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Tamara A. Lipscombe

Antonia Hendrick

Peta L. Dzidic

Darren C. Garvey
Edith Cowan University

Brian Bishop

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Directions for research practice in decolonising methodologies: Contending with paradox

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Tamara A Lipscombe¹ , Antonia Hendrick², Peta L Dzidic¹,
 Darren C Garvey³ and Brian Bishop¹

Abstract

The complex nature of colonisation presents with the potential for paradoxes in decolonising approaches, hence, fixed conventions and methods are discouraged. In this way, decolonising methodologies concerns interrogating dominant conventions in research that have typically excluded alternative ways of knowing from academia. This raises concern about the issue of breaking conventions, when it is potentially difficult to realise that one is depending upon them. An incremental approach to the research process and subsequent knowledge generated provides opportunity to challenge the conventions that typically dictate research praxis. In addition, fostering epistemological transformation and pluralism presents a solution to problems derived from dominant cultural assumptions and practices. My aim for this article is to extend upon the literature pertaining to decolonising methodologies, with this contribution of focusing on the research process as a means to avoid paradox in the decolonial intention. Accordingly, a process imperative that focuses on *how* researchers do research, over the tendency to focus on outcomes, emerges as a strategy to identify and contend with paradoxes within decolonial work. A questioning convention is posited as a means for mining the assumptions and biases of the dominant culture that would otherwise ensnare ones thinking. Consequently, research may be better liberated from oppressive colonising practices that are tacit within research and academic conventions. Narratives are provided throughout for illustrative example, and to better explore the concepts named.

Keywords

Decolonising methodologies, critical pedagogies, epistemological transformation and pluralism, relationships and knowledge, research process and contextualism, knowledge production

Introduction

The town Mayor is at the head of the table, with his supporting administration surrounding him. Aboriginal Elders are seated down one side of the table, and community stakeholders and relevant service providers on the other side. The town council facilitates these sorts of advisory groups as a means of ‘community engagement’. The meeting here is intended to represent a common interest for reconciliation and bettering the relationships between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples in the local community. The meeting agenda includes discussing a few things that have changed since the last meeting: the council has (1) renamed the advisory group, (2) changed the frequency of meetings and (3) a new chairperson for ongoing meetings is to be appointed. The council

moves a motion to vote in a new chairperson, and everyone is asked to put forward nominations for the role. The Elders indicate that they would like more time to consider and discuss the matter between the community members themselves beforehand. However, the aforementioned change in the frequency of meetings resulted in removing the bi-monthly

¹School of Public Health, Curtin University, Perth, WA, Australia

²School of Allied Health, Curtin University, Perth, WA, Australia

³Kuringkurl Katitjin, Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA, Australia

Corresponding author:

Tamara A Lipscombe, School of Public Health, Curtin University, Kent Street, Perth, WA 6102, Australia.

Email: tamara.lipscombe@postgrad.curtin.edu.au



meetings that were exclusively for the Aboriginal community members, further limiting the opportunity for the Elders to deliberate over the recent changes and how they would like to proceed as a collective.

As the advisory meeting is unfolding, it seems clear that the council has items on the agenda that they want to ‘tick off’, and as a result of this focus on outcomes, the voices of the Aboriginal community members are being ignored and placated. The Elders had been very clear with what they were wanting in this process: time to consider and talk among themselves. The council members seem to be missing the bigger point to their engagement with the Aboriginal community; they are not considering the voices, viewpoints and needs of the Aboriginal members whom the group primarily concerns. Further pushing the agenda, the council asserts that the community members had ample time to prepare as they had been sent out in advance a document detailing the changes. The assertion completely disregards and disrespects that the community members are volunteers, have competing demands, and may not have the time or energy to comb through the dense document, and ignores the importance of relationships in cultural ways of doing. Arguably, the process denotes limited cultural competence on the council’s behalf as no one had really ever asked the Aboriginal members ‘what would work for you, when we need to inform you of changes?’

The vignette above is based on true events, and illustrates how paradox can emerge in initiatives intended to advance Indigenous affairs. While the events occur in a community context, the tensions between colonising and decolonising praxis are embedded within the broader cultural context of colonised states. As the first author, I¹ am a PhD student at a university located within a colonised state, and in my research, I am exploring how society wrestles with issues of colonisation. Here, I find myself sitting at the everchanging contour of colonising and decolonising ideologies. I wrestle with trying to do ethical decolonising research from within the dogmatic confines of higher education; a context that is inherently colonising (Bishop et al., 2006a; Smith, 2012). Intrinsic to such research contexts is the issue of paradox, whereby contributions intended to benefit First Nations peoples become contradictory to those intentions. The concern is (re)colonising under a veil of decolonisation. Consequently, decolonising research presents as complex, and a highly loaded pursuit, with high stakes. This is a concern, because such challenge could deter people from engaging such an important approach.

