Recognising a turning point in Australian psychology



Prof Pat Dudgeon AM



Shannon McNeair, Prof Pat Dudgeon, Dr Leda Barnett and Monica Barolits-McCabe at last month's meeting of the Australian Psychological Society. ***Picture: supplied.***

Last month, on September 15, we recognised the 10th anniversary of the formal apology the Australian Psychological Society (APS) delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This apology acknowledged the detrimental role of psychology in the mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in particular by excluding recognising cultural difference. It recognised, for the first time, how the profession has worked in ways which did not respect Indigenous knowledges, perspectives and experiences.

The apology itself represented a significant milestone for the APS, and for our people.

I remember the audience at the 2016 APS conference when the apology was read out. I remember the intense emotions and tears through the room when we asked for all the Indigenous people in the conference to stand on the stage and be part of history. This moment, I believe, signified a turning point in Australian psychology.

Yet even more importantly as the apology itself, the anniversary is an opportunity for us to reflect on the apology and what it aspired to achieve – and for us to consider what more must be done to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and psychologists. We must ask ourselves what steps have we made to create change?

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Belle Selkirk, clinical psychologist

We know more actions are necessary to create positive change in the psychology discipline. Crucially, the APS will need to move to an advanced reconciliation action plan; to listen deeply, learn continuously and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on creating a better future.

Racism is particularly blatant and intense for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and experiences of racism are only increasing since the Voice referendum in 2023.

A recent report released by the Productivity Commission showed that more than half (54%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 18 and over had experienced at least one form of racial prejudice over a six-month period in 2024. Additionally, between 2019 and 2021, just under half (45%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 16 and over had experienced racial discrimination in everyday life.

Genuine co-design and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is fundamental to driving change in the psychology discipline, and in the lives of our people.

The Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP) is taking the necessary action and commitment to building a culturally-safe and anti-racist future. In August, the team hosted the inaugural AIPEP Community of Practice (CoP) Member Symposium. The theme was 'Anti-racism in psychology education'.

"Through initiatives such as AIPEP, we have seen what is possible when the profession commits to systemic change," said Belle Selkirk, a clinical psychologist and AIPEP lead.

"The APS apology was an act of truth-telling. It acknowledged past harms, but it also set an expectation that psychology must become more equitable, culturally-responsive and accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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Dr Leda Barnett, vice co-chair of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA,) shares the same sentiment. While there has been progress made since the APS apology, she would like to see more steps taken to better the future.

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Dr Leda Barnett, vice co-chair of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association

"There has been movement in the right direction, particularly towards honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and Indigenous psychology within the broader discipline. There is still work to do, but progress is being made," she said.

"Indigenous communities have the answers. Our people know our communities and hold the cultural knowledge. Psychologists need to be willing to listen, to support and, most importantly, to learn."

Across Australia, we have seen how recognition of Indigenous knowledges, cultural safety and a commitment to anti-racism have grown across multiple professions. These developments have not come about on their own. Through decades of advocacy, leadership, truth-telling and persistence from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and their allies, we have seen positive change emerge.

It is essential we keep up the momentum, hold institutions accountable and work towards reconciliation and a better future for us all.

Professor Pat Dudgeon AM is a Bardi woman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She is Australia's first Aboriginal psychologist, and director of the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP) at the University of Western Australia.

This article is part of a series of columns to appear in the *Koori Mail* about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from CBPATSISP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities.

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