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Theory to social action: A university based strategy targeting prejudice against
Aboriginal Australians

Running Head: Prejudice reduction

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Abstract

The level of racism in Australia against Aboriginal Australians is well documented. This has an extremely detrimental effect on the health and well-being of Aboriginal Australians. One part of the solution may be anti-prejudice strategies, but to date few strategies which include a pre-test and a *post test* assessment have been conducted in Australia. Our study describes the interventional qualities of a Cultural psychology unit at an Australian university. Results indicated that after a six week period, students reported a significant reduction in prejudice, acceptance of false beliefs about Aboriginal Australians, and the perception that Aboriginal Australians unfairly receive preferential or special treatment. The article concludes that cultural psychology units have potential to be an effective way of developing acceptance of cross cultural differences.

That Aboriginal Australians¹ experience extreme disadvantage in almost all aspects of Western well-being is well documented (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2005, 2007). What is less well known is the effect of racism on the health of Aboriginal Australians. As an example of work on this issue, Paradies (2006) demonstrated that the experience of racism contributes to poor health for racially marginalised groups. Paradies (2007) further notes that a number of variables associated with racism including lower rates of employment, lower levels of education, poorer housing, reduced access to medical care, psychological ill-health, maladaptive coping responses to stress and smoking, are all further predictors of physical ill-health. He emphasised that it is essential that Australia as a nation attempts to deal with the issue of racism; not only from a human rights perspective, but also from as a pragmatic public health standpoint (also see Paradies, Harris, & Anderson, 2008).

It is clear, therefore, that continuing racism in Australian society presents a serious social problem with psychological, ethical and physiological ramifications. All forms of oppression are problematic for the victims and the perpetrators in any given society. Certainly, research suggests that there are unacceptable levels of negative perceptions about Aboriginal Australians in the community today (see, for example, Mellor, 2003; Ngarritjan Kessarais, 2006; Pedersen, Beven, Walker & Griffiths, 2004). That such racism exists has been acknowledged by the Australian Psychological Society (APS) in their position paper on racism and prejudice (Sanson et al., 1998). As noted in that paper, racism is expressed at every level of Australian society, and they concluded with strong recommendations for racism reduction.

In the ten years since that position paper was written, little progress has been made in this regard. Psychology as a discipline, however, is concerned about the issue of social justice and Aboriginal people (Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett, 2000; Dudgeon & Pickett, 2000; Gridley, Davidson, Dudgeon, Pickett, & Sanson, 2000). Including Aboriginal perspectives into the psychology curricula is a particular emphasis (Sonn, Garvey, Bishop, Smith, 2000). One way of attempting to deal with racism is to implement anti-racism strategies, both in the outside community and within the education system. The discussion on inclusion of Aboriginal issues in the psychology curriculum has continued gaining more support in recent times; for instance, Ranzijn, McConnochie, and Nolan (2007) noted that “psychology has a responsibility to help redress Indigenous disadvantage” (p. 7) (also see Ranzijn, McConnochie, Day, Nolan, & Wharton, in press). Certainly, education is one important way of addressing and reducing the racism present in society. The study to be reported here is in keeping with these concerns and aims to address this issue by detailing a Perth-based strategy conducted within a university setting in a cultural psychology unit.

Racism should be dealt with simultaneously from a number of perspectives; that is, top-down action such as government interventions and policies as well as bottom-up action such as inclusions in the curricula at schools and in higher education courses (see Pedersen, Walker & Wise, 2005, for an analysis of anti-racism strategies). It is proposed that our study could be one step further in suggesting ways to deal with the unacceptable levels of racism in the Australian community. It should be noted that the terms “racism”, “prejudice”, and “negative attitudes” are often used interchangeably in the literature. Broadly speaking, our paper uses the term “prejudice” to refer to a negative pre-judgment

of an Aboriginal person or persons, and the term “racism” is used as a more structural/societal phenomenon.

Important Issues when Attempting To Reduce Prejudice

Before examining the literature on anti-racism strategies, some correlates of prejudice are considered which will impact on how our strategy was run as well as how it was not run. Some variables are particularly relevant when trying to diminish or eliminate prejudice toward marginalised groups from an individualistic, rather than structural, position.

Intergroup Emotions. One promising avenue of research examines the role of intergroup emotion; for example, collective guilt and empathy. Although both collective guilt (a self-focused emotion) and empathy (an other-focused emotion) have been found to correlate with prejudice (McGarty et al., 2005), it is further argued that it is more useful to concentrate on other-focused emotions (see, for example, Iyer, Leach & Pedersen, 2004; Leach Snider, & Iyer, 2002). In any event, collective guilt is not a common emotion in the wider community (McGarty et al., 2005). Thus, previous research indicates that anti-prejudice interventions should not overly concentrate on guilt.

Opportunity for Dialogue. This is another important individual strategy for reducing racism. In other words, ‘talking with’ rather than ‘talking at’: simply taking the moral high ground and preaching at people is unlikely to be effective (Pedersen et al., 2005).

