

CULTURAL SAFETY - WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR OUR WORK PRACTICE?

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Abstract :

Culturally safe service delivery is crucial in enhancing personal empowerment; and therefore should promote more effective and meaningful pathways to self-determination for Indigenous people.

Little has been said about encouraging people from Indigenous groups into the respective professional health and education discipline(s), and how to assist in providing a safe environment, which includes *cultural safety*. This is a phrase originally coined by Maori nurses which means that there is *no assault on a person's identity*. The people most able or equipped to provide a culturally safe atmosphere are people from the same culture.

Much of the current debate is centred on the need to move on from the 'short term, cost effective, quick fix' approach to Indigenous issues, driven by economic imperatives, the clamouring of industry and conservative, hegemonic practices. In order to genuinely address the challenges of Indigenous health and education, the issue of cultural safety cannot be avoided. Critical reflection on experiential knowledge and defining or framing a debate on cultural safety is essential.

INTRODUCTION:

The issue and concept of cultural safety, has been around for some time, indeed Indigenous people have been talking about it for quite some time. So what does it mean and why do some people think that it is important and needs to be discussed? Why is there so still so much unwillingness to genuinely engage in discourse in relation to the issue?

As a term used in academic circles, cultural safety first came to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Important milestones included conference papers presented on the work spearheaded by Maori nurses like I.M. Ramsden.¹ What she wrote about cultural safety in nursing education struck a cord with this author especially in terms of issues that were impacting on her work practice as a lecturer of Indigenous students. These issues included students' ongoing experiences of ongoing institutional racism, especially in the education system and lack of appropriate tertiary education opportunities.

One definition of cultural safety that has emerged from years of reflection, argument and discussion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students, is that it means:

more or less - an environment, which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what, they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening.

Why is this challenging for so many non-Indigenous people in particular?

This paper does not claim to have the answers. There are only ideas, thoughts and questions - formed over the years through readings and discussions with students and colleagues.

¹ Ramsden, IH (1992) *Cultural safety in nursing education in Aotearoa* at the Year of Indigenous Peoples Conference, Brisbane.

During the years of working in Indigenous education; the author became increasingly frustrated with the seemingly (ever increasing) chasm/barrier between what was expected of a lecturer and what the Indigenous students wanted and needed. The work seemed to becoming harder and more complex in some ways in the urban setting than the work in remote communities.

At one particular faculty planning meeting that the author participated in, the discussion highlighted a lack of appreciation of the factors that affected Indigenous students. It became apparent to the author that one of the critical issues that still framed the debates was that of cultural safety. This was also a critical factor involved in other cross cultural curriculum development the author has been involved in, most particularly in the Indigenous health and then local government areas.

The author felt that no-one could move forward really, personally or professionally, until it had been worked out what cultural safety meant, why it was so important, and what it meant for individual and organisational work practice.

Cultural Safety:

Much has been written in recent times of the need to develop strategies within service delivery, which would provide opportunities for practitioners to enable the development and acceptance of cultural diversity. In other words, it is stated that culturally appropriate programs/approaches are crucial in enhancing personal empowerment and as a result, promote more effective service delivery (be it education, health or whatever) for Indigenous people.

However little has really been said about actually encouraging Indigenous people into the respective health and education discipline(s) for example, in order to assist providing a safe environment; a safe environment which includes cultural factors. The people most able or equipped to provide a culturally safe atmosphere are people from the same culture. This would seem to be stating the obvious, so why is there so much resistance to promoting implementation of strategies designed to achieve this?

So far, 'culturally safe' environments for Indigenous peoples are rare, in any area of service delivery. Unfortunately, it does not appear that there will be sufficient numbers² of Indigenous peoples as health care professionals (for example) to provide widespread health care and one would presume - cultural safety. Some non-Indigenous people try to ensure a culturally safe atmosphere. However, one would have to ask the obvious question as to whether members of one culture can provide a 'culturally safe' environment for another group.

Why?

In beginning to answer questions to do with cultural safety and/or evaluate approaches; a matter of priority for any organisation involved in service delivery for Indigenous clients has to be to critically evaluate their work practice. This is also a critical element in determining pathways to genuine empowerment for the aforementioned clients and all the Indigenous stakeholders. Otherwise, the rhetoric of self-determination, social justice and reconciliation will never become reality. Instead, they will be destined to be relegated to the 'dustbin' of buzzwords that have passed their 'use by date'; thus perpetuating structural violence and systemic frustration, amongst other things.

How?

