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Social dreaming as a method for exploring the unthought known behind decolonisation in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the use of Social Dreaming (SD) as a method that can contribute to decolonisation efforts through the potential of dream sharing. Decolonisation is desired, yet feared, due to the painful emotions inevitably associated with racism and prejudice. Decolonisation efforts often encounter defences against delving too deeply into the background and essence of colonialism. We explore how SD can contribute to uncovering what is known about colonialism in Higher Education but struggles to emerge, the 'unthought known'. SD has previously been used in similar contexts, but this paper paves the way for a more sustainable delivery that feeds directly into policy and transformation. The investigation is centred around a series of six online SD matrices in the context of the University of Central Lancashire's efforts to decolonise the curriculum. The online SD matrices were hosted between January – June 2024. We hope the paper will significantly contribute to the knowledge base and methods at the disposal of HE institutions on a similar journey.

Introduction

Background

The global movement decolonising Higher Education (HE) is gaining momentum in addressing historical inequities and reimagining academic spaces (Luescher et al., 2023; Tamimi et al., 2023). This paper explores a research project initiated at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), UK (Adaobe et al., 2022), in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg (UJ), South Africa (SA). We aim to advance the understanding and practice of decolonisation in HE around the world. The UK and SA are grappling with the legacies of colonisation and apartheid. Many HE institutions in the UK and SA share a commitment to inclusivity, diversity and equitable knowledge production beyond the local, interchanging experiences of colonisation and apartheid as a shared space, similar, yet different. The complexity of racism and discrimination at the root of colonialism is also a story of unconscious knowledge and denial (Pule, 2024). Without acknowledgement, decolonisation in HE cannot go beyond 'tick-boxing'

exercises, such as increasing the number of books published by black people in under-graduate reading lists, satisfying a metric instead of instigating transformational change.

Decolonisation in HE is a discourse that challenges traditional structures deeply rooted in colonial legacies. This involves addressing the intersectional dimensions of race, gender and other social categories, recognising the interconnectedness of multiple axes of oppression in the pursuit of truly decolonised and equitable academic spaces (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). South African HE has been a focal point for decolonisation efforts, given the country's complex history of apartheid and colonialism (Griffiths, 2019). In the UK, the movement echoes global efforts to address historical inequalities and challenge white, colonial, imperial and global north perspectives within academic institutions (Tamimi et al., 2023).

This work requires delving into the historical and emotional context of colonisation within academic institutions and the ways these have shaped the psychological and social positions of decision-makers, which has shaped curricula, institutional structures and knowledge production, reinforcing embedded colonial perspectives while marginalising Indigenous knowledge systems. Postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy and Indigenous epistemologies are frequently invoked to critique existing power structures and envision alternative educational paradigms that prioritise inclusivity and diversity (Luescher & Holtzhausen, 2023).

A central focus of decolonisation work revolves around re-evaluating and restructuring curricula (Luescher et al., 2023). Incorporating diverse perspectives and narratives challenging the dominance of Western knowledge involves not only adding content but also rethinking the very foundations of knowledge production and dissemination, a fundamental restructuring of institutional practices, policies and governance structures. Students have played a crucial role in advocating for decolonisation in HE, particularly through #RhodesMustFall which started in Oxford (UK), ultimately gaining momentum in SA universities, culminating in #FeesMustFall, which became the highlight of the student decolonisation movement in SA (Griffiths, 2019). These grassroots efforts have significantly impacted institutional change, highlighting students' demands for inclusive curricula and equitable academic environments.

The authors of this paper were active in the field of SD before working together on decolonisation. Pule has researched the field in South African universities through a study of black student leadership (Pule & May, 2021); Manley's research has included SD in the context of the 'celebration' of the abolition of the slave trade in the UK (Manley, 2010; Manley & Trustram, 2018), British Muslim identity (Karolia & Manley, 2018, 2020) and in post-apartheid South Africa (Berman & Manley, 2018). Invited by UCLan's Decolonisation Workgroup, Pule gave a keynote presentation and co-hosted a SD session (26.06.24), to support the decolonisation process at UCLan. A partnership has been established between the two universities, bringing insights into issues of decolonisation and creating a rich tapestry of possibility for imaginative thinking in two continents.