Provision of Information. Another means of addressing racism is by the provision of information about cultural issues. One noteworthy study was conducted by Hill and Augoustinos (2001). They measured both modern (covert) prejudice and old-fashioned (overt) prejudice as well as stereotypes and knowledge about Aboriginal-Australians before a three-day cross-cultural awareness program. Directly after the program, they found increases in knowledge about Aboriginal issues, and decreases in stereotyping and in both modern and old fashioned prejudice. Three months after the intervention, however, although knowledge about Aboriginal issues was still significantly higher than three months previous, scores on the prejudice scales had largely returned to their pre-intervention means. Among the high prejudiced respondents, however, there was a significant reduction in old-fashioned prejudice.

False Beliefs. One variable related to the above that has been linked to negativity toward Aboriginal Australians is false beliefs about members of that group. In particular, in their Western Australian community survey, Pedersen, Griffiths, Contos, Bishop and Walker (2000) found that prejudiced respondents were significantly more likely to endorse false beliefs such as ‘Aboriginal people only have to make one car payment, and the Government will pay the rest’. In passing, it is noted that this relationship has also been found with other marginalised groups in Australia. For example, Pedersen, Watt and Hansen (2006) found that prejudiced respondents were significantly more likely to endorse false beliefs such as “asylum seekers are illegal”.

If such false beliefs can be learned, the question as to whether or not they can be unlearned is raised. Preliminary research suggests that this may be so. Batterham (2001)

found that challenging false beliefs about Aboriginal Australians significantly reduced the acceptance of them. Additionally, participants whose false beliefs were challenged scored significantly lower on modern prejudice compared with a control group. It could well be, however, that the notion of “true” vs “false” is too simplistic. At times some (negative) beliefs that respondents hold about Aboriginal Australians are not necessarily “false” (Pedersen, Dudgeon, Watt & Griffiths, 2006). As these authors found, often these beliefs are to do with the negative perception of “special treatment” being afforded Aboriginal Australians. Often they are false beliefs; however, sometimes there is some truth that Aboriginal people are given certain advantages (e.g., equal opportunity strategies which recognise Aboriginal disadvantage). Critical understandings of the broader historical and social contexts need to form part of interventions in an attempt to address social disadvantage and to appreciate the need for additional supports and attention that allow disadvantaged and marginalised groups to engage in society in empowered ways. Thus, in any anti-prejudice strategy, equal opportunity issues and the redressing of social disadvantage should be made clear. As Hill and Augoustinos (2001) noted, prejudice reduction programmes should deal with modern forms of prejudice not simply old-fashioned forms. A major tenet of modern prejudice is that marginalised groups have the right to the same opportunities as others; however, they want more rights (McConahay & Hough, 1976). This is the crux of the “special treatment” issue.

Effectiveness of Anti-Prejudice Strategies

Although there has been a large quantity of psychological research on racism (and anti-racism), there is less research on prejudice reduction itself. It is possible that this dearth

of information is due to the small number of psychologists working in this field. Alternately, it may be because such strategies are notoriously apt to fail for a range of reasons such as the effect of attitudes within the wider community (Pedersen et al., 2005). It is difficult to change individuals' attitudes over a long period of time when they are exposed to negative messages in their every day lives. For example, media images about Aboriginal people, as found by Meadows (2001), are often negative. Additionally, dealing with the complex and often controversial issues such as racism can lead to conflicts during the process (see Gaines, 2004, for a description of his conflicts as an African American lecturer teaching racism: both at an individual student level, a class level, and the organisational level). Anti-racism interventions remain critically important, however, and there have been some successes at least on a short term basis (see Donovan & Leivers, 1993; Hill & Augoustinos, 2001).

Overview

Although there is considerable research theorising about the antecedents of prejudice and racism against Aboriginal Australians, as previously noted, there has been little empirical work examining strategies to reduce prejudice. Thus, our study investigates whether prejudice against Aboriginal Australians could be reduced after six-weeks of a cultural psychology unit. We aimed to reduce prejudice against Aboriginal Australians, together with reducing other relevant prejudice-related variables. Importantly, this paper does not attempt to deconstruct the active components of the strategy, but presents the data as a global attempt to reduce prejudice toward Aboriginal Australians. It will be seen that we used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In fact, Yardley and Bishop (in

press) argue that using a variety of methods is more than simply advantageous, it is necessary if researchers wish to gain a good understanding of the research question.

Pedersen et al. (2005) reviewed literature pertinent to anti-racism strategies in Australia and made eight suggestions with respect to implementing such strategies. These were to: (a) combat false beliefs, (b) involve the audience, (c) invoke empathy, (d) emphasise commonality and diversity within and between groups, (e) focus on changing behaviours as much as changing attitudes, (f) meet local needs, (g) evaluate properly, and (h) consider the broader context. These principles underpinned the planning our anti-prejudice strategy, and four significant issues drove all parts of the strategy. First, the study attempted to avoid inducing collective guilt. Although there is a significant negative correlation between prejudice and collective guilt (the higher the prejudice, the lower the guilt), as Leach et al (2002) argue, collective guilt is an aversive emotion and people tend to avoid aversive emotions.

