

Critical Reflexivity in Indigenous and Cross-cultural Psychology: A Decolonial Approach to Curriculum?

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Highlights

- Critical reflexivity is a mechanism for working toward decoloniality in higher education.
- We analyzed Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology students' written reflections.
- Analyses revealed that students negotiate experiences of discomfort and uncertainty in the classroom.
- Findings support the value of discomfort for prompting transformations among students.
- We pose a commentary on the tensions inherent to accompanying our students in this uncertain space.

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Abstract Critical reflexivity is a mechanism for working toward decoloniality in higher education, with the potential to prompt students' to critique the contexts in which they are embedded, and facilitate transformative learning. We present a critical examination of the tensions surrounding decoloniality and critical reflexivity in an undergraduate unit on Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology at a large Australian university. We invited students in the unit to participate in a written reflexive exercise at the beginning ($N = 44$) and end of semester ($N = 23$) and analyzed these reflections qualitatively for level (four-category scheme for coding) and content (causal layered analysis) of reflection. Findings suggest that, while students' primarily demonstrate reflective engagement at levels preordinate to critical reflexivity, they are also engaged in active and nuanced processes of negotiating discomfort and uncertainty in this space. We pose critical commentary on the notion of safety in teaching practice, and consider the role of the academic institution in parametrizing the decolonial stance. This research holds application and transferability to higher education settings, and for the enduring project of engaging a decolonial approach to the curriculum within psychology.

Keywords Decoloniality · Curriculum · Critical reflexivity · Indigenous · Psychology

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Introduction

Firstly, we wish to acknowledge that this research took place upon the land of the *Wadjuk Nyungar* people—the traditional custodians of the South-West of Western Australia. More broadly, we also wish to acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country, and Indigenous and First Nations people globally for whom our research is intended to benefit. We locate ourselves in this context as both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators in the interconnecting spaces of Indigenous education and psychology.

Over the past two decades within Australia the Indigenized curriculum discourse has been positioned as a means to bring both Indigenous perspectives and issues to the fore in dominant psychological practices (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014). The inherently politicized nature of pedagogical practice is embodied at the cultural interface of Indigenous knowledges and the Eurocentric university curricula that pervades the higher education setting within Australia and beyond (hooks, 2003; Mackinlay & Barney, 2014; Nakata, 2007). In recent years, the *decolonial turn* has challenged the invisibility of Indigenous perspectives within and beyond the Australian higher education setting (Bulhan, 2015; Sonn, 2016).

Decoloniality in Psychology

Decoloniality has the potential to illuminate the ways in which epistemic violence is committed against Indigenous knowledges and practices (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Sonn, 2016). Cruz and Sonn (2011) articulate a *decolonizing*

standpoint within community psychology, a stance that actively recognizes the relationship between culture and power, and acknowledges the discipline as both a cultural practice and product. Furthermore, Maldonado-Torres (2017), extends on Frantz Fanon's offerings to articulate a *decolonial attitude* in which actors challenge epistemic colonization by embracing a "...love and understanding that involves the reclamation of sub-others..." ultimately, this decolonial attitude returns "...the gift of the self beyond recognition..." (p. 440). Dudgeon and Walker (2015) advocate the value of identifying the "...paradigms that underlie psychology in order to understand how and where to decolonize the science" (p. 282). Doing so holds potential to transcend a critique of dominant Western ideals and draw attention to epistemic violence (Mignolo, 2009) in order to generate *new horizons* where alternate futures can be embodied (Sonn, 2016).

Decolonizing knowledge within disciplines is contemporarily regarded as a means to broaden the scope of valued ways of knowing and to challenge processes of colonization (Bulhan, 2015; Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012). While the concept of *decolonizing the curriculum* has held much promise, there is risk that decoloniality may become metaphorical (Mackinlay & Barney, 2014), particularly when embedded within structures that continue to elevate Eurocentric ideals (Bulhan, 2015). Some caution against the practice of privileging decoloniality as a panacea at the expense of examining contemporary convergences in Indigenous and Western knowledges (Nakata et al., 2012).

Challenges of a Decolonial Approach to Curriculum

The design and delivery of Indigenous studies is inherently political; Indigenous ways of doing, being, and knowing highlight the limitations within disciplinary thinking and practices, and more broadly, limitations in dominant Western knowledge and practices (Nakata et al., 2012). While regarded as a mechanism of teaching for decoloniality, endeavors to embed Indigenous content into psychology curricula have been identified as likely to do no more than "...trigger compassion based on benevolence rather than socially transformative change" (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014, p. 12). Particular tensions may arise when Indigenous studies are integrated into pre-existing curricula, or delivered in compulsory units of study (Nakata et al., 2012). In this framework, the Indigenous-Western dichotomy is consolidated and the implication that Indigenous means *other* (e.g., an external, *out there* entity for study) is preserved (Bulhan, 2015).

