

Facing a World of NO: How Accessible is a Career in Psychology for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians?

Jacinta Wainwright,
Victoria University, Australia
Heather Gridley and Emma Sampson
Australian Psychology Society

As a discipline and profession, psychology has far more to gain than lose by attracting and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to pursue careers in psychology. The availability of Indigenous health professionals is an important, if not critical, component of providing culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. If psychologists are genuine about addressing the wide gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health outcomes, an important way forward is to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychologists from the current total of fewer than 50 Australia-wide, which represents only 0.3% of the profession. This paper draws together interviews with 3 Aboriginal women who have completed 4 years of accredited study in psychology. Their comments provide insight into the barriers confronting many Indigenous people embarking on a career in psychology, whether it is pursued via a supervised practice pathway or accredited postgraduate study. Learnings include the importance of addressing institutional and interpersonal racism, challenging culturally-bound approaches within psychology curricula, and ensuring cultural safety and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and graduates.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience alarming disparities in health, including a 10-17 year gap in physical health and life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, as well as being twice as likely to report higher levels of psychological distress compared to non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009). The links between the social context (particularly the impact of colonisation) and poorer health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are well established (Garvey, 2008) and have led to a number of government and community initiatives such as 'Closing the Gap' (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2009).

Increasing the number and capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals who can respond to the needs of their own communities has been widely

acknowledged as vital in meeting closing the gap targets (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew & Kelly, 2012). Yet their significant underrepresentation in the higher education system compounds the high levels of social and economic disadvantage faced by Indigenous people (FaHCSIA, 2009). Supporting and graduating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people "qualified to take up professional positions across community, government and corporate sector will [therefore] help to address this disadvantage" (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. ix).

Psychology as a discipline and profession has much to gain by attracting, supporting and increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians pursuing careers in psychology. Along with increased capacity to provide culturally safe, equitable and accessible services (Garvey, 2008), the input and influence of Indigenous knowledge, traditions and experience has the potential to enrich and

diversify the field of psychology and make it more culturally relevant and accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While this is relevant to the whole discipline, it aligns particularly with the field of community psychology, which explicitly espouses key values of empowerment and self-determination, diversity, social justice, partnership and inclusivity, and requires that “all students become knowledgeable of and sensitive to the needs of people from a range of cultural backgrounds... with special attention to the particular strengths and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians” (Australian Psychological Society, 2010, p. 25).

There are currently fewer than 50 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander registered psychologists, representing only 0.3% of the profession¹. According to the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA, 2010), this number should be closer to 625 to achieve parity (2.5 percent of the Australian population are Indigenous), which AIPA points out will take another 293 years to achieve at the current uptake of Indigenous people pursuing careers in psychology.

Given the very low number of Indigenous psychologists, it is important to understand the barriers and opportunities that exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and graduates on the path to registration. This paper explores how accessible this path is from the perspective and experiences of three Indigenous people who have completed four years of APAC-accredited psychology study. Given the relatively small number of Indigenous students who enrol in undergraduate psychology programs, and the even smaller number who are admitted to and successfully complete a fourth year, it is likely that there is much more to be asked and said about those first stages of the journey. But the focus of this paper is on that very small number of Indigenous students who do reach that point.

Method

We approached three Aboriginal graduates known to one or more of the authors who were currently working in the health and community services sector, to share their experiences of studying and pursuing psychology as a career. These graduates were selected opportunistically as information-rich cases, given the potential of their experiences to shed light on undergraduate, postgraduate and supervised practice components of psychology, and to provide perspectives on the psychology curriculum as experienced by Aboriginal students. They represented a diversity of experiences in terms of location, career and life stages, and had completed their undergraduate and fourth year psychology studies across four different universities. They did not know each other.