Social dreaming

In SD, group participants share their recent or more distant night-time dreams. Dreams are offered by participants as and when they choose, when the participant feels that the dream has something to offer related to the other dreams and the topics that are

emerging in the matrix. SD adopts the term 'matrix' instead of 'group' to differentiate it from what is traditionally understood to be psychodynamic group work. Instead of offering a dream, participants can also offer associations to the dreams in the matrix. There is no interpretation of the dreams or associations. Instead, these are allowed to 'float' and autogenerate meaning through links and connections that naturally emerge in each participant's mind. After the SD matrix, there is a post-matrix discussion, where more explicit meaning-making related to the overall theme is shared with others, providing a sense of collective cohesion to the event.

SD was used because of its potential for unlocking deeply held, troubling thoughts and feelings that otherwise might not find expression, leading to avoidance and/or denial of the issues underpinning colonialism in HE. Our research assumes that staff and students harbour knowledge about colonisation that is too painful and uncomfortable to consciously express and that such 'knowns' need to be provided with a space that makes the thinking of this knowledge a possibility. We hypothesise that SD can provide such a forum which uncovers what Christopher Bollas termed the 'unthought known' (Bollas, 2018), which in our research context is understood as internal knowledge about racism, colonisation and prejudice which cannot be discussed due to the complex difficulties of affect attached to this knowledge, such as grief, anger, disavowal, frustration, guilt and shame. The SD matrix provides a safe container for the emergence of these painful emotions, through which previously raw, undigested thoughts and feelings – equivalent to Bion's Beta elements (Bion, 1967, 1970; Manley, 2018) – can be processed into thought (Bion's Alpha elements). The matrix is focussed on 'the dream, not the dreamer' (Manley, 2014), liberating the individual from any personal negativity, while the dreams 'cloak' the unpalatable truths in the guise of condensed images and metaphorical embellishments.

Methodology

Online SD

We ran six online SD matrix series, one event a month, January–June 2024. Participants were mainly staff and students recruited through interest generated at UCLan through the Decolonisation Workgroup and at UJ through circulating the event information through the UJ Humanities newsletter and through networking with other SA universities and social media platforms. Some participants were invited by word of mouth outside of these constituencies and nobody was excluded. The framing of the topic – decolonising HE – was the focus of the information given to participants. In SD, it is the matrix as a 'container' for the topic in question that creates the space and contextualisation for the dreams and associations. SD as a 'safe space' is made possible by the democratic nature and freedom to choose when to participate that the method offers. Although the topic has the potential for upset, SD avoids personalisation of affect by concentrating on dream images and associations as belonging to the matrix as a whole, not to the individual. This, combined with the abstract nature of the dream image, bolsters the sense of safety in the matrix.

Online SD matrices became popular during COVID, when people needed expressive spaces and online being the only avenue available (Pasini & Trimboli, 2023). Of the six

matrices, four were complete, one was cancelled due a lack of participants and a sixth was conducted in a reduced fashion due to low attendance. In total, 65 people participated in the matrices. Five matrices were analysed involving the identification of image-affects (Manley, 2018) and inter-connectivity of thoughts and feelings (both within each matrix and across matrices) as un/dis-covered through the dream images and associations. Each SD matrix lasted 60 min and was followed by a post-matrix discussion lasting 30 min. The purpose of the post-matrix discussion is to begin the process of analysis in the form of initial meaning-making by the participants themselves. Later, this is followed up by the researchers' analysis of the transcripts.

Although SD has traditionally been conducted as a face-to-face event, the application of an online alternative has proved successful, even preferable in some respects to the physical gathering. Working online made it possible to recruit participants from the UK and SA in a convenient, practical and non-discriminatory fashion. The online matrix also allows the participants the option of switching off the camera, which emphasises the SD position of concentrating on the 'dream, not the dreamer'; it facilitates the engagement of participants with hidden disabilities, such as blindness or deafness, with access being equal for all. There are disadvantages for some participants who experience an unstable connection, but in practice this was minimal. Issues relating to the possible lack of a closeness and face-to-face contact that might have been expected of group work seem to not be intrusive.

Ethics

The research obtained ethical approval from UCLan (reference BAHSS2 0417).

