

Critical Reflective Learning in Social Work Graduate Research: Learnings from an Australian Study in Child Protection Service Delivery

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Abstract

Assumptions and worldviews shape social work research, particularly when influenced by settler colonialism in contemporary Australia. This article explores experiences from graduate research drawing on Ruch's model of reflective learning and Fook and Gardner's action-orientated approach to critical reflection. Written following PhD completion, it investigates significant learnings by reviewing reflective journal entries, feedback on draft manuscripts and supervision notes that were made during the time of the study. Deconstructing and reconstructing assumptions across all phases of graduate research show the trajectory from experienced social worker to novice researcher and the context within which this learning takes place. This process foregrounds graduate research influenced by Australia's demographic, historical and political context in which the impact of colonisation continues to reverberate. Critical interrogation is

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required for socially just change. Currently, there remains a risk that graduate research produces knowledge that is founded on and shared through white perspectives, maintaining the status quo. Critical reflective learning needs a stimulating and safe learning environment that encourages hidden assumptions to surface and be openly questioned. This study concludes that personal and professional biases unconsciously influence graduate research and need to be identified in a constructive and supportive learning environment.

Keywords: critical reflective learning, decolonising, graduate research

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Introduction

By acknowledging Yorta Yorta, Pbangerang, Dhudhuroa, Wiradjuri and Bunjalung Country, the authors pay tribute and show respect to First Nations peoples and recognise their enduring relationship to Country. This article is written on unceded land. The words ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’, ‘Indigenous’ and ‘First Nations’ peoples will be used interchangeably. To address relational accountability (Steinhauer, 2002), the first author (C.M.) is introduced. C.M. identifies as a Dutch woman born on flat country surrounded by waterways. In 2009, C.M. arrived in Australia to work as a transnational social worker (TNSW) in a rural child protection office. She enrolled in a Masters by Research in 2012 and then upgraded to a PhD in 2015, which she completed in 2020 alongside a full-time academic role. C.M. acknowledges she can never truly shed her eurocentric lens, having been born and raised in the Netherlands. The third (L.M.) and fourth (G.T.) authors supervised all aspects of C.M.’s doctoral research. Reflective conversation with Aboriginal researcher Dr Mishel McMahon and Aboriginal Elder Auntie Maureen, were integral during the final stages of candidature. This study intends to explore the reflective learning in graduate research that contributes critically to a growing understanding of the socially just change that is needed for social work research.

Globally, doctoral studies in social work do not have a long tradition and are a relatively recent development in comparison with other disciplines (Leskošek and Matthies, 2017; Howard *et al.*, 2018). In Australia, the first doctoral graduate completed their research in 1948, with the first Indigenous doctoral graduate, Dr Bill Jonas, completing in 1980 (Kiley, 2017). There are thirty-two higher education providers offering social work programmes in Australia. In a settler nation such as Australia, reflective learning and the need to decolonise epistemological frameworks in social work education are widely advocated (Zubrzycki

et al., 2014; Bennett *et al.*, 2018; Fernando and Bennett, 2019). Doctoral education is important in the development of social work research and practice (Hodgson *et al.*, 2021). Social work research is critical in informing policies, programme design and innovative practice in the human services sector (Tilbury *et al.*, 2020). Most learning in graduate research is focused on developing candidates' research skills and abilities as conceptualised by Western perspectives (Mowbray and Halse, 2010; Åkerlind and McAlpine, 2017). Reflective learning in doctoral studies is under-researched. Traditionally, the mastery of research skills by the end of candidature is the primary objective (Mowbray and Halse, 2010), with some emerging evidence that doctoral supervision has a role in addressing these dynamics as a forum for reflection, learning and personal and professional growth (Beddoe and Davys, 2016; Downey *et al.*, 2017). There is limited emphasis, however, on examinations of worldviews and research values that influence graduate researchers (Yeager and Bauer-Wu, 2013) and interpretations of the context they are investigating. Therefore, a deeper look at the premises of thinking and action in social work graduate research is a topic for exploration in its own right (Hodgson *et al.*, 2021). Within the global forces at play, there may be an unrealistic expectation that candidates apply cross-cultural competencies that ensure a contextualised response (Payne and Askeland, 2016; Townsend and McMahon, 2021) but fail to address the processes of learning that enable this work.

