



ABORIGINAL ISSUES NEWSLETTER 1996 NO. 1

Newsletter of the Aboriginal Issues, Aboriginal People and Psychology Interest Group of the Australian Psychological Society, ACN 000 543 788

Editorial Committee: Ross Williams, Pat Dudgeon, Jenny Dunlop, Tracey Uink

Convenor's Message

I would like to welcome all new and old members to the APS Interest Group on Aboriginal Issues, Aboriginal People and Psychology.

Currently our membership is about 150 psychologists and several community members and interested individuals.

Over the last few years of our development I have been delighted to see the increasing interest and participation in social justice issues, particularly Australian Indigenous issues by the members of our profession. Of equal significance is the increasing number of Indigenous people choosing to enter psychology courses across the country.

We have a responsibility as a profession to ensure that Indigenous social justice issues maintain a focus in our activities, thereby taking part in the process of reconciliation and facilitating the path to Indigenous self-determination for Australian Indigenous peoples.

Hence the aims of our Interest Group; to increase skills and knowledge relevant to Indigenous people by psychologists and work towards the development of appropriate policies within the APS to ensure cultural sensitivity.

Pat Dudgeon, Interest Group Convenor

Editorial policy

Our intention is to produce the newsletter of the Aboriginal Issues, Aboriginal People and Psychology Interest Group three times a year. It will have two major functions:

1. To inform members of recent and forthcoming activities of the Interest Group and other events relevant to Aboriginal people and Psychology.
2. To promote discussion within the field by publishing short articles on issues relevant to Aboriginal people and Psychology with particular emphasis on the experiences of practitioners.

We do not see the Newsletter as an alternative outlet for articles which might otherwise be published in learned journals; we are looking for shorter, less formal pieces, of about 800 - 1200 words. Lengthy literature reviews and reference lists would be inappropriate, and no specific format, such as APA, will be required. For example, contributors are encouraged to use the first person where appropriate.

The Newsletter will also contain news from regional sections, Aboriginal psychology students and occasional book reviews.

Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Interest Group

The Interest Group Executive has established the following goals for itself in 1996:

1. State sections - effectively, the IG already has one active state section, Western Australia. By the end of 1996 the IG aims to have at least three formally established sections, Western Australia, Victoria and one other.
2. Curriculum development - the IG supports the inclusion of curriculum material relevant to Aboriginal issues in all undergraduate psychology courses. This would be greatly facilitated by the development and wide dissemination of appropriate curriculum materials. We look to the APS to support the development of these materials and to assist in making them available to interested psychology lecturers.
3. Newsletter - the IG aims to produce a newsletter with three yearly editions - Autumn, Winter and Spring, first edition in June 1996.
4. Training activities - given the raised profile of professional development in APS membership, the IG will consider the desirability and practicability of conducting professional development activities for psychologists whose work is likely to bring them in contact with Aboriginal people and communities.
5. APS Annual Conference - conduct a symposium session and offer active support to other activities related to the Interest Group's field of interest, eg. welcome from local elders, workshops, cultural tours.

A Practitioner's Perspective

by Peter Dunlop

It must be hard for Aboriginal people today looking for good news. There seems to be no good news around. A woman in QLD is elected to parliament on the basis of racist views. Attacks on ATSIC continue as do the claims of misappropriation of Aboriginal funds and demands for legislation to extinguish native title on pastoral leases. The massacre at Port Arthur is described in the media as the worst massacre in Australian history when all aboriginal people know the massacres perpetrated against their forebears were much worse and the perpetrators were never brought to book. So much for selective forgetting and the general unwillingness of non-Aboriginal Australia to acknowledge the past. Closer to home, there was the premature death of Rob Riley, a great Aboriginal leader of exceptional talent who achieved so much in such a short life. His death mirrors the fate of so many Aboriginal sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives whose premature deaths pass unremarked upon in the wider community because they remain unknown to all but those closely connected to them.

Against this backdrop the only good news seems to be the progress of the National Inquiry into the Removal of Children which is currently sitting in this Perth and the commencement of National Reconciliation week. But neither represent unqualified good news. Both of are statements of hope. But the promise implicit in them is fragile and uncertain as, in the end, their success depends upon the response of non-Aboriginal Australians more than the efforts of the Aboriginal people involved. This

raises the question : Are we as non-Aboriginal Australians willing to acknowledge the great harm which has been done to Aboriginal Australians as a consequence of the policies and actions of our forebears and in acknowledging this are we prepared to accept our share of the responsibility for doing our utmost to assist in repairing, as far as possible, the damage that has been done?

