Title page

Full title: "It is usually about the triumph of the coloniser": Exploring Young People's Conceptualisations of Australian History and the Implications for Australian Identity.

Short title: Conceptualisations of Australian history.

Key words: Australian history, Indigenous history, oppression, racism, Australia day, white privilege, Australian identity, community psychology, colonisation, multiculturalism, conscientization

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Abstract

Australians of European descent reconstruct Australian history to silence the mistreatment of Indigenous Australians, and to favour the coloniser perspective. Literature suggests that while this reconstructed history is typically accepted uncritically, in recent times young people may have become more critical of this historical account. Exploring young people's conceptualisations of Australian history may provide insight into emerging perspectives of Australian history, and ultimately young people's understanding of Australian identity. A qualitative research design with a social constructionist approach was adopted. Twelve young people aged 18 to 25 who self-identified as having an interest in Australian history were recruited and participated in a semi-structured interview. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically. Three major themes emerged: 'learning and 're-learning' Australian history', 'making sense of what is happening', and 'who is an Australian?'. Viewed through a Freirean lens, some young Australians of European descent appear to be undergoing a conceptual shift from holding perspectives associated with the oppressor, to adopting a more critical stance of Australian history. Despite this, understandings of oppression were at times paradoxical. Further research is required to understand the phenomena of this proposed shift, and to facilitate and encourage this process of siding with the oppressed.

"It is usually about the triumph of the coloniser": Exploring young people's conceptualisations of Australian history and the implications for Australian identity.

Since European colonisation in 1788, Australians of European descent have facilitated continuous oppression of Indigenous Australians through constructing Australian history to favour the coloniser and to exclude Indigenous Australian perspectives (Arrow, 2007). This reconstruction of Australian history is often accepted uncritically, although more recently there is some indication that young people's perspectives have shifted (Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004) and these shifting attitudes may impact upon their perceptions of Australian identity. However, to date there is limited research that examines young people's conceptualisations of Australian history to support these assumptions. In this paper, we first cover theoretical understandings of how oppression of Indigenous Australians is maintained and how Australian history is reconstructed to favour the coloniser, before reviewing the emerging literature on young people's attitudes towards Australian history and Indigenous Australians. We then present the findings from our qualitative research exploring young people's conceptualisations of Australian history and Australian identity.

White privilege is an invisible, and often ignored, automatic acquirement of unearned assets which grants dominance in society based on Caucasian features and white skin colour (Phillips & Lowrey, 2018; McIntosh, 1990); whiteness manifests in society through discourses and normalised behaviours that positions white people as powerful (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). In Australia, Australians of European descent can be seen as having white privilege (McIntosh, 1990), maintained through Australia's formal and informal social structures that normalises whiteness, and excludes those who are not white (Green & Sonn, 2005). Whiteness and white privilege is maintained through knowledge construction, with white people having the power to position non-white people as the 'other' to legitimise colonisation (Green, Sonn & Matsebula, 2007). Australians of European descent control the knowledge held about Indigenous Australians, and position themselves as experts with power and ability to control Indigenous Australians, maintain their dominance, perpetuate ignorance, and continue the oppression of Indigenous Australians (Green et al., 2007; Green & Sonn, 2005). This 'knowledge' is one that ignores and denies Indigenous voices, establishes Indigenous Australians as an inferior race, and is largely considered a 'truth', leaving white conceptions of Australian history largely unquestioned/contested, and maintaining the oppression of Indigenous Australians (Green et al., 2007).

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

One's ability to disrupt the perspective that this knowledge is a one 'truth' relies on their position of power in Australian society (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Australians of European descent have a responsibility to challenge other white people to break down how their whiteness operates to oppresses Indigenous Australians, and not dictate how Indigenous Australians should behave in their fight to cease oppression (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Freire (1972) theorised that for liberation from oppression to occur, both parties must have a conscious understanding and awareness of the existence of oppression, their roles as oppressor or oppressed, and be motivated to take action in liberation efforts. If genuine realisation, or conscientization, does not occur on the part of the oppressor, further oppression may occur with the oppressor perceiving that they themselves should be the ones to promote liberation of the oppressed, rather than the oppressed themselves being active agents in their liberation. In the Australian context, Australians of European descent may have not (fully) recognised their white privilege, nor that this cultural dominance is oppressive. Even where cultural dominance is recognised, the nuance of genuine liberation efforts may not be understood.

