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Why cultural competence is the wrong approach for white Australians

Julaine Allan and Katarzyna Olcoń write:

Widespread participation in Australian Black Lives Matter protests has demonstrated community concern about racism and its impacts. Many people want to know how they can help change both the current consequences of racism and be less racist in the future. The 1991 [Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody](#) made 339 recommendations about ways to improve the experiences Australia's First Nations peoples had with government systems, primarily legal, but also health and education. Yet, these systems continue to be the key contributors to racial discrimination in Australia.

There have been no strategies for systemic change to prevent racial discrimination. Instead, the main way of addressing racism and its consequences has been cultural competence training. Cultural competence training aims to change our interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ways that can be assessed by others, such as in accreditation procedures. Cultural competence training focuses on ways staff communicate with people from cultures different to their own based on awareness that values, beliefs and experiences vary according to cultural background.

Outcomes of cultural competence training research

Three systematic reviews of cultural competence research conducted between 2005 and 2013 in the [USA](#), [UK](#) and [Australia](#) found no evidence that cultural competence training had a positive impact on patient health outcomes or service delivery.

Underlying the lack of evidence is that cultural competence is a philosophy that divides people into groups via describing beliefs and behaviours associated with belonging to a defined culture rather than concepts that can be enacted. The result is that in Australia, cultural competence training provide information about the cultures of First Nations Peoples, yet they usually omit the systemic issues shaping their lives, with racism at the forefront. To effectively provide services to First Nations Australians requires not trying to “learn” about Aboriginal culture as a priority but learning about ourselves first. The critical approach to cross-cultural service provision needs to specifically incorporate an analysis of race, racism, and whiteness.

Concepts of colonialism and whiteness are

[Race was made](#) to justify the European colonialism and the systems of racism and whiteness followed. Most people have a minimal understanding of colonialism and the history of racial oppression broadly. White students, in particular, have an understanding of Australian history that is “[usually about the triumph of the coloniser](#)” and the pioneer stories of settling the land . The history of white invasion, colonisation and genocide of Australia's First Nations People is frequently perceived as something to “just get over”. Yet, [truth-telling](#) has been described as central to structural reform and building a new relationship between First Nations and the Australian nation. A new relationship free of racism.

The two most important terms to understand when confronting whiteness (our own and those of others) are white privilege and white fragility. White privilege is an “unearned advantage and conferred dominance” due to white skin color. Although white people like to deny it, it is there. When a topic of race and white privilege is brought up, white people often respond with “white fragility” that is “a range of defensive moves,” including “outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation”.

Other ways to understand racial inequalities

For Australians to understand and challenge the mechanisms of racism, it is necessary to look at how it is sustained through systems such as health care and education. The first element to confronting racism lies in directly reflecting on how white privilege and dominance work to maintain it. Racism needs to be directly addressed in classrooms and work settings by challenging whiteness and white privilege, not trying to learn how to be “culturally competent”.

Although formal anti-racism training and programs are still limited, there are many ways white Australians can start learning about the topics that have been silenced for way too long. The [Anti-racism resources from Australia and beyond](#) are a way to start. If we stop focussing solely on cultural competence and face racism and whiteness, we will stop perpetuating our current oppressive social structures.

And here's more reading:

- DiAngelo R (2018). [*White fragility: Why it's so hard for White people to talk about racism*](#)
- Farrugia JP, Dzidic PL & Roberts LD (2018). ["It is usually about the triumph of the coloniser": Exploring young people's conceptualisations of Australian history and the implications for Australian identity](#)
- Gair S (2016). [Critical reflections on teaching challenging content: Do some students shoot the \(white\) messenger?](#)
- Goddu AP, O'Connor KJ, Lanzkron S et al (2018). [Do words matter? Stigmatizing language and the transmission of bias in the medical record](#)
- McIntosh P (1995). [White privilege: Unpacking the invisible backpack](#)
- Nelson A (2007). [Seeing white: a critical exploration of occupational therapy with Indigenous Australian people](#)
- O'Dowd M (2011). [Australian identity, history and belonging: The influence of White Australian identity on racism and the non-acceptance of the history of colonisation of Indigenous Australians](#)
- O'Dowd M (2012). [Engaging non-Indigenous students in Indigenous history and “un-history”](#)
- Pearson L & Sophie V (2019). [10 things you should know about white privilege](#)
- Picower B (2009). [The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: how White teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies](#)
- Rix L & Rotumah D (2020). [Healing mainstream health: Building understanding and respect for Indigenous knowledges](#)
- Seeing White Podcast. S2 E2: [How Race Was Made](#)
- Uluru Statement (2017). [The Uluru Statement from the Heart](#)
- Young S & Zubrzycki J (2011). [Educating Australian social workers in the post-Apology era: The potential offered by a ‘Whiteness’ lens](#)

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