

## **(De)Constructing paradigms: Creating a psychology curriculum for conscientisation education**

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*Critical psychology challenges the traditional assumptions of mainstream psychology by identifying the bases of power that maintain inequity and unjust social practices and working towards transformational change. Psychology has the capacity to be at the forefront of a social change agenda to remove the barriers that impede human functioning; the vanguard of such a social change agenda should be the educational settings in which psychology is taught and where psychologists are trained. To this end I propose a curriculum framework embedded in critical theory and critical pedagogy that allows the educational processes (pedagogy) and course content (knowledge) to be (de)constructed and the hidden unspoken discourses to emerge. In addition, in the context of Australia this includes a decolonisation agenda that analyses the ways in which power is used to maintain subordination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the ways in which education becomes a vehicle of contestation and substantive reconciliation. To this end, I articulate the philosophical and theoretical concepts that I utilised during my doctoral research and which have evolved over the past 10 years of teaching practice and which is now embedded into the Bachelor of Behavioural Science at the University of Notre Dame (Fremantle campus). Such an approach to psychology education has the capacity to increase the diversity of students attracted to the discipline, improve student satisfaction, contribute to the creation of a more inclusive society, as well as achieve the relevance and potential that has been suggested is currently lacking in psychology.*

Psychology has evolved as a discipline that focusses on the intra-psychic processes of the person with less emphasis on the context that triggers or influences that process. Yet as a profession it is conducted in a society that is shaped and directed by the values, norms and biases that characterise its culture and temporal location in history. Therefore, its practitioners and scientists are educated, and then practise, within a spatial and temporal zone not in a vacuum; furthermore these practitioners and scientists are not immune from the socialisation processes that construct the identities of the individuals that comprise those various contexts (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997). The modernist view of the individual is based on the binary notion of self/other and has resulted in individualism dominating the construction of Western society. It has been demonstrated that commitment to the values of individualism, meritocracy, and consumerism that characterise educational settings serve as a barrier to student satisfaction and completion by conceptualising personal success (or failure) as located within the individual with no

consideration of the contextual factors that promote or inhibit that success (Darlaston-Jones, 2005). In essence, the value placed on the individual is defined by the absence of an equal commitment to the collective. Society then becomes comprised of what Gergen (1999) describes as isolated souls who are doomed to enter and leave the world as self with everyone else defined as other and therefore different and separate from. It is this deification of the self that has led to what I have come to view as the theology of individualism that dominates Western culture often to the exclusion of community and which has such damaging and isolating effects on individuals, particularly Indigenous students (Kinnane, 2014). Consequently, I argue that the education of psychology students should incorporate critical theory in the analysis of the complex interactions that occur between the person, the relational interactions of family, employment, and neighbourhood as well as the broader socio-political, economic, and cultural milieu. I further argue that in a settler context such as Australia that such analysis must include an emphasis on

decolonisation both of the discipline and profession of psychology as well as the broader societal context. While similar calls for a more inclusive psychology have been made, psychology education has thus far resisted and avoided the necessary changes and has succeeded in maintaining the status quo. Consequently, articulating a curriculum framework that decolonises the discipline and offers the potential for societal change might assist and encourage other educators to consider different approaches to the training of the next generation of professionals.

Proponents of critical psychology argue that psychology can no longer sustain the misguided belief that psychology is a value neutral endeavour (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997). Critical psychology therefore challenges the traditional assumptions of mainstream psychology with a particular emphasis on identifying the bases of power that maintain inequity and unjust social practices. To achieve this goal, universities need to be transformed into pluralistic spaces that expect, and plan for, difference within the student body (Tanaka, 2003) but which also deconstruct the epistemological and ontological foundations on which they are built (Claiborne, 2014). Such an approach requires deep scrutiny of the curriculum in relation to the types of knowledge that is taught and the hidden implications of including, or excluding, other knowledge and perspectives, and it includes integration of the student's external world into the learning environment (Bartell, 2003). Therefore I suggest that as a discipline and a profession, psychology should be at the forefront of a social change agenda to remove the barriers that impede human functioning; the vanguard of such a social change agenda should be the educational settings in which psychology is taught and where psychologists are trained. To this end I propose a curriculum framework embedded in critical theory and critical pedagogy that allows the educational processes (pedagogy) and course content (knowledge) to be (de)constructed and the hidden unspoken discourses to emerge. In addition, in the context of Australia (and other colonised settler spaces), this includes a

decolonisation agenda that incorporates an analysis of the ways in which power is used to maintain subordination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the ways in which education becomes a vehicle of contestation and substantive reconciliation (Dudgeon, Darlaston-Jones & Clark, 2011 ; Darlaston-Jones, Herbert, Ryan, Darlaston-Jones, Harris & Dudgeon, 2014).

