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Research and Practice in the Contact Zone: Crafting Resources for Challenging Racialised Exclusion

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the challenges, tensions and possibilities for pedagogy and community research in contexts where race relations have been, and continue to be, characterised by dynamics of dominance and subjugation. I draw on three areas of research and practice (i.e., developing pedagogy for anti-racism, partnering a community-based agency working to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and researching immigrant settlements) where I have been involved in examining responses to intergroup relations with a focus on identity construction. Based on this work, I have found myself venturing far beyond the borders of community psychology to identify multiple ways in which people negotiate racialised oppression. This writing has also helped in identifying the intricate ways in which research and practice can inadvertently contribute to oppression. As an example, I discuss whiteness studies and Indigenous studies as part of this venturing. This scholarship has opened up valuable opportunities for me to enhance critical pedagogy and research, and examine the diverse responses to this area of research and pedagogy. I discuss some of the conceptual and methodological resources that have been helpful in making visible symbolic ways in which race related privilege and power continue to shape intergroup relations. I also discuss the importance of investing in different ways of knowing and doing as an essential political imperative for a progressive community psychology.

Introduction

It goes without saying that the story I share here is not mine alone, but the product of ongoing collaboration. Some of the ideas will appear in a collaborative with Mariolga Reyes Cruz in which we articulate a decolonising standpoint in relation to studying culture in community psychology.

Over the last few years colleagues and I have been interested in explicating the tensions, challenges and possibilities for engaging in empowerment research and practices alongside different communities where the relationships between those communities are characterised by dominance and subjugation. Some of this work has focussed on understanding the immigration and settlement experiences of different immigrant communities, including our own communities of origin, in Australia (e.g., Sonn & Lewis, 2009). While in other projects we have concentrated on examining the ways in which Aboriginal people negotiate the discourses of the dominant group (Sonn, Bishop & Humphries, 2000) the dynamics of identity negotiation for white Australians engaged in reconciliation (Green & Sonn, 2005): and, more recently, we have begun to explore the identity making processes for second generation members of ethnic minoritized communities in Australia (Ali & Sonn, in press). At the heart of the different studies is a focus on understanding the

complex dynamics of social identity construction within contexts that are characterised by social relations of domination and subjugation, especially where there is racialised oppression.

While we recognise the complex and multiple ways in which oppression takes place, much of our focus has been on explicating the nature and functioning of racialised oppression. Following Fanon (1967, see Bulhan, 1985) and Hall (2000) we view social identity, based on race and ethnicity, as constructed within social/cultural/historical contexts via social and symbolic means. Because of histories of oppression and colonisation these social and symbolic resources for social identity construction are unevenly distributed. Social identity construction is an important site through which we can examine symbolic power and privilege afforded because of group members and how these are negotiated in everyday relations. In our understanding engaging with symbolic power is vital to disrupting the dynamics of oppression in intergroup encounters and contributing to transformative research and practice.

An aim of this work is to develop praxis and to contribute to the construction of community psychological approaches that can help expose and transform racialised oppression that continue to shape

the lives of different groups in Australia and elsewhere, and that can contribute to the capacity for self determination and voice. In pursuing this agenda we have found useful the critical and ongoing contributions of different authors in community psychology aimed at developing the transformative capacity of community research and action (e.g., Montero, 1990; Prilleltensky, 1994; Rappaport, 2000; Watts & Serrano-García, 2003). However, like others (e.g., Watts, 2009), I have found some of the taken for granted processes and assumptions of knowledge construction in community research and action limited. In this presentation, I overview some of our work including the challenges and tensions that have lead us to critical social science literature, in particular the writing on critical race theory, whiteness studies and indigenous studies that are helping us to articulate a decolonizing standpoint from where to engage with issues of identity within an awareness of a broader set of social, political, historical, economic arrangements. I start with some of the experiences and literature that have been helpful in theorising some of the challenges in negotiating dynamics of race in different contexts and settings. I then discuss some current work in partnership with a community development agency and use some of the issues that we have been exploring in efforts to engage in empowerment oriented work alongside Aboriginal Australians. I conclude the presentation by making connections with community psychology research and action.

