

## PRACTICE REFLECTIONS

# Healing the Psychic Misery of Aboriginal People in Mparntwe (Alice Springs): Who Is Best Placed to Do This?

Tyson Carmody<sup>a</sup>

Keywords: Aboriginal, knowledge, narrative, narrative therapy, practice, academic, cultural

<https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.88911>

---

Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia

Vol. 11, Issue 2, 2023

---

In this paper, I highlight how I utilise narrative therapy practices in my private practice at Kings Narrative. More specifically, I explore the concept of “psychic misery”, which I recently learned about while studying the Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work at the University of Melbourne. Psychic misery, a term penned by Adalberto Barreto and Marilene Grandesso in Brazil in 2010, describes what occurs when the skills, experiences, and knowledge of people in the community are not valued in the same way as academic knowledge. I bring attention to the correlation of this work in Brazil to local Aboriginal communities within and surrounding Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. I emphasise how, in my practice at Kings Narrative, I privilege and prioritise the cultural experiences, skills, and knowledge of Aboriginal men as the preferred and desirable skills for employment. Moreover, it is within the cultural skills and knowledge of Aboriginal men that we find solutions and strategies to shift and unpack problem stories within the community. Our Aboriginality is enough: enough to be employed, enough to start a business, and enough to navigate our way successfully through problem stories.

As I read more and more about narrative practices, I am learning new names of practices that describe ways of doing or understanding life. These names I am learning, I have never seen or heard of before. Names like “absent but implicit”, “folk psychology”, “outsider witness”, and now “psychic misery” are just some examples. As an Aboriginal man, I have known what these names talk about before I knew the names themselves. I have lived experience of these concepts, and upon reading the many papers, I feel a sense of familiarity and connection once I internalise the ideas from the readings. This is followed briefly by a sense of excitement or even relief that I have a name for something I feel connected to or have experience in. I say “briefly” because upon learning the name, I reflect and ask myself: Who gave these names to this way of understanding? Or, moreover, who did not give these names?

I feel a sense of responsibility and accountability not to use these names in the context of my practice, because my people, Arrernte people, did not give these names. Am I diminishing Arrernte people’s local knowledge (Barreto

---

<sup>a</sup> Tyson Carmody is a trusted narrative therapist, community leader, proud Arrernte man, father, and the founder and managing director of Kings Narrative. His vision at Kings Narrative is to support Aboriginal men to be the authors of their own stories and build a proud future for their sons to inherit. Anyone who has worked with Tyson knows the patience, generosity, and knowledge he brings to everything he does. Tyson has that rare ability to walk in many worlds at once, bringing together people from all backgrounds and levels of experience with respect and care to navigate complex realities with strength and humility. Tyson is the walking blood memory of his ancestors and carries with him a dignity and ability to communicate that is extremely rare. Because of this ability, Aboriginal men of all ages seek his counsel, mentoring, and support. Tyson creates culturally safe environments in which men can connect, unpack trauma, and build self-belief.

& Grandesso, 2010) by using names such as psychic misery? My sense is yes. I would like to adapt this idea of psychic misery to my local context using Arrernte language, but first I will need to consult with my Old People<sup>1</sup> to determine whether a word or concept fits. That way, if there is an Arrernte name for it, when the time comes to talk about it in my practice, people do not have to spend time attempting to translate the English name psychic misery into something they can understand. They can simply understand it from the outset.

I am currently studying a Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work at the University of Melbourne, and earlier this year I attended an online teaching block. I reflect on a video presented to students by David Denborough during day one of the online teaching block. It was a video of Michael White (2018) speaking about encopresis as a metaphor for the “problem story” (5:44–11). When this new word was introduced to me, I had no idea what it meant because I had never heard the word before. To help me internalise the context of the video, I searched online during the duration of this video for its meaning. Consequently, my search for the meaning of encopresis meant I have no recollection of the rest of the video.

This reminds me of the importance of contextualising work and attending to privilege, such as having English as a first language of instruction. This is required every time an Aboriginal person in Alice Springs steps into a colonial space, for example, a hospital, school, or court room. We hear an English word we do not understand and spend so much time and energy trying to find a meaning for it in order to translate that word and meaning into our own language. If we have it in our own language, then we can begin to understand it. Once we understand it in our language, we then translate that understanding back into English so we can continue with the conversation. By the time this is all done, we have missed so much important information; but we do not want to give the impression of wasting the time of western professionals by asking questions, so we simply nod and agree to whatever is being said, just to get it over and done with. The western dominant view often misinterprets this nod as agreement, consent, or understanding, as Barreto and Grandesso (2010) noted:

When people no longer have a belief in themselves, or a faith in their own knowledge, this brings psychic misery. And the situation is made worse if they seek assistance from people who only value academic knowledge and do not value local knowledge. (p. 34)

This quotation from Barreto and Grandesso (2010) resonates with me, as do their writings about their work in the Favelas, Brazil, because I feel a strong correlation between the psychic misery contexts in the Favelas and Alice

---

<sup>1</sup> Old People: Elders, senior lore men and women, leaders.

