

Dialogue and the Cultural Other in Conflict Situations: An Augmented Understanding

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Abstract: In edition 1 volume 1 of the Dialogue Journal I outlined the case for a three-tiered framework to theoretically position intergroup dialogue. The framework was based on a) the concept of difference between groups, b) the bridging of difference through an inclusive vision, and c) transformation framed through the understanding of predominant dialogue scholars, chief amongst which was Paulo Freire. Although useful, I found the framework inadequate, particularly when applied to conflict situations. In short it fails to appreciate and interrogate difference and its role in the dialogue process. In particular, it does not take account of the competing narratives upon which difference and conflicting identities can interact. A framework of moral psychology based on the workings of behavioural psychologist Johnathon Haidt was utilised to go deeper into the manner in which people construct their sense of cultural identity. Haidt argues that we position the cultural other according to broad conceptions of moral reality to identify with either the certainty of a cultural in-group or the flexibility of broad notions of humanity. This paper explores this augmented framework of dialogue in the case of negotiations to treaty between Aboriginal Victorians and the Victorian government in Australia. Data analysis on interviews of key figures in the treaty process, as well as the analysis of an online interactive campaign involving members of both groups, revealed a hidden complexity to the dialogue process and the discourses from which cultural threat is framed. The paper argues the case that well thought out theories around identity can augment our understanding of dialogue.

Keywords: Dialogue, Cultural bias, Cultural conflict, Moral psychology, Aboriginal treaty.

Intergroup Dialogue: Appraising the Early Framework

In an early edition of the Dialogue Journal (Atkinson 2013), I outlined the case for a three-tiered framework of intergroup dialogue based on three domains: a) the concept of difference between groups, b) the bridging of difference through an inclusive vision and c) transformation. With regards to the initial domain, that of difference between groups, I used a critic-constructivist understanding of a cultural group. This not only provided a means for exploring the way in which difference is constructed between people, but also the juxtaposition between such difference and the social context. As

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an example, labels such as ‘refugee’, ‘Muslim’, ‘African’ or, for more impact, ‘African Muslim refugee’ are frequently applied and used unthinkingly as if they capture an understanding of a swathe of the population. A critic-constructivist perspective interrogates such labels and how and why they are constructed.

In the case of the second domain, the bridging of difference in the dialogue process through an inclusive vision, I found profit in the work of social learning theorist Etienne Wenger (1999). Incredibly, given the emphasis on learning within dialogue, there is little in the theoretical literature that explores the construction of meaning across cultures. Broadly, Wenger looks at how people create spaces of participation, negotiation and shared identity within and between groups. Wenger’s focus is on the ways by which social meanings intersect and act upon each other within a group of learners to create broader meanings which contribute to (or block) the sense of identity of people and their potential to experience meaning within society.

For the third domain, I was particularly interested in understanding the change process that members of cultural groups experience through their conversations with the ‘other’. For that I turned to dialogue theory. ‘Dialogue’ has been theorised by multiple scholars, coalescing primarily around the ethical co-creation of meaning through multi-vocal conversations. Foremost academic contributions include the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer (1989), the reciprocity of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), the spiritual communion of Martin Buber (1965), and to a lesser extent the rational re-constructionism of Jürgen Habermas (1984). It is a list that unfortunately mirrors the dominant hegemony of western academia.¹ In my own case I drew on Paulo Freire (1970), who has been hugely influential in the area of pedagogy and human development through his critical orientation to dialogue, David Bohm (1996), who sees in dialogue a vehicle to human consciousness, and Martin Buber, who extends dialogue into spaces of silence and solitude. These three scholars present a pathway to positive change emphasising the importance of critical understanding (Freire), communion (Buber), and suspension of thought (Bohm). Given the learning-based focus of my research I found the work of these scholars to be particularly appropriate in the context of understanding transformation through multivocal conversations. The following diagram depicts this three-part model of intergroup dialogue.

1 Dialogue Theories I and II (Sleap and Sener 2013, 2015) produced by the Dialogue Society broadens this list to non-western voices. Nevertheless, the lack of female and African voices reveals an urgency to interrogate the lack of diversity in understandings of dialogue.

