

Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.



Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being

Laura Cook

School of Psychology
University of South Australia
Adelaide, SA, Australia, 5000

Email: laura.cook@postgrads.unisa.edu.au

Abstract

This paper discusses issues which arose while conducting research for an undergraduate presentation on fostering resilience in Indigenous communities. A review of the literature highlights factors common to successful projects. These factors included working collaboratively, relinquish the role of 'experts' in Indigenous psychologies, and learning to listen to the experiences of Indigenous communities before acting. There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating both the positive impacts of collaborative work with Indigenous communities, and the negative consequences of prescriptive interventions. However, at policy level there currently appears to be a resurgence of prescriptive and paternalistic interventions. As a discipline which promotes evidence based practice, it is argued that psychology has a responsibility to promote social and political change when evidence suggests that disadvantage is being increased or maintained. As a future psychologist, it concerns me that we do not appear to be rising to that challenge.

Introduction

The aforementioned presentation focused on the potential of narrative gerontology to facilitate the intergenerational transmission of resilience in Indigenous communities. Resilience has been shown to be a powerful protective factor against the effects of minority stress (Daniel, O'Dea, Rowley, McDermott, & Kelly, 1999; Eley et al., 2006; Halloran, 2004; Homel, Lincoln, & Herd, 1999). The telling of life stories can assist individuals to identify strengths, heal relationships, pass on coping strategies and create novel solutions to problems (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; Cohen, Green, Lee, Gonzalez, & Evans, 2006; Dudgeon, Garvey, & Pickett, 2000; Halloran, 2004; Homel et al., 1999;

Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.

Kenyon & Randall, 1999; Koch, Mann, Kralik, & van Loon, 2005; Ranzijn, 2002; Webster, 1999). Being heard by 'outsiders', such as psychologists, can facilitate the building of trust and reconciliation, as well as guiding interventions (Dudgeon, Collard, & Pickett, 1997; Jeeawody & Haveika, 2006; Koch et al., 2005; McTaggart, 1999; Tsey, Whiteside, Deemal, & Gibson, 2003). The presentation also discussed the positive impact of the Participatory Action Research model (PAR) in facilitating the process of listening and talking as a way to move from problems to solutions in addressing obstacles to Indigenous well-being (Koch et al., 2005; McTaggart, 1999).

A number of issues became apparent as I researched the topic of Indigenous mental health. Firstly, Psychology has made progress in learning to work effectively with Indigenous communities (Anderson et al., 2006; Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; Burchill, 2006; Hammill, 2001; Jeeawody & Haveika, 2006). Secondly, the progress that has been made is strongly related to listening to communities and facilitating Indigenous control over programs (Dudgeon et al., 1997; Green & Sonn, 2005; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Ranzijn, McConnochie, Day, & Nolan, 2006). Finally, that Government policy and Institutional practices often seem to work against collaborative attempts at improving conditions in Indigenous communities (Anderson et al., 2006; Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, 2005; Drew, 2006; Gerrett-Magee, 2006; Henry, Houston, & Moony, 2004; Hunter, 2006).

Context

It has been argued that change at the (micro) community level is not sustainable if there is no matching change at the (macro) policy level (McTaggart, 1999; Minutjukur, 2006; O'Donoghue, 1999; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003; Riley, 1997; VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit, 2000). These issues lead me to wonder how psychology as a discipline can be more effective in supporting policy change, as well as community and individual change. Having now moved on to postgraduate study as a Clinical Masters student, I have moved one step closer to entering the profession. However, I am still seeking answers to those questions. This paper is an exploration of questions which will have an impact on how I hope to practice as a psychologist in the future. Given a strong personal commitment to social justice, it is likely that I will at some point engage in work with Indigenous communities, refugees, and other marginalised groups. It would be preferable if that work went beyond 'damage control' and addressed social structures which perpetuate disadvantage.