Colonisation practices are employed globally in order for white people to maintain power over non-white people, and knowledge construction is used as a colonising practice in Australian schooling (Green et al., 2007; Smith, 1999). Fabricated history accounts were, and are, delivered for uncritical consumption in efforts to maintain colonisation as a continuous practice (Hage 2002; Smith, 2009). Australians of European descent are in the dominant position to control, and influence the telling of history; their account is privileged over others' accounts, and in doing so maintain their dominant position (Arrow, 2007). The public's perspective of Australian history is influenced by settings, such as in education, that are constructed to portray history in favour of the coloniser (Breen, 2003). For example, the history of Australia is often re-constructed by Australians of European descent to purposefully exclude or dismiss the mistreatment of Indigenous Australians (Arrow, 2007), Indigenous Australian perspectives are often silenced in textbooks, teachers are typically a reflection of the coloniser (white), and mistreatment and genocide of Indigenous Australians is often referred to as 'European Settlement' (O'Dowd, 2012; Sharp, 2012). The classroom is a site that does not promote the exploration of alternate perspectives of history, and contributes to this constructed account of Australian history as a one truth/knowledge (Walter, 2013). This contributes to a society that, through the normalised perspective that whiteness equates to power, uncritically accepts practices that oppresses Indigenous Australians (Walter, 2013).

The formative national identity builds on and maintains this historical perspective, focusing on whiteness and excluding the mistreatment of Indigenous Australians, attributing qualities of mateship, easy going tendencies, and larrikinism to colonisers (O'Dowd, 2012), and promoting continuous colonisation and oppression of Indigenous Australians (Arrow, 2007). This is typically accepted uncritically by those in positions of power (O'Dowd, 2012). This construction of history means students are predominantly exposed to and influenced by the dominant white culture's perspective of Australian history that depicts colonisers as commendable (Sharp, 2012).

Although the Australian identity is shaped by these post-colonial ideals, it appears that young people are beginning to incorporate multiculturalism in their understandings of the Australian identity; potentially indicating a shift in how young people define an 'Australian' (Phillips & Smith, 2000; Purdie & Wilss, 2007). Being critical of the history that created this identity may provide opportunities for the inclusion of Indigenous retellings of history, and cessation of oppression for Indigenous Australians (Freire, 1972; O'Dowd, 2012).

Maddison (2012) and O'Dowd (2011) argue that in the past, young Australians of European descent typically avoided discussions of Australia's history of mistreatment and oppression towards Indigenous Australians. This served to reduce feelings of guilt of being a reflection of the coloniser, and to not challenge their post-colonial idea of what it means to be Australian (Maddison, 2012). However, little is currently known about young people's conceptualisations of Australian history itself. It is important to consider how young people conceptualise Australian history, as today's youth will be in positions of power to perpetuate or assist in ceasing oppression of Indigenous Australians in the future (Brown, Wallace, & Williams, 2001).

While there has been no published research that has specifically focused on young people's conceptualisations of Australian history, there has been research conducted that explores related themes. Over a decade ago, Bourke and Geldens (2007) interviewed young people to understand their perspectives on Reconciliation. Participants deferred responsibility for past actions to Indigenous people, ignored and conveyed limited empathy towards Indigenous trauma, and suggested the need for Indigenous assimilation into a dominant western society (Bourke & Geldens, 2007). Participants were unaware of how white privilege has shaped Australian culture, and how cultural differences between European and Indigenous Australians result in tension for full Reconciliation (Bourke & Geldens, 2007).