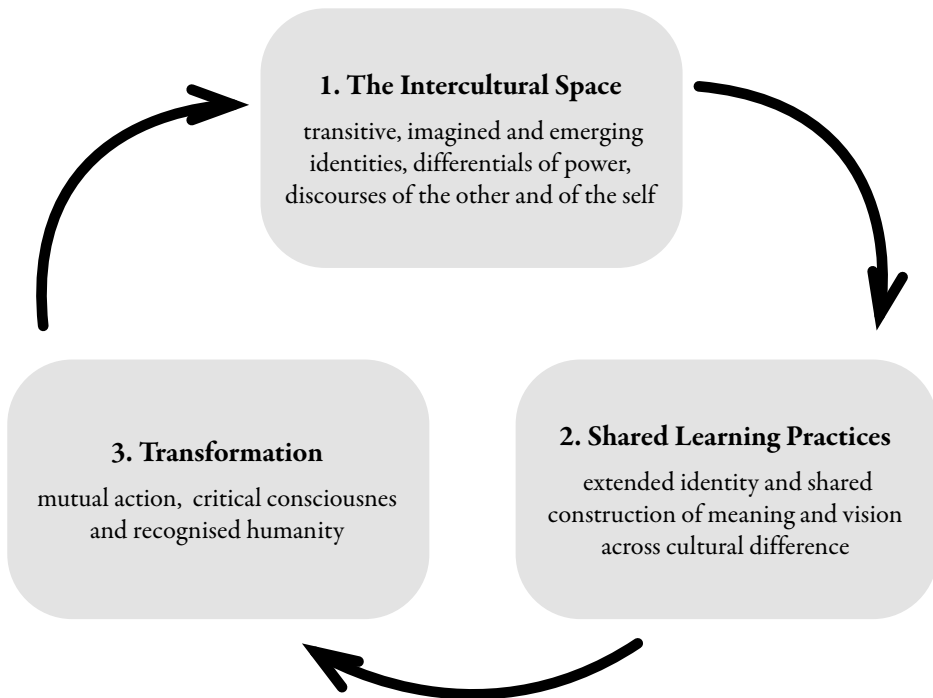


Figure 1 Framework for intergroup dialogue

With regard to the first two case studies, where the focus was on members of groups seeking to enter a broader mainstream society (refugees, long term unemployed migrants), the framework proved very useful (see Atkinson 2018a and Atkinson 2018b for a more detailed discussion). In particular it enabled me to ask important questions around people's sense of identity, what and how they learnt in their conversations with the 'other' and how such conversations led to change. For my third case study, focusing on the treaty process between Aboriginal Victorians and the Victorian government, I found the framework inadequate, however. Unlike the two previous case studies, this case study took place within the ongoing context of misrepresentation, disparagement and exclusion of the perceived 'disadvantaged' Aboriginal culture by the 'dominant' culture. The framework above, however, while inclusive of dialogue, is not inclusive of the reasons for cultural bias and how they are formed in connection with certain groups. In short, I lacked an unbiased understanding for exploring bias itself. Meeting this problem required a significant detour into the nature of cultural bias and the extremely powerful framing of moral psychology.

Augmenting the Framework: Moral Psychology and Cultural Bias

Cultural theorist Kwame Appiah (2016) makes the point that our identities are 'held together by narratives' which we inherit from previous generations that are without substantive essence. Consequently, while stories at the level of the nation or an ethnic group may shift and change, the associated labels have a continuing presence that traverse both space and time. In identifying ourselves as part of a national or ethnic group we derive an imagined, though powerful link both with the past and with place. A consequence of such identification is a bias in the way we imagine ourselves and the 'other' alongside, to paraphrase Appiah, a willed ignorance about the dark side of our cultural story (Appiah cited in Heintz, 2018). Our identity is so 'deeply internalised and embodied' (Surak 2012) that our bias is not only implicit but also unconscious (Pearson, Dovidio and Gaertner 2009).