The purpose of this article is to extend upon the literature pertaining to decolonising methodologies, with this contribution of focusing on the research process as a means of contending with paradox within the decolonial intention. In contending with paradoxes within decolonial work, we argue a principal message of the importance of being ‘process-focused’ in research, and that *how* one goes about doing research is essential, and meaningful outcomes of the research will inevitably follow a quality process. In line with

this, we present conceptual and narrative account to illustrate the importance of engaging contextualism and epistemology for the decolonial endeavour. We build upon these ideas to finally offer a simple yet tangible tool for doing research within a colonial endeavour – a *questioning convention*.

I begin the article by providing a positionality statement, so the reader may understand my relationship to decolonising discourses (Rowe, 2014). Then, a brief explanation of decolonising methodologies is presented, followed by discussion on the central focus of this article: paradoxes in decolonising initiatives. The following two central conceptual facets to contending with paradox are then presented: (1) contextualism and (2) knowledge gifts. Contextualism broadly argues that a comprehensive research process comes from taking a critical approach to understanding surrounding context that influences (Bishop, 2007; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Jaeger and Rosnow, 1988). The section on knowledge gifts concerns epistemological perspectives, the necessity of recognising epistemic gifts (Kuokkanen, 2007). For this, we highlight the importance of relationships as a conduit to epistemic gifts – that cultivate flexibility to transform and adapt one’s vantage point in knowing (Nakata, 2007a, 2010). To conclude, we posit a ‘process imperative’ that may assist those endeavouring to do decolonising approached. Essential to a process imperative is one’s criticality, and as such, a process of questioning – a questioning convention – is provided as a tool to assist the critical approach.

Speaking of context: who is speaking?

My name is Tamara. As first author to this article, my academic ventures are currently in partnership with a diverse and prolific advisory team; we have a diverse background including Non-Indigenous and Indigenous identities, and work from research and teaching positions in psychology, social work and Indigenous settings. My thinking, writing and research have been shaped by the invaluable contributions of my advisors, which is thus represented with co-authorship to this article. To qualify ‘whose knowledge claims are represented’ herein, this is a collective effort; while I as first author ‘drives’ the PhD project, the exploration is shared, and a collective effort, subsequently as are the knowledge claims generated. My academic orientation for exploring the phenomena is community psychology and inter- cross-cultural psychology. In my research, I explore a site of cultural contestation – Australia Day – and how people within Australian society make sense of this day. The national holiday of Australia Day is a site of contestation because the date is linked to European settlement and the beginning of Indigenous peoples’ marginalisation in Australia.

I am one of the many people – Non-Indigenous, Indigenous and identifying otherwise – at the interface of our connecting histories and cultures (Nakata, 2007a), whom are attempting to make sense of and reconcile a complex colonial history. I am White and in identifying as such I recognise a set of genealogical, cultural and political experiences associated with this

category (Smith, 2012). The adage is that, being White quite frankly means to hold a relative position of privilege (Pease, 2010; Smith, 2012). But I wonder if there are different ways of being White; perhaps, more central to my being in the arenas of Indigenous domains concerns ‘who is one in solidarity with?’

For example, I was present in the event depicted by the vignette above. I was seated between two Aboriginal Elders as the only White community member in for the council meeting with the Aboriginal Advisory Group, which I have been a part of for several years now. At the time of the event, I was prompted to consider ‘how can I respond in a way that advances our collective interests of reconciliation?’ In that instance, I offer my voice. When I had an opportunity to speak, I simply reflected that the Elders’ voices were not being listened to by the greater collective. I highlighted that the Elders’ requests were reasonable, and followed by questioning why the council were reluctant to support the Elders’ wishes. By simply noticing the process and questioning ‘why couldn’t things be different?’ the process changed. The council agreed to the Elders’ request for more time. And after the meeting, my Aunties² told me that I ‘did a good job’, and they were proud of me for my contribution.

Situating decolonising methodologies

Colonisation presents as a continuous and dynamic process, and often has resulted in the advancement of a group of peoples at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Similarly, decolonisation is regarded as a continuous and dynamic process, however, juxtaposed to colonisation (Loomba, 2015; McCaslin and Breton, 2014; Smith, 2012). Decolonial processes concern an alternative assertion of power that acts to resist and subvert colonial praxis that are experienced as oppressive (Kovach, 2009; McCaslin and Breton, 2014; Medina, 2011; Morgensen, 2012). The heterogeneous nature of colonisation requires decolonial praxis to embody sensitivity to contexts and the diverse ways in which colonising praxis manifests. To that end, the contexts of research present as just as relevant as the research problem itself.

Research as a Colonising Entity. Historically, much research has been instrumental in European imperialism and colonisation, whereby research provided a conduit for racist and oppressive discourse (Jones and Jenkins, 2014; Kovach, 2009; Land, 2015; Smith, 2012). For example, scientific inquiry related to psychology, biology, eugenics, anthropology and Darwinism have been used to objectify Indigenous peoples in ways that permitted hierarchal constructions of race, whereby Indigenous peoples are dehumanised in comparison to the construed supremacy of White people (Nakata, 2007b; Smith, 2012). Such research has provided justification for much of the oppression experienced by First Nations Peoples (Nakata, 2007b; Smith, 2012). Looking back on such research provides insights into how deep cultural ideologies can inform research in ways that ultimately construct findings to legitimise the

control and governance over Indigenous peoples (Nakata, 2007b; Smith, 2012).

