

Engendering civic responsibility in Australia through education and shifting discourse(s)

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In this paper I explain my journey toward understanding the concept of whiteness and its role in perpetuating racism. This learning journey was facilitated through the unit Culture and Society in the Bachelor of Behavioural Science, which focuses on what Freire called conscientisation; a heightened socio political awareness. I strive to give an insight from a position of a white Non-Australian person and how this informs my personal epistemological perspective and experience of racism and oppression in Australia. Hence, I provide an 'in-but-not-of-a-culture' perspective of a white person operating in a colonised space. In line with this I expand on moral exclusion and critical whiteness theory to highlight Australia's journey towards social justice where civic responsibility is practised and genuine reconciliation is realised.

My motivation to write this paper was to offer an insight into my individual educational progress from understanding racism and oppression toward a commitment to social change and how this emerged within and from my German background. To enhance the reader's understanding of my perspective, I position myself within the context of this issue throughout the discussion. I am a sojourner from Germany, a country with a history of racism and genocide, living in Australia, a country dealing with its colonial history that resulted in racism toward and oppression of Indigenous people. Additionally, I am a foreigner in a country where language and culture are different from the one in which I grew up. Consequently, I am out of my comfort zone within the majority of my social interactions. This position gives me the advantage of being partly a 'bystander' as I live within Australian culture but I am not of its culture (Breen, 2007; Heyer, 2012). Technically, I am an outsider due to visa status, country of origin and mother tongue. However, after four years of residence in Fremantle I feel part of this community and Australian society. It is the combination of these factors that have enabled me to be less resistant to questioning myself and my beliefs and made me more attentive to not reinforce racism within society and myself.

As both a learning device and an assessment I was required to write a series of Critical Reflexive Analyses (CRA) throughout the unit *Culture & Society* in the

Bachelor of Behavioural Science that encouraged me to link the theoretical content of the unit to my own beliefs and worldview. Such a process made me realise that to strive for changing negative social behavioural patterns on a collective level, prior critical analyses on an individual level is essential. This requires the examination of a person's prejudice, stereotyping and beliefs and the reasons she or he holds them. Deutsch (2006) argues that a precondition to overcome social injustice is to be aware of it. Therefore, it is essential to know your position within the context of an issue you are analysing in order to be aware of your own bias; and in line with this, to examine your individual limitations in working within the issue you are promoting. Awareness gained through education and experience can then be followed by mindfulness, which may then ultimately lead to "conscientisation" (Freire, 1974, pp. 24-25).

In order to position myself within the context of discrimination I begin with reflecting on my national and social identity. Having been raised in Germany several generations after the Second World War, I view civic responsibility as my duty. I remember watching documentaries about Nazi-Germany with my parents from an early age, which was followed by social-political and historical education in high school. Jewish survivors of the *Holocaust* visited our high school to inform about their lived experiences and memories of that time. Additionally, we visited the concentration

camp *Buchenwald*, which enhanced our knowledge and notion of past events. *Buchenwald* is now a museum and understood as a place of learning through sympathetic imagination (Rodden, 2005). The *Buchenwald* visit had a major impact upon me; I will never forget the horror and profound sadness I felt when we stood on the ground which used to be a concentration camp, knowing what happened there. Neither I nor my parents committed any of these crimes, however, I still felt a sense of guilt. Naturally, not all students responded to the *Buchenwald* visit in the same way, in that reactions varied from feelings of shame and guilt to withdrawal from this confrontational situation. I remember the majority of conversations after the visit being highly emotional and there seemed to be a collective consent to never let something like this ever happen again in our country. What was demonstrated through my education at school and at home is “Germany’s commitment to remember its history and to understand the events of World War Two” (Opotow, 2011, p. 209). We have been raised with a “forbiddance to forget” (Proske, 2012, p. 43), which I have internalised from a young age and this to me is part of my civic responsibility.

However, as an adolescent, I found myself incapable of comprehending how a horrific event such as genocide could have taken place in my own country, performed by my own people. I always thought “This is not me. This is not how my parents are. This is not German”. Such thoughts demonstrate that it is one thing to be informed about historical events and their aftermath, but it is another thing to comprehend its social and psychological complexity and how it affects one’s identity formation (Kaiser, 2010; Opotow, 2011). The unit *Social Psychology*, which is a prerequisite to *Culture & Society* in which I studied Opotow’s (1990a, 1990b) concept of the scope of justice helped me to engage in such a process. Opotow (1995) describes the scope of justice as a ‘boundary of fairness’ in which rules and morals apply, but only to people within that scope. This was one of the learning devices which

