Title: Adopting a decolonising lens: Towards an epistemological transformation of social work knowledge
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Adopting a decolonising lens: Towards an epistemological transformation of social work knowledge

This paper presents the experiences of a white social worker conducting research into Whiteness within social work. It is argued that social work in Australia is built upon Western epistemologies, which continue to dominate contemporary Western social work. First Nations peoples, people seeking asylum and people of refugee background commonly access social work services and many also become social workers. Why then, with multiple knowledges available and ways of doing and being possible, is the Western white way predominantly and continuously privileged over others? Adopting a decolonising lens, this paper argues for an unlearning and de-privileging of what is taught within Australian social work and the position given to white people and Western knowledge as the mainstream. It is argued that Whiteness can be understood as an embodied experience, that sustains and propels the power and privilege of the West above the rest. In this paper, it is suggested that the process of critically examining the embodied experience of Whiteness (as it relates to the production of social work knowledge) calls for a valuing and privileging of unheard voices, voices from the periphery, voices often labelled “alternative voices”, voices that demand a transformational rethink of what constitutes social work knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Whiteness, social work, knowledge, decolonisation, Western epistemology.*

I would like to start by positioning myself. I believe this is important because it locates me in relation to the research and it explains my context. I am a 28-year-old female and I identify as being Euro-Australian and white. I am heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle-class. I am also a trained social worker, which means I have received a university education. I understand that the majority of my social statuses are those most valued in Western society. This paper begins with a discussion of some of the contemporary literature exploring Whiteness, and then shifts to focus on Whiteness within the social work profession. I then incorporate experiences associated with my PhD research project which I believe are a relevant contribution to the Whiteness literature and what is being called for by Critical Race and Critical Whiteness scholars as a necessary step forward. My project, which at the time of writing was beginning the data collection phase, aims to explore how Whiteness is manifested and operationalised in white social workers’ practice and how white social workers interpret Whiteness in the context of their practice, focusing specifically on social work practice with people seeking asylum and people of refugee background.

**What do I mean by Whiteness?**

Whiteness is defined by Frankenberg (1993: 1) as the shape that race takes in white people’s lives. That is, Whiteness is “the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and the law” (Moreton-Robinson 2004: vii). It is often hard for white people to see themselves as raced given their lives are seen as natural; their way of living, traditions and understandings are the invisible norm (Frankenberg 1993: 105). In Western counties such as Australia, culture or race is often something that is only attributed to those who are not white (Pease 2010: 112–114). According to Frankenberg (1993: 1), Whiteness includes three linked dimensions. Firstly, “Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege”; secondly, Whiteness is a standpoint from where white people view the world, themselves and others; and thirdly, Whiteness is a set of unmarked and unnamed cultural practices.

According to Ahmed (2007: 153), “if the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness”. Ahmed (2007: 152-155) explains that in a world where white is the norm people inhabit a white world, they become acquainted with and accustomed to implicit knowledges of what it means to be near or far this white world experience. Thus, for Ahmed, Whiteness is embodied and “holds” through the habits of this white world and she adds (by including Pierre Bourdieu’s work (1977)):

We can link habits to what is unconscious, and routine, or what becomes ‘second nature’. To describe whiteness as a habit, as second nature, is to suggest that whiteness is what bodies do, where the body takes the shape of the action. Habits are not ‘exterior’ to bodies, as things that can be ‘put on’ or ‘taken off’ (Ahmed 2007: 156).

Whiteness then, not only shapes what bodies do, but what they “can do”, how mobile they can be, how close or far they can get to the implicit knowledge of what it means to inhabit a white world and therefore what is or isn’t within their reach (Ahmed 2007: 150-152). Through discussion of the work of Frantz Fanon (1986 as cited in Ahmed 2007: 153), Ahmed explains that “bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world ‘white’, a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival”. Furthermore, white bodies, have an inherited power to shape the world through habits in a way where white bodies continue to be the best fit, the closest to, the dominant white world (Ahmed 2007: 156). To me, Ahmed (2007: 159-162) is saying that white bodies, within a white dominated society, are afforded more space, more mobility and more voice. In these spaces, white bodies become invisible as the norm, and non-white bodies stand out as “out of place” and unable to inhabit some spaces, far from the core of the white world experience and thus peripheral to it.