When confronted by this question as individuals there is a sense of being overwhelmed and powerless. What can one person do when what is required is a collective response of the non-Aboriginal community as a whole. The sense of helplessness grows even further when faced with the fact that in many ways the attitudes and beliefs of non-Aboriginal Australia are strongly influenced by the organisations and interest groups such as the mining and pastoral industries who fear they have something to lose. So what can we do as individuals and psychologists?

Part of the answer to this question was brought home to me in a discussion with one of the Aboriginal students the other day. We were talking about the fact that so many Aboriginal people are suffering as a consequence of the policies which resulted in the removal of children from their families and their communities and that something must be done. He responded by saying : "Well that is where you psychologists have to come in." Implicit in this statement is his belief that psychologists have an understanding and knowledge of what helps people to heal from trauma, deep hurt and pain and if they know these things they should have some ideas about what processes need to be set up to assist the healing of Aboriginal people who carry the legacy of these policies within them.

His belief is not unreasonable as those of us who practise Clinical Psychology at least do purport to have such knowledge. But his statement puts us in a bind. Where, in the psychological literature or the training of psychologists is there evidence that we have applied this knowledge to assist in the healing of Aboriginal people. It is nowhere to be found. So where do we start?

There seems to be no clear answer to this question and the task seems overwhelming. So many Aboriginal people have been affected and, as is demonstrated in the report "Telling Our Story" (1995) prepared by the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, the effects have been devastating. The report refers to the contribution of the removal policies to difficulties in forming lasting relationships, uncertainty in bringing up children and identity problems. It also refers, among other things, to the consequent high rates of imprisonment of Aboriginal people, high rates of alcohol and drug dependency, and high rates of suicide, self harm and other mental health problems. Up to now, where there has been a response to these problems it has been at the level of attending to the symptoms rather than the cause. Imprisonment temporarily contains the problem, drug and alcohol programs focus upon the dependency and mental health services mostly attempt to diminish the symptoms through medication.

Instead of containment or the treatment of secondary symptoms what is needed are services which tackle the problem at its source. That is services which enable those affected to deal with their feelings of loss, being cheated, not belonging, shame, confusion about who they are and rage about the injustices which have been perpetrated against them. These services also need to include avenues of overcoming deficits which are a direct consequence of the experience of being separated as children from family and cultural roots.

So what do psychologists have to offer? For a long time, I believe too long, we have tended to respond to this question by saying that the cultural differences between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people are so great that there is nothing we can do, that our approaches to healing are so rooted in Western traditions and beliefs that they cannot be transferred across the cultural gap. Whilst there is no doubt there are

important cultural issues which have to be addressed there are some things we know about healing processes for people who have been subjected to extensive deprivation, abuse or trauma during childhood which seem to be true in all cultures. In particular we know that the starting point for such processes is to provide ways of enabling those affected to talk about their experiences in a safe place and a milieu of love and caring. We also know that opening up wounds which people have kept hidden for years can have a devastating effect and throw the person into greater turmoil as they are confronted with the confusion, sadness, fear, anger and hurt they experienced as a child in a rawer form and that the healing process mostly takes a long, long time. So the talking has to take place. But it has to take place in a context where there is a real commitment to providing long term ongoing support.

The rest of what we know about healing processes by and large reflects the various theoretical frameworks upon which we draw and strategies we have developed for assisting people to get past blocks or resistances and reintegrating the different parts of themselves in new ways. Which aspects of this part of our knowledge can be transferred to working with Aboriginal people and which cannot is something we do not know. But unless we are prepared to take the risk of stepping into that unknown we will never find out and thereby fail to provide to Aboriginal people those parts of our knowledge which are potentially helpful to them.

