

## **‘Ready, Steady... Practice!’: How Working Better with Indigenous Australian People can Take as Little as Three Minutes of Your Time**

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*For fans of a certain afternoon cooking show, the title of this article may bring to mind the frantic preparation of apparently delectable meals relying on a restricted range of ingredients within a restrictive time frame. The notion that good things may be achieved in a short period is applied in this article which proposes that it is the choices made within the minutes of our psychological practice that contribute and accumulate to better working relationships with Indigenous Australian peoples. I discuss the impact that an expectation of criticism may have on health professionals and students when confronting the overwhelming prospect of working with Indigenous Australian peoples. The idea that a great deal of effort is required to bring about what only ever seem to be small (if any) improvements in the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians is challenged by suggesting that it is the enactment of small, repeated efforts which have the potential to produce important and sustainable relationships, and a platform for ongoing, collaborative ventures. To begin, readers are encouraged to endure a number of confronting ‘truths’ about the psychological profession and its members. Although the statements are delivered here to a community psychology audience, their relevance for the profession is arguably broader than that, spanning academic and applied domains, as well as the concerns of students. These provide a challenging precursor to the development of the idea of ‘three minutes’, including several activities aimed at setting readers on a path to making every minute count.*

Psychologists and others who would deem themselves part of the so-called ‘helping professions’, actually contribute to the ongoing and insidious oppression and marginalisation of Indigenous Australian people. You see, you and your kind, for all your best intentions, can never be more than another piece of the machinery that has been imported to subjugate and disempower. How else can you explain the incessant gnawing of something ‘not quite right’ about what you do with Indigenous people? It endures despite your best efforts to soothe it with the balm of cultural appropriateness and a fumbling, self-conscious sensitivity. Worse still when you use Indigenous people as pawns towards your own ends, co-opting the misery and misfortune of others to either satisfy and purge your own demons of unearned privilege, or to add culturally derived permission to pursue your own agenda.

Your legacy is more searing than any

piece of shot or cumbersome iron shackle, and more lethal than any poison or germ used to spoil a water hole or infect a warming blanket. You have bred mistrust in the guise of benevolence through your social experimentation and your inheritance is a social landscape bereft of trust in you and your so-called expertise. Even those among you who express the desire to destabilise positivistic and impersonal psychology merely succeed in creating edifices that reflect fundamentally the same self-serving and selfish needs of the profession. In the end you never really stray too far from that which you deride and merely hoist self-effacing pot-shots at the hand that feeds you. How can you do otherwise when professional credibility, academic acknowledgement and peer recognition act as all too tempting carrots to draw you away from developing truly genuine relationships. Just look at the language you use. Who does it appeal to? Does it change much from the

scholarship required to be 'published lest you perish', and the vocabulary you use to co-opt and confound your subjects? Are uncertainties about the validity of clinical diagnoses or counselling models regarded as an artefact of a professional speciality, or a deficit of Indigenous peoples' ability to conform to them? Ironical too don't you think that the jargon used to reflect 'community', merely serves to erect linguistic and technical barriers that cement the divide between you and them?

And so you meet with your intentions to, "Cross Borders, Remove Barriers, Drive Change and Challenge Assumptions" which, despite the suggestion of revolution, merely reinstate the status quo by providing a professionally soothing mantra to obscure more sinister desires bent on the containment and destruction of Indigenous identity. Unfortunately, forums such as this only seem to provide the opportunity for you to gather with your collaborators so you might feel virtuous and righteous and impervious to critique, while recycling the distorted title of 'helping professional' in ways that re-imbue it with power and prominence amongst your insular and self-interested selves.

### **Introduction: Take two**

Perhaps a tirade such as this characterises the anxious thoughts of many budding, and not so budding psychologists wanting to, or required to work with Indigenous Australian people? I suspect that these words and the criticisms they embody are those that many people expect to hear from their Indigenous Australian clients, or anticipate them silently harbouring. From the outset let me say that not every Indigenous person holds these hypercritical views of community psychology or community psychologists. I can also say with a fair degree of certainty that not every Indigenous person knows what psychology, community or otherwise, is, let alone possesses an opinion of the skills or personalities of its members. The views contained in the introduction are also not necessarily those of this author; however they are distilled from the author's experience from over two decades work in community, clinical and

classroom settings with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian peoples. They are also filtered through the author's identity as an Indigenous Australian person and psychologist, a particularly hybrid position that permits an insight as both target for, and provider of, psychological services for Indigenous Australians.

