

# Seeing White: Turning the postcolonial lens on social work in Australia

## Author

Tanja Dittfeld, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, Australia

## Abstract

Social work is a profession based on (White) Euro-American concepts, problems and historicity in which Indigenous knowledges and cultures are marginalised, and the effects of colonisation are obscured to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers. Cultural competence is increasingly emphasised and expected of social work graduates internationally to make the voices, stories, and knowledges of Indigenous peoples who have been, and continue to be, marginalised heard. The conventional approach to cultural competence in social work is however problematic as it maintains rather than challenges the universality of Whiteness in Australia through a fixed gaze on the Indigenous ‘other’. To decolonise social work however requires a critical understanding of the development of social work identity and ideology within the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. The article subsequently argues for the use of postcolonial theory to shift the focus from the effects of colonisation on Indigenous peoples to the colonial origin and continued coloniality of the social work profession, practice and curriculum within Australia. The purpose of turning the postcolonial lens on social work is not to build an argument for non-White social work but to build an understanding from which social work can support the Indigenous struggle for self-determination, decolonisation and social justice.

## Introduction

Cultural competence is increasingly emphasised and expected of social work graduates internationally (Small et al., 2016), particularly of those about to practice in multicultural settler colonial nations such as South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States of America (henceforth the USA) (Mogorosi, 2018). Following the Australian Government’s Behrendt review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education in 2012 (Behrendt et al., 2012), the Australian Association for Social Workers (henceforth AASW) correspondingly released new curriculum guidelines (AASW, 2012) . In conjuncture with the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) and the AASW Practice Standards (2013), these guidelines require that Indigenous peoples’ ways of knowing, being and doing are taught in all qualifying

social work degrees. While these new guidelines are an important step towards challenging hegemonic Eurocentric knowledge traditions and practices in social work (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 809), they in turn present some critical epistemological challenges precisely because of the Whiteness, or Eurocentrism, that permeates the staffing, organisation, curriculum, education and practices of social work (Bennett, 2015; Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015; Monani, 2018; Walter et al., 2011).

Social work developed in response to social problems that emerged during the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe in the 1880s (Mogorosi, 2018, p. 3), and the invasion of Australia was correspondingly designed to relieve Britain's need to transport convicts somewhere after the loss of its American colonies (Ablett & Morley, 2016, p. 9). Colonialism and colonisation are thus the bedrock of contemporary social work in Australia. Yet, there is an almost suspicious silence when it comes to the relationship between colonialism and social work (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011). When the relationship is explored, it is typically with reference to colonisation as a collective trauma that may be transmitted inter- or multi-generationally (see e.g. Masson & Smith, 2019; Tamburro, 2013, p. 2). Social work's incentive to engage with the history and effects of colonisation is hereby positioned as rather functionalist, that is to say as a way to understand the colonial roots of dysfunctional behaviour of Indigenous peoples and families to be able to work more effectively with them (Tamburro, 2013, pp. 2-3). A singular focus on the traumatic history and effects of colonisation for the sake of efficiency firstly presents Indigenous peoples instead of colonisation as the problem, and secondly negates social work as a product of colonialism (Smith, 2019, p. 115) and, more importantly, a continued instrument of coloniality today (Masson & Smith, 2019, p. 20).

The relationship between colonialism and social work must subsequently be explored to delineate how the settler colonial Australian context enabled colonial practices and power relations to be institutionalised in social work pedagogy, curriculum and practice and how the conventional approach to cultural competence in social work is representative of continued colonial practices and power relations. Postcolonial theory lends itself to this endeavour. Notwithstanding the plethora of perspectives represented by postcolonial theory – or rather postcolonial theories –, the onus is to identify and disrupt the material and discursive legacies of colonialism that perpetuate socialised and racialised injustice (McEwan, 2014, p. 137). Turning the postcolonial lens on social work instead of Indigenous peoples enables an understanding of the ways in which cultural competence is embodying and upholding socialised and racialised injustice.

The article subsequently proceeds by briefly outlining the key tenets of postcolonial theory as well as its usage in and relevance to social work. The article then continues to delineate the colonial context of social work in Australia and social work practice in

(post)colonial Australia. Lastly, the article discusses the colonality of cultural competence and the potential of cultural humility for social work to move beyond (White) defeatism.

## **Postcolonial theory and its relevance to Social Work**

Indebted to anti-colonial thought from South Asia and Africa in the first half of the 20th century, postcolonial theory emerged in the USA and the United Kingdom (henceforth the UK) in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Elam, 2019). Despite the much debated 'post', postcolonial theory is not concerned with the temporal era after colonialism per se but rather the material and discursive legacies of colonisation that have decisively shaped the world (Seth, 2013). As such, postcolonial theory is primarily concerned with the processes, effects, and reactions to European colonialisms from the sixteenth century up to present day colonality or neo-colonialism (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 205).

When applied in social sciences, postcolonial theory is mostly used to address the global inequalities and power discrepancies between the global South and North. The interface between postcolonial theory and social work similarly revolve around social work as a recently acknowledged and consolidated international profession (see e.g. Dominelli, 2012; Jung & Tripodi, 2007; Midgley, 1995, 2003). Postcolonial perspectives in social work are thus mainly applied to analyse and respond to international social issues such as global food insecurity (Deepak, 2014), the changed scope of social work practice in the face of globalisation (Deepak, 2012; Kang, 2013) alongside the ambiguities of transnational social work practice in the form of 'professional imperialism' (Arce, 2019) and diasporic social workers practicing in either the global North or South while being from the other (Crabtree et al., 2014; Fox, 2010; Wehbi et al., 2016).

