# ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK & WELFARE EDUCATION

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## CONTENTS

# 1. Editorial

It is amazing to find we are in June 2013 already! This is the first edition for 2013, and our first edition of Advances collaborating together as Editors. In this Special Edition we feature papers from the successful Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Educators (AASWWE) Symposium held on 27th –28th September 2012, at Magill Campus, University of South Australia, Adelaide. The theme of the conference was Cultural Diversity: Social Work and Human Services Education: Working with difference. A second edition for 2013 will continue to feature papers from that conference.

As social work and welfare educators in Australia, New Zealand and beyond, our quest is to prepare students for work in a sector characterized by difference and diversity. As professionals we seek to understand and work effectively with people regardless of our differences including age, gender, ability, sexuality, nationality, culture or ethnicity. In recognition of the cultural diversity encountered in social work and welfare education and practice the Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Educators (AASWWE) invited academics, field educators and students to share their experiences of working with diversity. We have a unique selection of articles to offer you here informed by original research, and drawing on critical pedagogy and critical social work.

The first article by Pukepuke and Dawe describes a holistic, collaborative student retention and success initiative, designed for first-year social work students at Unitec Institute of Technology in New Zealand. Next Gordon and Zufferey look at the political context of the universities we work in, to identify the implications of working with diversity in the current neoliberal environment. Examining the topic of gender and differences, Dunk West sought to understand participants' gendered experiences through the lens of sexual scripting theory.

Zuchowski, Savage, Miles and Gair report research exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in field placements. The findings identify racism and Eurocentricsm in practice and reveal the disregard of Aboriginal cultural ways of helping, and the potential for disempowerment.

Lennette and Ingamells report on an educational initiative with group of overseas skilled refugees and migrants. This article reports the benefits that accrue from the students progressing as a cohort and being supported to "bend" the curriculum to their own needs and community involvements. Again, focusing on working with diversity, Wache and Zufferey identify the needs of students from new and emerging communities enrolled in higher education in an article that reports on a small study of the experiences of African students.

Two papers focus on the challenges of ensuring excellent supervision for social work students. Hosken argues that in order to reduce discrimination supervision needs to be shaped by humility rather than the more popular goal of competence. Supervision can create the capacity to challenge discriminatory policies and practices as they are normalised through social work systems and the broader society. Zuchowski explores the impact of the increasingly common practice of external supervision for social work students on placement, where suitably qualified supervisors are not available on site. This article reports the experiences of students often 'caught in the middle'of the complex set of stakeholder relationships that can accompany external supervision arrangements.

Grace, Townsend, Testa, Fox, O'Maley, Custance and Daddow note that the internationalisation of social work education is driven by student diversity as well as by employer demand, the profession internationally, and by universities. Students from diverse backgrounds bring with them their own distinctive cultures, knowledges and ways of being and their article promotes the concept of grass roots internationalisation —drawing students' diverse experiences into the curriculum in ways that enrich and internationalise the learning of all students.

Lastly, Buchanan identifies that Australian students may enter university with individualised perspectives, often subsequently challenged by the community based principles held by students from other cultures. Teaching critical thinking can be challenging and the paper explores the establishment of tutorials that create a communicative space where educators and students may explore concepts of critical thinking and embrace knowledge creation as a shared pursuit that addresses issues of power and difference.

We also continue to welcome submission of papers at any time that align with the aims of the journal. We welcome three kinds of papers: papers for full refereeing (7000 words max); "Practice Reflections" and contributions to "Other Voices" (2000 words). "Practice reflections" and "Other Voices" should focus on recent events or current topics of interest to the journal audience of social work, welfare and may provide a different perspective for practitioners, educators and students. We also will welcome books for review and will from time to time commission reviews of books we feel will be of interest to our readers. In this issue Matt Rankine reviews "Critical Reflection in Context: Applications in Health and Social Care" by Jan Fook & Fiona Gardner (2013).

Please feel free to e-mail either of us to discuss a paper you may be considering for submission and we welcome your feedback. We look forward to working with many of Advances' readers in future and take this opportunity to thanks the many reviewers who have contributed very useful feedback to our authors.

**Susan Gair** and **Liz Beddoe**
Editors
susan.gair@jcu.edu.au
e.beddoe@auckland.ac.nz

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# 2. Creating education spaces for successful Indigenous tertiary learners: The TATT Project.

**Tepora Pukepuke and Lydia Dawe**

Tepora Pukepuke Unitec Institute of Technology Auckland, New Zealand. email: tpukepuke@unitec.ac.n

Lydia Dawe Social Practice Department, Unitec Institute of Technology.

