Review of: "The Uluru Statement from the Heart – A consideration from three perspectives"

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Review of David Turnbull's article The Uluru Statement from the Heart – A consideration from three perspectives

Abstract

This article shows full support for the Uluru Statement by developing a coherent interpretive account that integrates three perspectives based on the First Nations people, Ann Wilcock's holistic framework of occupational science, and the writings of Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham, respectively. However, the author's dialogue with the Indigenous people is not as successful. The presentation is more properly a monologue, since it benefits Wilcock's theory only. It is questionable what the Indigenous interlocutor, as represented by Graham and the writers behind the Uluru Statement, will gain from traces of colonialism in the text. Suggestions for improving the dialogue are made.

Keywords: dialogue with the culturally different other, indigenous psychology, colonialism, decolonization.

Introduction

David Turnbull's article attempts to enter into a dialogue with First Nations people who issued The Uluru Statement from the Heart (First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017), by developing a coherent, interpretive account of the Uluru Statement. This he does by a juxtaposition of three perspectives: The first perspective is that of the First Nations people; the second is drawn from the legacy of the occupational scientist Ann Wilcock; the third is from writings of the Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham.

This review will first comment on the interpretative account of the Uluru Statement, and then make some suggestions, based on indigenous psychology (Pe-Pua, 2015), on how to improve the "dialogue" with the culturally different other.

An Integrative and Sympathetic interpretation of the Uluru Statement

As an attempt to fully support the Uluru Statement, Turnbull has presented an interpretive account that is well written and coherent. The integration of the three perspectives is successful. Wilcock's holistic framework of doing-being-becoming-belonging is quite impressive. I believe Graham's writing can help us further fine tune Wilcock's categories by differentiating more clearly between being and belonging. Being (what is) is an ontological category from which the social

category of belonging (how is one related) can be derived. This is made clear by Graham who writes:

The land *is* a sacred entity, not property or real estate; it *is* the great mother of all humanity. ... Because land *is* sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. (Graham, 2008, italics added).

In the interpretative account of Turnbull, being and belong have coalesced: "This perspective asks the question, 'who are you?' The answer to this question necessarily takes a relational form that begins with human society." In this formulation the being question ('who are you?') is assumed to have a relational answer: "For First Nations people the answer to 'who are you?' is in terms of connection with land as well as with kin." When being (who are you) and belonging (social relations) are clearly differentiated, we arrive at two types of ontology—relational versus non-relational being (Gergen, 2009), with far reaching ramifications for the kind of belonging privileged in different cultures. For instance, derived from a non-relational ontology is a possessive (impersonal) type of belonging as characterized by the settlers, according to Turnbull:

Many settlers, by contrast, are convinced that a small number of generations are sufficient to confer an entitlement of belonging. Others point to their own recently acquired citizenship papers as sufficient proof of belonging (and this undoubtedly means a lot to those people).

A Dialogue that Benefits only One Party

Another goal of the article is to "open up the possibility for dialogue, firstly with First Nations people, and second, with decolonial and other scholars who share similar passions and interests around truth-telling and justice." In spite of good intentions, however, the dialogue falls short of the stated goal of "mutual observation and mutual learning."

To begin with, the dialogue is fraught with inconsistencies. Turnbull claims rightly that "It is not appropriate to turn to Western philosophers for this perspective; it is essential to take into account what a First Nations philosopher has to say." But it turns out that the focus of the article is on the legacy of the occupational scientist Ann Wilcock (2007). Turnbull further claims that to support the Indigenous people's struggle is "to follow their lead; to support and encourage and never to take control." But this principle was violated by the conclusion of the paper:

Taken together they provide additional support for the claim in the article by Turnbull and Barnard (2023) that there is an ongoing need for a naturalistic philosophical perspective in occupational science. This perspective, exemplified by that of

Mary Graham, is required to interpret the colonial experience of First Nations people, and to understand the impact of colonization on First Nations occupations.

The claim-- that to understand the truth of First Nations people, it is necessary to first understand the truth of Wilcock's naturalistic philosophy—has its deep roots in colonialism, which assumes that the natives cannot function on their own without some kind of foundation borrowed from Europe. The colonial thrust is even more evident when the Indigenous philosophy of Graham is rendered an exemplification of Wilcock's naturalistic philosophy. Why is it not sufficient to say that there is a confluence of ideas between Graham and Wilcock? Why is it necessary to label Graham's philosophy "naturalistic"? There is nothing mutual in this "dialogue." Graham's theory gains nothing from being labeled "Aboriginal naturalistic philosophy." But for Wilcock, it is crucial that the Indigenous people be considered "natural." I hesitate to delve into details of Wilcock's theory, because that will take up the space meant for "dialogue" with the Uluru Statement. It shall suffice to mention that, according to Turnbull and Barnard (2023), the term 'natural' in Wilcock's "naturalistic philosophy" refers to First Nations people's health and occupation prior to the arrival of English colonists in 1788. The authors (Turnbull & Barnard, 2023) point out that Wilcock's standpoint refers to "mythical times" of a "romantic naturalism"; that "There is a romantic nostalgia for what has been lost pervading all of Wilcock's work" (p. 11); and that "apart from its romantic connotations, she implicitly defined the word negatively in comparison to modern conditions" (p. 15).

It is unfortunate that Wilcock needs this romantic naturalism to justify her holistic theory of occupation which is sound in and of itself. But to the Indigenous Peoples, this practice is a variant of the white supremacy game, which has a long history of marking specific groups as the idealized model of human beauty and intelligence. Adding "natural" to the list does not change anything-- even if it is reverse discrimination in this case-- because the game consists of having the appellative power to label the culturally different other by their hypothetical "essence" ("colored," "natural," or "the noble savage").

Suggestions for a better Dialogue

I am sure that these barriers to dialogue are both unintended and unexpected. This just goes to show that good intentions are not enough for the making of a mutually beneficial dialogue with the culturally different other. What we need is the tools for analysis that can be found in the literature on decolonization (Hernandez, 2022; Bhatia, 2002), especially in a radical decolonization called the ontological turn (Heywood, 2017). Given Turnbull's sincere interest in dialogue with the Indigenous Peoples, the literature on decolonization may pave the way for a better dialogue in the future. Lastly, in response to the call for partnerships with First Nations people, Turnbull is interested in the development of the notion of *complementarity* between science and First Nations peoples' knowledge, by way of reciprocal observations and reciprocal learning. Let me suggest in this respect the writings of Joseph Gone (2021), who has done much research on the interface between science and Indigenous knowledge.

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