

# Chapter 15

## The Place of Individual Spirituality in the Pedagogy of Discomfort and Resistance



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**Abstract** The overpowering whiteness of everything is a process of erasure that has its historical genesis and contemporary perpetration in colonisation practices; white-washing history and current events in order to rub out the subtleties of oppression on so many levels. For me as Māori, reactions to this process are juxtaposed between feelings of discomfort and resistance, especially to the all-encompassing colonising term of ‘Indigenous.’ Audre Lord (1984) wrote, “I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you” (n.p.). An overwhelming sense of despair is evident in the above refrain, but there is also a pedagogy of hope that comes from a galvanizing depth of social positioning and action. Is the source a mark of individual spirituality, perhaps? Through a pedagogy of discomfort and a dichotomous Māori-Indigenous resistance lens, the presence and resilience of spirituality is found across different layers of cultural tacit and explicit behaviours. This chapter highlights a contextual space for preparing social work students with just those layers of cultural behaviours; to start developing practice awareness that incorporates inner peace and well-being. These tenets are central to the core of what the profession needs in order to survive, but this context involves both personal and political insights.

As a Māori woman, I have been comfortable for a long time, with being identified as Indigenous, but mine is an ongoing learning journey about how this term has been used as a de-identifying label, and so, where I can, I resist that terminology for myself.

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## Introduction

At Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, Australia, the learning and teaching approach is embodied in *Yindyamarra Winhanganha*. It is a Wiradyuri phrase gifted to the University by the Aboriginal Elders, and refers quite specifically to an ethos of having *the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in*. Social work students coming into this learning space have the opportunity to critique the importance of the deeper meaning behind the words. The enactment of those words actually offers a first point of ‘resistance’ because the tenets of Yindyamarra are juxtaposed precariously with other university values of being: agile; inspiring; impactful; inclusive, and insightful. These are homogeneous values that are manifested through the way that individuals strive to make something of themselves in a primarily competitive team environment. How can the people—engagement learning approach of using Yindyamarra Winhanganha be effective within such a framework?

The answer to that question lies in how students attribute their understanding to the manifestation of Yindyamarra, which is about *Respect, To Do Slowly, Be Gentle, To Be Polite, and To Honour* (Dr Stan Grant Snr. OAM; Leanna Carr-Smith, personal communication, August 2018). The discomfort for social work students comes from knowing that they have to be cognizant; to have an ‘Albatross awareness’ (Mlcek, 2018), and navigate effectively across different levels of cultural values and knowledges. The Albatross seeks far and wide; its strength is one of beauty and intrigue; it soars across vast oceans; it flies when we walk and swim; its cruising and resting is purposeful and focused, and it is a seeker of life and regeneration. The Albatross presence is entrenched in my own *Pūrākau* (storytelling; auto-ethnography); my Māori heritage, and my reference to pivotal creation stories, and on some levels they are the same, but on many, they are different.

For example, when engaging with communities, both Māori and Aboriginal Australians have a similar sentiment that is captured in the idea that, “We have a different epistemological tradition which frames the way we see the world, the way we organise ourselves in it, the questions we ask and the solutions we seek. It is larger than individuals in it and the specific ‘moment’ in which we are currently living” (Smith, 2012, p. 23). These ideas are not dissimilar to those from Nakata (2002, p. 283), who writes about the collectivity of rights and interests of Indigenous knowledges being held by Indigenous peoples, and how the dissemination of these knowledges is bound by rules of historical oral traditions, “regarding secrecy and sacredness”. There are countless stories to demonstrate the ‘largeness’, the ‘secrecy’, and the ‘sacredness’ of situations that are bound together by so many different cultural threads that relate to spirituality, knowledge, life and death, land, and water—the world in which we live—and especially for Māori, *Te Āo Māori*—‘the Māori World’. One *whakatauki* (proverb) emphasises and epitomizes the execution of goals for social work students—to set themselves forward to being in a better place, through being respectful, to go slowly, to be gentle and polite, and importantly, to honour:

*Titiro whakamuri hei arahi mā āpōpō.* We walk backwards into the future, our eyes fixed on the past. We look to the past so we can move forward understanding

where we have come from in order to understand who we are today (Gordon-Burns & Campbell, 2014, p. 4).

## Spirituality and Moral Courage

In a similar fashion to the ideas noted above, Blackstock (2007, 2011) writes about having moral courage; about ‘breathing forward’, and about the “breath of life” (Dr John Healy, personal communication, August, 2019), whereby knowledge is passed from one generation to another. Following these tenets in life, work, and study, helps us to start developing the ‘wisdom of living well, in a world worth living in’, but we do not reach that state through undertaking and completing a degree qualification; we can only begin the process.