enabled me to understand the mechanisms that took place in Nazi–Germany, and to finally begin making some kind of sense of my country’s history. I learned that every human being has their own scope of justice in which they morally include or exclude people who appear to be similar or different to themselves. Opotow (1990a) asserts that moral exclusion comprises the following five elements: conflict of interest, group categorisation, moral justification, unjust procedures, and harmful outcomes. After having read some of Opotow’s work, I was able to link these elements to the treatment of Jewish people and other minority groups within Nazi–Germany. People who are morally excluded are outside the scope of justice and therefore increasingly endangered (Opotow, 1990b). Moral exclusion is arguably the most dangerous form of oppression, as it starts with seemingly minor changes, for instance in political and social discourse, but can end in genocide (Deutsch, 2006). A catastrophe that took place in my own country and influenced my national identity starkly in terms of feeling guilty and ashamed of being German. It was a challenging process to overcome these feelings and shift them into a mentality of civic responsibility. Therefore, the material offered in *Social Psychology* and *Culture & Society* provided additional knowledge to comprehend my country’s history in regards to its national identity from past to present times.

Levi (2007) argues that the memory of Nazi-Germany holds the potential to enable other nations to find a “self-critical approach” (p. 127) to analyse and learn from their own history of crimes against humanity. This will therefore, raise questions of responsibility for current generations in terms of current moral exclusion and enhance learning from past events in order to prevent a repetition of history (Proske, 2012). However, simply recollecting facts and imagery of historical violence is not enough to address an individual and collective conscientisation; instead, conscientisation essentially involves empathetic learning and the provision of

alternative histories to achieve genuine reconciliation (Rodden, 2005). This is not to compare the genocide of Jewish people to crimes committed to Indigenous Australians and I am certainly not comparing Germany's history with Australian history as they differ starkly on many levels. Furthermore, I am aware that simply discrediting the actions of others maintains the status quo as it is likely to result in defensive responses (Schick, 2000). What I am arguing is that sympathetic imagination teaching styles as previously described, make history more accessible for young adults as it involves a spatial connection to past events and empathy for its victims (Rodden, 2005). Although each country's history and national identity is different, it can be argued that human beings from different cultures and nations are connected through a "shared humanity" (Dudgeon, 2008, p. 23) and within this a "togetherness in difference" can be realised (Salter, 2013, p. 151).

One of the most important aspects of my learning journey, that I identified and connected to my German and Australian experience was the notion of contemporary responsibility, which establishes that past injustice is intergenerational and therefore so too are their associated apologies (Murphy, 2011). Present generations in Australia inherited benefits from white settlement and it can be argued that benefitting from the riches of the past brings about inheriting the debts, too (Tatz, 2001). Germany embarked on a mission to address these debts and to conscientise her people so that such a crime as the Jewish genocide could never happen again. This objective was demonstrated in the Nuremberg processes, through financial compensation to survivors and acknowledgement of crimes committed against humanity (Levi, 2007). Furthermore, the critical study of the Holocaust and National Socialism became embedded in the German school curricula through textbooks, concept papers and visits to memory sites (Proske, 2012). Historical knowledge about past injustices instead of historical ignorance is ensured through engaging with history in this manner (Medina, 2011).

Additionally, sharing lived experiences with following generations contributes to this process. A personal example is a conversation I had with an elderly member of my family where she shared her experience within the *League of German Girls* and explained how it gave her a feeling of community in the uncertain times of war. The *League of German Girls* was part of the *Hitler Youth*. It was the only permitted girls organisation in Nazi-Germany and membership was compulsory. It sought to prepare the children for their duties in war times (Pentlin, 2007). Furthermore, basic needs such as food could on many occasions not be provided by parents, but could be obtained from the *Hitler Youth*. Although I cannot identify myself with my family member's experience, the conversation enabled me to theoretically understand the person's involvement within the social and economic context of this time. This example demonstrates that personal shared experiences combined with historical education fosters open dialogues and maintains reflexivity about the past through ongoing conversations. Furthermore, the material provided in *Social Psychology and Culture & Society* allowed me to engage with the theoretical frameworks and enhanced my ability to link theories to real events.

The *Culture & Society* unit was not only 'eye-opening' when examining past and present, but also inspiring and motivating when thinking of the future. To demonstrate the steps of my learning journey further, I mention the following articles, which were assigned readings in the unit, and what I learned from them. I felt connected to Radermacher's (2006) reflection on whiteness and reinforcing racism as I am a white, international student like her. Whiteness theory is the study of white superiority ideology and its unearned privileges through institutionalised racism (Endres & Gould, 2009; Suchet, 2007). The Radermacher article encouraged me to reflect on my whiteness and where I may unintentionally reinforce racism. Radermacher (2006) stressed that silence about oppression is damaging and will never

bring about social change. Consequently, I seek dialogue about prejudice and racism within my social environment to find out why people hold certain beliefs.