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Tutorial Assistance Teaching Team (TATT) project: a holistic, collaborative student success and retention initiative, designed for first-year social work students at Unitec Institute of Technology in New Zealand. The TATT project underwent its pilot year in the beginning of 2012. Though the project supports all students, it is particularly relevant to educators working with Indigenous student populations as the initiatives use Maori cultural principles. The TATT project brings together academic and pastoral care resources and creates culturally safe spaces for a diverse student cohort. The paper outlines the project's cultural underpinnings, components, processes and student response, and discusses the lessons learned from the experimental first year of this on-going project.

**Keywords:** *student retention, information literacy, Indigenous, Maori, social work education, tertiary, librarian.*

## INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand tertiary sector has responded to a worldwide economic downturn by demanding efficient and effective service delivery from tertiary providers. In particular there are sector directives relating to the Indigenous people of New Zealand (Maori). The Tertiary Education framework provides the vision of the sector and informs the Maori Education Strategy with hopes to improve the performance of Maori learners, and to pathway them to higher learning. This approach supports the aspiration of Maori themselves in further education and reflects the many approaches to improve students' completion rates. This paper examines the tertiary sector vision in relation to supporting the aspiration of Maori in education, in particular the social work programme at Unitec, which hosts a high percentage of Maori students. The Unitec social work programme has created a team of academic and pastoral staff to support students of all backgrounds, but uses te ao Maori principles as the foundation for the initiatives. The paper outlines these initiatives and the work undertaken with a Maori student caucus in the pilot year. The challenges and excitement for the two team members, a lecturer and a librarian, is described, and how the collaborative nature of their work has helped students develop as independent learners is outlined. The team ran a series of workshops that were well attended, and students contributed to the scheduling of these sessions to create relevant and timely delivery in a friendly fashion. We also discuss the concept of an embedded librarian and how this role can be 'normalised' as an ordinary part of the student classroom environment.

## BACKGROUND

### The New Zealand Tertiary Education Sector

The New Zealand Government's strategic direction for tertiary education is outlined in the Tertiary Education Strategy (TES). It was informed by the draft-form of the Tertiary Education Framework that provides overarching vision to improve participation and achievement of Maori. The Maori Education Strategy 2008-2012 provides the focus for how to improve the performance of the education system in contributing to Maori success and achievement. There is rising demand for tertiary studies, although the current economic climate has meant tertiary education has come under review. It is a time of fiscal restraint with a need for tertiary spending to be used efficiently and effectively. TES recognises the tangata whenua (people of the land) status of Maori and partners to the Treaty of Waitangi. Thus the provision of tertiary education has a particular role of Maori student support: developing the skills, competencies and knowledge to allow success for Maori through undergraduate studies and pathways to higher education (Ministry of Education, 2011). This gives a clear mandate to tertiary education providers and to our programme to ensure Maori social work students' unique and specific education needs are being met in ways that are culturally relevant and likely to lead to academic improvement.

### Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand

Unitec Institute of Technology is a tertiary institution located in Auckland, New Zealand,

with a student cohort of over 23,000 students from 80 countries. Courses range from certificate to doctorate level and are held on three campuses as well as via distance education. (Unitec Institute of Technology, 2012c). Unitec has a strong vocational focus, with strategic initiatives in place to create work-ready graduates that respond to the changing needs of employers (Unitec Institute of Technology, n.d.). Indigenous Maori students make up 10% of government-funded equivalent full-time students (EFTS) (Unitec Institute of Technology, 2012b). Unitec has made Maori student retention and success a priority as part of national education strategy objectives.

**The Bachelor of Social Practice**

The Bachelor of Social Practice (BSocP) is a full-time three year program based at Unitec's Waitakere campus. Students have the option of specialising in their third year in either Social Work or Community Development. The BSocP has a culturally diverse student body, which includes 25% Maori students as of 2011. Students have the option of graduating with the BSocP, which qualifies them to work in social work, mental health, community development, and counselling, with an option to continue with postgraduate diploma and masters degrees in Social Practice and Counselling (Unitec Institute of Technology, 2012a).

Social work graduates in New Zealand are affected by the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Act that introduced voluntary social work registration in 2003, and moves are underway for mandatory registration. Social work registration requires practicing social workers to have a qualification recognised by the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB). Currently the SWRB ensures social workers: meet professional standards of competent practice; are accountable in practice; and have continuing professional development. The registration of a social worker requires they have an accredited qualification, competency and in some cases a set number of practice hours. The BSocP is a qualification recognised by the SWRB (Social Workers Registration Board, 2012).

