



Australian Aboriginal stories and psychopathology

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To examine for evidence of the persistence of psychopathology over millennia. The Australian Aboriginals have the oldest continuous culture on Earth.

Method: Australian Aboriginal stories were examined for evidence of behavior which could be understood in terms of current psychopathology. Efforts were made to avoid the confounds of culture. **Results:** Parts of stories were located which were consistent with (1) odd thinking and speech, inappropriate affect, eccentric behavior, and lack of close friends, (2) unexpected grandiosity and irritability in one twin, with pathologically low mood and suicide in the other, (3) sick role behavior and (4) malingering.

Conclusion: Certain aspects of human psychopathology have persisted for millennia.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to look for Western defined psychopathology in the ancient Australian Aborigine stories. Psychopathology refers to the study of mental distress or disorder, or the manifestation of behaviors which may be indicative of mental distress or disorder, or maladaptive behavior. It generally excludes criminal behavior or gain-based activities which are not dependent on abnormal mental function. Psychopathology is found in all psychiatric disorders including psychotic, mood, and personality disorders. Malingering, by definition, is not a form of psychopathology, but is often included in discussions of this topic, owing to apparent relatedness. When the observer and subject are of different cultures there is great need for caution and sensitivity in approaching conclusions.

Cultural relativism is the concept that health and normality emerge within a social context and that the content and form of mental health will vary greatly from one culture to another (Berry et al., 1992). Thus, it is not appropriate to steadfastly attribute diagnoses to ancient individuals using current diagnostic criteria; especially when the accounts are incomplete. However, it is appropriate to highlight behaviors of the past which bear a resemblance to modern concepts.

The psychiatrist of one culture who takes an interest in the mental life of the people of another must tread carefully to avoid accusations of “racism” (Sashidharan, 1986), “sexual exploitation” (Ameen, 2002), and “condescension” (Minde, 2005).

Kleinman (1987) observes that much cross-cultural psychiatry has been conducted to demonstrate that particular disorders occur in people of different cultures, with a view to strengthening the claim that these are universal disorders. While researchers (such as those who conducted the WHO International Pilot Study of Schizophrenia) probably inadvertently misdiagnose some cases due to cultural insensitivity, it is not clear that examining historical civilizations for evidence of psychopathology is necessarily a flawed enterprise. The fact that the observer is of one culture and the subject is of another, calls for delicacy, but is not a blanket disqualification.

The Australian Aboriginals have the oldest continuous culture on Earth, extending back 40 000 years (perhaps more). They have an extremely rich oral tradition and many of their stories have been transcribed into written English over the last 200 years.

The identification of early accounts of mental symptoms and even disorders may give context to the difficult field of mental phenomenology. In addition to respecting cultural factors, it is necessary to be aware that mental phenomena are complicated by history and fashion. The identification of psychopathology in other places and times does not speak to the underpinning genetics and biology, it does, however, provide some evidence of the universality and persistence of particular components of psychopathology.

2. Method

All the translated stories which could be accessed in records and books held in libraries and private collections were examined. (Some Aboriginal stories remain secret and exist only in the oral form; these, of course, were not examined.) Details of stories were considered against widely held current definitions of psychopathology and disorders.

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3. Results

Three stories were identified which appear to describe elements of psychopathology, and one which appears to describe elements of malingering.

3.1. Goolahwilleel

There is scant information about Goolahwilleel in childhood. It is stated that he did not make friends with other young children in the usual manner and preferred to spend time alone playing with sticks and drawing in the sand. He endured initiation without complaint, but he had no interest in spear throwing or leaning hunting skills.

The following account of his early adulthood comes from Parker (1989) whose work is now in the public domain and can be quoted in some detail:

“Young Goolahwilleel used to go out hunting every day. His mother and sisters always expected that he would bring home kangaroo and emu for them. But each day he came home without any meat at all. They asked him what he did in the bush every day, as evidently he did not hunt. He said that he did hunt. . . .

“To-morrow,” he said, “you shall not be disappointed. I will bring you a kangaroo”.

Every day, instead of hunting, Goolahwilleel had been gathering wattle-gum, and with this he had been modeling a kangaroo – a perfect model of one, tail, ear, and all complete. So the next day he came toward the camp carrying his kangaroo made of gum. Seeing him coming, and also seeing that he was carrying, the promised kangaroo, his mother and sisters said,

“Ah, Goolahwilleel spoke truly. He has kept his word and now brings us a kangaroo. Pile up the fire. Tonight we shall eat meat”.