All three graduates had been mature-aged students, one was pregnant with her first child, and one was a recently separated mother of two young children. Two had extensive work histories in both Indigenous-specific and mainstream settings, including family violence and child and family services. At the time of interview in 2011, Sally² had attempted to pursue the supervised practice (intern) pathway, but discontinued the route and was on track to qualify as a family therapist instead; Kellie was attempting to complete supervised practice in the public sector despite her first supervisor having withdrawn in frustration at what both saw as the registration board’s unreasonable expectations; and Jayne, having failed to gain entry to a Masters program, continued working with Indigenous people in the areas of social and emotional wellbeing and education, and was considering resuming the supervised practice pathway to complete her training as a psychologist before her ten-year limit post fourth-year expired.

The graduates were interviewed by the first author as part of a practicum placement with the Public Interest team at the Australian Psychological Society. She explained to the interviewees that this was not a formal research

project but an opportunity to document the experiences of one or more Indigenous psychology students or graduates and thus inform the Reconciliation Action Plan project that was underway at the APS. Interview questions focussed on their experiences of psychology studies, what had supported them in their studies and subsequent pathway to registration as a psychologist, and what barriers they had experienced along the way. They were also asked where they saw their Aboriginality fitting with these experiences, what advice they would give another Aboriginal student interested in psychology, and how they would like the data from the interview to be used. All three were very keen to be involved, with comments like “anything that will hopefully get the [registration] board to understand our issues” and “the APAC [Australian Psychology Accreditation Council] guidelines do need to be tackled if we want to get heaps more Indigenous psych[ologist]s into Masters programs”. Their responses are summarised here under the broad headings of barriers to and facilitators of access to study and career pathways in psychology.

Barriers to Access: Continuing Study and Registration Pathways in Psychology

The three graduates were invited to comment on any barriers they had experienced or observed during their psychology studies and/or as provisional psychologists en route to registration.

Seeking registration through a supervised practice pathway. Pursuing the supervised practice pathway to achieve full registration as a psychologist was described as extremely stressful by all three graduates interviewed, as well as unaffordable for one. Of the three, only one was still pursuing this path at the time of interview. Overall, procedural requirements towards meeting competency in the prescribed assessment tasks led to feelings of frustration and hopelessness, as resubmitted case studies were deemed not satisfactory, and one graduate’s supervisor had withdrawn from the process in protest. Two

graduates described the tone and content of letters advising the outcome of assessments as having a particularly negative impact on their confidence and capacity to achieve the competency. Sally described her experience of the process as “punitive” and “rigid”, with unclear expectations. She said that after a while:

I would receive letters from the Board but did not want to open them. I would not open them for days or wait until my next supervision session (to open them)... There was no joy (in the process) and I thought I’m not going to finish it. They (the Board) were asking me to jump all these hoops, but did not tell me which ones or how. They gave me no instruction on what the problem was with the case study. I had already written it twice and I did not want to be refused a third time... Sometimes I got so angry and thought ‘don’t they want more Indigenous psychologists?’

Sally commented that many Aboriginal people find mainstream education “difficult to navigate” in addition to dealing with discrimination and abuses of power throughout their lives. As an Aboriginal person she said, “You already face a world of no” and in the face of what she described as the “rigidity and rejection (of the Board)...you are going to throw it in”. The graduates felt that the internship process should be more supportive and flexible; otherwise, as highlighted by Kellie, Indigenous graduates are, “set up to fail” and while “you don’t want special treatment” there should be “some leeway and greater support”. Sally’s suggestion was to “maintain the requirements but provide constructive criticism; the approach should be to support and guide (the graduate) to achieve competence.”

Seeking registration through postgraduate study. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians face major

disparities not only in health but also in education, income and employment. Two graduates identified significant disadvantage in not having completed secondary education, combined with financial disadvantage for one. This disadvantage was not taken into consideration when seeking entry into a psychology Masters program.