Even though a key tenet of postcolonial theory is to challenge the underlying and unexamined Eurocentric assumptions, motivations and values that are insensitive to the meanings, values and practices of other cultures (Smith, 2012, p. 58), postcolonial theory is scarcely used to understand the development of social work identity and ideology within different socio-political, temporal and spatial contexts including colonialism. Notwithstanding the few studies on settler colonialism and social work (see e.g. Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011; Tamburro, 2013), settler colonialism is virtually absent from postcolonial scholarship and the same can be said for social work. Evading social work's role in (settler) colonialism is however highly problematic as it not only invisibilises the colonality of the profession today but also frames "social work as a rather positive reaction to the injustices wrought by the capitalist system" (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018, p. 2).

While touching on varied issues of language, land, nationalism, gender and hybridism, postcolonial scholars such as Spivak (1988), Said (2003), Mohanty (2003), Fanon (2008) and Bhabha (2012) are dedicated to epistemic decolonisation. An emerging field of scholarship propelled by Indigenous activists, practitioners and researchers is correspondingly concerned with addressing the coloniality of knowledge (see e.g. Adams, 2014; Barnes, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2013; Denzin et al., 2008; Smith, 2012; Swadener & Mutua, 2007; Zavala, 2013). Coloniality of knowledge refers to the “collective memory of imperialism [that] has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized” (Smith, 2012, p. 31). When postcolonial theory is applied in social work, it is therefore often to challenge the ‘ethnocentric monoculturalism’ of social work curriculum, practice and pedagogy (see e.g. Mlcek, 2013; Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011; Tamburro, 2013).

While this speaks to epistemic decolonisation, the incentive to revise social work curriculum, practice and pedagogy is positioned as a way for social work students, practitioners and academics to attain the “knowledge, skills and values that will support and enhance their ability to work in partnership with Indigenous peoples” (Tamburro 2013, 1). Despite the emphasis on partnership, this on the one hand speaks to the neo-liberalisation of social work in Australia (Wallace & Pease, 2011) and on the other hand skates over the reproduction of colonial power relations by knowledge being constructed as unidirectional instead of reciprocal. Social workers are hence expected to obtain knowledge about the (Indigenous) ‘other’ to work efficiently with them within a modified, but essentially still hegemonic modern Eurocentric knowledge and practice tradition. Epistemic decolonisation of social work, by contrast, requires social work students, practitioners and academics to engage with taken-for-granted neutrality of Whiteness or Eurocentrism by identifying and challenging the dominant *us* (social workers) rather than the racialised *them* (Indigenous peoples) (Walter et al., 2011, p. 9).

Turning the postcolonial lens on social work is not merely a way for social work to satisfy the doctrine of postcolonial theory but also for social work to honour its one unifying mandate internationally, social justice (Kam, 2014). The conditions, morbidity and mortality of Indigenous peoples in settler colonial nations demonstrate “colonization in which a particular process of genocide is proceeding, and against which Indigenous peoples’ struggle is one for survival as peoples” (Land, 2015, p. 3). Indigenous academics and researchers such as Smith (2012) have congruently begun to address social issues experienced by Indigenous peoples within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonisation and social justice. For social work to support rather than undermine this struggle necessitates a shift of lens from the disadvantages

experienced by Indigenous peoples as a result of colonisation to social work's role in inadvertently upholding these disadvantages.

To make this argument requires a distinction between the historical period of colonialism and the structures of coloniality. Whereas the temporal era of colonialism is usually considered to have ended by the 1970s when European colonisers had retreated from their geographical colonial territories and handed back political power, colonial practices and power relations continue in subtle, insidious, and racialised forms throughout the world (Go, 2013; Loomba, 2000; Masson & Smith, 2019). The next two sections subsequently outline the context and dynamics of social work during colonialism and postcolonialism in Australia, albeit with the position that Australia is far from postcolonial.

### **The colonial origins of social work in (White) Australia**

Colonialism is typically understood as European economic and governmental expansion into Asia, Africa or the Americas, starting in the fifteenth century and peaking in the 1930s when European colonies and former colonies covered 84.6 percent of the land surface of the globe (Loomba, 2000, p. 15). This understanding of colonialism is in itself a testament to the hegemony of Eurocentrism established through the process of colonisation as it firstly overlooks earlier forms of colonialism, secondly homogenises the expressions, experiences and impacts of European colonialism, and lastly clouds contemporary social and racial differences of many societies.

Compared to earlier forms of colonialism, European colonialism was nevertheless admittedly distinct. Not only were the colonisers from a different continent, but European colonialism was also established alongside capitalism in Western Europe (Loomba, 2000; Tamburro, 2013). As such, European colonisation went beyond extracting goods and wealth from the colonised countries to restructuring the social, political and economic structures and relations of these countries to produce the economic imbalance that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism (Loomba, 2003, p. 3).

The process of colonisation was presented to the world as civilisation that brought moral and material improvement to the colonised, and was therefore seen as justified in the control, exploitation and subjugation of Indigenous peoples (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011, p. 28; Tamburro, 2013, p. 2). While colonial practices and methods were highly heterogenous as they unfolded in different parts of the world, European colonialism did inevitably lock the colonisers and colonised into the most traumatic relationship in human history (Loomba, 2000, p. 2).

