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Decolonization and trauma-informed truth-telling about Indigenous Australia in a social work diversity course: a cultural safety approach

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ABSTRACT

Actual accounts of the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since colonization remain largely misunderstood and misrepresented within Australian education systems and the broader social consciousness. Culturally sensitive practice and ethnic diversity are challenging topics to teach social work students when truth-telling is absent. Social workers need to develop an understanding of intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, critically reflect on perpetuated stereotypes, and confront internalized beliefs about peoples of diverse ethnic and cultural identities in preparation to work respectfully with Indigenous communities. A course focused on building students' knowledge and skills for culturally responsive practice is described in this paper, along with suggestions for enhancing teaching and learning. The paper argues for the importance of truth-telling about Australia's continuing racism in social work education to create cultural safety for service users.

KEYWORDS

Diversity; social work; trauma; teaching; learning; Indigenous Australians; truth-telling; decolonizing

Introduction

Social workers must recognize and support the sovereignty (Russ-Smith, 2019) of Indigenous Australians, uphold social justice, and promote human rights (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020). A critical element of these core commitments is recognition and understanding of ethnic and cultural diversity, which refers to socially constructed differences between peoples in appearance, language, and traditions (Indigenous Allied Health Association (IAHA), 2019). Social workers and Indigenous peoples have identified a need for appropriate training to promote culturally responsive practices (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020; Harms et al., 2011). Cultural responsiveness involves building more respectful and empowering relationships with ethnically diverse peoples by considering their cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives (Gay, 2002). Educators who incorporate ethnic and cultural diversity into their curriculum and teaching practice are better equipped to teach diversity to support their students to show solidarity with diverse communities.

In 2012, the Australian Association of Social Workers (2016) introduced a requirement that Australian universities must embed Indigenous knowledge as part of ethnic and cultural diversity content in their degree programs. North American programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (Council of Social Work Education, 2020) and the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (Canadian Association for Social Work Education, 2014) also include cultural diversity content, broadly defined. CASWE explicitly names Indigenous issues as an accreditation

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priority, while CSWE does not. The accreditation requirements for programs in Australia also specify that cultural diversity content should include information about working with Indigenous communities (Sivertsen et al., 2017). This requirement is a response to the ongoing impact of European colonization, for which there are no widespread reparations (Bennett et al., 2011). The AASW has instructed accredited programs to adopt these changes within existing courses or create dedicated Indigenous courses (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020).

Social work educators face numerous challenges when inserting historical content into diversity courses and building culturally responsive practices (Bennett, 2022; Bennett et al., 2011). Teaching Indigenous content requires a trauma-informed teaching-and-learning approach, which accents truth-telling (Bennett & Woodman, 2019). Educator-student relationships can benefit from this approach, as it can support cultural safety in relationships and create a reciprocal and respectful environment for Indigenous educators and students.

Background

The importance of social work education focused on the experiences of Indigenous Australians, and culturally responsive practice is now outlined. Australia became established as a white settler colonial society after the invasion by the British in the eighteenth century, which resulted in the denial of the traditional owners' rights and sovereignty (Dittfeld, 2020). In Australia, the *terra nullius* (empty land) claim has been used to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their lands, denigrate their culture and knowledge, and attempt genocide (Bennett et al., 2021). Indigenous Australians continue to be displaced by colonization as a result of numerous systems reaffirming the interests of the colonial state (Gates et al., 2022b; Russ-Smith, 2019).

The impact of colonization is complex and multifaceted resulting in collective, community, and "intergenerational" trauma – transmitted from one generation to another – among Indigenous peoples. Trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as harmful and which can be life-threatening (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Trauma can have lasting adverse effects on an individual's mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (Weinberg & Fine, 2022). Contemporary Indigenous Australian communities continue to be affected by the hidden burden of racialized intergenerational trauma and the adverse effects of disrupted cultural continuity caused by dislocation from traditional lands, languages, and cultural practices (O'Neill et al., 2018; Perez, 2022). Menzies (2019) explains intergenerational trauma as involving a social group's experience of loss and harm, which often results in a cultural bereavement based on the historical and colonial nature of trauma; trauma "effectively renders the group powerless and deprived of the communal scaffolding, structures and systems to navigate traumatic situations" (p. 1526). Indigenous Australians experience intergenerational cultural trauma as a result of colonization.

