

APA Virtual Convention 2020
Symposium sponsored by Div. 1
Back to the Future---Retracing Our Steps via Indigenous Psychologies

Chair: Louise Sundararajan

Participants

Richard Katz, PhD, First Nations University of Canada, Canada

Title: Indigenous Healing Psychology: Pathways Toward Justice and Equity

Rachel S.K, Ting, PhD, Monash University, Malaysia

Title: An Anti-Hero Version of Resilience That Challenges Our Priorities

Discussion by Louise Sundararajan

It is a pleasure to participate in this prescient panel. This panel is prescient in so many ways. First, when I submitted the proposal of this panel to APA, I wrote on 11/29/19 the following:

The 21st century is grappling with the fact that the run-away train of science and technology is heading toward irrevocable degradation of the biosphere, not to mention the potential degradation of humanity. How can psychology help to open up a new trajectory of science by questioning some of its ontological assumptions and resetting some of its epistemological priorities?

The Figures 1 to 3 sum up well the challenging ways of being human in the era of technology. (My apologies to Rob Harle for mispronunciation of his name in the video)



Fig. 1. Mother Nature On the Run by Rob Harle, use with permission.



Fig. 2. Questioning the Absence of Memory by Rob Harle, use with permission.

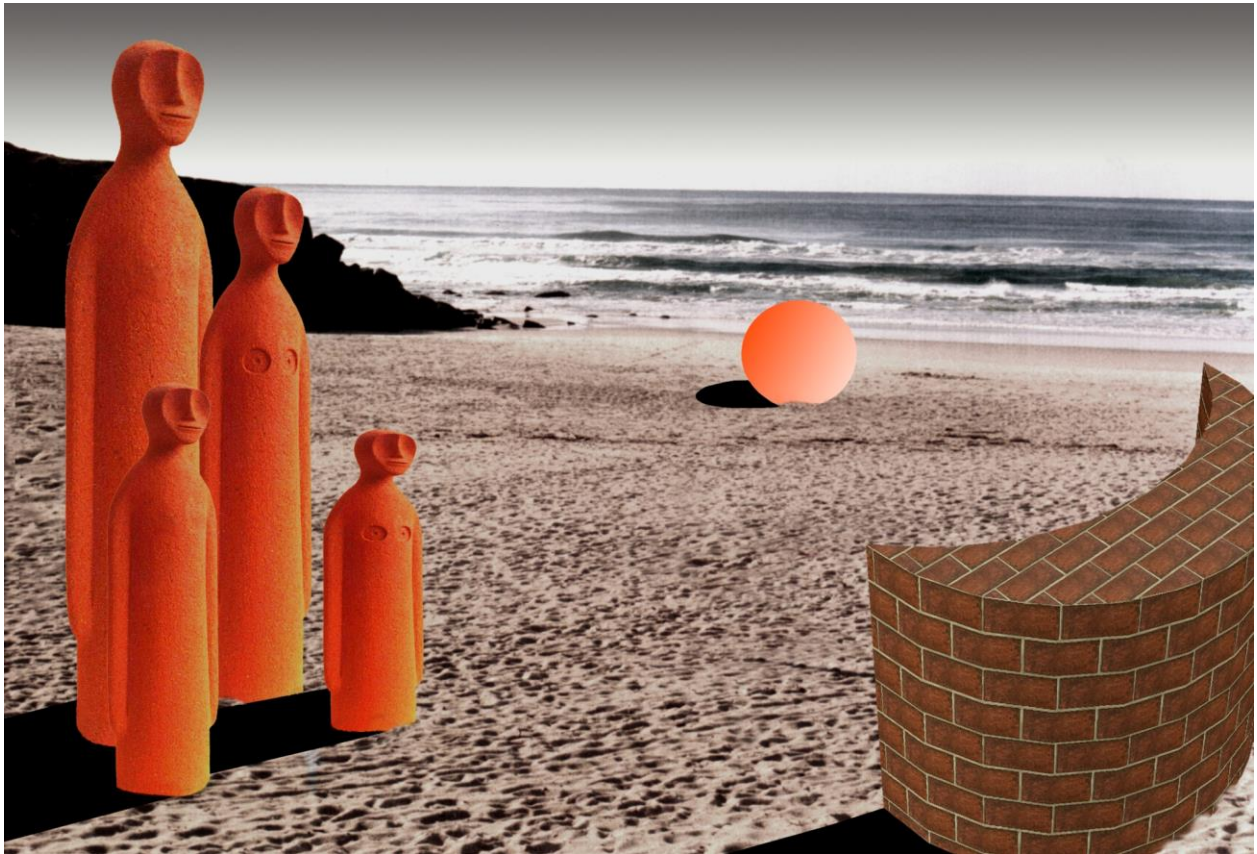


Fig. 3. Family Beach Outing by Rob Harle, use with permission.

