

Reflection Article/Essay

Critical reflections about decolonial practices in academia: contributions and challenges in the education process of the occupational therapy students

Reflexiones críticas sobre prácticas decoloniales que se dan en la academia: aportes y desafíos en el proceso formativo de estudiantes de terapia ocupacional

Reflexões críticas sobre as práticas decolonizadoras que ocorrem na academia: contribuições e desafios no processo de formação de estudantes de terapia ocupacional

Ana Maturana^a 

^aUniversidad de Santiago de Chile – USACH, Santiago, Chile.

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Abstract

This article invites us to reflect about the decolonial practices developed within the academia, based on my experience as an assistant in the Psychosocial Support Program of the School of Occupational Therapy at the University of Santiago de Chile, situated in the ongoing debates of occupational therapies from the global south. The objective of the article is to rethink the social relations that occur inside the university, in order to deconstruct and resignify the assumptions of the colonial modern-project that conditions us as a university community. From an analytical perspective of decoloniality, this article analyzes the role of the university, the notion of social unease and the possibilities of a decolonial and liberating practice in the university, especially as experienced by students. Therefore, it is important to reflect on whether it is possible to establish psychosocial support programs that contribute to this task, keeping in mind that the university reproduces modern colonial-rationality. The conclusion is that it is possible to create spaces for support and community coexistence through the humanization and decolonization of relational forms, constructing *other* responses to social unease while unveiling the implications of modern colonial-order in the daily lives of the student community.

Keywords: Universities, Psychosocial Support Systems, Occupational Therapy.

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Resumen

Este artículo nos invita a reflexionar sobre prácticas decoloniales que se desarrollan en la academia a partir de mi experiencia como acompañante en el Programa de Apoyo Psicosocial de la Escuela de Terapia Ocupacional de la Universidad de Santiago de Chile, plan de estudios que se sitúa en los debates actuales de las terapias ocupacionales desde el sur global. El objetivo del artículo es repensar las relaciones sociales que se producen dentro de la universidad, con el fin de deconstruir y resignificar los supuestos del proyecto moderno colonial que nos condicionan como comunidad universitaria. Desde una perspectiva analítica de la decolonialidad se analiza el rol de la universidad, la noción de malestar social y las posibilidades de una práctica decolonial y liberadora en la universidad, especialmente, en la experiencia de estudiantes. De allí la importancia de reflexionar si es posible instituir programas de apoyo psicosocial que contribuyan a esta tarea teniendo presente que la universidad reproduce la racionalidad moderno colonial. Se concluye que es posible construir espacios de acompañamiento y convivencia comunitaria a través de la humanización y decolonización de las formas de relación, construyendo respuestas *otras* al malestar social, develando las implicancias del orden moderno colonial en la vida cotidiana de la comunidad estudiantil.

Palabras clave: Universidades, Sistemas de Apoyo Psicosocial, Terapia Ocupacional.

Resumo

Este artigo é um convite para refletir sobre as práticas decoloniais que se desenvolvem academicamente, a partir de uma experiência vivida e acompanhada com o programa de apoio psicossocial da Escola de Terapia Ocupacional da Universidade Santiago de Chile, cujo plano de estudos enfoca nos debates atuais de terapias ocupacionais no sul global. O objetivo deste artigo é repensar as relações sociais que se produzem dentro da universidade, com a finalidade de desconstruir e resignificar as premissas do projeto colonial moderno que nos condiciona como comunidade universitária. Desde uma perspectiva analítica decolonial, analisa-se a responsabilidade da universidade, a consciência do mal estar social e as possibilidades de uma prática decolonial e de libertação dentro da universidade, especialmente na experiência dos estudantes. Daí a importância de refletir se é possível instituir programas de apoio psicossocial que contribuam para esta tarefa, tendo em conta que a universidade reproduz a racionalidade colonial moderna. Conclui-se que é possível construir espaço de acompanhamento e convivência comunitária através da humanização e decolonização de distintas formas de como se relacionar, construindo respostas *outras* para o mal estar social, revelando as implicações da ordem colonial moderna na vida cotidiana da comunidade estudiantil.

Palavras-chave: Universidade, Sistemas de Apoio Psicossocial, Terapia Ocupacional.