Indigenous Australian students and educators often carry and experience unresolved individual and community trauma before entering the classroom (Atkinson, 2002). Considering Indigenous historical and contemporary issues, such as Black deaths in custody (Fox et al., 2019; Klippmark & Crawley, 2018), may trigger or exacerbate intergenerational trauma. Possible reactions of resistance, denial, and resentment among non-Indigenous peoples when faced with information about Indigenous people's experiences may also lead to an adverse learning environment for both educators and students (Bennett, 2022; Bennett & Gates, 2019; Bennett & Gates, 2022).

Therefore, social work education should incorporate and implement a trauma-informed lens encompassing social workers' skills, knowledge, and practices. According to Goodwin & Tiderington, 2022), social work curricula is said to be trauma-informed when it acknowledges the pervasive effects of trauma, trauma symptoms and accounts for the impacts of trauma on individuals, families, and communities. It also provides students with evidence-based knowledge and skills to become more trauma-informed in their practice.

Colonialist, paternalistic, and assimilative legacies entrenched in educational institutions have meant that universities in Australia have often failed to provide an environment of cultural safety. Instead, universities tend to contribute to experiences of alienation and further colonization (Coopes, 2009). Therefore, the risk of re-traumatization, coupled with possible reactions of resistance, denial, and resentment by non-Indigenous peoples, could result in an adverse teaching-and-learning environment for educators and students. Being honest is particularly germane to social work education. It is essential for students to understand that social workers have been complicit in perpetuating trauma with problematic interventions (for example, playing a crucial role in removing children under "White Australia" policies that created the Stolen Generations) aimed at eradicating Indigenous Australians' languages and cultures. (Yu, 2019). In 1997, the AASW and the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) issued a joint Statement of Apology for their role in forcibly removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. AASW publicly acknowledged social workers' role in the implementation of government policies, such as assimilation policies (Bennett, 2022), that led to the Stolen Generations, and so committed themselves to reconciliation.

Truth-telling is key to trauma-informed teaching and learning where non-dominant knowledge is foregrounded in diversity courses. Telling the truth is crucial for challenging whitewashed, Anglo-centric accounts of history (Bennett & Gates, 2021). It is a transparent and deliberate dialogue that confronts past injustice and claims responsibility for redressing it (Farrell, 2021; Hafford-Letchfield, 2010; Vijeyarasa, 2007). Truth-telling is an established strategy of *Truth and Reconciliation Tribunals*, which involve "primary post-conflict response[s] to mass human rights violations" and are "growing in prevalence in conjunction with war crimes trials and tribunals" (Androff, 2010, p. 1964). There has been no systematic effort to tell the truth about the harm inflicted upon Indigenous peoples (Vijeyarasa,).

Truth-telling is required to address trauma-causing issues such as massacres, sexual, physical, and spiritual abuse, neglect, and policies of direct harm (Gray, 2020). Consequently, it is imperative that social work courses cover the various policies and laws that have traumatized Indigenous Australians. During the 1910s and the 1970s, for example, many Aboriginal Australians were taken from their families and communities. These generations of children became known as the Stolen Generations (Australian Law Reform Commission. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Gatwiri & Mapedzahama, 2022). Child removal policies left a legacy of intergenerational trauma (Menzies, 2019) that continues to affect communities, individuals, and families today (Behrendt, 2012; Bennett & Gates, 2021). Indigenous peoples continue to experience intergenerational trauma due to the historical impact of colonization, assimilation policies, the Protection Act, and the White Australia policy (Menzies, 2019).

