chooses to be once those understandings are clear. Grasping the intersectionality and complexities associated with navigating often conflicting or competing identities at any given time and place demands a humility and reflexivity that has to be taught and developed over time – this is currently missing in psychology education and training. Developing critical reflexivity within teaching practices and curricula design can transform the educational landscape into one that is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledges, cultures, values and beliefs. Also, and importantly, this modifies underlying philosophical thinking and standpoints that ultimately contribute to 'epistemological equivalence', whereby no single knowledge or body of 'truth' is viewed as superior to any other – instead, each learns and benefits from the other.

IT WAS WITH these ideas in mind that the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP) was conceived in 2012 with funding secured from 2013 for a collaborative learning and teaching project that aimed to increase the recruitment, retention and graduation of Indigenous psychology students, to integrate Indigenous knowledges and psychologies in psychology courses for all students, and to facilitate training pathways. One significant outcome was the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council's (APAC) endorsement of the project's outcomes, which led to a statement of support being included in APAC's new Accreditation Standards in 2019. This requires all psychology schools and departments to demonstrate their inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum, to provide pathways and support to recruit and retain Indigenous students, and to include cultural responsiveness as a graduate competency in the training of all psychology students.

Since the original grant concluded in 2016, there has been a shift in the societal response to many of the issues captured in the project. Black Lives Matter emerged as a significant social movement following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, and this spread globally. In Australia it galvanised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

and non-Indigenous allies to protest against the alarming and unacceptable number of deaths in custody. The protests attracted thousands of people in cities and regional centres across the country, signifying the importance of the issue for much of the Australian population. That these protests occurred despite a global pandemic and its strict physical distancing requirements emphasises the intensity of emotion and outrage at these deaths and the apparent impunity of the perpetrators. The underlying systemic and institutional racism that ignores or downplays black/blak lives is arguably Australia's single most important challenge, and the urgency of addressing this cannot be overstated. At the same time, the response to the pandemic by Indigenous communities has been hailed as a success for Indigenous governance and management. Given the vulnerability of First Nations peoples, particularly those in regional and remote areas, to any form of respiratory infection, the decision by community leaders to enter lockdown demonstrated a strong proactive response to a deadly risk. This is a clear manifestation of self-determination's centrality to wellbeing: it is among the factors most associated with the success of preventive health approaches.

Several universities around the country have made strides in meeting the requirements of the new Accreditation Standards and will form part of the reference group for the revised AIPEP 2 initiative. This new project will be overseen and guided by members of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association (AIPA) and other senior Indigenous scholars and practitioners to ensure Indigenous governance. The reference group will form a community of practice to share knowledge, experiences and resources, and this will assist educators and students to develop their understanding of the purpose and nature of a decolonisation agenda for the discipline and profession. While past relationships between Indigenous peoples and psychology have been less than ideal, reflecting the dominant evolutionary views of social Darwinism and white supremacy, recent times have seen important shifts. The Australian Psychological Society (APS) now engages with key Indigenous researchers, educators and community leaders to integrate Indigenous knowledges, culture and practices into the training and education of psychology students as well as the daily routines and practices of the APS itself. The APS partnered with the original AIPEP team and is a member of the reference group for AIPEP 2.

While the APS demonstrated its support for a decolonisation agenda – and its affirmation of the Black Lives Matter movement – by releasing a joint

statement with AIPA and others against racially motivated violence, perhaps the most significant event in the history of the society was the Apology it offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in 2016 for the profession's involvement in past policies and practices – not least of which was the separation of children from their families known as the Stolen Generations.

In this way, psychology can stand at the forefront of recognising the central role that Indigenous knowledges can play in addressing critical social issues. Nowhere is this more important than in contributing to a healthy society where self-determination and human rights are supported. This requires a workforce that is taught essential skills and knowledge about the history and contemporary impacts of colonisation for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, that understands the importance of working appropriately with diverse populations and that affords Indigenous knowledges an epistemic equivalence with Western knowledge constructions. Given that such a workforce can be created by implementing AIPEP philosophies and practices, this project represents a pivotal moment in the history and evolution of psychology education and practice.

For references see [griffithreview.com](http://griffithreview.com)

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Pat Dudgeon is from the Bardi people of the Kimberley, WA. She was the first Aboriginal psychologist to graduate in Australia and has made outstanding contributions to Indigenous psychology and higher education. The inaugural Chair of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association, she was also a commissioner with the Australian National Mental Health Commission and is a research professor at the School of Indigenous Studies, University of Western Australia. She also works in the NHMRC Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing research project.

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