Broader context: History of race relations.

The history of relations between Aboriginal and settlers has been marked by colonialism and the ongoing effects of oppressive race relations (Glover, Dudgeon & Huygens, 2005). Since settler arrival in 1788 different practices and policies had been in place that oppressed the Aboriginal people. In the different States and Territories these were nuanced. But, key policies and discourses ranges from protectionism to assimilation and later self determination. It was not until the late 1960's and early 1970s that Aboriginal people were recognised as citizens, and prior to this time they were counted along with the Flora and Fauna of the country. Since that time there had been several significant Inquiries and Royal Commissions that have highlighted the devastating impacts of colonisation and the ongoing oppression of Aboriginal people. These included an inquiry into the disproportionate number of Aboriginal people who were dying in police custody, the practice of removing Aboriginal children from families to be raised on missions and children's

homes and the successful challenge to the myth of *Terra Nullius*, the claim that Australia was vacant when settlers arrived. Out of these developments came several initiatives aimed to heal relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people including the process of formal reconciliation. In more recent times we saw further oppressive responses reflected in governmental interventions, known as the Northern Territory Intervention, into issues of community dysfunction that arise out of colonialisation. Suffice it to say that extreme disadvantage continues and racism still characterise the lives of Aboriginal people in Australia.

The significance of race in Australian relations is also evident in the histories of immigration. In the late 1800's, Australia, along with other British colonies, like South Africa and New Zealand initiated legislation to protect the interests of the white people in those countries. In Australia, this was reflected in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which came to be known as the White Australia policy (for an overview of race and racism in Australia see Hollinsworth, 2006). This policy favoured immigration from English speaking (that is white) countries. There were other means of control and exclusion in the different States. This policy was removed and replaced by multiculturalism in the 1970s. In more recent history we have also seen successive governments respond in extreme ways to refugees and asylum seekers as well as the construction and circulation of representations about Muslim's as barbaric, uncivilised and terrorists. These discourses are anchored in colonial histories (Said, 1979).

This is an abbreviated history of significant discourses and policy initiatives in Australia that should suffice to show that race had always been foundational in the formation of Australia as a nation state (see Tascón, 2004). The meanings of race has shifted over time, but as Quijano (2000: 95) has noted "the meanings have historical continuity that can only be understood in relation to colonial histories of empires". Even though race has been debunked as a social construction, it continues to be significant in structuring people's lives and undermining belonging (Noble, 2005). Cowlshaw (2000), for example, wrote that "race is more than a process of categorization". In her view "It is also a way of life, a major element of a cultural domain in which relative status suffuses subjectivities and colors all social interaction". While Fine and Weis (2002: 274) wrote that "Race is a place in which post-structuralism and lived realities need to talk. Race is a social construction indeed. But race in

a racist society bears a profound consequence for daily life, identity, social movements, and the ways in which most groups are seen as 'other'. Thus, in our work we have in part focussed on identifying and deconstructing racisms and colonialisms within research and practice and everyday lives. This continuity of racialised power relations in post colonial times, Quijano refers to as the coloniality of power (see also Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000).

In the next section, I want to offer some reflections based on my personal and professional journey, by inserting myself into the story. This approach is informed by the proposals of those in critical race theory who have been advocating for writing about lived experiences as a means to disrupt processes of othering (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Moving racisms

White majority as well as a different kind of black person in relation to Aboriginal Australians.