The 'truths' outlined above are included deliberately here primarily as a provocative device to prompt reflection, and in particular, to gain an insight as to whether your reaction tended towards the accommodating, retaliatory or dismissive? Reviewing the introduction, did you find yourself responding defensively against what the remarks were saying about you or your chosen work, or offensively because they didn't go far enough? Did being homogenised ("you and your kind") elicit a reaction to being stereotyped, or were you thinking, "oh no, here we go again, why does he have to bring that stuff up here? Can't they (Indigenous peoples) just get over it?" Or, "I didn't pay my conference fee to get told that I'm a bad psychologist, let alone a bad person!" If so, these may well have primed you for how you view the rest of this article, if indeed you choose to read on.

### **A little history**

Concerns about a critical reception are at least as old as those told during the fledgling "Psychology and Indigenous People" interest group meetings convened at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University, some fifteen or so years ago. At the time, this forum provided a space for discussion and catharsis for psychologists working with Indigenous Australian people as clinicians and researchers, and also for students interested in the field. Interest in the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous people was receiving unprecedented stimulus, prompted by inquiries into the incarceration (Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991), removal (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) and mental health (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission,

1993) of Indigenous Australian peoples. Psychology was in many ways implicated in this milieu as a means by which to understand and ameliorate the attendant psychological repercussions of these not-so historical traumas. However, while such reports highlighted the dearth of research and culturally appropriate resources, a corollary of these revelations was a critical backlash aimed at services and service personnel who had, in the eyes of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, failed to demonstrate a satisfactory duty of care (e.g., Swan & Raphael, 1995). This has placed professions such as psychology, and professionals such as psychologists, in the catch-22 situation of being implicated as both the cause and solution to problems relating to Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing. Negotiating this position as 'enemy and ally' remains a tense proposition.

This has seen many helping professions engaged in a process of critical reflection on their involvement with or ambivalence towards Indigenous Australians. While the ensuing years have witnessed action by psychology to address both ethical and practical concerns (Gridley, Davidson, Dudgeon, Pickett, & Sanson, 2000), the critical residue of this period also lingers as anxiety and hesitance for many students and practitioners with regards to what constitutes good service, and good service provider behaviour. It seems that for all the good promised by the critical stocktake of psychological endeavours with Indigenous Australian peoples, an attendant void has developed whereby the certainty provided by what had been regarded as adequate professional behaviour, has since been destabilised by its rejection as inappropriate. Understandably, questions of how to work, research and relate better with Indigenous people remain at the forefront of student and practitioner conversations, just as they were in spaces such as that provided by the Centre for Aboriginal Studies nearly two decades ago.

### **A case in point**

Today these concerns are retold by a new generation of students, graduates, researchers and clinical and community practitioners, cognisant to varying degrees of the reconciliatory, post-apology context in which their actions are located and judged. A recent example concerned a Masters student as he prepared to embark on his fledgling career. Keen to work with Indigenous Australian people, his counselling competence appeared above reproach. Yet his concern for his lack of cultural competence presented as a factor likely to undermine the development of his psychological practice, due to it having already undermined his confidence. Our meeting began with the familiar request for facts about Indigenous people and the checking of what he believed to be facts about Indigenous people – “are we this?”, “are we that?”, “is eye contact acceptable?”, “what kinds of approaches are ok?”, and so on. His questions were also underlined by a concurrent concern – given that there is so much to learn, how can one ever hope to be ready to practice without having learned it all? In response I provided my usual frustrating, albeit honest answers of either, “I’m not sure” or “it depends”, both of which act as a means of reducing the pressure that I, and perhaps other Indigenous people feel when placed in the position of being the experts on absolutely everything Indigenous. They also provide an opportunity to pause in order to consider how best to respond.