The embedding of Indigenous content within curricula is often aligned with student learning outcomes such as *developing cultural competency*, with the practice of evaluating cultural competency via conventional Western assessment

strategies further undermining the transformative potential of learning in this space (Bullen & Flavell, 2017). Paradoxically, the discourse and practice of *Indigenizing* the curriculum may undermine students' abilities to engage meaningfully with the intersections of culture, power, and the ongoing implications of colonization (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014). With these issues considered, Darlaston-Jones et al. (2014) advocate a decolonial stance based on critical pedagogy and conscientization (Freire, 1970), an approach that reflects Dutta's (2016) call for "...a change in the terms of the conversation and not merely its content." (p. 5). A change in the terms of conversation encompasses challenging the strong delineation between educator and student, education as practice of freedom (hooks, 2003), and recognizing the cultural and social identities and contexts embodied by students (Nakata et al., 2012).

Critical Reflexivity and the Decolonial Curriculum

In order to address the preceding challenges, Nakata et al. (2012) suggests the decolonial project is enhanced by providing students with tools to critique the contexts in which they are embedded, and to engage in rigorous processes of thinking about thinking. One entry-point to engage in transformative learning in this space is critical reflexivity (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2015). Critical reflexivity is central to understanding one's worldviews (Sonn, Garvey, Bishop, & Smith, 2000) and working toward decoloniality (Bulhan, 2015; Page, 2014); however, the extent to which critical reflexivity is supported and engaged within tertiary settings remains unclear (Kember et al., 2000). This may be due to the range of evaluative frameworks for critical reflexivity and differing ideas of just what critical reflection is, how it may facilitate the doing of one's practice, and how it manifests (Fook, White, & Gardner, 2006; Kember, McKay, Sinclair, & Wong, 2008; Kember et al., 2000; King & Kitchener, 1994; Ryan & Ryan, 2010). At the heart of critical reflection is the act of locating the "...historical and cultural origins of the assumptions, question[ing] the meaning of the assumptions, and develop[ing] alternative ways of acting." (Stein, 2000, p. 3). The process is a personal and self-oriented activity (Reynolds & Vince, 2004), comprising both iterative and vertical dimensions to practice. Literature suggests a link between capacity for critical reflection and the development of cross-cultural capabilities (e.g., Abrams & Moio, 2009; Taylor, 1994). If these are indeed the skills with potential for equipping individuals to interoperate in intercultural settings, they may also be the skills with potential for enacting decoloniality. For example, extant literature specific to the complex Australian Indigenous studies space points to the occurrence of critical reflection within curricula based on decolonial intentions and the experience of transformative learning (Bullen & Roberts, 2018a, 2018b).

Of particular relevance to the current study is transformative learning theory within which critical reflection is considered to play an integral role (Mezirow, 1990). While epistemic transformation has been noted as a by-product of ordinary personal engagement in complex intercultural spaces contextually similar to our own (e.g., Bennett, Power, Thomson, Mason, & Bartleet, 2016; Taylor, 1994) we reiterate that this as the ultimate goal of the space itself is fraught. The dilemma of such a positioning and intent aligns with Nakata et al.'s (2012) discussion of the perils of disrupting students in the name of pedagogy, and critique on the ethics of interventions intended to transform students (Taylor & Cranton, 2013).

Decoloniality In The Curriculum: Our Specific Context

The unit, delivered at a large Australian university, is on Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology and is designed to promote cultural capabilities within undergraduate psychology students. Of note, this core third-year unit follows delivery of a core inter-professional first year unit on Indigenous cultures and health behaviors designed to support students development of foundational cultural capabilities with specific reference to Indigenous Australians (for an overview of this first year unit, inclusive of curricular, pedagogical, and assessment models in the context of critical reflexivity and transformative learning, see Bullen & Roberts, 2018b). Importantly, this first year unit is typically students' first exposure to models of critical reflexivity and (for the vast majority), to Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and people. It is also one of few mandatory Indigenous perspective-based units within the faculty of Health Sciences. Thus, the third-year unit which forms the context of this study is uniquely positioned in its building upon this vital earlier learning. Anecdotal evidence, and findings of extant literature, reflect tensions around student perceptions of having already *done* Indigenous Studies (Chiodo, Sonn, & Morda, 2014; Sonn et al., 2000). As such, the nature of development of skills in critical reflexivity remains unclear to those educators who seek to foster it with intent of assuming a decolonial approach within the unit. The current research aimed to explore the level, nature, and content of critical reflexivity engaged by students undertaking a third-year unit in Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology.

Method

Research Design

We locate our research within a social constructionist frame (Gergen, 1985) and acknowledge that our worldviews, positionality, and experiences have inevitably

shaped our approach to this research, our analysis, interpretations, and messages conveyed in this paper; the nature of this influence is further explored in the discussion. A qualitative approach allowed for exploration of the meanings participants' ascribe to their experiences.