A "culturally safe" environment affirms the experiences of peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Williams, 1999), ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other lived experiences (Gates, Ross, & Bennett., 2022a). A culturally safe space for learning and sharing is one in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feel safe and that there is no assault, challenge or denial of their experience (Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Culturally safe education is about shared governance and respect. Indigenous Allied Health Association (IAHA), 2019) created Cultural Responsiveness in Action: An IAHA Framework discusses the need for social workers to examine their cultural values, knowledge, and skills they have developed as well as their attitudes toward others, and think about how this may affect their practice. Further, IAHA recommends social workers understand and respect Indigenous peoples. However, simply knowing historical facts is not enough. Students benefit from adopting culturally responsive and safe attitudes and values that they can practice in situations where facts about communities in and of themselves will not suffice. Several researchers indicate that cultural responsiveness is an ongoing learning journey (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Curtis et al., 2019; Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2018), where non-Indigenous peoples commit to unlearning their unconscious bias, privilege, and racism. Cultural responsiveness in social work education is a framework for engaging with students, organizational structures, and ourselves in a self-reflection and self-critique cycle for improving cultural safety (Gair, 2018). This framework necessarily

needs to be trauma-informed and consists of understanding the links between colonization, intergenerational cultural trauma for Indigenous Australians, and the reluctance by non-Indigenous peoples to hear the truth of the impacts of colonization and take appropriate responsibility for the harm and loss (Bennett & Gates, 2021).

Providing culturally responsive education via Indigenization of content in social work classrooms can help redress historical trauma against Indigenous Australians. Yet research in this area in practice education is sparse. In the classroom setting, retraumatization can occur through poorly chosen readings, activities, and unsafe assignments (Carello & Butler, 2014). In addition to teaching about trauma, trauma-informed teaching is also important, where cultural safety values are modeled, and educational practices align (Carello & Butler, 2014). A trauma-informed teaching-and-learning approach involves decolonizing work by non-Indigenous educators and students. The aim is to address any vestiges of power and privilege based on personal or systemic racism. Racism is a powerful mechanism of colonialism in white settler societies, where non-Indigenous groups benefit from the exercise of power and privilege over traditional owners and caretakers of a country and other minority racial groups (Dune et al., 2022; hooks, 1995; Prehn, 20222022). Decolonization refers to the efforts of dominant groups to address racism, provide compensation for harm done, and reinstate Indigenous sovereignty (Almeida et al., 2019; Bennett, 2022). Considering the power and privilege that bind race relations begin with critical multiculturalism, which Nylund (2006) describes as an instrument for disrupting racism. It involves working toward pluralism and celebrating difference while being reflexive about our positionality and experiences of disadvantage and advantage and cognizant of a dominant social paradigm that privileges whiteness (Nylund, 2006).

Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) theorize this labor of critical reflection as "cultural humility," which seeks to position social workers as learners rather than knowers. Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) argue that instead of giving knowledge as experts, social workers might see themselves as learners of patients and their communities. Adopting an attitude of humility, therefore, involves relinquishing personal investment in the mastery and control that accompanies expert knowledge. By encouraging social workers to see themselves as lifelong learners, the practice of cultural humility allows the potential for "mutually respectful and dynamic partnerships" (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 118) between social workers, service users, and communities. Critical attributes of cultural humility are openness, self-awareness, absence of ego, and the capacity for self-reflection and critique, all of which support genuine mutual exchange (Foronda et al., 2016). Understanding student experiences of learning Indigenous Australian content provides one avenue to further social work education in this area. Knowing students' perspectives can inform social work educators on ways to present Indigenous Australian content to promote culturally safe classrooms and develop culturally responsive graduates. This paper reports on a pilot study exploring social work students' experiences learning Indigenous Australian content. We consider what social work educators can learn from their experiences to inform future teaching and the development of culturally responsive social workers. This study is based on the participant's lived experiences of one social work course and is exploratory.

