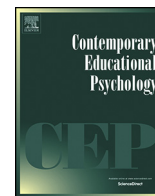




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Toward a positive psychology of indigenous thriving and reciprocal research partnership model



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ABSTRACT

There are many examples of Indigenous success in the current Australian context. However, little is known about how to identify, measure, and emulate these successes more broadly. Partly, this can be attributed to an array of theoretical and methodological limitations that have plagued Indigenous Australian research. The latter include a lack of concerted research being founded upon the voices and agency of Indigenous children, youth, and communities and a lack of large-scale quantitative research. Hence, Indigenous Australian research has often failed to yield a translational evidence-base resulting in meaningful policy and impacts of salience to Indigenous Australians. Simultaneously, positive psychology, with its emphasis on explicating how individuals can thrive and get the most out of life, has become an increasingly important part of contemporary scientific psychology. Rather than replacing conventional psychology, positive psychology adds to it, broadening the study of human experience. Many tenants of positive psychology are aligned with Indigenous conceptualizations of human experience, especially those emphasizing the wholeness and interrelatedness of human experiences. In addition, positive psychology focuses on strengths, and Indigenous leaders, organizations, and community members' prefer approaches, whereby Indigenous strengths are identified so that they can be emulated more broadly. In this paper, we describe our implementation of a *reciprocal research partnership model of Indigenous thriving*, utilizing a research framework founded upon both positive psychology principles and holistic Indigenous Australian worldviews. This model prioritizes the voices and agency of Indigenous people and proposes that research be conducted in partnership as opposed to research being imposed on Indigenous communities, and it focuses on Indigenous Australian strengths as opposed to deficit approaches. After acknowledging the disadvantages that Indigenous Australians face, we describe this strengths-based approach and how its utilization of Indigenous research methodologies in combination with Western approaches can contribute to a new approach to translational research of salience to Indigenous Australians. We then review extant theory and research that supports elements of the proposed model. We further suggest its potential for practical innovation in Australia and how, if successful, this new approach may also find application in other Indigenous populations and, more broadly, for disenfranchised groups around the globe.

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“A new generation of Indigenous people are turning dreams into reality: Education; economic participation, self-esteem and success are part of this new Indigenous world, and there is no going back” (Langton, 2013a).

“There are plenty of examples of Indigenous success; we just have to recognise it and replicate it” (Dodson, 2009).

There are a growing number of Indigenous people not just attaining success but triumphing and thriving in a new Indigenous Australia. Yet at the same time, too many Indigenous Australians are failing to thrive. Indeed, Australian governments in the last two decades have acknowledged that Indigenous Australians are the most disadvantaged Australians across all socioeconomic indicators and one of the most disadvantaged populations in the world (Australian Government, 2015). Craven and Parbury (2013) have also lamented the waste of Indigenous talent and emphasized the need to harness Indigenous Australians' full potential to not just succeed, but to flourish and that: “we have much to learn and gain from empirically synthesising and analysing what ... successful Indigenous Australians, and other Indigenous people, identify as drivers of their

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success” (p. 372). It is therefore critically important to identify what the drivers of Indigenous thriving are so that they can be utilized to augment this success more broadly (Craven & Parbury, 2013; Dodson, 2009). Yet despite its importance, there is a paucity of empirical research concerning the drivers of wellness, resilience, and thriving that have enabled some Indigenous Australians to triumph and ultimately reap the rewards and satisfactions of engaging in and contributing to Australia’s educational and economic life (Craven & Parbury, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to present a potentially potent new *reciprocal partnerships model of Indigenous thriving*. This strengths-based model entails a research agenda focused on enabling Indigenous Australian thriving using positive psychology principles and holistic Indigenous Australian worldviews to develop a positive psychology of Indigenous thriving. We do not assume that what we offer is the only research approach available when working with Indigenous Australians, or that this integrated approach should necessarily replace other approaches which are important for interrogating specific issues salient to specific Indigenous Australian communities. Rather the model intends to broaden research paradigms available for Indigenous people, researchers, service providers, and other stakeholders who desire to see Indigenous Australians attain their full potential. The focus of positive psychology is on how individuals can thrive and flourish given the right skills, strengths, and social context (Hayes & Ciarrochi, 2015). Although some positive psychology approaches have proven effective with non-Indigenous populations, it cannot be assumed that its success will readily apply to Indigenous people, or at least to the same degree that it does to the non-Indigenous population, although recent research evidence is promising (e.g., Bodkin-Andrews, Craven, Yeung, Dillon, & O’Rourke, 2012; Craven & Yeung, 2015; Yeung, Craven, & Ali, 2013).