More recent research suggests that there may be a shift in young people's conceptualisations. Grigg and Manderson (2015) explored young Australians' understanding

and experiences of racism. Participants conveyed an awareness of how dominant culture shapes understanding of Australian history, and acknowledged past attempts to silence Indigenous histories (Grigg & Manderson, 2015). This research suggests young people may be starting to be critical of Australian history, and are deviating from past tendencies to ignore and/or avoid Indigenous mistreatment in Australian history. There is also some evidence to indicate that young people hold less racist and prejudicial views towards Indigenous Australians than older generations (Dunn et al., 2004; Pedersen, Beven, Walker, & Griffiths, 2004). However, the extent to which views of history have changed, and the impact of changing views on conceptualisations of Australian identity have yet to be explored.

The Present Study

Indigenous Australians experience continuous colonisation due to white privilege (Green & Sonn, 2005). What is held as at the true 'knowledge' of Australian history preserves Australians of European descent as the dominant culture, and maintains the oppression of Indigenous Australians (Arrow, 2007). Further research is required to explore possible changing conceptualisations of history among young Australians (Bourke & Geldens, 2007; Grigg & Manderson, 2015) and understanding these conceptualisations may inform future efforts to cease oppression and develop a more inclusive Australian identity. Therefore, the aim of this research was to explore the question "How do young people conceptualise Australian history?".

Methods

This qualitative research was conducted from a social constructionist epistemological position, acknowledging that participants' conceptualisations of Australian history may be reflective of their contextual influences and understandings (Gergen, 1985). This position aligned with the chosen analytical approach, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and the use of semi-structured interviews to discover individuals' perceptions, understandings, and experiences of a phenomenon (King, 2010).

The inclusion criteria for participants was being aged between 18 and 25 years, and self-identifying as having an interest in Australian history. Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Twelve participants aged between 18 and 24 were recruited ($M = 21$ years, $SD = 1.55$), however demographic information was only provided by 11 participants. The sample included six females, four males, and a participant who identified their gender as non-binary. The majority of participants self-

identified their primary occupation as 'student'. Ten participants were born in Australia, with participants self-identifying their ethnicity as Caucasian, Australian, British, White, and Sri Lankan.

Principles of saturation were applied to determine sample size, and to ensure that a comprehensive data set was obtained (Morse, 1995). Saturation refers to when no new information is obtained in data collection (Morse, 1995). While we recognise that saturation can be complex to determine as experiences of reality vary between individuals (Green & Thorogood, 2009), we deemed near-saturation was achieved when no new ideas or themes emerged from the data (Morse, 1995). Saturation was facilitated by the socio-cultural homogeneity of the group; the recurrent themes and ideas were all reflective of the majority of the sample's primary European heritage.

A demographic questionnaire included open-ended questions that captured birth place, ethnicity, gender, age, and occupation. The semi-structured interview guide included eight open ended questions that covered topics pertaining to conceptualisations of Australian history. Questions explored participants' experiences of learning Australian history in school, important moments in Australian history, how Australia Day is celebrated, discussions of Australian history with other people, and how Australian history influences society today.

Participant recruitment and interviews commenced once ethics approval was granted by the XXX University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number HRE 2017-0427). Interested young people were provided with the consent form and the information sheet by email, and the time and place for the interview was negotiated.

Prior to commencing the interview, participants were asked to read the participant information sheet, sign the consent form, and were invited to complete the voluntary demographic questionnaire. Once completed, participants placed the questionnaire in an unlabelled envelope, and responses were kept separate from interview recordings and transcripts. All interviews were audio-recorded. At completion of the interview, participants were debriefed and offered the opportunity to provide immediate feedback, and/or provide feedback on a summation of findings at the end of the research as a form of member checking. All participants accepted this invitation, and a newsletter was emailed once analysis was completed. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and de-identified.