In this instance I suggested we examine the questions he was asking, discovering that they were as much aimed at minimising anxiety about the anticipated misgivings he felt Indigenous people would undoubtedly and automatically have about him and his work, as they were about raising his awareness and understanding of Indigenous Australian peoples. Although not initially expressed, his questions were concerned with allaying fears of anticipated critique (like those in the opening tirade) as much as they were about gaining clinically useful information geared towards

enhancing his professional competence.

### **The best defence**

Anticipated critique has been discussed previously as a factor in barriers to working with Indigenous Australian people. Williams (2000) describes the role persecutory guilt has in explaining students' ambivalence towards working with Indigenous people. A pre-emptive anticipation of rejection acts as a reason for avoiding engagement in the first place, or at least fosters the construction of relationships that are tentative and cautious. Williams notes that students may avoid expressing opinions that could be construed as insensitive to the plight of Indigenous people in order to appear inoffensive and as not participating in any ongoing program of oppression or racism. In my experience, students (and clinicians and researchers) often desire to do the right thing for fear of doing the wrong thing – a fear that at its extreme can invoke a paralysis of sorts, derived from knowing that while culturally competent service is mandated, grappling with the emotive and cognitive constraints triggered by what they believe this requirement entails, can be overwhelming.

Radermacher (2007) provided a student's perspective of approaching Indigenous studies, describing how a variety of strategies are employed in order to rationalise non-participation and non-engagement. Interestingly, she notes that this course of action appears more prevalent for students born in Australia. Resistance and avoidance makes discussion of disengaging positions difficult and often impervious to examination. However Radermacher's description of her own journey to greater awareness demonstrates that pitfalls and discomfort, while likely, are traversable, but this also requires a willingness to confront uncertainty and court offensiveness.

This point has implications for facilitators of tertiary courses to ensure a degree of safety for those in the midst of such self-disclosure, and the skill to integrate what is said into an ongoing narrative of cultural competence development (e.g., Gerrett-Maggee, 2007). Consideration is

also required by lecturers who in their efforts to confront entrenched positions, merely succeed in reinforcing the status quo by an over-zealous appeal for change. In my experience, movement towards reflection on these matters is rarely achieved by just telling someone to do so, and can require a lecturer to demonstrate vulnerability and courage when examining their own position, as well as that of their students.

While the best defence against an anticipated charge of racism, insensitivity or ignorance may be to deploy pre-emptive arguments to the contrary, or to avoid the risk of imperfect engagement in the first place, the prospect of developing genuine and honest relationships remains unlikely. I suspect the Masters student described earlier was seeking a course that would sustain, validate and legitimise him to work with Indigenous Australians by affirming the potential for success through incremental effort. His investment in the time to speak openly and participate imperfectly at our meeting exemplified what I have termed, "fearless conversation" (Garvey, 2007), and was, in my opinion, a good indication of his willingness to engage in a generative and cumulative process of competence development. The positioning of the fledgling practitioner as incomplete and imperfect, while humbling to adopt, is far less demanding and far more realistic than the (often self-imposed) expectation to be fully-formed and faultless. This position does not need to devalue or deny the skills or competence that the person may already possess. It suggests instead that a negotiation as to their relevance, meaning and value for Indigenous peoples needs to occur, as do similar conversations concerning the role and place of the psychologist.

### **Explaining the title: 'Ready, Steady ... Practice!'**

So what does a reference to the cooking show, "Ready, Steady, Cook!" have to do with this endeavour? The frivolity suggested by the reference is meant as more than an attempt to provide a quirky title, and certainly not an

indication of the levity with which I regard the pursuit of working better with Indigenous Australian peoples. I do, however, admit to being a fan of the cooking show genre as perhaps are some of you? I even considered different titles; however, 'Master Psychologist', 'My Psychology Practice Rules' or even 'Iron Psychologist' seemed a little grandiose. But there is a serious reason for this pop cultural reference. For those unfamiliar with the show, it is a contest between two chefs assisted by audience members, using a limited number of ingredients in a short period of time. The title 'Ready steady...practice!' then is part invitation and part enticement to consider what might be achievable in a matter of minutes.

