



Embedding Indigenous Knowledges and Cultural Safety in Social Work Curricula

Commentary on “Creating a culturally safe space when teaching Aboriginal content in social work: A scoping review” (Fernando & Bennett, 2018)

Deb Duthie

Faculty of Health, School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 24 September 2018; Accepted 9 October 2018

As I reflect on the number of years’ experience I have in the social work discipline teaching and learning space, including specifically teaching in Indigenous Studies, it is somewhat concerning that many commencing social work students continue to present with a colonialist awareness of Indigenous history, complete with assumptions as to why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to be on the lower end of the scale in terms of social, cultural, economic, and political wellbeing. Hence, it is imperative that social work students are cognisant of their own ideologies, values, and assumptions, as personally and professionally challenging as this may be. Embedding Indigenous Knowledges in social work curriculum is a means of doing this, as is educating students to practice in *culturally safe* methods of social work. Cultural competency is no longer sufficient nor suitable, instead rightly labelled as narrow, tokenistic, as “a problematic ‘add on’ to professional education” (Furlong & Wight, 2011, p. 1) and as a form of new racism (Pon, 2009). These views make the importance of culturally safe social work practice even more vital (Fernando & Bennett, 2018).

As future social work practitioners, students need to know, at minimum, the historical role social workers have played in Indigenous history, as instruments of government, implementing the policies of the day, in particular, the removal of Indigenous children to assimilate into white society. As is acknowledged now, these removals were often based on little understanding of the ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing within Indigenous cultural and family contexts. Rather, the dominant western ways of what was right or wrong dictated.

The resultant Stolen Generations, and the longstanding and continuing impact of inter-generational trauma that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced, means that social workers must understand this history to ensure there is no repeat of that devastating era. The increasing number of Indigenous children who continue to be removed in 2018, however, suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still being faced with racial and discriminatory policy directives at the hands of

social workers, with future generations likely to experience continued intergenerational trauma (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (AIHW), 2018).

A recently released film entitled “Cherbourg Mob: Our Struggle, Our Fight” (Kelly, 2018) highlighted the distressing and traumatising experiences for a number of Indigenous women who had their children removed. One striking issue was the lack of culturally safe practice knowledge of the young non-Indigenous social worker, instrumental in the removal of their children. Listening to these women tell their stories, reinforced for me a number of aspects: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still not be listened to in terms of social work practice and child welfare; social work practices continue to occur that re-engages Indigenous families in intergenerational trauma time and time again; and that social work students are not being provided the knowledge required from their university studies to practice in culturally safe ways.

Yet, many Australian university social work courses continue to struggle with embedding Indigenous content within their curriculum; and where Indigenous content is located, it is too often focused on the deficits of Indigenous peoples, rather than illustrating the resilience and strengths, underpinned by a cultural richness that has enabled longevity. Hence, social work courses appear to have a long way to go to fully embed Indigenous knowledges and cultural safety in curriculum. As Calma (cited in Zubrzycki et al., 2014) correctly stated, “one of the greatest challenges is how to create cultural safety in the classroom, in the field, in the academy—and for students, staff, clients and practitioners” (p. 1). Challenging it may be, but important it is (Fernando & Bennett, 2018).

It is acknowledged that Indigenous academics teaching in this space are vital. We bring our cultural knowledges, experiences, cultural capital, and model our own ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing into our classrooms. However, this can also be problematic. Dr Chelsea Bond noted in her recent publication entitled “Teaching while black: Navigating race and racism within higher education”, the extra labour placed upon Indigenous academics to give of themselves within teaching contexts, while critical in the teaching and learning space, does takes its toll (Bond, 2018).

Non-Indigenous social work educators, then, also have a responsibility to contribute to embedding core Indigenous curriculum—a need to step up, embrace, and contribute to learning and teaching in the Indigenous space. For example, whiteness studies has more impact on students when taught by non-Indigenous academics (Dumbrill & Green, 2008), who can dismantle Eurocentricism, tending to decrease the defensiveness, denial, and resistance of students who may feel they are being “blamed” for past atrocities that occurred to Indigenous peoples.

But we also need to consider the safety of Indigenous students in the university space, who are often called upon (in class) to explain cultural contexts. Many Indigenous students have living family who have direct experience living under the protectionist and assimilationist acts. They have learned first-hand of the experiences of their grandparents, aunties, and uncles.

