

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

Frankie Shane Merritt

Bachelor of Arts, University of New England

Master of Arts (Psychology), University of Sydney

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

of the University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia

May, 2014

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification. I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge all the traditional custodians of this land and I pay respect to their Elders, past, present and future.

I would like to acknowledge and thank a number of people who helped me achieve this finished thesis. Firstly, to Dr John Grootjans, who has mentored me and supported me immeasurably through this process, and also, Dr Shayne Williams who did the same. Sometimes the discussions were heated, sometimes there were disagreements, but always there was support and encouragement. Thank you both.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Sue Watt, who has supported me, and challenged me and therefore made my work so much better. I would like to thank Dr Linda Turner, my secondary supervisor, for her enthusiasm and friendship, and for the encouragement she continually gifted me. Thank you both.

I would also love to thank my participants, by name, but sadly I can't due to confidentiality and ethical considerations! You all had inspirational stories; that was evident. But you all, individually and in different ways, personally inspired me, and spending time with you, mostly in your home or community, was a fulfilling and rich experience.

I would like to dedicate this to my mother, Elizabeth Jeanette Wheeler-Merritt, who died too young. Without you I wouldn't be strong, and I wouldn't have survived through the adversities life brought. Without the memory of you, I would have given up long ago. I miss you every day.

Table of Contents

<i>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</i>	1
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	2
<i>Table of Contents</i>	3
<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>List of Appendices</i>	ix
<i>Thesis Summary</i>	x
<i>Please be advised:</i>	xiv
Chapter One: Introduction	15
Overview	15
The Theoretical, Philosophical and Epistemological bases for this thesis	16
A historical overview of colonisation in Australia:	18
Resilience and Survival.	22
Mismatched Worldviews.	24
The role of psychology: the ‘whiteness’ of psychology:	28
What this thesis is undertaking:	30
What’s resilience and what’s it got to do with ‘survival’?	32
Research questions/problem, aims, contribution to knowledge and statement of significance	34
Chapter Two: Literature Review - Colonisation, Decolonisation, and Liberation Psychology	37
Stereotypes, prejudice, internalised domination and internalised oppression	41
The relationship between power and health inequities	43
The relationship between this thesis, the term resilience, and decolonisation	44
Cultural Safety can be a core tool in decolonising	46
Decolonisation in Practice – decolonisation of programs	47
Decolonisation in Practice – decolonisation of methodology	48
Decolonisation in Practice – decolonisation of methodology – the role of Psychology	50
Decolonisation in Practice – decolonisation of language	51
The decolonisation of healthcare	52
Liberation Psychology	53

Chapter Three: Literature Review - Miscommunications and Cultural Safety	57
Problematic aspects of communication in the biomedical approach.	57
Miscommunications are pervasive.	59
Miscommunications are not just about language barriers.	61
Cultural differences and differences in worldviews.	62
Miscommunications can be about a lack of informed choice and can be implicit in power imbalance.	63
Examples of miscommunication - Indigenous experiences in the Systems	64
Miscommunications: the role of Worldviews	67
Recent studies related to First Nations Australians and conceptions of mental health	69
Cultural Safety is about vulnerability, power, and the legitimacy of difference	74
What's the difference between cultural safety and cultural awareness, and cultural competence?	75
Indigeneity and Identity	80
Chapter Four: Introduction to the Three Studies	89
The theoretical position this research takes	89
Why qualitative methods?	91
The Methodological Approach and Context: Paradigms, Ontology and Epistemology	93
What is Indigenist Research?	96
Methodological Overview for the Three Studies	97
Procedures	101
Development of themes	101
Concluding statement on the methods and procedures of this study	105
Chapter Five: Study One – Theme Extraction from Published Literature	106
Methodology of the Theme Extraction from Published Literature	106
The Results for Study One:	110
Theme One: Disparate Resilience definitions	112
Theme Two: The Cultural context of Adversity	120
Theme Three: Indigenous survival behaviours	122
Theme Four: Indigenous concepts of health/mental health	124
Theme Five: Intercultural Practices and Resilience – Health Context of the Study	125
Theme Six: Assumptions about constructs	126
Summary of Study One	128
Chapter Six: Study Two – The Biographic Analysis	130
Methodology	132
Results from the Biographic Analysis	135

Theme One - The Importance of Indigenous Identity and the Connection to land/Connection to the Past	136
Theme Two - Two Worlds	137
Theme Three - Family as ‘Social Capital’	138
Theme Four - Spirituality	139
Summary of Study Two	140
Chapter Seven: Study Three – The Interviews	142
Methodology	142
Ethical clearance and considerations	144
Interview Setting	146
Participant selection.	147
Supervisor and Peer validation of the coding process	149
A checking procedure embedded within the interviews, and member checking of the coding	150
An Introduction to the Interviewees.	151
Interviewee One – Sophie	152
Interviewee Two – Victoria	152
Interviewee Three – Stanley	152
Interviewee Four – Helena	153
Interviewee Five – Suzanne	153
Interviewee Six – John	154
Interviewee Seven – Beatrice	154
Interviewee Eight – Annabelle	154
Specific Results from the in-depth interviews	155
1. What does the term resilience mean for Aboriginal people (from an Australian Aboriginal perspective)? How is resilience experienced by Indigenous Australians? How does this compare to the Western definition of resilience?	155
2. How well does resilience, as a Western psychological construct, map onto Indigenous people’s experiences and understanding of survival.	158
3. Is survival, as it is experienced by Indigenous people, a similar concept to the Western construct of resilience?	162
Resultant Themes from the interviews	164
Theme One - Narratives of Adversity	164
Theme Two - Narratives of Linkage	175
Theme Three - Narratives of Insight	184
Theme Four - Narratives of Agency	190
Summary of Study Three	201
Chapter Eight: Overall Researcher Reflections	204
Researcher Reflections	204
Leximancer analysis software	207
Chapter Nine: General Discussion	209
The nature of the inequitable distribution of health care – the barriers to health parity	221