Despite the shared history of trauma, colonial practices, methods and impacts were highly context specific. To meaningfully interrogate the colonial origin and continued coloniality of social work in the Australian context thus requires an outline of the colonial-settler invasion of Australia from 1788 onwards. In contrast to New Zealand, the British colonised Australia without treaty or consent, mainly because Australia was treated as a colony of settlement in contrast to a colony of conquest. This depiction of Australia as a colony of settlement has given rise to the erroneous impression that colonisation of Indigenous peoples in Australia was less brutal and more humane than European colonisation elsewhere (Harris, 2003). However, from the invasion to the time of federation (1788-1901), and arguably beyond, white settlers subjugated Indigenous peoples to physical and cultural genocide through the introduction of new diseases including smallpox, measles and influenza; continuous dispossession and removal of Indigenous peoples from ancestral land onto missions and reserves, and thinly veiled assimilation initiatives (see e.g. Dessarab & Wright, 2019; Docker, 2015; Duthie et al., 2013; Harms et al., 2011; Long & Sephton, 2011; Short, 2010).

Colonial policies such as the Assimilation Policy (1897-1965) undermined Indigenous identity and culture and justified the dispossession of Indigenous people and the removal of Indigenous children from their parents. The aim of the assimilation policies was to erase potential conflict over who owned, and whose identity is fused with, the land between the Australian nation and Indigenous peoples (Moran, 2005, p. 170). The assimilation policies were embedded in the misplaced settler notion of “Australia as *Terra Nullius*, a blank page, an unpeopled, un-cultured, wasteland that cried out to be cultivated was no more than the self-legitimising fiction with which the insecure newcomers sought to reassure themselves of their legitimacy” (Collingwood-Whittick, 2008, p. 60).

The removal of Indigenous children from their families, usually referred to as the Stolen Generations, was similarly presented to be in the best interest of Indigenous children as it would allow them to assimilate into and get the benefits of “white” (settler) society and civility that mirrored European norms and practices (Long & Sephton, 2011, p. 97). Several scholars (see e.g. Cassidy, 2009; Short, 2010; Van Krieken, 2004) have argued that the Stolen Generations presents cultural genocide quintessential for Australian settler colonialism in that it only allowed for “assimilation to a single, individualised and de-communalised 'way of life'” (Van Krieken, 2004, p. 146). Despite major knowledge gaps of key Australian social work organisations, activists, campaigns and events (Mendes, 2005), it is known that social work contributed to the removal and displacement of Indigenous children and families under the guise of protection and assimilation (Briskman, 2014; Harms et al., 2011, p. 157).

The mission to create a single, uniform white Australian culture was extended with the Natives Citizenship Rights Act of 1944, which required fair-skinned Indigenous peoples to stop mixing with darker-skinned relatives and community members, practising their culture or speaking their own language to qualify for citizenship in Australia (Dessarab & Wright, 2019, p. 220). This not only created a rift amongst Indigenous relatives and community members, but also lay the ground for the internalisation of oppression and inferiorisation for Indigenous peoples (Fanon, 1967 cited in Masson & Smith, 2019, p. 14). The origins of social work as a profession in Australia is thus grounded in early British ideological foundations of charity, individuality, social hygiene and later political ideologies of white nationalism and supremacy (Ablett & Morley, 2016; Mendes, 2005; Monani, 2018; Smith, 2019).

Present-day coloniality is in sum possible because colonisation went beyond the decimation of populations and expropriation of land and resources to the entrenchment of Eurocentrism and inferiorisation of Indigenous peoples' histories, cultures and languages (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013 cited in Masson & Smith, 2019, p. 14), rendering epistemic decolonisation necessary to address social issues experienced by Indigenous peoples within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonisation and social justice.

## **Social work in (post)colonial (just as White) Australia**

Similar to colonialism, postcolonialism is a highly contested term (Loomba, 2000; McEwan, 2014). Formal decolonisation unfolded from the eighteenth century in the Americas, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand to the 1970s in the case of Angola and Mozambique and attempts to pinpoint the beginning of postcolonialism temporally and spatially is difficult. The contentious nature of postcolonialism is compounded by the comparative difference in the politics of decolonisation between settler nations such as Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, USA or Canada and nations such as India, Tanzania or Brazil where the European colonisers were overthrown by Indigenous peoples (Loomba, 2000, p. 8). More relevant than the spatiality, temporality and politics of decolonisation is thus the question of what postcolonialism entails.

### **White settler apology – strategy or sacrifice?**

Postcolonial scholars such as Spivak and Said posit that postcolonialism is about recovering the history, agency and resistance of peoples subjugated by colonisation and coloniality (McEwan, 2014, p. 138). Since the 1960s and 1970s there have been significant steps towards the recovery of Indigenous peoples' history, agency and resistance in the form of increasing Indigenous political activism, the furthering of Land Rights, restoring of traditional ownership and emerging Indigenous cultural nationalism (Land, 2015; Saunders, 2018). The 2008 apology to Australia's Indigenous

peoples by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on behalf of the Federal Parliament was moreover lauded as a defining moment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. With the apology the Australian government made a formal commitment to ‘Closing the Gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia. The apology subsequently symbolised the possibility of Australian healing as a nation and marked the end of a long period of overt government hostility to reconciliation (Fejo-King & Briskman, 2009, p. 108; Land, 2015, p. 14).

Moving from what has been achieved to what should have been achieved from a postcolonial perspective, it is contentious whether the apology was more than an empty strategy to restore comfort without white settlers having to sacrifice anything personally (Land, 2015, p. 239). The Australian Government is still to legally recognise Indigenous sovereignty and to remove problematic raced sections from the constitution (Saunders, 2018). Australia was moreover one of only four countries that voted against the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which was adopted in 2007 by the United Nations General Assembly (Fejo-King & Briskman, 2009), only to declare its support for the Declaration in 2009. Hence, while white settlers in Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, USA and Canada may feel estranged from Britain and its (post)colonial practices, white settlers were on the other hand the agents of colonial rule and their own subsequent development is therefore not comparable to that of Indigenous peoples. To quote Loomba (2000, pp. 9-10), “[n]o matter what their differences with the mother country, white populations here were not subject to genocide, economic exploitation, cultural decimation and political exclusion felt by indigenous peoples or by other colonies”. Indigenous peoples evidently still lack full political inclusion, land rights and cultural sovereignty in Australia.