Not surprisingly the reasons for cultural prejudice have increasingly become the object of study as researchers and academics seek to understand its persistence within society. Combined with the idea that a significant degree of our cultural bias lies outside of our conscious awareness is the further suggestion that such facility is reinforced through the learned recognition of powerful signs. Constructed meanings associated with a targeted group serve to not only stereotype the values and behaviours of others but also reinforce the cultural characteristics of one's own group (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004; Sears, Hetts, Sidanius and Bobo 2000). This framing of the other to strengthen one's own sense of identity appears ubiquitous to human constructed cultural groups. Skin colour, clothing and symbols are obvious physical identity markers of difference. Likewise, national, cultural and ethnic meanings are actively and continuously internalised and re-constructed. Religious communities do not just form identity constructs based on their own unique meanings; they situate themselves through a 'complex process of selection, emphasis and recognition in relation to proximate [cultural] rivals' (Cucarella 2019 conference paper).

Work in the area of moral psychology suggests that while we may all tend to be culturally biased, that does not necessarily translate into an active prejudice. As moral psychologist Jonathon Haidt charges, people do not react or even view the same situation the same way. Haidt's work on moral philosophy (Haidt 2012; see also Haidt, Graham and Joseph 2009) suggests that we actively construct and internalise cultural meanings both cognitively and emotionally according to our moral ideology.

Haidt argues that such moral ideology exists on a spectrum. At one end of this spectrum are people who strongly identify with moral obligations around loyalty, authority and sanctity. In contrast, other people are more inclined to identify with values of fairness and protection from harm. The former favour an in-group bias

believing that their country, their culture is clearly identifiable, unique and worth preserving. The loyalty, authority and sanctity they feel in their constructions of national identity frame not only how they see themselves but also others. Accordingly, the cultural other is potentially viewed as a direct threat, based upon their own moral bias. As a consequence, they feel an obligation to protect and defend what they see as a singular sense of cultural identity.

People who belong to the latter group, on the other hand prioritise fairness and social wellbeing over the authority of the state, loyalty to national ideals or sanctity to the group. They endorse national diversity and liberation believing that such values generate virtues and practices that allow people to live in harmony as autonomous agents with their own goals. The result is a differing set of discourses around cultural identity according to people's moral perspective and the way society, and threat, is framed. Those who prioritise authority, loyalty and sanctity take a collectivist position to one's own identity, seeking to preserve the status quo and the cultural hierarchy in order to safeguard security. By contrast, those who favour fairness and protection of harm are likely to take a cosmopolitan position towards others. Unlike the cultural collectivists, who require threat to strengthen their own position, the cosmopolitans feel validated under conditions where existential threats have been minimalised.

Within such a scenario, people on the borders of national identity play a unique role. They are alternatively cast as fellow human beings or a threat to the nation. Their identities are alternatively constructed to support the mainstream status quo or to disrupt the status quo. In the context of cultural conflict, such as in my case study, moral psychology reveals a complexity between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people beyond a simplified dichotomous relationship. The following diagram depicts this augmented understanding of intergroup dialogue. It begins with Haidt's spectrum of moral psychology resulting in different discourses of the other and a complexity to the intercultural space. This in turn results in different cultural learnings and transformative potential.