Our proposed model seeks, in fact, to integrate Western and Indigenous methodologies, particularly those emphasizing the importance of embracing Indigenous knowledge, values, self-concepts, and autonomy, in new synergistic ways to yield translational research of salience to Indigenous children, youth, and communities. We propose this new interplay of methods for a number of important reasons. Research with Indigenous Australian community members has emphasized that they would value the opportunity to have access to the advances generated by Western research methods and have expressed concern that they have not been informed about what such methods can offer (e.g., Craven & Parente, 2006). Research focusing on Indigenous issues in Australia (and elsewhere in the world) has failed to attract our leading non-Indigenous researchers. It has also failed to attract the attention of many crucial disciplines including psychology, and there is an underwhelming reporting of advances in research with Indigenous populations in the leading research journals in the social sciences and an associated lack of frequently cited leading scholars in the field internationally. This is unfortunate as advances in international research theory, methods, and practice have not been capitalized upon to advance issues of salience and benefit to Indigenous Australians. Further, combining Indigenous and Western methods offers the potential to reciprocally enrich and advance traditional research methods in new ways by enriching it with Indigenous perspectives and constructs.

To ensure integration of Indigenous and Western approaches and to safeguard against overstating the claims of positive psychology principles for Indigenous people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors have developed this new approach in partnership (e.g., with three of our authors being Indigenous). The collaborative approach between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars in developing the proposed model, research framework, and approach toward a positive psychology of Indigenous thriving, reflects the approach we advocate for working in partnership—one of

collaboration and genuine knowledge sharing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers as well as research paradigms that prioritize the agency and voice of Indigenous children, youth, and communities. We also suggest that past reliance on single paradigms or methodological approaches has not achieved the gains that Indigenous Australians hope for. For example, many albeit well-intentioned approaches in education and psychology targeting Indigenous Australian populations have failed to penetrate beyond the classroom door. Clearly, a new approach and addition to our research arsenal is needed.

In this paper, we propose a fresh strengths-based approach with broad implications for enabling Indigenous Australian children, youth, and communities to thrive. We first make the case that Indigenous Australian disadvantage is a critical issue of our time, and present a rationale for the need to harness Indigenous people’s full potential to flourish. We then describe how incorporating positive psychology principles and methods that are consistent with Indigenous holistic worldviews and build on successes can lead to a new reciprocal partnership model of Indigenous thriving futures and a unifying research framework to enable translational research of salience to Indigenous Australians. This new perspective includes both Indigenous voices and methods in combination with selected approaches from positive psychology and Western research that may facilitate Indigenous empowerment, motivation, and positive self-concepts. While we do not assume that this perspective will be equally applicable to all Indigenous populations, we suggest that the basic framework is flexible enough to serve as a blueprint that can be adapted more broadly. Third, we present an overview of extant theory and research that support elements of the proposed framework. We conclude by posing a new psychology of Indigenous thriving as a potentially influential platform for launching a new generation of research to help to enable Indigenous Australian children, youth, and community to thrive.

1. The benefits of a positively-oriented approach

1.1. The problematic nature of deficit discourse in Australia

Indigenous Australian research has often relied on a deficit approach that emphasizes Indigenous people’s relatively low socioeconomic status and ethnic characteristics to explain the gap in health and well-being between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Fforde, Bamblett, Lovett, Gorringer, & Fogarty, 2013). This approach fails to recognize or focus on strengths and the provision of opportunities that facilitate growth and thriving. A reliance on deficit approaches has a number of adverse impacts on Indigenous children and youth that carries across the lifespan. First, it serves to perpetuate the deficits. For example, Australian teachers sometimes praise Indigenous students for substandard achievements, hiding the fact that they are not performing to mainstream national standards (Stronger Smarter Institute Limited, 2014). Such deficit thinking and low expectations among teachers implies that Indigenous children are less able to learn than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Sarra, 2008) and can be “self-perpetuating, where pre-conscious patterns of assumption and thinking facilitate ‘out of awareness’ searching for evidence to reinforce them” (Stronger Smarter Institute Limited, 2014, p. 25). Indeed, attitudes that assume deficits can create the conditions for what has been referred to as ‘stereotype threat’ (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which has been associated with underachievement (e.g., Hartley & Sutton, 2013).

Second, deficit approaches fail to take into account the strengths of Indigenous children, youth, and communities. There has been a general research focus on “how best to help Indigenous students fit into the system, rather than exploring what Indigenous students may bring with them as strengths to the learning experience”

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