After discontinuing an earlier attempt to engage in the supervised practice route, Jayne had recently applied to undertake a Masters course. She was advised that she met all other requirements and received strong support for her application from within the university faculty but she was unsuccessful due to not meeting the minimum standard set by APAC for postgraduate entry: a distinction average of 70 per cent and above; Jayne's results had ranged between 65-75. It was suggested she repeat her fourth year of study, pursue the supervision pathway a second time, or undertake further study outside psychology. She described feeling a mixture of anger and hopelessness and thinking "what's the point, why do I want this, it's not worth it", as well as self-blame; "I should have worked harder." Upon reflection, Jayne suggested that a rigid application of the entry requirements impacts heavily on Indigenous people, resulting in the exclusion of many who are already socially and economically disadvantaged. While wanting to be accepted on her own merits, she also reflected that:

Having completed year 10 at secondary school and not having turned on a computer until I went to university yet nonetheless completing four years of training in psychology, as well as having many years experience working in the community services area and being a single parent of two children, it was difficult to be told that under the current standards I had not done enough.

Encountering racism and culturally

bound approaches. All graduates spoke of their experiences of racism within psychology; two reflected on the broader Eurocentric approach of psychology while one had experienced racism in the classroom. Kellie described how racist and ignorant remarks denying Indigenous experiences of colonialism both past and present featured throughout one course unit and permeated her whole experience of that year of study. In addition, she felt pressure from fellow students (as the only Indigenous person in the class) to know everything relating to Indigenous people. This led to a great deal of stress and hurt and was the first time she had ever felt "really oppressed as an Indigenous person." She would regularly go home from class in tears until she said she eventually "shut up" in that class and when asked for her opinion would decline to comment. When she took this stand her lecturer backed her which she said was the only time he did so. Not receiving back up or support from her lecturer until that time was of particular concern to her; it added to her distress and experience of no support. With the exception of one fellow student who followed her out of a particularly distressing class, she said she received no other support from within the university.

Sally questioned the approach of psychology particularly as it relates to Aboriginal people. She expressed concern that the clinical model of assessment tends to label people and doesn't take the social context into account. As an Aboriginal person she said she is "sick of labels" and that labels are "not helpful." She emphasised that "the context is everything" for Indigenous Australians given what they have been through, and that "putting people into boxes reflects racism." Aboriginal people, she pointed out, have been identified as having higher rates of depression but the context of past and current structural oppression is not fully taken into account within a traditional psychology approach. As an example of the

ongoing or current impact of structural or institutional racism, Sally pointed out that proportionally more Aboriginal children are taken from their families through child protection systems across Australia today than non-Aboriginal children – representing more children than were taken away during the Stolen Generation.

Aboriginal ways of knowing as described by Jayne are completely different to the cognitive and counselling models offered by psychology. She described her psychology studies, particularly at an undergraduate level, as culturally-bound and not relevant from an Aboriginal perspective. If offering advice to another Aboriginal person studying psychology she said:

I would tell them to be aware that their own personal opinions are irrelevant until you are trained and qualified in a (white) man's way. But I would also tell them that even if they find the content of the course is not relevant to them that this does not matter, as the skills you learn such as writing, research and analysis are very relevant. Finally, I would advise them to get support and surround themselves with other Aboriginal students and community members.

Facilitators of Access: Cultural Safety, Equity and Support

Graduates were asked what they found enabled or supported them during their studies. These reflections point to opportunities to increase access and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within psychology and to ensure the curriculum is culturally relevant.

Building culturally appropriate and safe environments within universities. Two interviewees identified the Indigenous Student Support Services (Indigenous Education Units) within their respective universities as the most helpful support and

resource while studying. Sally described how staff at the centre encouraged her to apply for scholarships which she then received. This enabled her to put all her time and attention fully on her study without the need for a part-time job. The centre also provided access to a computer with a library connection, a comfortable and supportive space where people were friendly and good to talk to – “You could attend the centre to study or just hang out.” As a result, she did not encounter any barriers to pursuing psychology at that time, and she had a sense the university was supportive and open to Aboriginal students. Up until then she felt she hadn't connected much with the local Aboriginal community, and this experience “supported me to connect more with my Aboriginal identity.”