Method

The objective of the study was to analyze the responses of Australian university social work students to course content about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The study aimed to understand how students experience Indigenous content taught within their degree, what impact it had on them, and whether they felt equipped to engage with culturally responsive strategies in practice with Indigenous individuals and communities. More broadly, we wanted to explore if the strategies we had proposed utilizing trauma-informed teaching and critical self-reflection could promote cultural safety in a social work course. As an exploratory study, it was important to understand the in-depth experiences of students. We also wanted to employ an Indigenous, culturally responsive research approach. As a result, we conducted qualitative in-depth and semi-structured interviews in a yarning conversation style. Yarning is an Aboriginal conversational, relaxed, open-ended style of

communication (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) describe Yarning as "a cultural form of Indigenous conversation" and discuss the research Yarn, which focuses primarily on developing a connection, trust and relationship (p. 37). Yarning in a semi-structured interview such as the one utilized in this project can be informal and relaxed whilst discussing the topic of interest. Research yarns are used to gather information from participants' stories. The yarn has a defined purpose which is to obtain information relating to the research objectives (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Yarning can build respectful relationships and model trust, cultural knowledge, and skills (Golightley & Holloway, 2020). Morseu-Diop (2010) explains that yarning can encompass a range of communication modes, including traditional language often mixed with English phrases, a strong emphasis on non-verbal communication including culturally specific expressions and mannerisms and, as well, "talking without speaking" (p. 119). Yarning encapsulates respect, sensitivity, patience, humility, and courage (Morseu-Diop, 2013), particularly on the part of a non-Indigenous person who interacts with an Indigenous person. Yarning allows communication to be more relaxed and culturally sensitive, thus enabling participation across cultures supporting discussion of issues that might be sensitive (Fredericks et al., 2011). In our research, this approach ensured congruence with an Indigenous approach to research and was culturally responsive. Further, the method allowed the researchers and participants to explore various topics and the nuances of learning Indigenous content. Common themes and individual experiences can both be considered.

Participants were recruited from one Australian University and were enrolled at one of three campuses in southeastern Australia. To provide consent to participate in the study, students needed to be at least 18 years old, be studying social work, and were currently enrolled in the standalone course on practice with Indigenous Australians. The goal of the course was to raise student awareness of colonization and white privilege and build skills for culturally responsive practice. Classroom activities and course assignments asked the students to reflect on these topics to build cultural responsiveness (Bennett & Gates, 2019). Students were exposed to diverse Indigenous perspectives by reading Indigenous authors and having Indigenous guest facilitators on campus for specific weeks requiring cultural content.

Ethical approval was obtained from the lead Australian university. Potential participants were recruited as a convenience sample by placing advertisements at the university's three campuses. An online forum was also used to inform students about the study. Students contacted the researchers by e-mail and were then interviewed either face-to-face or by telephone. Seven participants were recruited, including six females and one male. All participants were domestic students, and none identified as Indigenous Australians. They ranged in age from their early 20s to their 50s. Two cisgender women, one identifying as an Indigenous Australian from the Gamilaraay country in northern New South Wales (NSW), the other as non-Indigenous, conducted the research interviews. At the time of the interview, the Indigenous interviewer was not employed by the organization. The non-Indigenous interviewer was employed at the university but was not involved in teaching or grading the participants. A non-Indigenous interviewer was used to give the participants the choice of speaking to either an Indigenous or non-Indigenous interviewer. Interviews took one hour and focused on students' experiences of teaching and learning Indigenous content, how it affected them and any strategies that could make the learning space safe for themselves and others. A suicide prevention hotline was available for individuals who might become distressed due to the sensitivity of the issues. Participants' permission was obtained to audiotape interviews, which were then transcribed. Participants could choose to review their transcripts and make changes before analysis.

The data was thematically analyzed, reviewing individual interviews to identify key themes and then comparing common themes across interviews. Themes were developed both inductively, reflecting the words and ideas of the participants and capturing their experiences within the course more broadly, as well as deductively, with the interview questions, particularly those dealing with cultural awareness and improving the teaching and content, guiding theme development. To support credible analysis, the researchers used reflexivity to monitor the impact of their prior knowledge on analysis and discussed the coding of content.

