

RUNNING HEAD: INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Encounters with the dominant culture: Voices of Indigenous students in mainstream higher education¹

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Abstract

Students from minority and non-dominant backgrounds often have negative experiences when dealing with higher education systems. In this study we explored Indigenous student's experiences in mainstream higher education. Interviews were conducted with 34 participants, systematically selected from a listing of 110 past and present students, about their experiences in mainstream higher education. Participants included people who had successfully completed programs at Curtin University of Technology, those who did not complete courses, and those who were participating in bridging courses at the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS). The qualitative data were analysed for unique and recurring themes using content analyses. The data showed that subtle and overt forms of racism impact on students' experiences in mainstream education. Participants mentioned issues associated with conflicts between indigenous and mainstream cultural values that are reflected in course content and levels of support across schools. The CAS was highlighted as a context for the strengthening of cultural identities, providing emotional and tangible support, and providing a link between the community and the university. Efforts aimed at strengthening of cultural identities need to be supported and the diversity of Aboriginal people must be acknowledged. Research and interventions challenging mainstream norms and structures that maintain social inequality are required. The challenges to affirmative action need to be located in their proper historical context.

Keywords: Aboriginal Education, Cultural Awareness, Racial Relations, Social Change, Interviews, Social Support

Encounters with the dominant culture: Voices of Indigenous students in mainstream higher education

Since the 1970s there have been considerable changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across the country have broadened their participation in tertiary courses (Bin-Sallik, 1991). At Curtin University of Technology (CUT) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students (ATS) were concentrated in particular areas of study. According to CUT statistics, in 1997, 69% of ATS students were enrolled in courses offered by the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS), 15.8% in Arts, Education and Social Sciences, 7.2% in the Curtin Business School, 5.8% in Health Sciences, and 2.7% in Engineering and Science. Despite the implementation of various access and equity policies and the development of strategies to recruit and retain Indigenous students in mainstream tertiary courses, their participation and completion rates are still lower than that of the dominant group (Bin-Sallik, 1991; Kemmis, 1997; Whatman, 1995).

Although there have been many research efforts aimed at understanding and redressing the issue of participation completion by different groups, explanations are often limited because of a tendency to focus on individual differences and to ignore contextual factors. For example, there is a wealth of literature exploring individual-centred factors and school participation (e.g., McInerney, 1990; McInerney & Sinclair, 1992). These studies often ignore the social, political and cultural context of education. Cultural theories and sociocultural models offer alternative explanations for the different participation rates in higher education for different groups. Cultural perspectives, for example, argue that school failure can be explained in terms of cultural incompatibilities (see Tharp, 1989). On the other hand, Ogbu (1992) argued that broader social, economic and political realities impact on minority schooling and suggested that the nature of relations between groups explains the different levels of success in education. He stated that voluntary minorities such as migrants come to a country with their culture intact and are more likely to participate in dominant group structures because they see it as a way to improve their status in society. Involuntary minorities, that is groups brought into a society through slavery, conquest, or colonisation, enter schooling with a set of cultural characteristics developed in response to the challenges of a social, economic, and psychological history of rejection and oppression. Mainstream structures will do little to change their social and economic status; instead these are seen as settings that threaten their cultural identities through continuing processes of assimilation. These groups respond to these threats by developing oppositional cultures reflecting resistance to mainstream education.

Deyhle (1995) reframed Ogbu's (1992) interpretation, arguing that only some of the culture that groups develop can be seen as oppositional and that other aspects have survived colonisation. These aspects of culture can lead to substantive differences in values between Indigenous and mainstream people and become barriers because of power differentials between groups. Deyhle suggests that this cultural conflict is as important as race in understanding what happens in education settings. Like Deyhle, Gilmore, Smith, and Kairaiuak (1997) pointed to cultural differences and underlying racial politics in explaining educational outcomes and experiences for Native Alaskan students.