Central to deliberations of what the postcolonial entails are the issue of speaking ‘for’, ‘with’ or ‘about’ the ‘Other’ as well as how to write about ‘the Other’ without othering (Manning, 2016; Said, 2003; Spivak, 1988; Webb, 1992). This in turn means that who controls the definition of difference and whose social and political interests are fulfilled by relegating the colonial to the past needs to be considered in discussions of the postcolonial (Webb, 1992). Drawing on Fejo-King and Briskman (2009, p. 105) who address the coloniality of social work in Canada, the continued gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia appears to be embedded in a political context in which Indigenous aspirations for Indigenous sovereignty, land justice, cultural recognition and spirituality continues to be subjugated to “Western-style aspirations of economic gain, home ownership, education and employment”. As such, reconciliation and closing the gap are (still) premised on white civility as the desirable outcome in the Australian context. White settlers in Australia evidently continue to have the power to define and control the representation of Indigenous peoples, their histories, and their

access to rights, rendering the claim that Australia is postcolonial more fabrication than fact (Saunders, 2018).

### **The legacy of (post)colonial social work practice**

Colonialism has clearly influenced contemporary governmental political approaches to Indigenous peoples and also positioned social workers to serve the purpose of social control, domestication, and status quo maintenance (Masson & Smith, 2019, p. 20; Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011, p. 7). While no study has yet precisely outlined the role that social work or social workers played in the Stolen Generations (Mendes, 2005, p. 123), the AASW preceded the Kevin Rudd apology by, in 1997 endorsing a Statement of Apology on behalf of Australia's social welfare sector and in 2004 formally acknowledging and apologising for social work's part in the Stolen Generations. Yet, social workers continue to be the primary human service providers involved in child protection and out-of-home care services.

In the last two decades since the 1997 Bringing them Home Report, the Australian Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their families, the removal of Indigenous children from their families has risen in Australia. Indigenous children are as such not just over-represented compared to non-Indigenous children (AIFS, 2019) but the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care has doubled since the Stolen Generations (Wahlquist, 2019). The removal of Indigenous children moreover often occurs in cases where parents were themselves removed as children (Long & Sephton, 2011, p. 97), thus demonstrating that the apology and subsequent political efforts have not worked to disrupt the inter- and multigenerational effects of colonisation.

The colonial origin of social work laid the foundation for the relationship between social workers and Indigenous peoples in Australia inevitably being underpinned by mistrust, fear, and anger (Briskman, 2014). Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma (2008, para 43-44) eloquently summarises the implications of colonial social work practices for the present-day relationship between social work(ers) and Indigenous peoples and communities by stating,

the legacy of the role of social work and welfare services sometimes lives on in compromised relationships with communities where the 'welfare' is still associated with the devastation of separation and the Stolen Generations. Without pointing the finger of blame at social workers either individually or as a profession, I would argue that this legacy still lives on today because of the unacceptably high number of Indigenous children being taken into care.

Not unlike during colonialism, the continued practice of removal of Indigenous children and social workers' role serve to delegitimise Indigenous practices of caring and social support through the imposition of social service providers under the guise of a humane and benevolent activity (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018). As also exemplified by the role of social work in the offshore detention sites Nauru and Manus Island (Briskman, 2019), social work continues to function as a promoter of white civility that stands as a benchmark of assimilation and exclusion for all other non-White peoples (Walter et al., 2011, p. 8). Despite Australia's official efforts to 'close the gap' and for reconciliation, coloniality is thus sustained by not focusing attention on the actual cause of the problem, colonisation, but rather on getting Indigenous peoples to change and to assimilate into the capitalistic society that Australia is today (Green & Bennett, 2018, p. 262) with social work(ers) as the instruments of this assimilation.

## **The Coloniality of Cultural Competence**

Coiled in the backdrop of the perceived threat of terrorism, Australia recognised that it is a multicultural country under the Howard government in 2003, and an increasing demand for culturally competent public service and appropriate services to diverse peoples subsequently entered government policies at all levels (Harrison & Turner, 2011, p. 338). Social work generally operates within the dominant government policies and ideologies of any given time (Masson & Smith, 2019, p. 20), and a focal point in social work correspondingly became to promote (cross)cultural competence and responsiveness in social work curriculum, pedagogy and practice (see e.g. Bessarab, 2015; Mlcek, 2013; Tamburro, 2013; Walker et al., 2018).

The AASW's Code of Ethics states that "[c]ultural competence can be achieved through a commitment to achieving culturally appropriate service delivery and a culturally appropriate workplace environment. This commitment would require a focus on systemic, organisational, professional and individual levels" (Farrelly & Lumby 2009, p.17 cited in AASW, 2010, p. 42). To be culturally competent, social workers are expected to have knowledge about different cultural practices and worldviews, to develop awareness of their own cultural worldview and cross-cultural skills (Nadan, 2017, p. 78). From a postcolonial perspective, the conventional approach to cultural competence is problematic as rather than to challenge and disrupt the universality of biophysical and discursive Whiteness in Australia, it maintains an essentialist and essentialising fixed gaze on the Indigenous 'other' that allows Whiteness to mask its privilege (Nadan, 2017).