Springs. It is almost as if they are talking about working in Alice Springs and the surrounding remote Aboriginal communities. This is what I find in my practice when I work with Aboriginal men in my community. Men no longer have a belief in themselves, or a faith in their own knowledge. The dominant discourse born of colonisation portrays our men through a single story (Adichie, 2009) as violent, drunk, unemployable, and unwanted. The single story takes a hold and can be viewed as the truth of Aboriginal men by society as well as by Aboriginal men themselves. Numerous services and support programs target Aboriginal men in Alice Springs, but few are delivered in a way that truly values and respects the cultural knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal men, so our men do not engage with these services. If men do engage with these services, rarely is it on their terms, which in turn does not create a safe space for rich story development.

Contemplating the second sentence of the quotation from Barreto and Grandesso (2010), I do believe the situation is exacerbated if Aboriginal men seek assistance from people who only value academic knowledge and do not value local knowledge. This reminds me of a quotation from African American politician Major Williams (2022) that I saw on social media: “Anyone that profit off of you being blind will never give you the tools and resources to see”.

There is a continuous flow of western academics coming to Alice Springs to work with Aboriginal people. Many arrive with noble intentions; nonetheless, they are entering high-paying positions situated in Aboriginal organisations and communities with assumed authority based on academic knowledge. Owing to vast differences in cultural ways of being and understanding life, there are limitations to building a sustainable connection whereby local cultural knowledge is privileged. To make this visible for Aboriginal men, I like to draw a clock in the sand converting 60 minutes into 60,000 years as a visual representation of the extensive history of Aboriginal culture. I contrast Aboriginal history with colonisation and western knowledge arriving 235 years ago, which on the clock equates to just under 15 seconds. For Aboriginal men this activity shifts the focus back onto the cultural skills and experiences we have as Aboriginal people and builds a sense of pride that we come from something special, the oldest continuous living culture in the world.

From observations, it seems that often a one-way transaction occurs in which western academics are given access to ancient and sacred practices from the oldest continuous living culture in the world, but the skills transfer the other way is minimal. Salary packages for an incoming academic can be lucrative, offering support for moving, housing, and potentially even a vehicle as incentives. Many careers have been made or boosted by working in Aboriginal communities. When the time arrives for that academic to move on from the Aboriginal organisation or community, who replaces them? Has there been an intentional transfer of skills to develop a local Aboriginal person to take over that role? Unfortunately, I have found this is seldom the case; one white academic is replaced by another white academic. Who is profiting from this relationship? Could this be interpreted as western academics profiting

off of Aboriginal people being “blind” as the quote from Major Williams suggests? Questions of accountability should be asked of white academics, such as: What are your plans to transfer skills from your academic knowledge to local Aboriginal people so they may be positioned to take over that role when you leave? In what way have you trained and developed local Aboriginal people to step into your position? If there are no Aboriginal people in leadership or therapeutic roles within Aboriginal organisations, what is the message being sent to Aboriginal people accessing that service? What is the story being told about academic knowledge versus local knowledge?

Through my practice in Kings Narrative, I am accountable to my community and to Aboriginal men to upskill and transfer knowledge from the academic training I have obtained, while privileging their local knowledge. Our vision statement at Kings Narrative is to see Aboriginal men re-author their own stories, to step outside the discourses in place preventing men from seeing their true worth. Kings Narrative employs only local Aboriginal men to work with and support Aboriginal men in our community. Our staff have been employed based on their local and cultural knowledge and given opportunities to gain further academic skills and qualifications to complement their existing expertise. At Kings Narrative we say, “you can’t be what you can’t see”. To enact this, when people consider Kings Narrative, they see Aboriginal men who are strong in cultural and local knowledge, and who are celebrating and preferencing that cultural and local knowledge. They observe these same Aboriginal men navigating the academic space, endeavouring to learn and develop from a new world view without forsaking their understanding of life based on their cultural world view. There is a greater likelihood of an Aboriginal man looking at Kings Narrative and seeing themselves.

If we consider psychic misery is in effect in Alice Springs because local and cultural knowledge has not been valued, then it is justifiable to conclude that Aboriginal men are considered lacking in desirable academic skills and qualifications for employment. Many Aboriginal men in Alice Springs and the surrounding remote communities remain unemployed, and if they are employed, it is in uninspiring entry-level roles. I see men who in the academic, western space are viewed as unqualified, yet those same men when they are on Country in their cultural space are professors with PhDs. We are the original therapists, engineers, astrologists, biologists, teachers, inventors, linguists, explorers, and governors. We employ only Aboriginal men at Kings Narrative so that we can showcase how we are privileging a new set of employment desirables. We are saying to Aboriginal men, your current skill set based on your cultural and local knowledge is more than enough; what you have is valued and needed. Not only is it enough to be employed, but it is also enough to become your own employer, to start an innovative and successful business of your own. What greater way to re-author your story as well as re-authoring the story of your community, especially if your community is experiencing or living in psychic misery?

