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Responding to Townsend (2020) and Gibson and Farias (2020)
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COMMENTARY

Decolonising the curriculum is an ongoing and collective effort: Responding to Townsend (2020) and Gibson and Farias (2020)

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Abstract

This paper responds to Townsend (2020), and Gibson and Farias (2020), who were invited to write commentaries regarding Simaan's (2020) 'Decolonising occupational science education through learning activities based on a study from the Global South'. My reply acknowledges work done by scholars in the Global North and South, both in and outside occupational science, that critiques Western-centric hegemony in academia. It recognises the multiple aspects of decolonial work in occupational science education, and its collective and continuous nature. I argue that my objective of stimulating reflections and discussion about decolonising occupational science education and knowledge has been achieved by this collective effort to extend this discourse. Future reflections, research, and activism in this area are of paramount importance if we are to truly decolonise occupational science.

Keywords: Decolonisation; Occupational science; Global South

Decolonising knowledge production and education, including the knowledge being produced by occupational scientists and disseminated in occupational science courses, is a vital enterprise that can only make headway through the combined efforts of critical thinkers in the field. This paper furthers that work, offering a response to Townsend (2020), and Gibson and Farias' (2020) invited commentaries on my paper (Simaan, 2020) published in the Learning and Knowing Occupation section of the *Journal of Occupational Science*. In taking up the opportunity to respond to their critique, I celebrate the opportunity to engage in open discussion that will help to illuminate a way forward.

An Expanding Body of Work Critiquing Western-Centric Education

Elizabeth Townsend has contributed an extensive body of work on occupation, enablement, and occupational justice (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007; Whiteford & Townsend, 2011; Wilcock & Townsend, 2000). She was the editor of the Learning and Knowing Occupation Section (Townsend & Hocking, 2020) in the *Journal of Occupational Science*, and I am honoured to have worked with her on 'Decolonising occupational science education through learning activities based on a study from the Global South' (Simaan, 2020), and to have received her commentary on it. Townsend's humility and generosity has allowed her to be open to learning from other-than-Western perspectives that can contribute to occupational science and occupational science education becoming more inclusive.

Townsend's (2020) commentary on Simaan (2020) reaffirmed the need for a conversation about decolonising knowledge and education in occupational science at this time of world history, by referring to the Black Lives Matter movement and the links between decoloniality work and anti-racism activism. Townsend (2020) confirmed the importance of

critical pedagogical work in occupational science, and the integration of the works of critical pedagogical thinkers such as hooks and Freire whose theories were used to ground my discussion.

While my intention was to ground my pedagogical approaches in the works of women of colour (i.e., hooks) and scholars from non-Anglophone communities (i.e., Freire and Santos) concerned with scholarly work from the Global South, Townsend's (2020) commentary reminds us of pertinent literature from the Global North. Bringing that literature into the discussion would have added breadth to my critique of Western-centric conceptualisations of occupation (i.e., Kantartzis & Molineux, 2011) and reinforced the need to expand such conceptualisation from Global South perspectives (i.e., Beagan & Ottawa, 2011). Townsend (2020) further suggested some helpful references with regards to critical pedagogical approaches in occupational science (i.e., Blank & Reynolds, 2015; Sadlo, 20016; Taff et al., 2018; Townsend, 2015).

Grounding the discussion in the works of authors from outside the Anglophone sphere was commended in the commentary written by Gibson and Farias (2020). They reaffirmed the usefulness of such work in contributing to the "repertoire of notions" (p. 446) from the Global South that aid in understanding, and educating about, occupations and daily resistance from outside the West, which have so far been ignored in Western academia, including occupational science pedagogy.

The Multiple Aspects of Decolonial Work

Gibson and Farias (2020) clarified their understanding of what decolonial work in occupational science education might include, stating that decolonising teaching practices should aim to raise awareness of, challenge, and unlearn, dominant ways of knowing about occupation. This decolonising work, they argued, is an uncomfortable

process that aims to “dismantle a demographic hegemony that privileges Western, middle class, white, heterosexual, and able-bodied women’s ways of understanding occupation that generally fit occupational science education” (p.445). Gibson and Farias (2020) particularly acknowledged the problem with understanding occupation as a universal phenomenon—one occupational science needs to address.

While I agree with this definition and commend its attention to dismantling the intersections of oppressive factors that can influence how occupation is conceptualised within occupational science literature, this was not the definition of decolonising education within which my paper was framed. Rather, given its specific focus, Simaan (2020, p.434) employed the following definition of decolonisation in higher education:

The decolonisation of a curriculum can be progressed by focusing on and drawing from ‘the work of non-Western, colonized writers and intellectuals...[and] reach[ing] beyond the academy to valorise the knowledges of the colonized—ways of thinking that colonizers tried to suppress or destroy’.

(Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019, p. 21)

The attention in this definition is on two aspects of decolonial work in education, which were my focus: 1) drawing from the work of intellectuals from the Global South; and 2) promoting knowledge created by non-academic Global South communities, thus blurring the boundaries between academia and the community to enable a more inclusive learning about notions and practices that are not created by privileged scholars only.