Evidence of 'what works'

The links between systemic disadvantage and poor physical and mental health are well known (Anderson et al., 2006; Brown, 2001; Eley et al., 2006; Jeeawody & Haveika, 2006; Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2004; O'Donoghue, 1999; Ranzijn & Bin-Sallik, 2001; Tsey et al., 2003). There is also considerable evidence which indicates that self-determination and empowerment of individuals and communities is an important component of addressing disadvantage (Anderson et al., 2006; Brown, 2001; Burchill, 2006; Cohen et al., 2006; Dudgeon et al., 1997; Dudgeon et al., 2000; Halloran, 2004; Mellor, 2004; Riley, 1997). As previously noted, the progress which has been made by psychology in working with Indigenous

Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.

communities is largely a result of adopting a collaborative and empowering approach (Burchill, 2006; Dudgeon et al., 1997; Halloran, 2004; Jeeawody & Haveika, 2006; Koch et al., 2005; McTaggart, 1999; O'Donoghue, 1999; Ranzijn et al., 2006; Riley, 1997).

Ethical imperatives and obstructions

The principles of collaboration and empowerment are codified in the Australian Psychological Society's (APS) ethical guidelines for working with Indigenous communities. These guidelines promote cultural sensitivity, community involvement in research and practice, and more effective training of psychologists (Australian Psychological Society, 2003). An undergraduate training course in Indigenous cultures for psychology students has recently been instituted at the University of South Australia to help meet this last guideline (Ranzijn et al., 2006). The APS (2003) ethical guidelines also note that:

Psychological solutions to the current-day work, health, educational and social issues confronting indigenous people are likely to be unsuccessful, unless political, legal and social solutions for the restoration of their cultures and individual human rights, privileges and dignity are also found. (p. 5)

This statement implies that psychologists, and the discipline as a whole have an obligation to work for wider social change, particularly where our evidence base suggests that Government or other institutional policies are moving away from 'best practice'.

Drew (2006) noted that the requirements of garnering academic currency in the form of publications and grants may hamper efforts to working respectfully and collaboratively with Indigenous communities (Drew, 2006). Prioritizing the creation of academic 'products' may be at odds with creating long-term transformational relationships between researchers and communities (Drew, 2006). There appears to be increasing tension between working ethically with Indigenous communities and fitting in with 'economically rational' corporate models of knowledge production (Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2005).

Reinscribing disadvantage

One example of how 'whitefella' laws and institutional practices reinscribe disadvantage is related to the ways that intellectual property rights can exclude Indigenous communities from the programs, and other 'products' which they helped to develop. Burchill (2006) gave an account of a project undertaken to expand the Family Well-Being training program to Tasmanian Indigenous communities in order to address domestic violence (Burchill, 2006). The program was initiated by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and developed "in conjunction with Indigenous groups in Tasmania (p. 8)." The author noted that "an essential feature of this project was the involvement of Indigenous people at all of its stages (p.8)." The program in Tasmania was noted as a successful expansion of the project due in part to the input and support of the Indigenous community. It was considered to demonstrate the effectiveness of the principles of participatory action research (Burchill, 2006). However, Burchill also noted that the training was currently unavailable to the communities which had participated as the

Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.

“Curriculum for the training remains the property of Adelaide Tafe College, South Australia (p. 11).” Burchill (2006) also notes that:

Another experience that stifles progressive community development outcomes is when funding organisations expect us to do things their way, but sometimes this means we lose control of the work. They take their stories, end a project, and then we are left to deal with what is left. (p. 11-12)

According to an evaluation of the original program by Tsey and Every (2000), the course was initially developed by “a group of Adelaide-based survivors of the ‘stolen generation’ (p. 509).” It seems both counterproductive and ethically problematic that a program developed by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people has become the property of an institution which can then limit its availability to the group it was designed for. This is just one illustration of how Indigenous disadvantage is sustained by institutional prerogatives and social practices. This seems to be an area where Psychology should speak out.