**Maori Aspiration in Higher Education**

The United Nations (UN) defines Indigenous people as those with distinct characteristics living in a region prior to new arrivals bringing a dominant culture. The UN asserts the right of Indigenous populations to hold their own unique knowledge and practices (United Nations, n.d.). Indigenous social work practitioners are well aligned to provide culturally responsive social services, and therefore Maori are in high demand to achieve relevant qualifications in order to work with their own distinct communities. The advancement and success of Maori in contemporary times is inextricably linked to advancement and success of Maori learners in the tertiary sector, via improved pathways to higher learning. Higher education of Maori will improve their career opportunities and accumulation of wealth leading to higher standards of living. Such improvements in lifestyle provide improved health and wellbeing of Maori and ensure their survival into a distant future (Durie, 2003).

**BSocP Student Challenges to Successful Study**

Many BSocP students are the first in their family to attempt tertiary study, and for most it has been several years or decades since attending secondary school. The BSocP is a challenging interdisciplinary programme which brings together the fields of sociology,

psychology and mental health, as well as Maori and Pasifika cultural studies. Tutorial discussion sessions are available for lecture content to be discussed and clarified, but these sessions only address a fraction of student learning and pastoral concerns. BSocP students tend to be overwhelmed by academic literacy and technological challenges in the first semester, leading them dangerously close to dropping out of the programme altogether. To address this issue, Unitec offers academic and pastoral support services for all students, but by necessity these services are generic in nature, with the burden on the individual student to proactively seek the needed resources. The BSocP programme needed a student support initiative to provide a middle ground between the subject-specific content of the lectures, and the generic content of the existing academic development workshops. More specifically this support programme had to respond to the cultural needs of the many Maori students in the program, while being inclusive of all students in the BSocP.

## THE TATT PROJECT

In early 2012 a pilot project was designed to meet the academic and pastoral needs of the BSocP students, and to increase student retention rates in the programme. The name "TATT" was originally an acronym for Tutorial Assistant Teaching Team, although the makeup of the team changed during the pilot year to include non-tutorial services. Although the TATT project has only been running for a single academic year, it provides unique positioning by embedding Indigenous principles at all levels of intervention. The authors Tepora Pukepuke (Lecturer) and Lydia Dawe (Librarian) are positioned within the academic literacy section of TATT alongside a tutorial assistant. The librarian role has changed in the student view from the traditional stereotype of 'book finder' to that of a 'central educator'. The pastoral care section includes: a student counsellor fulfilling counselling fieldwork hours; a current Unitec student affiliated with a mentoring programme called PASS (peer assisted study support); and an administrative support worker. Over the course of the 2012 school year, the TATT project has delivered initiatives such as:

- Voluntary academic skills workshops tailored to the curriculum and timetable of BSocP first-year students (TATT Workshops)
- A culturally safe study space for all BSocP students, located within the Department of Social Practice (the "TATT Room")
- One-on-one counselling sessions for Social Practice students
- The Maori Caucus ("Te Whanau o te Matauranga") - a study group for Indigenous Maori BSocP students
- TATT website - a Moodle page containing the workshop schedule, helpful links, TATT team contact information, and academic support resources for BSocP students.

### Te Rau Puawai

Maori aspiration to succeed in education relies on student supports that respond to the unique and specific needs of Maori. There are three renowned Maori student support

centres: MAIA at Unitec New Zealand; The Maori Centre at University of Otago; and the mental health workforce programme Te Rau Puawai at Massey University (Ministry of Education, 2001), with a more recent document noting the improved tertiary responsiveness, and citing collaborative approaches, of improved support for Maori learners (Tiakiwai and Teddy, 2003). One of these programmes, Te Rau Puawai, is worth examining as it has consistently high pass rates, a comprehensive range of supports, and uses Indigenous Maori principles similar to those used by the TATT team.