The more subtle and insidious modalities of power and domination relate to the monoculture within scientific research and knowledge. The ‘scientific’ worldview has a history of dominant ideas that privilege a particular way of knowing (Foucault, 1989; Michaels, 2011; Vandana, 1993). In a time of globalisation, western perspectives have typically been privileged within the scientific realm and consequently elevated to a construction of universal or objective (Michaels, 2011; Rowell and Hong, 2017; Vandana, 1993). What concerns decolonising methodologies is how the monoculture within science has consequently excluded and invalidated First Nations Peoples’ knowledges and ways of knowing (Nakata, 2007b; Rowell and Hong, 2017; Smith, 2012). The monopoly over research practices and subsequent knowledge production tends to constructed knowledge in such a way as to privileges particular systems of knowing and subjugates alternative systems, which essentially equates to colonisation of or over knowledge (Rowell and Hong, 2017; Smith, 2012), and constitutes epistemic violence (de Sousa Santos, 2016; Dotson, 2011). And epistemic violence being the social and cultural praxis that preclude marginalised voices from being considered (Dotson, 2011).

With the above in mind, tensions therefore exist in being situated within education and research institutions that have historically contributed to the oppression of First Nations Peoples (Barnes, 2018; Smith, 2012; Tuck and Yang, 2012). In decolonising research, critical awareness of colonising praxis is paramount (Kovach, 2009; Tuck and Yang, 2012). It is incumbent on the researcher to recognise the damage that can occur to populations through conventions in research, and take a critical approach to research to mitigate any risks of disenfranchising Indigenous peoples (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). This concerns prudence and attentiveness surrounding the possible implications of one’s research, and prompts the question *who does the research serve* (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016; Foucault, 1989; Smith, 2012)?

The Value of decolonial research. It is important to note that not all research is colonising or problematic for First Nations Peoples. Research can play a role in preserving Indigenous cultural knowledge when those knowledges and practices are engaged in ways that are appropriate and genuine (Nakata, 2002, 2010). What constitutes ‘appropriate’ and ‘genuine’ is of course contested and at times allusive, but something to strive for nevertheless. Nakata’s (2007a, 2007b) formative work on the cultural interface provides great insights on dealing with the subjectivity of knowledge in research, directing one to engage in intersubjectivity. The cultural interface refers to the points in which two (or more) cultures converge and interact, and concerns the contested space between the respective knowledge systems. Kuokkanen (2007) contends that Indigenous epistemes are gifts to academia that can bring new vantage points and knowing to the

tradition of academia. Hence, it is advised that researchers explore the interface between various ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, knowledges and ways of being (Bullen and Flavell, 2017; Nakata et al., 2012).

For this, Nakata suggests developing knowledge about knowledge, otherwise known as meta-knowledge (Nakata, 2002, 2007a). Meta-knowledge concerns cultivating understandings of how self, individuals and or collectives are situated at that interface of differing knowledge systems, histories, traditions and practices (Nakata, 2002, 2007b). And by engaging in the intersections of varying knowledge traditions, one may contend with the subjective nature that knowledge plays in constructing reality – in turn, promoting ontological and epistemological pluralism (Bullen and Flavell, 2017; Nakata et al., 2012).

In this way, there are many possible benefits of decolonising methodologies. It can assist in the inclusion and celebration of alternative ways of knowing – Indigenous and otherwise. It can assist in preserving Indigenous cultural knowledge, as well as elevating it within dominant research culture which it has typically been excluded from (Bullen and Flavell, 2017; Nakata et al., 2012). Consequently, research and phenomena can be explored anew, which undoubtably poses exponential benefit to the academy and understanding phenomena (Kuokkanen, 2007).

Paradoxes in decolonising research approaches

The gaps between the ideologies of decolonising methodologies and the monoculture in academia permit abundant opportunity for paradoxes to emerge. In my own experiences, I have received a lot of support from within academia surrounding the area of research and implementation of decolonising methodologies. But the litany of support presents as a little inconsistent with the actual exercise of doing this type of research. Meaning that, often I find myself in conflict between my obligations to decolonising methodologies and those to the institution that I belong. Paradoxes within decolonising approaches concern instances where practices maintain settler or colonial privilege. To avoid this maintenance requires taking precautions where possible to ensure that knowledge generated throughout the research is not used to diminish Indigenous peoples or to legitimise and maintain settler or colonial privilege (Jones and Jenkins, 2014; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012).

