The Non-Indigenous responsibility to engage: Scoping reconciliation and its alternatives

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Contents

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This Academy Paper is the outcome of a Workshop supported by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia in conjunction with the Faculty of Arts, the University of Melbourne and the Victoria University. The Workshop was held on 15 and 16 April 2016.

Conveners

Assoc. Professor Sarah Maddison (The University of Melbourne), Assoc. Professor Tom Clark (Victoria University), Assoc. Professor Ravi de Costa (York University) and Professor Peter Read FASSA (The University of Sydney).

Background

Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is necessarily a fraught and challenging endeavour. Some consider the very expectation of reconciliation unhelpful, while many consider specific formal reconciliation processes in Australia and other countries to have failed. Yet the need for a more effective engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people remains pressing, particularly in light of an anticipated national referendum on the question of constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Reconciliation mechanisms are concerned with changing relations between groups from one of antagonism and conflict to one of mutual respect and future cooperation. Reconciliation has been as an influential framework for thinking about the continuing impact of historical injustice on oppressed and marginalised groups within settler colonial societies. Australia and Canada are clearly such cases.

With some notable exceptions based in political theory, scholarship on reconciliation has tended to take a narrow view of these processes, debating the merits of various approaches often based around the mechanisms of transitional justice, and contesting the value of various goals. In the wake of these debates there remains a pressing need in the field to identify, clarify and test the hypotheses and assumptions concerning efforts to improve relationships between divided groups through processes that fall under the banner of 'reconciliation'. We suggest that current scholarship on critical race theory and Indigeneity do not adequately address the circumstances of the contemporary non-Indigenous inhabitants of settler-colonial states such as Australia and Canada, and this workshop was planned with the intention of further interrogating these concerns.

In light of this, the aim of the workshop was to explore whether and how reconciliation in Australia might connect to the attitudes of non-Indigenous people in ways that prompt a deeper engagement with Indigenous needs and aspirations. It asked participants to explore concepts and practices of reconciliation, considering its specific application in Australia and Canada.

Framework

This workshop gathered an international group of 24 scholars with expertise in two geographical contexts: Australia and Canada. To supplement the generous funding from the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) the convenors secured additional funding from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connections programme, along with funds from their 2014 ARC Discovery Project 'Non-Indigenous pathways to reconciliation in Australia'. The combined funds enabled the participation of scholars and policy practitioners from Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. The workshop was held at Victoria University, Melbourne, on April 7 and 8, 2016.

The workshop was arranged around four core themes: 1) Reconciliation in the settler colonial present, 2) Non-Indigenous understandings of the challenge to engage, 3) Strategic options in policy and scholarship, and 4) Political challenges for reconciliation in Australia. The two day workshop started with a welcome address by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda, and ended with a plenary discussion and closing remarks by Justin Mohamed, CEO of Reconciliation Australia. Day one closed with reflections on the day's discussions from the former CEO of Reconciliation Australia, Leah Armstrong.

Discussion

The workshop was structured around eight sessions (two sessions for each core theme). The first theme focused on reconciliation in the settler colonial present. Lorenzo Veracini's and Elizabeth Strakosch's papers explored possibilities for structural transformation. Veracini focused on the language that is being used about settler colonialism. He proposed to move away from a language of accounting – which is related to the logic of settler colonialism – to a real estate language. He proposed, for instance, the metaphor of the treaty as a rental agreement as a way to recognise Australian Indigenous sovereignty. Elizabeth Strakosch argued that treaty remains a tool in the settler's house. She suggested that transformation cannot stem from unilateral imaginations of colonial completion as settler colonialism is rooted in the fact that the eventual legitimacy and stability of the settler-colonial project is 'always-already assumed'. Strakosch argued that transformation can only come from beyond settler colonialism, from a site of shared negotiation, a shared space of politics between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

The second session, which focused on reconciliation in the settler colonial present of Canada, further explored this notion of a shared space of politics and imagined pathways to engage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Joanna Quinn stressed the importance of engaging with unreceptive audiences and, building a critical level of understanding of the 'other' among these audiences, through exposure and education; a process that she termed 'thin' sympathy. Adam Barker and Emma Battell Lowman argued for a need to change the structure through which people understand these relationships. Echoing Veracini's call for a more meaningful and effective metaphor, Barker and Battell Lowman suggested adopting the Haudenosaunee notion of 'the clearing' as a spatial metaphor in which plural perspectives on the ways to transform the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are being negotiated. 'The clearing' consists in

seeing beyond settler colonialism to a reverse space where indigeneity is at the centre, settler colonialism is denormalised, and where every relationship is always already defined in the context of indigeneity.

