Country and the Campus: Conceptualising Aboriginal Students University Experience

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Introduction

Enhancing the quality of life of individuals, communities and societies as a whole is the guiding tenet of social marketing (French and Gordon, 2015). The inequalities faced by minority groups such as Australian Aboriginal peoples, is an area in which social marketers can assist. Improving the educational attainment of Aboriginal Australians is a stated priority of the Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG, 2009) ‘closing the gap’ policy. The participation of Aboriginal Australians in higher education varies across universities, yet remains below parity with the population percentage (Gale and Parker, 2013). This paper conceptualises how Aboriginal peoples’ concept of Country is latent within the university campus experience yet is important to fostering cultural safety and, ergo, educational attainment.

Aboriginal Australians’ Concept of Country

Prior to invasion and colonisation, Australia comprised approximately 750 distinct Aboriginal societies with different languages or dialects, history and territories (Walsh, 1991; Collard, 2000). For Aboriginal people the concept of Country is profound—being on Country; being from Country; being of Country (Bunda, 2015) or example, the lived reality for a desert person is different from that of a saltwater person: the priorities, the food, the relationship to the weather is disparate. Country is inextricably tied to the Aboriginal body, spirit and mind in socio-economic, legal-political and religious-ethical disciplinary practices that have been translated and transferred across generations (Bunda, 2015). The Dreamings of each language group connects Country to all other aspects of life (Atkinson, 2002) including familial and spiritual bonds (Dudgeon, Garvey and Pickett, 2000). This makes being welcome on another Aboriginal language groups’ Country to study, walk and work very important. It is broadly acknowledged that the concept of Country influences Aboriginal students (Bourke, Burden and Moore, 1996) but the concept of Country as a dimension of ‘cultural safety’ in the contemporary university campus experience of Aboriginal students remains unexplored.

Country and the University Campus Experience

Today, university campuses offer a range of distinctive spaces, programs, activities and support structures for Aboriginal students as well as Torres Strait Islander students — both of which comprise Indigenous Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support centres provide both a culturally-safe place for peer-making and academic support, but also a haven for respite, social networks and opportunities to ‘give back’ through mentoring or community activities (Day and Nolde, 2009). Such places can mitigate the isolation felt by some Aboriginal students (Barney, 2016), particularly when they have relocated from their home Country to attend university and are studying on another language group’s Country.

Universities typically recognise the importance of their local surrounds by undertaking acknowledgements of and welcomes to Country (Harrison et al., 2013). As the practice of making overt recognitions of Country have become widespread, cautionary
advice for universities offered by Everett (2009) is to avoid and be conscious of tokenism in acknowledgements and welcomes as they can be seen as inauthentic and undertaken to complete an institutional obligation to engage with Aboriginal content and perspectives. But beyond the manifest acknowledgements and welcomes, the role and influence of Country on the campus experience of Aboriginal students remains unfamiliar to most university staff. More accomplished education institutions have some staff that understand the important relationship between the institution and the Aboriginal owners of the land on which it stands, and both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff who are adept at working within and across various social groups (Harrison and Greenfield, 2011). These staff build collaboration with the local community, displaying Aboriginal cultures through artworks, flags, reserve car parks for Indigenous community members, promote Sorry Day observances and teach about Aboriginal cultures (Harrison and Greenfield, 2011). Facilitating networks is also valuable in supporting Aboriginal students (Behrendt et al., 2012) as networks enhance cultural safety by empowering individuals (Bin-Sallik, 2003). ‘Student-to-Country’ networks that connect Aboriginal students from another Country and the Aboriginal custodians of the Country where their university is located, for example, represents a potential social marketing initiative.

**Universities as Culturally Safe Places on Aboriginal Country**

For many Aboriginal students, the campus experience is disjointed and at points contradictory. From the perspective of many Aboriginal students, the campus experience is often comprised of welcomes and acknowledgements of Country and other activities punctuated by interactions with some highly adept staff who understand the importance of the concept of Country and its (largely undocumented) relevance to perceived cultural safety. Yet in other campus experiences, many Aboriginal students encounter cultural blindness, being the belief that approaches used by the dominant culture are universally applicable (Cross et al., 1989). Indeed, unfamiliarity with the uniqueness of local histories and expressions of Indigenous culture by academic staff, non-academic staff and fellow students frequently leads to the homogenisation of Aboriginal knowledges and cultures (Harrison and Greenfield, 2011). On the whole, these inconsistent campus experiences where Country is both exalted and ignored creates a confusing context for many Aboriginal students, resulting in muddled (at best) or suspicious (at worst) perceptions of the cultural safety of their university. Thus, attending university on another Country and receiving mixed messages regarding the university’s cultural safety leads to self-questioning of ‘fit’ and belonging and, in turn, sub-optimal learning (Kift and Field, 2009).

Beyond its influence on learning, the cultural safety of universities is known to influence Aboriginal peoples’ decisions to stay and complete their studies (Bin-Sallik, 1991; 2003); with national data reporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student completion represented only 0.5% of the total number of university completions (Department of Education, 2014). Cultural safety comprises a number of factors, including the appropriateness of student support structures, inclusive curriculum and interactions in the university environment that do not challenge or deny Aboriginal
students identity (Bourke, Burden and Moore, 1996; Williams, 1999; Wilks and Wilson, 2014). Cultural safety has cognitive, behavioural and affective aspects and is dynamic (Garvey, 2010), in that it is characterised by constant change over time.

**An Overarching Research Question for Social Marketers**

There is an opportunity for social marketers to explore the deeper, latent role of Aboriginal Country and, albeit incrementally, assist in ‘closing the gap’. Hence, the following research question is posited as a starting point for interested social marketers:

**RQ. How and why the concept of Country influence Aboriginal university students perceived cultural safety across their university campus experience and subsequent educational attainment?**

**References**


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