Furthermore, Desmond and Emirbayer's (2012) analysis of social responsibility made a major impression upon me and contributed starkly to my learning progress. The authors stress that we are not born racist; rather, we are raised to be racist. This notion and the complementary advice to scrutinise ourselves and our inner circle, initiated the examination of my own discriminative thoughts and statements. Through a conversation with my mother I was able to identify one of the sources of such thinking; one of my close family members taught me that all people are the same and that we should treat others as we ourselves expect to be treated. In a white Western society, this seems to be a great thing to say and ideal to live by. However, after a critical reflection of its implication in terms of whiteness, this ideal quickly lost its innocence and positivity. The statement that all people are the same fundamentally disrespects the diversity of all human beings. Furthermore, it implies that there is no such thing as 'whiteness', which is the denunciation of the issue itself. Consequently, the statement supports the denial of racism which is a popular mechanism of modern racism (Nelson, 2013). Hence, I understand now what is meant by a "discourse of colour-blindness" (Endres & Gould, 2009; Radermacher, 2006, p. 4) that reinforces racist attitudes and behaviour.

Endres and Gould (2009) enhanced my understanding of my position within the issue as they stress that recognising covert benefits from whiteness is an important step toward understanding its concept and white privilege. I learned that race is a social construct, a definition of status, not genetics (Endres & Gould, 2009). Consequently, I critically evaluated the ways in which I am advantaged by my 'white' status in everyday life and how it might have influenced my development. Darlaston-Jones (2013) improved my comprehension of the fundamental difference between equality and

equity and how much the latter is needed in context of contemporary Indigenous Australian issues. It helped me to dismantle discourses of equality and disadvantage in regards to Indigenous issues highlighted in Darlaston-Jones et al. (in press). Therefore, I now understand that within this context equity is needed instead of equality, because of the disadvantage Indigenous peoples experience within the colonised space of contemporary Australia (Gilbert & Hoepper, 2014).

It is not enough to promote equality when there is an imbalance in the distribution of resources and access to them. In this context people have to be provided with an access to resources according to their needs, which can mean that Indigenous persons might have access to different, yet equitable, opportunities to Non-Indigenous persons. Highlighting the difference between equality and equity needs to be stressed when responding to equality discourses such as that Indigenous people are given privileges over Non-Indigenous Australians when some housing, jobs and scholarships are specifically allocated to them (Darlaston-Jones, 2013). Such practices demonstrate equitable access to resources and needs to be understood within its context and aftermath of colonisation.

Furthermore, I learned that personal change is often linked to feelings of discomfort (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2012). Critical reflexivity and the knowledge gained through *Social Psychology* and *Culture & Society* often dissociates me from my social environment. Critical self-evaluation may lead to individual sacrifice, which can be demonstrated in stepping away from a position of power and privilege in order to make a political statement. For instance, I find myself confronted by racist 'jokes' and when people realise that I do not laugh, I get comments such as, "you do not have a sense of humour, because you are German". Although these discriminating statements offend and hurt me, I do not passively accept them, which is sometimes challenging as it excludes me from the dominant group in these situations. I know that my behaviour

makes people feel uncomfortable, which influences their response to me. In turn, that makes me feel uncomfortable, too, but I understand that it is an inevitable part of the process. When others make racist ‘jokes’, on the surface it appears to take away their responsibility for the harm they just inflicted, because it is ‘only’ a joke. This diffusion of responsibility and mitigation of racist discourse is one of the ways in which people are morally excluded and I view it as part of my civic responsibility to not ignore this harm (Opatow, 1990b; Van Dijk, 1992). Furthermore, Desmond and Emirbayer (2012) argue that ignorance may lead to indifference, which can be viewed as “loyalty to the status-quo” (p. 261). Therefore, I will continue to not participate in the mitigation of discrimination when it comes to ‘jokes’ on the expense of oppressed and marginalised groups in order to decrease denial and the reproduction of racism (Nelson, 2013). As a consequence, my membership to the dominant group will be weakened at these times (Van Dijk, 1992). Thus, I am using my privileged position as a member of the dominant group to purposely decrease my power by stepping away from their attitude.

After a critical reflection upon oppression on a collective level in regards to white Australia’s treatment of the First People of this country, I was encouraged to examine situations where I potentially discriminate the ‘Other’. Desmond and Emirbayer (2012) state that “honest reflexivity confronts the self in its full complexity, and it does not shy away from the nasty bits but seeks them out in order to set them straight” (p. 274). Writing the CRA on oppression and prejudice made me aware of involuntary discriminative thinking in particular situations and therefore enabled me to change in attitude and behaviour. Desmond and Emirbayer (2012) describe the process of ‘critical self-engagement’ as a commitment to reflexivity rather than the likely impossible task of removing all thoughts of discriminative content.