Kellie described seeking counsel with an Indigenous elder as the most helpful support, particularly given her experience of racism in class. Through this counsel she felt supported and reassured and was able to continue and successfully complete her fourth year studies. Some, but not all, universities have established ‘Elder-in-residence’ programs, and it is common in Aotearoa/New Zealand for a university or other public body to appoint respected Māori elders (Kaumatua) of either gender as consultants on Māori protocol.

Incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives. Sally's experience highlights the importance of ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives are incorporated into the curriculum and that the program of study is culturally and locally relevant. Having discontinued the supervised practice path, Sally undertook further postgraduate study outside of psychology. The course targeted Aboriginal workers with a particular focus on regional centres. It was delivered in a way that recognised the expertise of the students and was highly collaborative. For example, she said “when presenting theory, lecturers would ask how

this theory fitted within the local Indigenous context” and would modify the application of theory for each setting based on the ideas and experience of the students participating in the course. She is now on track to qualify as a family therapist, not a psychologist.

Discussion: Addressing Barriers along the Road to Registration

The experiences of the Aboriginal graduates interviewed highlight the numerous and interrelated barriers that prevent successful entry into psychology courses and detract from retention once within the discipline. They also identify critical ‘success factors’, which are important for strengthening opportunities for Indigenous Australians wishing to pursue a career in psychology.

These experiences concur with recent research and government reviews which have found that “to succeed at university Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need access to a range of social, financial and academic support... (and)...once at university, the focus on support must be maintained because ‘access’ without effective support is not opportunity” (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 57). As identified by the graduates interviewed, financial disadvantage has an impact on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying psychology. If access to and continuation of study within psychology is to be achieved, not only is the availability of financial support (e.g., income support, scholarships) important, but also essential is the readiness of academic staff and processes (e.g., faculties/schools/course administrators/entry requirements) to take into consideration the impact of this disadvantage in course entry, initiatives to support retention, and assessment methods.

Part of this support is also about providing a culturally safe learning environment at both classroom and university levels. The support provided through Indigenous Education Units, such as

enrolment and access to assistance, tutoring, accommodation support, meal preparation, computer access, culturally safe pastoral care (such as an ‘Elder in residence’) and a culturally safe study and social space for students, has been widely acknowledged as creating a “supportive and welcoming place to come to within an often challenging unfamiliar environment” (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 60). This support is particularly important given the higher number of mature aged and rural and remote Indigenous students who are likely to be living away from their communities and/or supporting extended families.

The interviewees’ experiences of feeling culturally unsafe concurs with research that highlights the need for tertiary institutions to focus on fostering cultural bonding between students and their peers, and identifies the responsibility of educators to create culturally safe learning environments. It also supports the recommendation recently made to the Australian Government (Behrendt et al., 2012) that while Indigenous Education Units are essential in the support they provide to students, responsibility for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be a whole-of-university effort where faculties should be primarily responsible for supporting the academic success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, given the discipline-based knowledge and staff available to them (tutoring, mentoring, connections to the professional world, employment opportunities).

The cultural (in)appropriateness of psychology, as a discipline and profession, was raised by all three graduates as deterrents to continue pursuing a career in the field. Psychology’s decontextualised approach, lack of acknowledgement of the impact of colonisation on current experiences and failure to adequately address contemporary Indigenous issues and equip students with

appropriate skills to respond, led to the graduates questioning the relevance of the discipline for their careers and communities. The Social Health Reference Group for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Council and National Mental Health Working Group (2004) made an important distinction between Indigenous understandings of social and emotional wellbeing and non-Indigenous concepts of 'mental health':

The concept of mental health comes more from an illness or clinical perspective and its focus is more on the individual and their level of functioning in their environment, whereas the social and emotional wellbeing concept is broader than this and recognises the importance of connection to land, culture, spirituality, ancestry, family and community, and how these affect the individual. (p. 9)

Curriculum that encompasses both discipline- and Indigenous-specific knowledges and perspectives, and that is localised (like the family therapy course discussed by Sally), has been linked to success in higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as well as "playing a critical role in building new and dynamic approaches to learning, research and innovation" (Behrendt et al., 2012, p. 94).