In this paper I articulate the philosophical and theoretical concepts that I utilised during my doctoral research and which have evolved over the past 10 years of teaching practice. In the early days of my involvement in the Bachelor of Behavioural Science at the Fremantle campus of the University of Notre Dame it was only in the units (courses/subjects) that I taught that this framework and approach could be applied. However, in recent years it has become possible to expand it into other units and it is now embedded across the entire degree programme. Consequently, the degree now reflects the vision conceived in my PhD and articulated in this paper. I illustrate the synergy between the disciplinary knowledge and the pedagogical practices employed in its transmission and how this can contribute to transformational social change. Such an approach to psychology education has the capacity to increase the diversity of students attracted to the discipline, improve student satisfaction (Darlaston-Jones, 2005), and contribute to the creation of a more inclusive society, as well as achieve the relevance and potential that has been suggested is currently lacking in psychology (Albee, 1986; Breen & Darlaston-Jones, 2010 ; Riggs, 2004).

As is the case with many researchers, my interest in the relationship between political process and education (and higher education in particular) is a function of my own life experience. Throughout the four years I spent as an undergraduate and Honours student I felt a strong sense of isolation. For me the theories of human behaviour to which I was exposed in psychology did little to explain human action and it seemed too simplistic to reduce that complexity and diversity of human nature to a mean score. I interpreted my experience

however, as a personal deficit and questioned my suitability as a student. Once I entered postgraduate study in Community Psychology I realised there was another way of seeing the world, one that meshed with my own need to view a holistic context rather than segments of it and it was here that I began to rethink my internalisation of the negative. I still questioned whether my experience was isolated to me or whether other students had similar responses not only to the educational environment but to the study of psychology specifically. It was this that ignited my interest in the learning process and the role of universities as a vehicle for social commentary and this interest was sustained and nurtured by the students I taught, and the stories they shared with me in an informal way as their tutor and lecturer.

In my PhD thesis (Darlaston-Jones, 2005) my story was echoed in the voices of many of the students I interviewed; it has also been prevalent in the stories of students I have taught over the years. Yet it would not be accurate to see these experiences as a negative reflection on the various educators or sites. My own experience as both a student and academic in different contexts suggests that there exists a strong commitment among university staff to assisting students and to help them to achieve their goals. This however, makes it more important to understand and identify the mechanisms involved in the student experience because if their undergraduate years are characterised as 'surviving' within an environment that explicitly promotes student support structures, it must mean that something else is occurring at an implicit, unconscious, taken-for-granted level of interaction that is problematic for students. It was this analysis that led me to the work of critical theorists such as Freire, Parker, Apple, Giroux, and hooks who argue that education needs to be about liberation and freedom; it must contribute to the creation of a society that values and respects diversity and which is inclusive of all peoples. By definition such an approach to education intrinsically incorporates psychology and in the context of

a settler nation such as Australia it must incorporate a decolonisation approach to substantive reconciliation between the settler and the First nations people who were affected by the colonisation process.

During the social reforms of the 1960s non-traditional students were able to access higher education in greater numbers than at any time in history. Not only were they entering universities but they were influencing the development and direction of their courses. There was a global increase during this time in programmes devoted to women, and Indigenous peoples, and a resurgence of interest in politics and philosophy as vehicles for the critique of a status quo that ignored the privilege of Whiteness and the structure of power in constituting society (Aronowitz, 2000; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Freire, 1998). These social changes were stimulated by the enthusiasm and euphoria that characterised the post World War II years and that provided the catalyst for the spread of democracy (Bean & Metzner, 1985). But if the 1960s and 70s were characterised by student empowerment, recent decades have been defined by disempowerment (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Giroux, 2001; Hook, 2013 ).