Thematic analysis of transcripts, following procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted to explore participants' conceptualisations of Australian history. Analysis began with familiarisation of the data, followed by the generation of topic codes representing the immediate and descriptive forms of content. Next, analytical codes

representing information that required further interpretation and abstraction were generated though identifying patterns between the topic codes, and organising them into potential categories. After coding, themes were developed through identifying patterns and relations between these analytical codes. These potential themes were reviewed and informed the development of a thematic map. Themes were named, described, and refined, with, quotes used to illustrate the relevance of the theme to the overarching research aim.

Various strategies and practices were engaged to increase the quality of the research and rigour of the analysis (Creswell, 2014). Reflexive journaling was engaged in to minimise bias in interpretation (Creswell, 2014). We acknowledge that we are part of the dominant culture in Australia and that our white privilege may influence our understanding. We aimed to limit biased interpretation through our privileged perspective by conducting interviews with the aim of listening and honouring what participants discussed. However, we acknowledge that remaining truly unbiased in this research context is arguably an unachievable concept.

An audit trail was maintained to ensure replicability of the research (Creswell, 2014). Analyst triangulation was undertaken through attending multiple peer coding sessions to ensure that different perspectives were gained, and to minimise bias in interpretations of data (Creswell, 2014). Member checking was utilised to ensure interpretations of data were accurate (Creswell, 2014). Three participants provided feedback on the summary of research, indicating their satisfaction with findings and commenting on the professionalism of the research process. No new information relating to the findings was provided.

Findings

Learning and 'Re-Learning' Australian History

Participants critiqued their experiences of learning Australian history in primary school and high school, including the absence of an Indigenous perspective, and noting history was told from the perspective of the coloniser. As one participant commented, "I guess the world is just a really horrendous white washed place and we're often always provided with a white perspective. A white colonist perspective, and that erases a lot of histories …" (ID8). This participant reflected on the invasive influence of history told from the perspective of Australian's of European descent, continuing on to say "…it is usually about the triumph of the coloniser as opposed to the atrocities that occurred because of the colonialism" (ID8), highlighting how the erased segments of history portrayed the coloniser in a favourable and non-critical light.

Participants also expressed concern with how teaching methods forced this coloniser perspective of Australian history onto students. For example:

…I don't think it was very in depth, there wasn't a lot of class discussion. From memory, there was opportunity for people to say something but there wasn't really good in depth back and forth between teachers and students, or students just talking among themselves what it meant, and developing their own opinions it was all just, here is the information and this is what happened. In saying that, it's always a bit hard to discern whether it's biased… (ID12)

It appears that limited discussion inhibited opportunity for the coloniser perspective of history to be challenged. Participants described their experience of learning history in primary and secondary school as one where they are passive recipients of a knowledge. It was not until their tertiary education that participants questioned if their learnings in school were reflective of a 'true' account of Australian history.

Participants illustrated that learning Australian history at university was fundamentally different than learning in primary and high school, and described this re-learning as "collaborative" and conducted within a "safer space". One participant described learning Australian history at a tertiary level as occurring within "…a space where you can talk about it, and you have this view and I have this view and what do you think it means?" (ID10). Furthermore, participants described how discussing Australian history allowed for formulating their own opinions; this including appraising the validity of their previous understanding of Australian history. For example:

…by talking to other people and getting their thoughts, views, and opinions, you can sort of change the way you think. That's important to distinguish the learning environment between a tertiary education, and say high school. (ID12)

In contrast to the passive receptacle experience in learning Australian history at primary and secondary school, participants described a more 'active' learning experience in University, where they were encouraged to consider an alternate Australian history, critique voices attached to this dominant telling, and reflect on what was previously expected as being a truth.

Making Sense of What is Happening

During interviews, participants used their knowledge of Australian history to make sense of the social, economic, and political, consequences that Indigenous Australians currently experience. In their critique of a system that perpetuates Indigenous disadvantages, participants recalled 'common' disadvantages that Indigenous Australians experience. For example:

> The job rates are so low, and the incarceration rates are so high, they're doing fine in their own communities but when they get immersed into a white society as it were… or you're a regular Australian now, or European Australians, as they were. Like if you're doing a job interview you will go to your white over your black. (ID1)

This participant described a system in Australia that is racist and implicitly favours Australians of European descent. They conceptualised a 'regular'/European Australian, suggesting that Indigenous Australians face disadvantages as they do not conform to this white ideal.