Blackstock (2007, 2011) reminds me of the problematic state of being Māori while trying to juxtapose my worldview with that of non-Māori, whereby, like many Aboriginal people, drawing “a correlation between being elderly and wisdom, setting aside the Elderly in favour of the less wise young and middle aged would be unthinkable”.

## Pedagogy of Discomfort

A ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Boler & Zembylas, 2003) includes social workers blending emotional intelligence with mindfulness in order to try to engage meaningfully and respectfully with individuals and diverse communities. There is little escape from ‘doing nothing’, otherwise we become part of the oppression we seek to expunge through anti-oppressive practices. We utilise our discomfort in situations of difference, to reflectively re- envision our ability to construct new emotional understandings of the ways we can live with others, through *praxis* (Mlcek, 2018); through intentional practice.

However, going backwards and forwards to the advent of individual moral courage, and maximising opportunities, re-envisioning can happen in quite unexpected and meaningful ways that go to the heart of making our own spirituality visible. To preface the following case example, I highlight the thoughts from Blackstock (as cited in Angela Sterritt, February 13, 2017), who advises that the most important thing is to ‘*identify your values and develop the moral courage to defend them*’. In my experience as a social work educator, those burgeoning social workers who venture out into the profession, or who are already-there, often demonstrate an ambivalence about what their values are, and that uncertainty can have a negative impact on ways to move forward and engage respectfully with individuals and communities.

*Case study:* Each year at the Social Work Residential Schools, I am invited as a senior lecturer, and associate professor of social work and human services, to

present on one aspect of the social work curriculum, which happens to be one of my research areas—critical whiteness and privilege: the impact on social work practice. My presentation is usually delivered to approximately 120 students, from both undergraduate and post-graduate social work courses, and I try to preface something different each time I present. In 2017, I presented on developing cultural competence, and started with the question: How do we channel new understandings about the negative impact of whiteness behaviours in order to progress developing cross-cultural competencies for social workers? As an outcome of that session with students, I wanted to identify my work on an ‘adaptive social work model’, suggesting that the answer lies in new trends in adaptive social work practice that problematise the idea that cultural competence is a framework that incorporates a ‘one-size-fits-all’ set of strategies that can be used in any context with different cultures, including work with Indigenous Australians.

In 2018, I wanted to explore with the students, their understanding of the nexus between: race, culture, and ethnicity, as well as the presence of privilege. Although the challenge would seem to present some complex dynamics (for example; Is there such a thing as race? What is culture? Who has ethnicity?), I took a deliberate auto-ethnographical stance, which for Māori, the closest alignment is to the methodological enactment of *Pūrākau* (telling of: legend, myth, and story). This theory is used in *Kaupapa Māori* research because of its ability to layer stories one upon the other (Pihama, 2010), and so in a variety of ways, becomes a fundamental transformative method for distributing knowledge, values, protocols and Māori worldviews. My first task was to create a culturally-safe place for me and students to discuss a potentially ‘divisive’ topic, and the best way to do this is to tell a story. That first story was to introduce myself; who I am and where I come from; my connection to land and water, and the pictorial development of my values and sense of privilege as being part of a Māori *iwi* (tribe), *whanau* (community and family), *maunga* (mountain), *waka* (canoe), *moana* (sea-surrounding area), and *marae* (tribal meeting place, and my particular one, *Hungahungatoroa*, being the ‘resting place of the Albatross’). I showed them photos of my grand-mother with her *chin moko* (tattoo) that was bestowed on her by her Elders, the *Kaumatua* of our tribe; I showed them photos of my White Father and Māori Mother, but I did not identify any of them at first. I would like to think that my question to them—‘who do you think these people are?’—planted the seeds of critical thought around biases towards race, culture and ethnicity. I wanted the students to hear and see how my worldview can be thought of as an ‘Indigenous worldview’—though since then I have become uncomfortable with the use and privileging of the colonizing term, ‘Indigenous’, and so this will become another story.

As my stories unfolded—about race, culture, ethnicity, and privilege—as expected, several students became more and more uncomfortable, and ‘discomfortable’. Emotions appeared to become raw, with some responses reactionary, combative, and accusatory, but I held the Socratic, dialogic line from Western learning and teaching methodologies, to show empathy by facilitating students to explore their discomfort. I like to think that we all went some way to practising *Yindyamarra*, through respectful listening, and acknowledgement of different understandings and

opinions, and also by honouring the different values and worldviews that students brought to the discussion. Of course the discussion revealed complex levels of understanding and discomfort. One of the revelations for me, which has contributed to a re-envisioning of my own learning, is the way that several students objected strongly and vocally, to the potential of being identified as coming from a country on the African Continent. *We are not from Africa, we are from Nigeria, or, we are from Zimbabwe.*

## Discussion

Immediately after my talk, and even much later when students had time to reflect on their own identity and values going into field education placements, I received mostly-positive feedback from students and group facilitators. Interestingly, there seemed to be a joined-up reaction whereby they both loved and hated the session. And that is okay; it was clear to me that the discussion had taken not just them, but all of us, out of our comfort zones; its outcomes cannot be erased too easily. For me, from now on, and certainly for next time, there are two important considerations.