This article seeks to identify beliefs and assumptions in graduate research and the ways these interact with the context and critical reflective learning (Hickson, 2011; Tilbury *et al.*, 2020; Hodgson *et al.*, 2021). Investigating this gap in knowledge is important. Child protection practices informed by First Nations worldviews require a philosophical shift from the deeply ingrained colonial mindset and an understanding of bias, racism and whiteness (Townsend and McMahon, 2021). Failing to draw attention to positionality, the social context that creates identity and perceptions of the world, carries the risk of social work graduate research simply regurgitating and strengthening the dominant 'white voices' in academia and white Western family models in mainstream child protection (Funston and Herring, 2016; D'Souza and Pal, 2018). Practicing cultural humility requires self-awareness to redress power imbalances; previous personal and professional experiences influence current practice and research (Tervalon and Murray-García, 1998; Danso, 2018; Modderman *et al.*, 2021). There is a need for social workers, in practice and research, to build a stronger critical analysis of privileges gained through exploitation and domination by colonial powers (Townsend and McMahon, 2021). This study draws on critical reflective learning experiences during social work research entailing a narrative-informed study of social workers from the UK delivering child protection services in Australia.

Background

Social work is an increasingly mobile profession, especially between countries with colonial ties and English as a common language: the UK, Ireland, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia (Modderman *et al.*, 2017; Modderman, 2020; Peter *et al.*, 2022; Staniforth and Connor, 2021). TNSWs are powerful stakeholders involved with the lives of people who are marginalised and stigmatised through the social constructs of Western society. There is a risk that globalisation and the inherent phenomena of transnational social work from the UK and Ireland to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand perpetuates the colonisation agenda (Modderman *et al.*, 2021; Staniforth and Connor, 2021). TNSWs entering the Australian context of child protection practice may experience a sense of uncertainty about the role of social workers in this context. Place-specific conditions and practices may cause cultural dissonance that requires renegotiation of social work identity and practice in unknown territory (Modderman *et al.*, 2020). Most social workers who move to Australia show limited awareness of First Nations people, different ways of knowing and the context of colonisation that form the backdrop to past and contemporary procedures and policies in Australia's child protection service delivery (Baines, 2018; Modderman *et al.*, 2020).

The present study critically investigates beliefs and assumptions that shape doctoral social work research in Australia. Social work research surrounding transnational social work in child protection calls for interrogation and reflection on self and historically constituted power relations (Lincoln and Cannella, 2019). As a TNSW, C.M. is an 'insider' on the topic under investigation. This position involved several identities that derived from personal and professional experiences during the overarching graduate research process (Hopkins, 2007; Finlay, 2017; Lotty, 2021). At the same time, she was and is an 'outsider' to First Nations experiences, which lie beyond her experiential understanding. Taking a critical standpoint and practicing cultural humility opens an intercultural space that allows social work research to engage with counter-colonial practices (Modderman *et al.*, 2021; Townsend and McMahan, 2021). This position addresses bi-cultural ethical considerations and acknowledges that social work researchers have the power to design a study and identify findings through their epistemological standpoints (Cannella and Lincoln, 2011). In doing so, it uncovers the unconscious social structures of Western hierarchy in academia and highlights socially restrictive assumptions blind to localised ways of knowing in doctoral social work research (Fook and Gardner, 2012; Townsend and McMahan, 2021). Positioning white as the norm and Western thought as central to social work practice and

research creates methodological challenges, including the risk of bias and over-subjectivity (Walter *et al.*, 2011; Zubrzycki *et al.*, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Lotty, 2021).