One participant elaborated on this proposed system that does not allow Indigenous Australians to advance in society:

> …it all sort of comes back to these people were treated this way. But they might be in poverty maybe because they culturally don't want to assimilate with the Australian economy. Or they're disadvantaged because their family has been in poverty and it's hard to break that cycle. (ID11)

This participant recognised that mistreatment throughout history has placed Indigenous Australians in a cycle of poverty, but also attributes the continuation of this cycle of poverty to resistance to assimilate in the western society. It was apparent that while participants appeared to have some level of awareness of systemic racism within Australia, the manner in which they tended to grapple with this appeared to lack a degree of criticality. For example, noteworthy in both examples was the manner in which the participants, who did not identify as Indigenous Australian's themselves, appeared to speak as 'experts' of Indigenous Australian experiences. Participants' use of words such as "they", "their" and "these people" are othering, and suggestions made to break disadvantage were not directed at issues within the system, but instead directed towards victim blaming - an unwillingness to assimilate. There is some suggestion in this theme that while a tertiary level learning environment may have introduced a different voice to the telling of Australia's history, there remains a lack of criticality as to what this voice offers.

Othering appears to continue in instances where participants proposed and grappled with solutions to Indigenous disadvantage. Although participants acknowledged that

Indigenous Australians are continually being oppressed due to Australia's post-colonial history, they tended to present paradoxical suggestions reflective of the coloniser perspective, the perspective they themselves identified as problematic. For example:

> … the government is trying to throw money at these people but it's sort of like how you have rich parents who don't have the time to invest emotionally in the kids so it gives you tons of money…like here have what you want just don't give me trouble, I love you here's money, I want you to be a part of this. So you know Australia isn't really investing the emotional energy into making Aboriginals and Muslims and all the minorities… they're not investing the emotional energy into integrating them, they just give the financial attention. (ID5)

This participant extended their interpretation of the welfare system to other groups identified as minorities in Australia, generalising the importance of assimilation. In this example there is some suggestion of 'dominant Australia' being tokenistic in efforts addressing disadvantage (through monetary handout); a 'rich parents' metaphor has been used to illustrate the relationship dynamic between Indigenous Australians and the Australian government suggesting paternalism. However, there remains a lack of critique, evidenced by the suggestion of assimilation as the ultimate solution to social disadvantage.

Participants emphasised the importance for the government to control how compensation for history is provided to Indigenous Australians. Again, a lack of criticality is evidence, for example, one participant said "… you give them money and scholarships but if you don't teach them what to do with it or their lives, there is no point to that. You've got to teach them how to survive in the western society" (ID7). In this example, the suggested solution itself is paternalistic.

It appeared that while learning Australian history at a tertiary level may have equipped participants to begin to appreciate knowledge as a construction, whereby there are multiple voices and accounts of history, the level of criticality attached to this understanding appeared mixed. For example, while some participants appeared sympathetic and understanding of racist systems, assimilation remained the dominant strategy to resolve issues surrounding social disadvantage.

Who Is an Australian?

This theme refers to how participants grappled with what constitutes an Australian; with accounts varying. For example, some participants identified and discussed a post-colonial idea of what it is to be an Australian:

> Australians are seen as larrikins, hard-working, and that comes from um, how difficult it was to farm in Australia from way back when and we did have to work hard. Having a sense of humour in the middle of hard work really makes a difference to get you through the day. (ID4)

This construction casts 'Australians' who are likeable and hardworking and is based on the image of the coloniser as constructed in the colonisers' account of Australian history. Other participants identified a tension regarding who can be considered an Australian, for example:

> A true Australian is an Aboriginal who is connected to the land, maybe there are white people who are really connected to their land. But Australian, well… being Australian, it is that spirit. Most people, usually Aboriginals, have that strong spirit to the country; that is Australian. White people, they're always immigrants in my opinion. (ID5)

This participant challenged the authenticity of non-Indigenous people identifying as Australian.