Recent shifts in ideology have seen a reversal of the social justice trend with universities reducing offerings to students and refocusing the role of tertiary education away from 'learning' and towards 'training' (Blackmore, 2001). In this manner, universities are conceptualised primarily as instructional sites and the fact that they are also cultural and political sites is largely ignored (Claibourne, 2014; Giroux, 1983). The marketing of higher education as a 'must have' commodity to society has resulted in the sector creating a demand and then servicing it with one eye geared to the job market and the other firmly on the stock market (Aronowitz, 2000). This is demonstrated by the increased globalisation of higher education and the associated embedding of neo-liberal ideology around market forces. With students being reframed as consumers and universities competing for

the lucrative full-fee paying international student, as well as the use of technology to provide access to on-line learning, the ubiquitous 'business model' defines what constitutes a 'student' and 'knowledge' and converts both into commodities. The net result of this ideological shift is that citizenship education, which has been a foundational tenet of a liberal democratic society, plays a subordinate role to the vocational relevance of the curriculum (Giroux, 1983; Tierney, 1999). In this new order, the morality that once informed debate within universities in regard to human existence has been replaced with technical arguments about bottom line economics and increasing positions of power over one's competition.

One of the main contentions of critical psychologists is that psychology plays an important role in supporting the Western view of a civilised society (Albee, 1986; Albee, Joffe, & Dusenbury, 1988; Allen, 2001; Baritz, 1974; Jacoby, 1975; Riggs, 2004; Sarason, 1976, 1981). Indeed, psychology is taught in the universities that are themselves a major contributor to the maintenance of the status quo. It is through the socialisation processes that occur in major social institutions (education, church, law, media, family etc.) that society is constructed, and it is from these institutions that the values and norms that become the cultural barometer for society are drawn. Mainstream psychology then by extension becomes a perpetrator of the inequities that result from these power imbalances rather than a voice of opposition and reform (Albee, 1986; Albee et al., 1988; Allen, 2001; Baritz, 1974; Jacoby, 1975; Sarason, 1976, 1981). This is particularly relevant to a multicultural nation such as Australia where it becomes imperative to create an educational system that is relevant to all citizens not just those of the dominant group. To achieve this goal, universities need to be transformed into pluralistic spaces that expect, and plan for difference within the student body (Tanaka, 2003) but which also deconstruct the epistemological and ontological foundations on which they are built (Claiborne, 2014).

This requires not only the disciplinary knowledge but also the pedagogical practices by which that knowledge is transmitted to be deconstructed and (re)analysed in order to achieve the goal of student satisfaction and social justice and transformation.

Responding to the challenge of educational change entails two different but equally important approaches: First, the development of Instrumental Structures at an institutional level which includes (but is not limited to) on-line learning environments with appropriate support services; evening and early morning class times; flexible office hours for academic staff and student services, especially in the student administration and library area; adequate and affordable on-site child care for students and staff; affordable tuition strategies; on-site employment for students; and opportunities for students and academics to meet informally to talk and engage. While at one level such strategies might be regarded as a simplistic solution to a set of complex problems, the benefit is that these adjustments to the daily operations of the university provide a visible, immediate message to students that the university understands the complexity in their lives and is making an effort to accommodate this. In this way the student experiences a culture of understanding and support rather than rigidity in its daily functioning. Many universities, are already utilising these initiatives in an effort to support students and therefore for these universities, the focus can be transferred to the deeper more complex and critical analysis of the cultural nexus between the university and society. However, the challenge exists for the more traditional universities to follow this example and adjust their ideology in line with the needs of the contemporary student.

The second component is the creation of a Decolonisation Curriculum which requires a deeper, and more fundamental philosophical and epistemological shift. This is especially relevant to education in a colonised space because the intergenerational transmission of the values, assumptions, beliefs, and practices that established the racial hierarchy of one group in relation to

another needs to be broken if substantive reconciliation is to occur (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2014; Dudgeon, et al., in press). This context requires that the dominant teaching and learning practices be called into question and (de)constructed to incorporate Indigenous voices, knowledges, ways of working, and belief systems. Indigenous psychology has to be valued alongside the Western paradigm in a way that acknowledges both but which encourages the critical reflexivity necessary for members of the dominant group to understand their own position relative to Indigenous peoples and the shared history of colonisation. In emphasising the subject position of each person in the context of colonisation, the opportunity to include conversations around class, gender, sexuality, and other intersections of identity also emerge. If the student population is multicultural and multi-class then so too the educational processes (pedagogy) and course content (knowledge) need to reflect this by deconstructing the taken-for-granted knowledge that we are privileging and disseminating. It calls for the discourses that maintain asymmetrical power relations (Prilleltensky, 2003) in the learning context and the community to be challenged by creating a teaching and learning environment, or a 'community of learning', that positions the student at the foundation (Hanno, 1999); a critical approach to education based on the liberation theories of Freire (1970, 1998, 1999); and a reassessment of how the content we teach privileges certain groups over others (Riggs, 2004). Such an approach requires deep scrutiny of the curriculum in relation to the types of knowledge that is taught and the hidden implications of including or excluding other knowledge and perspectives, and it includes integration of the student's external world into the learning environment (Bartell, 2003). This approach changes the power dynamic relative to the type of knowledge that is taught, and therefore privileged, and this could have dramatic benefits to students who feel isolated and marginalised by the dominant ideology, and this is especially true for Indigenous students.