Te Rau Puawai is a joint venture between Massey University and the New Zealand Ministry of Health aimed at increasing the numbers of Maori mental health workers in the disciplines of social work, social policy, Maori health and policy, nursing, rehabilitation and psychology. Te Rau Puawai can be translated as "a hundred flowers" indicating early ambition to grow and nurture a hundred Maori students to complete a qualification, with the intention of them then moving into the mental health workforce. This programme began in 1999, providing comprehensive academic and pastoral support of Maori students enrolled at Massey University. In 2002 an independent evaluation of the programme (Nikora, Levy, Henry, and Whangapirita, 2002) and another in 2004 reported that the programme exceeded expectations in the first two years (1999-2001) with 56 bursars completing their qualifications. Bursars achieved an 80% pass rate compared with 65% for all students at Massey University as a whole. In 2004, this pass rate has continued, a significant achievement in light of increasing numbers of bursars being accepted and many without previously studying at the tertiary level (Nikora, Rua, Duirs, Thompson, and Amuketi, 2004) and the rates continue to climb. Both these evaluations link the success of the programme to the extraordinarily high rates of financial commitment to resource the comprehensive wrap-around supports of students, with proactive regular contact, academic and peer mentors, pastoral supports, and a student space with a resident mentor. Additional to these supports are the Indigenous Maori principles underpinning the work such as *manaaki* (care and hospitality), *whanaungatanga* (a family environment and connections), *tuakana-teina* (mentorship, and reciprocal learning spaces) and *tinorangatiratanga* (self-determination, and leadership of the education processes) (Nikora, Levy, Henry, and Whangapirita, 2002).

**Indigenous Principles in TATT**

TATT draws on many Maori principles informing the Te Rau Puawai programme including *manaaki*, *whanau* (family, connection), *tuakana-teina*, *tinorangatiratanga* (Nikora, Levy, Henry, and Whangapirita, 2002) and *mana* (respectful relationships, honouring each other, regard); as well as social work and community work roles such as advocacy and brokerage. These principles were used by Tepora who was part of a peer-mentoring project to support first year social work students at Massey University (Pukepuke and Nash, 2009). The use of Indigenous principles in TATT is not meant to exclude non-Maori students - quite the contrary. The intention is to be more inclusive, growing a sense of community across the diverse BSocP student body, and a friendly, supportive environment. Using these principles is also a way of modelling the Maori social work frameworks that students study in their first year.

The TATT team has its own values that inform day-to-day practice with students, stakeholders and each other. Our team values respectful relationships, robust electronic

and face-to-face communication, clear and consistent feedback, and accountable and transparent ways of working. We have weekly team meetings throughout the academic year to discuss our programme principles, workshop planning, strategic and operational objectives of our institute, and to just spend time together. To nurture our own team's sense of *whanaungatanga* and *manaaki*, we share a hot drink and funny stories about the week. After this exchange, we turn to the more formal agenda, having wide ranging discussions, confessions of our working week, difficulties and highlights. These meetings serve to bring us together in personal and professional ways, and ensure we are information-sharing on our practice so we all know what is happening. The team has become well informed on institutional policy and procedure, pastoral considerations, and pedagogy underpinning our academic work.

**TATT Initiatives**

TATT offered a range of initiatives including academic skills workshops; uploading resources to a website; a special Maori group meeting regularly for support, study and fun; and lastly a student zone with resident support staff.

**Voluntary Academic Skills Workshops (TATT Workshops)**

At the pre-semester start of the academic year, the TATT team organised and delivered the first year orientation programme, aligning with Shrupp's (2009) rationale that if orientation is done in a friendly and helpful fashion it creates a lasting connection with students and is likely to raise retention rates. Approximately 80 of the 110 expected students participated in this event, allowing the team early face-to-face contact with the students over a three-day period. The TATT team hosted the students through their first experiences within the programme, both formally as part of the orientation schedule and informally during refreshment breaks. The TATT brief during orientation was to be friendly, helpful, and immediately responsive to student enquiries. This helped to build whanaungatanga (connections or relationships) between members of the TATT team and the students.

The first five weeks of semester one were devoted to workshops designed to follow a logical progression of learning around key academic skills such as Australian Psychological Society (APA) referencing and researching and writing techniques. Initially, there were offerings of eight workshops a day, in two four-hour streams so students could choose what workshops most suited them. Several workshops were offered multiple times so students who may have missed a session could have the opportunity to attend at a later date. These intensive first few weeks centred on teaching basic academic skills, but had a sub-theme of messaging our sense of faith in student abilities and the need for them to rise to their greatest academic capacity. The workshops were structured by lesson plans with clear aims, objectives and lesson resources, though delivery reflected the teaching style of each lecturer as well as flexibility in some of the content based on classroom questions from the student.

**TATT Website**

The TATT workshops have an online element, in the form of the TATT Moodle page. Moodle is an open-source e-learning platform generally used at Unitec to disseminate course content, post schedules, and facilitate communication via online forums and announcements. At Unitec, Moodle serves as a 'one-stop shop' for class content, and we

decided it would make sense to create an online presence in a place that was most familiar to students.

The TATT Moodle page is primarily used to post the upcoming week's workshop schedule. Additional content consists of useful links, tips, or videos relating to a recently discussed subject as well as humorous images and quotes to lighten the tone of the site. All members of the TATT team post their contact information on the page so students can contact them with questions.