For the last 16 years, I've worked in predominantly White academic settings as a researcher and educator in community psychology teaching mostly non-Aboriginal students. I was already sensitive to how psychology and community psychology uses notions like race, ethnicity and culture to categorize groups often misrepresenting or not representing people like me. And for me, these omissions and misrepresentations became a key motivation for writing about the experiences about my community of origin and other communities marginalised by colonial practices in psychological knowledge production. The issues of intersections of colonialism and psychology became further complicated as I engaged with the writings of Indigenous scholars in Australia and Aotearoa (often known as New Zealand) (Martin, 2003; Oxenham, 2000; Smith, 1999). They were writing back, writing about decolonization and anti-colonialism, to assert Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being in the world. As I engaged in this work nagging questions emerged. What are the implications of these writings for my research and teaching? How would I engage in empowerment praxis when the dominant ways of being, knowing, and doing of the psychology and also community psychology is named as problematic? I began to explore possible answers through collaborating in projects led by Indigenous Australians, raising the stakes for our White colleagues and students in research and teaching settings.

"Paying attention to the politics of location implies being aware not only of the anticolonial or antiracist position that one chooses in designating a mode of inquiry, but also of how those positions choose us as researchers" (McCleod & Bhatia, 2009: 597)

I emigrated from South Africa to Australia. As I got immersed in Australian society, it became apparent to me that racism here was of a different kind. It was not a legal system anymore as it was in South Africa during Apartheid. Racism was more subtle, emerging through discursive networks and the micro-politics of power. In South Africa, I was labeled 'coloured' and positioned in-between black and white. The membership afforded me privileges while being discriminated against by the same people imposing marginality on me. In Australia there was no such explicit hierarchy, yet, I was constructed as a racialized outsider in relation to an ostensibly Part of my work as an ally to Indigenous Australians has been to work with the Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University in Western Australia to incorporate issues of diversity into psychology courses and to research individual and community responses to oppression. I was learning about the history and continuing oppression of Indigenous people and wanted to be involved in responding without imposing my agenda. The writing and activities of colleagues at the Centre and also the writing focused on Indigenous Australians rights to self-determination, made even more salient how some of the assumptions and theoretical tools that underpin psychology actually worked to silence and undermine Indigenous voices (e.g., being trained as "expert" and "objective knower" of others, developing models privileging Western ways of being and knowing, building theory based on core values such as individualism). The writing of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) from Aotearoa was particularly challenging and helpful. She wrote about decolonising methodologies highlighting the importance of engaging with imperialism from the vantage point of the dominated. She argued that colonialism is a form of imperialism achieved through control of culture, economics and education. Knowledge and knowledge production is implicated in process of colonisation and as such decolonisation, in part, is about engaging with colonisation. One site for decolonisation is the very processes and practices of knowledge production and the creation of ways of doing and being that are empowering and ethical.

The exchanges with Indigenous Australian colleagues and our shared experiences of racialisation, and the

shared stories of colonialism across Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, led me to turn the gaze away from a superficial understanding of the cultures of others onto examining one's own culture in relation to other cultural groups (Sonn, 2004). My discomfort recognizing the disempowering effects of the knowledge production practices of my discipline and from being othered in everyday settings moved me to problematize dominance and normativity. I began deconstructing dominance through research and teaching while affirming the cultural identities and aspirations of those silenced in Australia's Eurocentric psychology. Central to this shift was Freire's (1972, 1994; Huygen & Sonn, 2000) critical pedagogy, in particular the focus on deconstructing taken for granted social and political realities. For me, this meant a form of inversion, of shifting the gaze towards normativity because I was teaching ostensibly 'white' students.

Deconstructing normativity

The critical writings in whiteness studies and privilege are linked with the work on decolonisation. Critical whiteness writers argue that Whiteness signals "...the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (Frankenberg, 1993: 236). Those who belong to this group are typically not asked to reflect on their cultural identities because their culture is the norm. Thus, Whiteness is often invisible; members are blind to the privileges that they have by virtue of their group membership. The invisibility of Whiteness is what makes it so powerful; people are rendered blind to the ways in which culturally sanctioned practices can work in an exclusionary and often colonising manner.