Analysis

The analysis of each matrix begins with participants in the post-matrix discussion when participants are invited to move away from the reverie/semi-reverie of the SD matrix to a more cognitive, conscious forum of reflection and discussion. Participants are invited to begin a meaning-making process by offering the most significant images from the dreams, associations, thoughts and feelings that emerge from the matrix. The discussion is recorded and transcribed, serving as a check/reference point for the researchers when undertaking the complete analysis of the matrices at a later date. Once all the transcripts are complete, the researchers individually identify important images and associated feelings and thoughts in all the transcripts. By 'important', we understand what is both relevant to the contained subject matter – decolonising HE – and also providing insights that are especially pertinent to the SD experience. Although the criteria for 'important' may partly be subjective, the researchers are able to objectively assess 'importance' by noting the highlights of the post-matrix discussion and the way the images and associations become recurrent and open to development in the course of each matrix and sometimes from matrix to matrix. A further check against the dangers of 'wild analysis' (Schafer, 1985) – where an individual researcher may become carried away by enthusiasm for the discovery of meaning that may not exist – comes through the researchers sharing their individual assessments of the meaning-making process and ensuring

agreement between themselves about the validity of an interpretation. If agreement is not reached, the hypothesis is rejected.

The results of our analysis are described below. The extracts are not collated or numbered linearly, since the way social dreaming works is rhizomatically and nomadically (Manley, 2018), so that one image as a 'node' can interconnect with many other images and different feelings simultaneously, reflecting the complexity of the SD process and also honouring the difficulties of the subject matter under consideration. The quoted extracts below are allowed to 'float' in this text as in the matrices themselves.

Findings

The forest, barriers on the road ('credit' barriers, barriers of colonialism, boundaries), finding an alternative through the forest

One of the images that emerged and framed an entire matrix was that of a forest. A dream was offered of walking along a road in a forest and being confronted by a barrier, painted red and white. In another association, this was called a 'credit barrier', alluding to financial barriers that can come between the traveller and their journey. In the dreams and the associations, the barrier has lots of different functions, one of them being connected to credit or money, another indicating the impossibility of going beyond artificially created barriers and the need to find solutions to the obstacles that lie ahead. In SA, study finance has been a central focus of the decolonisation argument, in that without funding, there is a barrier to access to education (Griffiths, 2019). Solutions in the matrix included avoiding the barrier by going into the forest where although the path is not so clear, at least the barrier is not in front of you.

In the context of a SD matrix framed by the problem of colonialism, the barriers on the road evoke the barriers of colonialism, the boundaries that are unnaturally created, often against the arrival of refugees or immigrants, as we can see in the UK and Europe of today. The environment of the forest provides a possible alternative, a place where it is possible to wander freely without barriers. However, at the same time, it is easy to get lost. The problem of the barriers on the one hand and a dangerous freedom on the other were evoked in the matrices, where clearly delineated paths lead to obstacles, but the alternative paths in the heart of the forest can be obscure and possibly mis-leading:

> Equality issues and inclusion issues and all those type of issues can feel like you're walking through a forest because what is it and how do we do it? And you know, there's just yeah, it can feel like you're walking through a forest trying to find your way and, you know, just this attempt to walk on a path but it's not so clear.

The image of the forest strongly evokes the sense of complexity and darkness associated with colonialism, where the colonial road includes barriers and yet the forest path is uncertain and obscure. In this way, the use of the image, and the associated affect of fear (thus the image-affect) of the forest is helping the matrix understand the difficulties of colonialism and decolonisation.

In an association to the forest dreams, the following extract shows how the traveller might face a barrier on the road and attempt an alternative route through the forest, but

the forest may also be hiding wild animals within it, emphasising both the danger and the hidden aspects of such a threat.

> And to get to school, I had to drive through this very dense forest which was full of wild animals and wild boars. And in the midst of the forest was the boundary between France and Switzerland, where the crossing was sometimes open and sometimes closed, with a red and white barrier . . . often with my moped, I had to find, fairly illegally, a way to drive around this barrier.