Introduction

The following reflective article emerges from experiences in universities, recognizing the position and place I have as an academic and member of the Psychosocial Support

Program (hereinafter PAPsi) at the School of Occupational Therapy at the University of Santiago de Chile (hereinafter USACH Occupational Therapy). This academic program bases its curriculum on the current debates and controversies surrounding occupational therapies in the South. Understood as “a mobile platform that foregrounds power asymmetries and their effects on the subjectivities of both those who are in the field of the discipline and those who are in the field of intervention or study” (Díaz-Leiva & Malfitano, 2021, p. 3), thus recognizing the challenges involved in building a critical occupational therapy from Latin America. These tensions challenge us to rethink our role as academics who support educational processes, identifying the need to reflect on and make visible our academic practices, thereby awakening from the intellectual and political lethargy in which academia has been immersed for so long (Borsani & Quintero, 2014). These reflections invite us to question the forms and modes of relationships that have historically been established within the academia between academics and students, in contexts where a permanent individualization and hierarchization of power predominate, reproducing and exacerbating the same social problems that affect society as a whole.

In this regard, what takes place within the university cannot be dissociated from the dimensions of the modern-colonial order, which imposes specific expectations that shape our processes of subjectivation and directly affect how we inhabit our everyday lives. By acknowledging this colonial order, we recognize the condition of domination and oppression reproduced in academia—one that arbitrarily positions us, as faculty, as mere spectators of reality. Making this matrix visible allows us to identify a problem, express our disagreement, and organize ourselves to intervene and make possible *other*¹ alternative forms of relating (Walsh, 2013), far from the naturalization that characterizes much of our academic practice.

Challenged to examine the role we play as academics in the training and accompaniment of students, we question the supposed place of neutrality, inherent to modern-Western reason, that is embedded in our daily lives and common sense, and the importance of studying this matter. Thus, based on experiences developed during academic reflection sessions with teachers and students, a collective mental health assessment was conducted in 2019, in which the student community participated. This allowed us to demonstrate a collective sense of belonging regarding the problems affecting university life, and with it, the urgency of considering and proposing meeting spaces that collectivize this sense.

In this context, the Psychosocial Support Program emerged from the Collective Mental Health Diagnosis carried out in 2019. In its implementation process, there were five key moments that made it possible to build the theoretical-methodological proposal and learn from the experience developed: a) relevant background, b) scenario of the experience, c) rationale, d) methodologies that contribute to a decolonial commitment, and e) final reflections and main lessons learned and challenges.

¹It refers to “fostering and revitalizing “other” political-ethical rationalities that distance themselves from modern-Western-colonial reason, which are rooted in and aim to act towards freedom, transformation and creation of radically different social structures and conditions of existence” (Walsh, 2013, p. 16).

a) Relevant background

First and foremost, it is important to consider some of the direct implications of the modern colonial project in Chile in recent years, including its effects on citizens and the formation of new forms of social unrest. First, inequalities and inequities in the redistribution of resources, determined by structural political, economic, and social conditions, have become increasingly evident (Aceves & Safa, 2012). With the social unrest experienced in Chile in 2019², a large portion of citizens have ceased to be indifferent and have expressed their need to debate the rights to education, healthcare, and the pension system, among others, in public spaces. Social inequality has become embodied in people's daily lives and has generated intense social unrest, as German Pérez points out:

[...] have generated a strong individual and collective unrest that manifests itself through fears, insecurities, loss of references, apathy, short-term rationalities, and other series of symptoms that reflect the need to project policies that reconstruct the interpretive maps of reality, recover social and individual expectations, and foster the potential of the individuals (Aceves & Safa, 2012, p. 235).

This individual and social unrest has also been understood through frameworks that pathologize and/or medicalize such distress (Soto, 2012), instrumentalizing it through existing classifications of mental illness. This, in turn, reinforces the perceived need for health professionals to act as managers of others' competencies, creating fertile ground for individualistic and competitive practices (Hernández Zapata & Ceballos Tabares, 2020).

In this sense, a study published in 2021, shows one of the extreme situations of unrest, showing that between 2000 and 2017, 6,292 suicides among adolescents and young people were recorded in Chile. The average death rate from suicide was 8.5; 5.4 and 14.7 per 100,000 in groups 10-24, 10-19 and 20-24 years, respectively (Araneda et al., 2021). Within its conclusions, it is clear that the group with the greatest social vulnerability is the one of unemployed young people, without access to psychological and psychiatric support services. The same study identifies the importance of carrying out research into the social, economic and cultural factors that affect young people.

In the article *Health and Related Factors Among Undergraduate Students During SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study*, it is clear in its conclusions that the prevalence of mental health problems among students is high; depression (37.1%), anxiety (37.9%) and stress (54.6%), and that some of the associated factors, such as the sense of belonging, can be used in preventive interventions (Valdés et al., 2022).

