Cultural Responsiveness and Social Work – a Discussion

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This paper uses a critical framework to discuss the importance of culturally responsive practice when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities. Critical social work aims to critique and dismantle the societal structures that create oppression and inequalities for powerless groups of people within society. The social work profession will be used to illustrate the importance of culturally responsive practice, as it attempts to ensure that its practice is culturally safe with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. This article explores cultural responsiveness through three auto-ethnographies from both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal perspectives that are highly applicable to a range of professions.

Introduction

Australia, as a colonised nation, has witnessed a destructive journey of dispossession, displacement and trans-generational trauma for Australia’s First Nations People; the impacts of which continue to this day (Bennett 2013). The social work profession has played a significant and catastrophic part in this journey through its implementation of policies of cultural genocide (Gilbert 2005). One of the ways that social workers have been involved in implementing policies of cultural genocide is through their role in the removal of Aboriginal children, known as The Stolen Generations, which has been acknowledged through an apology given by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). The profound grief, loss and trauma these policies inflicted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is still clearly visible today.

In 2004, the AASW formally apologised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for the profession’s role in the creation of the Stolen Generation and for the implementation of assimilation policies that ‘contravened core values of social work such as human dignity and worth, social justice and self-determination’ (AASW 2004, pp 1-2). This validation of the trauma caused by the aggressive imposition of the colonising culture, acting as the ‘expert’ in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, was an important first step towards healing what has understandably been a contentious relationship between social work and Australia’s First Nation Peoples (Briskman 2007: 80-98).

Today, Australian social workers are guided by the AASW Code of Ethics (2010: 17), which clearly outlines the profession’s commitment to valuing ‘the unique cultural knowledge and skills, different knowledge systems, history, lived experience and community relationships of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content must now form a core component of AASW accredited social work programs. This clear statement that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges are now core to the knowing, being and doing of social work’ encourages the development of culturally responsive social work practices across the profession, in both education and practice (Zubrzycki et al. 2014: 100). But for this to be enacted, there must first be a clear understanding of what it means to practice in culturally responsive ways.

Critical Social Work

Critical social work outlines the need to recognise the social structures that impact upon the life experiences of members of society and also directs social workers to work with the most vulnerable and oppressed within society in order to create social change and social justice (Payne 2014: 22). Furthermore, critical theory provides the basis upon which not only to examine but also to challenge the social structures that create oppression. Australia has a particular set of views and beliefs around issues of race that have been created through the process of colonisation and have (Quinn 2009: 92) been used to oppress and discriminate against Aboriginal Australians. This oppression also limits the opportunity of Aboriginal people to have a voice in determining the issues affecting their lives. A critical approach opens space for Aboriginal people and other ‘minority’ groups
to claim their knowledge and expertise. This paper provides an example of this in that the authors are not from the dominant culture grouping in Australia and two are Aboriginal Australians.

**Culturally Responsive Social Work**

The AASW’s Code of Ethics (2010: 17) refers to cultural responsiveness within social work as ‘culturally competent, safe and sensitive practice’; a definition extended by the AASW’s Practice Standards (2013: 11) to include ‘culturally responsive and inclusive practice’. According to Zubrycki et al. (2014: 21), culturally responsive practice refers to the development of ‘collaborative and respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in order to respond to the issues and needs of communities in ways that promote social justice and uphold human rights’. The journey towards cultural responsiveness necessitates awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing; and then critical awareness in applying this information to social work practice. Cultural responsiveness, if practised effectively, works towards improved outcomes through the integration of culture in service delivery (Centre for Cultural Competence Australia, 2013).

Importantly, cultural responsiveness goes beyond mere competence and awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As Dean (2001: 629) explains:

>Once we presume to ‘know’ about another we have appropriated that person’s culture and reinforced our own dominant, egocentric position. I am proposing that we distrust the experience of ‘competence’ and replace it with a state of mind in which we are interested, and open but always tentative about what we understand.

Unlike cultural competency, cultural responsiveness is an ongoing process that requires thinking of the self in relation to others and the systems in which they interact. Critical reflection is a crucial element in culturally responsive practice.