The Unit: Overview and Learning Activities

The unit comprised twelve weekly 2-hour lectures and 1-hour tutorials and students were instructed to complete weekly readings. From the outset, students were informed of the aim to increase their awareness of their own, and other, cultural contexts and worldviews. In both lectures and tutorials, students were invited to reflect on and consider potential application of learnings to future psychological practice. Lectures were a space for theoretical and empirical knowledge to be shared, and a range of perspectives to be offered, from Indigenous people directly affected by issues such as the Stolen Generations,¹ to those who had experienced tensions within intercultural spaces in their own practice. Presenters were selected by the unit coordinator for their positionality; to speak freely and with richness about their complex practice contexts and work in intercultural spaces. This reflective approach prompted questions and discussion among students that broached sensitive issues. Tutorials offered a space to deepen students' engagement through a series of self-reflexive activities. Assessments in the unit include small group presentations (on contentious issues indigenous and cross-cultural psychology), an individual life story assessment (requiring students to interview a community member with experience of intercultural interaction, then transcribe, analyze, and present the findings in a written report), and an end of semester examination requiring students to respond to a series of short answer questions on approaches and theories in Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology.

Participants

Participants were students enrolled in a third-year undergraduate psychology unit on Indigenous cross-cultural psychology at a large Australian university. Forty-four participated in the reflexive exercise at time one (self-identified as: female = 26, male = 17, male trans = 1) and 23 at time two (self-identified as: female = 16, male = 7). The disparity in participation at time one

¹ Stolen Generations refers to the forcible removal and displacement of Aboriginal children from their families by the government of Australia during the first half of the 20th century and continuing into the 1970s. The intergenerational impacts are proximal and enduring, and form a "...profound part of the Indigenous Australian story" (Dudgeon, Wright, Paradies, Garvey, & Walker, 2010, p. 32)

($N = 44$) and time two ($N = 23$) is commensurate with a characteristic corresponding decrease in the number of students whom attend lecture two (time one) and lecture twelve (time two). At both time points, participants were primarily full-time and domestic, and of median age 18–25 years old. Participants by majority identified as Australian (including; “Australian,” “white,” and “Australian/Caucasian”), with a smaller proportion identifying as Asian, British, Irish, American, South African, and African; no participants self-identified as Indigenous Australian, Aboriginal, or Torres Strait Islander.

Reflexive Exercise

At time one, the written reflexive exercise invited participants to consider: (a) how they felt about the prospect of undertaking the unit, (b) what they expected to learn, (c) what (if any) challenges they anticipated, and (d) what (if any) skills, knowledge or experiences they felt they possessed that might be useful in undertaking unit. At time two, participants were asked to consider: (a) key things they would take away from the unit, (b) challenges they experienced in the unit, and (c) how they might use their learnings from the unit in the future. We also asked about participants’ gender, age, study mode, and cultural identity.

Procedure

Following ethics approval by the university Human Research Ethics Committee, we notified students (via an online student portal) of the opportunity to participate and then recruited participants during the regular lecture period. All students took part in a 15-minute exercise during the lecture in the second (time one) and in the final week of semester (time two), however, to allow students’ to exercise their right to informed consent, contribution of each students’ reflections as data (i.e., participation in the research) was voluntary; all students retained the original copy of their reflections. To ensure participants’ confidentiality and to avoid perceived or actual coercion from research team members, an independent research associate managed data collection and verbatim transcription; any identifying data was removed prior to analysis. The research process was punctuated by ongoing reflexive discussion within the research team, reflexive journaling, and maintenance of an audit-trail.

Data Analysis

Kember et al.’s (2008) four-category scheme for coding was used to evaluate the sophistication of students’ reflections; deemed appropriate due to its alignment with the

possibilities of personal epistemic shift (Mezirow, 1990) and its usage within contextually similar research (see Bullen & Roberts, 2018a). Student submissions were analyzed at time one and two for evidence of the four levels of reflection, codes included: Habitual Action/Non-Reflection (student shows no attempt to reach an understanding of the topic), Understanding (student shows understanding of topic with no application of knowledge), Reflection (student shows application of topical knowledge in relation to personal experience or self), and Critical Reflection (student engages in examination of, and shifts in, foundational assumptions in relation to the topic).

Causal layered analysis (CLA), a multi-level analytical framework, was adopted to deconstruct complex socio-cultural phenomena at four levels of understanding: Litany (i.e., surface-level explanations for an issue; e.g., students’ describe the topic as novel), Social Causal (i.e., systemic and technical explanations for an issue; e.g., Indigenous psychology is siloed into specialist units), Worldview Discourse (i.e., language and values that construct particular meanings of an issue; e.g., the unit is framed as an opportunity for discovery of self and other), and Myth Metaphor (i.e., deeply held cultural scripts, archetypes, and emotional responses to an issue; e.g., students’ use violent metaphors to analogize their learning; Inayatullah, 1998). The CLA was conducted according to steps and processes outlined by Bishop and Dzidic (2014); data were initially coded into the four levels and then subject to an inductive thematic analysis (i.e., no predefined codes) within each level. In combination these two analyses enabled broader abductive (Frankfurt, 1958) interpretation of complexities in this space.