Alternatively, some participants expressed no definitive understanding of what it means to be an Australian. For example:

> … being Australian honestly just means whatever you want it to mean. And Australian history, you can either take it as it comes and be proud of it yourself or you can look at it as if it's just a string of circumstances that brought us to this point. (ID9)

This participant highlighted that one's perception of Australian history is important to identity development.

Through their critique of Australia's history, many participants expressed confusion in their contemplations regarding what it means to be an Australian, and appeared to internalise tensions of being non-Indigenous and living in a country where this is privileged. Participants appeared to struggle with how they fit in Australia based on their understanding of Australian history, for example:

> … Europeans came here which were not Australian and a lot of them probably don't even see themselves as Europeans. It was hundreds of years ago since they've been here in Australia. So it's just so hard, Europeans are still Australian, I view myself as an Australian even though I am European as well... and I feel like you can be both, but yeah that's just very hard. (ID9)

In accounting for their multiple heritages, it seems that participants struggled to conceptualise what it means to be an Australian. It also appears that participants reflect on ideas of authenticity when conceptualising their own Australian identity. This tension was also

reflected in participants considering how to appropriately celebrate Australia Day; noted by some participants as being described as 'Invasion Day'. Participants reflected on being non-Indigenous, and expressed concern and at times guilt for celebrating it. For example:

> …people want to go out and have a great time but then at the same time you feel kind of reserved cos you're like 'Oh, should I be celebrating? Like should this be a happy day?' It's supposed to be for us but it's about them. They're protesting in the street but should I be going to them? (ID1)

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore young people's conceptualisations of Australian history. Three themes were identified, together, they captured a series of tensions regarding participants developing understanding of Australian history, and how this appears to shape their understanding of social disadvantage and identity in Australia. Participants noted their learning of Australian history in primary and secondary school was passive. When learning Australian history in university there was some recognition of different knowledges, perspectives and voices, and that this can shape the account of Australian History shared. The learning environment at a tertiary level was suggested as being conducive to deeper thought, as being active, and "safe". In the theme 'making sense of what is happening' participants appeared to grapple with the history that they had seemingly re-learnt at a tertiary level, and tensions arose in participants endeavours to understand issues of social disadvantage. Most notable were the paradoxical suggestions made by participants pertaining to addressing disadvantage, with assimilation the dominant 'solution' posed by participants. Finally, while paradoxical and lacking criticality at times, some participants new found understanding of Australian history appeared to introduce some tensions surrounding how they (and others who are similarly non-Indigenous) claim authenticity as being 'Australian'. Each of these findings are discussed below and interpreted within Freire's (1972) theorising on oppression.

Previous literature suggested that young people may be more critical of the coloniser influence in Australian history, and their perspectives towards Indigenous Australians may have shifted to be more positive in recent times (Dunn et al., 2004; Grigg & Manderson, 2015). Findings from the current research only partially supports this notion. Despite young people expressing perspectives that appeared to indicate a change in perspective (criticising the colonisers' influence of Australian history in school, and criticising how Australia's post-colonial history perpetuates disadvantages for Indigenous Australians), they tended to contradict these perspectives by approaching other topics with assimilation ideologies. For

example, the suggested 'solution' to address disadvantage was the necessity for assimilation. Therefore, this proposed shift in how young people conceptualise Australian history is disrupted by assimilation ideologies, furthering oppression.