Accordingly, decolonising methodologies present as complex and uncertain from the outset (Barnes, 2018). Decolonising methods cannot be simply or superficially placed into something like a university curriculum and/or research, and questions can be raised about the pragmatics of doing so (Bullen and Flavell, 2017; Tuck and Yang, 2012). However, that complexity and uncertainty are arguably essential to the nature of decolonial approaches; without engaging in the complexity and uncertainty of the approach, one risks superficial adoption of decolonising discourse,

which then, in turn, surreptitiously propagates forms of (re) colonisation and have negative consequences (Barnes, 2018; Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Tuck and Yang (2012) frame this issue of paradoxes as transforming decolonisation into a metaphor rather than something being actualised. Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique on decolonisation warns against the tendency towards settler appropriation of the term decolonisation. That is, settlers benefitting from integrating 'decolonisation' discourses into their work, and beg the question of 'who does this discourse serve?' Superficial adoption of the term 'decolonisation' risks transforming settlers or beneficiaries of colonisation into an 'innocence' position, problematically providing absolution from settler guilt (Tuck and Yang, 2012). The concern here is that this type of positioning of decolonising discourse then acts paradoxically to re-centre Whiteness, appease guilt, galvanise settler futurity in colonised lands, and undermine decolonising ideologies and intentions (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

For example, the nature and time needed to build relationships with First Nations Peoples are seemingly not well understood or facilitated within the dominant research culture. At times, the language used in dominant research spaces has seemingly constructed relationships as commodities for research output, which risks paradoxically exhausting those relationships with Indigenous peoples to benefit one's self or the institution (Ball, 2012; Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). To elaborate, during the PhD candidature, there are multiple meetings held to track and oversee my 'progress'. The apparent markers of 'progress' are narrow: how many words has one written, what proportion of the intended sample has been sampled and how many publications has one achieved. Meanwhile, I am advised to finish the PhD as soon as possible – to see that it is soon over with so that I can 'get out there and make my mark on the world'. At the same time, I am informed that the university is pushing for 'timely completions' of PhDs (which is linked to funding), therefore, illuminating whose interests are central in this respect. Nearing the close of the meeting, one of the individuals evaluating my progress suggested that I could further write a paper on my engagement with Indigenous stakeholders. I do not disagree that a paper of such nature may provide a meaningful contribution; but something does not feel right. Nowhere prior in the meeting has those overseeing my progress indicated interest in the process and progress of my engagement and relationships with Indigenous stakeholders. The commentary was exclusive to a publication, without consideration of the possible content, contribution and quality, begging the question 'whose interests does this serve?'

And another example. During my undergraduate, I was taught narrow conventions around empirical-academic literature and research, which are heavily dependent upon written knowledge – 'read, write, and reference'. Although, little attention was paid to the limitations and potential issues of such conventions. The 'read, write, and reference' process tends to act as an echo chamber for those viewpoints privileged in and by

the ‘scientific discourse’. In my PhD journey, I find myself intrinsically bound by academic convention of citing ‘empirical’ written resources. Although relying on such resources seemed to diminish, omit and deny the wealth of knowledge residing in Indigenous oral traditions (please note that this is not exclusive to Indigenous knowledge and cultures). The importance of being able to acknowledge oral tradition and other such less conventional resources. This risk of excluding knowledge through oral tradition is further exacerbated in academia by depending upon those referencing conventions that do not consider yarning-style exchanges of knowledge. The issue denotes how the monoculture and monopoly in the fields of science tend to be constructed in such a way as to exclude and invalidate ways of knowing that fall outside the dominant conventions (Foucault, 1989; Nakata, 2007a; Rowell and Hong, 2017; Smith, 2012). If I depended solely on referencing conventions within the culture of academia, I would play a role maintaining in perpetrating epistemic violence (Dotson, 2011) against Indigenous knowledge traditions.

Breaking the convention of depending solely upon ‘academic sources’, hence, emerged an ethical issue for me. For this, my supervisors and I spent much time considering the issue and researching into possible ways of referencing First Nations oral tradition. After formulating a bit of a template for referencing, I proceeded to consult with those First Nations voices whom I wished to reference – detailing desire to acknowledge their knowledge offerings, the caveats of existing referencing styles and questions about how they would like to be reflected. Accordingly, the reader can see these acknowledgements referenced throughout (see Forrest, 2015; Forrest, 2019; Owen, 2020; Yasso, 2019b). Breaking with convention in this instance permitted us as researchers to acknowledge culturally diverse ways of knowing and doing, and recognise yarning as central to research.

These two vignettes above serve to illustrate the tension between competing ideological systems, and how the dominant conventions can pose challenge to decolonial research praxis. It suggests that convention or ‘acceptable practices’ needs to be questioned (Barnes, 2018; Rappaport, 1981). This is not to ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’ necessarily and remove western episteme arbitrarily (Bullen and Flavell, 2017; Nakata, 2010; Nakata et al., 2012), but rather to make newly informed decisions regarding one’s research praxis (Fredericks, 2009; Smith, 2012). In this way, decolonising research makes efforts towards dismantling social inequalities that have been born out of imperial-colonist constructions of knowledge (Jones and Jenkins, 2014; Nakata, 2007b; Smith, 2012; Sonn and Baker, 2016).

Contextualism in decolonial research

Contextualism is quite simply about understanding something in context (Bishop, 2007; Jaeger and Rosnow, 1988); understanding the greater story from which the research exists, and suggests researchers develop an understanding of

how they and their research are situated within a cultural context (Smith, 2012). This is to say that the context of a particular inquiry is just as important as the inquiry itself. It concerns the subjectivity of knowledge whereby the positionality or vantage point of the research and oneself then shapes how phenomena can be known, understood and constructed (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992). The researcher acknowledges that context influences (1) their own actions and (2) how the research is conceptualised (Bishop et al., 2002, 2006b).