**Whiteness within social work**

It is argued that social work in Australia is white: moulded from American and British knowledge and understandings, which continue to dominate contemporary Western social work education and practice (Walter et al. 2013: 241). According to Young (2008: 105):

It is widely recognised that social work’s genesis can be found in the same conditions which led to the colonisation of Australia, the development of capitalism, the Industrial Revolution, and the White desire of Europe to shape the globe in its own image.

White privilege is built into the profession’s knowledge, models of practice and values (Young & Zubrzycki 2011: 161). There is a consensus of opinion amongst those who have written in this area that the social work profession is built upon Western knowledge and traditions; that for the most part this has gone unacknowledged or unquestioned; and that social workers must turn the lens in upon themselves and interrogate their own privilege moving forward (for example, see Young 2004; Young & Zubrzycki 2011; Walter et al. 2013; Baltra-Ulloa 2013).

Walter and Baltra-Ulloa (2016: 30-31) argue that while the call for change exists, there remains a reluctance in social work to actually turn the lens in on itself and name white dominance within the profession. That is, whilst ideas of inclusion and being culturally competent and sensitive have become popular within the profession for acknowledging diversity and addressing oppression, void is the acknowledgment of white people as raced and thus the dominance they exert for being closer to the unquestionable norm – the white world. Whilst Walter and Baltra-Ulloa (2016: 31-32) do not claim to offer a “how to” manual, it is argued that a decolonising approach is required, which would involve a process of unlearning and de-privileging the Western knowledge that dominates Australian social work, and would involve letting go of control and power. This echoes the voices of authors such as Smith (1999), Briskman (2008), Grey at al. (2008) and Bennett et al. (2011) who have argued for a decolonised approach to practice, where we let go of our need for power and control, the assumption that the West knows best and the idea that expert knowledge lies within us as workers and researchers. In addition, it involves acknowledging the ongoing impact of colonisation, alongside a commitment towards honest relationships, deep listening and the valuing of local and Indigenous knowledges.

**Turning the lens in: My PhD project**

So, how do you take a decolonising approach and turn the lens in on yourself, as a profession and individually as a white social worker working with people seeking asylum and people of refugee background? This was the question that started my PhD journey and consumed much of the first year of candidature, as I aimed to develop a research method that turned the lens in on white social workers, their practice and the profession more broadly. Alongside this journey, I have been navigating the experience as a white social worker with a colonised mind and as a product of Western culture, conducting a project that interrogates Whiteness, with other white social workers. An obvious question is raised about how a white person does this if Whiteness for the most part remains invisible to white people? Essential then, was an additional aspect of the journey where I began an interrogation of Whiteness within my own life, to unsettle and question fundamental aspects of how I see social work, how I see myself, both personally and professionally, how I see my friends and clients, both white and non-white and how I understand power and privilege and oppression and the link between them.

I am currently working with a small group of social workers who themselves identify as white and who work with people seeking asylum and or people from the refugee arrived community, to interrogate Whiteness within their own practice and the profession more broadly. These social workers have been invited to meet with me individually several times to critically reflect on Whiteness and their practice, and to engage with literature related to Whiteness parallel to these interviews, aimed at facilitating an increased awareness of Whiteness and of having a white identity. During their involvement, participants are also invited to participate in a focus group, which will provide them with the opportunity to make sense of what they are learning and how it relates to practice, with other white social workers who are involved in the same process. My project will be further discussed later in this paper.