### **Cultural competence as a form of othering**

The very term cultural competence perpetuates the binary contest between 'us' and 'them' by putting emphasis on cultural differences (Sawrikar & Katz, 2014, p. 396)

instead of an emphasis on the non-universality of culture and cultural experiences (Mlcek, 2013, p. 1987). 'Culture' is often equated with 'non-Western or minority groups' or conflated with ethnicity, race, religion and nationality (Phillips, 2007, p. 53 cited in Harrison & Turner, 2011), and in turn presents the idea of Indigenous peoples as having culture and social workers as being cultureless (Nadan, 2017, p. 78). This firstly omits the meaning of contextuality and power relations and secondly perpetuates the notion of Whiteness as neutral.

In Australia, Indigenous peoples make up 2.4 per cent - about 460,000 out of 22 million people - of the population (Australian Government, n.d.), and while Indigenous peoples have a shared experience of oppression, subjugation, genocide and othering, the violent colonial linking together of different histories within the same temporality and spatiality translates into there not being any 'pure' identities and all identities as relational (Seth, 2013, p. 2). As previously mentioned, cultural competence however embeds a strong linear correlation between knowledge about the non-White 'other' and effective working with differences. A fixed gaze on acquiring knowledge about the history and culture of the Other can however lead to overgeneralisation of and blindness to the heterogeneity of people who belong to a broad grouping (Nadan, 2017, pp. 78-79). By presenting Whiteness as neutral, knowledge about the Other can moreover be used to justify subjugation of the other to White control. Child protection services provide a strong example of this in that the interventions are embedded in a Eurocentric (White) notion of parenting and family functioning (Sawrikar & Katz, 2014, p. 398), which serves to legitimise the disproportionately high number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.

Going back to the AASW's Code of Ethics (2010) it is stated that the commitment to cultural competence requires a focus on systemic, organisational, professional and individual levels. This presents somewhat of a conundrum as these levels are all saturated with White control, biophysically and discursively speaking. Despite the gradual dismantling of the White Australia Policy from the 1950s to its official nullification by the Whitlam government in 1973, the majority of social work academics, heads of social work departments in hospitals, charities and human services are predominantly white Anglo-Saxon or of British descent (Monani, 2018, p. 90), and merely 2.5 per cent of social workers were Indigenous according to the 2011 Census of Housing and Population with graduate numbers remaining low (Bennett et al., 2018). What is more, few Indigenous social workers have historically joined and remained active members of the AASW, largely because the ongoing impacts of colonisation and racism that occurs at every level for Indigenous peoples have not been addressed (Bennett, 2015, p. 24). The social work profession, professional standards and ethics are subsequently represented and defined by racially White people, and non-Indigenous social workers are in effect unlikely to know Indigenous peoples as colleagues. Non-

Indigenous social workers and Indigenous peoples are furthermore typically segregated and separated spatially, economically, geographically and socially (Walter et al., 2011, p. 9), which in effect means that non-Indigenous social workers are likely to only know Indigenous peoples as clients, data sources, or a specific client group that must be covered within the curriculum.

The antidote to the relational disjuncture is often presented as Indigenous social workers providing human services to Indigenous peoples and communities, which comes with its own range of challenges that are rarely addressed in discussions of cultural competence. The scarcity compared to the demand presents one unique challenge for Indigenous social workers. As Indigenous social workers often work with their own communities and families, they are moreover always unofficially on call and faced with tough decisions to keep the personal and professional spheres separate (Calma, 2008). Another challenge to consider is the hybrid position that Indigenous social workers find themselves in, in terms of privilege; meaning to have access to White privilege as social workers in contrast to the lack of privilege as non-White (Mlcek, 2013, p. 1988). The legacy of the social work profession can moreover create tensions between Indigenous social workers and their own communities. From a postcolonial perspective, the ultimate challenge is however that the demand for Indigenous social workers to work with Indigenous communities and families in itself presents an essentialist approach by valorising indigeneity uncritically (Barnes, 2018). While identity and lived experience of marginalisation may provide a more encompassing view of culture, it does not necessarily lead to a particular consciousness or unmasking of power relations (Bozalek, 2011, p. 472). It can thus not be assumed that Indigenous social workers necessarily know how to overcome the coloniality of social work knowledge and practice, the historical inferiorisation of Indigenous knowledges nor that Indigenous social workers by default understand Indigenous communities and peoples different from their own.

The relational disjuncture is further compounded by an epistemological disjuncture as social work curriculum and practice are predominantly derived from European, British, and Euro-American theories, cultures, and practices. The critical social work theories that emerged out of the radical social work of the 1970s in Australia under the successive influences of Marxist, feminist, anti-oppressive, and postmodern approaches (Ablett & Morley, 2016) and are used to devise curriculum have an inherent 'Whiteness gap', denoting that the theories are based on Eurocentric modernist assumptions and concepts (Healy, 2005 cited in Walter et al., 2011). The Eurocentric social work education curriculum is linked to the low graduate numbers of Indigenous social workers (Gair, 2017).

Importantly, epistemic decolonisation does not call for the complete rejection of all Eurocentric knowledge, but rather calls for building a bridge between (White) Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledges in ways that are appropriate and beneficial for the local community (Datta, 2018; Smith, 2012; Tamale, 2011). However, notwithstanding the reflexive praxis promoted by critical social work theories and approaches, the emphasis of critical social work theories is primarily on the knowledge that can be gained from Indigenous peoples rather than the social work practice and the ways in which practice is informed by race and White privilege (Walter et al., 2011, p. 12). This offers insights to why, even with social work curriculum promoting an understanding of White privilege and its effects on social work practice, the result is mostly for social workers' attitudes but not their behaviours to change in practice (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015, p. 193).