For those contemplating working or already working with Indigenous peoples, it should be a compulsory (orientation?) exercise to examine preconceived ideas and stereotypes. This is especially true, if more than lip service is to be paid and for rhetoric to become action in overcoming racist attitudes and discrimination practices in service delivery and the principles of social justice become positive actions.

The intention of this paper is open the topic up for debate, to encourage people to examine their organisation, programs and their work practice and ask some hard questions as to the 'what, how, when, where and why' of cultural safety.

What Are Some Of the Questions We Need To Consider in Relation to Cultural Safety? (And Why Do We Need To Consider Them?)

² At least in the short term. Also there is the question as to whether 'black faces mean better service' in an alien system (pers comm. indigenous student at FATSIS).

- What is the reason for (each particular) service to exist? What is the purpose of the organisation? Why do individuals work there?
- What does cultural safety actually mean for the organisation?
- How can we ensure that Indigenous clients are given a ‘second chance’ (or even a first chance) at gaining an appropriate and meaningful education or health care for example?
- How can we counteract or debunk the commonly held myth that by focusing skills, knowledge and understandings on particular groups (who for various historical and political reasons have ‘special or particular needs’) that we are ‘lowering the standards’ or ‘maintaining an apartheid environment’?
- Irrespective of the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of criticisms of educational institutions and health services, how can we address these criticisms in a constructive and positive manner?
- How can we ensure that we do not continue assimilationist and destructive practices thus perpetuating structural violence and systemic frustration?

What then are some of the 'nuts and bolts' of 'cultural safety'?

What are some of the 'minimum or 'generic' requirements?

Here are some suggestions by some colleagues and students, to work towards a set of principles:

- Respect for culture, knowledge, experience, obligations;
- No assault on a person's identity;
- Clients to be treated with dignity;
- Clearly defined pathways to empowerment and self determination;
- Culturally appropriate service delivery/environment;
- Basic rights to - education, housing, medical services, employment, environmental health services and hardware etc.;
- Right to promote, develop and maintain own institutional structures, distinctive customs, traditions, procedures and practices;
- Recognition of more than one set of principles, one way of doing things;
- Access to prerequisites of effective participation in the system of the 'dominant culture'. These prerequisites can include - organisational and communication skills, financial resources, administration support, appropriately trained and resourced staff, and political resources;
- Commitment to the theory and practice of cultural safety by personnel and trained staff;
- Debunking of the myth that all Indigenous people are the same;
- Working with where people are at and not where you want them to be;
- 'Right to make own mistakes', People doing it for themselves, being active and not passive;

- In relation to service delivery and provision of a culturally safe environment, the following must be considered:
 1. intended outcomes
 2. strategies to achieve these
 3. the context which is needed to support the strategy to effectively deliver the outcomes;
- Careful negotiation of power "outside" professional skills and knowledge which maybe used to enhance community decision making;
- Make the time required for skills and context to develop a certain level of understanding, otherwise the knowledge and skills of outsiders can dominate community directions;
- Identify the factors which support joint decision making and ways of promoting them;
- Development and implementation of a broader, less fragmented health approach which moves beyond the boundaries imposed by a focus on disease;
- Recognition and acknowledgment of the strong relationship between mental and physical health, and between health and the broader social, environmental and cultural factors;
- Needs to be consistent ongoing broad approaches (not one cause, one solution);
- Communicate co-operatively;
- Ability to do long term planning;
- Clarification of the place and role of non-Indigenous staff;
- Emphasis on community control or ownership which does not abdicate professionals from the responsibilities of their job and other obligations.

Conclusion:

True Indigenous empowerment in the 'systems' then, when provided with adequate funding, support, education and training can lead to innovative program/services which address all the parameters. This goes back to the basic premise that people need to do it for themselves rather than someone doing it for them, becoming active rather than passive participants.

The questions that still remain the loudest and most pressing for the author is:

How can we ensure meaningful development and delivery of effective and appropriate services for Indigenous peoples in Australia? What are the key factors that facilitate effective access, participation and control for Indigenous peoples in the current systems of governance?

We need to move on from the ‘short term, cost effective, quick fix’ approach, driven by economic imperatives, the clamouring of industry and conservative, hegemonic practices. We need to move on in order to genuinely address the challenges of Indigenous health and education.

The issue of cultural safety cannot be avoided. Programs will continue to perpetuate assimilationist practices if this critical issue is not dealt with upfront.

Cultural safety must not be allowed to drift away because it is too hard or too confronting. There is a paucity of literature on this area, and if nothing else practitioners and clients must be urged to contribute to the debate.