**What a decolonising approach offers social work**

In Australia, First Nations peoples and communities have been both voluntary and involuntary clients of social work services for decades, and many become social workers themselves. Furthermore, when people of refugee background and people seeking asylum enter the country, they receive social work support which are usually provided by non-government organisations. Once resettled, many people from the refugee arrived community have shown an interest in helping, and pursue careers in helping professions such as social work. What this diversity offers social work, is “multiple ways of knowing, being and doing” that may differ from the mainstream Western way of doing and thinking about social work practice (Baltra-Ullloa in press: 130). However, Western epistemologies continue to dominate how social workers perceive relationships and what we bring to them, the value that is placed on professionalism and how we approach interactions with those whose cultures differ from our own (Briskman 2008: 87-88; Baltra-Ulloa 2013: 99-100). The knowledge that dictates what social work knowledge is and how social work practice develops is often unquestioned by white social workers who receive their education in the West (Briskman 2008: 88). To me this rings true as my own educational experience afforded me proximity to the norm, the white world, that as a white social work student meant I saw everything I learnt as universally true.

Baltra-Ulloa (in press: 130) also discusses how Western knowledge sits at the centre of social work as the norm. It is argued that voices from the South, those from the periphery, who offer other ways of doing and thinking about how social work can be understood and practiced, are seen as alternative voices and the knowledge that they offer are thus alternative knowledges. Whilst these knowledges may be at times included into contemporary social work, their place as alternative remains. This status reaffirms Western knowledge as the privileged dominant knowledge, at the centre, and those that differ as alternative knowledges, on the periphery. Baltra-Ulloa (in press: 136-137), is calling for an unsettling of contemporary Western social work, which would involve the process of de-privileging and unlearning what is currently known and privileged. This would involve hearing and privileging voices from the periphery and being cognisant of what they offer us moving forward differently, not as alternatives to what we currently do and know, but equally valuable knowledges. Indeed,

the ultimate aim is to have no centre or periphery, no single writer and teller of stories and no preferred practice model other than splintering and unsettling all that we know while we honour the messiness of what we learn from each other (Baltra-Ulloa in press: 136).

To relate this work to that of Ahmed (2007: 156-158) and the argument that white bodies have more mobility in a white world, thus more ability to “do” and to define the world that is the norm, I believe in this context a decolonised social work would be about white social workers unlearning their privileged mobility and influence and thus allowing for an epistemological transformation of social work in which multiple ways of knowing and doingbecome the source of how we think about and do social work. This transformation would allow for a relearning that involves being in dialogue with each other, deep listening, being vulnerable and at times uncomfortable and two-way relationships that involve care, respect, trust, and knowledge sharing from both the client and the social worker (Bennet et al. 2011: 27-32; Baltra-Ulloa in press: 135-137). Westoby and Dowling (2013: 5) explain dialogue as a “deep, challenging, responsive, enriching, disruptive encounter and conversation-in-context; and also a mutual and critical process of building shared understanding”. Dialogue also involves acknowledging power and the historical context.

What I hope that my project will offer social work is a way of turning the lens inward in order to engage with the question of what a decolonised social work would look like. The explicit aims of my project are to explore how Whiteness is manifested and operationalised in white social workers’ practice and how white social workers interpret Whiteness within their practice. However, what I also aim to facilitate is a project where white social workers develop an increased race cognisance, to make Whiteness more visible to those who participate in the project, and to create change within social work organisations and white social workers’ relationships with clients seeking asylum and/or from the refugee arrived community. It is hoped that my project takes social workers on a journey of unsettling the Western thinking that has informed their social work training and that may continue to inform their practice, to start a process of unlearning and de-privileging that knowledge. It would also require social workers to think about whose voices have been included and whose have been excluded and why this occurs. Whilst in reality, the unsettling that occurs during five months of participation might be modest, this project is my attempt to provide space for white social workers to begin a process of decolonisation of their practice and initiate a level of critical epistemological and ontological transformation of social work. This would involve unlearning the privileged mobility and influence they have closest to the centre of a white world, and would involve hearing and valuing voices previously considered alternative, to rethink and transform social work knowledge.

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