**Components of Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive teaching is a multi-faceted process. Not only should it focus on teaching students Aboriginal content; it should, as outlined by Gay (2000: 20), necessitate using ‘cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them’. It requires the acknowledgement of the ‘legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning’. In this sense, culturally responsive teaching can be seen as a bridge ‘between that which is familiar in a student’s real world and that which is taught in the classroom’ (Collins and O’Brien 2011: 120).

Effective teaching requires more than a pedagogical framework and the sharing of content knowledge with students. The manner in which content is delivered is crucial to student engagement and responsive learning (Rajagopal 2011). Modelling is a tool commonly used in teaching practice and is based on the notion that effective teaching should ideally model and mirror the behaviour and application of critical reflection (Loughran 2002). When modelling culturally responsive teaching practice, ‘lecturers are required to give explicit, concrete examples and demonstrate their own ability to be culturally responsive’ (Shevalier and McKenzie 2012: 1087) by interweaving their students’ cultural identities and perspectives into the content of their lessons.

Dialogue is another way that lecturers can approach teaching cultural responsiveness. ‘Dialog is the means through which we learn what the other wants and needs, and it is also the means by which we monitor the effect of our acts. We ask, “What are you going through?” before we act, as we act, and after we act’ (Noddings 2002: 19). Dialogue, by definition, necessitates an open conversation – a sharing of meanings, thoughts and perspectives between willing participants. In culturally responsive teaching, dialogue is important as it demonstrates to students that ‘rather than the voice of one authority, meaning is made as a product of dialogue between and among individuals’ (Ladson-Billings 1995: 473) – allowing students to witness and participate in culturally reflective and responsive thought and practice.

Culturally responsive teaching necessitates paying attention to students and listening to what they have to contribute in order to build strong respectful relationships (Shevalier and McKenzie 2012). Effective lecturers can then respond to their students and teach them how to develop connections not just with each other; but also with those that are diverse from themselves. Culturally responsive teaching is the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ and at its core, it is about ethics (Shevalier and McKenzie 2012: 1100). It reflects a moral stance where the goal is to value human worth, while paying attention to each other’s thoughts, beliefs and perspectives is part of the journey towards opening hearts and minds.

When applying these three strategies – modelling, dialogue and attention – the culturally responsive lecturer remains mindful of the fact that cultural responsiveness
opens the student to critical reflection and being able to leave themselves vulnerably open to new ideas that may go against what their culture has always taught is the ‘only’ right way. This journey is non-linear, which is important to consider when planning courses in cultural responsiveness. Culturally responsive practice is a continuous learning experience that involves a change in perspective and in the way social work is approached and practised. As noted by Semchison (2001: 10):

All of the students, myself included, felt that the most powerful times in these classes were when we were allowed to engage in immersive learning ... Sharing on a social, personal level is the only true way to understanding and communication. What became evident for all of us is that anyone given the responsibility of making decisions affecting lives should first experience at least some aspects of those lives.

The final challenge to consider in social work education is to teach culturally responsive practice without assuming expert knowledge over others. It requires Aboriginal people to:

be able to live our lives free from assumptions by others about what is best for us. It requires recognition of our values, culture and traditions so that they can co-exist with those of mainstream society. It requires respecting our difference and celebrating it within the diversity of the nation (Human Rights Commission n.d.).

Implications for Critical Social Work

Cultural responsive practice is, above all, an affirmation of diversity, valuing all groups, identities and cultures within Australia. It integrates respect for this diversity in organisations' programs and policies and in the very teachings of social work (Perso 2012). It offers a way to be truly sensitive to another's culture, customs, beliefs, values and behaviours (Williams 2007). Awareness of one's own culture, values, beliefs, traditions, context and history is central to culturally responsive practice.

For Bennett et al. (2011: 27), 'the process of reflecting on the self in practice, especially at the beginning of a social worker’s practice with Aboriginal people, is complex and multifaceted and transcends cultural boundaries and identities'. Becoming aware of one's own culture enables social workers to address stereotypes, and 'their own assumptions and biases in order to reduce barriers' (Mason et al. cited in Helfinger and Nixon 1996: 70). In this way, it contributes to socio-cultural consciousness and social workers' ability to engage in critical reflection.

