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Decolonising the Curriculum Within a Block Teaching Structure: A Beginning

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Abstract

The murder of George Floyd in Minnesota on May 25th 2020 sparked Black Lives Matter protests across the globe. The protests focused on race and racism and highlighted structural inequalities that are faced by people racialized as Black. As a British South Asian woman, the murder of George Floyd had a profound effect on me both personally and professionally. As a lecturer within a UK Higher Education institution, although I was aware of the decolonising agenda and was involved in relevant initiatives, the momentum of the BLM protests sparked a long time coming urgent progression of this agenda from the periphery into the mainstream. This paper highlights the first steps in my journey towards decolonising my curriculum.

What's the problem?

Broadly speaking, Moosavi (2020) argues that universities in the Global North remain sites of racism, orientalism and white privilege. He argues that decolonising is necessary at these institutions to overcome the exclusion of minority perspectives, which not only harms minority groups but also limits the overall scope of scholarship. Indeed, a comprehensive and accurate view of topics, within some

disciplines, is not possible if there is an exclusion of race and colonialism or if the perspective of only White thinkers and authors is provided (Choat and Ramgotra, 2019). By omitting diversity of voices, we as academics do not serve the needs of the communities in which we work nor do we prepare our students to be professionals who are aware of and who are able to deal with racial and cultural diversity.

From a discipline standpoint, psychology knowledge has historically been ethnocentric (Bhatia, 2002; Ellis and Stam, 2015). Its claims about universals human behaviour is based primarily on Euro-American participants (Bhatia, 2002; 2018). Even when conducting cross-cultural research, the Euro-American or Western position is the lens through which other cultures are assessed. For example, Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) strange situation experiment, which focuses on the quality of attachment between a mother and infant, has been repeated across a number of countries, however, this assessment is based on the Euro-American values of independence (Harwood, 1992). This can result in North American infants being identified as securely attached (easily consoled by mother after a short separation) when compared to infants from countries such as Japan who are identified as insecurely attached (excessive distress at being separated from their mother and not easily consoled) because there is little consideration of parenting practices of that particular culture (Takahashi, 1990). The narrative that some Western countries raise securely attached infants when compared to other countries is a priori problematic as it inadvertently places some countries and their cultures above others.

With the above in mind, I wanted to make changes to my own practice and begin the process of diversifying and decolonising my

teaching to reflect the diversity in the human population and the student population. Being the unit leader for a newly written Lifespan Developmental unit, provided me with the opportunity to incorporate the changes I perceived necessary directly on my practice. However, I was aware of the situationally imposed restrictions due to the COVID pandemic and that I had to do this within a short 6-week remotely delivered teaching block as well as within the small timeframe I had to develop my teaching and the assessment material.

So what?

The lack of textbooks from Black and Minority Ethnic writers on reading lists has been highlighted (Choat and Ramgotra, 2019). Hence, my initial approach was to try diversifying the reading list. Moosavi (2020) argues that individual academics are limited in achieving intellectual decolonisation because the knowledge that is accessible across academic databases, university libraries and the publishing industry prioritise Global North (Western) scholarship over Global South (non-Western). Thus, the structural exclusion of this scholarship and scholars makes amplifying a diversity of voices difficult. Indeed, the first problem I encountered was that I could not find textbooks on developmental psychology authored by Black and Minority Ethnic writers to include on the reading list.

My approach to decolonising began with Burman's (2017) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* book. Although an excellent resource, having struggled with some of the content myself, I assessed the content to be complicated as a first resource for second year undergraduate students. However, Burman (2017) highlighted that the emergence of child psychology was based on European and American males, whose research predominantly took place in the

global north. I used this as a starting point. As well as highlighting that the foundation of child developmental knowledge was produced by Euro-American male thinkers, I also focused on the structure of the family. This was to encourage students to critically consider the standard family type that developmental research is based on (e.g. the nuclear family, which does appear in other cultures, but the proportion is commonly higher in Western industrialised cultures according to Georgas, 1999). Using textbooks authored by non-white psychologists, such as Belgrave and Allison (2019) and Lauguani (2006), I presented the African-American and Indian family structures respectively to highlight other family types. I then encouraged students to critically consider whether research such as Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) strange situation experiment (sample consisted of a mother and infant) took into account these family structures and the implications of this in relation to how developmental research is designed and knowledge produced.