To meet these challenges of the 21st century, this panel proposes a radical move: Retrace our steps, thereby rediscover the pertinent answers so far neglected. More specifically, the panel demonstrates that we can reimagine possibilities to be human with the help of indigenous

psychologies that have deep roots in the remote past, when human's epistemic priorities were completely different. Richard Katz introduces teachings from our "first psychologists," who are the Indigenous elders and healers, including wisdom teachings from our hunting-gathering ancestors. Rachel Ting reports the discovery, in ethnic minority groups in China and Malaysia, of a primordial form of resilience so far neglected in mainstream psychology. This was my proposal back in Nov. of 2019. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes the presentations even more relevant today than 9 months ago when the proposal was submitted.

As the pandemic rages around the globe, it brings us to the cross-roads of two approaches to suffering. One is the heroic approach much celebrated in the West. Whoever can take more, both in terms of material possessions as well as suffering, is the winner. The hero myth gives us hope. That is why as the death toll of COVID-19 soars, people find hope in the space mission to Mars. Let us take a look at the physiological challenges involved in this spaceflight to Mars:

- Circadian desynchrony,
- Fluid shifts: the lack of gravity shifts fluid toward the head.
- Radiation damage: memory and learning centers in the brain are sensitive to ionizing radiation.

Yikes! That is bad enough not to mention the psychological challenges such as depression and stress caused by prolonged isolation, boredom, and close-quarters confinement of the crew. But with sufficient resilience training, our heroes can do it.

But why? Why do we need to push the envelope of suffering for the glory of the nation or science or some other highfaluting ideas? This question constitutes the second, alternative approach to suffering. Those who take this alternative approach want to know first and foremost whether the suffering is justified. In May 4th this year, I posted a blog that read: "What do we want to take with us in case we get to the other side of the pandemic? I wonder whether the business as usual that we can't wait to go back to is worth all the pain and suffering we are going through now." At the time it was not a popular view. Little did I know that shortly after that the Black Lives Matter movement eclipsed the media attention to the Mars mission, and swept the nation and the world with precisely this question: Is our suffering justified?

It is a real pleasure to find out that this question was implicitly, albeit quietly, raised by the ethnic minorities in Southwest China and Malaysia. For instance, the Yi equivalent of resilience is "being strong." So the research students went to collect heroic stories of being strong. There were embarrassing moments when the interviewees told stories that sounded pretty wimpy instead:

Having money like you folks is Jian qiang (being strong). As for the Yi people, coming back with money made on the outside will feel confident and Jian qiang. Those who are Jian qiang will be able to make money by migrant work on the outside both themselves

and their children. Those who are not Jian qiang are like us, who cannot do any work nor make any money.” (F3)

Shhhh you are not supposed to say that! Another family member said:

If I am in good health, I have self-confidence, like being very strong (Jian qiang). And I have face among friends and relatives. But if I have no money at home, I feel embarrassed to see my relatives and friends. (F2)

Yet another family member said:

I was thinking that if the government could take notice of our poverty stricken regions and the people in hardship, we would have hope enough to be Jian qiang (strong)”. (F9)

This is what Dr. Ting meant by anti-hero narratives. This kind of narrative is so honest and sobering that it exposes a gaping hole in the heroic picture of resilience—the severe deprivations (no money, no work, poor health, stark poverty, etc.) required for the making of heroism, just as the darkness of the night is needed for the stars to shine forth. These interviewees were not fooled by the heroic myth of resilience. Neither should we.

That is why it is always a good idea to turn to indigenous cultures when we need to reset our epistemological priorities. Another good idea we learned today is from Dr. Katz. His account of unlimited energy from synergistic cooperation contrasts sharply with the modern attempts to harvest unlimited energy through science and technology. We now are keenly aware of the price we pay in terms of degradation of the biosphere when we push nature’s envelope for more and more energy. Maybe there is no such thing as free and unlimited supply of energy. Or maybe there is—if we look for the right kind of energy in the right place, namely mental energy generated by a synergy of the human community, in which the more we give and share rather than take and hoard, the more we have. This is the long forgotten discovery of the hunter-gatherers, from whose “first psychology” we may derive new visions, not to reserve a seat on the spaceflight to Mars, but to rebuild with justice the only planet that we can call home.