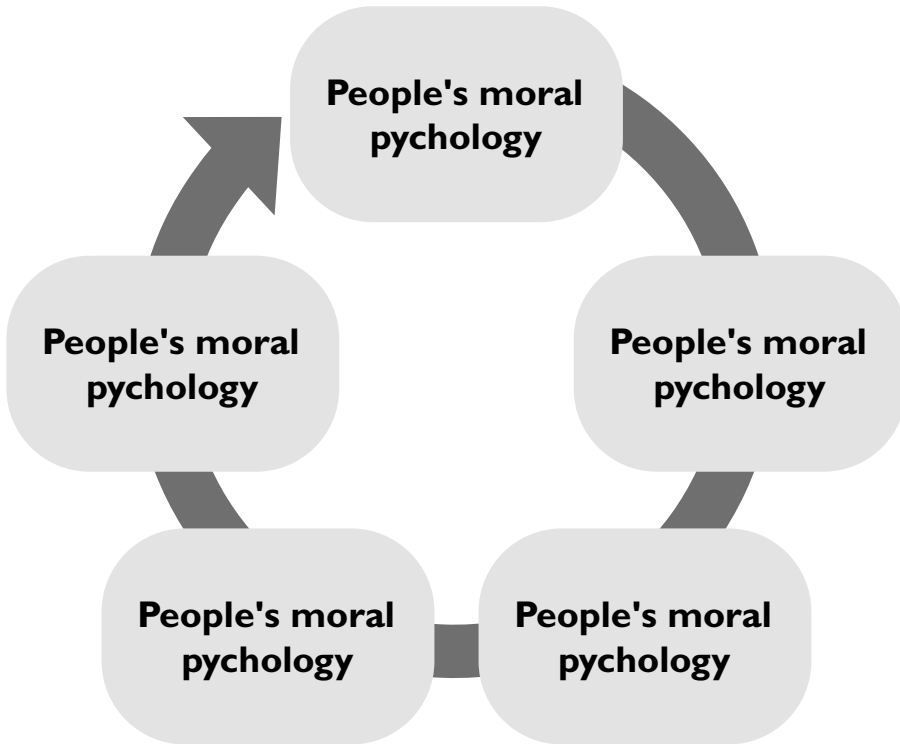


Figure 2 Framework for intergroup dialogue incorporating moral psychology

From a practical perspective, I positioned the above framework in terms of a two-part method. Step one, based on the work of Haidt, identifies significant discourses used to position the cultural other. Step two utilises the discourses identified in the previous step to inform understandings of how people relate dialogically to the other. I start, however, with a background to the Victorian Aboriginal Treaty process.

Background: The Victorian Aboriginal Treaty

Aboriginal people are neither recognised in the constitution, nor have a direct say in parliament. Neither has there been a treaty between Aboriginal people and any government, whether state or federal, in Australia. It was against this backdrop that in February 2016, the Victorian government hosted a meeting with 500 Victorian Aboriginal community leaders from across the state to seek their views on self-determination and constitutional recognition. To provide further background information, the Victorian Aboriginal population, constituting just under 1% of the Victorian population (ABS 2016), is made up of different tribal groups within which are different clans with heritage ties to the land extending over 60,000

years before white settlement. Key voices within Aboriginal communities include Aboriginal elders who have gained recognition as custodians of knowledge and lore, as well as traditional owners who are directly descended from the original Aboriginal inhabitants of a culturally defined area of land. Aboriginal people may also be members of different Registered Aboriginal Parties, which act to give advice and knowledge to the Aboriginal Minister at state level in the management and protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria (Parliament of Victoria, 2012).

The 2016 gathering unanimously called for treaty. A state-wide forum in May 2016 identified the next steps that needed to take place in order to progress this agenda. Going through these steps is unnecessary in the context of this paper; it suffices to mention two important aspects. Firstly, the treaty process has involved multiple Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, resulting in multiple sites of intergroup engagement. Secondly, the government's commitment to self-determination and treaty included a structured engagement between Victorian Aboriginal people and the Victorian mainstream society. This came to be known as the Deadly Questions Campaign. An online public space enabled non-Aboriginal Victorians to direct questions to Aboriginal Victorians in order to acquire a deeper understanding of Aboriginal cultures, histories, and issues. My research explored both these sites.

Application of Theory to Practice

As mentioned above, the model was applied to the case of negotiations to treaty between Aboriginal Victorians and the Victorian government in Australia guided by the meta question:

What are the factors that facilitate and hinder intergroup dialogue?

Step 1 involved the identification of four predominant mainstream constructions of Aboriginality in the history of relations between Aboriginal people and the non-Aboriginal mainstream. The first three I labelled in terms of exclusion, deficit and shared humanity. A fourth construction is not so much a discourse as a relationship. A space of 'sanitised acceptance' where people are prepared to acknowledge the Aboriginal presence and Aboriginal knowledge, but only in a delimited extent.

These four categories provide insight for informing Step 2. An understanding of these different discourses both framed data gathering and the analysis of data. Interviews were carried out with key Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal figures in the treaty process. An online interactive campaign involving members of the non-Aboriginal mainstream cultural group provided further data. Analysis focused on the ways in which Aboriginal people were framed within the broader society and the implications for dialogue.

