

*Psychology and Indigenous Australians: Foundations of Cultural Competence.* Rob Ranzijn, Keith McConnochie and Wendy Nolan, 2009

Reviewed by  
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Over a decade ago, the then-APS Accreditation Guidelines set the requirement that Indigenous and intercultural psychology be taught at introductory and subsequent levels in the three year undergraduate psychology program. In the current APAC Accreditation Standards, Graduate Attribute 1, Core knowledge and understanding, requires that students demonstrate an understanding of, *inter alia*, intercultural diversity and Indigenous psychology. When asking universities about how they meet this Standard, site visit teams are invariably told that some coverage is given but a claimed lack of knowledge on the part of lecturers and the lack of a suitable text to assist students' learning are cited as impediments.

The publication of this book goes a considerable way to meeting these needs. While there have been previous books such as those by Dudgeon, Garvey and Pickett (2000) and more recently, by Purdie, Dudgeon and Walker (2010), where the focus has been specifically on the practice of psychology with Indigenous populations, the current monograph provides much wider and richer historical and contextual information about Indigenous culture and how this influences and is influenced by psychology.

Clearly there needs to be further development in psychological relationships with Indigenous populations and greater general recognition of past injustices and how these affect the cultural perceptions held about the role of professional assistance. Practitioners need to be sure they are familiar with Indigenous values and behaviours, and in these times of increased immigration (including refugees) from African and Asian countries, there needs to be greater awareness of cultural differences and expectations. Training psychologists in cultural

awareness, sensitivity and being non-judgemental is fundamental and this textbook provides a starting point for the development of such cultural competence. Cultural competence refers to a set of skills and understandings that enable professionals to move outside their own cultural views and limitations to engage more widely in a range of cultural contexts. With this in mind, the book aims to develop a new generation of psychologists who can work appropriately and effectively with Indigenous clients and communities. This is indeed a brave and welcome step forward.

But while ultimately the book focuses on ways of working more sensitively with Indigenous people and communities, it is the earlier chapters that provide the historical context to colonisation mainly by Westerners from Europe. The authors provide descriptions of Indigenous societies and how they operated, the importance of the Dreaming and of social and kinship organisations. The areas that are important to Indigenous cultural history are:

- connections to land and country;
- the significance of sacred sites and stories;
- creation – the Dreaming, a timeless dimension at the dawn of time;
- the importance of kinship and family; sharing and reciprocity, as values in Aboriginal life;
- living a traditional egalitarian lifestyle; and
- the role of death, grieving and funeral practices.

All of these represent traditional cultural values and behaviours which carry some relevance into twenty first century Australian culture and, it is argued, need to be respected in our multicultural society alongside the values and practices of the immigrants.

Special mention is also given to the Stolen Generations (in the plural) which refers to the forced separation of children from their families from the late 1800s until the 1960s. These separations were part of the Government policy of assimilation to help the children

become more like white children. Three kinds of separation occurred: placing Aboriginal children into government-run institutions, white families adopting Aboriginal children and Aboriginal children being fostered by white families. In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released *Bringing them home*, the personal experiences of many Indigenous people removed from their families. The authors rightly point to the devastating effects that continue to this day of such forced removals of children.

One aspect of the book that teachers will find useful is the influence that psychology and psychologists have had on the way Indigenous peoples are described and on the provision of information that influenced government policies (Chapter 11). From my perspective, much of the work on IQ testing and children's cognitive development influenced the type and delivery of educational programs to Indigenous children. So, for example, the finding that Indigenous children did not perform as well on Piagetian tasks led to compensatory educational programs to assist with the apparent deficit in their abilities.

While this book fills an obvious gap in the resources available for the teaching of Indigenous psychology, it is not without some flaws. The writing at times is uneven with some long sentences, grammatical inaccuracies, inconsistencies in style (almost inevitable with three different authors) and level of writing, plus some clumsy wording. It is also not at all clear to what level of student the book is directed. As some universities move to more generic units at first year, then topics such as Indigenous psychology might find their niche in broader cultural awareness classes. It could also be argued that the information in the book would be best targeted at students in, say, third year, when they can place the information in a broader context and are perhaps thinking about a career in applied psychology. It would have been helpful if the authors had indicated their intended student

audience and their writing pitched to that particular level. As it is, in some places the writing and the exercises seem to be things that primary school students might do (for example, exercise 9.2) while other topics and writing are highly sophisticated (such as concepts like 'invisible privilege' and the moral and political complexities around the removal of children). These are minor quibbles and I hope that the book will be found to be useful resource and a starting point for teachers to read more widely and to think about Indigenous peoples, their culture, their history and the skills psychologists need to work with them effectively and competently.

### References

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