Findings

Kember et al.’s (2008) Four-category Scheme for Coding

Time One

Analysis identified statements most frequently at the Habitual and Understanding levels of thinking, with a few at the Reflection level; the four levels of reflection are ordered below from most to least common. Statements at the Critical Reflection level were not evident at time one. Examples of each are presented below in detail.

Understanding. Characterized by evidence of a developing understanding of the topic at hand, albeit with no application of this understanding to practical contexts Understanding was the most commonly identified level of thinking at time one. Students expressed an interest in the material they expected within the unit, while acknowledging that discomfort may arise. Notably, there

was uncertainty around *how* they might respond, without necessarily tying this uncertainty to a personal anchor point:

(QB) I expect to hopefully learn not only more knowledge related to Indigenous and cross-cultural studies, but to also learn how to apply this knowledge in a practical setting. (QC) This subject could have a personal impact on individuals, and there is the possibility of conflicts arising relating to beliefs or customs.

Habitual action. Characterized by evidence of minimal to no attempt to reach an understanding of the topic at hand, Habitual Action was the second most commonly noted level of thinking at time one. Students were typically impersonal and limited in their response, often citing feelings of ambivalence toward the unit, with rudimentary statements of expected learnings, “(QA) Indifferent. (QB) How to interact with other cultures as a psychologist.”

Reflection. Characterized by evidence of an application of topical knowledge in relation to personal experiences, there were the occasional moments of thinking at the Reflection level. Students expressed an awareness of personal discomfort, and a willingness to explore beliefs and values, in response to their imminent engagement in the unit. For these students, a common theme was the breadth of experiences, both generally and interculturally:

(QD) I have worked in the drug and alcohol sector for several years which has a significant focus on ways we can better support CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] and Indigenous consumers. So, it’s something that I am ‘passionate’ about.

Time Two

Analysis identified only statements at the Understanding, and Reflection levels. Some students appear to be located in a liminal space between Reflection and Critical Reflection. Levels of reflection are presented below in order from most to least common.

Reflection. This was the most commonly noted level of thinking at time two—a shift from time one, with a proportional doubling of respondents articulating a Reflective level of thinking. Students expressed an awareness of the ongoing nature of learning within intercultural spaces, and the willingness to explore and attempt to overcome strongly ingrained beliefs, in relation to future interaction and engagement as a professional; “(QA) That you can always learn more, always become more competent, more understanding, and more aware of the different paradigms that shape people.”

Understanding. Proportionally, approximately the same number of students remained at this level from time one to time two; however, it is unclear whether the same students provided responses at each time point. Students typically articulated an enhanced understanding of the topics and material of the unit postlearning experience, without necessarily tying statements to personal experience or insight:

(QA) Understanding the necessity to aim to be culturally competent. Understanding the history of different cultures [and] the impacts this has had (e.g., stolen generation) (In QB) Realizing [incomprehensible] bias and attitudes that may perpetuate oppressive ideologies. (QC) I will use this information when working with people of different cultures, particularly Aboriginal Australians.

Critical reflection and navigating liminality. Thinking at the Critical Reflection level—that is, an examination of, and shifts in, the individuals’ foundational assumptions in relation to the topic—was not identified. However, a few students articulated navigating a liminal space between the Reflection and Critical Reflection levels of thinking. Evidence of this threshold locus was reflected in the articulation of a developing awareness of the hegemonic influence of the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2000) upon Indigenous peoples, but no deconstruction yet of the shadow cast upon their own epistemic foundations. Students at this level of thinking (while few) generally expressed an awareness of both personal discomfort with the learnings within the unit, but more importantly the learnings internal to themselves. They also implied a desire and willingness to acknowledge, explore, and attempt to overcome strongly ingrained beliefs and values, accompanied by a recognition that they had yet to reach a place where this new perspective or personal worldview had become the new norm:

(QB)... I find it difficult to move beyond my privilege and guilt I feel for the part of historical events occurring in Australia that negatively impacted upon Australian Aboriginals. (QC) Applying an understanding that working in ...cultural contexts are complex and a lot of support and assistance provided comes from building rapport, understanding one’s historical context...”

Causal Layered Analysis

Time One

Litany level. Ambivalence—Students felt that the unit might require them to re-conceptualize their previous learnings, and anticipated challenges in “... trying to

learn psychology from a different perspective.” Students reflected on the novelty of this perspective, articulating anticipatory anxiety, “. . . I also feel anxious about having my views challenged,” whereas others described feeling excited and nervous at expanding their knowledge in this space. Eagerness and hesitancy were not mutually exclusive; a number of students expressed both feelings.