The curriculum structure identified in Figure 1 articulates a model of teaching and learning that is embedded within a decolonisation framework. It illustrates the progression of learning from the current dominant framework (Basic) which encourages surface learning and neglects critical reflexivity, towards a Freirian liberation model of teaching and learning (Advanced). The latter approach is based on deep understanding of the nexus between the self and other and the power bases that are involved in those relationships and therefore has the capacity to change the individual and the collective. The starting point for such curriculum construction must be the outcome one seeks to achieve; a psychology education that is reflexive, inclusive, and which seeks to participate in social transformation to redress the power imbalances that lead to psychological distress; a psychology that is reflexive to ensure relevance, and a psychology that is reflective of the context in which it operates. To this end, the process of education must be one of (de)construction in order to identify the discourses and acculturative practices that frame the values assumptions and beliefs that underpin the setting and which contribute to the dominance of whiteness and neo-liberal ideology. Creating a curriculum that unpacks dominance and exclusion and creates the opportunity for the opposite to emerge has the potential to lead to transformative praxis by encouraging students (and staff) to position themselves relative to the societal issues they seek to redress.

This perspective of psychology education means that five issues (Tanaka, 2002) gain greater relevance in understanding the student experience and how this relates to not only the university experience but how this is transferred to society.

These issues are:

*Voice:* whose voice is privileged in psychology and by extension who is silenced, are student and educators able to be seen as having 'subject position' or are they objectified by the consumer focus adopted by the sector and the discipline?