Second, our study aimed to provide an environment in which students felt safe to speak their minds, even when it was highly likely that some students' views were not in line with those of the lecturer and other students. As noted by Pedersen et al. (2005), dialogue is important, and views should be aired and discussed freely. The tutors in the present unit (there were five 2-hour tutorials conducted by tutors separate from the lecture) encouraged students to interact with each other in a respectful manner.

Third, our study used the concept of providing information. For example, during the strategy, we gave a detailed explanation of commonly-held false beliefs, as well as when Aboriginal people do receive benefits from some equal opportunity action as

outlined by Pedersen, Dudgeon, et al. (2006). Other factual information was incorporated during the unit: more detail will be given on this later.

Fourth, our study attempted to bring in voices of Aboriginal Australians. In particular, students were shown a video by Dr Chris Sarra “Strong and Smart” (Sarra & Maza, 2003) about how an Aboriginal school principal positively impacted on the lives of young Aboriginal children. We also included literature written by Aboriginal Australians, not just non-Aboriginal academics.

In order to assess prejudice both before and after the strategy, we quantitatively measured prejudice against Aboriginal Australians using an “attitude thermometer”². Collective guilt was measured quantitatively to verify the success of our attempt not to induce guilt. We also asked quantitative questions about students’ acceptance of false beliefs via a three item scale. Qualitative questions about students’ views on what is known as “special treatment”, or preferential treatment of Aboriginal Australians, were also asked both pre and post strategy. With respect to the qualitative data regarding “special treatment”, a ‘theoretical’ thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted on the corpus of qualitative data. We came to the data with a specific question. That is, were participant themes regarding the issue of special treatment (a) positive (b) negative or (c) neither positive or negative? Specifically, it was predicted that there would be a significant reduction in prejudice, false beliefs, and the perception that Aboriginal people unfairly receive “special treatment” after the strategy.

Methods

Participants

First year psychology students from an Australian university participated in an elective cultural psychology unit in Semester 2, 2006. They completed questionnaires at the beginning of the semester (Week 1), and again six weeks later (Week 6). A total of 123 participants completed the questionnaire at Time 1; this initial sample were comprised primarily of women (78.1%) whose combined mean age was approximately 21 years ($SD=4.86$). Most participants were born in Australia (65.9% of the sample) and identified themselves as White or European Australian (69.1% of the sample). A minority of participants (10%) identified themselves as being Asian Australian while 19.5% classified themselves as 'Other'. No participant identified as being Aboriginal.

Of the 123 participants who completed the initial questionnaire, five multivariate outliers were detected and deleted, and approximately half of the participants ($n=62$) completed the questionnaire at time 2. The final sample again was comprised primarily of women (71%) with a mean age again of approximately 21 years ($SD=5.45$). A comparison was made with the Time 1 data between those participants who completed the questionnaire at Time 1 with those who completed both questionnaires. There were no significant differences in age, sex, place of birth, or ethnicity between the samples. With respect to the social-psychological variables, there was no significant difference between the two samples with respect to guilt, the false belief scale, the belief in the existence of special treatment, or the belief that special treatment was bad. However, participants who completed both questionnaires were significantly more positive about Aboriginal Australians ($M=61.5$) than those who only completed Time 1 ($M=51.6$) ($t(111)=2.41; p<.02$). There was no significant difference at Time 1 between

White/European Australians and other Australians ($t(111)=2.76$, ns.) nor at Time 2 ($t(58)=0.20$, ns.).

Procedure

Time 1. Participants were recruited in class by the White lecturer of the unit. They were asked to complete a short questionnaire at the beginning of a lecture. All participation was voluntary and anonymous, and students were informed verbally and in writing that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage. Neither the lectures nor tutorials were compulsory. All lectures were taped and students could listen to them at home through iLecture (audio files of lectures made available for download off the internet). Most of the relevant specific information such as prejudice, false beliefs and “special treatment” came from the lectures while other cultural awareness issues were covered in the tutorials.

Strategy. In the intervening weeks between questionnaire deliveries, students were given a series of lectures focusing on social inequality both locally and overseas, with particular focus on Aboriginal Australians and asylum seekers (for the purposes of the present study, however, the focus is on Aboriginal Australians). The strategy used the principles outlined in Pedersen et al (2005). Almost all of the two-hour lectures in the first six lectures involved some information around Aboriginal issues. For example, in Week 1 (Introduction) information was given about Aboriginal children in the classroom; in particular, the collectivist nature of Aboriginal culture. For instance, what may be seen as “collaborative learning” in the eyes of an Aboriginal child may be seen as “cheating”