Participants recognised a system in Australia that is controlled by the dominant culture, and one that silences Indigenous histories and oppresses Indigenous Australians, whilst rarely reflecting on how their own white positioning in Australia may perpetuate this oppression. Consistent with previous literature, participants tended to deflect personal responsibility for Australia's history of oppression, and in turn did not display an awareness of their own privilege in an oppressive system that favours their whiteness (Grigg & Manderson, 2015; Pedersen et al., 2004). Specifically, participants blamed the Australian Government for oppression of Indigenous Australians, and victim blamed Indigenous Australians for experiencing disadvantages. Notably, participants were only aware of their white positioning in Australia when questioning what it means for them to be an Australian, particularly when considering the historical significance of Australia Day for Indigenous Australians. It is unclear why young people may be more likely to reflect of their whiteness in this context, but it may be due to the prominence of calls for changes to Australia Day in the year this research was conducted, with several local councils taking action to change the date Australia Day is celebrated (Bolton, 2017). Providing intervention to promote acceptance of Australia's colonial history (and the meaning it has for Australia Day) at a time where young people are in an internal state of conflict may be an appropriate catalyst for changing assimilation ideologies and negative attitudes towards Indigenous Australians (O'Dowd, 2011).

Participants' reflections on white positioning and the varied attempts to define an 'Australian' seemed to indicate a shift in how the Australian identity is conceptualised today. The Australian identity is typically and uncritically considered as one that defines Australians with post-colonial ideals (O'Dowd, 2012), however participants seemed to challenge this perspective through their critique of who is an Australian. While some participants still expressed sentiments of larrikinism, mateship, and a good sense of humour, reflecting a post-colonial construction of the Australian identity consistent with previous research (Phillips & Smith, 2000), others identified Indigenous Australians as the true Australians. Through their critique of Australian history, and making sense of how history operates today, participants may be in a process of attempting to stabilise their understanding of how they fit in Australia and what it means to be an Australian (Maddison, 2012). According to Moreton-Robinson (2004), the white person's identity is established through constructing themselves as superior,

and defining themselves against inferior 'others'. This process of 'othering' includes white people controlling their 'inferiors' to perform practices that will promote whiteness – in order to maintain the knowledge that a white identity is superior (and maintaining this position of power). There may be scope to suggest that participants, through discussing assimilation as a dominant solution and being taught a knowledge that positions Australians of European descent as powerful, are attempting to stabilize their identity as superior. Further research could explore how young people are attempting to conceptualise their Australian identity based on how history operates today.

Findings from the current research can be interpreted using Freire's (1972) theorising of oppression. Participants indicated that they sided with the oppressed by illustrating the importance of minimising disadvantages that Indigenous Australians experience. However it seems participants may not fully recognise or comprehend their position as the oppressor. This was evidenced in participants offering of compensatory solutions that were embedded within assimilation ideologies; such offerings would likely only further facilitate oppression of Indigenous Australians. The beginnings of reflection on white positioning, the oppressor-self, were evident in the confusion over how to celebrate Australia Day, and the critique of Australian identity. As such, the young Australians interviewed appear to be undergoing a conceptual shift, through conscientization, where they are becoming conscious of their position as oppressor. In doing so, they are becoming sympathetic of Indigenous Australian experience, and expressed a desire for Aboriginal disadvantage and oppression to be ceased. This level of awareness appears to be in its infancy, and at times the methods participants posed as strategies to end oppression reflected paternalism and at times victim blaming. There is limited literature describing the shift from oppressor to siding with the oppressed, despite this being referred to as a crucial process in the cessation of oppression (Freire, 1972). Our findings extend what is known about this process.

Applying Freire's (1972) theorising, younger Australians of European descent should be encouraged to take a more critical stance of their personal position as a reflection of the coloniser, rather than deflecting blame to the Australian government, or to victim blame Indigenous Australians for their disadvantages. The current perspective that Australians of European descent should have a paternalistic and controlling role in reducing Indigenous Australian disadvantage needs to be challenged. A key way to effect this change is through education. Education is an important intervention for influencing young people's attitudes towards Indigenous Australians (Pedersen et al., 2004) and the current findings suggest that the way in which Australian history is taught in schools should be reviewed. Participants

described themselves as passive recipients of knowledge in primary and secondary school that was taught as 'truth' for uncritical consumption. The uncritical consumption of this fabricated knowledge may indicate why participants were unable to reflect on their personal position as a reflection of the coloniser; this teaching of knowledge at a young age does not challenge the position of power that Australians of European descent are granted, in order to maintain this position of power. Participants described that only in the tertiary environment were they permitted to question this taught 'truth' and critique voices attached to it. This may be an indication that being equipped with skills acquired in this active learning experience impacts how one critically makes sense of history, socio-political consequences for Indigenous disadvantage, and identity development. Future research should explore the role that passive and active learning experiences in education play in the understanding phenomena of racism, oppression, and identity in Australia.