The author does not have clear ideas at this stage as to where to go from here. Other than trying to 'kick start' and keep the debate alive and progressing, it is beyond the scope of this paper to give concrete pointers for action/direction. In order to move on from the ad hoc discussions occurring over the last few years, questions that still need to be addressed are:

What kind of fora can be developed in order to address the issue of cultural safety and service delivery and coordinate meaningful responses?

What are the best ways to examine our work practice and evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of health and education programs for Indigenous peoples?

The question should also be raised that if services are delivered in a culturally safe, sensitive and supportive environment, is there still a need for separate facilities like community controlled health services or indigenous education institutions? Many would say yes, but that is another story...

To finish with the following :

Nothing's Really Changed

*We watched their ships come in
as they landed on our shores
What kind of people they were
we weren't really sure.*

*At first they acted friendly
sharing what they had
like flour, tea and sugar
and tobacco that they had.
Once that we had accepted
things began to change.*

*That's when we heard the gunshots
and the rattling chains
now the rest is history
and nothing's really changed
'cos here today in the 90s
we still wear the ball and chain...*

John Morgan
from *Message Stick*
compiled by Kerry Reed-Gilbert

and

*To apply to them all the highest principles of our present highly
advanced educational system, would be ridiculous. The black
children...are not docile and loving little creatures...,Again the will
of the stronger must rule and they learn the lesson of obedience, of
diligence, of quiet behaviour under the silent protest of their wild
nature*

Rev. L Keibel in *Never Trust a Government Man* Austin, T (1997)

Robyn Williams
April 1998

Appendix 1 - Social Justice

Social Justice - When I asked a colleague of mine what she thought it might be she replied - "No such things for us blackfellas, we'll never get it, it costs too much!" Social justice³ is supposed to be about making sure that the rights that people are entitled to in a society are, in fact, enjoyed by them. Basic rights such as the right to education, the right to housing, the right to medical services and environmental health services - should be enjoyed equally by all citizens.

Social Justice must always be considered from a perspective, which is grounded in the lives of indigenous Australians. Social justice is what you face in the morning. It is awakening in a house with an adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to a school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and appreciation for their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination. (Annual Report of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1993)

In regards to social justice, cultural safety should include recognition of customary law⁴, where dispute resolution and adjudicative mechanisms have been developed over centuries.

Cultural safety should also mean that :

Indigenous peoples have the right to promote, develop and maintain their institutional structures and their distinctive judicial customs, traditions, procedures and practices in accordance with internationally recognised human rights standards. (from Draft Declaration - United Nations - Article 33)

³ ILO Convention #169 specifically establishes as a matter of priority, improvements of the qualities of life and work and levels of health and education of indigenous peoples.

⁴ Interestingly there was considerable debate over whether customary law should be recognised in the proposed constitution for NT Statehood.

Appendix 2- Structural violence

Since the invasion (and subsequent colonisation) of Australia in 1788, Australian Aboriginal people have been exposed to a barrage of socio-economic, political and cultural change. Government policies after an initial period of land alienation and conquest, aimed in successive periods at six goals:

1. extermination
2. protection and segregation
3. assimilation
4. integration
5. self determination
6. Self-management.

Australia's colonial history is similar to other colonial nations in that the indigenes were subjugated, and special legislation, directed to managing, controlling, protecting and uplifting the minority was set in place. As a result of such institutional racism, Aboriginal people have become almost totally dependent on the majority. This is often referred to as 'welfare colonialism', and some would argue is still in place!⁵

Unlike other colonial nations however, Australia never recognised Aboriginal people's prior occupation or ownership of this continent. This was the beginning of the legal fiction of being 'uninhabited'. Consequently, no treaties have been signed to regulate relations between Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal governments. Today Federal and State legislation continue to dominate Aboriginal affairs and to define the parameters of Aboriginal policy, despite the fact that most forms of institutional racism have been abolished.⁶

Current policies reinforce the state of Aboriginal dependency because they fail to enshrine cultural difference in legal pluralism (recognition of more than one ultimate set of legal principles) and thereby perpetuate structural violence.

⁵ Scott Bennett in *Aborigines and Political Power* (pp85-110:1989) and David Pollard in *Give and Take* (pp61-75:1988) both write about the issue of Aborigines and bureaucracies, and the creation and maintenance of dependence as a means of ensuring control. Tim Rowse in *Remote Possibilities* (pp18-22:1992) specifically address the issue of welfare colonialism.