in mainstream eyes. In Week 2 (Scope and Methods), information was given about different forms of society as well as prejudice and its effect on Aboriginal children (taken in part from Pedersen with Dudgeon, 2004). In Week 3 (Prejudice against Aboriginal Australians and Asylum Seekers) information was taken partly from Pedersen et al. (2005). Part of the students' reading for that week was "Face the Facts" (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 2003). In the Week 3 lecture, the false beliefs surrounding Aboriginal Australians were covered in depth (taken from Commonwealth of Australia, 1992; Pedersen et al. 2000). In Week 4 (Perception and Intelligence), information was given regarding the cultural biases of "White" IQ tests with respect to cultural groups such as Aboriginal Australians. In Week 5 (Socialisation and Enculturation), information was given regarding the superior spatial skills of Aboriginal children which ties in directly with child-rearing patterns (taken from Kearins, 1976). In Week 6 (Aboriginal Children at School), information was given regarding the societal causes of the poor academic performance of some Aboriginal children (taken from Pedersen with Dudgeon, 2004) and a full description of the issues surrounding "special treatment" (taken from Pedersen et al., 2005). In this regard, students were told that there was no "right" or "wrong" answers; that ultimately students need to make their own judgments based on critical appreciation of the information they were given. Finally at the end of the Week 6 lecture, students watched a video called "Strong and smart" which detailed the work of Dr Chris Sarra and his transformation of the Cherbourg State School (Sarra & Maza, 2003). Throughout the 6-week period, the lecturer attempted to avoid a guilt-focus to encourage dialogue about Aboriginal issues, especially when students contested the content of the lectures. The tutorials complemented the lectures with

cultural awareness exercises and discussions. Students were also encouraged to consider the societal influences on individuals – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal (see Pedersen et al., 2005).

Time 2. Six weeks after the first questionnaire was distributed, the lecturer again approached students to complete the second questionnaire in the lecture. Quantitative questionnaires delivered at Times 1 and 2 were identical (see measures section below); the qualitative questions were slightly different, and will be described fully below. Again, all participation was voluntary and anonymous, and students were informed verbally and in writing that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Measures.

Demographic Information. Participants indicated their sex, age, whether or not they were born in Australia, and their ethnicity. They recorded their demographic information prior to completing the body of the questionnaire.

Prejudice. An attitudes thermometer was employed to measure positive or negative attitudes to Aboriginal Australians. The prefacing question read “In general how positive or favourable do you feel about Aboriginal Australians?” and students could respond on the thermometer from a base of 1°=Extremely Unfavourable, to a peak of 100°=Extremely Favourable. The thermometer scores were allocated to three categories. Those respondents whose scores were equal to or less than 33.3 were classified as

“Rejecting”, those whose scores were greater than 33.3 and less than 66.6 were classified as “Indifferent”, and those with scores equal to or greater than 66.6 were classified as “Accepting”. For ease of reference, from this point, we label this variable “prejudice”.

False Beliefs. A scale designed to measure participant endorsement of false beliefs in line with Pedersen et al. (2000) was created with three items in which participants indicated whether or not they agreed that 1) Being Aboriginal entitles you to more social security benefits, 2) Aborigines are more likely to drink alcohol than non-Aborigines, and 3) Aborigines only have to pay a few payments under a hire-purchase agreement for a car, and the government will meet the remaining costs (1=certainly false to 9=certainly true). All of these statements were factually incorrect.

Guilt. The guilt that participants felt was measured using a thermometer similar to the attitudes thermometer described above. The prefacing question read, “Overall, how guilty do you *personally* feel about the past and present mistreatment of Aboriginal Australians by other Australians?” Students could respond on the thermometer from a base of 1°=Extremely Innocent, to a peak of 100°=Extremely Guilty.

Qualitative data - “special treatment”. At Time 1, participants were asked “Both students and community members in the past have commented on what they perceive as “special treatment” given to Aboriginal Australians. In other words, benefits given to Aboriginal Australians that other Australians do not receive. What are your thoughts on this issue?” After the lecture on “special treatment” (Time 2), participants were asked what their views were on this topic. We were interested in the content of their

spontaneous responses and also whether more information would change their view. We used a thematic analytic procedure to do so (see Braun & Clarke, 2006).

With regard to “special treatment”, we identified whether participants reported that they felt that Aboriginal people received “special treatment” in line with Pedersen, Dudgeon, et al. (2006). First, the occurrence of each identified “special treatment” belief in the corpus of responses to the qualitative question was recorded (0=No, they do not receive special treatment, 1=unsure; 2=yes, they do receive special treatment). Second, if the participant did believe that special treatment existed, their response was then coded to indicate whether they thought that this is a good thing (0= it is a bad thing; 1= neither bad nor good; 3=Yes, it is a good thing). If participants were coded as 0 (no) in the first question, their response was left blank in the second column. It was this second question which we used as our index of “special treatment”.

To ensure the reliability of the coding scheme, the data were independently coded by two coders (the first and second authors). Inter-rater reliability regarding whether special treatment existed was satisfactory at Time 1 (.89); as an aside, this was not measured in Time 2 as the question was not framed to probe this question. Interreliability regarding whether special treatment was perceived as good or bad was also satisfactory (.94 at Time 1 and .91 at Time 2).

Results

Quantitative Results: Categorisation of Prejudice Scores

As noted, the prejudice scores were allocated to three categories: Rejecting, Indifferent, and Accepting. As can be seen by Table 1, almost no respondents fell into the Rejecting

category – either using all data, or just the participants who continued to the end of the strategy. Bar one participant, the sample was split evenly at the beginning between being Indifferent and Accepting. However, after the strategy, the Accepting category significantly increased from approximately half the sample to two-thirds of the sample (chi-squared $df=1 = 13.5; p<.001$).