**Maori Caucus - Te Whanau o Te Matauranga**

Tepora undertook an early semester one initiative to bring all the first-year Maori students together to allow these students a safe space to express themselves as individual Indigenous students free from psychological or emotional harm (Holley and Steiner, 2005). The group also was designed to assert the Maori students' right to be Maori, in Maori ways commonly referred to as *tinorangatiratanga*. This term can be interpreted as chieftainship, exhibiting leadership, self-determination over their environment and self-management of processes (Mead, 2003). Tepora was aware that any institutional change that improved academic outcomes for Maori could incite staff to label the work as unethical (Nakhid, 2006) or provoke negative student reaction due to perceptions of unequal treatment.

Tepora used the student database to extract a list of names of students who self-identified as Maori, and quietly made individual contact with these students to propose a Maori caucus *hui* (meeting). This hui was to allow a safe space for Maori students to connect with one another and a Maori staff member, as well as discuss issues of their cultural and personal safety within the bachelor programme. The TATT website notice board to advertise the hui was avoided, instead meeting details were emailed directly to the students. 23 students were identified, of which 16 have met about 9 times in the one academic year. Their hui was mostly led out by Tepora in the early meetings, though over time she has shifted the leadership role of the Chair to individual students.

The hui follows an Indigenous-based schedule, starting with *karakia* (prayer), then *panui* (notices) and then a discussion time where each student talks in turn and for as long as they desire. In this way the students and Tepora were able to fully articulate their own feelings and hear the concerns and celebrations of their peers. The hui ends with another karakia and sometimes with a *waiata* (song). The format of the hui is based on a Maori model of practice called *Poutama*, a set of steps defining stages of a meeting. The model clearly begins a session with karakia; allows the unfolding of issues with deep exploration and subsequent emotions raised during discussions; brings about resolution to the satisfaction of all parties, and to a place of healing; and with a clear ending (Webster, 2002). By the third sessions, students were self-mandating the leadership role of Chair, and by the fifth meeting declared they wanted 'to go public' and proudly named themselves *Te Whanau o Matauranga* which, loosely translated, means "the family of those seeking Maori knowledge". The whanau (group or family) of eight have also accepted a proposal by Tepora to form a writing group to document their experiences. This idea has been well supported by the Programme Leader and Chair of Research, as well as the Dean of Matauranga Maori. There is provisional approval to fund a 3-day writing retreat in the next academic year, and the likelihood of

publication to the Unitec e-Press research commons. In this way Tepora is mentoring a group of Maori students in the art and process of academic writing, and providing a satisfying outcome: Indigenous students becoming published authors.

**The TATT Room**

A student space was designed and created by the TATT team to offer all students a place of respite and care during their study day. A shared office space alongside the offices of the BSocP was transformed into a student-friendly space with a six-seater table, a whiteboard, a mini reference-library, tea and coffee facilities, and desks for the academic and pastoral TATT team. The room is decorated with Pacific Island lei and *tapa*, with fresh flowers on display. Most days, the room sees upward of a dozen students of all backgrounds. Staff make a point of acknowledging visitors with a cheery greeting and welcoming them in. Students come to the room to make themselves a drink, to ask a question of the TATT team, to conduct their own study groups, or to sit and spend time with the team. This mix of academic and pastoral motivation to come to the TATT room could be construed as unproductive or creating dependent relationships. However, in the context of the Indigenous principle of manaaki, the room and the welcoming nature of the staff is designed to make the students feel at ease and have a sense of 'home' and familiarity likely to lead to them accessing the TATT supports more readily. The leadership role of *tinorangatiratangais* also embedded through staff messages to students to treat the room 'as their own' and to consult with students on decisions regarding the TATT room, for example, the positioning of furniture and decoration of the walls. One Pasifika student visited the room for the first time and commented to Tepora that the room was warm and friendly and the decorations made her think wistfully of her own island.

**Independent Learners**

In creating an environment that encourages engagement between students and staff, it follows that the initiatives are designed to be timely, relevant and friendly. It is essential to promote the development of academic skill for students to complete assignments, but also to ensure that their grades are high enough to gain entry to postgraduate studies and have confidence in their referencing, researching and writing skills at this level. While TATT provides strong 'wrap around' comprehensive supports, the aim is to ensure students become independent learners, capable of applying their skills independently of the TATT team or other academic staff. In the academic skills workshops, we emphasize 'teaching them to fish' for themselves, and show that lecturers do not have all the answers. As a result, student questions are often reflected back to the audience to create group discussion so they can learn from their peers, following the *tuakana-teina* model of reciprocal learning. We would also encourage students to visit the TATT Moodle site to find next week's workshop schedule and use the research tips and links posted to encourage further exploration of a topic.

