Challenging psychology: reflecting on Riley's 'Manifesto for Change'

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SUMMARY: This paper reflects on the personal and professional implications for the colonization project of psychology critiqued by Rob Riley’s seminal address at the 1995 Australian Psychological Society conference.

KEY WORDS: Manifesto for Change, critical consciousness, silent acculturation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Rob Riley’s words at the 1995 APS conference reflected his identity as an activist and leader; they were bold and inspirational, and offered an undeniable challenge to the established thinking of the profession and its practitioners. I began my undergraduate psychology degree in 1996, a year after Riley’s seminal address; and in many ways this connection has influenced me throughout my education and subsequent practice. I first became aware of Rob Riley during the early 1980s, shortly after migrating to Australia. At that time, I knew nothing of the history or experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; I had rapidly become acculturated into the dominant racist attitudes of the people I met in Perth and who became my acquaintances and work colleagues in those early days. I was drawn into the divisive political rhetoric around Riley and his fight for recognition and land rights for Indigenous Australians; and yet, when I heard him speak on the news, I was drawn to this man – his charisma and passion were captivating and despite his refusal to sugar coat the oppression and abuse that non-Indigenous peoples had enacted over the generations I found myself admiring his determination to fight back. His strength is what I recall most from those early years; sadly, it was not enough to sustain him and hearing of his death in 1996 resulted in a deep sadness. I had never met him, nor had I heard him speak in person, and yet I felt that Australia had just lost someone really important; someone we would not value yet as we should.

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My decision to study psychology was linked to an embryonic commitment to social change and equity – not that I was consciously aware of it at the time; it grew and developed over the undergraduate years and bloomed in the first year of my Master’s degree when I was introduced to critical psychology and Indigenous knowledges. It was here that Rob Riley re-entered my life; when I first heard his words from the 1995 conference and the challenge he levelled to psychologists I was inspired to be part of that change agenda. Rob’s words forced me to question the nature of psychology as a discipline and what it meant for me to be part of a profession that had contributed to the displacement of Indigenous peoples, culture, and identity in Australia. I started to examine my identity as an English woman living as a settler in a colonised space and representing the identity of the coloniser; but I also began to question the nature of my psychology education and the normative assumptions that it constructed and reinforced via its theories and research. There was, in the essence of Riley’s words another psychology, an alternate psychology that spoke of liberation and social justice and that was concerned with wellbeing beyond the individual, and it was that psychology that I wanted to embrace but was absent in the traditional psychology curriculum.

In part the mono-cultural focus of traditional psychology is due to the expansion of a global psychology that reflects a white North American version of the discipline that consciously and unconsciously reinforces white dominance (Darlaston-Jones, 2005; Breen & Darlaston-Jones, 2010; Giroux, 2011; Green, Sonn, & Matsubula, 2007). While inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content has been required by the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) Standards since 2010 this often occurs in an ad hoc or superficial manner (Darlaston-Jones, 2004, 2015, 2016; Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones, & Clark, 2011). This is not necessarily as a result of deliberate omission, but rather due to the fact that psychology educators are themselves the product of the educational system that reproduces a particular form of epistemic dominance. This is the white privilege that Rob Riley tried to make visible, not only to psychologists but to Australia as a whole; my resistance to hearing this unpalatable truth during my Masters led to resistance and a sort of paralysis because I had no way of teasing these conflicting truths apart. How could I forge a firm identity as an Australian, while I was simultaneously complicit in a form of cultural genocide (Galtung, 1990; UNDRIP, 2007).

Navigating the complexities of the interface between personal, social, professional and national identities requires a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and personal reflexivity that allows for the sometimes painful deconstruction of self and one’s worldview and the various silent acculturation processes that contribute to its creation (Dudgeon et al. 2016). It is also beneficial to have a guide or mentor to assist on that journey of self-discovery. If such a journey can be embedded into the educational context of one’s discipline such that the discipline itself is also subject
to the same critique it has the potential to lead to a holistic process of making visible the unseen, unspoken normative assumptions that contribute to oppression, marginalisation and voicelessness.

Because psychology education and training is detached from Australia’s colonial history and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge within and between the settlers and the original inhabitants, there are no mechanisms to debate and navigate the consequences of that shared history (Darlaston-Jones, Herbert, Ryan, Darlaston-Jones, Harris & Dudgeon, 2014). The subsequent actions on the part of various governments and individuals that contributed to the loss of land, children, language, and culture is not taught or spoken of. Consequently, the role of psychology within the legitimising processes that normalised these actions is equally invisible. Within this space, students become attuned to the legacy that applies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; the deficits, disadvantage, and dispossession, within culturally safe narratives for the teller. What we are rarely told about are the acts of resistance, challenge, survival, and of strength; but more importantly we are never taught the legacy that we as the colonising settler derive from that history (Darlaston-Jones et al. 2014).

It is this omission that Riley wanted psychologists and the discipline to examine. As an English migrant in my adopted homeland of Australia, I am conscious of Riley’s charge to me as a psychologist; it is for me (and each person) to ask: in what ways do I accept this challenge to question myself and work reflexively and how do I do this effectively? My identity means that I derive a legacy of power and privilege, as a result of colonisation; so too my profession inherits a position of dominance and both need to be destabilised, deconstructed, and decolonised. Achieving the social and economic equivalency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, that as a profession and as a nation we claim we want, requires that Indigenous knowledges be incorporated alongside western paradigms in all educational settings (Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones & Bray, in press). Rob Riley’s manifesto is a blueprint for change for each psychologist, for the discipline, and for Australia and he will be remembered as one of the great leaders of our time (Dudgeon, Bray & Darlaston-Jones, this issue).
References