When reviewing publications in the field of occupational therapy and mental health, a study from Colombia titled *Challenges of Occupational Therapy in Mental Health: Reflections from a Teaching Experience* concludes that research has been primarily

²On October 18, 2019, a cycle of social protests began in Chile, rooted in the social unrest caused by state violence, translated into a system and political class inherited from the civil-military dictatorship, which has been maintained for the subsequent 30 years of democracy (Dulci & Sadivia, 2021). As a result of the increase and escalation of protests, a state of emergency was declared, restricting freedom of movement and assembly and handing over responsibility for public order to the military. This led to an increase in repression, with protesters being accused of being "criminals." After weeks of conflict, and based on statistical reports prepared by the Human Rights Institute, the state was recognized as responsible for the injuries to 3,581 people and the deaths of 7 people.

structured around clinical contexts, with a problem-solving approach that often addresses individual needs related to symptoms associated with prevalent disorders (Ramírez Osorio & Méndez Montaña, 2022). This institutionalization hinders the continuity of care processes and raises questions and limitations that we have been reflecting on within the PAPsi Program, as it conceals and denies the real conditions in which social distress is produced.

b) Scenario of the experience

The University of Santiago de Chile, through its Student Quality of Life Department, has support units that offer students medical, dental, and psychological care. “The latter consists of providing individual and group psychotherapy to students who are currently enrolled. The demand for care covers a wide range of clinical conditions, with particular emphasis on anxiety and mood disorders” (Universidad de Santiago de Chile, 2016). With the return to in-person activities following the pandemic lockdown, the University increased the availability of support resources. However, due to the high demand, waiting times increased. In response to this situation—and compounded by the effects of the social uprising—the academic units were challenged to generate support mechanisms that could collectively address the mental health issues that were emerging.

Mental health within a community is the result of its living conditions, its history, and its collective projects. It is associated with the experience of both material and symbolic well-being, and becomes evident through the construction of healthy, creative, and supportive relationships, real participation in decisions affecting daily life, and the possibility of belonging, integration, and building life projects (Custo, 2008, p. 21).

The author here argues for the interconnectedness between mental health and living conditions, thereby abandoning the supposed idea of individualization of these processes, a key idea that constitutes one of the foundations of the PAPsi, which emphasizes the importance of connections, participation, and life projects. Therefore, in 2016, psychosocial support began to be provided to students who required it, with the aim of providing support, strengthening connections, and providing support from a psychosocial perspective. Initially, these actions involved academics who provided guidance on topics related to the continuation or risk of dropping out of the academic project and its impact on mental health. Later, in 2019, through a collective mental health assessment, the program was structured and formalized, its vision and objectives were defined, and the support team was formed. Initially, it was focused on providing mental health care, “establishing a support and networking system, rather than as a therapy or treatment space” (Silva, 2020, 0:57). Following the social unrest and the pandemic that began in March 2020, the program was consolidated, with applications for internally funded projects that are part of the improvement plans and the 2020-2030 institutional strategic development plan of the University and the USACH School of Occupational Therapy.

c) Rationale

Based on the above, it is pertinent to re-establish the specific location in which this experience is developed, since universities not only carry the colonial legacy of their

paradigms, but also contribute to reinforcing the cultural and political hegemony of the West (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007). This implies recognizing that academia is a place where power relations that contribute to social unrest are reproduced, and we must make them visible in order to processively understand possible liberating practices.

By recognizing that universities are bridges that perpetuate socialization based on the colonial legacy described above, we see that, within the educational processes, students are often transmitted standardized knowledge that is far from their realities and the problems they face (Meneses, 2016). This situation places students in a position of alienation from social reality, with few spaces for acknowledging their experiences, rendering them invisible. This, in turn, translates into hierarchical relationships between academics and students.

By identifying these implications, we understand that we can no longer think of the world in a compartmentalized and fragmented way (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007), as this leads students to think of themselves and their problems in complete disconnection from the social reality that permeates their daily lives. This challenges us to question our place in academia and the practices of indolence and dehumanization that unfortunately happen within universities. These questions were previously posed by Freire (1972), who contributed in this area by recognizing the sociopolitical and historical conditions that constitute power relations. This issue is manifested in the idea of praxis, in the action and reflection that reveals the necessary relationship between “man and reality, man and world,” a reading of the world that allows us to account for the diverse fields of knowledge, practices and discourses that we must recognize as critical aspects in order not to instrumentalize the academy, understanding that “no educational action can dispense with a reflection on man and an analysis of his cultural conditions. There is no education outside of human societies and there are no isolated men” (Freire, 1976, p. 22).