So how do social work programs (and universities as a whole) take responsibility and appropriately embed Indigenous Knowledges and cultural safety in curricula, which has a positive impact on practice—curricula that does not retraumatise Indigenous clients, and supports Indigenous academics and Indigenous social work students? Here are some (but not all) suggestions:

- Bring Community into the curriculum. Curricula need to be informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and their ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing. The wealth of knowledge of Elders and Community leaders is phenomenal.
- Curricula need to focus more, and embrace, the positivity and richness of Indigenous Knowledges, Indigenous cultural contexts, and ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing.
- Social work programs must accept that Indigenous practice theories, models, and frameworks are valid concepts for working not only with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but for any client base.
- Non-Indigenous academics need to take responsibility for their own learning of Indigenous history and ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing—then “step up” and contribute to teaching and learning in proactive and authentic ways—ensuring collaboration and consultation with Community; and
- Universities, including all levels of senior management, must make a clear commitment to culturally safe practice across the teaching and learning spaces.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has publicly acknowledged and apologised for the role of social work and social workers in Indigenous history (AASW, 2004) and has endorsed the requirement that social work professionals are safe in practice; Universities Australia has acknowledged that graduates of Australian universities will have the knowledge and skills necessary to interact with Indigenous communities (Universities Australia, 2014), although the term “competency” is used rather than safety; and Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have consistently called for Indigenous Knowledges to be embedded in curricula across the caring professions (Cox & Taua, 2012; Duthie, Darracott, & Hardy, 2018).

Until these calls for Indigenous Knowledges and cultural safety to be embedded into social work curriculum are heeded—and undertaken with commitment, genuineness, and a sense of obligation—the impact of trauma will continue to ripple into the lives of future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

References

- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2004). *Acknowledgement Statement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. Retrieved from <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/618>
- Australian Institute of Health & Welfare. (2018). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stolen generations and descendants: Numbers, demographic characteristics and selected outcomes*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/a6c077c3-e1af-40de-847f-e8a3e3456c44/aihw-ihw-195.pdf.aspx?inline=true>
- Bond, C. (2018). *Teaching while black: Navigating race and racism within higher education*. Symposium held 27 April, Sydney, University of Technology.
- Cox, L., & Taua, C. (2012). Cultural safety: Cultural considerations. In H. Forbes, & E. Watt (Eds.), *Jarvis’s physical examination and health assessment* (pp. 40–60). Chatswood, NSW: Elsevier.
- Dumbrill, G., & Green, J. (2008). Indigenous knowledge in the Social Work Academy. *Social Work Education*, 27(5), 489–503. doi:10.1080/02615470701379891
- Duthie, D., Darracott, R., & Hardy, F. (2018). Towards culturally safe practice: Taking the field on the journey too. Presentation at the Australian & New Zealand Social Work & Welfare Education

- & Research (ANZSWWER) Symposium: “Disruptive Social Work”, Flinders University, Adelaide, 21 September.
- Fernando, T., & Bennett, B. (2018). Creating a culturally safe space when teaching Aboriginal content in social work: A scoping review. *Australian Social Work*, 72(1), 47–61. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2018.1518467
- Furlong, M., & Wight, J. (2011). Promoting “critical awareness” and critiquing “cultural competence”: Towards disrupting received professional knowledges. *Australian Social Work*, 64(1), 38–54.
- Kelly, J. (2018). *Cherbourg women: Our struggle, our fight*. Presented at Queensland University of Technology, 30 May.
- Pon, G. (2009). Cultural competency as new racism: An ontology of forgetting. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 20(1), 59–71. doi:10.1080/10428230902871173
- Universities Australia. (2014). Indigenous Cultural Competency Framework. Retrieved from <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/uni-participation-quality/Indigenous-Higher-Education/Indigenous-Cultural-Compet#.W9EWJFgUmUk>
- Zubrzycki, J., Green, S., Jones, V., Stratton, K., Young, S., & Bessarab, D. (2014). *Getting it right: Creating partnerships for change. Integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges in social work education and practice*. Teaching and Learning Framework. Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, Sydney. Retrieved from http://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/655804/Getting_It_Right_June_2014.pdf

Copyright of Australian Social Work is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.