The importance of sharing experiences/giving voice to the narratives for decolonisation	225
The use of humour was a common theme, and it overarched the other themes; adversity, linkage, insight and agency were united by this one factor.	229
An emergent theory - Three distinct ways of being resilient:	231
<i>Chapter Ten: Implications and recommendations</i>	235
Recommendations for the education system	237
Ways forward - Recommendations for the health system and specifically the discipline of psychology	243
Recommendations for Psychology as a discipline in Australia:	245
Psychology as an agent of advocacy	246
<i>Chapter Eleven: Conclusion</i>	249
<i>References:</i>	252
<i>Appendices:</i>	279

List of Figures

Figure 1: The Effects of Colonisation (Adaptation by Merritt 2014 from Cunningham & Stanley, 2003, p. 403). _____	38
Figure 2: Pathways to Resilience (Adaptation by Merritt 2014 of a diagram by Silburn, 2003, unpublished, cited by Stanley, 2003, slide 35). _____	45
Figure 3: Ramsden's Process to Cultural Safety (Adaptation by Merritt 2014 of Ramsden, 2002, Figure 6 - The process toward achieving Cultural Safety in nursing and midwifery practice, p. 117). _____	78
Figure 4: The Triangulated Data Sources _____	91
Figure 5: The Survival, Resilience, Thriving Spectrum _____	201

List of Tables

Table 1: The Methodological Overview of the Three Studies _____	100
Table 2: Summary of the Themes of Study One Emergent Themes _____	111
Table 3: Summary of the emergent themes of Study Two – the biographic analysis __	136
Table 4: Summary of the Themes of Study One, Study Two and Study Three _____	215

List of Appendices

Appendices	279
Appendix One – Interview Prompt Questions – Script	280-281
Appendix Two – Ethics Consent	282
Appendix Three – Information Sheet for Participants	283
Appendix Four – Consent for Participants	284

Thesis Summary

This thesis is about decolonisation and empowerment. It is specifically about First Nations people claiming or reclaiming their autonomy. This thesis explores concepts, in this case a focus on the term ‘resilience’, to address miscommunications and to perhaps minimise mistakes that can be made due to assumed knowledge; assumed congruence of terms and concepts.

The history of psychology as a discipline is discussed, along with its role in the oppression of First Nations people worldwide, and in Australia. The importance of worldviews, and how miscommunications can affect healthcare, is critical for health professionals to understand. The discipline of psychology needs to ensure that it is not limiting its worldview by being too insular; it needs to be reflexive enough to both recognise its part in the history of oppression, and to become an agent of change for those who have been oppressed. Indigenous voices need to be heard as part of this reflexive psychology.

Language, constructs and interactions between client and practitioner, are infused by power differentials. Language itself has power, and language can be an unwitting tool that perpetuates the power of a dominant culture. Language is informed by worldviews, and these vary depending on such factors as who the individual is, the culture, or the organisation. The salient point is that assumptions of shared knowledge need to be challenged; language can be culturally laden, and assumptions can impact upon communication. Psychology can be discordant with other worldviews, and this can lead to miscommunications that can have a detrimental impact on practice.

The concept of cultural safety is used in this thesis as a lens for focusing on the power differentials in interactions, and that are present in language. Cultural safety is about power differentials. It 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’. Therefore, cultural safety can be a tool for psychology to embrace that can help it to decolonise.

The research questions are: 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, 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.

This thesis discusses 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 this thesis 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 revealed these distinct ways of being resilient through dealing with adversities as demonstrated in the participant narratives. These ways are 'survival', 'dysfunction or adaption' and 'thriving'.

First Nations peoples are resilient, they are survivors, and it could be argued that they are more resilient than those who hold hegemonic power and privilege in society. However, it should not 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 based on a colonial past and perpetuated by hegemony and unexamined systemic practice. The discipline of psychology has made moves to facilitate it becoming an agent of advocacy; an agent of change. In order for this 'psychology serving humanity' to proceed, it must be reflexive, and must understand that language holds power. For example, those who may be thinking that there is a need to 'instill' resilience into this Aboriginal child, or that Aboriginal community, could be unintentionally perpetuating the disempowering mythology that these children are not resilient.

Please be advised:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this thesis may contain the names of people who are now deceased. Please be aware that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, when hearing the names of deceased persons, may experience sadness or distress.