I am outside Whiteness because I am a black person, an immigrant in Australia, keenly aware of how racism is significant in the lives of people of colour. And yet, I belong to a White institution and have been trained in a historically Eurocentric academic discipline. I am inside Whiteness too. My colleagues and the majority of the students in psychology programs in Australia are ostensibly "white." I had seen White colleagues "being helpful" without necessarily considering or understanding the different discourses that position non-indigenous people as helpers and Indigenous people as requiring help and the implications of these for empowerment work. Everyday we see how mainstream institutionalized systems in Australia privilege the knowledge and tools of Eurocentric psychology while looking

suspiciously at Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing (Dudgeon & Oxenham, 1990). Indigenous and non-white colleagues and I witness the ways in which some allies end up taking over spaces created for Indigenous people often becoming recognized as experts on Indigenous matters.

There are other ways in which normativity and privilege are reproduced other than becoming experts on Indigenous matters. Based on a review of literature Green, Sonn, and Matsebula (2007) identified three ways in which privilege is reproduced that are pertinent to understandings of cultural competence. These include: the construction of knowledge and history, determining national identity and belonging, and in anti-racism practice. In terms of the construction of knowledge and history there are core cultural anchored assumptions about self that all others are assessed against. For example, those in power also dominate discussions about who is civilised and who is uncivilised and what constitutes real and not real identity claims.

Race privilege is also reproduced in discussions about what it means to be Australian and who can or can't belong to the nation. Ghassan Hage (1999) used the work of Pierre Bourdieu to discuss the way in which white people in Australia claim governmental belonging, which is acquired through the accumulation of cultural capital, the sum of cultural and symbolic resources including knowledge, and social and psychical characteristics. The sense of governmental belonging is reflected in white people feeling that they have the right to say who is welcome and who is not welcome in the country.

In terms of anti-racism practice, white people often decide what is racist and what is not racism and they can also choose not to worry about racism, while racialised subjects do not have this choice. White people also have a choice and can focus on promoting tolerance, rather than disrupting systems of privilege. For example, at a recent national roundtable on racism towards Indigenous Australians held in 2009, I presented a short paper on whiteness and cultural competence. After the presentation groups of 5-8 people discussed the issues raised and then reported back. The response of the first table was interesting. The first comment was that although they recognised the experience of Indigenous people, they wanted to highlight that white people were also discriminated against in the 1930s and 1940s during the gold rush period. The Whiteness literature is careful to acknowledge the contingent nature of privilege and that it is unevenly distributed and

intersects with class, gender and age. One of the Aboriginal participants responded to the comment made by the reporter stating that it was in itself a reflection of claiming a privileged position and it shifted the focus of oppression to the white experience, while also equating the colonisation of Aboriginal people with experiences of early white settlers.

A diverse group of colleagues – including Aboriginal scholars – and I began to integrate as a key part of our Race Relations and Psychology courses the history of race relations in Australia focusing on Indigenous writers. Students were challenged to explore key concepts (race, ethnicity and culture) used in psychological research to examine difference to then turn to the Whiteness literature shifting the focus from the “other” to their own group memberships. This turn, exposes taken for granted social positions and the privileges afforded because of those positionings. Problematizing how the cultures of “others” are typically treated as static and antiquated was central; this served to reveal how understandings of self and others are produced through historically situated discourses, taken for granted knowledge and everyday practices within social and political contexts. Ultimately, the challenge is to grasp the implications of those understandings for everyday interactions.

Teaching about Whiteness to ostensibly White students has proven to be quite challenging. The notion of Whiteness is contested by most students, and so it should be. Typically the students’ initial response is to resist or reject the notion. The initial rejection, more often than not, is about equating Whiteness with racism and they do not want to be seen as racist. The response is to disconnect from the history of race relations and engage in us/them constructions without considering the societal arrangements that Whiteness speaks to. Whiteness studies in essence provide a lens to turn the gaze. It requires that we have a clear understanding of power in the context of race relations and the various ways in which power is produced and reproduced through cultural resources and processes. In the next section I turn to some of the current work with a community cultural development agency with whom we are working to build community and to explore decolonising praxis.