At a different level, Margolis and Romero (1998) highlighted aspects of the hidden curriculum that has implications for participation in mainstream higher education. They pointed to the informal mechanisms of control that impact on educational outcomes and experiences for people of colour in the United States. Aspects of the hidden curriculum include the extent to which race and ethnicity is considered in programs, discipline and expectations of students, the nature of teaching and learning strategies, levels of support for researching topics relevant to students' communities of origin, and the nature and quality of relationships between staff and students. Kemmis (1997) discussed these as direct and indirect effects of teaching and education. Direct effects are reflected in the extent to which educational practice undermines the cultures of Aboriginal people. Indirect effects are those produced via education of non-Indigenous people and through research as reflecting the impact of professions and professional work on Indigenous people. The strained relations between psychology and Indigenous people can serve as an example of indirect effects (Riley, 1998). In essence these frameworks point to clashes in culture and worldview and also racial politics and how these affect the participation of students from nondominant backgrounds in education.

In Australia, the broader context of reconciliation has brought with it many opportunities for universities to move beyond culturally imperialistic educational practices and to forge new relations based on respect and mutual recognition with Indigenous people (Kemmis, 1997). At CUT the Center for Aboriginal Studies (CAS) has been at the forefront of negotiating and developing consultative structures and processes to pave the way for implementing policies and programs at different levels that are informed by notions of mutual recognition and respect.

The CAS is an Aboriginal 'enclave' within CUT that has been operating since 1983. In 1994 the Centre was relocated into a purpose-built building. This building was designed with a number of Aboriginal symbols in mind to reflect the relationship of Aboriginal people with the land. It is a circular building with a large open

space in the centre that features wood, stone and ochre tones. An award winning painting by Joan Martin was translated into a large mosaic at the steps of the entrance inside the Centre. The mosaic symbolises the coming together of different Aboriginal tribal groups.

The guiding philosophy of CAS is Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATR). ATR can be defined in contrast to the mainstream worldview which largely reflects a British Anglo-Celtic heritage. ATR is derived from Aboriginal people's worldview which includes history, culture and ways of being. ATR recognises the rich diversity of Indigenous Australians. It is about making explicit the terms of reference, processes of doing, thinking, and feeling for a group of Aboriginal people (Mallard & Garvey, personal communication, 21.01.2000).

The CAS, which is managed by Aboriginal people, has a number of aims including promoting Indigenous participation in tertiary study, empowering Aboriginal people, and responding to the needs of Aboriginal communities. The CAS offers courses ranging from bridging courses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to a Master of Arts program with a focus on Indigenous research. In addition, the CAS also delivers full and half-day workshops for non-Aboriginal people on ways of working with Aboriginal people. Staff from the CAS also conduct lectures on Aboriginal history, culture, health and other topics in some mainstream courses and consult on curriculum development. The CAS and other teaching settings are the contexts in which various social, cultural, political and historical factors converge. The CAS represents an effort to ameliorate the effects of conflicting cultures and worldviews and to assert the voice of local indigenous people. The CAS is of particular importance because it has a key role in empowering Aboriginal people, responding to the needs of Aboriginal communities, strengthening and revitalising the cultural identities of its communities, and serving as a bridge between the mainstream and the Indigenous community.

Given this context we sought to identify from students' experiences the barriers and protective factors that influence their participation in mainstream tertiary courses and at the CAS. Informed by a collaborative research agenda, this focus was determined by the CAS and the researchers were invited to conduct the research project.

Method

There have been considerable advances in developing research models that are sensitive to the realities and needs of those involved in research programs (e. g., Smith, 1999). The guiding philosophy of the CAS and

principles of self-determination is consistent with the values and principles of collaborative research. Rappaport (1994) proposed that research be conducted in line with an empowerment research agenda. “In the empowerment worldview, the concern becomes how to collaborate with people to create, encourage, or assist them to become aware of, obtain, or create the resources they may need to make use of their competencies” (Rappaport, 1994, p. 366). The empowerment agenda goes well with collaborative research models that place strong emphasis on negotiating the research agenda with the community, involving the community as research partners, and using participants’ stories to communicate experiences. This collaborative process has also been echoed in Australia by Davidson (1992) and has been articulated in the Australian Psychological Society’s (APS) Guidelines for the Provision of Psychological Services and the Conduct of Psychological Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People of Australia (APS, 1996).