**The Librarian's Role in TATT**

Prior to becoming involved as a teacher in the TATT academic skills workshops, Lydia Dawe (Librarian) met with several lecturers to ascertain the levels of information literacy in the Bachelor of Social Practice student cohort. Information literacy (IL) is 'the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyse, and use information' (American Library Association, 2006). Most lecturers expressed concerns about student selection and use of information in

assignments. Several emphasized that they wished students would reference 'better quality' websites, instead of encyclopaedia-level sources such as Wikipedia and About.com. These particular comments reflect common faculty concerns about student ability to distinguish between popular and scholarly sources (Bury, 2011).

Finding meaningful and effective ways to teach IL is challenging. The traditional model for IL instruction often involves demonstrating how to use databases in the classroom (Bundy, 2004), followed by reference desk interactions between librarian and student. However, this approach can often make information literacy seem like an 'add-on' to students, rather than an essential element of their education (Proctor, Wartho and Anderson, 2005) The Australia and New Zealand Information Literacy Framework (ANZILF) recommends 'embedding' information literacy right into the curriculum if possible, to ensure that it is not seen as 'extraneous to the curriculum but... woven into its content, structure, and sequence' (Bundy, 2004, p.6 ). Scanning the literature, Lydia found that that this embedding of IL could range from librarian-led instruction sessions closely tailored to their assignment or subject (Hall, 2008; Bennet and Simning, 2010), all the way to creating 'embedded librarians' who teach and even grade IL courses within an academic program (Bowler and Street, 2008; Pritchard, 2010).

**Embedded Information Literacy in TATT**

Fitting sessions into an already packed class schedule can be a serious obstacle to providing effective instruction (Bowler and Street, 2008). With lecture time at a premium at Unitec, Lydia was only able to fit a handful of sessions into the BSocP classes, and inevitably found herself cramming each session with information. With TATT sessions being so well-attended by first-year students, she saw this as an opportunity to teach IL in the context of their assignment, away from the pressure of class schedules. Instead of providing a single IL lesson, Lydia could embed multiple information literacy 'pieces' into TATT's existing lesson plans. This way, IL would be taught in the context of their assignment as part of a holistic academic literacy 'package' as opposed to presenting it as a hasty 'add-on' to their class content.

Lydia's level of teaching interaction with the TATT workshops could be as simple as recommending resources at the end of a workshop, for example, websites on APA referencing, or as complex as teaching an entire session on aspects of research, for example, researching Maori culture or evaluating websites. Usually she preferred the middle ground, teaching a section of one of the 45 minute TATT workshops in partnership with the lecturer or tutorial assistant. For example, if the workshop was centred on academic literacies for a particular assignment, the lecturer would first discuss assignment question content and essay structure, while Lydia would contribute a section on breaking down the assignment question into research keywords. In this way, IL was presented as another tool to help students succeed - always in the context of completing the assignment, or 'getting an "A"' in the paper.

**Use of Library Terminology in TATT**

Lydia made sure she introduced herself at the beginning of every workshop and encourage students to stop by her office at any time for help. She was careful to identify herself as 'research help' rather than use the formal job title of Information Librarian. Lydia was

concerned that the word 'librarian' might have negative connotations for students. Students tend to underestimate the job functions, education level, and capability of academic librarians (Fagan, 2002) and therefore may be confused as to how librarians fit into their support network.

Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanaugh and Bateman (2007) identify the concept of *whanaungatanga* as a key element in establishing a culturally-safe environment for Maori students. *Whanaungatanga* involves getting to know the students as individuals, showing concern and care for their well-being, and establishing relationships of mutual respect. Lydia saw the reference desk as a physical and psychological barrier that did little to promote the values of *whanaungatanga* that Tepora Pukepuke (Lecturer) had worked so hard to establish in the TATT workshops. The privacy and relaxed time frame that one-on-one office-based 'research consultations' allowed seemed to be more supportive of this principle. To her surprise, she found that most students were highly organized, booking these 'research consultations' up to a week ahead of time. Consultations could last from 10-40 minutes, depending on the needs of the student. In the first semester of 2012, students booked over 80 'research consultations' with Lydia - not counting casual questions that she might answer on the library floor, in class, or via email. This is similar to Bennett and Simning's (2010) experience of a 400% jump in reference statistics after they started their embedded librarian project. Overall, it has been essential for the librarian to take the first step by reaching out to students in a tailored way, instead of waiting for students to come to the library after a generic orientation and introduction.

