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Towards cultural competence: Australian Indigenous content in undergraduate psychology

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development and preliminary analysis of psychology undergraduate courses on cultural competence in relation to Indigenous Australians. The paper summarises the process that led to the formation of draft curriculum guidelines for psychology academics, including the need to critically examine the assumptions and history of Western psychology in relation to Indigenous peoples, the inclusion of non-conventional teaching and learning methods, staff and institutional support, and appropriate staff development. The paper then discusses the responses of students to one of the courses developed from these guidelines. The courses were well received by students and although they do not in themselves teach professional psychological skills in working effectively with Indigenous people, they provide a solid basis for the development of such skills. Because this is a relatively new area, it is likely that there will be much refinement of these courses in coming years.

In recent years a growing awareness has developed that psychologists as professionals need to have a deeper understanding of the needs of Indigenous Australians and greater skills in working with and for Indigenous people. (In this paper the term ''Indigenous'' refers to Indigenous Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not indigenous people in other parts of the world, unless otherwise specified). The publication of a special issue of *Australian Psychologist* in 2000 entirely devoted to the relationship between psychology and Indigenous people, and the publication in the same year of *Working with Indigenous Australians: A handbook for psychologists* (Dudgeon, Garvey, & Pickett, 2000) were important steps forward. However, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Davidson, 2003; Dudgeon, 2003; Riggs, 2004; Sonn, 2004) there has been little published work in this area since then, particularly in relation to the development of curriculum for programs that are offered to students of psychology. The Australian Psychology Accreditation Committee (APAC), the body responsible for the accreditation of psychology programs, requires that all programs include some coverage of Indigenous psychology. However, what this means and what, or how much, content should be included is not specified. There is also a lack of guidance and resources in the professional literature for those seeking to develop appropriate teaching methods in this area. In the present paper we describe the outcomes of a project that aimed to identify the most important gaps in knowledge about Indigenous Australians and the best pedagogical approaches to filling those gaps.

The starting point for this work was a literature and web-based search. This showed that most Australian psychology programs did not at the time (2004) go beyond, at best, including Australian Indigenous issues as part of a cross-cultural psychology course. This situation is gradually changing, partly in response to the efforts of APAC in enforcing the requirement to include Indigenous content as psychology departments apply for re-accreditation of their programs. In the absence of documentation describing how programs might be best designed and delivered, advice was sought from psychologists and other professionals working in the field who had

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experience in working with Indigenous clients and communities. A reference group was formed, consisting of 10 people (nine women and one man), of whom three worked in the area of criminal justice (correctional services), three were in private practice, one was a forensic psychology researcher, one was employed by Centrelink, and two were clinical psychologists employed by the state government (in the departments of health and family services, respectively). Six of the members were Indigenous. There was general consensus in this group that all psychology graduates should be provided with access to Indigenous content as a required component of their undergraduate program of study. The group felt that this would be seen by the Indigenous community both as an important step forward, and as a major symbolic statement that demonstrates the commitment of the profession to addressing the needs of the Indigenous community. The following recommendations and suggestions were made concerning undergraduate psychology education.

Recommended content of psychology courses

General background in Indigenous issues

As a foundation for learning the group felt that courses (some universities label these as subjects or units) need to provide a sound understanding of the cultural, historical and contemporary frameworks that have shaped, and continue to shape, the lives of Indigenous Australians. This should include (at least): the basis of Indigenous spirituality and belief systems; the sources and contemporary characteristics of families and family structures; relationships with land; the interconnectedness of land, family and spirituality; and the diversity of concepts of identity. Group members felt strongly that it is also important for students to understand the impact of historical processes (such as colonisation, institutionalisation, assimilation, and the Stolen Generations) on identity and mental health. The relationships between broader contemporary contexts and social issues (such as housing, dependency, poverty, and unemployment) and psychological functioning also need to be examined and understood.