There is a movement from professional bodies (such as the AASW) directing practitioners to be culturally responsive. However, many practitioners have had limited training in the area and many have limited understanding of what cultural responsiveness means. Despite the work done to date, education programs are still struggling to implement AASW Practice Standards due to the lack of formal education for educators, and a limited number of Aboriginal Social Work academics.

Auto-Ethnographies

These ethnographies represent three varied experiences. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives are presented to highlight different journeys and different perspectives of cultural responsiveness. Sue is an Aboriginal social work academic who has taught for fifteen years. Bindi is an Aboriginal academic who has been teaching for five years. At the time of writing this article, Sonia was a first-year Masters of Social Work student on practicum with Bindi.

Sue

I am a Galari woman of the Wiradjuri nation, a mother and grandmother. I hold a Bachelor of Social Work (Hons) and a PhD. I have been employed in the university sector for over 20 years; 15 years as an academic. My earliest days of developing cultural awareness training to non-Aboriginal people started when my own children were in primary school. I was asked to speak to the teaching staff about the needs of Aboriginal children as well as Aboriginal history and how teachers could be cultural aware when working with Aboriginal people. This usually involved telling my own story as this helped participants to engage with cultural awareness and to be less personally challenged. Over time I became more unsettled during these sessions and started to question the outcomes, including whether I was entertaining the participants – though at times it was distressing for some of them to hear my story – rather than bringing about any real change in how non-Aboriginal people interacted with Aboriginal people.

I believe I was being asked to help non-Aboriginal people find a way to understand us, so that they could enable us to achieve and be just like them. The focus of the story was always Aboriginal people and what was preventing us from being just like them, rather than what non-Aboriginal people could do to change the way they were and to change the structures within which they lived and operated. Today I believe the focus of cultural awareness needs to be on non-Aboriginal people, and non-Aboriginal people being able to see how their ways of thinking, being and knowing have impacted upon themselves and their relationship with Aboriginal people.
Over the past two decades the terminology and the concept of cultural awareness has been changing. The most recent concept within the Australian context has been cultural responsiveness. I came across cultural responsiveness whilst trying to work out how to teach students to be culturally competent. When cultural competency first appeared, I thought at last we had something that was more than just someone doing a session or two, hearing stories and believing that they were either sensitive or aware of someone else’s culture. I thought we were moving from a passive state of knowing into an active state of doing something.

Cultural competency seemed the next step to cultural safety. We had been talking about ensuring services and professional practices were culturally safe, but the focus was still on the ‘other’, on Aboriginal people, and was based on non-Aboriginal people and services being aware and sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal people. I thought cultural competency would require people to show they were competent to work with Aboriginal people. To this end, I thought about the social work course on working with Aboriginal people I was teaching and to redevelop it to build the cultural competency of the students.

It was a time-consuming and frustrating task; no matter what I did I could not find the answer as to how to tell if someone was culturally competent. At this point I had to accept that whilst being culturally competent might be a great aspiration, it is also unachievable. Firstly, I recognised that cultures are ever evolving and changing, as are people. Secondly, there are so many different cultures and ways of experiencing cultures, just within Aboriginal communities, let alone the general society. It is my belief, therefore, that it is not possible to ever be culturally competent.

I then came across a model of cultural responsiveness. This model had been developed by Williams (2007) for those providing domestic violence services to African American communities in the United States. The model focused on different stages of cultural responsiveness and encouraged practitioners to understand their own culture and accept other’s cultural practices as equals even when they were different or in conflict with their own. At the same time, I found a policy from the Victorian Department of Health on Cultural Responsive Practice (Department of Health 2007) for multi-cultural clients. Although both models were focused on groups other than Aboriginal Australians, each offered important concepts for non-Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal people. Shortly afterwards I became involved in a project ‘Getting It Right’, which focused on social work curriculum regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. During this project, the project team discussed the place of culturally competent practice. I offered this new concept – cultural responsiveness – and started to teach it to social work students. I discussed my issues with competency and it was eventually decided to proceed with the concept of cultural responsiveness. A couple of other members of the group and I decided to adapt the American model for the Australian context. The model we developed based on stage theory², although not perfect, provided an important start.