What do I know?—Students’ reflected on the kind of knowledge they expected to learn in the unit, “I do not expect to learn academic like information but rather to expand my knowledge/life experience.” Students’ portrayed experiential and academic expertise as distinct forms of knowledge and considered experience with diversity and adversity as offering insight into experiences of marginalization. Some students reflected on the limits to transferring learning from their own lived experiences to others, “. . . I know how it is to miss your land and family. However, this cannot be compared to how Indigenous Australians have experiences to lose everything. . .” Students’ grappled with the extent to which they could understand or comprehend the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians.

Social causal level. An academic endeavor—For some students, the experience of undertaking the unit reflected an experience of going through the motions; for example, “I am happy to do this unit; I think that it will be interesting. I guess I just think it’s another unit I have to complete.” Furthermore, a number of students voiced concerns over their academic performance in the unit (e.g., achieving desired grades on assessments and presentations). In this context, the content of the unit may be decontextualized from deeper significances, and approached as an academic endeavor. A number of students referred to having studied similar units and voiced how this previous experience motivated their interest, or might complement their learnings in the current unit. Others were concerned that the unit would be repetitive and alluded to past negative experiences, “. . . in my past experiences units such as this have been somewhat boring and have made the experience of learning also boring.”

As a health professional—Role-oriented statements were evident within students’ reflections, for example, some framed the utility of the potential learnings in the unit in regards to being a “health professional.” Students spoke about learning “how to be” and “how to apply” the knowledge gained, “. . . how to be respectful and well-knowledge and adaptable health professional.” From this role-oriented position, students’ identities are perhaps fragmented and decontextualized from their personal identities.

Worldview discourse level. The true meaning—Some students framed their engagement in the unit as an

opportunity or discovery, in regards to knowledge of self, the constructed *other*, and of broader social-cultural dynamics. Language such as “privileged,” “excited,” and “honored” positions the unit as a unique opportunity to gain insight and fill a distinct gap in their knowledge, “. . . I think this is a ‘missing’ part of knowledge in psychology [and] in general.” A number of students referred to the “truth” or the “true” meaning, “I want to learn, internally, the true meaning understanding/implementation of cultural sensitivity,” constructing a discourse that *something* has typically been obscured from view.

Respect, sensitivity, openness—Students referred to a need to be “open-minded,” and to exercise “empathy [and] sensitivity when dealing with confronting information of other cultures.” In this way, students’ reflections conveyed a tentativeness about entering the space. There was also a view that emotional responses would require dynamic negotiation, for example, “. . . managing guilt around the consequences of colonization and focusing on how I can contribute to change.” Inherent to the reflections was a questioning of one’s ability to be responsive to new perspectives in the unit and confront one’s personhood and identity, for example, “I may have difficulty being open-minded to people who (ironically) are not open-minded. I expect tension from others who develop/already display resistance to acknowledging our history and cannot see past blame.” Students recognized the need, and then evaluated their ability, to be reflexive, empathic, and responsive.

Myth metaphor level. Shaken, challenged, and broken—Violent and disruptive metaphors captured students’ anticipations of a necessarily difficult learning process, “I have an accumulated wealth of experiences of being often, forced to perceive the similarities in humanity. Time and time again barriers (not always conscious) have been torn free or challenged.” This language evokes a sense that a student might be subject to *disintegrating* in the process of taking the unit; there is a sense that one’s ability to withstand this disruptive and challenging process is key to developing deeper-level understandings in this space.

Time Two

Litany level. No end in sight—Students’ reflections suggested that learning in this space is a process, marked by a recognition that knowledge is necessarily and inevitably limited. Students’ challenged dominant conceptualizations of learning as outcome-oriented, “[k]nowledge is not sufficient enough to be culturally competent” and reflected on the forms of knowledge that are valuable. For example, students’ voiced emergent

appreciation for “...individuals lived experience and subjective truth.” In recognizing the value of lived experience and the role of their own subjective experiences in meaning-making, students appeared to grapple with the perpetual nature of the process of learning. Students’ reflections suggested that the unit is a starting point, as opposed to end-point, in the process of developing cultural capabilities; “... [the unit] is way more complex than I could have imagined and that I have a lot more work to do on myself in order to become culturally competent and a part of enacting change.”

Social Causal level. The career in context—Students’ reflected on the limitations of their previous understandings of what it means to pursue a career in psychology. At time two, students’ reflections contest previously held understandings of the psychologist as value-neutral, with a competing construction of the psychologist as value-laden, for example, “...before this unit, there was a huge gap in my knowledge of actually working as a psychologist, sitting across from someone.” Inherent to this reflection, is a commentary on the ease with which one might assume the role of *expert* and *helper* of those who are constructed as *other*.