This study was conducted in collaboration with the CAS. From the outset of the project a concerted effort was made by the research team to ensure that the project was conducted in a way that allowed for the Indigenous group to direct the evolving research process.

Forming a steering committee. Before data collection commenced, a steering committee, consisting of the three authors, a delegate from the CAS, and three Aboriginal research assistants, was formed. The steering committee was responsible for the supervision of the overall project, and ensuring maximum involvement and direction from the Indigenous community.

Recruiting interviewers and constructing the interview guide. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to assess in detail the experiences of Indigenous students in mainstream higher education, and to gather demographic information. Two Aboriginal research assistants guided question development and read the final instrument to ensure the face validity and relevance of the questions. This process is central to ensuring that the researchers gain access to the participant’s worldviews (Brislin, 1993). Examples of the questions are: “What sort of positive (negative) experiences have you had at CUT?”; “How sensitive is your course of study to Aboriginal issues?”; “What is the cultural appropriateness of the course content?”; “What support did you get from the CAS, your family, mainstream staff?”; “What advice would you give to future students?”; and “What advice would you give to mainstream staff teaching Indigenous students?”

Recruiting participants.

Through the CAS, a list of past and present Indigenous students was obtained. The list contained names of 110 students. Every third person was selected from the listing until a total of 30 participants were reached. Ten people who had successfully completed programs at CUT, 10 who had not completed courses, and 10 who were participating in bridging courses at the CAS were recruited. In addition, twelve interviews were conducted with Indigenous students participating in mainstream courses. Due to poor quality of some tape recordings eight interviews were lost, leaving 34 for analysis. Unfortunately the interviewers did not keep notes for those interviews which were lost.

Ten participants were male and 24 were female. Three participants entered mainstream education as school leavers; the remainder entered as mature age students. Three students were from the Perth metropolitan region and 31 came from remote and country regions (e. g., Broome, Katanning, Port Hedland) or interstate (e. g., Torres Strait Islands, South Australia and Victoria). The group was diverse in terms of location of origin and language groups. Most of the participants received financial support to study. Some were not eligible because of levels of income, while only two held scholarships. Nearly all participants had children and/or dependents from their extended family.

Participants were currently enrolled, or had been, in a range of courses. Most of the participants were enrolled, or had been, in Social Science courses, which is consistent with University enrolment trends. A number of students were enrolled (or had been) in Commerce, Business and Service Management, and one each in Fine Arts and Occupational Therapy, and three in Psychology. Most participants studied fulltime.

Collecting the data.

Using the semi-structured interview schedule, participants were interviewed in-depth, to ascertain what factors influenced their participation in, and completion of, mainstream courses. Two female Aboriginal graduate social workers conducted the interviews in stage one. One Aboriginal woman conducted the interviews in stage two. The interviewers were trained before they conducted the interviews to ensure consistency in the process. Training the researchers was a key part of the research process and gave the researcher assistants an opportunity to develop their interviewing skills. Training involved role playing and practising interviewing. Prior to being interviewed, all participants were informed about the confidentiality and anonymity of the information they were to provide, and also their right to abstain from answering any or all questions. The interviews lasted between 30 to 50 minutes.

Data Analyses

Qualitative data analysis is a continuous and cyclical process that starts from framing the research question through to synthesising and interpreting the emerging picture developed through intensive engagement with the raw data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moutsakas, 1990; Patton, 1980). After data collection and transcription of interviews all information was coded. Initially, the interview questions and our interest in risk and protective factors provided some way to organise and search the data. Three researchers independently analysed a series of transcripts for recurrent and unique themes using this scheme. After each researcher had gone through this process, key themes were identified and through discussion it was decided that those would be used to guide analysis of transcripts. This broad coding scheme allowed for reducing the mass of data to smaller units (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study quotations are used in reporting to illustrate the salient themes. As an additional authenticity check some participants were asked to comment on the accuracy of the summaries and interpretations of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Their recommendations were considered and incorporated into the analyses.