The above leads us to identify the idea of the position we occupy in the world, in order to allow us and others to exist as human beings. This creates the foundation to envision ourselves beyond the constraints of the imposed *individual awareness* (Walsh, 2013), resignifying the place we occupy in the world, which opens the possibility of imagining ourselves in coexistence with others within the social reality.

The decolonization of the university is a task that must be conceived in articulation with other decolonization processes, which demand the creation of conditions that allow these changes to be incorporated. In reality, “we are not thinking about a reform, but rather about another way of thinking about the work of the university and higher education” (Ballesteros Trujillo, 2015, p. 246) by proposing practices that transform the hierarchical relationships reproduced in academia, which allows us to consider the formulation of an authentic project committed to the student community.

These critical reflections respond to dialogues that take place within PAPsi, as they compel us to examine and recognize the possible mechanisms of oppression that take place in the academic-student relationship. The aim is to denaturalize these experiences, considering the possibility of opening up to other ways of being, existing, listening to others, and thinking of ourselves as academics who accompany training processes and not as interveners alien to social reality.

It should be noted that these reflections are framed within the vision of the USACH School of Occupational Therapy, whose curriculum has incorporated occupational

therapies from the South, as an attempt to make visible and problematize the hegemonic foundations under which a single understanding and production of knowledge of occupational therapy has been dominated and established.

Such as North/Eurocentric Occupational Therapy, which finds itself in a position of political, cultural, and epistemological superiority, sustained in one of its dimensions by the technical and scientific development of wealthy countries, which do not recognize other cultural forms of knowledge on a level of equivalence and assumes a superiority of science based on facts and evidence (in the logic of the individual as object), where reality is a product of science and occupational therapy, as part of it, is one and the same, delimited by borders (Guajardo Córdoba, 2020, p. 6).

Based on these epistemic tensions, the USACH School of Occupational Therapy adopts a curriculum based on critical Latin American perspectives, understanding practices as ethical-political expressions that materialize the idea of justice as a common, rather than an individual, good (Guajardo Córdoba, 2020). These elements lead us to situate PAPsi practices within a university context, taking into account their scope and limitations.

To achieve this, it is necessary to remain vigilant and activate the capacity for self-criticism as a position of attentiveness to the different forms of reproduction of the very order being criticized (Díaz-Leiva & Malfitano, 2021), which are expressed in our disciplinary fields in training spaces, in the dissociation between theorization processes, discourses, and academic practices.

d) Methodologies that contribute to a decolonial approach

Recognizing ourselves as critical individuals, positioned within the Occupational Therapies of the South, effectively implies assuming the possibility of dismantling these elements through self-reflection on our practices. I do not mean a personal reflection, but rather a collective reflection that “problematizes power relations and allows us to create conditions for the deployment of insistent practices of self-observation” (Martínez & Silva, 2020, p. 118). This leads us to consider, from propositional elements, new methodologies that aim to open fissures that allow us to deconstruct the patterns and logics of domination that are expressed in this context, such as the pathologization and medicalization of social unrest that circulates within the student community. This has allowed the team to transform and rethink strategies that arise from experiences and learnings prior to academia, which are situated in various mechanisms of the mental health network in Chile.

In this way, actions are amplified by recognizing them as praxis grounded in Human Rights, thereby embodying the possibility of forming a diverse political community that materializes in the recognition of otherness (Guajardo Córdoba & Galheigo, 2015).

Among the main strategies implemented, based on these reflections and analyses, are: a) accompaniment, b) welcome groups, c) coordination with internal institutional and external networks, and d) coordination with the School's management team.

Accompaniment is part of our first methodological approach, which aims to critically reflect on the position we occupy as teachers within academia and to demonstrate that we must be attentive to recognizing that power relations are revealed within this relationality. These everyday practices lead us to observe the social representations the

student community has about academia, which leads the academic team to be recognized as an authority figure of knowledge. This categorization determines the position students take when requesting support, recognizing themselves as passive individuals who bring with them individualized and encapsulated experiences from their processes. By raising awareness of this situation, accompaniment aims to legitimize and recognize the diversity of their experiences, narratives, and discomforts, allowing them to recognize the place each person occupies in this relationship. This transforms this relationship into a dialectical process, one of dialogic relationships that fosters listening skills, which translates into creating more horizontal spaces that allow students to express their feelings, thoughts, and needs spontaneously and with less self-censorship. By legitimizing this discomfort within the relationship, it creates the possibility of fostering new understandings, debunking myths and prejudices, and projecting new horizons of meaning based on freedom and emancipation, thereby moving away from the individual awareness of their experiences.