Step 1-Identifying discourses of Aboriginal identity in mainstream society

As mentioned above, there were four main categories of positioning Aboriginal people in the history of Australia. Historically, Aboriginal people have been excluded by both the state and in the national imaginary. The constitution is yet to recognise Aboriginal people. At the time of federation, Aboriginal people were thought to be journeying towards extinction aligned with the social Darwinian perspective that 'lesser cultures', were not only 'inferior to higher civilisations' but could not survive contact (Manne 1998). It was not until the mid-1970s that the practice of taking 'half-blood' children from Aboriginal mothers to be raised as white was abandoned. It was only in 1992 that the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, that Australia was an unclaimed, un-owned land prior to European settlement was overturned, allowing Aboriginal people to own Aboriginal land.

A deficit discourse views Aboriginal people as lacking the skills, knowledge, or attitudes to succeed by themselves. Framed in cultural rather than racial terms, blame is directed towards a lack of training, an unstable home life, poor foundational skills in language or literacy, ensuing social problems, or even indigenous worldviews themselves. The discourse creates a sense of dichotomy between Aboriginal people and the constructed mainstream, serving to extend the status quo. Examples of the deficit discourse are common. A recent example illustrates its insidious nature. In 2007, Prime Minister John Howard carried out the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention. The intervention included substantial legislative changes to address allegations of child sexual abuse and neglect in the Northern Territory. Prime Minister Howard made the following media statement:

What we have got to do is confront the fact that these communities have broken down. The basic elements of a civilised society don't exist. (PM Transcripts 2007)

Howard's actions received substantial media interest that was overwhelmingly negative with regards to the portrayal of remote Aboriginal communities, while portraying Commonwealth intervention as necessary and heroic (Proudfoot and Habibis, 2013). The action left a legacy which situated Aboriginal people and communities in a situation of need for assistance because of their own 'dysfunctional' nature.

On occasions, a combination of political leadership and public sentiment has worked together to challenge the ideological position of a one-dimensional version of Australian nationhood. The result has seen the creation of a parallel discourse that is far more conciliatory and far more human-centred. A prime example is the apology speech in 2008 by former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd:

The nation is demanding of its political leadership to take us forward. Decency,

human decency, universal human decency, demands that the nation now step forward to right an historical wrong. That is what we are doing in this place today. (Rudd 2008, 3)

The result was a broader reflective stance taken on the place of Aboriginal people in Australian society, alongside debate on the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Finally, what I describe as ‘sanitised’ or ‘accepted’ occupies a middle ground between the deficit and the humanitarian discourse. It is a safe discourse, which neither confronts the cultural other, nor challenges the status quo. In minimising conflict, it also minimises spaces of cultural learning. As a consequence, it lacks a transformative ethos. Despite this, I feel that it is an essential area to understand, for it is essentially a discourse which moves from disengagement to tentative engagement as people emotionally grapple with the challenge represented by the cultural other.

Step 2: Viewing research data through a prism of moral psychology

As mentioned above, I explored both the discourses in the Deadly Questions Campaign and the experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people involved in the treaty process, informed through the above identified discourses. The Aboriginal people I interviewed were prominent leaders in the Aboriginal community. The non-Aboriginal people were involved in the treaty process as parliamentarians, government employees or facilitating organisations of treaty itself.

The Deadly Questions Campaign

An important focus of the Deadly Questions Campaign, that of asking *Aboriginal people* about *Aboriginal culture*, ensures that the questions themselves are not exclusionary. Many are, however, clearly identifiable with both deficit and humanitarian discourses: 50%, evenly divided of the 100 representative questions, fitted into these two categories.

Questions regarding the past and welfare support clearly reveal aspects of the deficit discourse:

It’s 2018, why is Aboriginal culture stuck in the past? (DQ)

You say you want to be equal, but you get so many concessions that the average Australians don’t, do you think this is equality? (DQ)

The allusion that members of the non-Aboriginal culture are either ‘stuck’ or claiming concessions situates Aboriginal people not only in deficit, but as a welfare burden to the ‘fair’ and ‘equitable’ ‘mainstream’ society. Such identified ‘deficit’ extends to

the perceived morality of Aboriginal people in casting themselves as victims of past atrocities that have long since finished. In the questions that follow, Aboriginal people are positioned as perpetrators; mainstream members are, accordingly, the victims:

Why are non-Aboriginal Australians made to feel guilty about the past? (DQ)

If we are about healing from the past, why are Aboriginal people still trying to fight for land rights if we should be equal now? (DQ)

How do people alive today genuinely claim injury for something that happened to others more than 200 years ago? (DQ)

Such statements as those above reveal both an ignorance of the impact of colonisation and the impact of ongoing racism. More to the point, however, they showcase the moralistic nature of people's bias towards the cultural 'other'. A perspective not based on evidence but on people's preconceived viewpoints as they make judgements according to their own moral authority – positioning others from a circumscribed view of social reality.