The research background

The present study

The present study addresses the following research question: ‘How can critical informed reflective learning strengthen social work graduate research in the context of Australian child protection service delivery?’ Data included forty-nine reflective journal entries, seventy-five supervision records and written feedback on sixty-eight draft manuscripts written by C.M. between 2013 and 2020. The reflexive thematic approach during analysis required a continual reflection on self—that is, a questioning of the assumptions made when interpreting and coding the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This involved challenging the dominant social structures, social relations and exploring and changing assumptions (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Fook, 2016; Modderman *et al.*, 2020). To explore subjective meaning, a two-step interpretive approach was taken. In the first phase, data were read and reread and analysed inductively to identify emerging themes (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). These themes were categorised into topics, including social work skills, research skills, First Nations peoples, supervision, decolonising practices and Western thinking. Reflexivity, a foundational aspect of qualitative research, required awareness of self and responses that contribute to developing knowledge for social work (Fook *et al.*, 2015; Dodgson, 2019). In the second phase, analysis was deductive, employing Ruch’s (2000, 2002) reflective learning model as a theoretical lens, complemented by the work of Fook and Gardner (2007) to critically reflect on action-orientated change, a shift in assumptions that fit newfound values as a novice social work researcher. Data analysis followed an interactive process of interacting with the journal entries, supervision notes and reviewing feedback on draft manuscripts to make sense of learnings during graduate research in the Australian context of child protection practice.

The completed graduate research study

The Masters phase of graduate research focused on the support and knowledge TNSWs require when migrating to Australia, resulting in a scoping review of the existing literature (Modderman *et al.*, 2017). The additional PhD study applied a narrative-informed methodology aimed at revealing the rich and diverse ways social workers experience place-

related change when they enter an unfamiliar practice environment as professional migrants. Details of the method have been reported in previous publications (Modderman *et al.*, 2019, 2020, 2021) and only brief details are provided here. Ethical approval was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee in July 2013 (HEC13-019) and extended in 2016. Ethical approval was also granted by the organisation from which the participants were recruited. Data were collected from in-depth interviews at two time points with thirteen social workers using purposive sampling. Participants gave verbal and written consent. Data collection within the PhD phase resulted in important findings of positioning self in Eurocentric thinking and inadequate assumptions towards First Nations peoples. Initially, it was felt as somewhat inappropriate to investigate these findings, with some hesitation to turn the mirror to self and take responsibility. Facing the uncomfortable led to these findings becoming the focus of a fourth and final publication of PhD findings (Modderman *et al.*, 2021). Support was sought from leading Aboriginal academic Professor Dennis McDermott on how to do this respectfully as a group of white academics. This resulted in extending the supervisory team with Dr M.M. and Auntie Maureen. Reflective conversations, or Yarning, allowed for an exploration of different perspectives and the ways in which worldviews influence child protection practice and research.

Theoretical framework applied in the current study

Ruch's (2000, 2002) model of reflective learning helps to unpack beliefs around knowledge, worldviews and relationships that are present in graduate research (Fook and Gardner, 2012; Hickson, 2016; Ruch and Julkunen, 2016). The model includes four modes: (1) technical reflection, which is associated with the empirical-analytical level of knowing; (2) practical reflection, which involves understanding that knowledge is relative, contextual and influenced by personal and professional assumptions; (3) critical reflection, which challenges the social, political and structural conditions that are closely aligned with an anti-oppressive stance and (4) process reflection, which draws on the unconscious and conscious aspects of practice and provides the opportunity to reflect and act on thoughts and feelings that are part of the complex web of dynamics in which they are embroiled (Ruch, 2000, 2002).

The application of reflective learning creates an opportunity to shift from dominant understandings and systems of oppression that exist in social work practices and research. The process of reflection brings different forms of knowledge to the surface, at the same time attending to present thoughts and emotions (Ruch, 2000; Davys and Beddoe, 2009). Fook and Gardner's (2007) approach to critical reflection connects

beliefs and assumptions that emerge in the modes of reflective learning and identify the need for socially just change. This involves moving from reflection into action to make sense of new awareness and underlying beliefs that transform social work practice and research that fits with fundamental values (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Gardner, 2009). This article demonstrates how critically informed reflective learning strengthens graduate research in child protection in the Australian context. The authors acknowledge that the theoretical lenses stem predominately from Western worldviews and do not incorporate First Nations' perspectives. However, the theoretical framework developed does enable this study to go halfway and examine the researchers' standpoints during graduate research and iteratively shift the focus of the analysis if required.