The invisibilised norm of Whiteness is also evident in the dichotomous juxtaposition of Indigenous peoples' conditions with those of non-Indigenous (White) peoples inherent to public and political discourse in Australia (Walter et al., 2011, p. 9). When 'closing the gap' in life expectancy, infant mortality, health, employment and education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Australians Together, n.a.), it is implied that this is achieved once Indigenous peoples are achieving the same conditions that have already been determined as indicative of a good (White) life by non-Indigenous (White) peoples. In using postcolonial theory to shift the lens from Indigenous peoples to social work and social workers the emphasis changes from the deficiencies and failures of Indigenous peoples to where and how standards and measures of failure and success are derived, who benefits from their existence and what the alternatives could be (Walter et al., 2011, p. 8).

### **Culturally humble social workers**

An alternative to cultural competence that is sometimes put forward is cultural humility. In contrast to cultural competence, the concept of cultural humility acknowledges that people are the experts of their story, and it positions social workers to be lifelong learners of cultural change (Sloane et al., 2018). A call for cultural humility asks social workers to explicitly consider power relations, to continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique, and to be aware that meanings change as cultures change. In line with postcolonial theory, cultural humility thus requires seeking out hidden histories of the profession, meaning the times when social work were advocates for social justice and when social work contributed to institutional acts of oppression and subjugation (Sloane et al., 2018, pp. 1015-1016).

As with cultural competence, cultural humility might appear vague and hard to operationalise. Harms et al. (2011) however conducted a study consisting of four focus groups with 30 urban Aboriginal community members who identified three key areas

of knowledge required for social workers to practice cultural humility, albeit the term cultural responsiveness was used in the study; (1) Aboriginal history and its impact; (2) cultural knowledge including family and community structures; and (3) the impact of social work interventions, and suggested methods for learning to build consultation and community connections, and field-education placements. These methods for learning would serve to overcome the previously mentioned spatial, economic, geographic and social segregation characterising the relationship between social workers and Indigenous peoples.

Duthie et al. (2013) correspondingly found that field experiences in Aboriginal communities had the potential to be mutually beneficial to social work students and Indigenous peoples by, on the one hand changing personal views and the professional and ethical aspirations of social work students and, on the other hand contributing to challenging some of the negative views of social workers held by Indigenous peoples. The importance in developing relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities appears to extend to experienced and well-regarded Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers with reciprocity, the integration and valuing of Indigenous and Western worldviews, skills such as deep listening and stillness being quintessential to these relationships (Bennett et al., 2011).

Postcolonial theory is critical of all essentialisms, and the essentialist approach to cultural competence in social work is highly problematic as it does not disrupt but rather upholds the biophysical and discursive Whiteness that permeates social work practice, curriculum, education and professional organisation in Australia today (see e.g. Bennett, 2015; Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015; Monani, 2018; Walter et al., 2011). While cultural humility is not immune to critique, it does move beyond cultural competence in that it demands that social work students, educators and practitioners are proactive in uncovering Indigenous histories, cultures and the impacts of social work interventions as these areas of knowledge have long been hidden in an effort to maintain power (Sloane et al., 2018, p. 1016).

## **Moving beyond White Defeatism**

Postcolonial theory is typically applied in social work in three different ways: (1) to problematise social work as a trans/international profession; (2) to understand colonialism's role in fostering collective, inter- and multigenerational trauma for Indigenous peoples; and (3) to problematise social work pedagogy, curriculum and practice in working effectively with Indigenous peoples. While these uses of postcolonial theory are highly relevant for the decolonisation of social work altogether, they do position the problem as outside of social work by problematising the conditions of Indigenous peoples rather than the context of colonialism and the structures of coloniality.

Tracing the genealogy of social work's origin and function within the settler (post)colonial context of Australia demonstrates that social work is founded on Whiteness as an unjustified, albeit normalised racial privilege that White peoples are socialised to remain oblivious about (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015, p. 192). The purpose of turning the postcolonial lens onto social work is not to promote non-White social work but to *rewrite* and *reright* (Smith, 2012, p. 72) the assumed universality of Whiteness and White civility in the social work profession, practice and curriculum by critically interrogating the colonial origins and continued coloniality of social work today. As Australian social work appears to remain located within the broader cultural context of avoidance and discomfort regarding race issues, this shift will likely lead to Australian social workers experiencing a sense of shame, embarrassment and defeatism.

The result of turning the postcolonial lens should however not be for social workers to succumb to guilt, or even worse deny the disparities caused by colonisation, but to admit complicity and to use this knowledge to proactively educate themselves and others rather than to wait for or expect Indigenous peoples to do it (Land, 2015, p. 32). Turning the postcolonial lens is thus not intended to abolish Whiteness or to move beyond race categories, but to focus on reconstructing Whiteness to create epistemological justice (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015, p. 192; Land, 2015, p. 32). The starting point for this endeavour is, following the words of Indigenous social workers Green and Bennett (2018, p. 262), to acknowledge:

[...] that Aboriginal people are neither the problem nor the cause of the problem. It is not Aboriginal people or culture or communities that need to be fixed. The problem is colonialism, a condition that permeates every part of Australian society and that includes our profession and the manner in which we exist and operate.