The second theme of the workshop problematised non-Indigenous understandings of the challenge to engage. Based on survey research in Australia, Yin Paradies' intervention analysed reconciliation-related attitudes, divergent patterns according to socio-demographic factors, and effective approaches to attitudinal change. He identified, for instance, noticeable divergences in attitudes to reconciliation and white privilege between male and female participants. Paradies emphasised the importance of both formal education and public education initiatives to foster positive attitudes to reconciliation. In the context of a noted volatility and deterioration of positive attitudes to reconciliation, Paradies suggested considering the association between white privilege, reconciliationist attitudes and increasing awareness of white privilege – or some alternative concepts such as settler privilege or settler complicity, which would engage non-white non-indigenous Australians – through training programs among students.

From the Canadian context, Jeffrey Denis, who based his analysis on interview research, also focused on plural understandings of reconciliation and reconciliation-related attitudes. He found that Settler-Canadians display a wide range of views on what reconciliation means. He suggested that this diversity creates challenges for reconciliation and that thinking in terms of a single pathway might be a colonial idea. According to his findings, two common attitudes stand out among this diversity: on one hand, understandings of reconciliation that lead to an integrationist 'better, stronger Canada' and, on the other hand, understandings that imagine a more radical transformation of society (including dismantling the settler state and the capitalist system and revitalising multiple overlapping Indigenous (and perhaps non- Indigenous) political-economic orders. In the face of these challenges, Denis suggests that a possible first step might be to reflect on history and honour the friendship treaties as the only legitimate basis for reconciliation in Canada.

Angélique Stastny, Sasha Henriss-Anderssen and Tom Clark drew on Australian focus-group research to characterise variations in non-Indigenous attitudes to settler-colonial history and to Indigenous people and cultures in terms of 'delegation' and 'embodiment.' Their findings indicated a paucity of embodiment. In all focus groups the responsibility to engage was overwhelmingly delegated, often through ambiguous ideas of 'shared responsibility' that did not clearly translate into a shared conversation. Stastny et al's findings also suggested the tenacity of the oppositional paradigm (the us-vs-them or us-over-them paradigm), which may greatly constrain non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous people and cultures.

Ravi de Costa reviewed the orthodox understanding of recognition in Australia and Canada, and suggested that politics constructed as acts of recognition of the Other are perhaps better understood as forms of self-recognition that call on non-Indigenous peoples to restrain and refashion their own behaviours and identities, rather than as forms of justice for Indigenous peoples. He challenged the idea that the presentation of historical facts would necessarily lead to a structural and social transformation, and suggested instead that a focus on self recognition may actually prove more productive for Indigenous interests. He engaged with the notion of sympathy towards Indigenous concerns,

previously explored by Joanna Quinn, and proposed to take it further and adopt a posture that sees non-Indigenous interests as bound up with Indigenous aspirations.

The third theme of the workshop addressed the strategic options in policy and scholarship, in the field of economy, education, justice and civil society. Jon Altman discussed economic aspects of reconciliation in Australia and argued that if the outcome of such process is predicated on the pursuit of economic sameness it is bound to fail. Instead, he advocated for a reconciliation process that embraces the notion of economic plurality or hybridity and which is inclusive of the recognition of difference. Altman suggested that the failure of successive Australian governments to advance the project of reconciliation might suggest that it is timely to empower Indigenous Australians to take over this process.

Sarah Maddison and Angélique Stastny assessed the effectiveness of both formal and informal education to engage the wider population in a process of social transformation centered on debates about colonial history and the structural injustices that it perpetuates in the present. Like Ravi de Costa's observations, results from their analysis suggested that knowledge about colonial harms, whether learned in school, via the media, or through more personal interactions, does not fundamentally change attitudes, and nor does it provoke a sense of responsibility to engage. They argued that the logic of settler colonialism also fosters a kind of 'deafness' to learning about Australia's history, Indigenous people and cultures, and an unwillingness to engage.