Similar controversies exist in relation to Indigenous community activities which have been undertaken using Community Employment Development Project (CDEP) funding. Under current Australian Copyright law, the Government, acting as the employer of Indigenous artists, holds the copyright to any artwork created during working hours (Australian Copyright Council, 2006). While this may be common practice in other contexts, in the case of Indigenous communities it may act as a barrier to self-empowerment and cultural maintenance.

There have been similar problems with language revival materials. The Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Corporation's (FATSIL) protocol guide addresses the issues of conducting language revival using Government funding (Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Corporation, 2004). They note that:

under the Australian copyright regime and, unless written agreements that provide differently are entered into, copyright rights in language materials usually vest in non-Indigenous individuals or institutions, such as the Crown and funding bodies, not the community. (p.17)

The fact that the Australian Government can own the renewed language of an already disadvantaged group represents a continuation of colonisation and cultural genocide (Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Corporation, 2004).

Evidence of the need for political engagement

These issues may be considered outside the normal range of psychology, however, given that they impact the self-determination of Indigenous communities, they may affect well-being and reinscribe systemic disadvantage. If psychology is to follow through on the recommendation of the APS to find “political, legal and social solutions (p.5)” to Indigenous disadvantage, then it would appear that working for change to current political policy is in our job description.

Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.

Recent policy changes have weakened Indigenous self-determination through the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and undermined funding of regional councils (Hunter, 2006). Land rights are being weakened, and more recently, the Government has adopted a policy of 'mainstreaming' Indigenous services (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, 2005). These activities have been called 'assimilation by stealth' (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, 2005). They are being widely criticised as a roll-back of Indigenous rights and an move to break-up Indigenous communities (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, 2005; Hunter, 2006; Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association Inc, 2005; Ngiya Institute for Law, 2005; Turner, 2006; Wright, 2006). According to Minutjukur (2006):

Now, in 2006, our CDEP program and our Municipal Services have been changed and we don't know what the future holds. And funding for our Community Office has disappeared even though the Community Council is still trying to look after our community. We feel like the grass is being burnt under our feet and no one is listening. Maybe the Government wants us all to move to Alice Springs or Adelaide. But we can't leave our country or it will die, and our children will die, and we will die. Then no one will be able to hear us. (Minutjukur, 2006)

While there has been much comment on the recent changes and their potential impact from a great variety of sources, there has been a conspicuous lack of comment or input from the discipline of psychology. It would seem that psychologists are well positioned at the interfaces between Indigenous communities, academic institutions and Government policies to observe their interactions and provide informed comment and discussion. While such comment is apparent within psychology journals, there is little evidence of it in more public forums.

Last year the letters to the editor section of *InPsych*, the bulletin of the APS, contained a letter regarding the resignation of a 30 year member (Wilks, 2006). The reason given was the author's disappointment that the APS had not issued public statements on the effects of detention in asylum seekers. Wilks expressed a belief that psychologists have a "professional responsibility to speak out and inform the general public and media of what we know to be the deleterious effects on the mental health of detainees (p.24)", and noted that on "this and other issues, other professional groups are willing to comment (p. 24)." The APS President responded by affirming that the APS had put out media releases, written to the Minister, for Immigration, and written submissions to Government Inquiries (Gordon, 2006). It is hoped that the lack of comment by the APS on the current Indigenous policy changes is also a case of "lack of knowledge (p. 24)," on my part, rather than an absence of engagement. However, if it is the case that I am missing the comment and input in media and Government submissions, even though I am actively seeking it, perhaps we are not speaking loudly enough.

Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.

Conclusion

Greater involvement in public policy debate may have a number of positive effects on the discipline of psychology – It could increase the social relevance of psychology, enhance our credibility with marginalised communities, and provide a stronger example of social responsibility to students who will someday enter the field. Working well with Indigenous communities, or other marginalised groups, implies addressing inequality in the wider culture of which we are members (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003). It appears to me that the ethical practice of psychology in our current culture requires political engagement at both the personal and professional levels. It is also mandated by our stated allegiance to evidence based practice. If we know what works, and yet allow our practices to be dictated by a damaging status quo, we are complicit in the continuing oppression of others.