Results and Discussion

Some patterns and themes are consistent with the questions that were used to collect the data. Other themes emerged after close scrutiny and analyses of the data. The findings are discussed in terms of the themes that were identified. The themes included relocation and adaptation, racism and discrimination, overt racism and modern racism, and cultural sensitivity, issues related to the roles and functions of the CAS, and participants' advice to future students and staff. In advice to students, person-level factors were identified by students as important. These themes were the core ones that emerged for students in this particular context.

Relocation and settlement

Culture shock and identity. All but three of the participants had relocated to Perth. Of the internal migrants to Perth, the largest group was from the Kimberley region (32%) which is more than 1000km from Perth. A further 21% had come from Northern Queensland or the Torres Strait, which is about 3000km from Perth. Only two had come from the Southwest region of Western Australia.

The experience of relocation was mentioned by a number of participants. The experience has a number of facets. Relocation presents a variety of issues, such as culture shock, unfamiliarity with a new location, losing social ties and support, and changing diets. Oberg (1960) coined the term "culture shock" to refer to the process of cross-cultural location and has received considerable attention in the literature (Bochner, 1982;

Furnham & Bochner, 1986). He observed that “culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs and symbols include the thousand and one ways in which we orientate ourselves to situations of daily life” (p. 176). The impact of relocation can be mild disorientation resulting in unusual behaviour resulting from a lack of familiarity with the new environment (Furnham, 1990). Other studies have found more severe impacts such as psychological and physical health problems arising from relocation (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

A dominant response was bewilderment. The following observations indicate the problems associated with relocation from the North-west.

I came from a really remote community, it was predominantly Aboriginal and I was brought up in an Aboriginal reserve and we had very little interaction with white people and it was very racist, so it was black and white. So I spent most of my education life in a welfare, hostel like, institution so when I came down it was the first time for me to mix and mingle with white people. Non-Aboriginal (people) were literally separated for most of my life. So that was really a shock for me. I was very conscious of my Aboriginality, being an Aboriginal person. For the first time it really hit me when I came to CUT. Coming from the country to the metro was a real shock. (female former student)

Culture shock provides some insight into the transition experience. However, for members of a non-dominant group racial and cultural identity is often made salient because of increasing contact with white people after moving from a segregated context. This can lead to challenges for settlement and intergroup relations. In addition, the move from rural and remote to metropolitan areas adds another dimension to the transition experience because of differences in social and community structures.

There were relocation problems associated with cross-cultural relocation, and some associated specifically with Indigenous Australians. As one student put it:

... we have all those barriers to overcome which are probably similar to overseas students, but it is different in a way because we are in our own country.

Social support and education. In addition to the issues of relocation and intergroup contact, there were problems associated with entering tertiary education. Some of these issues were applicable to all students, others specific to Indigenous students. The realities of dispossession emerge in settings where Indigenous and white people interact.

Relocation presents a number of problems. One major one is the lack of social support for students and their families. A typical comment was:

If you are coming from up north what's it going to mean coming down to Perth because you go through a lot of culture shock, if you don't have your family with you. If you have to move, your family is going to suffer from their being away from their own family, (you need) to be really clear about the sacrifices you are going to have to make down here in the short term.

A number of the respondents relocated with their immediate families, and this provided some support, but also created difficulties of its own. One respondent with young children spoke of the stresses that she and her partner had to deal with regarding young children.

One difficulty inherent in a number of respondents' comments reflects a number of social issues. A number indicated that they saw themselves as having obligations to their communities or as social change agents. One said:

Well, to be clear about why they (other potential students) want to go into higher education and what they want to be. Because I had a goal to go into higher education for the sake of education may not be enough to keep you in there. Look at what you are doing and how it will help the community...