To illustrate contextualism, I detail some considerations that arose when submitting my research ethics application. The national human research ethics guideline identifies minorities such as First Nations Peoples as a ‘vulnerable’ population (Hawkes et al., 2017), which suggests such populations are in need of ‘special protections’ if there are to be engaged (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017). Furthermore, such discourse implies that vulnerable peoples should only be involved in research if the research cannot occur without them – that is, if less vulnerable people cannot replace those more vulnerable (Bracken-Roche et al., 2017). What ramifications might such discourse have? Can such policy function as a contemporary form of segregation and exclusion? For example, if I were to avoid canvassing First Nations voices on a topic such as Australia Day, I would be omitting an invaluable perspective and perpetuate a process of privilege the voices of those already privileged in Australia. By deeply engaging in the context, I can better consider how to do ethical inclusion rather than unethical exclusion. Accordingly, decolonial approaches in research need to attempt to unveil and explicate historic and contemporary colonising praxis as a channel towards research better liberated from epistemic violence. From a position of understanding processes of colonisation, the respective practices can be (re)considered and transformed (Huygens, 2011).

Contextualism as a research process. With consideration for how dominant research paradigms and praxis can preclude alternative ways of knowing, the principle of contextualism can similarly be embodied within the research process. James (1890) warns against psychological snares, whereby one’s thinking is trapped by their own expectations or preconceived notions. The concern in research is that the narrowness of a parochial account may foster findings and interpretations that inadvertently privilege and reproduce a singular perspective (Bishop et al., 2002; Garvey, 2015; Wicker, 1989). Akin to the issues caused by scientific monocultures, ‘this precludes the researcher from being able to think about a domain in novel or non-sanctioned ways’ and poses concern for ‘limiting the capacity to proffer novel interpretations, resulting in the conduct of sloppy and unreliable work’ (Garvey, 2015: 3).

The concern here is how one might avoid tacit research and knowledge assumptions that may subjugate other ways of knowing. Wicker’s (1989) substantive theorising inspires

my thinking around the research processes, and provides an avenue for integrating decolonising methodologies. Analogous with abductive reasoning (Peirce, 2011), substantive theorising evokes an incremental approach to research and gaining knowledge (Bishop et al., 2002; Newbrough, 1995). Decisions are made throughout the research process and are based upon what is suitable for the specific site, or substantive domain (Newbrough, 1995; Wicker, 1989). The philosophy is that the research process is governed by a substantive domain, or, the ‘problem’. Decisions regarding methodology, methods and conceptual frameworks are chosen and adapted based upon what is suitable for the specific research site (Newbrough, 1995; Wicker, 1989). Ideally, the research is an evolving process of discovery whereby the direction taken depends on the knowledge generated in the events preceding (Mezirow, 2000; Newbrough, 1995; Wicker, 1989). The intention behind this process ensures that any knowledge claims generated will be genuinely grounded in the phenomena (Wicker, 1989), and wards against augmenting the research and findings which can occur as a result of the parameters of predetermined methods that do not appropriately consider the context (Garvey, 2015). In this, knowledge generated may subsequently permit liberation from possible imperial colonising ideology that may exist tacitly within dominant conventions and approaches less critical of intercultural tensions (Kovach, 2009).

For example, in my research, I wanted to understand the social contestation surrounding Australia Day and the recent efforts to ‘change the date’ of this national holiday. Due to the research foci being adjacent to colonisation, the historic unequal power relations between settlers and Australia’s First Nations Peoples emerged as an important issue to attend to. Accordingly, this led me to explore the historic development of Australia Day; however, with a focus on analysing the power dynamics evident within discourses. In this way, the cultural hegemony surrounding the research site can be explicated, and history re-told in a way that repositions the settler’s voice and perspective towards a more equal footing – a position of one among many constituents.

Accordingly, a researcher is advised to approach the research not fully anticipating the specific process in advance as it is necessarily emergent. This is what my supervisors and I refer to as ‘swimming around in the uncertainty’, where not-knowing is valued; and sense making of the information across contexts is a slow and iterative process. Arguably, one cannot unlearn the things they already know and separate out their conceptual knowledge such that the research is not influenced (Seidman, 1989). However, deconstruction of one’s preconceived epistemological assumptions may occur as the researcher reflects upon the substantive domain and conceptual basis, and subsequent insights may be generated through increments (Bishop et al., 2002; Mezirow, 2000; Seidman, 1989). The collection of experiences throughout one’s life: how one is enculturated and acculturated, provides a prism through which the researcher comprehends the research site.