Partnering CANWA

For the last 10 or so years I have been working with an arts based agency in Western Australia. I have been performing different roles – from board member,

researcher, and critical friend. The Community Arts Network use arts and arts practice to promote community engagement and they also advocate for the development and inclusion of art and broader understandings of culture in community development and planning. Since 2002, CANWA has been consulting with communities and key stakeholders about to the viability of creating an Indigenous Arts and Culture position in one of the shires in Western Australia’s Wheatbelt region (Waller & Hammond, 2006/2007). Suffice it to say that following consultative processes a unit was established with the aim to assist in Aboriginal self determined cultural and arts development in one of the regional communities in east of Perth in the central east or Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. It is a small town with about 1180 people, which includes people living in the town and in the greater shire (ABS, 2007). 118 people (about 10% percent) of the population are Indigenous. This compares with an average Aboriginal population of about three percent in Western Australia.

I think it’s just a lack of understanding and ignorance from the Wadjela [non-Indigenous] community towards Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people are visual people. They like to be seen out in the streets. In terms of their drinking, there’s a core group of people who drink a lot in Kellerberrin that may represent maybe 5, maybe 10% of people. That’s their choice. What it comes down to is choice, but don’t put all Aboriginal people in the same basket. Don’t paint us with the same brush because we’re all different; but that’s been the perception of the Wadjela community. Also that comes back to historical factors, historical things that have happened in the region. There’s been a lot of racial tension of course and with the previous government legislations and the Stolen Generation in the mission days for example. You know the power of men and particularly white men in communities quite often on councils, you’ll see a whole heap of white men in their 40s, 50s and 60s who sit on the council and these people are firmly entrenched with their views about Aboriginal people and Aboriginal issues (Keith, Aboriginal)

Race and whiteness in the contact zone

As part of CANWA’s ongoing engagement in CCD work in the Wheatbelt, we have been accompanying the agency to report and evaluate some of its community based projects and also to contribute as reflective partners. One of the projects that we reported on explored the role of the arts in

empowerment, CANWA's role in community empowerment and ways in which non-indigenous people can best support indigenous empowerment (Green & Sonn, 2008). Here I want to illustrate some of the complexity of negotiating intercultural relations by reading into a social interaction within a workshop setting. In one project we explored the ways in which participation in the arts activities fostered empowerment, the role of CANWA in empowerment and the possibilities for working together. Here I use one extract from a conversation with a non-Aboriginal woman who works for CANWA and is an outsider to the community. She facilitated photography workshops as one of the activities community members identified as something they would like to do. The facilitator had been to the town several times as part of the broader project.

Conceptual framework

We conceptualised the workshop as a contact zones, which for Pratt (1991: 33) is a "social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, a such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in parts of the world today." In this space different stories and representations shape and influence our understandings of self and other. These representations can be understood as discourses which are "historically constructed regimes of knowledge. These include common-sense assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas, belief systems and myths that groups of people share and through which they understand each other" (Mama, 1995: 98). Mama further states that Discourses position individuals in relation to one another socially, politically and culturally, as similar to or different from; as 'one of us' or as 'Other' (Mama, 1995: 98) and also inform how blame and merit is to be apportioned. People have different subject positions available within discourses and these can be contradictory depending on social and historical relations. Furthermore, power is transmitted through discourses and dominant discourses exercise their hegemony by "resonating with and echoing the institutionalised and formal knowledges, assumptions and ideologies of a given social and political order." (Mama, 1995: 8). We have drawn on this understanding to explore the dynamics of identity and politics in the contact zone.

The extract is of course open to other readings, but in view of CANWA's work and the broader

social/historical/economic context there are also limited readings. The extract is as follows:

Louise: She came in the morning with a six-pack of grog and cheekily said "do you want a drink?" and I said "no and I'm just not gonna see that. We're just going to put that away and that won't exist just for today" or something like that.