Other participants reported that they felt they had an obligation to educate their community. They reported that they had little support until they obtained employment, then community attitudes changed about the benefits of education. One participant felt that he/she needed to 'advertise' education. Another saw this as an avenue for development of the community. There are obviously many different views on the value and functions of higher education for Indigenous students. An important cultural issue to consider in making sense of the impact of transition is the fact that for Indigenous people the process challenges deep cultural structures because their cultural system is intertwined with the land. Thus, relocation goes beyond culture shock and presents challenges to cultural systems that are defined in terms of connections to the land and Aboriginal ways (Triandis, 1996; Reser, 1981). Once you move from the land you move into another group's country, one in which you become a stranger. This issue has also been identified by Deyhle (1995) in her work with Navajo people and has a major influence on educational outcomes in that community.

Overt racism, modern racism and cultural sensitivity

Overt racism. The negative evaluation of a group's physical characteristics is a key process of racism and prejudice (Jones, 1990, 1997). According to Jones, racism operates at multiple levels, including institutional and cultural levels. The negative effects of racism and discrimination on individuals and communities have been demonstrated (Fanon, 1967; Jones, 1990; Memmi, 1984). Therefore, searches of the data were conducted for reports of experiences of individual racism and discrimination. Of the 44% people who reported cultural insensitivity, 14% of this group reported that they had experienced racism and discrimination while studying at university. Those who reported experiences of individual-level racism dealt with it in their own ways. One student said that: "You can get students who are racist and don't have much time for you. That is their problem, not mine." On the other hand, a participant also said that: "Most of the white people were not very racist...". Another said:

I experienced no blatant discrimination. I guess it's twofold because I tended to alienate myself from the other students because of other Aboriginal students in the tertiary courses. We sort of depended on each other and did not allow ourselves to mix or become involved with others in the Department. On the other

hand you can say that people in the Department did not accept you so you looked for alternatives, you looked for your own people in other courses.

Another said: “there is a lot of ignorance out there amongst students, amongst staff, mainly on Aboriginal issues. Racism is rampant.” The following statement summarises the issue:

There is no understanding of the issues that Aboriginal people have. For example, everyone thinks that Abstudy is at a higher rate than Austudy, which is totally false. They think that we get more than mainstream, this needs to be demystified.

The low reported incidence of overt racism may possibly be explained by the fact that many of the participants were students at the CAS and may have had limited contact with the mainstream. However, just because there were no overt acts of racism does not mean that racism was absent. On the contrary, the excerpts point to racism at a different level and is confirmed by the fact that participants spoke of racism in terms of sensitivity, something captured by the notion of modern or symbolic racism (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Sale, 1999; Jones, 1997, 1998; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

Modern racism and cultural insensitivity: There is literature that shows racism has taken on a more subtle and complex form (Augoustinos, Rapley, & Turner, 1999; Jones, 1997; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Sanson, et al., 1998). In this study a lack of cultural awareness by teachers and insensitivity were issues that surfaced in the data analysis. Participants linked this to racism, which is consistent with perspectives in the literature. Many participants (44%) expressed concern over the different levels of insensitivity toward, and lack of awareness about Aboriginal issues. Schools and Departments reflected varying levels of sensitivity and awareness. The data suggested that participants were most likely to perceive disciplines in the social sciences as insensitive and ethnocentric.

For example, a participant said:

We were confronted with racist attitudes in lectures..., non-Aboriginal lecturers were talking about people and culture in such a way that suggested Aboriginality was not real but something that was constructed. This goes beyond my values because I don't see my Aboriginality as socially constructed. They were reducing Aboriginality and giving non-Aboriginal people the wrong image of what it meant to be Aboriginal.