For example, a predominant cultural narrative of my context concerns the archetypes of the ‘White oppressor’ who colonises Australia, and the ‘oppressed Indigenous’. Such narratives can ensnare one’s thinking and complicate the interpretation of data. When considering the history of Australia Day, I found many instances of Aboriginal voice and protest for rights. Here, the archetype of the oppressed Indigenous foregrounds an essentialised construction of events – that does little to assist in comprehending the historic and contemporary acts of strength and resilience demonstrated by Australia’s First Nations Peoples. Hence, when to better comprehend the events, I avoid making hasty conclusion, and attempt to take a naïve and curious approach to analysis. This assists the research in resisting the temptation to force the data to fit preconceived judgements about the issue, and better liberates one’s thinking from the confines of conventions to potentially arrive at a different interpretation.

Knowledge gifts – through people and relationships

There are a number of parameters and potential caveats to the intention of ontological and epistemological pluralism, and more broadly decolonising methodologies. Jones and Jenkins (2014) provide cautions of the benevolent coloniser who holds an imperialist assumption of placing oneself as the centre of knowing. A single perspective cannot grasp everything: some knowledge and understandings will likely be beyond the researcher’s grasp (Jones and Jenkins, 2014; Kovach, 2009). In addition, it is an imperialistic assumption to assume entitlement to all and any knowledge (Jones and Jenkins, 2014; Smith, 2012). Meaning that there may be some instances where it is not culturally appropriate to share knowledge oneself; or it is a knowers’ right to abstain from sharing their knowledge with someone if they choose to. Although, Nakata (2007a) and Kuokkanen (2007) invite consideration of how one’s experiences intersect with Indigenous communities, peoples and knowledge.

Differences in epistemologies lead people to treating knowledge in different ways (Cohen et al., 2011). Knowledge can be regarded as a gift, and as such, often the person, relationship and connection between peoples are something that matters in the exchange of knowledge. Kuokkanen (2007) contends that Indigenous epistemes are gifts to academia that can bring a new vantage points and knowing to the tradition of academia. The challenge herein is that, for those gifts to be recognised in academia and by researchers, this requires genuine openness and hospitality towards epistemes that are outside one’s conventional way of knowing (Bullen and Flavell, 2017; Dotson, 2011; Kuokkanen, 2007; Mezirow, 2000). Essential to recognising the gift of Indigenous epistemes is dismantling the pedestal on which dominant and western academic traditions have rested upon, and conceding that while conventional practices are epistemically privileged, these are not intrinsically superior to other ways of doing

research (Kuokkanen, 2007). While this sounds simple enough, the act of being able to comprehend the gift depends on the competency of one to adequately hear and respond to that which may be beyond their own epistemological framework (Ball, 2012; Dotson, 2011; Kuokkanen, 2007).

Relationships provide a conduit for transforming one's epistemological foundation. The adage is 'authentic relationships between teacher and student form a central process in transformative learning' (Cranton, 2006: 5) – transformative learning referring to the growth in one's worldview towards a more dynamic and inclusive frame of reference (Mezirow, 2000). Although from a decolonising position, genuine relationships challenge the conventional constructions of teacher-expert versus student-learner (Smith, 2012). Rather, people are valued and understood as knowers: everyone is a learner, knower, sharer of their particular knowledge and expert on their own particular experiences (Owen, 2020; Yasso, 2019). Meaning, a necessary condition for that learning, is respect and curiosity for the knowledge and knowing of the adjoining participants. Knowledge acquisition and learning are holistic experiences that are inseparable from relationships – the relationships with other people and the surrounding environment (Forrest, 2015; Mezirow, 2000; Owen, 2020; Yasso, 2019). Relationships between people permit knowledge to be explored collectively, in the space between differing peoples respective ways of knowing (Owen, 2020; Yasso, 2019).

Recognising the gifts in knowing is then dependent upon the relationships between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples (Kuokkanen, 2007; Smith, 1983). That is to say that transforming the monoculture of academia and the over reliance of dominant research conventions is contingent upon Non-Indigenous peoples capabilities to hear and make space for Indigenous epistemes, as well as the generosity of Indigenous peoples to share or gift to us Non-Indigenous folk their perspectives (Bullen and Flavell, 2017; Dotson, 2011; Kuokkanen, 2007). I take this to suggest the responsibility to listen with the intention of understanding (i.e. more than surface placations and voice falling on deaf ears), which requires reflective practice upon knowledge offered by others and one's responses to those offerings (Harvey and Russell-Mundine, 2019; Kelly et al., 2017; McGloin, 2009; Mezirow, 2000).

Accordingly, *how* someone is in relationships is meaningful, requiring integrity and trustworthiness to be established, what constitutes genuine relationships is difficult to fully capture in words, and I am certainly not the arbiter of 'building good relationships'. Smith (2012) provides guidance in terms of access to Indigenous knowledge and knowers, suggesting that researchers engage with ethical resources, policies, and guidelines developed locally by Indigenous communities and organisations. By referring to ethical resources constructed by Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples are positioned as the authorities on less oppressive engagement and research practices (Smith, 2012). This predisposes the researcher and their research to be more respectful, ethical and reflective of

what is of value to Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). There are numerous resources that provide advice and direction in this regard. Personally, I find the guidance provided by Indigenous Corporation Training Inc (2017) to resonate: these surrounding being trustworthy, transparent, respectful, invested, involved and patient. All things aside, it seems to me that the responsibility to negotiate relationships rests primarily with those whom the relationships concern.