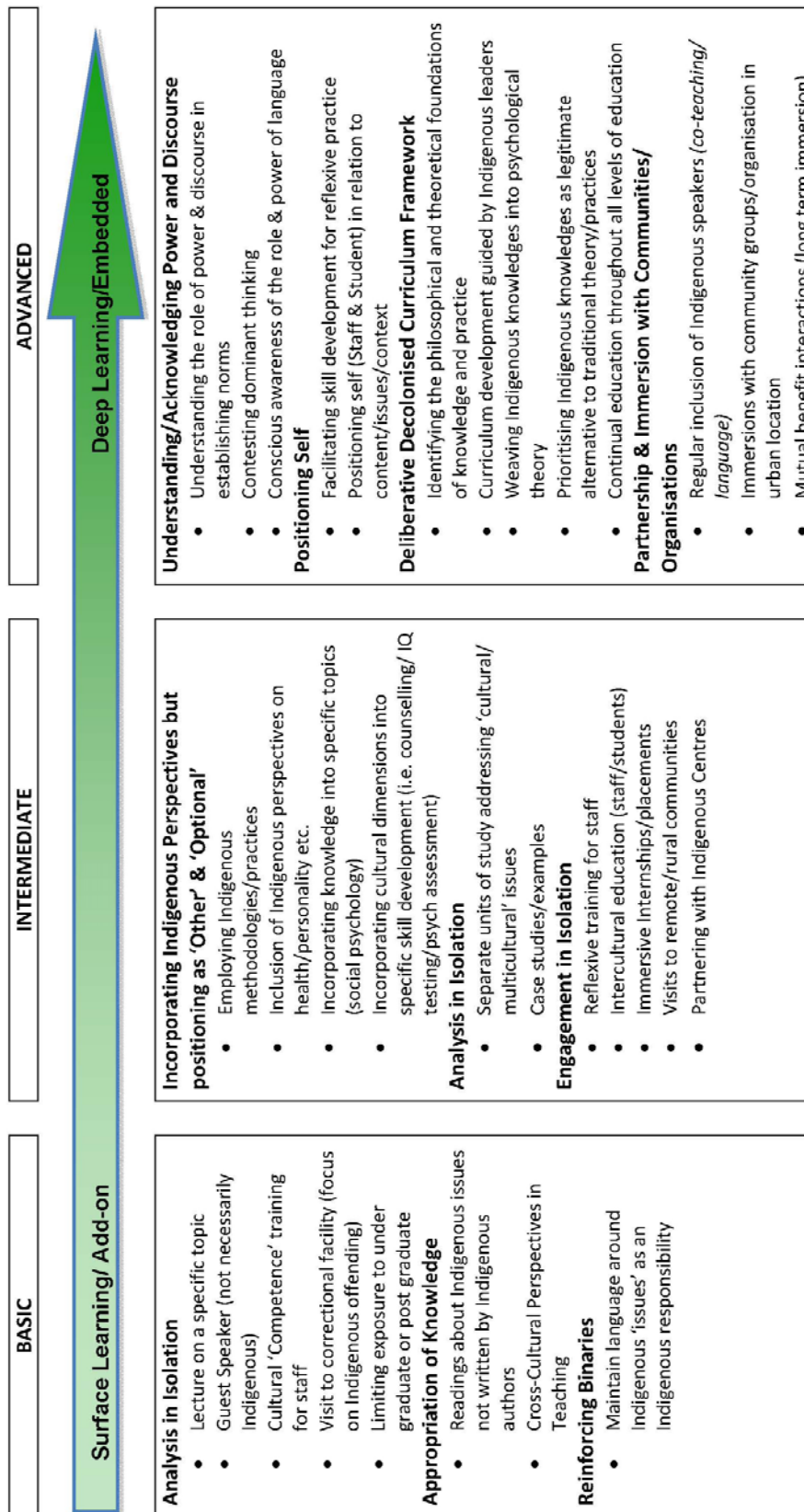


Figure 1: Decolonisation Curriculum Framework

*Power:* in seeking universal laws of behaviour do we question the Eurocentric mono-cultural nature of psychological knowledge? Do we examine the ways in which such an approach positions minority groups and particularly Indigenous peoples? Do we scrutinise the ways in which pedagogical theory and teaching practices reinforce the dominant perspective and so contribute to cultural hegemony?

*Authenticity:* do educators and students identify their own cultural space that includes issues of social, economic, and political power?

*Reflexivity:* is there an explicit examination of the subject positions that individuals occupy in society and their role in constituting the norms that contribute to the creation of the university as a cultural place?

*Reconstitution:* is psychology able to effect change and create a learning environment conducive to the development of an inclusive society?

Critical psychology has at its core a commitment to social justice and the creation of a 'good society' that promotes the wellbeing of all its citizens rather than just the interests of the privileged (Albee, 1986; Albee et al., 1988; Baritz, 1974; Brown, 1989; Deutsch & Steil, 1988; Fox, 1991, 1993; Fox & Prilleltensky, 1996; Newborough, 1992). Fundamental to this is a critique of society's major institutions and of psychology as contributing to the established norms that facilitate the marginalisation of less powerful individuals and groups. This entails an explicit analysis of power and the role it plays not only in the creation and maintenance of oppression but also in its ability to enact liberation (Foucault, 1997). As a profession, psychology uses its power to reinforce its position within society as an owner and disseminator of knowledge, but perhaps more importantly by defining what constitutes knowledge (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). This power can be used to

maintain the current systems or it can be used to transform society such that all citizens have fair and equitable access to community resources; in effect, the creation of a well-society (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) has been credited with raising the awareness of mainstream educators to the effects of marginalisation and oppression on educational performance. Freire insisted that it was not possible to understand why some children performed well at school while others did not, without a critical analysis of the cultural, social, political, and historical context the children were experiencing inside and outside of school (Freire, 1970). The view that all children enter school as a blank slate on which an educator can write was rejected by Freire as a nonsense in that poverty, marginalisation, race, and politics all contribute to how effectively a child will learn (Freire, 1970, 1998). In this respect, education can be conceptualised as a set of theoretical assumptions, processes, and practices that create and perpetuate a body of knowledge (Giroux, 1983). While Freire's work was principally conducted with primary and secondary school students his arguments apply equally to tertiary education.