Thalia Anthony then offered a legal perspective on the question of historical responsibility in Australia and Canada. She addressed the responsibility of courts to engage Indigenous experiences and perspectives in the sentencing process and reconsider the foundations of their own authority. Anthony argued that by failing to consider systemic Indigenous circumstances in sentencing, alongside unfounded claim in law to adjudicate over Indigenous people, Australian courts eschewed their responsibility. In contrast, Canadian courts have been more willing to address prejudices in the criminal justice system, recognise the historical responsibility of the criminal justice system in over-punishing First Nations people, and promote less penal outcomes. Echoing Jon Altman's emphasis on Indigenous empowerment, Anthony suggested that empowering Indigenous communities in sentencing and other justice processes can play an important role in reconciliation, and lead to structural transformation within the criminal justice system.

Ry Moran examined civil engagement in Canada through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He considered initiatives that encourage people to reflect upon history, political agency, and their responsibility to engage in reconciliation. Moran argued that microprocesses of reconciliation (the 'wee tiny reconciliations'), the open sharing of truth met by open and listening audiences willing to *hear* that truth can have a powerful and transformative effect on a society, and is reconciliation in action. These willing, open and listening audiences aside, however, the vast majority of Canadians have not engaged in these reconciliatory processes (a situation similar to the 'deafness' to learning identified in the Australian context by Maddison and Stastny). Their lack of engagement and the issues underpinning it (contentious questions of land, title, reparation and the injustices that maintain the settler state) remain a significant limitation to reconciliation.

The fourth and final theme of the workshop explored the political challenges for reconciliation in Australia. Informed by the reconciliation processes in South Africa and Northern Ireland, Adrian Little investigated what is at stake in the debate on constitutional recognition in Australia. He highlighted the pursuit of an artificial consensus – at the expense of dialogue and the pursuit of an agreed process – as a key limitation to the reconciliation process. Like other participants in the workshop, Little articulated the need for a shared space of politics where a more inclusive conversation between divergent and dissenting voices can occur. According to him, an important pre-requisite would be to ensure that there is a continuous momentum that would keep this shared space functioning regardless of people opting in and out of the debate from time to time.

Peter Lewis explored the limitations to the treaty debate in Australia. He emphasised the need for a dialogue that challenges 'embedded amnesia, denialism and cultural blindness'. Akin to de Costa's argument, Lewis asserted that the process should be presented and understood as mutually benefiting Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, by creating sounder moral and legal foundations for the nation. Peter Read's intervention explored the very wide diversity of Indigenous historical experiences and identities, and suggested that non-Indigenous people's engagement in reconciliatory processes is impaired by their failure to understand the former. He therefore suggested, along similar lines as Altman that debates around reconciliation should consist in empowering Indigenous people by providing them with the necessary information and tools to come to their own decision.

In the final paper of the workshop, Alissa Macoun further problematised the role of non-Indigenous people in reconciliatory processes and unpacked what she sees as a problematic Indigenous problem/non-Indigenous solution paradigm that persists in the reconciliation process in Australia. She suggests instead that non-Indigenous people recognise the limited nature of their knowledge and move the focus away from the future orientation of the settler narrative towards the present responsibility to engage with our judgements and attitudes.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The overarching theme that emerged during the workshop was the fact of structural and attitudinal limits to reconciliation within a liberal settler colonial order, and the need for a shared space of politics in Australia and Canada that engage with diversity rather than silence conflicts. Shared spaces have the potential to result in a structural transformation of the settler colonial framework. For such transformation to happen, however, long-term collective initiatives and responses are crucial. In light of this, there is a need to consider what this shared space of politics would look like and what the strategies to encourage civil society engagement with their historical and political responsibility could be.

The workshop was intended to lead to outcomes of direct use to scholarly research and theory, and of real and lasting value to policy discourses around and beyond reconciliation. The papers presented at the workshop will be collated into an edited collection published by Springer for a professional and scholarly public readership.