These findings suggest that the illustrated passive receptacle experience in primary and secondary school contributes to the perpetuation of a 'true' knowledge, and eventually contributes to participants' paradoxical ideologies. A taught knowledge that considers Indigenous Australians as inferior creates the perspective that Australians of European descent have power to control the perpetuation of racial inequalities – emphasising the importance of promoting active learning in primary and secondary schooling to disrupt this belief and the subsequent continuation of colonisation. Decolonising the curriculum in primary and secondary schooling by introducing alternate accounts and voices of history may encourage the breakdown of a 'true knowledge' that continues oppression and colonisation of Indigenous Australians. Facilitating learning of Australian history that incorporates Indigenous voices and history, and encourages critical reflection of the continued impact of colonisation may promote an exploration of white positioning and the meaning of the Australian identity at a younger age.

Encouragingly, there appears to have been a recent shift in how Australian history is taught in schools. The Australian curriculum for primary and high school has become more inclusive of Indigenous Australian content (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority [ACARA, 2013], 2013) emphasising reconciliation and equality for Indigenous Australians, respecting their rights and status, and promoting an exploration of how different groups express their identity. Working with Indigenous elders in the schooling context to ensure perspectives are being accurately accounted for may be an effective way to teach Australian history, without favouring the coloniser perspective and silencing Indigenous histories (Harrison & Murray, 2013). These culturally inclusive teaching methodologies

should also focus on reducing the prominent assimilation ideologies that young people may hold (Harrison & Murray, 2013).

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Research Directions

The sample for this research was twelve Australian young people residing in the Perth metropolitan area. Although strategies were adopted to ensure a diverse sample, most participants identified as Caucasian/White. Whilst the participants' relatively homogenous socio-cultural backgrounds may be viewed as a limitation in terms of transferability of findings to various culturally diverse contexts, it did provide a focus on views from the dominant culture in Australia. Future research exploring conceptualisations of Australian history with people from rural and remote locations and different cultures, in particular with Indigenous Australians, is required. We have referred to our sample as being primarily Australians of European descent. Given the requirements outlined in our ethics approval process we were unable to link participants' responses in interviews to their demographic information, and the data was consequently interpreted without considering the complex cultural backgrounds of our participants, including one participant from Sri-Lanka. We recognise this erasure of culture as a problematic reflection of our own whiteness, and recommend future research include greater consideration of all participants' cultural backgrounds.

Participants in this research reflected they were unable to effectively recall their experiences of learning history as they had not attended primary and high school recently. It is important to question the accuracy of their accounts of learning history in school, and interpretations are therefore tentative. Future research should explore students' direct experiences of learning history in school in order to acquire an accurate report. Further research is also required to determine how to aid the process of shifting young people away from assimilation ideologies, in order to understand how society can move forward in provide intervention to minimise negative attitudes towards Indigenous Australians.

Conclusion

This research is the first to specifically explore young people's conceptualisations of Australian history. Drawing on Freire's (1972) theorising of oppression, the key finding from this research is that young Australians of European descent appear to be undergoing a conceptual shift between oppressor and siding with Indigenous Australians in their struggle to cease oppression. Whilst acknowledging Indigenous Australian disadvantage, participants generally supported assimilation and paternalistic policy and practice. Uncertainty about the

Australian identity and how Australia Day should be celebrated further suggest a shift in thinking. Further research that considers Freirian (1972) theorising is required into how to facilitate this shift in all Australians to end the oppression of Indigenous Australians.

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