Speaking of pop references, can you identify a common feature of the following songs?

1. Bad, bad, Leroy Brown – Jim Croce (1973)
2. Honky tonk women – The Rolling Stones (1969)
3. Can't help falling in love – Elvis Presley (1962)
4. The fool on the hill – The Beatles (1967)
5. Goldfinger – Shirley Bassey (1964)
6. Build me up buttercup – The Foundations (1968)
7. Your love keeps lifting me higher – Jackie Wilson and the Funk Brothers (1967)
8. Desire – U2 (1988)
9. We are the champions – Queen (1977)
10. Daydream believer – The Monkees (1967)

A common feature is that the original versions of these songs are all less than or equal to three minutes in duration. If you were able to recognise the titles and something of their melody, it could be said that it doesn't take long for a lyric or tune to infiltrate our memory such that we find ourselves humming, tapping or singing along unexpectedly, sometimes to our own or other peoples' annoyance.

Brief utterances taking much less time than this can also make an impact in profound and enduring ways. If you were to reflect for a moment on important events from your life, I suspect they include succinct yet meaningful words or phrases. Examples of these words, received and delivered, might include:

- "Will you marry me?"
- "I do"
- "It's a boy!"
- "It's a girl!"
- "I hate you!"
- "I love you"
- "We regret to inform you..."
- "No"
- "Yes"
- "I understand"

While it can take but a matter of moments and a handful of words to experience something life-changing, sometimes words aren't even required. For example, a second son recently joined our family, and I suggest that all it took was the sound of that first inhalation of breath, the squawk of new life and the cry indicative of a healthy set of lungs to deliver an unfathomable, wordless impact. Granted, I now concede that the very same cry could stand to have its volume and frequency reduced between midnight and 6am.

Sometimes there are very simple words that are brief in their duration yet monumental in impact. While it takes about 20 seconds to read the following statement, its meaning still resonates for many:

*For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.*

(Kevin Rudd PM, February 13, 2008).

While such examples suggest that an impact can be made in a matter of minutes, proposals of marriage or expressions of affection, refusal or agreement, will usually have had some degree of forethought, and consideration for their consequences. Similarly, commentators and community people alike,

while acknowledging the words of our former Prime Minister, remain hesitant in handing out their unmitigated praise and thanks, preferring to wait a while in order to see what happens as a result of this landmark apology. Still, there can be little doubt as to the immediate and longer term impact that such brief events can deliver, and harnessing this potential in the context of our work with Indigenous Australian people is worth considering.

### **The deadly package**

While the preceding examples have attempted to highlight this potential, the following case study provides an opportunity to propose junctures at which a few moments consideration may have been prudent.

*A colleague recounted the story of a visit to a remote Aboriginal community. His scheduled work done for the day, he was invited by the local school principal to hop in the back of the truck and take a drive out to pick up some materials for the students upcoming dance tour. Several of the students had come along for the ride as well and so off they all went, bumping up and down on the corrugated dirt road that led out of town. After a while, the truck stopped. My colleague didn't know where they were, but the children seemed to as they ran off to explore. Looking around, apart from a clump of thick vegetation to one side of the track, the rest of the place seemed devoid of life. The heat radiating from the ground created that shimmering effect in the distance – like water where there's no water. There was a faint odour of smoke in the air which seemed odd given the lack of things to burn. My colleague continued to survey the place, desolate, hot and getting hotter. All of a sudden, his eyes were drawn to a particular spot on*

*the horizon. It was as if there something, or someone emerging from the shimmering pool. One figure...no two were now getting clearer and closer. Thin figures, very dark figures. One slightly taller than the other with the taller one carrying what looked like a spear! The lack of concern from the principal caused my colleague to wonder whether he was in fact imagining this? A hallucination? A trick of the light?*