The welcome groups are spaces that enable participants to discuss their shared experiences. They focus on methodologies that facilitate debate and critical analysis of the social structures that shape social unrest, questioning and rethinking the hegemonic learning that students bring with them. Thus, in an initial meeting, participants discuss a proposal of topics, which are then addressed in the following session. This facilitates the collective expression of feelings regarding anxiety and fear associated with, for example, confinement due to the pandemic, family indebtedness, gender-based violence, and others. The discussion of the existing classifications of mental illness allows participants to stay far from the imposed knowledge that individualizes, reduces, and pathologizes social problems expressed through different emerging forms, such as anxiety and depression. These spaces for reflection incentive participants to recognize their interdependence, allowing them to rethink and reconstruct paths that promote diverse modes of coexistence within the framework of social relations that determine and constitute these experiences.

The coordination with internal and external institutional networks has allowed students to manage their own spaces, making use of the institutional resources available and the solidarity networks with which we have established contact. Due to the high demand for care, the University is unable to fully respond to the student community. Thus, we have emphasized the need to open and connect spaces for exchange with institutions outside the university, whose practices align with the goal of: breaking the existing hegemonic practices of mental health. This allows for collaborative work that offers support systems that complement the strategies and initiatives implemented by the program, opening new pathways to intervene networks across other contexts and communities.

All the work described is carried out in coordination with the leadership team of the School of Occupational Therapy at USACH, with whom actions are envisioned and developed within the framework of a decolonization process of the curriculum. In this way, collaborative support is provided so that the students accompanied by PAPsi can take on a leading role in their educational process. This is achieved through coordination with the academic team, who agree to adapt their teaching methodologies and assessment methods based on the unique characteristics of each student.

These practices aim to challenge and break away from the logics of subordination and domination that are reproduced in academia, by articulating administrative and pedagogical processes. This approach recognizes that students often experience high levels

of distress in response to academic standards, which contributes to academic dropout when institutions fail to meet their needs (Castro-Martínez & Machuca-Téllez, 2023).

e) Final reflections and main lessons learned and challenges

“There is no social practice more political than educational practice,” said Freire, “indeed, education can hide the reality of domination and alienation or, on the contrary, it can denounce them, announce other paths, thus becoming an emancipatory tool” (Freire, 2003 as cited in Walsh, 2013, p. 38).

The reflections and practices described are situated within an ethical-political sense that understands academia and educational practice as a particular political scenario in which diverse living conditions that constitute the social unrest of the student community are interwoven. This makes it necessary to understand that our practices and modes of relationship can hide or make invisible the reality of domination and alienation, as Freire points out. Thus, critical reflection must be inseparable from our daily work.

These reflections and actions take on a proactive character in our academic work, as they provide elements that aim to initiate a path that allows us to make visible the prevailing social unrest, fostering practices that overcome the asymmetry in the student-academic relationship and allow us to reveal and highlight the implications of the modern colonial order in a specific setting. The proposal aims to contribute to current debates and discussions about the hegemonic foundations existing in the discipline, whose prevailing discourses reproduce the modern colonial order in the very spaces of university education under the pretense of universality, objectivity, and neutrality inherent to scientific reasoning (Díaz-Leiva & Malfitano, 2023). By outlining decolonizing practices in academia, we can make visible and possible new paths to understand and address the social unrest experienced in university communities.

Under the identification of the conditions mentioned, the University could be thought of as an obstacle to the implementation of a support program that sustains its practices from South Latin American perspectives. However, on the contrary, it appears as a possibility to identify this fragility of the system and with it, be able to approach the development of support strategies from new ethical-political rationalities of disciplinary, professional and academic praxis, which facilitate the construction of a community that thinks of joint support strategies, to feel again that we are interconnected with others, weaving with the students new modes and forms of relationship, which challenge, transgress and fissure the instituted mandates (Walsh, 2016).

In this sense, spaces such as PAPsi can be understood as initiatives to strengthen the university community that contribute to the common good, aiming at the transformation of social relations, fostering safe spaces, and promoting a networked practice that seeks to deconstruct and re-signify the assumptions of the modern colonial project. The goal is to avoid reproducing the narratives, practices of domination, and hegemonic logics that currently prevail in the discipline, in academia, and in our everyday lives. Experiences like these involve constant reflection and a willingness to transform our pedagogical practices, opening up a possible alternative within the system—creating fissures and proposing its participatory and democratic reconstruction from within (Walsh, 2016).

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Corresponding author

Ana Maturana

e-mail: ana.maturana@usach.cl

Section editor

Prof. Dr. Ana Paula Serrata Malfitano