Findings

Drawing on Ruch's (2000, 2002) model of reflective learning, the four modes of technical, practical, critical and process reflection will be discussed separately and are presented as a linear, step-by-step procedure. In practice, the analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process, with a growing awareness of the need for change and reconstruction (Fook and Gardner, 2007).

Technical reflection

Reflective diary notes during data collection demonstrate the confusion associated with being an insider and outsider within the research—an insider as TNSW, and simultaneously, like participants, unfamiliar with First Nations peoples and worldviews. Initially, the insider position enabled building rapport, finding similarities and understanding lived experiences:

I feel like I am listening to myself... It is hard to stay neutral as I experienced the same. Sometimes I shared information and wondering why, as this is about their story and not mine. (Journal notes 2013)

An in-depth understanding of the 'what' and 'how' experiences of child protection practice in the transnational space was shared and participants easily relayed their experiences with C.M. as she 'understood' transnational social work. Engaging with the 'why' questions to enable meaning-making at a deeper level as white social workers in Indigenous spaces was initially rushed over. Research interviews were conducted as if undertaking a structured assessment, a skill well known to the graduate researcher from child protection practice. The noticeable task-

orientated focus of working through a set list of interview questions prohibited deeper reflection on the position of self as white social workers engaging with First Nations peoples. C.M. remained in control of the topic and interview process as illustrated below, where a participant is sharing experiences. As a doctoral researcher, C.M. is focused on her interview schedule, on facts, which hinders exploring the ‘why’ questions and personal experiences. The following is an example from supervision notes in 2015:

Did you get any training around the historic development of social work in Australia or working with the Traditional Owners of the land? (C.M.)

We got one day training... (Participant)

So you got one day training? (C.M.)

And it was so basic it is insulting, I knew about all the historical incidents and still ongoing, the Aboriginals being second class citizens but to come here it was two days training, but it was all slapstick, it was not like, these are the reasons so many children are over represented. (Participant)

Any Aboriginal people that came to train you? (C.M.)

One Aboriginal and the rest were from overseas. (Participant)

And do you work with a lot of Aboriginal clients in this region? (C.M.)

Doctoral supervision created a space for technical reflection related to the empirical–analytical level of knowing, which draws on external sources of knowledge to examine skills (Ruch, 2002). Technical aspects of utilising narrative methodology during research interviews were discussed in supervision and compared with their use in practice. Reflection raised awareness of the need to change dynamics as a researcher, and to slow down. In turn, this allowed interview skills to emerge that created space for extended narration, which included deeper exploration of the position of self as white social workers working with Aboriginal peoples. As a senior social worker, C.M. was able to hold the space for clients when talking about complex and intimate issues. In contrast, as a doctoral researcher, she felt self-conscious and nervous when conducting interviews, tiptoeing around topics relating to First Nations peoples. The supervision notes reflect this:

How do I collect the right information and ask the right questions? Should I present myself differently, am I too white myself? Can/may I challenge racist comments made by participants during research interviews? (Supervision notes, 2015)

In supervision sessions, the skillsets for social work practice and research were regularly discussed, including reflection on similarities and differences between essential skills and formal theory around conducting

interviews. This enabled identification of assumptions that need to change to fit the identity of professional self, ‘whitism’ and how skills may transfer or need to be adapted across different roles.

Practice reflection

Practice reflection positions knowledge as contextual and identifies the personal and professional assumptions gained from specific practice experiences (Ruch, 2002). The narrative-informed overarching PhD research design embraced multiple realities, unique experiences and subjective interpretations. Research participants shared personal narratives that showed the contemporary and place-based beliefs about child protection practice and their assumptions. C.M., as co-creator of narratives, was also required to face her assumptions and complicity to inadequate ideas that signal systemic racism in child protection service delivery when reading interview transcripts that discussed experiences of working with First Nations peoples.