Since that time, I have continued to develop the model. In considering the model as it stands, a key danger is evident. Whilst it is important to reflect the gaze back onto non-Aboriginal people and their ways of thinking, knowing and doing, there is danger in their continued power and ownership of knowledge over Aboriginal people. In short, non-Aboriginal people become the experts and Aboriginal people are the objects of their knowledge and practice. Developing a way of shifting the gaze onto non-Aboriginal people and their culture whilst ensuring Aboriginal people are recognised as the experts of their knowledge and lived experiences is essential.

**Bindi**

I am a Gamilaroi woman and have been a social worker for 16 years; five as an academic, recently graduating with my PhD. This professional history has given me a lot of practical knowledge and experience. My story has been one of change. When I first started social work I thought my job was that of a conduit – the plug that put Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples together, with the goal of improving Aboriginal peoples’ socio-economic situation and general wellbeing. I was partially successful at this in the mental health arena in which I worked. Then I came to university and found myself in what I considered to be the dark ages.

Academia is preoccupied with experts and expertise and often has non-Aboriginal people in the role of Aboriginal ‘expert’ (they suffer from ‘expertitis’³). These experts are held up as people who know all about working with Aboriginal people. Usually this position is given kudos, pay and power. Often Aboriginal people are overlooked as experts in their own culture; with academics seemingly more comfortable with a non-Aboriginal expert. It is not uncommon for an Aboriginal person to be offered the ‘in-house’ expert role, only to experience a reality where they get all the Aboriginal jobs and little of the recognition that comes with being a specialist in the area. The Aboriginal academic’s cultural ideas and knowledge are appropriated into the system and the individual is overlooked and undervalued in the broader process. This is the epitome of colonisation practices.
Cultural teaching seems to be treated like acquiring a driver’s licence: all you do is read the information, take the test, pass and voilà, you have an Aboriginal expert. Cultural responsiveness, however, changes the rules. It takes the focus off the experts and places the responsibility and accountability with the social worker themselves. None of us will ever be experts, even in our own culture. We acknowledge our own individual knowledge but are aware of the diversity and ever changing landscape of culture (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal). Cultural responsiveness invites us to step back from ‘expertitis’ and to privilege and empower the knowledge holders and keepers – the Aboriginal people themselves. Until social work and social work educators give the power, control and kudos to Aboriginal people wholly and solely, and give the message to non-Aboriginal students that they are the ones that must be aware of their own culture, values and worldviews, then we cannot move forward.

I ask non-Indigenous people that are already in this space. Are you being truly collaborative? Are you setting yourself up as an expert? Are you teaching someone to replace you (and are they Aboriginal)? Being a true ally means fighting with someone, and not for them or instead of them. It is being prepared to be humble and grateful and to help someone obtain a publication or grant without having to put your name on it. It is everything against the ‘game’ of academia but everything for real life social justice.

The aim of cultural responsiveness is to question Western ‘experts’ and expertise and to aim for epistemological equality. That is, the opening up of creating space for Aboriginal peoples’ lived experiences, knowledge and position. Through the telling of our stories, of not only allowing space but also privileging the voices of Aboriginal people we ensure that Aboriginal people are acknowledged as the ‘experts’ of their own lived experiences. This recognises the importance, value and status of Aboriginal people’s knowledge and culture and sees it not as an alternate position but as an equal position. It is also important that the academy does not give all of the Aboriginal work to the Aboriginal academics but sees it as everyone’s responsibility. Sue Green says, ‘if you can work with us (Aboriginal people) you can work with anyone’. The emphasis is on the with us, not for us, to us or at us. That is the challenge of cultural responsiveness.

Sonia

As a first-year Master of Social Work student, I entered into my research placement with one goal in mind – to learn as much as possible about how I could work in a culturally responsive manner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Whilst I was aware that this would require a personal, emotional and academic investment on my behalf, I did not expect this placement to take me on such a personal journey of self-discovery and self-reflection.