Worldview discourse level. Tolerating the uncertainty, pluralism, and the unknown—Narratives of uncertainty and discomfort constructed each as necessary and valued as part of the process of learning. It seems that students come to see discomfort as an indicator of a meaningful learning process as opposed to an indicator of lack of competence, “It’s more important to question your own beliefs and be open to new info/experiences than to just rote learn about cultural things.” The learnings students’ reflected on tended not to be content-based, rather, they focused on the plurality of realities and ever-present uncertainty, “Beyond anything the unit has definitely promoted a deeper understanding of what it means to engage in spaces that you don’t originate from.” Here, uncertainty is constructed as a strength and asset, rather than a threat.

Myth metaphor level. Eyes wide open—Students employed the metaphor of having their *eyes opened* to the issues in this space, evocative of a “veil” being lifted such that one can see things with greater clarity, “seeing situations from another culture’s view opens the eyes.” Perhaps the veil in this metaphor is the privilege, bias, worldviews, and ethnocentrism to which many students referred. It is important to highlight, however, that in the process of lifting the veil of privilege, students do not achieve certainty; it is a launching point for continued learning through self-discovery and the relationship of self to *other*.

The I in the process—Students’ reflections captured a paradox; learning about the *other* meant learning about

oneself. Inherent to students’ reflections was an understanding of culture as central to one’s social world and personhood, “...my own attitudes [and] opinions are a result of my culture, AND [emphasis in original] these can be completely different to those I encounter in the future.” Paradoxically, students’ reflected that the more they learned in the unit, the more they realized they did not know, “Hopefully if I ever work with minority groups I can be more sensitive to differences. It’s taught me the more I learn the more I realize I don’t know.” Here, we note with interest the persistence of stratification (i.e., “minority groups”) despite the students’ realization of limitations in self-knowledge.

Discussion

We aimed to explore the level and content of critical reflexivity engaged by students undertaking a third-year undergraduate psychology unit on Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology. We found strong alignment between findings generated via Kember et al.’s (2008) four-category scheme for coding and those generated via CLA (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014). At time one, the majority of student reflections highlighted ambivalence and anxiety toward engaging in the unit and were not demonstrative of critical reflexivity. Students’ anticipated the potential for experiencing discomfort, however, did not connect with this discomfort at a personal level. Student reflections were bound to their future roles as a health professional and current context (i.e., wanting to achieve a high grade). For some, undertaking the unit seemed to reflect a process of *going through the motions*; a hurdle to overcome on the way to obtaining an academic qualification. We venture that this approach reflects a fragmented framing of self (e.g., student self, professional self, and authentic self are distinct) which is perhaps contrary to the practice of embodying the decolonial attitude (i.e., interrogating one’s own humanity, in order to engage with the humanity of others; Maldonado-Torres, 2017). At this time point, students’ emerging awareness of the limitations of their experiences, education, learnings, and knowledge pervaded.

Again, at time two we saw strong alignment between findings generated from each analysis. Broadly, both forms of analysis suggest that the students engaged in deeper more nuanced levels of reflection at this time point, and we saw a shift in students’ regard for the role of the unit in the broader context of their learning about culture and Indigenous studies. For example, students appear to move from conceptualizing the unit as a *gap filler* in their knowledge of Indigenous Australian issues and culture, to seeing the unit as a *starting point* for an

ongoing process of learning and negotiating culture and power relations. While students' appear to have enhanced ability to articulate theoretical and conceptual information (e.g., referring to ethnocentrism), their reflections are also characterized by process statements, rather than focusing on these content-specific learnings. At this latter time point, we see a shift in the students' regard for the role and value of uncertainty and discomfort, which they came to see as a necessary element of learning.

Findings of this research suggest that engagement in the unit may facilitate a movement toward engaging with the nuances and complexities of power relations bound up in culture, and in psychology. Our research design precludes identification of the mechanisms that facilitate this transformation, or from commenting on the extent to which students have moved along continua of cultural awareness, capability, or competency. Rather than assert such claims, we intend to reflect here the learnings gained from the expansive, reflexive, and iterative discussions we have shared as a research team in the process of preparing this paper.

The Politics of Discomfort, Safety, and Vulnerability

We claim that findings from this research reflect students' shifting conceptualizations of uncertainty, and a shift toward embracing an *ethic of discomfort* as a mechanism of facilitating critical reflexivity (Zembylas, 2017). Discomfort has been explicitly considered within higher education settings as a prompt which engages students in a process of problematizing their "...emotional habits and routines and their attachments to structural injustices..." (Zembylas, 2017, p. 8). The discomfort experienced by our students, and students of Indigenous studies more broadly may be underpinned, in part, by concern over expressing unpopular views within the classroom (Chiodo et al., 2014; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). Tailoring learning activities to create safe pedagogical spaces has been posited as a means of mitigating discomfort (Clark, Chur-Hansen, Turnbull, & Masciantonio, 2013; Fox, 2013). Practices that limit discomfort, and preclude open dialog and the opportunity to take risks in a dialog, may be counterproductive to the decolonial standpoint (Bulhan, 2015).