There are of course many other dimensions to our ignorance. Most of us are also profoundly ignorant of many aspects of Aboriginal culture. This ignorance ranges from a lack of knowledge of the basic rules of communication among Aboriginal people to the lack of understanding of the fundamental values and beliefs which shape and inform their relationships with each other, their sense of self and their relationship with the rest of the world. So the risk in becoming involved is even greater than at first sight. But again, unless we are prepared to take that risk our ignorance will remain. If we do take the risk however there is some hope of being able to find a way of successfully integrating those parts of Western psychology which are relevant to the healing processes for Aboriginal people with the wisdom and knowledge of their own culture in this respect.

It is clear from the above that whatever contribution we may make as psychologists to the development of services of the kind being discussed it must be done in partnership with Aboriginal people. We cannot do it alone. As to the form this partnership should take we have to be guided by the Aboriginal people involved. It may be that we can contribute by assisting in the training of Aboriginal counsellors who wish to focus specifically upon the problems arising from removal. Another way of contributing could be to pair with an Aboriginal person and act as a co-facilitator/counsellor with individuals, families or groups. A third would be to provide consultancy support to Aboriginal people who are providing counselling services or self help groups.

Whatever the way we contribute the objective should be the expansion and improvement of services for Aboriginal people whose lives have been effected by the removal of children. If we succeed in doing this we will also have succeeded in expanding the knowledge base of psychology in a way which frees it in a significant way from the constraints of its cultural roots. And in doing this we will have moved some distance down the road towards reconciliation, at least in the context of psychology.

Peter Dunlop is a Clinical Psychologist who worked for many years in the WA Prison and Mental Health systems. Currently he works at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University.

ABORIGINAL PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

Hi everyone. My name is Tracey Uink and I'm a Nyoongah woman who is currently studying 4th year psychology at Murdoch University (WA). I've attended the last two annual conferences and at the last one I volunteered to help towards organising students to attend the 1996 conference.

The purpose of me writing to you is to give you some information about the conference as well as including any other interesting info.

ANNUAL APS CONFERENCE

The conference is an ideal opportunity to extend and strengthen our network as well as consolidating existing friendships.

It is to be held at the Wentworth in Sydney from 25 through to the 29 September, 1996.

The APS has already been approached to waive the Registration Fee for us and they should be getting back to us in the near future about it.

However, there is no financial assistance available from either the APS or DEET for travel or accommodation. I'll be organising a support letter from Pat Dudgeon, Head of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University of Technology, so that people can approach organisations etc for funding assistance.

Information about billeting and low cost accommodation will be provided closer to the conference.

A one hour session has been scheduled on Friday 27 September in the Boardroom for us to discuss issues raised at the last two conferences and either organise to action them or keep them for reference only. Hopefully everyone still has the first two newsletters that Darren Garvey and Ross Williams sent out some time ago now and if not, then I'll send put the notes from the first two conference closer to this year's conference. It is also envisaged that a planning committee for the 1997 conference will be organised for Saturday 28 September, again in the Boardroom, so as to discuss forming an Aboriginal and Islander Psychology Student group. More information about this will be included in a letter to everyone closer to the conference. A working party will be formed at the end of the discussion if the idea is given support. No student social event will be organised before the conference as it is thought that people will be better able to organise something once we're all in Sydney at the conference.

OTHER USEFUL INFORMATION

If you've got access to the Internet then an option for those interested in 'Indigenous Psychologies' is 'Native Net'.

There's also a book which looks at Indigenous Psychologies and it is titled INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGIES.

The Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University of Technology (WA) hosts Work in Progress Seminars every month or so. The purpose of the seminars is to give both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and practitioners an opportunity to come together and learn from one another. Jenny Dunlop is a good contact person if you want to know more about the seminars. Jenny only works every Thursday and Friday and can be contacted on Tel: (09) 351 3548 or Fax: (09) 351 2888.

Tracey Uink

Working-through in the process of history

Ross Williams

Visiting a New Zealand art gallery, I saw several portraits of Maoris painted about the turn of the century. The elderly tattooed faces have a sad dignity; clearly the painter wishes to convey the nobility of this race and his sorrow that they are so soon to die out. They wear their finest ceremonial robes, like Sunday best, all set for a fine funeral but for the technicality of breathing.

This genre of art, representing aboriginal peoples as the moribund objects of sententious reflections about human destiny and respect for vanishing peoples, was quite popular in the United States and Australia about the same time. A title like "Last Survivor of a Once Proud Race" would be attached for any members of the public who needed a little more explanation. The tender-minded Social Darwinism inherent in the genre is easy to read. These races were dying out under the impersonal forces of History, and it was the responsibility of those who replaced them, as the phrase went, to "smooth the dying pillow"; our forebears in White Australia were coincidentally fearful that the teeming yellow hordes from the North might do to them what History was doing to the Aborigines.