Ways Forward

Clearly there is significant potential and opportunity for the profession to address the barriers raised in these interviews and promote psychology as a viable and attractive career for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. While many of the barriers cited by the interviewees in this brief snapshot might be encountered by any trainee psychologist, Sally's point that as an Aboriginal person, "You already face a world of no" is particularly poignant. Moreover, it could be said that the profession (and

community) needs Indigenous psychologists more than they need psychology.

The APS, the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia, has developed a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), committing the profession to "building respect, relationships and understanding between Indigenous and other Australians to close the gap in mental health and wellbeing outcomes" (APS, 2012, p. 8). The RAP has a stated goal of working toward reaching a total of 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander registered psychologists by 2016, by facilitating "mechanisms for increasing the employment of Indigenous people, and in particular psychologists" (p. 20) as well as contributing to "national debates and policies that impact on the Indigenous psychology workforce" (p. 19). The plan commits the APS to advocate for "mechanisms that support and retain Indigenous psychology students such as affirmative action, recognition of other learning (crediting other subjects), and flexibility with entry requirements" (p. 21). It is also suggested that research and practice supervisors of Indigenous students and graduates be required to demonstrate cultural competence. These aims cannot be achieved while our own processes for admission to postgraduate study or guiding interns through their supervised practice experience remain rigid, impervious to change, demoralising and discouraging to supervisors and supervisees alike, and completely embedded within western notions of 'professionalism' and what constitutes 'psychological' practice.

As a discipline and profession psychology has far more to gain than to lose by attracting and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to pursue careers in psychology. With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people increasingly aspiring to engage in post-secondary education and pursue professional careers, it is likely from their practice records that all three graduates interviewed will

continue to achieve success in their careers whether within or outside psychology. Ultimately, the loss will be the profession's if we squeeze them out of psychology. We want to ensure that psychology is in a position to benefit from these aspirations, so as a discipline and profession we can better contribute to closing the gap through improved career choices and greater economic and professional opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and more culturally relevant services for Indigenous clients and communities. Psychology will be greatly enriched in turn by the wealth of knowledge and wisdom that exists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

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Notes

¹ In February 2012 there were 28,632 psychologists registered in Australia (Psychology Board of Australia, 2012). AIPA (2010) noted that only 39 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychologists were identified at the 2006 census, when 625 would be expected if parity existed within the profession (2.5% of the Australian population and the profession). Part of the challenge is identifying the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychologists. The 2006 census identified 39; however, subsequent investigation by AIPA and the APS has shown numbers to be around 42

registered psychologists and up to 60 when postgraduate students and/or APS members who are not fully registered are included.

h.gridley@psychology.org.au

² The graduates' names and identifying details have been changed to protect their confidentiality, but all have read a draft of this manuscript, provided feedback, and consented to its publication.

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Author biographies

Jacinta Wainwright is a provisional psychologist undertaking postgraduate studies in Community Psychology at Victoria University. She conducted and wrote up the interviews for this paper in ongoing collaboration with the interviewees, as part of her practicum placement in the Public Interest team of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) in 2010-11. She is an experienced practitioner in the fields of family violence and child and family services in regional Victoria.

Heather Gridley, FAPS, is a community and counselling psychologist, and was a founding member of the APS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Psychology Interest Group. As APS Manager, Public Interest, she supervised Jacinta's placement at APS.

Emma Sampson's background is in community psychology and she is currently employed within the APS Public Interest team where she has contributed to the society's Reconciliation Action Plan.

Address correspondence to
Heather Gridley