

Cultural Self-Reflection Activity: *The Deconstruction Exercise*

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Step 1: Ask students to write down an anonymous question - anything they want to know about Indigenous Australia but have been afraid to ask.

The anonymity gives students the opportunity to ask questions that may be contentious if asked in public. From these questions, choose those which are suitable for deconstruction. These questions must hold the **potential for analysis** that will give students the opportunity and scope to illustrate 'whiteness' and the importance of understanding the **social determinants of Indigenous health**.

Explain to students that the object is **not to answer the questions**. Instead, they are to examine the space from which they were asked.

Step 2: Provide an example of a question to the class and model a critical analysis of the question in a class discussion.

Note: while workshoping in class and for assessments, it is important to use anonymous questions from **previous classes**, so as not to put the current students' questions under immediate examination. This approach fosters a continuance of student engagement and helps avoid the 'blame and shame' often felt when students examine their own 'whiteness'.

- Choose a question that has **plenty of scope for critical discussion** - field suggestions from the class as to how you might critically analyse the question.
- Ask students to reflect on the following questions:
 - What does the question say about the background (cultural, socioeconomic etc) of the person who asked it?
 - Does the question show respectful inquiry?
 - What assumptions has the person asking the question made?
 - Does the question echo stereotypical representations, biases or discriminatory positioning?
 - What impact do the assumptions and biases in the question have on the social determinants of Indigenous health?

The goal is for students to be able to recognise:

- Homogenous depictions of Indigenous peoples that deny diversity
- Depictions that set up a racialised space where Indigenous Australians are reduced to a one-dimensional, catch-all category, and deemed 'inherently dysfunctional.'
- The unspoken assumptions that indicate a colonial position or deficit-based narrative. If students can identify these silences (what is not said), then they are developing the critical tools needed to identify the 'framing' that is evident in key public health policies, such as the Council of Australian Government's contested 'Closing the Gap' policies.

For example, the question "Why are Aboriginal people prone to drug and alcohol addiction?" gives you the opportunity to open up a discussion about stereotyping, racialised language and/or social and economic exclusion.

Example: *Why are Aboriginal people prone to drug and alcohol addiction?*

One way to prompt students' critical thinking is to pose questions that critique the original question. For example:

- All Aboriginal people?
- Is racism a factor in this question?
- What does **prone** mean?
- Is this a human condition or an 'Aboriginal condition'?
- What has been **left out** of this question? (eg, social determinants of Indigenous health?)
- What is the relevance of the social and cultural determinants of health - history, intergenerational trauma, systemic disadvantage and social exclusion?

Examples of questions and student critiques:

<p><i>Why are Indigenous people prone to drug and alcohol addiction?</i></p>	<p>This question embodies the taken for granted world view of 'Western eyes' whereby categorisation or stereotyping is used to construct an image of Indigenous life. Whether the question actually reflects reality is of little concern according to colonial discourses, as 'truth' lies with those with...the commanding view of the person asking the question - a Westerner assumes the right to know how things 'are' in regard to Indigenous drug culture and use. This question implicitly stereotypes an entire culture negatively through the use of the colonising discourse.</p>
<p><i>Why are all Indigenous people lazy bums?</i></p>	<p>Analysis of the term 'lazy bum' and what it is inferring in regard to Western understandings of work; and challenging perceived notions of choice under a neoliberal framework that obscures historical and structural impacts of colonisation and white privilege.</p>
<p><i>Can we really allow the process of decolonisation? And what are the implications for white Australia?</i></p>	<p>It is clear that colonial discourse reverberates throughout the question and that the questioner's worldview supports maintaining colonial power imbalances at the expense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health.</p>
<p><i>If we come from Adam and Eve, then where do black people come from?</i></p>	<p>The question is linked to ... racial essentialism, in the simultaneous privileging of whiteness, and devaluing of Aboriginality, to construct a symbolic boundary according to a binary of 'us-them' and 'superior-inferior' that is assumed to be natural, which was part of a state-sponsored ideology of Social Darwinism within the Assimilation era.</p>
<p><i>Why is it that Indigenous people of mixed blood have more success in life?</i></p>	<p>The phrase 'mixed blood' is one that is heavy with historical racist overtones and discredited biological notions of superiority. Selecting this phrase instead of the more benign 'mixed race', 'biracial' or 'multiracial' serves several purposes. Firstly, it is a dehumanising phrase such as one might apply to breeding stock or in denigrating an animal's pedigree. Secondly, in this context the term 'mixed' stands in opposition to pure. The phrase connotes a contaminated or adulterated substance. In this case the implication is that European blood is contaminated with Indigenous blood, which is why, this question suggests, these individuals are between white and Indigenous on the spectrum of success.</p>