

# How can Psychology and Counselling be agents of change for Aboriginal Australians?

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My PhD thesis is about decolonisation and empowerment; it is specifically about First Nations people claiming (or reclaiming) their autonomy. I explored concepts and their use with Aboriginal people and I chose one concept to focus on. The concept I chose to focus on was “resilience”. I chose this concept to help me address the issue of miscommunications, especially in regard to healthcare delivery with Indigenous Australians. By focusing on miscommunications – using a term like “resilience” – I hoped to play a role in helping to minimise the mistakes that are made due to assumed knowledge. For example, the assumed congruence of terms and concepts that is at play in healthcare interactions between Indigenous and non-indigenous clients and counsellors.

The history of psychology as a discipline is problematic, as it has had a role in the oppression of First Nations people worldwide, and in Australia. It is vital therefore to challenge disciplines to decolonise. A way to do this is to unpack and examine terms and concepts used, as they can both indicate and perpetuate worldviews. I consider that recognising the importance of worldviews, and how miscommunications can affect healthcare, is critical for health professionals to understand. I also consider that the discipline of psychology and, of course, counselling needs to ensure that it is not limiting its worldview by being too insular. My assertion is that the helping professions need to be reflexive enough to recognise their part in the history of oppression. I also call for them to become agents of change for those who have been oppressed. As part of this decolonisation of the disciplines, Indigenous voices need to be heard. Without these voices, how else will disciplines such as psychology be truly reflexive?

The effects of worldviews manifest in counsellor and client interactions, and language, constructs and interactions between client and practitioner, are infused by power differentials in a therapeutic setting. As we know, language has power, and language can be an unwitting tool that perpetuates the power of a dominant culture. Language is, of course, informed by worldviews. Worldviews vary depending on such factors as who the individual is, the culture, or the organisation. What is important here is that assumptions of shared knowledge need to be challenged, in part because language is culturally laden. Assumptions can therefore impact upon communication. In the example of psychology,

worldviews inherent in the discipline can be discordant with other worldviews. If a practitioner is not aware of these differences, then this can lead to miscommunications and miscommunications can then have a detrimental impact on practice.

The concept of cultural safety is used in my thesis as a lens for focusing on the power in interactions, and that are present in language; cultural safety is about power differentials. Cultural safety necessitates reflexivity, as it incorporates a need for a recognition of this inherent power, and it requires that practitioners abide by a doctrine of “doing no harm”. Cultural safety can be a tool for psychology to embrace that can help in decolonisation.

The research questions I asked were: What do you think the term resilience means for Aboriginal people (from an Australian Aboriginal perspective)? How well does resilience, as a Western psychological construct, map onto Indigenous people’s experiences and understanding of survival? How is resilience experienced by Indigenous Australians? How does this compare to the Western definition of resilience? Is survival, as it is experienced by Indigenous people, a similar concept to the Western construct of resilience?

These questions were explored using case study method, in Study Two and Study Three, and theme extraction in Study One. Three sources, or studies, formed a triangulation in this thesis, which aided in the robustness of the research. The first data source is the theme extraction from published literature; a unique synthesis approach where I used thematic analysis to give order to, and aid in the analysis of, a select, specific subsection of literature. The theme extraction and synthesis focused on resiliency and Aboriginal people. The second, a biographical analysis, involved the analysis of a small collection of biographies or autobiographies of First Nations people. The third data source is the in-depth interviews with the study participants, all of whom were First Nations Australians.

The findings of these three studies demonstrated a need for First Nations Australians to be consulted about concepts or practice that are used with them or their communities. Study One, the theme extraction, uncovered a need for this type of consultation to resolve the disparate definitions of resilience in the literature, as well as the need for culturally informed definitions. Context was a theme that emerged, in that the context of adversity, survival and colonisation needed to be considered when dealing with First Nations individuals, groups, communities or organisations.

Study Two, the biographic analysis, resulted in themes from the books on identity, including: the pressures of “two worlds”, the importance of family, and the importance of spirituality. Cultural identity emerged as important to First Nation Australians, and how this identity gives a vital sense of belonging is important. A theme of how the family can be a surrogate social capital for First Nation Australians also emerged. This linkage was revealed to be vital for well-being, and conducive to buffering both racism and the need to operate within “two worlds”. The findings also illustrated how First Nations Australians find solace, comfort, and meaning in spirituality.

In Study Three, the interviews revealed that the terms “resilient” and “survival” resonate and relate to Aboriginal people, and it emerged that survival and resilience were often interlinked and used interchangeably by the participants. Some other themes included the importance to participants of hope and a positive outlook. The themes also highlighted the constant barrage of adversity, which, although a theme, was a context for all the themes as well. Adversity was a context that both forged and hindered the themes of linkage, insight, and agency. The narratives within these emergent themes spoke to the ongoing effects of colonisation, with the subsequent difficulties of living in “two worlds” and the constant systemic racism.

My thesis discussed the inequitable distribution of health care, and how the issues raised from the emergent themes highlight the barriers to health parity for First Nations Australians. The findings also highlight that giving voice to the narratives of the oppressed is vital for decolonisation.

The main finding of my research supports the fact that First Nations Australians are strong, successful survivors, and are, on their own terms, resilient. An emergent theory three distinct ways of being resilient, was generated from the themes. The interviews I undertook revealed these distinct ways of being resilient through dealing with adversities as demonstrated in the participant narratives. These ways were: “survival”, “dysfunction or adaption” and “thriving”.

First Nations peoples are resilient, they are survivors, and I would argue that they are more resilient than those who hold hegemonic power and privilege in society. However, I insist that it shouldn’t be left to First Nations Australians alone to hold sole responsibility for their current and future health and wellbeing. The problems we have to face as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians stem from contextual problems. These are based on a colonial past and they are then perpetuated by hegemony, and by unexamined systemic practice.

I note that the discipline of psychology has made moves to facilitate becoming an agent of advocacy, an agent of change. In order for this “psychology serving humanity” to proceed, it must be reflexive, and I feel that it must understand that language holds power. An example I often give to illustrate this point is that of a composite case of a researcher going in to an Aboriginal community with a plan to address structural, contextual and social disadvantage by instigating a program to teach Aboriginal kids resilience. I see versions of this approach all the time. I am not at all against resilience and *optimising* resilience is an admirable endeavour. Rather, my stance is that those who are thinking that there is a need to “instill” resilience into this Aboriginal child, or that Aboriginal community, are in danger of (unintentionally) perpetuating the disempowering mythology that these children are *not* already resilient.

## References

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Merritt, Frankie Shane. (2014). *Liberation Psychology as an Agent of Change for First Nations Peoples: An Exploration of the Decolonisation of Concepts to Minimise Miscommunications and Assumptions in an Australian Context* (Doctoral thesis cum laude, University of New England, Armidale, Australia).

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