

## **PSY 410.L Capstone: Voices of Native Americans**

Fall Semester, 2009 (MW 4:10-5:25, PSYC 127)

Co-Instructors: Bill Stiles <stileswb@muohio.edu>, Professor of Psychology, and Tony Ward <tonyward.transform@xtra.co.nz>, Wierking Visiting Professor<sup>1</sup>

This capstone class/project is intended as a first attempt to learn from the complex and unique identities of America's first residents. Students and professors will work together with members from indigenous communities to design, conduct, and report the results of a research project in this general topic area.

The research and educational process will be collaborative and strive to include indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate contributions to understanding complex human experiences. Management structures will be horizontal and consensus-based, using the *Ward Method of Consensus Building*: involving individual and group work.

The work will probably involve literature searches and readings in Psychology, Cultural Studies and related areas, and working collaboratively with Native Americans. It will probably include conducting and analyzing interviews and research into the experience of traditional Native American peoples and their social and cultural engagement and transformation in relation to majority American culture. The project may also include a first-hand experiential study of traditional non-Eurocentric processes, opening up new and exciting perspectives on Indigenous Psychology.

The outcome of the course is intended to be one or more collaborative reports of results suitable for presentation at scholarly conferences or publication in scholarly journals as well as reports made to tribal officials and departments who would benefit from information derived from the study. It may also include additional kinds of publications, a proposal for a wider program of research in Indigenous Psychology, and/or plans for action based on the results of the work that may hopefully help to shape and conceptualize programs of support for Native Americans.

### **General Background**

Across many studies, immigrants to America have described their feelings of grief and loss of their home culture and the emotional and psychological adjustments they have had to make in deciding to live here. In attending the difficulties expressed by recent immigrants, investigators have tended to overlook the perhaps similar and parallel difficulties of Native Americans in adjusting to the dispossession of their lands, resources, languages and customs, and to the demands to melt into the broader American culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Ward is the 2009-10 Distinguished Visiting Wierking Professor. He has been invited to work at Miami University in the Psychology, Architecture and Educational Leadership Departments, to work on issues of *Community Engagement*. He runs a private consulting firm in New Zealand, prior to which he was Director of Programme Development at a Maori University (2000-2006), a Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Auckland, and an Assistant Professor of Architecture at U.C. Berkeley. He has more than 40 year's experience in Community Design across cultural boundaries.

This is a critically important project, building a foundation for the study of Indigenous Psychology. World-wide, indigenous peoples in colonized countries make up a disproportionate number of prison inmates, are much more inclined to be suffering mental difficulties and higher suicide rates. Thus, there is an urgent need to investigate alternative forms of understanding and assistance, and that these will most probably be most effective if they are rooted in an indigenous understanding of reality.

### **Dual Identities**

People who have lived in two cultures have experienced life in two modes--sometimes starkly contrasting with each other. Prior to colonization, indigenous peoples around the world possessed their own methods and processes for describing and adjusting to the world, and these methods and processes were rooted in the experience and wisdom of hundreds of generations. Through a process of dispossession and cultural imposition, they have been forced to adjust to alien cultural forms that contrast starkly with their own.

When we look at the similar kinds of dilemmas experienced by recent immigrants, we find that the contrasting experiences form separate communities of voices within such individuals--in effect, dual identities. The process and outcome of the inner dialogue between these internal communities of voices are important for personal well-being. We hypothesize that the experiences of contrasting, historically hostile cultures among Native American peoples may have many points of similarity.

Just as the historical encounters between cultures have sometimes been violent, the internal encounters of dual cultural identities may be difficult and painful. People who come from middle class, white families of European origin may fail to appreciate that the structures, beliefs, mores, and identities of their own families are not universal. For example, concepts of the self, of individualism, of the role and identity of the family, of ancestors, may carry a very different meaning for Indigenous peoples, and their imposition in social work and therapeutic encounters may be misleading or even damaging. The French/Algerian Psychiatrist Franz Fanon once said that for the colonized, the most odious form of colonization, and that which has brought with it the greatest pain is the *colonization of the mind*.

The class aims to investigate this internal multiplicity. It also advances a larger aim to develop a collaborative research program to jointly understand the perspectives and needs of Indigenous people and ways that their cultural identity can be better supported and realized.

**Contact either of the co-instructors for further information and relevant readings.**