Table 1. Categorisation of prejudice scores

	Rejecting	Indifferent	Accepting
Time 1 (all participants)	1%	57.6%	41.4%
Time 1 (continuing respondents)	0%	49.1%	50.9%
Time 2 (continuing respondents)	0%	34.4%	65.6%

Descriptives

Data from those participants who completed questionnaires at Time 1 and Time 2 ($n=62$) were analysed. Table 2 presents the descriptive characteristics for the prejudice item, the false belief scale, and the guilt item, setting out the means and standard deviations. At Time 1, participants hovered around the “slightly favourable” mark on the prejudice scale and around the “slightly innocent” mark on the guilt scale, and above the mean on the false beliefs scale (high scores = acceptance of false beliefs). At Time 2, participants hovered around the “fairly favourable” mark on the prejudice scale, again around the “slightly innocent” mark on the Guilt scale (no change), and below the mean on the false beliefs scale.

Table 2. Descriptive characteristics (only using continuing participants)

Scale/Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	No. items	α	Range
Time 1					
Prejudice	61.46	20.64	1	-	1-100
False Belief Scale	4.89	1.70	3	.67	1-9
Guilt	47.08	31.72	1	-	1-100
Time 2					
Prejudice	70.85	16.58	1	-	1-100
False Belief Scale	3.12	1.64	3	.71	1-9
Guilt	45.59	32.65	1	-	1-100

Note. High scores indicates lower prejudice

Qualitative Results: Special Treatment

With the “special treatment” item, at Time 1 most participants reported that they believed Aboriginal people received special treatment (87.6%) with 10.6% being unsure, and 1.8% reporting that they did not believe that Aboriginal people received special treatment. Of that 87.6% who reported that Aboriginal people received special treatment, the largest category of participants were those who saw this as being negative or unfair (44.5%). Just under one third (30%) reported that they did not see it as good or bad, and just under a quarter saw it as a good thing (25.5%). At Time 2, almost two-thirds of participants reported perceiving special treatment as being positive (62.7%), followed by

approximately one-third who reported it as neither good or bad (25.4%) followed by 11.9% of participants who reported that it was bad.

Although our study did not aim to replicate the categories found in the Pedersen, Dudgeon, et al. (2006) study, certainly some of the comments mirrored them. For example, one of the categories found in the 2006 study were about financial handouts. This was also found in our study (Time 1):

“Occurrences in history have an effect on today, but how long can they milk it for? If we continue to give Indigenous Australians handouts that they abuse and come to take for granted and complain if things are not done for them, what help are we really doing? Many other Australians could use these opportunities to better themselves”.

Some of the data also mirrored the second category regarding unfair special rights as found in the 2006 study:

“Australian Indigenous have too many special rights. When the Europeans settled America they gave the natives a division of the land and that is exactly what we should have done, not welfare benefits health and even education. I find the special treatment unnecessary for now most only depend on this and make no effort to strive to reach those treatments themselves” (Time 1).

Echoes of the category “unfair legal system advantages” were also found; for example,

“That Indigenous Australians don’t receive as much special treatment as is thought to be believed. However, it still worries me that I do see Indigenous Australians who are given special treatment, whether it be leniency from the courts that it is abused and not taken on or used for advantage (Time 2).

Finally, some participants’ comments were similar to the fourth category: housing. As one participant noted:

“I believe that some Indigenous Australians do receive special treatment by the government such as special incomes (Centrelink) just for being Aboriginal, selected scholarships, special housing, and other such things. This to me is not fair because it should be up to themselves to be able to provide for themselves to be able to provide for themselves and not Australians and the Australian government to do it just because they are different and a minority group considered special because they were the original settlers or owners of Australia. They need to help themselves not make it someone else’s responsibility” (Time 1).

Strategy results: Both quantitative and qualitative

Three *t tests* were conducted, the first with respect to prejudice. Specifically, a paired samples *t test* found that scores on the prejudice item were significantly lower at Time 2 compared with Time 1 ($t(58)=-4.87, p<001$)³. In other words, participants reported more negativity toward Aboriginal Australians before the strategy. The study then examined time differences with respect to the false belief scale. A paired sample *t test* found that

scores on the false belief scale were significantly lower at Time 2 compared with Time 1 ($t(61)=-5.97, p<001$). In other words, participants reported less acceptance of false beliefs after the strategy. With respect to special treatment, a paired samples *t test* was conducted using the results from the thematic analysis. There was a significant difference at Time 1 compared to Time 2 ($t(54)=-6.13, p<.001$). Specifically, participants were significantly more likely to report that any “special treatment” was a good thing after the strategy.

Finally, to examine whether we were successful in not invoking guilt, the time differences with respect to guilt were examined. As hoped, a paired sample *t test* found no significant difference on guilt between Time 1 compared with Time 2 ($t(58)=-0.61, ns.$).

Discussion

The aim of our study was assess the success of the interventional qualities of a cultural psychology unit. More specifically, the aim was to determine whether the strategy was related to a significant reduction in prejudice, and whether or not participants decreased their acceptance of false beliefs and their perception that Aboriginal people unfairly received “special treatment”. As predicted, there was a significant reduction on all three measures. As an aside, these results were replicated in a similar 2008 study (Pedersen, Aly, Hartley & McGarty, 2008).