I soon realised that many of the worldviews of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people – the importance of extended families and kin, for example – were perspectives that my culture of birth, the Chilean culture, shared. It quickly became clear to me that if I were to understand a culture other than my own, I would first have to understand my own cultural beliefs.

This stage of the learning journey was the most difficult for me. My focus had been on learning about others, different ways of being, doing and knowing, and having to turn that focus on myself was both confronting and essential. The first step was accepting that I had been in denial of my own culture and cultural beliefs for a long time. As a Chilean-born Australian, I had turned my back on my Chilean heritage in my teenage years in an attempt to ‘not stand out’ – to blend in and become invisible amongst my predominantly white, Anglo friends. I felt shame about my cultural background and had made a conscious decision to assimilate as much as I possibly could to disappear into ‘white’ society. Facing these feelings during this placement was a powerful experience. Accepting that I have a culture that is different to the dominant, Eurocentric culture was difficult, as I had convinced myself that ‘blending’ and assimilating was the only way to be truly accepted according to our unspoken rules.

It was difficult to accept that I had my own culture, set of beliefs and worldviews that had shaped who I was, how I thought and what I felt – that was different to the dominant, white, Eurocentric Australian culture. I became aware of my differences and found myself feeling defensive. If someone looked at me on the street, my immediate thought became ‘it’s because I’m not white’. This was a short-lived stage and I think it was just a part of coming to terms with my own identity. I also realised that I had been trying hard to belong and be part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as I felt so connected to it. Upon weeks of reflection, I realised it was the similarities with my own Chilean heritage that drew me to Aboriginal culture. Understanding who I am, where I come from and what has shaped my thoughts, beliefs, prejudices and actions was crucial to beginning to understand, and be open to, aspects of other cultures.

Whiteness theory and discussions of power and privilege were particularly enlightening at this point. As an educated woman, I realise that I am positioned with both power and privilege, especially in regards to my future clients. Understanding this was important, but of greater importance was understanding that with this level of
privilege comes immense responsibility and the need to employ a level of cultural humility. It offers me knowledge of how to consider and make changes at a broader level – such as in policy – to challenge oppression and rectify situations that are negatively affecting the people with whom I work.

Conclusion

The debate about cultural responsiveness in social work is only just beginning. Understanding our own identity is integral to cultural responsiveness. Social workers need to critically reflect on what they have learnt about Aboriginal peoples, whether this has changed any pre-existing views they may have had, and if they themselves have been able to individually change and grow from the information presented.

Cultural responsiveness is not a short course or module. A real commitment requires it to be ongoing and evolving, just like culture. The process should be encouraging and inspire the continual reflective learning process that is so important to social work practice and development. Social workers need to embed cultural responsiveness whilst ensuring Aboriginal people remain the teachers, mentors and guides in this process. Non-Aboriginal social workers can value Aboriginal people’s knowledge and show them respect and humbleness.

Our experiences highlight how the process of how we teach can be more important than what we teach; echoing the Indigenous perspective that the learning is more important than the result. How we learn and who we learn it from is important, but it is the decision to learn in an ongoing, open, and sustainable way that makes a great social worker. Cultural responsiveness is a model for social workers to aim towards. In the end, it takes a willing, humble and vulnerable participant to embark on the culturally responsive path. To end colonisation and white privilege, however, and to be true to our social justice values, cultural responsiveness seems a necessary response for our students, our profession and ourselves. Cultural responsiveness can be seen as empowering and transforming for the student. It approaches the individual’s growth as multi-dimensional, active and a true personal and social process. Cultural responsiveness is emancipatory; it teaches there is no ‘magic pill’, no ‘one answer’ to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues or peoples, but that better connectedness and relationships hold the key to real and sustainable change.

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End Notes
1. Stage Theories generally tend to say something starts at stage 1, then through development move to stage 2, then stage 3 and so on.
2. Phrase borrowed from Peter Humphries — friend, colleague and mentor in social work.