The supervisory team (L.M. and G.T.) and C.M. acknowledged that TNSW practices needed to explore an alternative response that moved beyond a lack of knowledge of ‘the other’. This also involved the need for them to face their personal default position and move from ‘knowing’ to ‘doing’ and actively engage with cultural humility to counter internalised colonial assumptions underpinning social work practice and research. Reflective conversations with Dr M.M. and Auntie Maureen supported the process of writing about TNSWs’ understandings of First Nations people (Modderman *et al.*, 2021). This required listening, a stepping back to explore personal assumptions before interpretation of research data and a deeper understanding of First Nations’ worldviews:

I need to listen more and remember where knowledge comes from, what is my assumption? Decolonising starts with acknowledging that the knowledge I thrive from is all Western. Colonising processes are still happening, especially in child protection. Don’t write about colonialisation as a past event. (Supervision notes – 2019)

When Dr M.M. challenged C.M. to introduce her identity in a journal paper to demonstrate an alternative response to academic writing than the theory and knowledge embedded in Western epistemology and ontologies (McMahon, 2017), this was not welcomed immediately. It was rejected as ‘this is not how it is done in academic journals’. C.M.’s default Western point of view continues to dominate as the normal way of doing. It took time to allow different sources of understanding and learning about relational worldviews. As a result, an alternative and unfamiliar response to the positioning of self was required. This involved accepting that cultural influences change over time and vary between geographical locations. Reflective discussions

with the supervisory team (L.M. and G.T.), Auntie Maureen and Dr M.M. created a shift in awareness and brought about change:

Mishel talks about Aboriginal culture and First Nations' perspectives as two entities, they are intertwined but a lot of knowledge, health, language and thinking evolved from Western perspectives. It is our cultural make-up, how we were born, our world view, our family meals. There is a need for social work to explore First Nations' perspectives—this is more than culture. Child-rearing can be interpreted differently when coming from a Western perspective instead of First Nations—for example, parentification and neglect. I need to explore this more. (Journal notes: 2019)

In this context, doctoral supervision initially emerged with an overreliance on Western epistemology and ontology common across universities in Australia. Extending supervision and active engagement with First Nations' worldviews created a shift, an openness to other ways of knowing and doing. Practicing cultural humility involves honouring co-design methodologies and lifelong learning.

Critical reflection

Critical reflection involved a process of critical self-evaluation, investigating how research and social work values are influenced by social, political and cultural context (Ruch, 2002). The development of the overall PhD study with four publications demonstrates how the Western dominant discourse initially was taken for granted. For example, the first published paper (Modderman et al., 2017), a scoping review of the existing literature, explored what knowledge TNSWs need to gain when working with First Nations peoples. This approach focused on Indigenous peoples as 'others', a problem that needs solving through 'cultural competency', which undermines challenging colonial practice and the need to turn the mirror to the self. This expanded to 'cultural traditions' in C.M.'s home country, the Netherlands, where it suddenly became clear how the Dutch Christmas tradition of blackface 'Black Pete' perpetuates racist stereotypes. Colonial perceptions are widespread across Western societies across the world and continue to inform thinking, actions and emotions (Fook and Gardner, 2007).

Reading journal notes and transcribed interviews as part of the current study also triggered shame for possessing a 'colonial mindset' that currently pervades the broader child protection system and universities in Australia and beyond. C.M., similar to research participants, also practiced as a TNSW in front line child protection service delivery without awareness of decolonising practice:

When I arrived in Australia, I did not fully understand the impact of historic child protection laws and the Stolen Generations on current child protection legislation and practices in Australia. This makes me guilty of having held inaccurate beliefs, of being inadequately informed about the historical and social-political context of removing Aboriginal children from their parents. I was not fully aware of the origins of the trauma First Australians continue to experience. (Journal notes, 2018)

Initially, the topic of First Nations people and TNSW was not addressed as a question in the first interview schedule. In the second follow-up interview there was one specific question: ‘Thinking back to practice in the UK [or Ireland] and your education, how do you see your work with the Indigenous peoples of Australia? What was your understanding and how did this influence practice?’ The PhD research initially selected some aspects of First Nations peoples but merely as another resource available for Western researchers without engaging with cultural humility. Reviewing research transcripts, C.M. and participants co-produced the normalised dominant characteristics of the mainstream culture in Australia in everyday child protection. Assumptions were not challenged and, initially, the topic was avoided during data analysis even though field data identified significant relevant material in participant stories, including the changing perceptions and experiences of TNSWs through time (Modderman *et al.*, 2021).