But before we go into detail about the aims of our study, we briefly discuss one unexpected finding – that participants who completed both Time 1 and Time 2 reported significantly more positive attitudes toward Aboriginal Australians than those who

completed only Time 1 data. Why so? The students who took part in this elective unit would have been clear about the content of the unit very early on, and students who were more rejecting may have self-selected out. We attempted to establish how many students withdrew from the unit within three weeks of beginning of semester; this should tell us whether students were “scared off” by the confronting nature of the unit. Although there was a decrease of 61 participants between Time 1 and Time 2, only 16 students actually withdrew from the unit. Thus, although a minority of students did drop out of the unit early, most of the students who did not show up for collection of the Time 2 data remained in the unit listening to iLecture (or not as the case may be). In short, the fact that the students who did not complete Time 2 data reported higher levels of prejudice is likely to be due to two factors. First, a small number of disaffected students dropping out; secondly, there was something qualitatively different about the students who chose to come to lectures. One could hypothesize that these students were more open in their attitudes having a greater willingness to learn; but this cannot be ascertained from our data.

Does this unexpected finding mean the strategy was not worthwhile? We would argue not. It simply shows that one of the weaknesses of anti-prejudice strategies is that individuals - whether in a class such as ours or in a community sample - may opt out producing a self-selecting bias. However, positive end results are still possible from such in-class strategies. Specifically, flow-on effects are important for students who remain in class. What the students learn in class could well be passed onto others when a relevant situation arises both now and in the future; in other words, a “trickle effect”. Also, our approach indicates one way to build the capacity to oppose prejudice among a self-

selected group while reducing the possibility of a backlash from people with hostile attitudes. Indeed, there is some evidence that hostile group norms within prejudice-reduction strategies can increase prejudice levels (Myers & Bishop, 1970). Their finding, we believe, could relate to the validation of ideas when talking within a similar-attitude group (in our study, there was less homogeneity). Thus, simply because some participants self-select out, perhaps because of their negative attitudes, does not mean that anti-racism strategies should not be attempted either in the community or in a cultural psychology unit. As concluded by Dudgeon and Pickett (2000) “critical awareness and cultural competence within a social justice framework are key elements of a psychology committed to reconciliation” (p. 82).

Quantitative results: Prejudice

As predicted there was a significant reduction of prejudice between Time 1 and Time 2 (the Time 1 participants who did not complete Time Two data were not included in analyses). It is worth noting when examining the prejudice levels at the beginning of the strategy that they were not particularly high.

Quantitative results: False beliefs and prejudice

It is noted that ‘setting people straight’; that is, giving participants with factual information, may not always work, or at least work alone. Schwarz and colleagues note that information, rather than automatically debunking myths, can often strengthen them (Schwarz, Sanna, Skurnik, & Yoon, 2007). Rational thought does not always underlie prejudiced thought. In the present strategy, however, it would appear that the debunking

of myths was successful. . Our findings support those of Hill and Augoustinos (2001) who found a significant increase in knowledge about Aboriginal people and history after their intervention. It may be that the combination of information, discussion and a guilt-free environment may have a special ability to alter false beliefs. Despite our promising results, to propose a causal relationship would be too a simplistic a conclusion: it is important to note that while false beliefs can lead to prejudice, prejudice can also lead to the acceptance of false beliefs. Alternatively, a third variable could lead to both. Regardless of the direction of the relationship between variables, it is apparent that false and inflammatory information is detrimental to Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations, and may be useful as one tool in anti-racism strategies. Further research explicitly examining/exploring the components may be able to disentangle active and inactive components of the strategy.

Qualitative results: Special treatment and prejudice

Regarding the reduction of participants' reporting that Aboriginal people unfairly receive "special treatment", the prediction was based on the prior relationship between prejudice and special treatment (Pedersen, Dudgeon et al, 2006). The content of these categories will not be further analysed as this is clearly articulated in the Pedersen, Dudgeon et al. article; but, as outlined in the Results section, the major themes outlined in the 2006 study were also mirrored in the present study. Our conclusions are similar to the earlier paper: there is not a level playing field when comparing the situation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. There is a significant difference between "equal treatment" and "equity". We further note that we took into account the suggestions of past

researchers regarding dialogue and not simply “sermonizing” (Pedersen et al., 2005). In class the lecturer did not tell the students this is what they must believe. Instead, she pointed out the issues covered in the 2006 article, and encouraged them to critically reflect and draw their own conclusions.

How do the quantitative and qualitative data merge? Well, we argue. Certainly there are differences in the way the data were collected. With the quantitative data, researchers had an active role in which questions were put to participants. With the qualitative data, researchers had an active role in identifying the themes themselves (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, both methods of data collection have very different epistemologies. As noted by Yardley and Bishop (in press), problems can occur if quantitative and qualitative findings seemingly contradict one another. Happily, the results in the present merge well with both a significant reduction in prejudice and false beliefs (data quantitatively collected) and the belief that any special treatment was unfair (data qualitatively collected). Thus, whether we look at the issue of Aboriginal prejudice from a framework of “false beliefs” or “special treatment”, the aims of the cultural psychology unit were met.