## References

- Ablett, P., & Morley, C. (2016). Towards a history of critical traditions in Australian social work. *Social Alternatives*, 35(4), 7.
- Adams, G. (2014). Decolonizing methods: African studies and qualitative research. *Journal of social and personal relationships*, 31(4), 467-474.
- Arce, G. M. (2019). Latin American social work and the struggles against professional imperialism. In Kleibl, T., Ronald, L., Noyoo, N., Bunk, B., Dittman, A., & Seepamore, B. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Social Work* (pp. 163-173). Oxon: Routledge.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2013). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

- Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW]. (2010). *The AASW Code of Ethics*. Retrieved from <https://www.aasw.asn.au/practitioner-resources/code-of-ethics>
- Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW]. (2012). *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards*. Retrieved from <https://www.aasw.asn.au/careers-study/education-standards-accreditation>
- Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW]. (2013). *Practice Standards*. Retrieved from <https://www.aasw.asn.au/practitioner-resources/practice-standards>
- Australian Government. (n.d.). Our people. Retrieved from <https://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people>
- Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS]. (2019). Child protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-protection-and-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children>
- Barnes, B. R. (2018). Decolonising research methodologies: Opportunity and caution. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 48(3), 379-387.
- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: Final Report July 2012*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.au/review-higher-education-access-and-outcomes-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people>
- Bennett, B. (2015). “Stop deploying your white privilege on me!” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement with the Australian Association of Social Workers. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 19-31.
- Bennett, B., Redfern, H., & Zubrzycki, J. (2018). Cultural responsiveness in action: Co-constructing social work curriculum resources with Aboriginal Communities. *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(3), 808-825.
- Bennett, B., Zubrzycki, J., & Bacon, V. (2011). What do we know? The experiences of social workers working alongside Aboriginal people. *Australian Social Work*, 64(1), 20-37.
- Bessarab, D. (2015). Changing How and What We Do: The Significance of Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing in Social Work Education and Practice. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 1-4.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bhattacharya, K. (2013). Border crossing: Bridging empirical practices with de/colonizing epistemologies. *Global dimensions of qualitative inquiry*, 115-134.
- Bozalek, V. (2011). Acknowledging privilege through encounters with difference: Participatory Learning and Action techniques for decolonising methodologies

- in Southern contexts. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(6), 469-484.
- Briskman, L. (2014). *Social Work with Indigenous Communities: A Human Rights Approach* (2nd edition. ed.). Annandale, N.S.W: The Federation Press.
- Briskman, L. (2019). Social work co-option and colonial borders. In Tanja, K., Ronald, L., Noyoo, N., Bunk, B., Dittman, A., & Seepamore, B. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Social Work* (pp. 52-59). New York: Routledge.
- Calma, T. (2008). The role of social workers as human rights workers with Indigenous people and communities. Retrieved from <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/role-social-workers-human-rights-workers-indigenous-people-and-communities>
- Cassidy, J. (2009). Unhelpful and Inappropriate? The question of genocide and the Stolen Generations. *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, 13(1), 114-139.
- Collingwood-Whittick, S. (2008). Ways of Seeing 'Country': Colonial, Postcolonial, and Indigenous Perceptions of the Australian Landscape. *LiNQ (Literature in North Queensland)*, 35(1), 59-77.
- Crabtree, S. A., Parker, J., Azman, A., & Carlo, D. P. (2014). Epiphanies and learning in a postcolonial Malaysian context: A preliminary evaluation of international social work placements. *International Social Work*, 57(6), 618-629. doi:10.1177/0020872812448491
- Datta, R. (2018). Decolonizing both researcher and research and its effectiveness in indigenous research. *Research Ethics*, 14(2), 1-24.
- Davis, A., & Gentlewarrior, S. (2015). White privilege and clinical social work practice: Reflections and recommendations. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 26(3), 191-208.
- Deepak, A. C. (2012). Globalization, power and resistance: Postcolonial and transnational feminist perspectives for social work practice. *International Social Work*, 55(6), 779-793.
- Deepak, A. C. (2014). A postcolonial feminist social work perspective on global food insecurity. *Affilia*, 29(2), 153-164.
- Denzin, N. K., Lincoln, Y. S., & Smith, L. T. (2008). *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Dessarab, D., & Wright, M. (2019). The relevance and purpose of social work in Aboriginal Australia - post- or decolonisation. In Kleibl, T., Lutz, R., Noyoo, N., Bunk, B., Dittmann, A., & Seepamore, B. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Social Work* (pp. 219-232). Oxon: Routledge.
- Docker, J. (2015). A plethora of intentions: genocide, settler colonialism and historical consciousness in Australia and Britain. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 19(1), 74-89.

- Dominelli, L. (2012). Globalisation and indigenisation: Reconciling the irreconcilable. *The SAGE handbook of international social work*. London: Sage, 39-55.
- Duthie, D., King, J., & Mays, J. (2013). Raising Awareness of Australian Aboriginal Peoples Reality: Embedding Aboriginal Knowledge in Social Work Education through the Use of Field Experiences. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 12(1), 197-212.
- Elam, J. D. (2019). Postcolonial Theory. Retrieved from <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0069.xml>
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks*: Grove press.
- Fejo-King, C., & Briskman, L. (2009). Reversing colonial practices with Indigenous peoples. In Allan, J., Briskman, L., & Pease, B. (Eds.), *Critical social work: Theories and practices for a socially just world* (2nd ed., pp. 105-116). Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin.
- Fortier, C., & Hon-Sing Wong, E. (2018). The settler colonialism of social work and the social work of settler colonialism. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1-20.
- Fox, M. (2010). Post-colonialist practice: An Australian social worker in rural Zambia. *International Social Work*, 53(5), 720-731. doi:10.1177/0020872810371207
- Gair, S. (2017). Pondering the colour of empathy: Social work students' reasoning on activism, empathy and racism. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 47(1), 162-180.
- Go, J. (2013). Introduction: Entangling postcoloniality and sociological thought. In *Postcolonial Sociology* (pp. 3-31): Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Green, S., & Bennett, B. (2018). Wayanha: A Decolonised Social Work. *Australian Social Work*, 71(3), 261-264.
- Harms, L., Middleton, J., Whyte, J., Anderson, I., Clarke, A., Sloan, J., . . . Smith, M. (2011). Social work with Aboriginal clients: Perspectives on educational preparation and practice. *Australian Social Work*, 64(2), 156-168.
- Harris, J. (2003). Hiding the bodies: the myth of the humane colonisation of Aboriginal Australia. *Aboriginal History*, 27, 79-104.
- Harrison, G., & Turner, R. (2011). Being a 'culturally competent' social worker: Making sense of a murky concept in practice. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 41(2), 333-350.
- Jung, S. Y., & Tripodi, T. (2007). Trends in International Social Work Research Brief Note. *International Social Work*(5), 691-698.
- Kam, P. K. (2014). Back to the 'social' of social work: Reviving the social work profession's contribution to the promotion of social justice. *International Social Work*, 57(6), 723-740.