The humanitarian discourse is characterised by a shared human reality alongside critical reflection of one's own cultural viewpoints. An important aspect is that of bridging the sense of constructed difference inherent in the deficit discourse:

What can white Australians do to support Indigenous Australians in moving towards racial equality? (DQ6)

What's the most helpful thing a non-Indigenous Australian could do to support Aboriginal Australians? (DQ7)

Concerns of power, identity, and equality are broached to acknowledge present inequality and the Aboriginal desire for a changed relationship

What does a reconciled Australia look like to you? (DQ8)

What can white Australians do to support Indigenous Australians in moving towards racial equality? (DQ9)

The remaining 50% of the questions neither supported a viewpoint of Aboriginal people in deficit, nor as deserving of justice and political representation. These are the questions which I described above as belonging to the category of 'sanitised acceptance'. While many were simplified questions concerning the colours of the flag or the meaning of Aboriginal terms, the more interesting, from a dialogical perspective, were those that asked Aboriginal people about their view of white society:

What is the one thing that you wished more non-Indigenous Australians understood about Indigenous Australians? (DQ10)

How do you feel when white people champion for you? (DQ11)

It was notable that many questions were not simply about Aboriginal culture, but culture more generally.

As most of us are mixed heritage, do you also relate to those parts of your heritage that are non-Indigenous? (DQ12)

How do you feel about the increasing multiculturalism in the Victorian community? (DQ13)

While the questions in this category reveal a lack of knowledge of Aboriginal culture, they also reveal a willingness to learn from and to communicate with Aboriginal people. There is a corresponding reflection around the imposed positioning of Aboriginal people alongside the recognition past and present actions may be wrong. While the topic is delimited, the invitation to talk as equals has been tentatively accepted.

Collectively the Deadly Questions Campaign revealed different discourses directed towards Aboriginal culture. On the one hand were those people who favour fixed cultural narratives underpinned by perceived different values. On the other hand, there was an acknowledgement of shared humanity divided through wrongs in the past and inequality in the present. Between these two perspectives were people willing to converse with and to learn from Aboriginal people. In other words, there was not one 'mainstream' Victorian community with one mainstream cultural identity. The interface between Aboriginal and mainstream culture may be viewed as being far more complex. This complexity, as I show below, has deep significance in the context of the treaty process.

Aboriginal people

In contrast to facilitators, questions around Aboriginal identity drew a considered, self-confident response from participants.

It is about tapping into something bigger than who we are. (Aboriginal respondent 1)

Culture and identity is what we live and breathe. It is being strong, black and proud. (Aboriginal respondent 2)

Interestingly, the sense of surety in Aboriginal culture did not necessarily translate

to a sense of ease or effortlessness in understandings of Aboriginality. Indeed, as the following statements reveal, there is an element of struggle and emotional challenge for Aboriginal respondents when engaging with their cultural identity.

Mate that's a PhD...It's an in-depth question, its got many answers. (Aboriginal respondent 3)

I still struggle with what that means, as the whole Aboriginal community struggles with what that means and the mainstream community struggles with what that means. It raises its own dilemmas and questions constantly. (Aboriginal respondent 1)

I think this is the point. Aboriginal culture is resilient and contains possibility because of the continuous struggle to define and be true to itself under the imposed constraints of mainstream society. A continuous effort by community leaders that draws on both the struggles of the past and the aspirations of the future to create shifts in the cultural landscape in the present. It is, however, a journey that cannot be traversed alone. As two respondents said,

I identify with the struggles of my community that they have faced over the last couple of hundred years. We've survived, adapted, been resilient and we are strengthening culture and re-enlivening cultural practice...because of who we are. (Aboriginal respondent 5)

I think it is all Victorians journey. (Aboriginal respondent 4)

It is here, I believe, that we can discern a key dialogical element of Aboriginal culture. Culture itself is central to Aboriginal identity (Aboriginal respondents 1 and 2). While Aboriginal culture is difficult to define (Aboriginal respondents 3 and 4), it is also resilient. For Aboriginal people, understanding and discussing the past is a necessary part of cultural renewal (Aboriginal respondent 5), a journey that cannot be traversed alone. As shown in the Deadly Questions Campaign, however, a large extent of the non-Aboriginal population is either opposed to, or unsure of, the journey of shared cultural recognition.