Supervisors (L.M. and G.T.) and C.M. became aware of their hesitation to explore a topic that is so present in contemporary child protection practice and the research data. Initially, it felt like entering territory that did not belong to them as white academics. They became aware of the impact of their white privilege on the research. Extending the supervisory team and listening to the experiences and knowledge of Dr M.M. and Auntie Maureen created a safe space to talk freely about First Nations’ and Western worldviews and how they influence child protection practice and research. Experience in child protection service delivery and decolonising practices were discussed, and individual positions were explored and enabled deeper insight and knowledge creation:

Mishel and Auntie both talk about “our ways of doing”. I think that is important business, I am not sure how to capture this in my writing as a white woman, but it means a lot and gives space to move beyond only thinking about ‘my way’ of doing and being. (Supervision notes, 2019)

The conversations with Dr M.M. and Auntie Maureen enabled deeper insights into how First Nations’ knowledges contribute to a relational worldview. Discussions included how the social, historical and cultural context continue to shape the experiences and lives of First Nations peoples in Australia. Yarning, an Aboriginal practice of sharing information, involves allowing the presence of a less task-focused position and sitting with the process of deep listening and reflecting. This type of

experiential learning is not learning that can be mastered quickly, there is no clear beginning or end. Overreliance on Western epistemology and ontology is common for social work and universities in Australia. It requires an ongoing shift to engage with other ways of being without reverting to the Western default position.

Process reflection

Process reflection is concerned with the relationship dynamics within supervision during the period the doctoral study. Unconscious and conscious processes in interpersonal encounters and transference triggered C.M., who shared many experiences with the research participants. Psychodynamic concepts of mirroring and containing enabled a deeper understanding of the emotional response to these topics for a novice researcher (Ruch, 2002). This occurred not only during data collection but also during repeated cycles reading and analysing the transcripts. Participants' experiences triggered strong feelings for C.M., specifically around the impact of child protection practice on First Nations communities. Careful guidance during supervision was required for these emotions to be unpacked, as well as self-care to ensure a neutral stance and an unbiased representation of the participants' experiences:

... listening to audio and re-reading transcripts... , social workers like me and then they say things like "I feel that what's happened in the past it's happened. It was wrong what happened, but you have to move on with your life and I think there's been an apology" How can child protection staff not understand transgenerational trauma? (Journal notes, 2018)

Supervisors introduced questions about the dynamics of supervision in practice and how this relationship differs from supervision in doctoral research. Reflecting on the emerging identity of being a novice researcher led to renewed confidence and containing discomfort in the narrative research endeavour to understand meaning and context of experiences. Acceptance of the long and windy road of 'doing' narrative research led to a focus on making meaning instead of on showing participants (and self) as racist in snippets of text. Instead, examining underlying structural issues and lack of awareness of decolonising practices in child protection service delivery became a topic of discussion. It involved working through the layers of knowing and investigating the nature of experience and the context in which these experiences take place.

Process reflection involved a shift in professional identity, from being a senior social worker to being a novice researcher and untangling the position of self within the research. The position of being a student of a topic well-known through practice needed time to find a place in the

supervisory relationship. Deeper exploration and engagement with the research topic in Indigenous spaces required a different approach than reliance on knowledge as a practitioner in child protection. Pastoral care offered during moments where one felt 'stuck' enabled capacity for change and honest reflection on the position of self. Discussing diverse perspectives on the application of theoretical lenses, research designs, methodologies and methods strengthened C.M.'s confidence and skills as an emerging social work researcher. Supervisors holding this space and being available regularly to allow reflection enabled an arrival at decolonising perspectives.

Discussion

Researching transnational child protection practices in a settler nation such as Australia reaffirms Western views as unintentionally central in knowledge production. The study was similarly influenced by theory and knowledge mostly embedded in Western epistemologies and ontologies (Modderman *et al.*, 2017). The doctoral study initially showed limited awareness of First Nations peoples and the context of colonisation that forms a backdrop to Australia's past and present child protection practices. Graduate research may unwittingly replicate colonial practices that normalise the privilege of non-Indigenous graduate researchers.