Just last year, I was attending a local Noongar (Australian Aboriginal Nation) seasons celebration. After the event, a few of us were gathered yarning. Yarning topics were sensitive to Aboriginal matters and local community, and I was the sole Non-Indigenous individual in the group. Soon enough, a query about my ethnicity and background emerged in conversation – an informal exploration of positionality. An Elder from the area where I live, and whom I have had a close relationship with for several years was quick to respond with something to the effect of 'she Gadia-Noongar, and we [community Elders present] teaching her'. With *Gadia* being a reference for White, Auntie's assertion suggested my *participation in learning*, by engaging in the cultural interface where it concerns intersections of White and Aboriginal ways of knowing and solidarity in that endeavour. From a decolonising framework, this is to suggest that people are knowers and their knowledge and ways of being are valued; and it is through genuine relationships and interest in knowers and their knowledge that one can expand and transform their own epistemology.

In reflecting upon my own experiences of learning and building relationships, the words 'I'm not done' feel most apt. And relationships are not something that can or should be commodified for the sake of research. My venturing into my chosen research domain is a part of a longer standing journey that begun in my undergraduate course. I am afforded this opportunity because of the openness, curiosity, invitation and support of others already in related areas. Relationships take time, and are long-standing commitments that extend beyond the boundaries of a single research project (Land, 2015; Smith, 2012). And relationships cannot be built in a way that can be projected and accounted for by a dominant research paradigm that inadvertently or intentionally reinstate and reproduce particular kinds of relationships (Land, 2015; Sherwood and Kendall, 2013; Smith, 2012). A simple step in building good relationships that is perhaps often missed is just 'showing up' (Smith, 2012). This approach to relationships in research is what Smith (2012) refers to as the whangai model, whereby one is incorporated into the daily lives of Indigenous peoples in developing and sustaining lifelong connections and relationships. I find that relationships and building connections with community takes time and continuity, which is about repeatedly being in spaces with people.

Reciprocally, the relationships that one forms can shape the research journey, the way one thinks, and arguably one's life. 'Showing up' for me has been about letting myself be okay with uncertainty of how I fit in a space. When I started

participating in the local Aboriginal advisory group and community, I did not know what it would bring exactly or my role in that space. But through my relationship with the Elders, we – me in relationship with the Indigenous Elders – figure it out. In respect to working in an ‘Indigenous interest space’, I did not know exactly how this would position myself within a community, whereby showing up and building relationships would result in being invited to further participate or contribute. For example, by participating in Indigenous-led research projects or guest lecturing in cultural studies units. In this way, showing up allows one to emerge as a participant within a broader community (Sonn, 2004). Building reciprocal relationships allows me to share the research with others, provides opportunity for guidance on my process and explore other possibilities of doing solidarity with Indigenous peoples (Land, 2015; Sonn, 2004).

Concluding considerations

The decolonising approach explored in this article concerns eroding imperialist ideologies and epistemic violence that is embedded within the culture of academia (Smith, 2012). Decolonising approaches are (rightly so) complex and challenging, and there is much potential for paradoxes to arise in doing decolonising research. However, it is difficult to see how the dominant culture and traditions within academia limit one’s ability to think outside the conventional ways of knowing, as well as the visibility of colonising processes. Arguably, there is an over dependence on conventions in academia that ensnare one’s thinking.

Accordingly, a dialectical approach to research may assist resisting ensnarement caused by dogmatic convention (Fairclough, 2001; Rappaport, 1981). Problem solving for complex social issues needs to be divergent and everchanging (Fairclough, 2001; Harvey, 1996; Rappaport, 1981). What is ‘accepted’ and conventional needs to be questioned (Barnes, 2018; Rappaport, 1981). We argue that the issue of paradox can be identified, wrestled with and contended, and suggest an iterative-generative approach to research. This may ensure the resultant knowledge claims are considered in light of the social, temporal and contextual circumstances (Bishop et al., 2002; Seidman, 1989; Wicker, 1989), and sensitive to paradoxes in decolonial work. In addition, partnership and relationship building with First Nations Peoples is essential for transforming convention.

Caveats and important considerations

Nakata (2002, 2007a, 2007b) cautions that the boundaries between cultural domains such as what is Western and what is Indigenous are unclear. Meaning, in everyday practice, people live and learn by negotiating with the everchanging traditions, relations and intersections of varying knowledge systems (Nakata, 2002, 2007a, 2007b). Western knowledge and practices are not necessarily equated as colonisation (Bullen and

Flavell, 2017; Nakata et al., 2012); however, the dominance and monoculture within academia can be (de Sousa Santos, 2016; Rowell and Hong, 2017). Western and Non-Indigenous ways of knowing are not necessarily antithetical to decolonising approaches or Indigenous knowledges and practices (Barnes, 2018; Nakata, 2002, 2010). Rather, varying cultural knowledge systems may display qualities of congruence, incongruence, contrast, compatibility and incompatibility, and at times, these dispositions are complementary through intersubjectivity (Nakata et al., 2012). In turn, such practice and subsequent production of knowledge can embody the pertinent qualities of decolonising methodologies (Nakata et al., 2012; Smith, 2012). Attending to the subjectivity of knowledge, and how it is culturally imbedded may better situate the research and researcher within the relationship between colonisation and decolonisation (Kuokkanen, 2007).