This comment highlights the point that cultural differences have depths that the need for ‘cultural sensitivity’ could be seen to trivialise. Sarason (1981) commented about some “disturbing thoughts about our capacity to forget (if we ever knew it) that we have been molded by culture which, because it always does its job well, gives us a selective view of the present and a distorted view of the past” (p. 117). Our far from perfect understanding of our own culture creates a context where understanding of another’s is extremely difficult. Cultural sensitivity can refer to the more superficial levels of culture. Often there remain many aspects that do not allow us to understand other cultures and do not allow us to recognise that there are fundamental misunderstandings of the

basic elements of culture. Rather than be culturally sensitive (which implies some paternalism), we need to embrace cultural diversity (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994) and approach other cultures with awe. A central part of this process will require exploration and understanding on one's own cultural norms and their evolution (Ramsden, 1993). The person quoted above continued by discussing the ways in which the system threatens her Aboriginality and expressing her concerns about the images of Aboriginal people the system promoted.

Others said that insensitive information was presented in lectures that violated Aboriginal rules and protocols.

For example, one participant said that a text written by a non-Aboriginal person who lived in an Aboriginal society and went through various stages of initiation ceremony detailed this process in the text. This is a group-specific process; if members from other groups discussed it they would be breaking some cultural protocol.

Participants also reported that certain aspects of different social science courses were not sensitive because women had access to information that was taboo. A participant said: "There was stuff that wasn't appropriate for us Aboriginal people to be seeing or reading and that was hard." The person continued: "Sometimes you had to ignore your cultural values and beliefs in order to get what the institution says you have to get done - that was hard."

The comments reflect different levels of sensitivity across schools and departments. They also reflected the damaging effects, albeit unknowing, that a lack of cultural awareness and insensitivity among staff can have on those participating in mainstream courses.

On a different level, some participants felt that only certain epistemologies and ways of knowing were advanced. No sensitivity was shown toward Aboriginal ways and lectures were sometimes delivered in a way that devalued Aboriginal ways of knowing. For example, psychology was seen as individualistic and did not cater for collectivistic conceptions of people and community as reflected in Indigenous cultures. One person said: "In a sense psychology did not look at groups of people but people as a whole." Another person reiterated this stating that: "everything is individualistic, set and structured, but when you're working with Aboriginal people it can't be that way." Together, the content of these statements point to conflicts in worldview that pose serious challenges to students, as has been illustrated elsewhere (Deyhle, 1995). This issue sits at the heart of developing multicultural and inclusive curricula and settings that value diversity (Kelly, Azelton, Burzette, & Mock, 1994). Students in business and commerce courses commented that those courses did not inform them about Aboriginal culture. These students highlighted that those areas dealt with different bodies of knowledge and not Aboriginal issues. Consequently, issues of sensitivity were reflected in different forms, including levels of support and understanding of the issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Fewer salient themes related to issues of diversity within the Indigenous community. For example, one participant said she was happy with the Aboriginal content in her course, but she was a Torres Strait Islander. She said that Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures are different and that concepts and meanings across groups would be different. Some participants said that they were satisfied with the content and sensitivity with which Indigenous issues were dealt in Social Work, while others expressed dissatisfaction. Importantly, one participant suggested that mainstream staff should not only consult with CAS staff but should also seek students' views. Some of the concerns expressed by the students can be reframed as aspects of the hidden curriculum which can include the treatment of race in courses, the lack of intellectual support for particular ideas, stigmatisation of students as affirmative action cases, and so on (Margolis & Romero, 1998). These processes serve as informal forms of control and can undermine efforts to enhance students' participation in courses.

“I usually have my breakdowns there”: Roles and Functions of the CAS

Ethnic and racial groups, and the social support systems within them, fulfil a range of functions for their members. Some of the functions provided by these support structures include coming together to validate and share experiences with others who have a similar history, providing opportunities for members to experience a sense of self worth, dignity, and a sense of belonging (Smith, 1991; Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1984), providing a protective haven from a harsh external environment (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), and sharing resources and support (Cox, 1989). Felton and Shinn (1992) suggested that group membership can provide supportive functions through validating norms, providing a sense of solidarity and providing opportunities for, and facilitating, social integration.