### Librarians as teaching partners

Many faculty still see librarians as facilitators of collections rather than teaching professionals (Bury, 2011). However, librarians can be valuable teaching partners because they are very connected to the student experience - and subsequent struggles. Librarians know where and how confusion may occur once the assignment has been handed out (Pritchard, 2010). Essential to the success of this project has been the partnership between the librarian and lecturer and the reframing of the librarian as a trusted teacher and helper, rather than an 'information gatekeeper'. Faculty endorsement is key to student buy-in of librarian expertise. The librarian, like IL instruction, cannot be seen as an add-on, but an essential part of their academic toolkit (Matthew and Schroeder, 2006).

## REVIEW AND EVALUATION

### Reflexive evaluation

TATT is an experimental program in a pilot year, so it is expected to evolve over time. The TATT staffing for next year has been confirmed, although there is no specific budget allocation. As a result, constant evaluation is necessary to ensure that the TATT project components are meeting the students' needs, allowing us to justify our team existence as well as the purchasing of academic and pastoral resources.

### Peer evaluation

The TATT team meets weekly to discuss various aspects of the project and to problem-solve, particularly in the area of teaching. One of the benefits of team teaching is the

opportunity to be evaluated by your peers. This peer evaluation process has been beneficial in several instances. At one point, TATT teachers were found to be veering too far in the direction of content-based lecturing so as to almost duplicate regular class content, instead of inhabiting the middle ground between content and generic academic skill teaching. At the beginning of semester two, to lessen student complacency in the workshops, the team also adjusted the lesson plans to allow more student participation in the form of facilitated discussion sessions and group activities. These fluid changes required the team to adapt to more rigorous methods of documenting their work, while learning about new pedagogy and accountability strategies.

### Student input in shaping workshops

The best way to find out what students need is to ask them! Students would be asked for their feedback both in and out of class on what types of workshops they were interested in, and at what time of day. For example, one group of students suggested that the TATT team hold a session called 'Ask your Tutor' in which students could ask questions related to study, to be openly discussed in the workshop. On another occasion, the TATT team responded to student demands for a session on grammar, and a focus-group of students then provided the structure and content of the lesson plan.

## FEEDBACK/OUTCOMES OF THE TATT PROJECT

### Attendance in TATT Workshops

The main indicator of success in the first year of TATT workshops has been student attendance. The sessions are voluntary and are held on a day when there are no classes scheduled. TATT workshops in semester one generally had 30-35 students in attendance out of a cohort of 100 students. Many of the students were 'regulars' to the TATT workshops, but as the semester wore on, other students would come and go depending on their needs. There were fewer students attending workshops in semester two (12-15 generally in attendance). This may have been because many of the semester two TATT workshops were skills-based or refresher courses, and possibly students had become more accustomed to the academic environment and needed less help. Lydia noticed more BSocP students participating in library study groups - particularly the Maori Caucus - in semester two than in semester one, indicating that students had started to form stronger ties with peer groups for support. The TATT team looks forward to repeating the workshops in 2013 to better compare and analyse attendance patterns.

### TATT Survey

At the end of semester one of 2012 a paper-based student evaluation was undertaken with first year students. There were 19 respondents of a possible class of 102, with all respondents having attended at least one TATT session. Eighteen questions were asked about: attendance at TATT; relevance of workshop content to their assignments and learning; quality of workshop teaching; accessibility of schedule information; and accessibility to the tutors.

Most students indicated that they attended TATT to learn better academic skills (18) and they perceived that it helped them learn (17) with slightly fewer saying they enjoyed the

contact with students (15). Zero students responded that they attended because they felt obliged to.

Four students reported they would have dropped out without TATT support, with a further three saying they possibly would have dropped out. Eleven said they would have stayed in the programme regardless of TATT support. Students reported that TATT was helpful, provided clarity for assignments and was enjoyable. They commented on the three TATT teachers, saying they were 'awesome', 'supportive, intelligent, and knowledgeable'.

All students commented positively on TATT and the contributions to their assignments, the following student quote sums it up: 'I love coming to TATT because I always leave the room with my *kete* (basket) full of knowledge'.

All respondents said TATT teachers were well organised. Thirteen students strongly agreed the TATT teachers were supportive toward them, while 4 agreed and one was uncertain. Students felt the TATT teachers were knowledgeable and competent, 15 strongly agreed, and three agreed. One student commented on the three TATT teacher styles saying 'I love Tepora's teaching style, straight to the point', then praising the one-on-one provided by another teacher and his constructive feedback, and Lydia as 'an awesome asset to have in TATT'.