⁶ As Eve Mumewa D Fesl says:

As the ceaseless ocean swirls at the feet of sandy shores
Tossing the helpless grains with uncaring will
Policies splash from the pens of the Anglo power men
Mixing the truth with glowing words of peace
Conning all who heed them to a belief that all is well -
A rose tinted history - a rose coloured justice! (p194 : *Conned*)

Structural violence is inherent in the social order. It may be expressed as *physical violence*, indicated in patterns of life expectancy across groups and time; it may underlie *psychological violence*, indicated in patterns of alienation; or it may be expressed as *systemic frustration* of aspirations.

This means that the predominant social order denies one category of people' access to the prerequisites of effective participation in a system developed and controlled by powerful interest groups. These prerequisites include organisational and communication skills, financial resources, and commitment of personnel and trained staff.

Legitimate pathways to effective participation are generally defined by controlling groups in order to maintain their own power. This is an aspect of the fact that [p]ower derives from imbalance in the social exchange...In other words, one interactant achieves power through the inability of the other to reciprocate. The latter is in a position of dependence, satisfaction of need is contingent on compliance. (Russell 1981:67)

Appendix 3 - Systemic frustration

Systemic frustration typifies more completely the position of Aboriginal people in Australia today. It forms a major obstacle to Aboriginal people's aspiration for self-management.

It can be argued (by Eckermann et al:1992) that systemic frustration can be seen in the following example:

1. where social organisation and patterns of decision making within rural/urban Aboriginal groups have been oversimplified;
2. such oversimplification has led to the development of pervasive stereotypes which have helped to shape culturally inappropriate legislation such as the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (1976) as well as the attitudes and actions of some bureaucrats who are supposed to assist Aboriginal organisations to achieve their aspirations;
3. the resultant mismatch between Aboriginal expectations and legislative provision has heightened conflict within Aboriginal groups and perpetuated 'a position of dependence' (Russell 1981:67).

No other Australian groups have been reduced to such powerlessness in terms of access to political and economics resources.

The 1970s saw yet another (albeit major) change in government policy. Having long supported legislation designed to eliminate Aboriginal people as distinct cultural entities, governments adopted a policy of 'multiculturalism'⁷ wherein society supposedly accepts the legitimacy of cultural diversity and leaves others, including racial and ethnic groups, with the right to their own cultural beliefs and practices.

The cultural traditions and practices considered 'typically' Aboriginal however were based on stereotypes of group orientation, decision making by consensus and 'community affiliation'. Not surprisingly, these stereotypes fitted well with existing non-Aboriginal systems. If Aboriginal groups operate on the basis of consensus in the 'community' then one could assume that they were able to elect a committee to represent the 'community', select an executive from this committee and in general fit into the legally established parameters of non Aboriginal decision making.

Legislation, which assumes the existence of the 'Aboriginal community', can be deemed to be culturally inappropriate. As such, it exerts enormous pressure on those Aboriginal groups, which attempt to develop political and economic influence within the policy of self-management, and so engender systemic frustration.

⁷ 'Multiculturalism' is another contentious issue. Many indigenous people object to it for example as it is claimed that the concept doesn't include Aboriginal people. Some would even argue that 'multiculturalism goes against 'cultural safety' as it is not about protecting individual/separate cultures. In fact 'multiculturalism' can be seen as a contradiction. (Station. S (1997) peers com.)

Research and cultural safety

Cultural safety means an environment which is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity and truly listening. Unsafe cultural practice is any action that diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and wellbeing of an individual or group. Past unsafe cultural practices are a major factor in Indigenous peoples' abhorrence and distrust of research.

Culturally safe research is situated within the projects and politics of decolonisation. Research that results in exploitation, misrepresentation or inadequate protection and preservation of Indigenous knowledge systems, moral systems and life systems threatens cultural safety.

Ethical guidelines constitute a model for culturally safe research, but for this to be effective there must also, clearly, be a deep commitment by researchers to cultural safety. Researchers need to recognise that research may constitute a threat to cultural safety and acknowledge their role in this process.

Researchers from the same culture are more able to provide a culturally safe environment for Indigenous research projects. The ability of researchers from a different cultural group to provide cultural safety can be compromised by racial or cultural bias' that may be subconscious and unacknowledged. Equalising power differentials is a critical factor in establishing culturally safe research.

Issues to think about for this Topic:

- Cultural Security
- Cultural maintenance
- Validation and respect
- Different frameworks of beliefs and practices

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