If the Victorians sadly contemplating these pictures look smug and hypocritical from our vantage point, no doubt this is because we of the 1990s would never have fallen for such claptrap; Freud has kindly provided us with the terms - denial, projection and reaction formation - by which we may diagnose our forebears. The application of psychological theory, most frequently psychodynamic theory, to historical processes is usually termed psychohistory and anyone seeking to learn more of the field might begin with the works of Erik Erikson, Kenneth Keniston and Robert Jay Lifton. But psychohistory, like all history, should not distance us from the past; Barbara Tuchman wrote about the Middle Ages in a book she called "A Distant Mirror", implying that the study of the past offers reflections of the present.

On a visit to an old mission at Carollup in Western Australia last year, several psychologists were shown through a small museum in which, amongst other displays, we saw several group photographs of Aboriginal children lined up, clean, neat and smiling for the camera, with the white staff standing behind them. The older pictures were from the days of child removal; the more recent of the period when the Mission was a home for neglected children. The guide stopped at one picture and began to tell us what became of some of the happy teenagers smiling at us. Drugs, gaol, madness, death. To be fair, many of these children, having been neglected or abused at home, may have done no better if left with their families. But back on the bus, one of the party said that she had been troubled by the quietly confident gaze of the white staff; they knew that they were doing the right thing by these underprivileged children. In their shoes, at that time, would we also turn that untroubled face to the camera?

We might simply choose to dissect the past, of course. Many historical phenomena in White-Black relations are readily interpreted as defence mechanisms; for example, the projection of greedy aggression onto the "yellow hordes" had a prior manifestation in the early nineteenth century image of the thieving, murderous blacks; by the end of the century the consequences of this projection had reduced the Aboriginal people to the point where they could no longer contain it, hence the growing fear of Asia. Certainly White Australia's fear of invasion was realistic in World War II, but what lay behind the fear, only recently made public, that the Aboriginal people of the north would assist any Japanese invasion?

A process is taking place in White Australia by which we are slowly coming to terms with the reality of the prior occupation of Australia by Aboriginal peoples and their

Wednesday February 14 1996
 'Toward Art Therapy with Aboriginal Seniors'
 Susan Mason, Art Therapist.

Wednesday March 6 1996
 Aboriginal Men's Health - Mental Health Issues:-

1. Aboriginal Men: Mental Health Within the Context of General Health Status
 John Mallard - Aboriginal Health Unit, Curtin University
 Video - Identity and Population/Culture.
2. Mental Health: Views from Aboriginal Men About Aboriginal Men
 Lawrence Sellers - School Psychologist, Fitzroy Crossing, Kimberleys.
3. Mental Health Issues in General Hospital Admissions
 Michael Wright - Social Worker, Aboriginal Programs, UWA

Wednesday April 10 1996
 Narrative Therapy
 David Vickery - Clinical Psychologist, Family and Children's Services Department

- Tuesday May 7 1996
1. Collaborative Research
 Rosalie Dwyer - Community Services Training Centre, Family and Community Services Department
 2. Intellectual Copyright of Indigenous People - Implications for Research
 Michael Blakeney - Faculty of Law, Murdoch University.
 3. Interim Guidelines for Postgraduate Research with Aboriginal People
 Jill Abdullah and Ernie Stringer - Postgraduate Studies Program, Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University.

1996 APS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

SYDNEY - WENTWORTH HOTEL

Wednesday 25 September to Sunday 29 September

Program to be published in the June edition of the APS Newsletter.

Of special interest:-

- Aboriginal Cultural Welcome and Dancers
- Forum on Aboriginal Issues and Psychology
- Aboriginal Psychology Students Meeting
- Interest Group Meeting
- Cultural Tour

Aboriginal Psychology Students:

Aboriginal Psychology Students are advised to contact the Interest Group as soon as possible for assistance with the Registration Fee.

Billeting is being arranged.

Letters are being provided to assist Students gain funding for fares and expenses.

See the June edition of the APS Newsletter for more information and Registration form.