- Kang, H.-K. (2013). Claiming immigrant cultural citizenship: applying postcolonial theories to social work practice with immigrants. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 1(2), 233-245.
- Land, C. (2015). *Decolonizing solidarity: Dilemmas and directions for supporters of indigenous struggles*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Long, M., & Sephton, R. (2011). Rethinking the “best interests” of the child: Voices from Aboriginal child and family welfare practitioners. *Australian Social Work*, 64(1), 96-112.
- Loomba, A. (2000). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Manning, J. (2016). Constructing a postcolonial feminist ethnography. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 5(2), 90-105.
- Masson, F., & Smith, L. H. (2019). Colonisation as collective trauma: Fundamental perspectives for social work. In Tanja, K., Ronald, L., Noyoo, N., Bunk, B., Dittman, A., & Seepamore, B. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Social Work* (pp. 13-26). Oxon: Routledge.
- McEwan, C. (2014). Postcolonialism. In Desai, V. & Potter, R. B. (Eds.), *The Companion to Development Studies* (Third edition. ed., pp. 137-141). London :: Routledge.
- Mendes, P. (2005). The history of social work in Australia: A critical literature review. *Australian Social Work*, 58(2), 121-131.
- Midgley, J. (1995). *Social development: The developmental perspective in social welfare*: Sage.
- Midgley, J. (2003). Social development: The intellectual heritage. *Journal of International Development: The Journal of the Development Studies Association*, 15(7), 831-844.
- Mlcek, S. (2013). Are we doing enough to develop cross-cultural competencies for social work? *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1984-2003.
- Mogorosi, L. D. (2018). Social work and indigenisation: A South African perspective. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 30(1), 1-18.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders*: Duke University Press.
- Monani, D. (2018). At Cross roads: White Social Work in Australia and the discourse on Australian multiculturalism. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 10(2), 87.
- Moran, A. (2005). White Australia, settler nationalism and Aboriginal assimilation. *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 51(2), 168-193.
- Nadan, Y. (2017). Rethinking ‘cultural competence’ in international social work. *International Social Work*, 60(1), 74-83.

- Ranta-Tyrkkö, S. (2011). High time for postcolonial analysis in social work. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 1(1), 25-41.
- Said, E. W. (2003). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Saunders, I. (2018). Post-colonial Australia: Fact or fabrication? *NEW: Emerging scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies*, 2(1), 56-61.
- Sawrikar, P., & Katz, I. B. (2014). Recommendations for improving cultural competency when working with ethnic minority families in child protection systems in Australia. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 31(5), 393-417.
- Seth, S. (2013). *Postcolonial theory and international relations: A critical introduction*: Routledge.
- Short, D. (2010). Australia: a continuing genocide? *Journal of Genocide Research*, 12(1-2), 45-68.
- Sloane, H. M., David, K., Davies, J., Stamper, D., & Woodward, S. (2018). Cultural history analysis and professional humility: historical context and social work practice. *Social Work Education*, 37(8), 1015-1027.
- Small, E., Nikolova, S. P., & Sharma, B. B. (2016). Cultural competency in the global setting: Are social work students prepared to serve in a culturally diverse world? *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(3), 666-682.
- Smith, L. H. (2019). Epistemic decoloniality as a pedagogical movement. In Tanja, K., Ronald, L., Noyoo, N., Bunk, B., Dittman, A., & Seepamore, B. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Social Work* (pp. 113-126). Oxon: Routledge.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd ed.). London: Zed Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea*, 21-78.
- Swadener, B. B., & Mutua, K. (2007). Decolonizing research in cross-cultural contexts. *Early childhood qualitative research*. New York: Routledge.
- Tamale, S. (2011). *African sexualities: A reader*: Fahamu/Pambazuka.
- Tamburro, A. (2013). Including Decolonization in Social Work Education and Practice. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*, 2(1), 1-16.
- Van Krieken, R. (2004). Rethinking Cultural Genocide: Aboriginal Child Removal and Settler-Colonial State Formation. *Oceania*, 75(2), 125-151.
- Wahlquist, C. (2019). Indigenous children in care doubled since stolen generations apology Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jan/25/indigenous-children-in-care-doubled-since-stolen-generations-apology>

- Walker, L. A., Davis, D. K., & Lopez, M. (2018). The impacts of processing the use of derogatory language in a social work classroom. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 27(1), 41-53.
- Wallace, J., & Pease, B. (2011). Neoliberalism and Australian social work: Accommodation or resistance? *Journal of social work*, 11(2), 132-142.
- Walter, M., Taylor, S., & Habibis, D. (2011). How white is social work in Australia? *Australian Social Work*, 64(1), 6-19.
- Webb, H. (1992). Doin'the Postcolonial story. *Neidjie, Narogin and the Aboriginal Narrative Intervention... 'Span*, 32.
- Wehbi, S., Parada, H., George, P., & Lessa, I. (2016). Going home: Social work across and about borders. *International Social Work*, 59(2), 284-292.
- Zavala, M. (2013). What do we mean by decolonizing research strategies? Lessons from decolonizing, Indigenous research projects in New Zealand and Latin America. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1), 55-71.