In the context of decolonisation, there are significant, provocative details in this extract which speak to the 'unthought known'. For example, the question of legality becomes an issue. In the extract, there is only one way around the barrier but this is, strictly speaking, illegal. In this way, this association brings up the tortured question of the difference between the legality of a system of law and an ethical or practical 'legality', all of which speaks to the dilemma behind the status of 'illegal immigrant' or an oppressed majority in one's own country, as in SA. If it is illegal in the system for an immigrant to enter the country, is it nevertheless morally illegal to try to do so? In the association above, the consequence of not being illegal would be to be denied an education. This is why the person in the extract is prepared to confront the possible dangers of the wild that might be lurking in the forest. The 'known' in this association suggests that in those circumstances it is ethically 'legal' to be illegal, which expresses the crux and paradox of the matter when considering immigration (and this is often assumed to be the immigration of people of colour, therefore immediately potentially racist). It is also a reminder of the nineteenth century colonisation of the countries that constitute many of the places of origin of the present immigrants or refugees into Europe. This could be a reminder of how the slave trade, which was once legal by law but morally 'illegal'. In SA, apartheid was similarly legal but morally illegal, the effects of which are felt today in the exclusion of students from the education system as a result being in a previously disadvantaged status due to the remnants of apartheid (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). This 'unthought known' – that sometimes 'illegal' is 'legal' - therefore becomes a 'thought known' in the space of the SD matrix.

These bringing together of multiple paradoxes in the dreams and associations of the matrix is a quality that Freud called 'condensation' (Freud, 1900/1976; Schneider, 2010). In this way, a dream image or association can bring together, at once, the paradoxes and difficulties that constitute the colonial problem and, therefore, the issues of decolonisation.

Silence, the drying up of dreams and a reflection on the meaning of silence

One of the matrices was struggling to express dreams, images and associations. There were long moments of silence which were held by the researchers in their roles as hosts. In this way, the silence becomes part of the process. The silence includes the feeling that this is a demonstration of the great difficulty and complexity of the subject of decolonisation, even in the context of dream sharing and the shared unconscious. The complexities connected to racism, prejudice, inclusivity, diversity, religions, different skin types, people who might look white, but do not identify as white, or who are black but project a persona of themselves as white, much like

Fanon's black skin, white mask (Fanon, 1967; Luescher-Mamashela, 2012), along with associated issues, as witnessed in the previous analysis, such as legalities and illegalities, combine into a problem of multiplicity that can sometimes seem overwhelming and paradoxically expressed through lack of expression, in silence. Silence is a reminder in the matrix to never underestimate the difficulties behind the decolonisation project. Nevertheless, from the silence emerges more emergent thinking of the knowns, harboured within the matrix, as suggested in the following extract, where a further paradox comes into the thinking space: the more issues of decolonisation are present, the more silence prevails.

> I associate the feeling of silence of dreams to a feeling, a social feeling, that in the world today there are so many difficult and complex problems that I'm often left speechless. I don't know what to say about lots of issues in the world. And in the context of colonisation and decolonisation maybe there's an element of being speechless about something which is so hard to understand and yet is present; and the more present it is, the more speechless you become.

This summarises the difficulty and the simultaneous clarity of the matrix: the more the knowledge is brought to light, the more awful it appears. In the context of the silence of the matrix, the following extract stresses this difficulty as a fear of bringing up this complex knowledge, especially because that complexity comes without perfect solutions, which is anathema in a society that is frequently focussed on seeking to achieve clarity and targets. The sense of the following extract is that it may be necessary for HE institutions to learn to live with uncertainty, that is to say the nurturing of 'negative capability' (French, 2001), which is unpalatable in the world of policy-making, laws, systems and structure. In such a world, regulations, categories and classifications become Deleuzian 'striated spaces' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) that prevent the flow of ideas and creativity and the necessary existence of the 'smooth spaces' of condensed complexity that are encountered in SD.

> Makes me wonder what we're afraid of by not being perfect. I've got this feeling at the moment of a kind of fear, of being afraid of stuff. You know, what might the dreams bring? What are people going to think of me if I bring in a dream or thoughts that's not recommended or perfect?

