Cultural Safety Services

Cultural Safety and Self Determination: A necessary relationship.

Cultural Safety

The concept of cultural safety is drawn from the work of Maori nurses in New Zealand and can be defined as:

An environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge, or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge, and experience of learning, living, and working together with dignity and truly listening (Williams, 2009).

For Aboriginal peoples this translates into practice that reflects an understanding, acceptance, and respect for the importance of Aboriginal identities, culture, Community, and endurance.

Cultural safety is critical to the social, emotional, physical, and mental health of Aboriginal peoples and communities. For any environment, be it the workplace or a service being accessed by Aboriginal peoples, cultural safety must be at the forefront of any, and all, interactions with Aboriginal peoples. It must be created on a foundation of cultural awareness, cultural respect and sensitivity and it must allow for the principles of self-determination to ensure meaningful and genuine interactions.

Self-Determination and Cultural Safety

Self-determination positions Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples as primary decision makers in our own lives (Gooda and Kiss, 2013, p. 9). Self-determination is imperative to creating and maintaining culturally safe practice and environments. According to Behrendt et al. (2017), self-determination is integral as it is a) Victorian Government policy, b) international law requires the Victorian government implement self determination in all its policies and, c) evidence demonstrates that "self-determination is the only policy approach that has produced effective and sustainable outcomes for Indigenous peoples" (p. 3).

Section 19 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic) recognises culture as a right for Aboriginal peoples. The Australian Human Rights Commission recognises the right to self-determination for all peoples and references Article 1 in both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Furthermore, at an international level, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) specifically recognises the right to self-determination and autonomy for all Indigenous peoples (Articles 3, 4, 18), and the right to culture (Articles 8, 11 and 31). The UNDRIP informs policy at a local level in Victoria such as Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017–2027 and the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023.

The UNDRIP outlines four key principles which covers all the articles within the declaration. These principles are:

1. Self-determination
2. Participation in decision making
3. Respect for and protection of culture
4. Equality and non-discrimination

Self – determination is Aboriginal-led; not Aboriginal consulted (Phillips, 2017, p. 19). Cultural safety for Aboriginal peoples must be determined by Aboriginal peoples (Williams, 1999, p.213). Necessary changes and influences must be Aboriginal led to ensure culturally safe environments, free of tokenism and oppression.

When people are working and operating within the frames of the UNDRIP they are working in a culturally safe manner.

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Case Study – Cultural Safety and Self Determination: VACCHO Cultural Safety Framework development for the State Government.

In November 2018, a State Government Department (SGD)commissioned VACCHO to undertake a Cultural Audit of working environments and assist with the development of an Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework. This work involved:

1) Organisational-wide staff attitudinal survey developed in collaboration with the SGD to capture the following:
   - a snapshot of the perceptions and attitudes of staff towards Aboriginal issues and peoples at an individual level
   - an understanding of staff attitudes, beliefs, biases, and knowledge regarding Aboriginal cultural safety within the workplace
   - data on the experiences of Aboriginal staff working in the organisation.

2) Interviews with 72% of the SGD Aboriginal staff; conducted via phone and face-to-face

3) Physical Assessment of 24 SGD locations across Victoria

4) Review of the following SGD areas:
   a) Existing Cultural Safety and Cultural Awareness Training modules
   b) Policies and procedures specific to employment and employment pathways
   c) SGD website and social media profile

It was found that only 12% of Aboriginal staff interviewed felt their working environment was culturally safe, over a third (36%) had experienced racism in the previous 12 months, and of those over half had experienced racism on more than one occasion. Many had not or "preferred not to say" whether they had reported incidents and less than half felt they would be supported if they did report racism and/or breaches to cultural safety.

Overall, non-Aboriginal staff who responded to the survey had low levels of knowledge of discrimination, intergenerational trauma and the importance of culture, family, and connectedness for Australia's First Peoples. The majority of non-Aboriginal staff felt the working environments within the SGD were culturally safe and that Aboriginal cultural values and practices were respected.

Aboriginal staff continue to face racism and lateral violence in the workplace, both of which impact the social and emotional wellbeing of SGD Aboriginal employees and impact cultural safety for all staff.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff interviewed as a part of this project defined cultural safety as:

"A place I am respected for my knowledge and cultural history"

"An environment that nurtures the wellbeing and careers of Aboriginal people and actively provides opportunities"

"Being respected, all round"

"The ability to speak about your experiences, positive or negative, in a safe space; and have your concerns responded to."

"Accountability of non-Aboriginal staff; affirmative action for Mob"

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Overall, the suggestion from SGD Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander interviewees was to genuinely *listen* to Aboriginal staff, Traditional Owners and Community and value the strength and endurance within Aboriginal culture, values, and self-determination.

Many interviewees expressed their disdain at feeling that their Aboriginal cultural knowledge was often either sought out unnecessarily (assumed to be experts) or dismissed as irrelevant. There was a common theme in the interviews that many Aboriginal staff employed at the SGD are failing to see a balance in the way their cultural identity is treated and respected.

In collaboration with the SGD, VACCHO developed a Cultural safety Framework for the organisation, based on the principles of

- Self Determination
- Equity
- Respect
- Collaboration
- Accountability
- Aboriginal Leadership
- Aboriginal Knowledge

The Cultural Safety Framework addressed four Focus Areas, each with a specific objective

Focus Area 1: Leadership & Governance
Objective: Cultural safety is embedded and visible in the way the SGD works in all sites and at all levels of the organisation.

Focus Area 2: Aboriginal Workforce, Support & Development
Objective: A workplace where Aboriginal staff are supported to advance and develop as valued employees and leaders both within the SGD and the broader Community.

Focus Area 3: Social & Emotional Well-being – Environmental & Behavioural
Objective: To create a workplace that is environmentally and behaviourally respectful, welcoming, and inclusive of Aboriginal staff and Community members.

Focus Area 4: Relationships & Partnerships
Objective: the SGD continuously forms respectful, trusting, mutually beneficial and culturally appropriate relationships with Aboriginal staff, communities, Traditional Owners, and other stakeholders

The development of the SGDs Cultural Safety Framework was a successful project for VACCHO, resulting in significant organisational changes within the SGD to support culturally safe practice and working environments for all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and Community members working at, and engaging with, the SGD.

Centring Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander voices to inform the SGDs Cultural Safety Framework is demonstrative of Aboriginal self-determination in practice, and its important relationship with cultural safety.

Conclusion

The symbiotic relationship between Aboriginal cultural safety and self-determination cannot be denied.

At its core, cultural safety relies on self determination to inform culturally safe practices, services, and organisations. Similarly, the autonomy of Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander peoples requires the support of *culturally informed* and *culturally safe* systems, organisations, practices, engagement, consultation, and individuals in both personal and professional contexts.

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