Implications and Conclusions

Certainly there is cause for cautious optimism when looking at the outcomes of this study. The predictions were supported: there was significant reduction in prejudice, the acceptance of false beliefs, and the reporting that Aboriginal people unfairly receive “special treatment”. In line with our prediction, there was no significant change in reported guilt from Time 1 to Time 2. The strategy attempted to avoid instilling guilt, in

line with past research and theoretical recommendations. Guilt is a self-blaming emotion and thus aversive in nature; people will go out of their way to avoid feeling it (Leach et al., 2002). If one is attempting to achieve attitude change, therefore, it is suggested that anti-prejudice strategists may be better off concentrating on more other-focused emotions such as empathy or moral outrage (see, for example, Leach et al., 2002). Researchers do not want participants “zoning out” in the middle of an anti-prejudice strategy (see Singleton, 1994, for a description of such zoning out) and blocking out useful information in order to avoid aversive self-focused emotions. Having said that, much of the information regarding Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships in Australia, and indeed White/Non-White relationships globally, are integrally laced with guilt and themes of inequality. It also needs to be acknowledged that some literature links experiences of collective guilt, under certain conditions, with decreased levels of prejudice (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2004). It is evident that there is a fine line to be walked in the necessity of introducing guilt-related topics, and the avoidance of it completely.

As in all research, however, there are limitations with respect to our research. It would have been ideal to conduct a 2nd *post test*. As found with previous research, the effects of anti-prejudice strategies do not always have long lasting effects. As found by Hill and Augoustinos (2001), although their anti-racism strategy was successful in the short-term, it had limited success in the long-term. There is no way of knowing whether our participants reverted to their previous attitudes over time. Unfortunately, we were unable to under take a *post test* as we fed back the results of the study to the students during the semester as part of their learning process. Future studies could address this by

ensuring adequate post strategy measure (for example, at 3 month, 6 month and 1 year follow ups).

The cultural psychology unit was an elective one, not a compulsory one. However, we could have implemented the strategy in a compulsory unit for the same purpose, but the choice of the students to do psychology (or social work or market economics for that matter) is also an issue of “election” by the participants – just at a different level. If we think about anti-racism strategies in the wider community, it is very likely that similar problems will occur unless the cultural awareness programme/prejudice strategy is compulsory. If they are not, people are likely to self-select into programmes where they learn about cultural issues if they are open to learning about these issues.

It is also possible that demand characteristics may have influenced students’ responses. However, it should be noted that there was no significant increase in the guilt variable; thus, it could be argued that it is unlikely that demand characteristics were responsible for our significant results. Additionally, our sample consisted of university students (and self-selected into the unit at that) and therefore the results cannot generalise to the wider community. Although this does not affect the aim of the study – to address prejudice against Aboriginal Australians in the university setting – the limitations need to be reiterated and this sample may not reflect the attitudes of others in the Australian community. The same anti-prejudice strategy conducted elsewhere in the community may have different outcomes. As argued by others (e.g., Forrest & Dunn, 2007) racism is often contextual. Future research could also investigate whether similar strategies to the ones described here would be equally effective with respect to prejudice against other

marginalised groups such as Muslim Australians, African Australians or Asian Australians. This broader limitation aside, it is imperative that psychology students graduate with some knowledge and understanding of issues surrounding Aboriginal people in Australia, and as such, this study is a useful addition to previous research.

Another issue which is important in conducting such strategies is the presence of Aboriginal voices. Although this unit was a unit on cultural psychology, not specifically about Aboriginal issues (although it did contain a great deal of content on the subject), it is important that Aboriginal voices are heard, especially those in the field of psychology. It may not be possible to have key Aboriginal people appear in person to talk to students, but there are other means. The unit lecturer attempted to do this by bringing in literature written by Aboriginal researchers such as Dr Chris Sarra. When linking the issue of special treatment with other issues covered within the unit, one student noted at Time 2:

“... However Chris Sarra’s story inspired me, it’s nice to know that people can make a difference in Indigenous Australians lives – without forgetting their heritage”.

Similarly at Time 2:

“Before the lecture I believed that Indigenous people did receive a special treatment and they shouldn’t. I generally thought they are lazy and just rude. To some degree I still do believe that, but after today’s lecture I’m more interested on how to improve today’s society and behavior towards Indigenous Australians. Seeing/watching Chris Sarra (sic) video about Indigenous Australians and his sense of hope and working with them to make better society and less prejudice

gives me the interest to do the same. Society wouldn't change unless everyone puts effort to make it better and not discriminate against Indigenous Australians. The special treatment doesn't really exist to the extent that people think it does."

Quite a few students mentioned this DVD – all of whom were positive about it. The authors recommend DVDs such as this as useful in facilitating attitude change.

Although there was some success in reducing prejudice, the means for both false beliefs and the belief that special treatment was negative were still somewhat high. After the strategy, one unconvinced student said:

"Some Indigenous Australians do receive special treatment in relation to education, healthcare and money. I find assigning benefits to a different race/color/ethnicity to be as bad as racism, granted, some Indigenous Australians deserve it and use it to their gain. Most squander or wrought (sic) the system. Too few are trying to make a difference" (Time 2).