Decision-making, what democracy actually means, the abdication of responsibility, feeling of loneliness and individual v. the group, striving against resistance, emerging anger, lack of power and resources

In the face of complex difficulties, paradoxes and multiplicities, the participants in the matrix brought up dreams and associations relating to the difficulties of decision-making and the questioning of democracy and personal responsibility; the loneliness of accepting responsibility; and the struggle between this individual loneliness versus the attraction of the majority. Attached to these were expressions of anger, powerlessness and a struggle with a lack of resources. In the following dream, the lonely dreamer walks aimlessly up and down, meeting faceless or nameless people, doing tasks with no meaning and never reaching any destination:

> I would just keep going up the stairs or down and just doing it alone, most of the time and occasionally meeting people along the way. It was a very strange dream and I couldn't remember anyone I met, but it was more . . . so just taking a lot of tasks going up a very, very tall building with just different floors and never really feeling like I've gotten to where I need to get to . . .

As an example of the rhizomatic patterns of SD and the creation of multiplicity, these thoughts began emerging all together and interweaving with previous images, such as the images of the forest discussed above:

> Actually just the idea of going out and sort of losing yourself a bit in the dark is really appealing. I had a friend who I remember used to laugh about him when I was sort of 15/16 and he used to go out and he claims that he went out and he liked to go into the countryside and he claimed that he would close his eyes and just walk, really see what happened.

In this image, an individual goes alone into nature and attempts to 'see' through the darkness of closed eyes, resonating and therefore linking in with the dark forest image. This highly condensed image also demonstrates how an understanding of the value of the social unconscious can illuminate what is known but yet unthought. The known is buried inside the individual and the closing of the eyes also refers to a potential state of dreaming. In this image, the individual in their connection with the natural environment (as opposed to the artificial environment of colonisation), 'digs deep', so to speak, in an attempt to 'see' the knowledge within.

Anxiety, getting it done, the 'exam', being judged, legitimising, elections

With a focus on the decolonisation in HE, the image of exams, and with it, the legitimacy of worth, of being judged and the 'examination' of elections, came to the fore. In the following dream, although the dreamer no longer sits exams, the anxiety associated with examination is illustrated in this way:

> [I had a] dream recently that I [had] an exam coming up that I needed to study for. And then I didn't have enough time to study for that exam. And I was feeling very anxious and overwhelmed. But the funny thing about the dream is that I am not writing any exams. And I haven't written for a few years but still that feeling of that anxiety that pressure the feeling of I need to get this thing done.

This is a feature of SD, where the experience of a person's individual anxiety in examination becomes expanded and woven into a social collage in the matrix through the use of references and associations to political elections – in other words the potential forum for equalising all and therefore decolonising all – and how this is linked to the failures of decolonisation in HE:

> I think about the number of registered voters that did not vote. I think about the number of eligible voters that did not register to vote. And it is as sad as it is when I bring it back to the context of the context of higher education. How many people realise how the system still requires a lot of change? How many researchers notice the gap and don't do anything about it . . . Yes, that showed that there's so many people that are eligible, [they] should be glad, but they not doing anything. How many people in academia can actually use their platform to do more research to you know, but they're not doing it?

In addition, a South African participant points to the phenomena of black people wearing 'white masks' (Fanon, 1967; Sithole, 2022), the victims of colonialism becoming the oppressors, demonstrating the depths of the wounds of colonialism:

> ... when I asked many of my colleagues across the country ... about their experiences with either research supervisors or clinical supervisors, when they had white supervisors, all their things were okay. They did not have any issues. But when they had black supervisors, they had so many issues. They had so many complaints. They were treated so badly ... And it's so disheartening, that is so painful, to the point where you start to think these people made it through to the other side. Did they make it through and take the identity of their previous addresses? ... Or were they supposed to not make it through and try to do something different than their previous oppressors?

Black stones and diamonds – tensions and contradictions of change and transformation, the pain and pressure, turning stones to precious gems; associations, discomforts and fears towards Blackness

A dream about black stones fostered associations regarding the tensions and contradictions of change and transformations linked to discomforts and fears towards Blackness by those identifying as black as well as those identifying as white. Ideas were expressed about what Blackness means and how it affected the group as a whole and personal levels. The dream highlighted the work involved in turning ordinary stones into precious gems. This brought about the association that links geology to this dream to transformation and change. It was interesting to discover the link between geology and colonisation, and current mining trades between Europe and Africa (Hearth et al., 2020). This is another instance of the unthought known emerging in the matrix. The image of the black stone was introduced as follows:

> It's an image of a black, a very, very smooth black stone. I think a bit of a reflection of as a child picking up and finding is to turn it around in my pocket for a number of years when I was very very young, but that often enters my brain this texture of the stone the smoothness ... and the weight of the stone.