Results

Interpretivism uses qualitative research methods that focus on individuals' beliefs to gain understanding of and make meaning of experiences (Myers, 2008). Interpretivist researchers rely on the participants' views of the situation being studied (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). Several key themes emerged from the interviews, highlighting the participants' experiences within the course, their feelings of readiness for future practice, and their suggestions for future teaching of the course. Three of the themes focused on the use of truth-telling, which led to *challenging past knowledge, gaining new knowledge*, and the importance of *hearing directly from Indigenous peoples*. The next theme, *decolonizing self*, captured the participants' growing self-awareness of culture and privilege. The final two themes focus on the participants' readiness for *culturally responsive practice* and their *suggestions for improving the course* and supporting students to process the more confronting content. Participants' stories are used to illustrate these themes.

Impact of truth-telling

The course challenged participants' conceptions about Indigenous Australian history and culture by telling the truth about their past and present lives. Participants felt their previous school education concerning Indigenous Australian history and experiences was minimal and inaccurate. Some participants felt the education system had let them down, resulting in them being ill-informed and sometimes disrespectful. One participant had spent a lot of time self-educating about Indigenous history but was still unaware and shocked about many of the atrocities that had occurred which were presented in the course. While the participants found it difficult to understand the history of Indigenous Australians before the course, they did not realize just how uninformed they were. One participant stated that much of the literature they had access to was incomplete, and the truth of the situations was either absent or distorted:

> *We go through all these you know, [information] about Aboriginal culture and history and context and I went yay no worries I know everything! [Laughing] I'm all covered here so you know let me at 'em and then all of a sudden I've kinda gone with this subject, I know nothing.* (Participant 1)

The interviews highlighted that knowledge and teaching of Indigenous histories had been poor or absent in the participants' Australian primary and secondary education, with the participants having completed school in the last few years to more than 20 years ago:

> *So, from my previous learning from primary and high school I really only had a glimpse. It wasn't really even an accurate reflection of what a diverse culture it is. It was learning about Dreamtime stories in primary school and learning how to do Aboriginal art and being taught it was important but not really being taught the significance of it or the history.* (Participant 7)

While all the participants were domestic students from Australia, they were concerned that their international student peers had even more limited knowledge of Indigenous Australians' history. They felt this lack of experience might have upset international students, making them traumatized about content and more likely to disengage from the learning. One student reported they had acquired their knowledge of Indigenous Australians over time and from the media, noting:

> *I don't know. I think it was just there. I suppose it came from my upbringing [. . .] because I suppose possibly what the media were saying about different things. I don't, I didn't recognise it as coming from anywhere it was just was always there if that makes sense?* (Participant 4)

The participant felt Indigenous peoples are often stereotyped in the media as being drunk and unemployed or as being abused by their partners or children. The participants spoke about the impact of hearing from Indigenous guest lecturers who were leaders and mentors in their communities. Consequently, some participants became angry at the misrepresentation and lack of representation of

peoples and historical events. Some had begun to question why specific topics, such as sovereignty for Indigenous peoples, did not get adequate media coverage.

For some, personal experiences either helped or hindered their ability to learn once enrolled in the course and the extent to which the content challenged them and their existing views. Some had negative experiences with Indigenous peoples, such as witnessing drinking and violence. Some peoples had already made assumptions about the way Indigenous peoples kept their houses, the cleanliness of their children, and the vehicles on their property. For others, personal relationships with friends and family who were Indigenous Australians meant they had already faced and adjusted many of their stereotypical views and biases. Unearthing prior stereotypes and challenging existing knowledge was an important area of learning for the participants and particularly prevalent at the beginning of the course. As the course progressed, the participants were able to identify new knowledge gained from the course. Participants were most affected by three historical events in the history of Indigenous peoples as a result of the course. The first was the long and painful history of massacres of Indigenous peoples across Australia (Bennett & Gates, 2021). Participants were unaware of the length and extent of these events and commented on the lasting impact learning about this would have. Most participants reported feeling angry, ashamed and sad.