Author's note

It has been a year since I originally wrote this paper. Since that time, policies to address Indigenous disadvantage have continued to be implemented with little community consultation. The recent controversy over Federal intervention in response to child abuse in Indigenous communities is a case in point. It is heartening to note that the Australian Psychological Society has recently released a statement calling for increased community consultation and control over the interventions (Australian Psychological Society, 2007). It is hoped that this statement will move beyond the confines of the APS website, and represent a significant contribution to the public debate.

Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.

References

- Anderson, I., Crengle, S., Kamaka, M., et al. (2006). *Indigenous health in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific*. Retrieved 10th October, 2006, from <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezlibproxy.unisa.edu.au/ehost/pdf?vid=60&hid=104&sid=a689f758-1589-4390-a3f0-c49cee28b193%40sessionmgr103>
- Australian Copyright Council. (2006). *Information sheet G082: Indigenous artists*. Retrieved 31st October, 2006, from www.copyright.org.au/pdf/acc/infosheets_pdf/G082.pdf
- Australian Psychological Society. (2003). *Ethical guidelines: Complementing the APS code of ethics* (5th ed.). Melbourne: The Australian Psychological Society.
- Australian Psychological Society. (2007). *APS statement - Federal Government intervention on safety in NT Indigenous communities*. Retrieved July 29th, 2007, from http://www.psychology.org.au/news/news_updates/#6jul07
- Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation. (2005). 'Mutual obligation', 'shared responsibility' and 'mainstreaming' in Indigenous affairs. Retrieved 18th October, 2006, from http://www.antarvictoria.org.au/documents/indig_policy_mainstreaming_fact_sheet.doc
- Bennett, B., & Zubrzycki, J. (2003). Hearing the stories of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers: challenging and educating the system. *Australian Social Work*, 55, 61-70.
- Brown, R. (2001). Australian Indigenous mental health. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 10, 33-41.
- Burchill, M. (2006). Strengths and challenges: Working towards family well-being in Tasmania. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 18, 8-13.
- Cohen, H., Green, R., Lee, Y., et al. (2006). Older adults who overcame oppression. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 87, 1-8.
- Daniel, M., O'Dea, K., Rowley, K., et al. (1999). Social environmental stress in Indigenous populations: Potential biopsychosocial mechanisms. *Annals the New York Academy of Sciences*, 896, 420-423.
- Drew, N. (2006). The seagull imperative. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 18, 40-43.
- Dudgeon, P., Collard, S., & Pickett, H. (1997). Reconciliation and Psychology: Indigenous Australian perspectives. *Curtin Indigenous Research Centre Discussion Paper*, 5.
- Dudgeon, P., Garvey, D., & Pickett, H. (Eds.). (2000). *Working with Indigenous Australians: A handbook for psychologists*. Perth: Gunada Press.
- Eley, D., Hunter, K., Young, L., et al. (2006). Tools and methodologies for investigating the mental health needs of Indigenous patients: it's about communication. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 14, 33-37.
- Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Corporation. (2004). *FATSIL guide to community protocols for Indigenous language protocols*. Retrieved 1st November, 2006, from www.fatsil.org/papers/FATSILProtocolsguide.pdf
- Gerrett-Magee, R. (2006). Discomfort: The university student and Indigenous peoples. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 18, 28-32.
- Gordon, A. (2006). Response by Amanda Gordon, APS president. *InPsync*, 28, 24.

- Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.
- Green, M., & Sonn, C. (2005). Examining discourses of whiteness and the potential for reconciliation. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 15, 478-492.
- Halloran, M. (2004). Cultural maintenance and trauma in Indigenous Australia. *Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law*, 36.
- Hammill, J. (2001). Granny rights: Combating the granny burnout syndrome among Australian Indigenous communities. *Development*, 44, 69-74.
- Henry, B., Houston, S., & Moony, G. (2004, 10). *Institutional racism in Australian healthcare: a plea for decency*. Retrieved 15th October, 2006, from http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/180_10_170504/hen10112_fm.html
- Homel, R., Lincoln, R., & Herd, B. (1999). Risk and resilience: Crime and violence prevention in Aboriginal communities. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 32, 182-196.
- Hunter, E. (2006). Social engineers and bystanders: the limits of 'responsibility' in Indigenous affairs. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 14, 24-32.
- Jeeawody, A., & Haveika, J. (2006). *The Djirruwang national Indigenous mental health pilot project: Addressing promotion and prevention*. Retrieved 10th October, 2006, from <http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/health/clinical/mentalhealth/publications/publication1.pdf>
- Kenyon, G., & Randall, W. (1999). Introduction: Narrative gerontology. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13, 1-5.
- Koch, T., Mann, S., Kralik, D., & van Loon, A. (2005). Reflection: Look, think and act cycles in participatory action research. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 10, 261-278.
- McTaggart, R. (1999). Reflection on the purposes of research, action, and scholarship: A case of cross-cultural participatory action research. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 12, 483-511.
- Mellor, D. (2004). Responses to racism: A taxonomy of coping styles used by Aboriginal Australians. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 74, 56-71.
- Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. (2004). *Universal prevention: Pathway to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage*. Retrieved 10th October, 2006, from <http://www.mcatsia.gov.au/cproot/-1/1484/UP%20Concept%20Paper.doc>
- Minutjukur, M. (2006). *Indigenous politics: A letter to Australians*. Retrieved 25th October, 2006, from <http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetail.asp?ArticleID=1810>
- Narungga Aboriginal Progress Association Inc. (2005). *CDEP discussion paper 2005: Consultation questions & answers: NAPA*.
- Ngija Institute for Law, P. a. P. T. T. (2005). *Briefing paper no. 2: Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP)*. Retrieved 23rd October, 2006, from <http://www.jumbunna.uts.edu.au/research/cdep.pdf>
- O'Donoghue, L. (1999). Towards a culture of improving Indigenous health in Australia. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 7, 64-69.
- Prilleltensky, I., & Prilleltensky, O. (2003). Reconciling the roles of professional helper and critical agent in health psychology. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 8, 243-246.

- Cook L. (2007) Psychology's role in working with Indigenous communities to promote well-being, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 3(2), 106-114.
- Ranzijn, R. (2002). The potential of older adults to enhance community quality of life: links between positive psychology and productive aging. *Ageing International*, 27, 30-55.
- Ranzijn, R., & Bin-Sallik, M. (2001). *The health and well-being of Aboriginal Elders*. Paper presented at the National Conference of Australian Psychological Society, Adelaide.
- Ranzijn, R., McConnochie, K., Day, A., & Nolan, W. (2006). Benchmarking the teaching of Australian Indigenous content in undergraduate psychology. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 18, 23-27.
- Riley, R. (1997). From exclusion to negotiation: the role of psychology in Aboriginal social justice. *Curtin Indigenous Research Centre Discussion Paper*, 1.
- Tsey, K., Whiteside, M., Deemal, A., & Gibson, T. (2003). Social determinants of health, the 'control factor' and the Family Wellbeing Empowerment Program. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 11, 34-39.
- Turner, C. (2006). Talking about sharing - Ongoing conversations about how psychology can and should work for and with Indigenous Australia. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 18, 6-7.
- VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit. (2000). *We don't like research but in Koori hands it could make a difference*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
- Webster, J. (1999). World views and narrative gerontology: Situating reminiscence behavior within a lifespan perspective. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13, 29-42.
- Wilks, M. (2006). APS silence on asylum seekers. *InPsych*, 28, 24.
- Winter, A., Wiseman, J., & Muirhead, B. (2005). *Beyond rhetoric: University - community engagement in Victoria*. Retrieved 23rd October, 2006, from www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/highered/Beyond_Rhetoric_full_report_ended_ver_July05.pdf
- Wright, J. (2006). *No education, no work, and now no CDEP*. Retrieved 23rd October, 2006, from <http://www.ntew.org.au/news/2006/2006/13690>