Later, a participant commented as follows:

> We had a comment about how the Black Diamond could be polished and made into a diamond. So you extract the blackness and then you go off and you polish a diamond into this white shining thing.

The comment emphasises change and transformation, as in the black stone that could be polished and made into a 'white' diamond as indicated in the extract above. The image reminds participants how diamonds come from black stones after being placed under pressure and fire, then polished to shine as they do. So, this work of transformation requires pressure and fire to transform institutions. This resonates with the Fallist movements that involved burnt buildings (Griffiths, 2019) and resulted in transforming South African Higher Education. Simultaneously, there are tensions and contradictions involved in change and transformation in terms of questions about identity. This is the identity of the institutions, identity of the people in the university where groups or individuals ask questions like: Do I really want to change? Do I really want to be open?

Do I really want to be accommodating? What does it mean to be inclusive? Who am I after being inclusive? These questions can be linked to the fear and anxiety associated with the work of change and transformation involved in decolonisation as in the association below:

> I can't help linking up the images of fear and blackness. So, of all blackness and the unknown, the unknown stone, the potential darkness of the underground, the black place where the snake comes from.

In this way, this image that brings together the black stone with the diamond is symbolic of the work involved in decolonisation and transformation of HE. Further associations brought up the discomfort projected towards blackness, including the discomfort and fear associated to blackness. In this context, decolonisation may be confrontational if it is seen to be engaging with 'contamination' resulting from mixing with people of different backgrounds, races, religions, ideologies or other differences. However, the transformation resulting from decolonisation may reveal fundamental human values that can be uncovered through engaging with difficult questions about existence.

Discussion

HE is full of good intentions when it comes to decolonisation, but there is a gap between intent and transformative action. This gap is not limited to HE and is obvious on an almost daily basis when political leaders and societies face up to the realities of colonisation, as can be seen in the 2024 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting being held at the time of writing this article. How else is it possible to interpret the UK's position when confronted with demands for reparations for the damage of the slave trade, as wanting 'to address "current future-facing challenges" rather than "spend a lot of time on the past"'? (BBC, 2024a). This statement in the context of a gathering of nations that were once colonised by Britain, demonstrates the deep, underlying social malaise that also underpins problems of the colonisation mindset in HE in the UK. A representative of the First Peoples of Australia interrupted the British sovereign in protest at this colonial presence, but the reaction was business as usual: 'The ceremony concluded without any reference to the incident, and the royal couple proceeded to meet hundreds of people who had waited outside to greet them' (BBC, 2024b). This silence is a colonial reaction which mirrors the silence of one of our matrices, further demonstrating the profound wounds of colonisation which also pervade HE. The purpose of the SD sessions in this study has been to work towards transformation in thought that make a superficial approach to decolonisation untenable. This research demonstrates that there is no real future without full, unequivocal and felt acknowledgement of the past. This is why the change in access for black people to universities in SA is not accompanied by transformation and colonialism is perpetuated by systematic racism and other systematic mechanisms. For example, black lecturers are employed through programmes that aim to increase the number of black academics. Career advancement programmes are set up while the same academics are silenced through 'organisational culture' that facilitates them to be worked out of the system through

'legitimate' HR processes. Taken from the matrix, the question can be asked: How much fire should one endure for a black stone to become a diamond? In parallel terms, this is why the addition of authors from the global south to reading lists in universities in the UK is not necessarily accompanied by transformation or decolonisation. There is a need to take brave, transformative steps to break out of the fear, anxiety, shame and guilt that prevent decolonisation from taking root. This study shows how thinking and affective responses must be essentially acknowledged before meaningful action can happen. Otherwise, external actions are adopted that fail to break down the inwardly held complex and problematic feelings that govern the prevention of institutional transformation by default of a system that mirrors colonial habit and business as usual. The space of transformation is painful and complex. In the matrices of this study, this space is the dangerous, dark forest, where paths are unclear, and dangers hide in the obscurity. We suggest that it is known to all of us that this is the dangerous place where decolonisation can truly happen, but it might be easier to choose the path where a barrier can simply be lifted out of the way, so that a familiar road can be followed. When this happens, what is known about the forest remains an 'unthought known'.