Place-based beliefs about child protection practice and research implicitly privilege Eurocentric worldviews. Asserting counter-colonial thinking is a challenge in social work graduate research. Within the Australian context, there is a need to be alert to contemporary discriminatory discourses relating to First Nations peoples. Findings show how readily Western research ideologies and social work practices continue to dominate. In this study, the graduate researcher arrived with knowledge and skills from her experiences in child protection service delivery. At the start of the research, she was mostly unaware of what she did not know about First Nations peoples and her position of self in this context as 'white and Western graduate researcher'.

Child protection research that is inclusive of First Nations worldviews requires reconstructing the position of self and socially just action. Findings demonstrate this PhD study was initially embedded in the forces of colonialism, with a lack of confidence to address issues outside the experience of the graduate researcher and supervisors. This highlights the need for courageous conversations about racism, the position of self, and the 'colonialist mindset' that currently pervades the broader university sector in Australia. When drawing on Indigenous knowledge to support their process of learning, non-Indigenous researchers reflect this in authorship. In this example, it was decided to place C.M. first as she described her experiences of her PhD with Dr M.M as the second

author. Reciprocity in their relationship allowed for Dr M.M. sharing First Nations worldviews and as an Aboriginal scholar, she supported C.M.'s learning.

There is a risk that only some aspects of First Nations knowledge will be selected and drawn on merely as another resource available for Western researchers. Graduate researchers, and their supervisors, need to take responsibility for improving their understanding of the place-based cultures and communities in Australia and for seeking local community-approved training to learn about culturally distinct awareness and responsiveness.

This article is important for non-Indigenous researchers, it acknowledges that Western research methodologies that inform social work practices have a detrimental effect on First Australians and their communities. Practitioners and researchers are guilty of having inaccurate beliefs, being inadequately informed about the historical and socio-political context and the origins of the trauma First Australians continue to experience. Non-Indigenous researchers belong to the mainstream group and must take responsibility to learn about First Nations knowledge, relational worldviews, the position of self and openness towards accepting different realities. This moves beyond the focus on 'what do I need to know about this culture', instead, it requires applying a critical lens to self. Complacency and avoiding topics that are uncomfortable undermine culturally humble social work research.

Supervisors need to be tuned in to their own biases and at the same time hold the uncertainty that encourages thoughtful and decolonising research practices. Supervisory relationships need a sense of openness and a non-judgemental approach where graduate researchers are supported to integrate existing knowledge with new knowledge and discuss their uncertainty (McPherson *et al.*, 2016). Within this supervisory environment, supervisors need to be alert to their tendency to shy away from topics that are unpleasant and demonstrate the privilege of certain group membership in academia as white researchers.

The Australian front line child protection workforce is fundamental to keeping the most vulnerable children in society safe from harm. Learnings from this doctoral study highlight the need for decolonising social work practices. In graduate research there is a need to deepen understanding of various contexts; global, national, regional, local, community, historical, social, cultural, professional and personal in developing relevant research strategies (Fook, 2016). Social work researchers require an understanding of the needs of First Nations communities, and skilled responses to their lived cultural experience and the social, geographical and political realities that surround them. Knowledge developed from one situation does not necessarily apply to another setting (Fook, 2016). Working with First Nations communities requires

embracing critical reflection on contemporary child protection, self, and social work practice and research in Australia.

Conclusion

This article explored the experiences of graduate research in the Australian context of social work drawing on critical reflective learning (Ruch, 2000, 2002; Fook and Gardner, 2007). This framework highlights the transition to becoming a critically informed researcher and the repositioning of self in relation to newfound First Nations' knowledges and worldviews. Social work research within Australian universities and organisations remains colonist unless explicit work is undertaken to move towards decolonisation of self. In this study, this awareness raised discomfort and shame. Critical reflective learning supports the development of graduate research practices that move beyond Western concepts of social work. In doing so, graduate research practices hold space for decolonising practices in social work research.

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