These aspects are in no way a comprehensive list of what decolonising occupational science teaching should include. Rather, these aspects represent some of the needed work scholars involved in decolonial work may be doing, alongside the other important aspects mentioned by Gibson and Farias (2020). It can also be argued that the two aspects of decolonising the

curriculum dealt with in Simaan (2020)—integrating the works of Global South thinkers and blurring the boundaries between scholars and community when considering knowledge production—will contribute in some way, alongside more systemic approaches, to dismantling Western hegemony in academia by addressing epistemic reflexivity processes in learners and researchers, and the means and sources of knowledge used in occupational science education.

The process of decolonisation is continuous and no one scholar or researcher can act by themselves to do all the work required. Simaan (2020) was not intending to claim that the learning activity discussed in the paper, or the concepts used by olive farmers, have decolonised occupational science education. The paper aimed to contribute to discussions about some means by which occupational science education can begin to resolve the issue of cognitive injustice (Santos, 2014), which refers to the exclusions of concepts or ways of knowing from the Global South. I did not anticipate that by doing this alone occupational science curriculum would be decolonised. The reflections on this learning activity may provide a lens through which educators can frame some of the decolonial work they are doing. A more apt title for the paper might have been, ‘Decolonising occupational science education through the lens of a learning activity based on a study from the Global South’. I agree with Gibson and Farias (2020), however, when they cautioned that decolonial work should also be about disrupting white privilege and its implications, such as the false sense of universality of experiences and unhelpful practices that might be well-intended but in reality reinforce coloniality.

Gibson and Farias (2020) agreed with the use of Santos’ (2014) practice of intercultural translation, but felt that it needed to go further than what they perceived as only demonstrating the different occupations done by marginalised communities. They claimed that intercultural translation should lead to reflections on the different realities that may have

allowed or restricted such occupation, and that focusing on students' own experiences without problematising those experiences might contribute to what Santos (2014) termed the 'sociology of absence' and thus to perpetuating coloniality. Santos (2014, p. 172) stated that the aim of the sociology of absence "is to transform impossible into possible objects [of study], absent into present objects. It does so by focusing on the social experience that has not been fully colonized by" Western-centric thinking. Sociology of absence, for Santos, is a positive domain of study that contributes to a more inclusive understanding of societies.

Further, my aim was to reflect on both lecturer's and students' experiences and not only on students', as Gibson and Farias (2020) wrote. As the paper states:

This paper describes my personal reflections of how a study of a Global South community (Simaan, 2017, 2018) informed transformative occupational science education, which led to enhanced critical consciousness in researcher-teacher and learners. It describes a process of critical reflexivity by myself as researcher and lecturer, and by students in higher education.

(Simaan, 2020, p. 433)

Despite the risk of denying Global South communities' experiences by not interrogating some students' reflections on other communities, as Gibson and Farias (2020) have rightly indicated, the paper is believed to have contributed to both the sociology of absence and the 'sociology of emergence'—another concept coined by Santos (2014)—that refers to the exploration of alternative ways of being and knowing that aim at the enlargement of knowledge and practice. The learning activity described, and my practice as a researcher and educator, are intended to contribute to the sociology of absence by focusing on the experience of olive farmers and their daily wisdom that have not been totally colonised by Western reason; and to the sociology of emergence by learning about olive farmers' ways of being, doing and knowing.

Simaan (2020) provides some examples of tools employed within the sociology of emergence, such as the practice of intercultural translation, that can be used to explore alternative ways of being and knowing. This does not mean that the students referred to in Simaan (2020), or any Western students, may not be at risk of unconsciously fuelling more of the denial of marginalised communities' experiences and knowledge, and their means to produce it. Further, experiencing occupational apartheid (Kronenberg, 1999) doesn't mean that olive farmers themselves have not been consciously, or unconsciously, internalising their oppression and adopting Western, capitalist, and colonial means to do, and know about, olive farming. Examples of such internalisations have been discussed in Simaan (2018) and in the classroom, such as when young members of olive-growing families chose to take up more individualised and capitalist jobs.

Gibson and Farias (2020) commented on the incomplete process of 'conscientization' described in Simaan (2020) because students had not reflected on the differences between their situation and that of olive farmers, on what led to the occupational apartheid they experienced, nor on the internalisation of oppression by the colonised. Gibson and Farias (2020) also commented on the lack of discussion about systemic racism and anti-racism activism in Simaan (2020). They rightly claimed that systemic racism and racial oppression are interconnected with issues of decoloniality in occupational science. The occupation of olive growing was described in the paper (Simaan, 2020) and in the classroom as an occupation influenced by settler-colonial ideology and policy which led to occupational apartheid. Students heard and read that settler-colonialism in Palestine is based on an ideology of racial and ethnic superiority that justifies the control of land and communities deemed inferior (Masalha, 2012; Wolfe, 2006). Moreover, students learnt that occupational apartheid that results from such an ideology is enforced, because Palestinian olive growers

belong to the Palestinian communities thought of by settlers and their leaders as an inferior race/ethnicity (Simaan, 2017, 2018).