Participants also gained a lot of knowledge relating to the Stolen Generation and its aftermath. Some participants had been aware of this event but did not know the extent of the impact or that it had created intergenerational trauma for Indigenous Australians. The third event occurred when the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was implemented to address mostly unfounded allegations of sexual abuse of Indigenous children (Watson, 2009). After this initial focus, the NTER has since been re-designed and re-framed as "Closing the Gap" (Green & Bennett, 2018). Participants questioned whether lessons from the NTER had been applied, highlighted the human rights violations of this government intervention, and wondered how social workers took a social justice approach in response to the NTER. One participant felt dismayed that Indigenous individuals still lack a voice and influence in the state and federal government. In addition to these critical events, participants learned how to build relationships and trust with Indigenous peoples. Some had even seen it as their responsibility to educate others about the history and critical steps to respect and relationship building (e.g., not using someone's name immediately after they had passed away and how to culturally introduce themselves). In this way, participants felt they were expressing what they had learned and addressing other people's ignorance. All seven participants also enjoyed that the course was not all about negative issues but also about Indigenous strengths and resilience.

For several students, the contributions from Indigenous guest lecturers was the first time they had heard the voices and stories of Indigenous Australians. Hearing their voices made the issues more real to participants. Two of the seven participants were paralyzed by fear from these conversations, but others were empowered to learn more as well. For example, one student organized a meeting with a local Elder in their community to learn more about the history of conflict in the local area.

The overall content of the course and hearing from peoples with lived experience was confronting for the participants. They did not know how to process the feelings that came from hearing the realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, both in the past and present.

> *That realization that, oh my goodness you know, this isn't just something that we have been taught at University it's, it's a realization that this happened, and it happened to this person and yeah, quite, ah [. . .] confronting. (Participant 1)*

> *I suddenly went. I need to know more about what they think, what do they want, and so suddenly I needed to know their experience because it impacted on what I was doing and that then was less terrifying and I guess it was real and not academic. (Participant 2)*

Some participants were fearful of asking questions of the guest speakers in case they appeared ignorant, insensitive, racist or awkward. In this way, these students were polite to guest speakers but did not understand how to develop natural and responsive conversations with them in the time available. One student wanted to have more extended social interaction, to speak and meet with the

speaker personally: "*You don't want to press questions too hard. You don't feel like it's being answered you are like doesn't matter that's fine thank you.*" (*Participant 2*). These feelings of uncertainty and of being confronted by the content also arose from the self-reflection the course demanded of students.

Addressing power and privilege

The course encouraged participants to clarify their values and worldviews concerning their own culture as well as how this impacted their knowledge about Indigenous cultures:

> *We did a case study on a teenage boy, we had to look at the boy and remark on how the social worker handled the case. That was challenging. I think I watched that clip about fifteen times before I finally got it and went oh alright ok yeah no sure there might have been something that the social worker could have certainly done differently. And I think it was the more we learnt about being culturally aware, that it suddenly sort of started cementing for me.*

> *Yeah, I was surprised, but I also think it was good for us. I mean it was good to confront our unknowing if that is a word? It was good to actually know that, hey, you actually don't know it all! (Participant 1)*

The class activities challenged stereotypes and helped students become aware of their conscious and unconscious biases. The learning experience also gave them an improved understanding of who they are, of historical events, and of how their identities are constructed by the social construction of history. Participants reported an increase in self-reflection and a changed outlook on life. Additionally, the course increased student empathy and sometimes made them feel grief, loss, and anger around issues for Indigenous peoples. Students were asked to confront and reflect upon their own prejudices and privilege. Some participants realized, perhaps for the first time, that they had a culture and that it was predetermined by being privileged and white. They then reflected on how this impacted their interactions with Indigenous peoples:

> *I think it was week three or four and I sat there going. I'm not privileged! Then all of a sudden, I went hang on, actually I am, oh wow, so what do I do with that? (Participant 1)*

One participant became aware that they did not feel that they had an identifiable Australian culture using the example of traditional dress and dance. They felt they had been robbed of being able to identify their own culture and expressed their distress at the lack of "Australian culture." In addition, all participants became aware of the diversity of cultures present in Australia and the layers of privilege. One participant was aware their learning was in the early stages and still had a lot to learn as a culturally responsive social worker.