Clearly, anti-prejudice strategies will not change the attitudes of everyone and may have better effects on some people than others. Especially with regard to the false beliefs, although a reduction was found, there were still a good many students who still believed in the veracity of such myths to some extent. It is unclear why this is the case: were they at the relevant lectures? If so, were they attending during them? Did they simply not believe the lecturer and the literature? Were their schemas about Aboriginal people simply too entrenched to be able to move beyond them? Again, future research must

address the underlying reasons why some people are particularly resistant to such anti-prejudice strategies and other people are not.

Some researchers involved in the teaching of social justice to social workers who include oppression content in their units report negative reactions such as “student indifference, active resistance, student complaints to other faculty” (Singleton, 1994, p. 12). There were no student complaints or active resistance - that we know of - with regard to the strategy we present here. Likewise, in another recent Australian study describing an undergraduate course on cultural competence with regard to Indigenous people, Ranzijn et al. (in press) likewise found little indication of active student resistance. However, there were a minority of students who we simply did not reach in our study. We propose that it would be almost impossible not to face this when directly dealing with issues surrounding racism and oppression. As previously stated, research should investigate this issue of why anti-racism strategies may affect people in very different ways.

Finally, there was no significant difference at either Time 1 or Time 2 in the prejudice levels of White Australians and other Australians. This implies that when anti-prejudice campaigns are conducted in the Australian community, including people from different ethnic backgrounds needs to be considered rather than simply “White” Australians. There is absolutely no question of the privileges associated with Whiteness (see, for example, Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; Green & Sonn, 2005); however, there is no reason to believe that non-White non-Aboriginal people may at times not fall into the same trap of accepting false beliefs as White people do and being similarly prejudiced. Australians from other ethnic backgrounds are likely to listen to the same

radios, read the same newspapers, and watch the same television programmes as White Australians. Similarly, just as cognitions of outgroup rejection and intergroup anxiety predict prejudice against Aboriginal Australians in White Australian samples (Barlow, Louis & Hewstone, 2008), they have likewise been found to be predictive of anti-Aboriginal prejudice in Asian Australian samples (Barlow, Louis & Terry, 2008).

In summary, the following set of principles was found to be useful in reducing negativity toward Aboriginal Australians in this particular setting and this particular time: (a) including representations and voices of Aboriginal Australians, (b) encouraging open dialogue within the framework of mutual respect rather than simply lecturing to participants, (c) providing factual information; in particular, to combat false beliefs, (d) discussing fully the notion of “special treatment”, (e) creating a safe environment for discussions and (f) attempting to invoke empathy rather than guilt.

To conclude, our study presents promising data when it comes to this anti-prejudice strategy. It should be noted that strategies such as these can not be the sole answer to the greater problem of Aboriginal disadvantage and poor health. Prejudice is only one of the myriad of critical issues confronting Indigenous Australians. There are many structural issues that need dealing with such as employment, medical care, housing, and education (Paradies, 2007). In fact, as one participant said: “Any “special treatment” seems a little bit like a band aid on an open wound”. Prejudice, however, is a pervasive and serious impediment to Aboriginal people achieving social justice, and it needs addressing both in the wider community and within the university and education systems generally. The present strategy presents itself as a positive part of what must be a multi-faceted approach to dealing with racism. Psychology is well placed to engage

with racism at many different levels, such as in research and in ensuring that the discipline becomes culturally aware. The APS has recommended that psychologists should be sensitive to cultural issues, and more specifically Aboriginal issues (Gridley et al., 2000).

Even though this was a cultural psychology unit rather than a unit specifically on Aboriginal issues, it is heartening to know that even a strategy such as this can make a small difference and that the majority of attitudes were positive which augers well for the future. It is fitting then, to end this article with a quote from one of the student participants: *“My thoughts are that the special treatment given to Indigenous Australians is not a form of special treatment but rather a necessary step to provide Indigenous Australians with the chance to live a life that is equivalent to non-Indigenous Australians. This includes areas such as education, employment, housing and health care. Any other Australians who was (sic) disadvantaged would be receiving the same/similar benefits to ensure that they too were living a satisfactory life”*.

We could not have put it better ourselves.

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Endnotes.

¹ We use the term “Aboriginal” rather than “Indigenous” which include Torres Strait Islanders. After piloting by the second author (Barlow & Louis, 2008), it was found that the term “Aboriginal” is frequently used and understood by student samples (similar to that used) unlike the term 'Indigenous', which is not as frequently used, and also has politically liberal associations.

² Although we acknowledge that multi-items scales are preferable in many circumstances, there is certainly precedent for using the attitude thermometer for valid results (e.g., Wolsko, Park, Judd & Bachelor, 2003).

³. The *t test* between prejudice pre and post strategy, and the *t test* between the false belief scale pre and post strategy, together with accompanying means and standard deviations, was also reported in Barlow, Louis and Pedersen (under review) in their theoretical paper on prejudice and intergroup emotion.