

\*Decolonising Field

Education-  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students'  
Experiences in Social Work Field Placements

Challenging

Australian Social

# **Acknowledgement to traditional Owners**

# Research Team

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- ✖ Dr Sue Gair
- ✖ Ms Ines Zuchowski
- ✖ Mrs Lisa Curtis (student on placement)
- ✖ Ms Patricia Johnson

Acknowledgement to participants

# Why this study?

- Very little understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on Field Placement in the field.
- Literature limited
- Needed to know Indigenous students' experiences in their field education

# Context

- ✖ Work previously undertaking by Department of Social Work and Human Services:
  - + Murri Way (ways of working/ practice skills) (Lynn, Thorpe, Miles, 1998)
  - + Indigenising the curriculum (action research)
  - + What's stopping them? -barriers for students completing a BSW (Gair, Thomson, Savage, 2005)
  - + Current Project
    - ✖ Australian Association of Social Work Small Grant
    - ✖ Ethics, literature review completed
    - ✖ Student engagement with Indigenous Content

# Key issues Identified in literature

- ✖ Social Work a contentious issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- ✖ Cultural Appropriateness of Social Work Practice (Euro-centric approach)
- ✖ Issues Identified in field education in previous studies
- ✖ Reoccurring themes:
  - + disregard of Aboriginal experiences and cultural practices,

“Field education is one of the sites where classroom theories get translated into practice. For this reason it is imperative to explore practical strategies to decolonize

# Colonisation and de-Colonisation

- ✖ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's disadvantage
- ✖ Social Work Education gradually more inclusive
- ✖ Decolonisation key process
- ✖ “*...decolonisation involves recognising, then shedding the mindset associated with colonial processes by which one culture subjugates another and defines it as inferior*” (Weaver, 1998)
- ✖ Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must

# What we did

- ✖ Invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander JCU students or graduates who have undertaken a social work placement to an interview and focus group
- ✖ Topics covered in interviews included:
  - + Placement experience, supervision, challenges, level of support, possibilities of improvement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, culture clashes

# What we did

- ✖ Ten taped interviews
  - ✖ Plus one written response
- + One focus group with three participants,
  - ✖ Sharing of initial analysis and development of themes
  - ✖ Recommendations made
  - ✖ One participant provided further written information
- ✖ Participants reimbursed for sharing of knowledge

# Collaborative Research

- ✖ All involved in every stage:
  - + early conceptualisation of the research;
  - + joint authors of the grant application;
  - + Joint interviewers and transcribers;
  - + Collective analysis of the data
  - + conference presenters and
  - + co-authors as we disseminate the results

# Emerging Themes

- ✖ Racism - a significant part of participants' experiences
- ✖ Primary theme clusters:
  - + Lived experience- Racism
  - + Student survival
  - + Developing unique professional practice
  - + Recommendations for change

# Racism

- ✖ Life Long Experiences of Racism –
  - + Replicated on placement
  - + Placement no different
- ✖ Examples of Racism
  - + bullying
  - + devaluing (skills and knowledge)
  - + cultural differences (thinking that every Indigenous person knows everything about Indigenous culture)
  - + colluding / ignorance by University staff (non-Indigenous staff experts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people)
  - + labelled as aggressive if racism is challenged

# Racism

✖ ‘And when I say political, I mean that whole heap of bullying and standover that goes on there all the time. And just the way they talk about their clients, y’know, and Aboriginal and Islander people. Y’know, they don’t say it to your face, “oh them f-ing black ....” they’ll say it to another worker, and they’ll say it in an undertone’ David

# Racism

- ✖ Racism unchallenged / permitted / condoned
- + I said to her ‘*This is completely inappropriate...*’ and she said *things like... ‘y’ know she’s not racist because she has Aboriginal friends’...* So I was pretty much on my own. Kimberly

# Racism

## ✖ Institutional racism

+ Nah because I've been through the migaloo system. I've been through it before and I know it and they will get you, they shift the goal posts, and because they hear you, they listen, they know what you're saying, but they always gotta shift the goal posts to prove you're wrong. Jody

# Lived experience- Power and history

- ✖ ‘I didn’t know I was going to take children off their parents, just barge in, no empathy no nothing, ay, they were taking children, the parents were crying, the children would be out, I come out crying too.... That’s why I was so scared, you know, and I knew these people, and they are embarrassed, ashamed of me crying for their children. Juliet
- ✖ All of those issues and particularly given my personal background...my great grandmother was stolen, and then taken out to Palm Island and yeah, I think that really hit home to look at it from a professional perspective. Carla

# Survival strategies

- ✖ *I was not in my home town, but I was working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, I socialised with them a lot and was able to have some kind of cultural healing.*  
Mary
- ✖ *She's gotta have a mate. Y'know this is where the non-Indigenous people get us, by numbers. They know when they get one Indigenous person on their own, they can break em. But if they get a bundle, they can't break them.* Jody

# Survival Strategies

*I think having them there really buffers me, really buffers my role as a worker, but also as a student. And cos the Aunties can do most of the advocating (laughs) and the talking and it's good, because they not only offer that support, but that knowledge.* David

*You got to get this done to get to here, so and I suppose that's where you dust your feet, [laughter], dust your feet and move on.* Juliet

# Developing Unique practice

- ✖ When women used to come up to the service, I used to go up and meet them and start sitting there and just yarning with them. I just didn't want to sit behind a desk and look at books and think, what am I supposed to do? Just go out and do it. It sort of comes natural I suppose... Tara
- ✖ [I didn't want to] just say, this is the theories they were using, this is the framework I'm developing, I wanted to talk about how I was feeling with it all and I found that my supervisors were really supportive of that.  
Carla

# recommendations for change

- ✖ Increasing cultural knowledge and support in placement
  - + *Take them out, introduction to the workplace, um, their policy and stuff, how they can be supported, um, how they work culturally in that organisation and stuff. Because you know, realistically, with social work, you're going out and working with a majority, lots of them are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So having that understanding of culture.*' Tara

# Key Discussion Points

- ✖ *Being in the minority*
  - + *Being an Indigenous person, coming in to all white faces, that was a bit daunting.* Juliet
- ✖ Connection with lived experience
  - + *'my grandmother was stolen'* Carla
- ✖ Create culturally safe environments- safe spaces

# Stages of colonisation

- ✖ Denial and Withdrawal;
- ✖ Destruction/Eradication;
- ✖ Denigration/Belittlement;
- ✖ Surface Accommodation/Tokenism;
- ✖ Transformation/Exploitation (Laenui, 2007).

# Moving to Action

- ✖ Decolonisation (Laenui, 2007):
  - + Rediscovery and Recovery;
  - + Mourning;
  - + Healing/Forgiveness (Muller, 2010);
  - + Dreaming;
  - + Commitment;
  - + Action.
- ✖ Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must engage (Muller, 2010)

# action for Change

- ✖ Increase cultural awareness for field educators through training;
- ✖ increase cultural support for our Indigenous students, and
- ✖ increase preparations of educators and placement agencies to better ensure students' cultural safety.
- ✖ *The findings of this social work research are*

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