In the same way that we expect vulnerability from our students, we also need to embrace vulnerability as educators. Zembylas (2017) agitates for a departure from the assumption that new knowledge is gained and managed logically, and that education promotes an organized process of growth. We venture that vulnerability means locating oneself in a space with students, and exercising a willingness to reimagine our institutionally mandated role as expert in the classroom. We as educators "...need to

become the change that we expect in others" by embracing our own vulnerabilities in the learning process (Leibowitz et al., 2010, p. 124). Having said this, we need to acknowledge directly that vulnerability holds different implications for Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. The consideration of, and necessity for, safety of Indigenous educators generally tasked with introducing Indigenous content into curricula may be at best misunderstood, at worst disregarded and/or exploited, and at the very least demands attention at the institutional level (Asmar & Page, 2009).

If discomfort is a mechanism of transformative learning, it is counterproductive to elevate safety at the expense of discomfort. This should not be construed as placing individuals in precarious situations—again, this enters territory acknowledged by others (Nakata et al., 2012) as akin to mental disequilibrium, as "...'epistemic obedience' of the regenerated Indigenous..." (p. 129). Safety necessarily means safety for some and not others; in this way, emphasizing safety has the potential to maintain dominant social and power relations within and beyond the classroom (Fox, 2013). We suggest that students be invited, as were those who took part in the current research, to speak imperfectly, fearlessly, or courageously (Garvey, 2007). While students may view this act as reflective of ignorance, an alternative interpretation is to see it as burgeoning engagement with their own episteme and worldview, and arguably evidence of a decolonial stance permitted by interactions that are risky, yet generous and respectful. Rather than offering our students a retreat to safety, we advocate that educators and students alike enter the space mutually embracing the inevitable discomfort ahead, for which many will feel inadequately prepared, however, open to reaping the rewards of the "...gift of the self beyond recognition" (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 440).

We are mindful that emphasis on creating safe environments within the classroom can reflect a limiting view of students as vulnerable, naïve, or holding singularly privileged identities. We argue that framing students in this way can foster resentment and frustration among educators, facilitating a gravitation toward students who demonstrate progress as we perceive it, and away from those who do not. Paradoxically, we tend to disregard the pluralities of our students' social and cultural identities while attempting to educate them on the pluralities of others'. Constructing students as privileged and one-dimensional can give rise to attempts to decolonize "...students' minds and ways of thinking" as a first-step toward decoloniality (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 134). In this frame, Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing may be received as asserted beliefs and lead to resistance and disengagement among students, fostering the kind of intellectual

conformity that runs counter to a decolonial standpoint (Dutta, 2016) premised upon “a collaboration on what to *deconstruct* and how to *reconstruct* for the benefit of all.” (Bulhan, 2015, p. 253).

These sentiments bring into sharp relief the ways that we may unwittingly construct our students, perhaps to avoid our own discomfort, and the pedagogical assumptions that give rise to subsequent frustrations in our striving for decoloniality. We recognize how this positioning is counterproductive to *being* in a space with our students. If we hope to stand with our students as they navigate this space, rather than stratification into those who can and cannot reflect, we would be better served by exercising tenets of strong working alliance (e.g., empathy, compassion, and positive regard; Teyber & Teyber, 2010) to support their positioning at any level of reflection, at any given time.

Parametrizing the Decolonial Stance

Students’ and educators’ sense of authentic self is compromised by lengthy engagement with a banking model of education (Freire, 1970), often spanning entire formal educational histories. The rigidity of roles defined by the academy are dehumanizing for all parties; from a decolonial standpoint, the roles of expert educator and naïve learner are fluid, and can be variously occupied by any individual (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014). We contend, along with others (Bulhan, 2015; Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014; hooks, 2003), that practices of education for compliance and epistemic obedience embraced by higher education settings are incompatible with any meaningful attempt to engage pedagogy as a mechanism for reconciliation and re-imagining of power relations. At a structural level, as is the case for many undergraduate psychology programs (Mackinlay & Barney, 2014), our students approach Indigenous studies socialized to a form of psychology that privileges Western ideals: individualism, rationalism, and empiricism (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). The structure of the curriculum at our institution is such that, aside from one core-disciplinary unit on Indigenous cultures and health behaviors in the first year, the majority of students’ first and second year studies center on instruction in positivist research methods, developmental psychology, and social psychology. We contend that this curriculum pathway positions psychology within a dominant Western frame so that when students are introduced to Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology they are primed to experience this content as a challenge to their prior learnings (Roberts & Castell, 2016). Findings from the current research indicate that on entry into the unit, students experience this challenge as a threat to the veracity of their prior learnings, and as a threat to their ability to perform academically.

