Psychology Research Seminar

Speaker(s): Ms Chanelle van den Berg and Dr Rebecca Bennett

Title: What makes an effective ally to Aboriginal people in Australian higher education?

Where: 460.1.031 (ECL - Postgrad Teaching Space)
When: 12:30 – 13:30, Friday 25th October 2019
Host: Dr Helen Correia

Abstract

Context: As a growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enter university, it is important that universities offer best-practice academic, pastoral and cultural support services to foster an inclusive, productive and empowering university experience for Aboriginal people. An often-overlooked factor in this process is the role that non-Indigenous university staff play in enabling or inhibiting Indigenous student success and staff collegiality and career progression. For non-Aboriginal Australians, there is very little information as to how one might be an effective ally, acting to help resolve the gross inequities in terms of health, income and education that Aboriginal Australians face. The majority of academic research into the ally role focuses predominantly on LGBTIQ+ people and African Americans, with nominal studies regarding Indigenous contexts in health science and primary and secondary education. In the Australian context, specifically, a critical gap in the research is the presence of Indigenous voices; particularly, in the identification of characteristics, actions and experiences that an effective ally might possess. This project begins to address this gap, in the context of higher education.

Methodology: Framed as a collaborative auto-ethnography, five Aboriginal graduate students/university staff and one non-Aboriginal academic staff member participated in three phases of data generation and analysis over a six-month period. The first phase collected individual written responses to an agreed-upon central research question: ‘What makes an effective ally in Indigenous higher education?’ This data was collated and de-identified before the participants’ individually coded the data into common themes. In the second phase, through group discussions, we identified collective themes in the data set. Finally, critical analysis was applied both to the themes and to the author-participants’ cultural and professional relationships to the topic and each another.

Findings: Four dominant themes emerged in the thematic analysis - communication, awareness, relationships and empowerment (CARE). Particular attention was payed to contradictions and nuances within each theme, which were left intentionally unresolved. We concluded that while
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the CARE model is a useful starting point, there is no one set of rules that govern how to be an effective ally to Aboriginal students – and this is the point! Many of the negative experiences of the Indigenous author-participants in this study occurred when non-Indigenous people relied on essentialist stereotypes or assumed that one Aboriginal person’s experience was the same as another's. Thus, the overall findings emphasise the importance in viewing Aboriginal people as individuals, not stereotypes and the significance in being flexible, responsive and open to diverse presentations of Aboriginality. Additionally, effective allies were viewed as constantly learning, without claiming expertise; and as being aware, not only of the sociocultural and historical structures that affect Aboriginal staff and students’ daily lives, but also of their own implicit and explicit biases.

Impact: This research was a small step towards including a greater number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in discussion of how non-Indigenous people can best support them in their work and studies in higher education. It also offers a starting point for non-Indigenous members of the university community, who wish to become effective allies, to Aboriginal people, but are not sure where to start.

Biography

Ms Chanelle Van den Berg (BEd.)
Chanelle van den Berg is a Noongar (Pinjareb) woman from the south-west of Western Australia. She is currently the Senior Manager of Aboriginal Education at Murdoch University. Chanelle is leading the University’s efforts to increase the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education and efforts to ensure a more inclusive curriculum. Before working at Murdoch University, Chanelle was a primary school teacher. During her time teaching, she lead the school’s efforts to incorporate a more inclusive curriculum for student’s with disabilities and those at educational risk.

Dr Rebecca Bennett (PhD, Ba Hons)
Dr Rebecca Bennett is a teaching-focused academic in the Kulbardi Aboriginal Centre at Murdoch University. With a disciplinary background and PhD in Communications and Cultural Studies, her academic career has since focused on the Scholarship and of Teaching and Learning – specializing in academic acculturation and transition curriculum design for diverse student cohorts at all stages of the university student life-cycle. In 2017, Rebecca was part of the team of curriculum designers at Kulbardi who won the Australia Award for University Teaching in the Programs the Enhance Learning category. Her research and teaching interests explore social justice and higher education, with a secondary interest in critical digital pedagogies. Current research projects include understanding Aboriginal women’s experiences at university; an NCESHE funded project.
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exploring Aboriginal men’s perceptions of university; innovative curriculum design for Indigenous students transitioning into university; the characteristics of effective allies within Indigenous higher education and LGBTIQ+ staff experience at university.

Meeting the presenter:
To arrange a meeting with the presenter, please contact the host.