Interviewer: You said that?

Louise: Yeah, and I carried on doing what I was doing and then she came back again and said "if you don't want me to do this, if you don't want me to drink or if I've upset you, I can go" and I found that sad and confronting and all those things because it wasn't as if she was asking "am I allowed to do this?" or "will CAN WA do this if I do this?" or "will I get in trouble?" It was more like, "nah, I want to know what you think about me doing this" and I found that really sad and I don't know why.... It was more like "do you care that I drink? Do you care that I'm drunk at 10 o'clock in the morning?" as in "nah, as a person, do you care that me, as this person is doing this?" Louise: I guess it was the disappointment, maybe fear, because there was an element of just a big reality so I guess the reality of it was just frightening for me.

Louise is challenged by the actions of one of the workshop participants, a young Aboriginal woman. She does not know how to respond, but responds by refusing the request and ignoring the behaviour. The person comes back and asks Louise to respond, to engage, to take a stance. Louise feels sad and confronted. She is challenged by the fact that the young woman has brought her reality into the workshop and wants to know what Louise, the outsider white woman thinks and knows. The young woman knows of the stereotypes, the hegemonic discourses about Aboriginal people and drinking on pay day.

Louise goes on to talk about her disappointment and fear, about having to see reality, the 'real' life for many Aboriginal people outside of the workshop. She had to come to terms with her own position as a white woman, an outsider, and as a professional in the context of Aboriginal marginality and white race privilege.

Following Feldman (1992, as cited by Watkins and Schulman, 2008), in systems characterised by relations of domination and subjugation there can be distortions to what we see and do not see. Not seeing beyond the workshop, the differential subject positions, histories and lived realities that coalesce in

the contact zone, can result in the reproduction of relations of domination and privilege. In this project, it had become essential to engage with CANWA staff in critical discussions about taken for granted understandings about race, culture and ethnicity and how these are utilised in everyday discussions in Australia and the effects on our relations. In this framework, race, culture and ethnicity are social constructions and ideological and generated within colonial histories, and, like others, we have argued that it is imperative to deconstruct racism, culture and ethnicity in everyday settings based on the understanding that these notions are central to ongoing coloniality. For Louise this meant understanding marginalisation and social exclusion.

The contact zone itself is the space within which identities and histories come into conflict. In Australia, talk about race and racism has been repressed by the discourse of multiculturalism (Riggs, 2007). In this country, we do not talk about racism and even deny prejudice and contest racism (Rapley, 2001). But, for Aboriginal people and people of colour racism is an everyday reality within the Australian racial formation (Paradies, Harris, & Anderson, 2008). The fact that we avoid talking about or naming 'race' as significant in the history and current social relations is problematic and does result in the reproduction of white race privilege in everyday settings, including in settings such as those constructed for positive community development projects.

This excerpt reflects some of the tensions that arise when working alongside Aboriginal Australians in order to disrupt racism and contribute to empowerment. How do you empower in a colonised or post-colonising (Moreton-Robinson, 2003) space, where there is pain, frustration, complacency, racism? One of the critical elements here is that this research work has provided the basis for CANWA to engage and reconstruct its own understandings of empowerment and intercultural engagement. This process of developing praxis is ongoing and has included restructuring the agency to now include at least 50% Aboriginal staff members and putting in place relevant support systems for the staff members. CANWA's work continues, and there are important lessons to unpack further as they develop their praxis, which is part of our ongoing work. Some of this includes the tensions between knowledge and history and the fear that stories will be appropriated. There are also understandings of Aboriginality based on Western discourses that continue to influence understandings and shape practices. But, what is clear

so far is that lived experience in combination with critical theorising is an important epistemological position and central to a decolonising agenda.