Failure to examine the contributing effects of culture, history, economics, politics, and the institutions that support and contribute to the development of the person presents a limited understanding of human behaviour and its consequences (Smith, 1999). It was this that drove my initial investigations into the student experience in order to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that contribute to, and promote, success, satisfaction and retention among undergraduate psychology students and how the teaching and learning context as well as what is taught might contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction (Darlaston-Jones, 2005). This relationship and how this is interpreted by the student in relation to his or her self-concept, appears to be critical in understanding the experience of education

but it was the potentially oppressive nature of this relationship that emerged as a significant finding during my early research (Darlaston-Jones 2005). The value of any experience depends not only on the experience per se but on the struggles around the way it is interpreted and defined (Giroux, 1983). Therefore it is not just the actual interaction that occurs as a function of being a student that is crucial but how that experience is interpreted. It is also the effect of that experience in relation to the long term outcome for the student and how this is played out on the broader fabric of society that is imperative. If the structure, policies, and processes result in fewer students being retained within psychology then the cost to society is visible in the lack of graduates and the knowledge, and hence expertise, they bring to the broader community (Tierney, 1992). Perhaps even more important is the issue of the type of students that are being retained. Arguing that the value base of higher education imitates the Western ideal of individualism, consumerism, and meritocracy at the expense of social responsibility and justice then the type of student likely to flourish in that environment is one for whom that value base resonates. This then reinforces those ideals and values in society and the notion of a just and well society is lost in favour of one that emphasises individual achievement over compassion (Apple, 1982, 2000; Aronowitz, 2000; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Biesta, 2001; Claibourne, 2014; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

The reverse is also problematic in that being part of a system that promotes a set of values to which the individual cannot subscribe can result in the person internalising the difference as a deficit. This internalisation of deficit can lead to the student viewing him or herself as the cause of the problem rather than viewing the system as inappropriate or responsible. This process has been described as psychological oppression (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996) whereby the person develops a negative view of self in response to a situation or context rather than questioning the validity of the

situation or context in terms of its appropriateness. So for example, a student who fails to understand course content in spite of employing appropriate study techniques might internalise the situation in terms of lack of personal ability when in fact it might be that the lecturer is employing outdated teaching practices and arcane language in the delivery of the material or that the cultural realities of the student are not represented in the learning context. The long term effects of psychological oppression can be devastating not only to the individual but also to society (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996).

The purpose of critical psychology education therefore is not simply to identify oppressive systems, policies or practices; rather, it is to challenge the societal structures and mechanisms that permit the existence of oppression and effect change to establish a relational system based on mutual respect and responsibility (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). To achieve this outcome critical psychology focuses on establishing a different set of values and norms on which society might be established. Fundamental to this is the commitment to social justice and empowerment which endorses the underlying principles of self-determination, equal participation, compassion, and respect for diversity (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997). These values then become the lens through which society is critiqued to identify the systemic barriers that prevent individuals from achieving the goal of relational wellbeing. It also becomes the mechanism with which individuals can critique their own role and position in maintaining these barriers and provides the means for creating a new vision (Dudgeon, et al, 2011). When this critique is conceptualised through a multilevel model of interconnected relationships, the influence and impact of these power relations is afforded greater clarity.

In their model of wellbeing, Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) offer a framework for inclusion based on the balance between individual and the collective. The wellbeing of the individual is predicated on the wellbeing of the society in which he or



she operates and this includes the relational aspects of family and workplace as well as neighbourhood, city, and country. Consequently, at the individual and relational levels the focus is on intra-psychic and interpersonal dynamics while the inclusion of the collective context requires an examination of the economic, cultural, and political systems that operate there and their effect on the persons located within the society (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Critical psychology argues for balance so that the traditional focus on individualism is countered by an equal commitment to mutuality and connectedness and re-establishing the notion of social responsibility (Fox, 1985; Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997; Sarason, 1974) and this is demonstrated by this model of wellbeing. If, as has already been suggested, it is within our educational systems that the values of society are formulated then it becomes essential to ensure that the values being promoting within our schools and universities are those we wish to see endorsed at a societal level (Dudgeon, et al, 2011; Darlston-Jones, et al, 2014; Leistyna, 1999).

The model of psychology education that I have articulated resides within a theoretical framework of critical theory, critical pedagogy, decolonisation, and wellbeing. Combining these elements within which the five probes offered by Tanaka (2003; *Voice, Power, Authenticity, Reflexivity, & Reconstitution*) can be employed to assess each element and each decision. This means that the knowledge that is transmitted and the manner in which this transmission occurs has greater potential to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. This in turn is more conducive to student success which in turn has the capacity to transfer into society through the professional and personal relationships graduates engage in. As a consequence of the critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) that these students now possess they are not only able to respond to their own experiences in a more complete manner but they are able to identify oppressive practices when they occur in various settings and act accordingly.

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