Recently I facilitated a two-day workshop in partnership with another Aboriginal organisation called Brother to Another, which operates in Larrakia Country (Darwin). This was an employment workshop for young Aboriginal men from Alice Springs, in which we examined current jobs being advertised within Aboriginal organisations. We explored the language used to describe jobs and the desirable skills needed to do the job. This highlighted that even in Aboriginal organisations, the language used to advertise and describe job requirements is still heavily academic, which for the young men in the group was an almost immediate deterrent to considering applying for the job. We invited a guest speaker to share his employment stories as a young Aboriginal man when he had been employed as a youth worker at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre for children aged 14 to 18 years old. He was 19 at the time and did not think he had the employable skill set required for the job. However, the counsellors and senior staff strongly encouraged him to apply. They had a problem. The young people (who were Aboriginal) would not engage with the staff (who were not Aboriginal); they needed another young person with the same local knowledge to connect with and support the young people in care. This was a significant moment in the speaker's life, when he experienced what it was like to be valued for his local knowledge.

At the end of the two-day workshop, we sat as a group and reflected on the key insights and lessons from the young men's points of view. Throughout the reflection activity, one young man was especially vocal in his responses and reflections, offering valuable insights:

*Tyson:* What would you say is a highlight or something that stood out to you over the last two days? And is there anything new you have learned?

*Young Man:* I think a highlight for me is just being here with all you fellas, talking about this stuff. I thought we were going to be writing resumes and things like that, but it was good listening to other Aboriginal men who are working and to hear their stories.

*Tyson:* Is there anything new you have learned? Think of something you know about now that you didn't know yesterday or two days ago.

*Young Man:* I learned that you have to be really good at reading and writing if you want to get a job! I wish I stayed in school instead of dropping out and following my mates.

*Tyson:* Yes, reading and writing can help for sure. You spoke just before saying it was good listening to other Aboriginal men share their stories. If you think a bit more about those stories, could you maybe find a lesson there?

*Young Man:* Well, another thing I liked was when we went to Emily Gap and we was talking there. It was good talking about cultural things, but I never knew about that white policeman Willshire<sup>2</sup> who killed Aboriginal people and took two women through a men's sacred site. But now they have a street named after him in town!

*Tyson:* Yeah, it's important that we don't forget that. It's important history for us because he didn't just kill Aboriginal people, he killed Arrernte people. That's our people, that's our families. Did you ever think you would be learning about this history when you knew you were coming to an employment workshop?

*Young Man:* No way! I mean, we've talked about employment stuff, you know, and we saw different places where we could get a job, but we was also talking about our culture too, and I really like how we did that.

*Tyson:* What's the feeling like in your body now as you are about to drive off in the bus compared to what it was like when you first jumped off the bus yesterday?

*Young Man:* You know what? All I have to say is right now, when I look at myself as a young Aboriginal man, I finally see my true value. I am enough just because I am Aboriginal, because I got my culture. So yeah, I know my true value!

There are many questions running through my mind:

- What comes after psychic misery?
- What is the antithesis of psychic misery? Is this something that has been explored or studied before?
- What would it look and feel like in Alice Springs if there was no psychic misery?
- Who is responsible for eroding psychic misery in Alice Springs?
- Who is best placed to contribute to this story, to provide the tools and resources to see the value of Aboriginal knowledge?

When I look back on my life's experiences and lessons, which have led me to this exact moment writing this reflection, I understand how my Arrernte world view gives me the resources I need to privilege local knowledge. This is

---

<sup>2</sup> Constable William Willshire: the first policeman in Australian history to be charged with murder for killing Aboriginal people. Willshire was posted in Alice Springs in 1882 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Willshire\\_\(policeman\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Willshire_(policeman))).

insider knowledge. With this insider knowledge, I can navigate the academic world too. So, who is best placed to provide the necessary tools and resources? It is all there in my cultural understanding of life, all there in what Barreto and Grandesso (2010) spoke about, there in what Williams (2022) said, and it is there for all to hear in what the young man said when I asked about the feeling in his body at the end of the workshop. I will end this reflection by paying homage to that young man and the impact I believe he will have on our community: “right now, when I look at myself as a young Aboriginal man, I finally see my true value”.

## References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009, October 7). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED Talk. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg&feature=emb_logo)
- Barreto, A., & Grandesso, M. (2010). Community therapy: A participatory response to psychic misery. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 4, 33–41.
- White, M. (2018). *Funny moments* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TT73fQVvya8>
- Williams, M. [@MajorWilliamsCA]. (2022, July 23). *Anyone that profit off of you being blind will never give you the tools and resources to see #StillThinkingMajor* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MajorWilliamsCA/status/1550660956149071872?lang=en>