Summary and conclusion

As I reflect on the different paths of the journey, of weaving in and out of community psychology research and action literature, I often come back to one of the key aspirations: The inclusion of marginalised voices as central to deconstruction and reconstruction projects. For me this has meant grappling with notions like empowerment and social justice within a framework that recognises power, the sites and means for the reproduction of power and privilege in everyday settings, and the importance of understanding histories of colonialism in decolonisation efforts.

Community psychology is committed to social change. However, it has been necessary to venture beyond the boundaries of the discipline to develop resources for challenging racialisation. The writing from diverse areas that focus on decolonisation and that is written under critical race theory and whiteness studies have been extremely valuable in helping us articulate a standpoint from which we can engage in deconstruction, both as members of minoritised groups as well as in our roles as partners or allies to those who are excluded (Reyes-Cruz & Sonn, in press). This is and continues to be a challenging task, but through critical reflective practice, we are creating resources to explicate the micro politics of race within a broader social, cultural and historical context.

The writing in the areas I have identified above value lived experiences and critical analyses – the movement between being on the ground and theorising (Fine & Weis, 2007). It shares much in common with the critical writing in community psychology (Lykes & Moane, 2009; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003). Central to this critical analysis is an understanding of historical memory or history of colonial relations within which racialising practices develop and engagement in reflexive practice. There is a focus on promoting voice and developing ways of knowing that disrupts the power of the expert knower.

History and memory

History and memory are central to social change and in particular liberation psychologies. Martín-Baró (1994) argued that the recovery of historical memory

is central to liberation psychology, while Bulhan (1985: 277) argued that those who are oppressed have been denied “individual biographies and collective history” and have been made appendages to the “biographies and histories of others”. We have drawn on the writing of liberation theorists as well as others (e.g., Bhatia, 2007; Quijano, 2000) to argue that it is essential to understand histories of colonialism and the continuity of colonial relations in our efforts to promote anti-racist and anti-oppressive projects in our personal and professional lives. In our efforts we have brought people with different histories together in the contact zone and utilised the writing by Indigenous and black scholars as well as writing that deals with deconstructing normativity. We use this to facilitate de-ideologization and to create new subjectivities within limit situations (Martín-Baró, 1994). The processes of deconstructing racialisation and othering is challenging, but we have found it vital for countering the historical amnesia that is part and parcel of a liberalist agenda – an agenda that seeks to equalise future possibilities while denying historical and ongoing inequities in resources required for living.

Reflexivity

The very processes of knowledge construction is scrutinised for its disempowering effects, and there is recognition of the partiality of knowing. To this end, we also advocate an approach of situated knowing. Some of this is reflected in our effort to challenge both whiteness and race and to recognise the differential power afforded because of our social group memberships.

Instead of an exclusive focus on the other, one also needs to ask reflexive and introspective questions about oneself – about the position one occupies in matrices of power and privilege and the extent to which such positions inform one’s practices, actions and beliefs. As such, I cannot claim to be non-racist if I am white, or non-sexist if I am a male, but rather make non-racism and non-sexism a project within which I constantly re/situate myself, and within which I continuously take up a performative position. (Laubscher, 2006: 211).

The work in the contact zones departs from a dialogical orientation and commitment to the other. It is a praxis that is in line with the ethical positions articulated by different authors (Bird Rose, 2004; Montero, 2007; 2009). In our context this means understanding and recognising that, as old settlers and immigrants, as people who share this land, with

Aboriginal people, we are all positioned differently in relation to the legacy of colonisation and racism. While we are all positioned differently, as privileged or marginalised, or somewhere along this continuum, and we are all implicated in responding to the issues facing our communities. As part of this process we have focussed on examining dynamics of oppression as they occur in research, teaching and more recently partnering community based agencies by drawing on the writing from Indigenous and other scholars who write from liminal spaces as well as the writing aimed at disrupting normativity. Through this we endeavour to create spaces for relational and respectful engagement that does not only focus on the diverse other, but brings us into a mutual relationship aimed at disrupting racism (see Laubscher, 2006).

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