Although racial differences and white privilege did not feature in the quoted student reflections, students did reflect on the different realities between their own situations and activism and those of olive farmers. For example: *“I realise how different the opportunities between us are. For the Palestinian farmers, maintaining their daily occupations within the systematic land grab must require a steadfastness I can barely imagine”*; *“It must be so different with military outposts overlooking the groves and having to move through the sadness of destroyed trees...”* (Simaan, 2020, p. 438). In this way students were able to compare their situation with what they perceived to be the situation in Palestine, while interrogating concepts in occupational science and those that olive farmers offered.

Like decolonisation, ‘conscientization’ is an ongoing, iterative and unperfectable process. However, I agree with Gibson and Farias (2020) that students’ reflections should have been problematised, and that their stereotypes and unconscious biases stemming from their white privilege should have been interrogated further in the paper. I also agree with their proposal that those stereotypes—for example, the view that indigenous communities in Australia have a problem with alcoholism, as one of the students’ quotes in Simaan (2020) indicated—may lead to understanding these social and political issues as individualised problems. Although this was not discussed in the paper, students in my classes reflect on how an intersection of socioeconomic, historical, and political factors may lead to occupational injustice with negative health effects on individuals and communities. For example, systemic racism in higher education and the health and social care systems in the UK are discussed, alongside the effects racism may have on people of colour and their occupations. Students learn that communities don’t just passively accept their fate, rather they fight back and resist in their daily lives. Students also learn about how communities resist when they meet in the

classroom, or in field visits, people of colour who have a mental health diagnosis or physical disability, and who are leading struggles for racial and social justice (National Survivor User Network, 2018). Moreover, interrogating students' individual biases and their 'naturalised' views on minorities or indigenous communities is part of my practice in the classroom. For example, I facilitate discussions about comparing attitudes towards refugee communities learnt from the media with statistics and the lived experience of refugees, whom students meet during their field visits to organisations that work with people seeking refuge.

However, as Gibson and Farias (2020) stated, these activities in the classroom by themselves will not decolonise the curriculum, and change should come at the institutional level. I also agree that individual scholars, especially those scholars of colour who work within decolonial pedagogic approaches, can be left to deal with the burden of this work without institutional support. Sadly though, without some of the foundational work by activists of colour, institutions may not be able to reach an understanding that they need to change. Universities' and society's role in systemic racism, and the need to deal with it, has been highlighted recently in the UK by the so called 'attainment gap', which refers to discrepancies in academic achievements between White and Black students (McDuff et al., 2018). The term implies that individual students are to blame for their poor attainment, rather than the need to address what higher education institutions and society should do about it, and whether racism is a factor. Anti-racist activism by people of colour in the UK has led universities to begin to listen and act on an institutional level to ameliorate racial injustice as the source of the gap in students' outcomes (e.g., Ahmed et al., n.d.; McDuff et al., 2018). However, there is a long way ahead for higher education and the scholarly communities, and we need to remember that decolonial work should not fall only on scholars of colour, nor be tokenistic (Tuck & Yang, 2012). It should instead be an institutional and collective effort to

facilitate the redistributions of power, land, and resources including access to education, services, and occupations.

I thank Townsend (2020) and Farias and Gibson (2020) for their contribution to this discussion. Their commentaries have ignited more reflections and expansion of insight into our collective work on this topic, which was an object of Simaan (2020) as stated in the following quotes: “ It would be helpful to start a conversation about cognitive injustice in occupation-centred education” (p. 435); “sharing my students’ and my own pedagogical experiences is intended to promote reflections and theoretical and empirical work in occupational science education anchored in a decolonial approach and the ‘Epistemologies of the South’” (p. 440). I look forward to further reflections upon occupational scientists’ collective and continuous efforts to dismantle colonial and racist structures within ourselves as individuals, in our daily occupations, and in our institutions and knowledge.

Conclusion

Reflections and discussions about decolonising occupational science knowledge and education are emerging and the *Journal of Occupational Science* has been instrumental in showcasing this work. This discourse has long been anticipated by those who have been working on decolonial issues in academia and society. This discussion is highly important at this point in occupational science’s shared global history, in order to make the field more relevant to the vast diversity of communities around the world. Decolonial work has multiple aspects; Simaan (2020) was specifically focused on the level of the lived experiences of students and lecturer/researcher, and on the level of the knowledge created in occupational science and how discussions of cognitive injustice can be initiated.

This focus might have missed some useful sources of scholarly work that could have enriched the discussion as Townsend (2020) suggested, and her extended reading list has

been useful in this sense. Simaan's (2020) specific focus has not exposed other aspects of decolonial work, such as institutional and systemic structures, including racism. Gibson's and Farias' (2020) feedback on this has been helpful in extending the conversation and stimulating a discussion of how educators might include anti-racism issues and other intersectional and systemic aspects of identity and society. However, as argued in this commentary, decolonising is a continuous and collective effort that needs to embed thinking, discussions, and actions on all levels: the individual (person), the systemic, and the epistemological.

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