Together, the matrices provide an indication of the need for transformation before change, a distinction which is crucial in the context of decolonising HE. We suggest that this is a 'lightbulb moment' emerging from the SD sessions. A change might be represented in the matrices by a black stone being polished into whiteness, but it remains the same stone, the 'unknown stone'. A transformation would entail discovering personal agency, awareness and courage to find a new path through the forest. In the context of HE, this is indicative of the need for staff and students to engage in the dynamics of personal and systemic transformation instead of mere change. In the example, we gave at the start of this article, we can imagine the reading lists changing but the dynamics remaining, because people and interpersonal dynamics remain untouched, as does the educational experience, atmosphere and substance of what is being taught and learned. Transformation comes before change, not vice versa. Transformation reshapes the very foundations of knowledge delivery and interaction within academic environments. This is reflected in the SD process which transcends the setting and achieving of specific, time-bound targets. Instead, it embodies a transformative process that fosters profound, foundational shifts in perspectives and approaches, leading to meaningful and sustained change. Recognising this distinction is essential to appreciating the deeper impact and long-term goals of such transformative work. Wherever they are, universities around the world share values and principles. These are often encapsulated in statements of the values held by the university's academic community. Equality, diversity and inclusivity embrace values that are universally held. However, as this paper shows, there is a difference between stated values and values in practice. The more complex and preoccupying the problem, the more silenced it may become, denied or repressed rather than confronted. Clearly, the problem of racism and the need for decolonisation in HE is one such area of dreaded complexity, an area of contradictions and paradoxes, of desires that appear to be beyond execution. An HE institution might consider 'quick fixes' as being all it can achieve. The SD sessions brought out the unthought knowns of communities in HE. When this emerges into view, what was hidden is 'unhidden'. Complex situations require complex transformations. SD is one way of bringing complexity to the

fore and may provide a forum and an opportunity for transformation: towards a state of genuine decolonisation.

Conclusion

The authors believe that HE in the UK and SA is infused by deep colonial trauma. It may be that the extent of this largely goes unrecognised in the UK as a defence against uncomfortable feelings of guilt and reparation that recognition must surely bring. Sometimes attempts to decolonise HE are met with accusations of 'wokeness' or political correctness, which we would identify as further evidence of defensive reactions that prevent effective transformation from happening. In SA decolonisation and transformation are differentiated and taken as two different terms that play different role in the changing processes of the university or HE: transformation came before decolonisation. It came with post-apartheid and Nelson Mandela, while the idea of decolonisation has come about through student protests. Even though some may see decolonisation as an avenue to transformation, they are there for different purposes. It would be easy to suppose that in SA colonisation has been defeated with the fall of apartheid, but the scars of colonialism run deep, as our data demonstrate. Just as the British are sometimes praised and half-excused from pernicious colonial practices because they 'built the railways', so too did they 'invent' the model of university 'enjoyed' globally. In this article, we have focussed on the experiential work of SD and deliberately shied away from western theorisations of decolonisation. For example, a recent article by Garrett (2024) does a worthwhile and ethically sound summary of decolonisation in a social work context. We note, however, that even in this article, the author's recommendations are almost entirely based on *what* needs to be done rather than *how*. Perhaps, this is an ironic mirroring of 'coloniality' – the persistence of colonialism beyond empire – as pursued by the western mind set (Nelson & Studies, 2007). We hope that the present article on SD and decolonisation has helped to dig deep into experience and process that may support questions of *how* and move our epistemologies towards embodied experiences of transformation rather than change.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Julian Manley is a Professor of Social Innovation at the University of Central Lancashire, UK and a Senior Associate Researcher at the University of Johannesburg. He is widely published and an experienced host of social dreaming matrices. His work includes a range of perspectives on the development of social dreaming in different contexts such as the visual arts, issues of race and climate change. He helped to develop the visual matrix method that emerged from his work in social dreaming. He is a founding Director of the Centre for Social Dreaming and a Scholar of the British Psychoanalytic Council.

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