About a hundred yards [90 meters] away from the camp Goolahwilleel put down his model, and came on without it. His mother called out: “Where is the kangaroo you brought home?”

“Over there.” And he pointed to where he had left it. . . .

“But there is only a great figure of gum there.”

“Well, did I say it was anything else? Did I not say it was gum?”

“No, you did not. You said it was a kangaroo”.

“And so it is a kangaroo. A beautiful kangaroo that I made all by myself”.

And he smiled quite proudly to think what a fine kangaroo he had made.

But his mother and sisters did not smile. They sized him and gave him a good beating for deceiving them. They told him he should never go out alone again, for he only played instead of hunting, though he knew they starved for meat. They would always go with him in the future’.

3.1.1. Psychopathological considerations

The story of Goolahwilleel can be taken to be an example of artistic temperament. While this interpretation is likely correct, there may be additional features of interest.

Goolahwilleel was aware that his mother and sisters wanted him to kill animals and bring them meat to eat. He did not do so, instead, he followed his own interest of making a sculpture. This could be taken as evidence of narcissism, with a lack of concern for the wishes/welfare of others.

However, there is more. When his family complained that he had not brought home a kangaroo, he insisted that “. . . it is a kangaroo. A

beautiful kangaroo. . . Goolahwilleel. . . smiled quite proudly. . . But his mother and sisters. . . gave him a good beating. . .”.

This suggests Goolahwilleel experienced difficulty with normal interpersonal functioning. There appears to have been odd thinking and speech, inappropriate affect, eccentric behavior, and lack of close friends. Using another concept, Goolahwilleel appears to have had reduced theory of mind skill, being unable to grasp that his family had distinct minds and did not share his understanding of the world and appropriate action.

3.2. Perindi and Harrimiah

Perindi and Harrimiah were twins (Reed, 2006) and had a close relationship. They played together as children, were initiated together and hunted together as adults. Each had warmth and respect for the abilities of the other. They were attractive, skilled and much admired by the other members of the tribe.

On the occasion of some tribal dances, uncharacteristically, Perindi claimed that he had a better body than his twin. He went on to say that he was also a better dancer, and that this would shortly be revealed.

The following day they performed the frog dance. When this ended the young women flocked to Harrimiah and loudly praised his skill and energy. Perindi suddenly became very angry. He shouted at his twin, that he was “finished” with him and that if he ever saw him again he would kill him. He (Perindi) immediately left their shared hunting grounds and set up camp at a far distant site.

They then lived separate lives. Harrimiah grieved for his brother. Eventually, both married.

One day, while out hunting, the twins unexpectedly came face to face. Perindi sprang on Harrimiah, sank his teeth into his throat and tore away skin. Their families were nearby and separated them.

Perindi’s attack alienated his wife and her family and they drove him away from their camp. He then lived alone and “developed peculiar habits”.

Harrimiah was also changed after the attack. He spent many nights by himself, away from his camp. He continued to say that he wanted to win back the affection of his twin. He felt his heart “would melt with sorrow”.

When hope of a reunion faded, Harrimiah dug a pit and lay down in it. The wind blew sand over him, he cried and the pit became his grave.

3.2.1. Psychopathological considerations

These twins have had a very close relationship until adulthood, and there is no evidence of early psychopathology.

Perindi became boastful, which was a change in demeanor, and perhaps this suggests mood elevation. He became very angry, threatened the life of his twin should they ever meet again, and permanently left their hunting grounds. This suggests uncharacteristic irritability.

On the occasion of their unplanned meeting, Perindi responded with inappropriate violence. His response was not culturally sanctioned, and resulted in his expulsion from his camp by his wife and her relatives.

Throughout the story there are many mentions of Harrimiah’s grieving for his brother. After the attack he felt his heart “would melt with sorrow”. He became socially withdrawn. He dug a pit in which he lay. He cried and did not resist as he was buried by sand blown over him by the wind. These details indicate distress beyond normal reaction/grieving, and may suggest pathologically low mood with suicidal behavior.

The fact that these men were twins suggests the grandiosity and irritability on one and the pathologically low mood and suicidal behavior of the other may be genetically influenced.

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