Critically examining the nature of the profession

Many of the difficulties in working effectively in culturally diverse contexts derive as much from the nature of the profession itself as from the lack of understanding about Indigenous cultures and people. Students need to be provided with the tools and opportunities to critically explore the major paradigms of psychology and how these paradigms influence the impact of the profession on clients from culturally diverse backgrounds. It is important to recognise that the profession of psychology is political and, as with any discipline, is based on value-laden assumptions, hence the need to explore issues such as power relations.

Professionally specific content

Specific areas that need to be understood by psychologists working in specific contexts include cultural diversity in child development and learning styles; grief, loss and trauma issues within Indigenous communities, and related counselling options; understanding and challenging the psychology of stereotyping and racism; the danger of pathologising the behaviour of people who do not fit into dominant cultural paradigms; problems with deficit models; cultural safety and cultural respect; and mandatory mental health guidelines.

Examining values and attitudes

Students need to understand and reflect on their own values about Indigenous issues and cultural difference, because many of the policies that have been implemented in the past were justified in terms of assumptions (such as that the Indigenous people were/are primitive or sub-human) that were culturally bound. The historical facts can be presented in a way that requires the students to assess their own values. Effective interaction with Indigenous people cannot occur without an examination of the values that practitioners hold in relation to their own as well as Indigenous culture.

Pedagogical issues and strategies

Stand-alone versus integrated content

There is a danger that attempts to integrate Indigenous content across mainstream undergraduate psychology courses may lead to a loss of coherence about Indigenous issues in training. A mixture of stand-alone content and integrated material was identified as the best option. However, the group noted that stand-alone courses run the risk of reinforcing a them-and-us mentality and if taught badly can worsen existing stereotypes and attitudes rather then improving them.

Well-theorised content

The content of such courses should include well-theorised content that allows the material to be integrated into the overall psychology program rather than standing alone as some kind of curiosity.

Immediate relevance

Students need to be able to recognise the immediate professional relevance of the material, otherwise they might see it as an irrelevant imposition.

Partnership teaching

Partnership or team teaching with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous lecturers is critical, both to provide a range of perspectives and to model partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous professionals.

Indigenous involvement

Courses need to give students the opportunity to interact with Indigenous people. Many students may have never spoken with an Indigenous person. Culture-immersion programs are potentially very valuable, but may be difficult to resource, especially in classes with large numbers of students. Placements in Indigenous contexts can be a useful strategy for de-mystifying organisations and situations, but this may best be built in at postgraduate level. Guest lecturers, especially Indigenous, should not be allowed to be seen as tokenistic or objects. To avoid this, they need to be well briefed about their role.

Staff professional development

Ideally, all staff, even if not directly involved in teaching Indigenous material, should undergo cultural competence training. At present there are a very few academics teaching courses relating to Indigenous Australians and psychology, indicating the need to develop professional networks in order to build a critical mass of academics who can support and learn from each other.

In response to the identified lack of professional development activities available to psychologists, the project team organised workshops on the topic ''Indigenous Australians and Psychology: Effective teaching and practice'' for academics and other interested people from around Australia in 2005 and 2006 (Ranzijn & Severino, 2006, 2007: from 2007 the workshops have been expanded into annual conferences). These workshops, attended by 80 and 100 participants, respectively, provided the project with additional advice and information on the development of content and pedagogical strategies. The proceedings of these workshops are available through a website that has been established to provide information and guidance and enable interested persons to have input into the development of pedagogy in this area. In consultation with the Australian Psychological Society (APS), a set of comprehensive curriculum guidelines designed to assist other Australian psychology departments has been developed, based primarily upon the literature in this area, the proceedings of the reference group, and feedback from participants in the workshops. The guidelines are accessible from the website, which is freely available to interested parties. Please contact the authors to obtain the link.