One must engage in the apparent disconnections between the demands of research from within an institution (as a Western issue) and the pragmatics surrounding enacting a decolonising approach (Smith, 2012). It is useful to consider how colonial infrastructures and parameters operate in respect to the research (Loomba, 2015; Tuck and Yang, 2012), that the decolonising ideologies of the research may be in tension with. This way, the researcher can gain greater clarity over the caveats to the decolonisation approach, but also an avenue to insights into how to adapt and develop decolonisation approaches. Although, learning through genuine and equitable relationships can provide guidance on the dynamic process (Smith, 2012); especially in terms of generating knowledge that would have been otherwise outside one’s epistemological framework. Fostering relationships between peoples as a mechanism for change in line with a decolonial agenda (Hendrick and Young, 2018). Genuine relationships permit a meeting of differing epistemologies; however, genuine regard for others or another as a knower and holder of knowledge presents as a sort of precondition to fostering epistemological pluralism for oneself and in academy.

Significance of this article: a process imperative

The above loads onto the concern for *how* is in the research process is essential. And arguably, there is an unhelpful disproportionate focus on outcomes within dominant culture. Decolonising approaches present as an imperative towards a process orientation. Accordingly, what is done in decolonising research – actual method techniques – is secondary to the ethics around *how* the research is considered and conducted. This is a process imperative for dominant conventions to be deconstructed and interrogated, with attempts made to practicing in way that at the very least do not propagate settler privilege.

Accordingly, we posit a *questioning convention*. That is, a convention of a questioning conventions, such that potential antinomy and paradox are explored with curiosity; to ask,

why is 'this' the convention? And to question conventions in terms of 'what does this discourse do, for whom, and how?' There may be added value in refining the line of questioning to include contextual qualifiers such as '. . . in this place', '. . . at this time' or '. . . for this issue' (Garvey, 2020, personal communication).

In short, there is no single 'how to do' decolonisation. An orientation towards *process*, and building ongoing, respectful and reciprocal relationships poses a solution to wading through paradoxes that can emerge in decolonising research. New paradoxes will always emerge, but reform and change begin with identifying these. It is hard to think outside the box when the confines of culture often obstruct one from doing so, and where traditions provide heuristics for one's praxis. The insidious issues that dominant conventions can play in undermining decolonising agendas can be challenged by simply questioning. Questioning permits an interrogation of the underlying assumptions and biases of dominant praxis. Accordingly, researchers may be armed with new insights to make newly informed decisions about their research process – ideally, one that recognises the power differentials within academia and attempt to negotiate the research agenda with a more equal footing.

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ORCID iD

Tamara A Lipscombe  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8033-8308>

Notes

1. Throughout this article, *I* is used to illustrate the individual voice of the first author, while *we* is predominantly used to illustrate the collective knowledge sharing and contribution of all authors.
2. In Aboriginal communities, Elders are people who are regarded as such for their wisdom and cultural knowledge. Gendered terms such as 'Aunty' and 'Uncle' are often used to denote female and male Elders, respectively. I used these terms as those Elders have indicated their comfort with doing so, and reflect an established relationship. It is suggested that Non-Indigenous people should consult with Aboriginal people before using such terms as their use may be inappropriate as an outsider (Deadly Story, 2020).

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Author biographies

Tamara A Lipscombe is a PhD candidate in the area of psychology. Her teaching and research interests are in the areas of inter-cultural and community psychology, and issues relating to epistemic violence.

She is concerned with ethical research praxis in the context of partnering with First Nations peoples for social transformation and justice.

Antonia Hendrick is a Wadjella (white person) with English and Spanish ancestry. Her parents secured employment and shelter on arrival to Western Australia at a time when many Aboriginal people were denied these rights. Antonia is also a lecturer in social work at Curtin University with over 24 years of experience in family and community practice, research, and policy work. Her research interests include working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (namely Decolonising the curriculum), family and community work practice, and eco-social work practice.

Peta L Dzidic is a senior lecturer in psychology at Curtin University. Her teaching and research interests are in the areas of applied community psychology, research methods, and, ethics and professional practice as evidenced in her research areas pertaining to dominant cultural construction (e.g., gender, notions of the social “other”), environmental and social sustainability (e.g., urban design, rural issues, sense of community, governance and planning), social change processes, and social justice.

Darren C Garvey was born and raised in Cairns, North Queensland, and his heritage extends north to the Torres Strait region of Australia. He has a background in community mental health, and extensive teaching and curriculum design experience, and research expertise in ‘the need to consider the mental health of Indigenous health workers’, ‘the role of psychology with Indigenous Australians’, ‘ethics in psychological research’ and ‘Indigenous research methodologies’.

Brian Bishop is an adjunct associate professor at Curtin university. His teaching and research interests include community psychology, Applied social psychology, Indigenous issues, natural resource management, public participation, risk analysis and rural community psychology.