First, I will not forget to include the very real place of ‘nationhood’ within intersecting and conflicting discursive frames of race, culture, ethnicity, and privilege. That is, there are Indigenous philosophical traditions that are as long-standing as Western philosophical traditions, but the very clear articulation from students about their geographical origins, is actually not just about that. Rather, it is “founded within knowledge that derives from learning, experiences, understandings, worldviews, values and beliefs that are ancient. These forms have been handed down through generations, and although disrupted and disregarded through colonial impositions they have survived to continue to inform how we are in the world” (Pihama, 2010, p. 12). Cornell (2015, p. 10) problematises collective identification into being part of a nation, and especially where the language of nationhood is not used amongst groups to define themselves. But there are some common themes that arise from such discussions, and provide the precursor for resistance: “We are not only a people; we are also a political community, and we intend to organise as such and make decisions for ourselves”. Political responsibilities cannot be divorced from personal or collective realities, and vice versa.

Second, in being mindful of the above, adopting the decolonising methodology of reclaiming and sharing stories is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour. Auto-ethnography is a central part of an adaptive social work practice (Mlcek, 2018); knowing who we are, where we come from, and the values we hold. However, this form of identity development is but one aspect of *Pūrākau*—the richness of which includes Māori ways of storying through spiritual connections to myths and legends, as well as to *whakatauki* [proverbs]. This connectivity is fundamental to biography; who we are in relation to others. In other words, to explore and re-think Indigenous biography requires astute moments of sometimes- spiritual discomfort; *Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*: ‘I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past’.

Māori travel ‘backwards into the future’, because the past is central to, and shapes the present and the future. I need to be considerate of what aspects of that process make it distinct for me, what issues and concerns need to be taken into account, and how I convey the voices and perspectives of Māori and other Indigenous peoples in different ways; how might I approach biography more creatively in the future, but also how do I do that correctly and respectfully—often through my own ‘discomfort’ at doing things slowly?

*The past is central to and shapes both present and future identity. From this perspective, the individual carries their past into the future. The strength of carrying one’s past into the future is that ancestors are ever present, existing both within the spiritual realm and in the physical, alongside the living as well as within the living* (Rameka, 2016, p. 387).

A further lesson from the experience at the Residential School, is that we cannot claim the stories of others through collectivizing them; we cannot re-tell their stories, and we cannot even perceive them from a *Pūrākau* lens. Where *Pūrākau* is about layering stories one over the other, it is also a fundamental methodology for distributing knowledge, values, protocols and worldviews (Ihimaera & Hereaka, 2019, 2014, Slide 6). Claimants of their own stories are the only validators and legitimisers of that knowledge.

In social work and human services education we discuss the scholarship of understanding how ontology, epistemology, and axiology informs our own personal theoretical frameworks. But, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2000) acknowledges, Indigenous Peoples have their own epistemological traditions that help frame their worlds and ways of doing things, through transformative praxis (Smith, 2005). As an example, those frames for Māori are built around the ethics and philosophy within Tikanga Māori, which is one of the central components of Kaupapa Māori Theory. If Western terminology is used, for Indigenous Peoples, how we ‘do things’ is best-understood via an axiological interdependence (Ciofala, 2019, p. 13), that is continually transformational.

Kaupapa Māori is a combination of philosophical beliefs entwined within social practices, and this approach to life is not unique to this particular Indigenous group. As observed in the case study, what can be added to the socially positioned ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspective, is the importance of people and their spiritual connections to place as well as to every animate and inanimate object within their whole environment. To downplay this connectedness is to miss the complexities inherent in establishing and maintaining belongingness, cultural identity, and a fundamental sense of worthiness; of relevance and comfort.