Incorporation of Indigenous content in psychology undergraduate programs at University of South Australia

In the remainder of this paper we describe the ongoing development of Indigenous content within the undergraduate psychology program at the University of South Australia (UniSA). A three-tiered process has been developed consisting of a compulsory first-year course (''Indigenous Australians: Culture and colonisation''), integrated Indigenous content included in other courses across the undergraduate program, and an elective third-year course (''Psychology and Indigenous Australians''). The compulsory course is run by the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research (the Indigenous Studies department of the university), but it was developed, and is taught, in collaboration with staff from the School of Psychology. While it drew on some existing material from other Indigenous Studies courses, it is important to note that this course was designed specifically for psychology students. In other words, it is not a generalist Indigenous or cross-cultural course but focuses on the learning needs of psychology students. The elective course is run by the School of Psychology, but was likewise developed, and is being taught, as a partnership. The following section describes and reports on the evaluation of the compulsory course, which was delivered for the first time in the first half of 2006.

This course was taught to 220 psychology students across 13 weeks, with one 2-hr lecture (with a break in the middle) and one 1-hr tutorial each week. The lectures were delivered by a small team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous lecturers, and a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous tutors provided tutorials. Approximately 40% of the lecture content was delivered by Indigenous lecturers. The course was supported with an extensive set of on-line resources, including required readings and advice on additional resources. The stated aim was to develop an understanding of the characteristics of classical Indigenous Australian cultures, the impact of colonisation, the characteristics of contemporary Indigenous cultures and societies, and the role of psychology past, present and future. Table 1 summarises the approximate balance of the content of the lecture component of the course.

While some aspects of professionally specific content were included in the critical examination of psychology, this was not a significant component of this first-year course.

Given that students came in with very little background in Indigenous content of any kind (see below), the student evaluation data described below indicate that students were happy with the balance of topics. Table 1 describes only the content of the lectures. The tutorials were relatively unstructured, providing students with the opportunity to discuss content and issues emerging from the lectures and associated reading material. Informal advice from tutors indicates that the students used the tutorials to explore all content areas.

Table 1. Content areas of compulsory first-year course

Content area	% lecture time
Background in Indigenous Studies	50
Classical cultures	
History of colonisation	
Contemporary Indigenous society	
Critically examining psychology	25
Cultural competence and psychology	
History of psychology and Indigenous Australians	
Role of psychology – historical and contemporary	
Transgenerational trauma	
Grief and loss models	
Attitudes	15
Race and racism	
Whiteness	
Exploring individual attitudes and stereotypes	
Working effectively in Indigenous contexts	10

The course was evaluated by an anonymous questionnaire (the standard instrument used for all courses at UniSA) and was completed by 89 students (a response rate of 40%, similar to that for other UniSA courses). Table 2 summarises responses to the questions that are most relevant to this paper.

The responses concerning content were very encouraging, particularly for a course being taught for the first time. For most of the questions relating to content there was a positive agreement rate $>80\%$, with a very low disagreement rate, which suggests that the content of the course was well received by students. The responses to the questions on teaching and pedagogy were also generally positive. However, the amount of reading required was considered too great, resulting in an overall negative evaluation for this item (in response, the amount of required reading has been reduced substantially for 2007).

Students were also asked to provide written responses to three questions. Question 1 asked: ''In a few sentences, please describe your experience of participating in this course''. The vast majority of the responses were strongly positive, reflecting the kinds of reactions we were hoping to obtain. Themes that emerged from these responses included the following.