Many participants (70%) confirmed the various supportive functions and roles of the CAS and its centrality to the educational process. These included providing tangible, emotional and informational support. A participant noted that students at the Centre “give emotional and physical support, they are more supportive than mainstream students”. Another commented that the CAS was useful, “I usually have my breakdowns there.” “Support from the Centre staff was excellent, they were always prepared to give advice, encouragement and support, and people always had time to stop and talk - that is important”, another participant said. Two students highlighted the tangible support that the CAS offers. One said: “They have been helpful in other ways by providing resources, and material and physical support, ... and just being there.” Another mentioned that the access to computers at the CAS is helpful.

Consistent with the shared understandings that are evident in similar origin support networks (Cox, 1989), one participant also alluded to a shared understanding of issues between Aboriginal staff and students. “Staff here at the Centre listen to what you have to say. They understand what you are saying, they don't just presume

they know what you are saying...”. Another said: “...besides all the resources that they have, you get to meet other Aboriginal people and students that are on campus that probably face the same issues that you are.” This statement reflects the centrality of shared worldviews and consensual validation. It is important for people to know their experiences of reality are similar to those of others.

The importance of shared views was reflected in the supportive functions served by being embedded within a familiar socio-cultural group. Participants acknowledged that: “the Centre was the main support base; it was supportive because you felt safe.” The following comment summarises the issue: “Sometimes you feel the whole campus is just too much and it is nice to go into Aboriginal territory and having that privacy away from the white non-Aboriginal section; I think that is really important.” Therefore, the CAS provided a protective haven in which people could experience a sense of belonging and identification and familiarity. The acceptance by the students of the CAS as a safe haven occurs in spite of their diversity in terms of place of origin and culture. Part of this could be due to the symbols provided by the architecture and interior design of the building.

On a different level, however, there were some unintended negative consequences associated with the Centre. Although the Centre served a protective function, participants felt it hampered the development of networks within the mainstream context. For example:

the Aboriginal Students Association at the Centre was a main support base, it was supportive from the point of view that you felt safe and secure, you did not allow yourself to become part of mainstream groups, you did not have the support from the mainstream staff and students, you tended to go back to the Centre. I don't know which way it was.

Participants said that although they valued the emotional, psychological, and tangible support the CAS provided they felt a need for greater emphasis on some of the academic skills required in the mainstream. Respondents suggested that “they should be provided with more information about course content and requirements. While at the Centre you have to get an idea about what you are going to do, what your area of study will be. At the end of the year when you are going to pick your course, make sure the course suits your personal attributes.”

Summary and Concluding Remarks

This research investigated factors that influence the retention and successful participation of Indigenous people at Curtin University. A framework derived from an ecological paradigm and participatory methods guided the research process. Qualitative analyses of interview data show that the factors that influence Indigenous student experiences and participation in higher education are diverse and operate at different levels. Key problems include the challenges of relocation and cultural identity and cultural insensitivity, while the benefits of the CAS were highlighted.

At a different level of abstraction, the core issues and challenges faced by the students in the mainstream institutions and the different ways in which they are manifested and experienced can be linked to and understood in terms of student worldviews. Many participants highlighted relocation and adaptation issues. This finding essentially points to the challenges implicit in change and relocation. For many it means severing family and social networks; the absence of such networks can make the settlement process more difficult. Being dislocated from familiar systems and extended networks that give meaning and provide scripts for behaviour entail changes in relationships, gender roles, status, and cultural identity among other aspects. Importantly, the move away from one's community to participate in education which may be seen as assimilationist may be construed as a threat to cultural traditions and ways of being. It has been shown that this can place a strain on students elsewhere (Deyhle, 1995).