Preparation for culturally responsive practice

Even with their increased awareness of self, privilege, culture, and the truth of the present and historical experiences of Indigenous peoples, the participants felt uncertain about applying the knowledge they gained upon graduation. Many participants reported feeling they "knew everything" going into the course, only to learn it was incredibly complex to understand how to work with Indigenous peoples. It was reassuring for students to hear early on in the course that while there is much to learn, what is important is getting to know peoples and creating respectful relationships. Despite this, all reported feeling overwhelmed and lacking in confidence about how they would start building relationships with an Indigenous person.

Participants became aware of the stigma that still exists around social workers, in terms of not necessarily being liked or trusted after their roles in the removal of children during Stolen Generation. Some students were concerned that working with Indigenous Australians might be beyond their abilities. The course made one participant feel like something terrible had happened and that it couldn't be fixed. This created feelings of guilt and some participants reported feeling like they wanted to run from the issue and even leave the course. Participants reported the pressure to "get it right" in class became overwhelming and sometimes caused anxiety during class and about future practice. The

participants found the roleplays they engaged in as part of their classroom learning confronting and sometimes hard to watch, especially if the Indigenous guest speakers became involved as service users. For full-time students the course occurred at the same time as their field placement, which helped them to apply their learning practically, but also left them emotionally drained and physically exhausted. We asked participants if they had developed any strategies to keep emotionally safe when learning about the traumatic history of Indigenous peoples. This question revealed some feelings and concerns that the students had grappled with during the course. For example, some students described a fear of working with Indigenous Australians, either because they did not want to do further harm or because they felt it was a complicated area that they lacked the skills to manage:

> *Because the lecturer said a lot of the time 'If you want to work with Aboriginal peoples you need to do x [. . .]' and I would be like I haven't really thought about it before I came to Uni. But I don't want to now because I am going to stuff it up and get it wrong. I was very terrified of interacting with [Indigenous] peoples because I thought I would just get it wrong (Participant 2*).

The participants largely felt safe to voice these concerns and questions about how to safely work with Indigenous peoples in class. The classroom was set up as a collaborative, judgment-free environment that, although challenging, gave students the opportunity to critically analyze concepts. Participants also reported that the course had inspired them to learn more. They felt they had learned a lot about the history of colonization and structural oppression and could link this to the role of social welfare programs. Several participants were buoyed for future practice and had become interested in advocacy as a result of the course. One participant felt a greater openness and willingness to work with Indigenous Australians, and others were interested in working toward constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians.

Suggestions for the future of the course

We received valuable feedback from participants that will help inform future teaching of social work with Indigenous Australians. Students were primarily supported to hear, process, and deal with the more confronting content on Indigenous Australians' trauma experiences; as well as engaging in the sometimes uncomfortable and confrontational aspects of critical reflection required by the course. The participants felt this confronting content required additional support measures compared to other courses. The debriefing sessions, conducted at the beginning of every tutorial where the students could talk about how they managed the content during the previous week, were particularly valued by participants. They felt further peer discussion and supervision would be beneficial. Additional strategies to process the course learning included personal reflection and self-care.

Some participants wanted to know how to get more support when feeling emotionally drained or stressed. They suggested being given the university counselor's name and contact information at the start of the course. Others acknowledged they may not seek support from the counselor since it was more of a content issue than a personal one, despite knowing that there was a counselor on campus. One student was worried they would appear racist if they had issues with the content and another stated they were ashamed of asking for help. One participant used their journal that was part of the course assignment instead:

> *I saw the journal as my chance to get something out on paper and no one else saw my feelings and my emotions in it all, but I had this chance to get it out of my head and just onto a piece of paper (Participant 1).*