*In fact, the approaching figures were real people, a husband and wife who had been looking for food while the materials were being prepared in an open fire that had since burned down to coals and was smouldering nearby. Tied to the spear were two fish. It seemed that there was real water close by as well if you knew where to look. They all walked over to the coals and in the middle of the pit was what looked a package of singed and smouldering bark protecting something within. Some of the substance – what looked like a powdery, clay-like material spilled out where the leaves had burned through. The principal asked on the progress of the preparation and the tall man seemed satisfied with the finished product. He bent down and carefully removed the parcel, setting it to one side, allowing it to cool. The principal continued to talk with the couple some more, probably about the upcoming dance tour. It was at this point that my colleague made a confession about his conduct. He had become focussed on the package and what it contained. Not knowing the answer to this he*

*found his curiosity rising.*

*Accompanying his curiosity was the chance to feel and experience something 'special', something authentic, something cultural. So while the others spoke some more, my colleague moved closer to the package, bent down and ever so gently, picked at a piece of the material that had dislodged itself. 'Wow,' my colleague thought. Such was his attention on the clay that he had failed to notice the tall, slender Aboriginal man watching him watching the package. He had seen my colleague's movement and was himself now moving towards the coals. "Uh-oh!", thought my colleague as the man approached him, spear still in hand. "What have I done?" He looked towards the ground but felt the man's silent stare piercing him. "Better that than the end of that spear", he thought. The man then bent down to the package and observed the exact place that my colleague had touched. He extended his wiry hand and with a flick of the forefinger, removed the piece of clay that my colleague had touched. Not a word was said.*

*The bumpy ride back to town was a little quieter as my colleague reflected on the experience. He suspected that his actions had resulted in his contaminating that small piece of material and therefore it had to be removed. Two lessons emerged: 1. Be careful where you stick your fingers. 2. Just because you have fingers, it doesn't mean you can put them where you like, whenever you like. (Garvey, 2007, pp. 46-47)*

I have used this story previously as a self-disclosure because I am the main character, the so-called 'colleague', revealing my own imperfection and sources of lessons learned in relation to many of the professional matters that I discuss with students, practitioners and researchers. I include it here for the purposes of demonstrating that a minute or two spent considering the appropriateness and consequences of my personal desire in this context could have led to a very different and potentially less life threatening situation. In retrospect, I could have waited a minute or two to consider what I should do with my rising sense of curiosity. I could have asked permission, or at least asked someone about what was permissible and not permitted in this context, with the response guiding what would have been culturally safe behaviour on my part. I could have considered that the impact of a seemingly small gesture might have larger ramifications or mean something other than misplaced curiosity. So many options in that moment apart from the one that I chose, all of which in retrospect would have taken much less than the three minutes argued for here. In fact, the content of any three minutes need not be filled with words or questions at all, instead used as an opportunity to consider what one would like to do and the potential ramifications – an opportunity to pause for thought. I suspect that had I been required to visit that community again, I would have been considered *persona non grata* for some time – at least until I had made amends. I also suspect that the process of relationship re-building would have taken much longer than three minutes. Perhaps in your reading of the story you identify additional points at which a small investment of time to pause, check or consider was warranted?

#### **A little homework**

The period of three minutes is of course arbitrary. Strategically however, it is aimed at providing an alternative to the discourse which constructs working with Indigenous Australian peoples as an overwhelming, uncomfortable or

unnecessary prospect. Practically, it should be seen as an opportunity to do little things well and that little things such as those examples mentioned above – a word, a sentence, an acknowledgement, a question, a pause, or even the choice to endure a confronting introduction – can have an impact, as can their absence. Professionally, it embodies a call to devote focussed time to how we as individuals and the profession to which we belong, conduct ourselves with Indigenous Australian people. Symbolically, such action stands in contrast to the generally indifferent stance taken by the profession prior to the late 1980s while being reflective and supportive of changes within the profession since (Garvey, 2010).

In broader terms, three minutes can communicate a message beyond the moment in question, with these small investments accumulating and establishing over time, a place for us in the Indigenous community and a basis for research and other kinds of therapeutic engagement (e.g., Contos, 2000; Cord-Udy, 2006; Melder, 2007; Sonn, 2007). Genuinely offered, three minutes can do much to demonstrate that we can listen as much as tell, learn as much as inform, and be directed as much as assuming control. In doing so, these accumulated minutes can challenge criticisms levelled at the profession as inaccessible, impenetrable or elitist.