The facilitators of treaty

The question of how facilitators viewed their cultural identity was met with a sense of difficulty coupled with, and possibly a direct result of, the sense of discomfort they felt regarding what may be referred to as popular national constructions and a white nationalist discourse.

I'm not comfortable with mainstream views of being Australian. (Facilitator 1)

In the 'gross unwashed middle Australian psyche' the viewpoint frankly is just get on with it or get over it. It was hundreds of years ago that wrongs took place. Why can't aboriginal people move on? (Facilitator 2)

While facilitator respondents were clearly uncomfortable with a fixed national sense of identity, there was clear identification with what may be termed humanitarian values. Variations of the following statements were common. Cultural difference with Aboriginal people was alternatively structured around privilege, positioned as a narrative, or shaped by present and past oppression:

The basis of being a good human being is to care about others and have some form of empathy. There is also a responsibility as a member of the human race to look more broadly. (Facilitator 2)

My story does not involve exclusion... Aboriginal people, because of invasion, because of exclusion, dispossession, have actually bound together in terms of identity. (Facilitator 3)

It is within the nexus of recognised privilege of their own cultural position and inclusivity of others that I feel we can define the cultural values of the facilitators. Identifying with universal humanitarian values engenders empathy and understanding of Aboriginal people beyond a narrow-minded and opinionated nationalistic cultural discourse. This raises intriguing dialogical questions from an intercultural perspective. How do these respondents understand, to use facilitator 2's words, the 'gross unwashed middle Australian psyche', and how do they engage with those who choose a limited acceptance of Aboriginal issues?

Discussion of the treaty process through an augmented view of dialogue

In conclusion, we can note that within the complexity of Victorian mainstream society an obvious finding was the diversity of opinion. There are those sympathetic to the Aboriginal perspective on history and the continual fight for recognition today. Equally, there are those opposed to any such recognition, seeing themselves as cultural victims, while peddling a racist discourse that minimises the value of Aboriginal culture and the brutality of the colonial past. Between these two groups are those who are comfortable to engage with Aboriginal culture, but only so far. Aboriginal respondents, on the other hand, sought to protect their culture against mainstream racist attitudes while promoting their own expression of cultural identity. There was a realisation that their journey to self-determination was a journey best travelled within a broader context of the cultural renewal of Australia.

This discursive summary has deeper repercussions beyond a simple description of different attitudes to treaty. For the treaty to create deep cultural change it will need

to engage with the diverse moral, emotional and cultural worlds from which people frame their social reality. I believe this leads to important questions for the state of Victoria in terms of which issues and which groups are prioritised, and which are overlooked. Is it better to challenge racist attitudes or approach such fixed viewpoints from a different perspective? How do we engage with the disengaged, those with limited interest in Aboriginal people and their journey? How do we work with those who share a humanitarian perspective?

Conclusion

The framework described here maintains many aspects of that first approach developed in the 2013 paper. Uppermost is a recourse to the work of previous dialogue scholars and transparency in terms of expressing themes of influence. In the case here that was, and remains, a focus on mutual learning and transformative change guided by the understandings of Bohm, Buber and Freire. The major difference in this version is an understanding of how cultural bias can create diverse discourses of the cultural other across a spectrum ranging from inclusivity, on the one hand, to exclusivity on the other, thus leading to different discourses directed towards the cultural other. In the case expressed here, these discourses were based on deficit, sanitised acceptance, and shared humanity. This may not always be the case. Different cultures, different cultural contexts will create different discourses of the other. Nevertheless, I make the case that an understanding of moral psychology can augment dialogical frameworks through framing the conscious and unconscious cultural biases of the other in situations of cultural conflict.

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