They also recommended that the course instructors should make it clear that the course will be confronting and give case examples as to how past students managed this. Students also wanted ongoing support after completing the course if they made mistakes on field placements with Indigenous Australians or with following protocol. Participants suggested course assignments could be better linked to field placement activities or to a task that could benefit Indigenous communities; helping them transfer skills and knowledge from the classroom to practice. While participants did not feel comfortable when involved in roleplay

activities, they recommended they should be kept in the course. Roleplays were valuable learning tools, but participants wanted more time for students to prepare for and participate in them. Overall instructors needed to appreciate that learning about Indigenous Australians takes time and processing. All the participants recommended the course was important for developing future social workers and valued having this course offered in their third of four years of study. The skills they had been taught from the previous two years offered valuable preparation for this course; helping them to better answer questions about why Indigenous knowledge is critical to practice and gave them some skills to manage the confronting elements of the course.

Discussion

The results highlight the value of truth-telling, the important and challenging work of decolonization and recognizing privilege, and the need to consider additional support for students and ways to build their skills and confidence to engage in culturally responsive practice. One assumption the researchers had when conducting the research was that many Australian university students have had some Indigenous content in their primary and high school education (Newton, 2021). The research findings, however, highlight how academics cannot take any learning or knowledge about Indigenous culture and history for granted with both overseas and Australian students. Courses with Indigenous content need to present a basic and honest history of Australia and use it as a foundation for teaching.

There are important factors to consider when designing courses containing Australian Indigenous issues. Many participants noted that they felt an Indigenous person needed to be the primary teacher of the course. Participants suggested that at minimum, courses should be co-taught. In particular, this recommendation raises the question of who will play the role of an Indigenous person in roleplays, as well as whether this is the best way to learn this challenging course component. Educators need to ensure roleplays do not present Indigenous Australians negatively or portray social workers as the savior and simply present to "fix" issues. The feeling of wanting to leave the course, expressed by one participant, is a concern that must be addressed by educators across Australia to ensure that students feel supported in their learning and are prepared to engage with Indigenous Australians in culturally responsive ways upon graduation. Participants suggested having an ongoing group for students to discuss uncertainties would be useful and an important part of ensuring culturally responsive reflective practice continues beyond the course. At the time of writing this paper, our review of the literature revealed no research on peer supervision in a course with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content or on effectiveness of study groups when learning this content. Furthermore, there need to be more studies on how academics are responding to and preventing racism in the classroom as well as systematically evaluating how racism and inappropriate behavior can be dealt with by educators.

We also had further questions arise for us from this study. We wondered what educators should do with students' discomfort. There are significant ethical implications when students do not feel comfortable working with Indigenous Australian service users. Likewise, what about the discomfort and/or competence of educators in teaching this material? What is the role of universities in promoting cultural safety for Indigenous academics? Since this is an emotionally difficult area to teach, should Indigenous academics be the only ones teaching? If this was the case would this mean that Indigenous Australians have a dual burden of regular workload and also acting as aunties and uncles for Indigenous students in universities? In Indigenous Australian communities, aunties and uncles are respected Elders who form a part of the person's extended family that may or may not be from the person's birth family (Blakemore et al., 2021; Prehn et al., 2021). How can a faculty and staff workload model account for this? Are non-Indigenous academics responsible for teaching ethnic and cultural diversity content? Lastly, how do we measure and evaluate a culturally responsive and culturally safe teaching environment in Australia?

Limitations

The study was exploratory and the small sample size and homogeneous group of respondents, as well as the focus on one university course, means results cannot be generalized to other students and university courses. It is important for future research to understand the experiences and sense of safety for Indigenous students. Future studies are also necessary to investigate the responses and attitudes of international students who may have limited understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, race relations and tensions.

Conclusion

The study sought to explore undergraduate social work students' experiences of engaging in critical discussions about ethnic and cultural diversity and working toward cultural safety. When learning about the impact of colonization on Indigenous Australians, a trauma-informed approach and reflexive practice should be incorporated in order to engage students in becoming more culturally responsive social workers. The students' narratives reflected a willingness to question past assumptions about Indigenous individuals and communities, engage in decolonizing reflections and trauma-informed discussions, and provide recommendations about developing social workers in this area.

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