## **Pedagogy of Hope**

Social work practice can be intentionally focused work that generates opportunities to find out things; to explore possibilities and to capitalise on situations that may at first appear to be limiting. Knowing from discomfort (Wong, 2018), the social

worker must overcome such 'limit-situations' (Freire, 1972). For Viero Pinto (1960, as cited in Freire, 1972), limit-situations are not 'the impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where all possibilities begin (they are not the frontier which separates being from nothingness, but the frontier which separates being from being more' (p. 71). When deep listening (*dadirri*) is called for, engaging in sitting quietly with someone is not about doing nothing, but a way of helping to live in two worlds (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002). Listening deeply to what is being said is not about mindless contemplation, but a deliberate act of respectful engagement in relationship-building in order to generate trust and pragmatic endeavours. To recognise that people have strengths which they can bring to achieving solutions in their situation is also an act of unselfish practice. Ultimately, having cultural courage (Zubrzycki and Bennett 2006), as well as moral courage (Blackstock, 2011), is part of the process whereby social workers acknowledge that their being this way with people is 'the being with, not the doing to' (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 34).

## Adaptive Social Work to Counter the Discomfort of Whiteness

In being adaptive in our social work practice, we problematise the idea that cultural competence is a framework that incorporates a 'one-size-fits-all' set of strategies that can be used in any context with different cultures, including work with Indigenous Australians. In addressing some of the ideas and questions raised by the social work students from the case study, it is helpful to revisit how both the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) have suggested adopting a new way of working that asks practitioners to be more *culturally-responsive*. Cultural responsiveness in action, is a framework developed by the IAHA (2015) to respond to a call for a capability framework that provides guidance around what we need to know, be and do, in order to be culturally responsive. The central tenets and principles of this framework can be used to inform any human services situation, for example: seeing *culture* as a primary consideration for all engagements with individuals and communities; taking *holistic* and *inclusive* views of the best outcomes for diverse peoples; adopting a *rights-based culturally responsive approach*; recognising *leadership, strength, resilience* and *self-determination*; understanding the *unique professional and cultural perspectives of Indigenous peoples*; acknowledging the *diversity of individuals, families and communities*; and undertaking rigorous *education, evidence-based practice* and *research*. Will this be enough, going forward into the future?

A critical view of the above capabilities identifies a functional aspect to being adaptable, but there is another side to consider. Mlcek (2013, p. 1) notes that, "outdated ideas that have as their source prejudice, racism, whiteness behaviours, fear and mistrust, and a lack of knowledge and understanding about the complex layers in understanding situations of access and equity, discrimination and the abrogation

of human rights for marginalised communities”, require a call to action that can be discomfoting. Dealing with oppression can be a fearful and seemingly powerless experience; recognising privilege is difficult when one is born into it, or has acquired it through normalised, hegemonic means. As social workers, we continue to scrutinise our own biases and entrenched worldviews that are often developed out of an ethnocentric monoculturalism, as well as whiteness behaviours dominated by unearned privilege and power. We have to become both personally and politically astute in how we listen to the many ‘voices’ that impact our lives on a daily basis (Langton, November 2, 2019). Being impervious to self-critique can produce willfully negligent consequences, whereas the recognition of the entrenched nature of those behaviours comes from adopting cultural tacit behaviours and actions, for example, deep spiritual engagement with Pūrākau methods—the outcomes for which require moral courage and resistance.

## Conclusion

An innovative model of social work practice that can be used to inform a culturally-responsive one is necessarily made up of critical pedagogy; a way of working that transforms social relations and raises awareness about issues in society at large. Freire (2000, 2004) likens this stance to a ‘pedagogy of indignation’, when it is not enough to “wash one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless”, because to do so “means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral”. Another stance relates to a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), whereby social workers blend emotional intelligence with mindfulness to engage meaningfully and respectfully with individuals and diverse communities. We utilise our discomfort in situations of difference, to reflectively re-envision our ability to construct new emotional understandings of the ways we can live with others, through *praxis*.

The supposed neutrality of silence is problematic, and at least the above pedagogies, as well as others, become the cornerstone of anti-oppressive practice, and are used to build an adaptive framework for social work. The element of praxis becomes critical here, because intentional knowing will inform the adaptation that needs to occur, depending on the cultural context. That is, the practical consequences of being adaptable from a place of discomfort and indignation may not be appropriate, or even ethical, for all situations because cultural contexts can be diverse, complex and layered. The idea of ‘truth-telling’, for example, has to be part of a process of agreement-making—going into a scenario like the one highlighted here in the Case Study, requires respectful attention not only to the spirit of self, but to that of others; whose story are we asking or telling, and for what, and whose purpose?

There is no doubt that an adaptive social work practice framework can be used to counter discriminatory practices; the practitioner’s involvement can be one of discomfort, but to do otherwise is to be negligent. Derailments, hesitations, naivety, even chaotic variations, all happen as part of becoming a social worker/human services worker. Resistance can come from the tiny behaviours in life. A good place to



start is through a capability engagement that includes not only constant scrutiny and awareness of self, through rigorous education, evidence-based practice and research, but also through developing a political awareness about the realities of oppression within the world.

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