1. Engagement: responses indicated that the students did engage with the course material, both intellectually and emotionally. Free responses included mentions of having been touched emotionally, comments such as ''my eyes have been opened'' (a common response), and being motivated to work for social justice (because the

Table 2. Student evaluations of compulsory course

Comment	Agree or strongly agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree or strongly disagree (%)
Content			
The course developed my understanding of concepts and principles	89	10	1
This course helped me to appreciate cultural diversity	96	3	1
The content of the course was relevant to my interests and concerns as a student	64	25	11
Teaching and Pedagogy			
The staff teaching in this course showed a genuine interest in their teaching	93	7	0
The ways in which I was taught provided me with opportunities to pursue my own learning	74	21	4
I felt there was a genuine interest in my learning needs and progress	75	23	2
I have a clear idea of what is expected of me in this course	82	11	7
Indigenous perspectives were included in this course	99	1	0
This course used appropriate reading material and other resources authored by Indigenous people	75	22	3
Assessment in the course focused on understanding rather than rote learning	87	10	3
I received constructive feedback on my assignments	76	18	6
The workload for this course was reasonable given my other study commitments	20	11	69
Overall evaluation			
Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this course	75	17	8

questionnaire was confidential, we are unable to provide verbatim responses).
2. Enjoyment: students indicated in their free responses that they enjoyed the presentations and material and had learnt a lot. Many found it challenging, but also stimulating and rewarding.
3. Content: almost all were happy with the kind of content covered in the course, only one student expressing resistance to having this material as a compulsory requirement.

There were also many comments that the workload was too great.

Question 2 asked: ''In what way, if any, has your understanding about Indigenous Australians changed through participating in this course?'' Again, we received very positive responses. No students identified negative changes. The closest to a negative response was from one student who said that he/she was more confused afterwards than before. There were some recurring themes, as follows.

1. Knowledge: many students commented on how little they knew about Indigenous content before taking the course (this is likely to reflect how little of this material is now being taught in schools), even those who grew up in close proximity to Indigenous people in country towns.
2. Attitudes and beliefs: most students clearly indicated that their attitudes and beliefs had changed positively as a result of the course, and that they now understood that they had a personal role in reconciliation.
3. Theoretical underpinnings: the value of the inclusion of theoretical concepts such as world views, identity, and cultural competence was reflected in the comments. It was clear that providing the theoretical framework helped them to make sense of the facts they were learning because it placed them in a convincing psychological context.

Question 3 asked: ''Which aspects of the course did you find most useful? Which aspects of the course were least useful?'' A number of themes were very clear from the student responses. Students identified the concepts of cultural competence, transgenerational trauma and psychological impacts of historical events and policies as particularly valuable. A number of students commented that they expected that the insights gained from the course would help them not only in working with Indigenous people but in all aspects of the practice of psychology. The participation of guest lecturers, particularly Indigenous lecturers, received frequent positive comments. The emotional impact of the inclusion of personal experiences as related by the guest lecturers was also commented on by a number of students, saying that they helped to put the topics into a personal context to which they could more easily relate.

Some reflections on pedagogy

After this we evaluated the student feedback against the curriculum guidelines, which were in the process of being refined. The main points emerging from this reflection are as follows.

Student resistance

Student resistance (not wanting to learn or hear about the issues) is sometimes cited as one of the difficult issues in introducing required Indigenous content. We received very little indication of any student resistance to the course. There were some comments from a few students indicating that they would not have taken the course had it been optional, but these same students also commented that, having completed the course, they were glad they had taken it. We included an extended discussion about the significance of cultural competence for psychologists during the first lecture, deliberately linking the content of the course to the development of cultural competence, which was re-emphasised regularly at various points to revisit aspects of the cultural competence model. We feel that this may have contributed to the positive acceptance.

Stand-alone versus integrated content

The stand-alone format provided the opportunity for developing extended argument and making links between the various elements of the content. This would be much more difficult if the content was fragmented and distributed across other courses. We believe that integrating content across other courses is important, but that this is most effective if it is built upon a solid foundation of an entire course (or at least a substantial section of a course) focusing on Indigenous-related cultural competence. Because we believe that all psychologists should have a good grounding in this area, the best way this can be achieved is to have a course such as this one, which is compulsory.