We see this dynamic reflected in the findings from time one of the current research, by way of an emergent discourse on truth. This discourse was jarring for us as educators as it carries loaded implications; that learnings can be grounded in a positivist frame, and that we as educators in the unit will deliver said truths in the form of prescriptive learnings. This expectation contests the frame in which we present the available learnings, the roles that we strive to embody as educators in this space, and the roles that we invite our students to engage with (i.e., learner and educator). Despite our intended positionalities in this space, we must foster a preparedness to navigate and negotiate the positions students ascribe to us as educators, and to themselves as students. We assert, in alignment with others (Mackinlay & Barney, 2014; Sonn, 2016), strongly delineated roles within the classroom are problematic for a decolonial standpoint. In this way, we see that the structures we are embedded within, have the potential to place parameters around the decolonial stance.

At the curriculum level, we call for a re-framing of critical reflexivity from a decontextualized and demonstrable skill to a different *cultural site* that demands students and teachers actively negotiate and re-negotiate the construction of what is right and what represents risk or reward. This unit, and similar units, might be considered spaces where naturally forming communities emerge as places of respite, safety, and familiarity from the paradoxes, dilemmas, and undermining ideas that students are invited to encounter in dominant educational practices. In turn, these spaces may offer both students and educators greater mobility as they negotiate and locate themselves in processes of decoloniality.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications

Only those students who attended either the second and or final lecture of the semester are represented. Furthermore, direct comparison between time points is limited by the open and exploratory nature of our data collection method, and by participation of fewer participants at the second time point. We also note that at time one students had already been exposed to some unit content (e.g., the unit outline describing weekly topics, a list of reading topics, one lecture and one tutorial); we are unclear on the extent to which students’ reflections at time one may be informed by priming to respond in socially desirable ways. The mode of data collection possibly encouraged brief handwritten responses tantamount to (at time two, in particular) a unit evaluation rather than a personal reflexive exercise. Thus, alternate models of data collection that may yield deeper and more nuanced insights into the processes and content of critical reflexivity among students might be adopted in future.

Finally, we note this study has drawn on a range of literature from Eurocentric perspectives and origins, the authors of which are not scholars of decoloniality. Our intent is not to privilege these voices, nor to present *establishment psychology* as the “...arbiter of human experience” (Bulhan, 2015, p. 249); we must acknowledge the potential pitfalls of these inclusions within a study engaging in the decolonial space. Despite this, the rationale and utility of the inclusion of certain theorists (e.g., Inayatullah, 1998, 1998; Kember et al., 2008; Mezirow, 1990) is perhaps clarified in consideration of their alignment with our aim of exploring processes underlying epistemic shift as a result of students’ critically reflective process—and their use within the Australian Indigenous Studies space (e.g., Bullen & Roberts, 2018a).

The research also has notable strengths. CLA proved a valuable analytical approach for contextualizing the content of reflections to structures and systems, and highlighting the worldviews, discourses, myths and metaphors that underpin and drive tensions in this space (Inayatullah, 1998). Likewise, Kember et al.’s (2008) four-category scheme for coding was useful for locating students at points of reflexive engagement; this challenged our own tendencies to see students as either *getting it* or *not getting it*, and prompted reflexivity within the research team on the implications of this for engaging with our own students.

Conclusion

Decoloniality offers a means to examine and challenge the strong competitive Indigenous/Western dichotomy and cultural essentialism that serves to privilege particular ways of knowing, doing, and being (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Dutta, 2016). We hope that embracing this stance will challenge the prevailing assumption that admitting to feeling challenged or unsure of how to move is constructed as resistant and preclusive of the potential for critical reflexivity. Our adoption of the multi-level analyses that is central to community psychology highlights how this paradox, experienced by students at the individual level, is a symptom of broader structural and cultural dynamics; for example, a dynamic that privileges dominant educational practices and disregards the expansive offerings of Indigenous epistemes (Bullen & Flavell, 2017).

We suggest that the way we as educators construct our students, and, consequently ourselves has a good deal to do with whether the encounter sows the seeds of critical reflexivity and, broadly speaking, decoloniality. Despite the irony underpinning the title and proposition of this paper, there may be no such thing as *decolonial approach to curriculum* beyond that of our manner of ‘being’ within complex

educational environments such as the intercultural space. Conscious tolerance for discomfort, reflection on practice, willingness to engage authentically—each play a part, however, to what extent is difficult to discern given the shifting terrains. It is generally only upon ongoing immersion in the space that its complexity becomes apparent; student reflections considered here perhaps testify to this.

As we reach the end of our collaboration on this research together, as a team, we too reflect; to what extent does this research reflect a means to an end, or an end in itself? For us, certainly, this paper has carved out a space where, in the day-to-day of our work, we have enjoyed lengthy reflexive discussions and participated in genuine collaborations as Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. The cross-cultural relationships galvanized in this process hold the promise for future collaborations and a commitment to embodying the reflexivity, vulnerability, and ongoing learning processes we invite in our students. Here, we derive small comfort from the potential for this work to reflect both an end in itself, and the beginning of another ripple in the pond.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest to declare.

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