By taking the above approach, I was able to incorporate some diversity of voices into the unit curriculum. This circumvented my difficulties with finding specific developmental psychology texts from Black and Minority Ethnic writers because Belgrave and Allison (2019) and Lauguani's (2006) textbooks are not Developmental Psychology or Lifespan Development texts. However, I acknowledge that this does not mitigate that this scholarship is unavailable and/or inaccessible.

Having decided on the content of my teaching sessions, the next step was to decide when to deliver the material within the unit. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching in Higher Education institutes was moved online and a block teaching format was adopted. Nerantzi and Chatzidamianos (2020) describe the approach to

remotely delivered block teaching used at Manchester Metropolitan University. Curriculum delivery for each unit was within a 6-week teaching block and the Lifespan Developmental unit delivery of the curriculum was divided amongst three colleagues and myself. I was responsible for the content of two of the 6-weeks. I chose to incorporate the information regarding the emergence of child psychology being based on Euro-American male thinkers and the standard family type that developmental research is based on into the second week of teaching. I recognise that incorporating this content to one teaching session is insufficient to decolonise a curriculum. For this reason, another approach was adopted; the assessment for the unit was developed to encourage students to consider diverse perspectives beyond this single week, constructively aligning, in effect, the unit assessment with the learning objectives but also critically with the decolonising agenda.

The assessment for this unit was a case study analysis. Students were provided with two case studies and required to choose one for their essay. Both case studies were purposely chosen to be non-White individuals. This was to encourage students to question knowledge production during the remaining four weeks of the unit by thinking whether the various developmental topics consider or even present the perspective of non-white individuals. The content of my session aimed to springboard students thinking beyond this single week.

Now what?

Reflecting on my first experience of diversifying and decolonising the curriculum within a block teaching format, I recognise that the content of my teaching has not been decolonised to its entirety as this is a continuing process. However, the main steps I took to begin this

process are illustrated below.

1. Changing the content of one session (of the two I was responsible for) – the shortened number of weeks for unit delivery meant that I was not pressured to incorporate changes over a number of teaching weeks. This would have been the case if I had been delivering additional teaching sessions because I would not have felt that changing one session would be sufficient. In addition, I would have struggled to change any more of the teaching content, both because of time pressures but also the lack of relevant literature and the objective difficulties in finding textbooks authored by Black and Minority Ethnic writers to guide me. Therefore, this strategy seemed appropriate under these circumstances.
2. Incorporating Black and Minority Ethnic authored texts – following on from above, I focused on one topic area to begin with in order to highlight knowledge production through a non-White lens. Pedagogically, this strategy served as an important first step in exposing students to other perspectives as well as allowing students from minority ethnic background to see themselves, or others like them, reflected in the curriculum. Since universities are sites of production and validation of knowledge that can challenge the legacies of colonialism (Choat and Ramgotra, 2019), the inclusion of these perspectives was deemed to be important even if it was limited to one week. In retrospect, this strategy also benefitted me. As one of a very small number of minority academics within the department, I experienced a sense of anxiety about how the content would be received by a majority White student group. Therefore, focusing on one topic

area allowed me to ‘test the waters’ and assess my levels of comfort about delivering this content.

3. Assessment – focusing the assessment on non-White individuals meant that knowledge production was kept on the agenda throughout the unit. By foregrounding the Euro-American lens in developmental psychology knowledge production, students could critically consider the applicability of the weekly topics to the non-White case study individuals.

Conclusion

The decolonising agenda continues to gain momentum in the HE sector. To guide others who want to take their first steps into decolonising their teaching content, my colleagues and I have developed a Diversifying and Decolonising toolkit (Carey et al., 2020) to aid with this process. This toolkit poses a series of reflexive questions to the reader across three categories of learning: curriculum philosophy; teaching and learning methods; unit material and resources. Additionally, a resource list accompanies the toolkit. This is a collection of readings that aims to stimulate thinking on race and inclusion and includes a list of papers from Black and Minority Ethnic writers. The toolkit aims to be a useful starting point for those who wish to begin this process, as this is an ongoing and imperfect process.

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