Confirming or worsening stereotypes

One of the dangers noted in the literature is the possibility that courses such as this one, if not taught well, could confirm or worsen stereotypes and prejudice. This has not been our experience with this course. Indeed, the response from students

suggests the opposite. The role of the Indigenous staff (both lecturing and tutoring) in challenging stereotypes and attitudes deserves comment. For many students this was the first time they had met and talked with an Indigenous person, in either personal or more formal contexts. We feel that this had a major impact on attitudes and stereotypes.

Importance of well-theorised content

The course included both a structured theoretical framework for the design and content (drawing on cultural competence theory), an internal structure developing a range of theoretical perspectives (such as cultural mapping, collectivism/individualism, decolonisation, identity, transgenerational trauma), and a series of deliberate linkages to extant psychological theory in order to reinforce the relevance of the course to the discipline and practice of psychology throughout the teaching program. We think that this was an important element in the students' satisfaction with the course.

Indigenous involvement

The significant level of involvement of Indigenous staff in presenting the course content was clearly a major factor in student satisfaction. Many commented on the importance of hearing from Indigenous lecturers about their personal experience as an important complement to the more academic or theoretical content. However, it is also important to note that Indigenous staff also presented academic content; their role was not limited to personal stories or anecdotes.

Partnership teaching

The importance of partnership or team teaching was evident in student responses. The balance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous presentation was commented on by students as appropriate and valuable.

On the whole, we concluded that the curriculum guidelines worked well in developing this new course at UniSA.

Discussion

The curriculum guidelines emphasise the breadth and depth of the issues that need to be addressed in mounting a course or program incorporating Indigenous content. Student evaluations of a compulsory first-year course presented and evaluated for the first time in 2006 indicate that the content and strategies recommended in the guidelines provide a sound basis for developing Indigenous knowledge and understanding, with high levels of acceptance by the students who provided feedback.

The guidelines are consistent with previous writing in this area, especially the need to critically examine the often unconscious assumptions of the profession of psychology (Riggs, 2004; Sonn, 2004; Sonn, Garvey, Bishop, & Smith, 2000), the need for culturally specific and appropriate assessment and intervention (APS, 2003; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003; Phillips, 2004), the negative impact of psychology on the lives of Indigenous people (Dudgeon, 2003; Garvey, Dudgeon, & Kearins, 2000; O'Shane, 1995), and the need to understand the psychological impacts of colonisation and government policies (Koolmatrie & Williams, 2000; O'Shane, 1995).

While the guidelines provide well-grounded and tested strategies for incorporating Indigenous content, we recognise that there may well be alternative effective theoretical models and strategies. For example, models and theories concerning Indigenous psychology or cross-cultural psychology may also be relevant for pedagogy. Currently the cultural competence model seems to provide the best fit for our purposes, and it will be interesting to see the theoretical development of this field in coming years.

The implementation of the model outlined above may generate challenges for some psychology departments. The recommended strategies include generating a mix of stand-alone courses and integrated content, incorporating experiential components, and enabling students to interact with Indigenous people (Sonn, 2004; Sonn et al., 2000). These approaches are likely to require more resources than conventional lecture-based courses. Because of this, we believe that institutional support from senior management level is essential (Sonn et al., 2000) if these courses are to be not only offered by universities but sustainable in the long term.

In both of the workshops we received numerous comments from academics describing institutional resistance to the inclusion of Indigenous content. The difficulties identified included a lack of support from fellow academics, a lack of support from higher levels of the university, and arguments that (a) there was not enough space in already overcrowded psychology programs, (b) there was a lack of expertise to teach this content, (c) there were no models or guidelines to work from, (d) there would be high levels of student resistance, and (e) this kind of material is peripheral to the central purposes of teaching psychology.

We believe that each of these issues can be overcome with time and patience. While the full implementation of the strategies and models summarised here may seem unachievable to some academics, we recognise that implementation will

necessarily be a gradual, staged process in many instances. The curriculum guidelines recognise this, and include advice on a range of phasing-in strategies. To start by including some Indigenous content within existing courses is better than having none at all, provided that the small amount is well taught. Regardless of the amount of material included, it is important that academics who deliver it have a genuine commitment to this area. If the academics themselves are resistant to including such material, more harm than good may result, as is said to be the case for cultural awareness training that is delivered badly (Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Massey, 1991).