The final activity consists of a list to reflect upon with a view to considering your work with Indigenous peoples. Once again, I ask you to look beyond what may seem like obvious questions, and to devote some time to how you might answer them in contexts and with people who perhaps do not share your appreciation of the profession or its lexicon. When I suggest devoting 'some time', you might consider spending three minutes with each. The choice to do so is yours except for item 10 which is compulsory.

1. How do I introduce myself?
2. How would I describe psychology?
3. How would I describe community psychology?

4. How would I describe myself as a community psychologist?
5. How would I describe how I work? What do I have to offer – what skills do I possess?
6. How would I describe myself, my profession and my way of working in a way that encourages others to consider working with me?
7. How well do I cope with silences in conversations?
8. What questions do I have about working with Indigenous Australian peoples? Who can I ask?
9. What fears or apprehensions do I have about working with Indigenous Australian peoples? Who can I tell?
10. Who is someone important to me that I will spend an additional three minutes telling why they are important to me?

### Conclusion

I have argued elsewhere (Garvey, 2007) that psychology and psychologists must focus on their place within, and connection to, Indigenous communities if they are to realise any true opportunities for collaboration. The present discussion has been an extension of that theme, with its message and activities aimed at encouraging us to realise the potential of minutes well spent. An additional positive for the strategy is that it is reusable, transportable and applicable in situations ranging from remote area field trips, clinical intakes, community meetings and one-to-one conversations. It provides space to consider questions as well as answers, and removes the imperative to immediately provide either.

My concern that these suggestions might be regarded as merely common sense or simplistic is counterbalanced by my ongoing involvement in conversations with psychologists and others for whom the basics of relationship building with Indigenous Australian peoples appear to be overlooked and overwhelmed by concerns for larger, systemic transformation or rescue from personal anxieties. While the large and the personal are important aspects of the equation, we must also



be willing to consider their role in the construction of barriers to working better with Indigenous Australian peoples. We cannot continue to use the potential for criticism, or the seemingly insurmountable, as reasons for ambivalence or inaction unless we are also willing to examine their foundations, as well as the reality of whether they are in fact true. While a degree of healthy scepticism from Indigenous people is to be expected, in my personal and community experience, collaboration with expertise likely to support our social and emotional wellbeing is, at the very least, regarded as an opportunity worth exploring. Inevitably, this is progressed through time devoted to fostering engagement, and most commonly realised through imperfect and fearless conversation.

My argument should not be mistaken as a gross underestimation of the work to be done or a trivialisation of the quality or quantity of that work. Indeed, there is a lot to do, not all of which is easy or necessarily achievable within the proposed three minutes, or even the next 25 years as promoted by former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma in reference to the timeframe required to achieve equality for Indigenous people in the area of health and life expectancy (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2005). However, I would like us to consider what it would be like if the time required to achieve improvements when working with Indigenous Australian peoples did not have to involve effort or resources of a magnitude that made the prospect of doing so prohibitively daunting? What if brief but mindful action that facilitated engagement, sometimes in the absence of complete cultural awareness (while enhancing the development of that awareness) supported the development of a mutually understood therapeutic or research language, and a mutual opportunity to address concerns about inequities in power, resources and outcomes? I propose that such advancements can be underscored and embodied by the idea of three minutes suggested here.

I am not so naïve as to suggest that unmitigated success and unanimous acceptance of psychologist involvement comes as a result of an extra 'three minutes' here or there. However in terms of exemplifying responsive, caring and respectful practice, these very basic gestures, consistently and authentically utilised, continue to be a very good place to start, at least it has been in my own imperfect and ongoing experience. For example, when you complete number 10 from the list above, try telling me that three minutes can't make a difference in a relationship. At the very least I think such food for thought is always relevant amongst those who would bother coming together to consider "Crossing Borders, (Re)moving Barriers, Driving Change and Challenging Assumptions". While we must remain vigilant to the larger barriers to improved psychological service provision to Indigenous people, we should also be open to the small and everyday opportunities to develop relationships, and to the truth that real and meaningful psychological work is done or avoided in the moments and minutes of our interactions.

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