These data suggest that CUT, and all other universities with an Indigenous enrolment, should promote the development of mechanisms, processes, and settings that would give students an opportunity to develop networks that can facilitate the successful negotiation of processes of relocation and adaptation. The results strongly reflect the supportive functions fulfilled by the CAS and the unintended negative consequences associated with homogeneous networks and enclave systems. The CAS is a distinct Aboriginal physical space with a range of symbols, markers, and other features that foster a sense of place, identity and belonging. At the CAS Aboriginality is valued and a core feature of the units and courses is decolonisation and identifying and challenging mainstream values and ways which have impacted negatively on Aboriginal people. Through Aboriginalising the curriculum content, teaching and learning processes, and organisational structures, the CAS is working to rebuild and revitalise cultural scripts that have not previously been legitimated.

It has been shown that strong cultural identities are central to the wellbeing of people; they are sources of meaning (Barth, 1970; Deyhle, 1995; Smith, 1991). This is consistent with work (Barth, 1970, Cox, 1989; Deyhle, 1995; Sonn & Fisher, 1996) that shows that a sense of belonging, identification and relatedness is central to the successful adaptation of groups experiencing change or negative impacts. Inevitably, people will have different orientations to cultural identity development in a dominant group context that will, in turn, have implications for teaching and learning. Berry's (1997) responses to intercultural contact, which include marginalisation, assimilation, integration, and separation, and Watts (1994) model of sociopolitical development may provide useful ways of understanding social and psychological responses to some intergroup challenges that confront students who enter higher education.

On the other hand, involvement in enclave systems may lead to isolation from other settings in the University. This, in turn, may have negative implications for students who eventually decide to move from an enclave to mainstream settings. It follows that people should have opportunities to develop and reconfigure

cultural identities on their terms and, at the same time, have resources and opportunities to develop the skills and competencies to negotiate the demands of mainstream education. This is not to say that mainstream settings do not have the responsibility to become more appreciative of cultural diversity and to detect and change hidden structures of exclusion (Margolis & Romero, 1998) that undermine change activities. On the contrary, it is in the responsibility of mainstream systems to create settings and norms that value social diversity, a cornerstone of cultural pluralism.

A central issue in the research was participants' comments about cultural sensitivity and awareness. Although cultural insensitivity (modern racism) is not as overt and behaviourally based as other forms of racial prejudice, the interpretations and meanings that this form of racism has for the groups subjected to it can be just as damaging. From the perspective of participants and in line with a contextualist framework that stresses participant experiences of reality (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994), these are real barriers that need to be taken seriously. It seems that the collectivistic nature of Aboriginal communities as reflected in participant comments presents challenges to psychology's understanding, which to date has been very individualistic, culturally bound and culture blind (Davidson, 1993; Marsella, 1998; Sampson, 1993). There is no intention here to present a homogeneous picture of Aboriginal communities by emphasising Aboriginal ways. We acknowledge Indigenous diversity, while at the same time we think that we will need to gain, with Aboriginal people, a solid understanding of the Aboriginal Terms of Reference or worldview as reflected in kinship systems, family networks, traditions, cultural values etc. and how these inform identity and community and provide sources of meaning (Marsella, 1998; Smith, 1999). If we do not, it is possible that students will continue to have experiences that undermine and devalue their realities and views.

Racism and lack of awareness need to be addressed by universities through policy, cultural awareness training, the promotion of multicultural education, and a thorough examination of dominant group biases that maintain inequity. A vital component of this cultural awareness training needs to be an understanding on one's own cultural background and the impacts of colonisation and oppression. It is essential that we critically look at the dominant culture and history because disadvantage and inequality have historical and social roots (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). In a sense it is in our collective interests to promote the positives of cultural diversity alongside critical analyses of the dominant culture as a way to combat racism and intolerance.

Overall, this study provides a basis to explore in greater depth how different contextual factors influence the participation of Indigenous students in mainstream education. They also provide a foundation to develop support systems and learning environments conducive to building better relationships among our student population. Importantly, there needs to be affirmative action and equal access to resources to encourage and retain students in mainstream. We recognise that social change is a very slow process, and given Australia's colonialist history

and the complicity of the education system in the past in assimilating Aboriginal people, the task will be very challenging.

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