It may also be timely to ask whether these various forms of resistance may be symptomatic of the new racism described by the APS position statement (1997), and discussed by, for example, Pedersen, Clarke, Dudgeon, and Griffiths (2005). This new racism is not necessarily an expression of negative attitudes towards Indigenous people on the part of individual academics, but rather a consequence of a Western paradigm or worldview that regards some aspects of the curriculum (e.g., research methods and statistics, cognition and perception, learning theory) as core and non-negotiable while other aspects, such as cultural competence or Indigenous issues, are regarded more as fringe or luxury. The American Psychological Association currently seems less concerned with core psychology content in its accreditation decisions and more concerned about whether the pedagogy is consistent with the aims of the program (Benjamin, 2006). If one of the aims of a psychology program is to produce graduates who are culturally competent, as required by the Australian Government's National Practice Standards for the Mental Health Workforce, which are in the process of being rolled out (Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, 2003), it follows that courses such as that described here should be regarded as core business, not peripheral.

There is also a great need for more Indigenous people to become psychologists. At present there are very few (our current estimate is that there are somewhere between 12 and 20 Indigenous psychologists in Australia where proportionately there should be 400). An important next step is to work on strategies to overcome this severe underrepresentation. Many Indigenous people who may wish to become psychologists are already working in the Indigenous health and wellbeing sector. Perhaps universities, psychology departments and APAC could discuss and debate the issues surrounding entry requirements for programs and the ways in which non-university training might be accommodated and assessed. We also hope that presenting courses such as that described in this paper will help to create a learning environment that is more attractive to prospective Indigenous students than that which prevails in many psychology programs at present, which may be seen as of little relevance to Indigenous lives.

As a final comment, the APAC accreditation guidelines refer to the need for psychology programs to include some coverage of Indigenous psychology. We feel that the term ''Indigenous psychology'' may be problematic for a number of reasons. The word ''psychology'' itself has negative connotations for many Indigenous people, and because psychology as most people understand it is largely a Western construct (Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, & Misra, 1996), having an ''Indigenous psychology'' may be another form of cultural colonisation. There is a substantial and developing body of literature exploring concepts of Indigenous psychologies across a wide range of international contexts (Allwood & Berry, 2006). The issues that the Indigenous psychology literature is exploring, and the models that are being developed, are significantly different to those being developed within the cultural competence model that underpins our Indigenous-related courses. Hence, we do not regard our work as part of what some may label as ''Indigenous psychology''. Using a term such as ''psychology in relation to Indigenous Australians'', although it is unwieldy, may be preferable. Also, in our opinion, including a limited amount of coverage of Indigenous psychology or cross-cultural psychology will not provide a sufficient foundation for the development of cultural competence.

In conclusion, we hope that this paper demonstrates that the task of teaching cultural competence in relation to Indigenous Australians is challenging and complex but it is achievable, and can be achieved in a way that results in enjoyment and acceptance on the part of students as well as working towards educating a generation of psychologists with a commitment to social justice. The major conclusion from the reference group and the workshops was that psychology graduates should have the knowledge and skills, motivation and confidence to be able to deal professionally with Indigenous issues and clients (and interact in a natural way on a personal level with Indigenous people). This will be a lifelong task that is not achievable within one or two courses within a psychology program. It is a developmental process (Wells, 2000), starting with sound foundations of knowledge, understanding and self-reflection in undergraduate courses that can be built upon by more skills-based teaching, including placements, at postgraduate level and refinement of those skills in practice in Indigenous contexts. We believe that the introduction of courses such as that described in this

paper is essential if psychologists are to have a useful role in addressing the major issues facing Indigenous people and working towards social justice.

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