Personal reflexive processes require that I consciously stop the mechanisms of maintaining a positive self-image when I

realise I am creating a negative presentation of the ‘Other’ in my thoughts (Deutsch, 2006; O’Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007; Van Dijk, 1992). The realisation of discriminative thoughts within oneself is a negative feeling and so I understand if people dislike to expose themselves to such emotions. However, leaving the personal comfort zone is essential if education within these issues is to have a positive effect (Radermacher, 2006). Therefore, critical reflexivity needs to be promoted in education, so that civic responsibility can be practised in order to achieve genuine reconciliation. Although apologies on a collective level have been expressed, it can be argued that white Australia has yet not taken responsibility on an individual level for the consequences of oppression and past violence (Levi, 2007).

Whilst writing a CRA about whiteness, I came to understand that to know where and when I am part of the problem will help me to be part of the solution. Although, people are not free from racist and oppressive thinking in general, they have a choice in the way in which they deal with it; accepting the challenges of change is the foundation to the solution (Sims, 2014). Social change can be achieved, but it requires commitment, time and effort (Freire, 1974). To initiate these factors, people need to realise that they are not only changing in favour of ‘Others’, they are also changing for themselves and future generations (Deutsch, 2006). This is due to the aspect that disallowing ‘Otherness’ limits tolerating and accepting one’s own Otherness (Schick, 2000). Consequently, this it is not only damaging to the identity formation of the oppressed, but also to the oppressor (Freire, 1974; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996).

A “shared humanity” (Dudgeon, 2008, p. 23) enables people to understand people who are different to them and within this shared humanity, cultural diversity is to be understood and respected and will be reflected in being “together in difference” (Salter, 2013, p. 151). This respect needs to be performed in people’s rhetoric and everyday social interactions. Therefore, to achieve social change we need to be more critical when considering the

words we chose to shape our reality (Hall, 2001). Furthermore, tolerance toward diversity and human rights need to be taught to our children in order to engender civic responsibility (Gilbert & Hoeppe, 2014; Opatow, Gerson & Woodside, 2005). Providing information and education influences the discursive recipients' knowledge and belief systems and therefore eventually their actions (Van Dijk, 2006). Thus, discourse(s) need to shift if social change regarding racism and oppression is to be achieved in Australia (Collins, 2013).

Destabilising the discourse of being guilty of crimes committed in the past and calling civic responsibility into question for current and future generations may hold the potential to change attitudes and behaviours. The feeling of guilt which is also expressed when unpacking whiteness can cause people to avoid situations of confrontation and inner conflict (Schick, 2000). Thus, guilt can deter from critical reflection which is so very essential in the process of change of discriminative thoughts and behavioural patterns. Furthermore, responsibility brings about acknowledgment, which encourages moral inclusion and shows epistemic respect to experiences and memories of the 'Other' (Dudgeon, 2008; Medina, 2011; Proske 2012). Therefore, shifting the prevailing discourse of guilt versus innocence to a discourse of responsibility is a positive approach to achieve societal change (Proske, 2012; Schick, 2000).

This article is not suggesting how prevailing issues need to be solved as this would reinforce the production of whiteness as I am a non-Indigenous person. The intention is to rather offer an additional epistemic perspective and to emphasise the shift of focus to bring awareness to alternative discourse(s). Therefore, the construction of society through the language which is used to create meaning demands consistent re-evaluation (Medina, 2011). The examination of discourse(s) within a historical and social context, demonstrates that historical events hold distinct meanings to different generations (Dudgeon, 2008; Hall, 2001). In context within Australian

colonial history this may mean that a question of guilt for past generations transforms into a question of civic responsibility for current generations. To conclude, through the reflection and critical analysis upon my personal and social identity, I came to understand that being white and German contributes to these identities in more ways than I was previously aware. During *Culture & Society* I came to position myself in terms of these identities in my Australian social context, described as being in, but not of a culture. The CRAs on prejudice, oppression, racism and whiteness theory enabled me to detect attitudes of 'white superiority' and partiality within myself and Australian society. The knowledge I gained through *Behavioural Science*, and *Culture & Society* in particular, enabled me to shift my language and behaviour and promoted dialogues about the issue within my social environment. Through unpacking my private learning journey, I demonstrated that personal and social change is to be achieved through education, understanding history in a contextual fashion and open conversation about serious issues such as racism towards and oppression of minority groups. Sympathetic education and shifting discourse(s) will increase moral inclusion and engender civic responsibility; as a result it will decrease racism and harm committed to minority groups.

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Biography

Sarah Koelsch was born in 1981 in Germany. She studied Law in Bonn and Cologne and as part of her studies she specified in Criminology. In 2012 Sarah moved to Australia and started a Bachelor of Behavioural Science at The University of Notre Dame Australia, in Fremantle in 2013.