All 18 respondents felt the TATT teachers demonstrated clear evidence of planning and preparation, and 17 strongly agreed or agreed that TATT helped them understand the assignment material, though 2 were uncertain.

Students were invited to comment on the TATT teachers. The 12 responses were positive saying TATT 'rules', is 'the best', is 'a beaut'. Again they commented that the TATT teachers 'set us straight when we are confused or stressed' and were 'beautiful teachers with wisdom words'. Students also acknowledged the levels of commitment, time and patience demonstrated and their on-going availability that ultimately led to improved assignment grades… this is summed up by one student: 'TATT teachers are great. They have helped me a lot to achieve better grades. They were always available when I need[ed] them'.

Mostly students knew the TATT schedule for the week from the TATT website, though three said they were uncertain. All students were clear they knew how to contact the TATT team, with 14 strongly agreeing that the team were approachable and responded quickly, three agreed and one was uncertain. One student commented on the help and support they received, and how flexible the teachers were: '*The TATT team have been helpful and supportive in all .. Including assignment topics. They go out of their way to help with what we, students, need. They are flexible to our learning!*'. One student felt their own levels of understanding made them less likely to come to TATT… *'It made me afraid to contact because I felt I should have known the question I have by now.'*

Both Tepora and Lydia found the evaluation aligned to their own anecdotal feedback from students during academic consultations, and further encouraged the team knowing the students were seeing the TATT initiatives as useful. It also gave us several areas to work on, particularly how to be inclusive of those students who had not been attending.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The main lesson that the TATT project has taught us is to never underestimate the students. We have found that most of the BSocP students, even those who were struggling, were attending TATT not just to learn how to pass, but to learn how to get an 'A'. Our students are hungry for success, and they will rise to our expectations of them.

It has been essential to the success of TATT that the academic skills workshops be tailored to what the students are actually studying at the time. For example, instead of offering a workshop entitled 'Researching 101', it is better to create one that responds to their current assignments, such as 'Finding Information for Psychology Assignment #2'. Students need to know that the workshop will be worth their time and will address their specific needs. It is also more important for the team member leading the workshop to understand the assignment requirements than the academic content underpinning it. Often students haven't carefully read the assignment before starting it and simply need help understanding the instructions.

Collaborating across departments - ie. between the Department of Social Practice and the Library - can be logistically difficult, but it is worthwhile. All members of the TATT team have unique specialities, and when we pool our resources, the students benefit. Understanding each others' strengths has meant that the TATT team is better able to refer students to relevant support services - academic support, pastoral support, research support - when necessary, ensuring a smoother transition for the student. This collaborative work has meant the team has transitioned through some difficult periods of planning, delivery and cohesive team work to celebrate their continued delivery of services throughout the academic year.

Encouraging students to embrace their own cultures and to 'be who they are', is better than asking them to conform to an academic monoculture. Respecting and understanding the needs of students from Indigenous and collectivist cultures has made them feel more comfortable in an academic environment, and more likely to seek help when they need it.

In conclusion, the TATT pilot project can be seen as a success in collaboration between departments creating a focused synergy on individual expertise to create a student-focused set of initiatives. The project has encouraged independent study in students by teaching them skills and reducing their reliance on academic and information literacy staff. In the next academic year the lessons learned may allow a more streamlined set of initiatives, freeing staff to deliver similar services across all three years of the programme. This project has application beyond the social work department, and, due to embedded Indigenous principles, this makes it suitable for improving academic success and retention of Maori and non-Maori students alike. Mostly it is just exciting to see the students growing in their own academic capability and independent research capacity.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 3. Working with diversity in a neoliberal environment

**Mr Lyndon Gordon and Dr Carole Zuffery**

Mr Lyndon Gordon, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

Dr Carole Zufferey, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

**ABSTRACT:**

Social work is a profession dedicated to working with diverse population groups from a social justice perspective. This research examined the influence of neoliberalism on social work in South Australia and how it impacted on the practice of South Australian social workers with service users. Whilst the structural impacts of neoliberalism on social work in Australia are well documented, the perspectives of social workers about the impact of neoliberalism on their social work practice have received little critical attention. In this qualitative, exploratory study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven South Australian social workers employed in government and non-government organisations. A significant finding of this research was that economic imperatives increased pressures on social work practitioners and limited their ability to take into account the complexities of the material problems experienced by disadvantaged families and community groups. This pressure impacted on their capacity to work in culturally competent ways with diverse population groups. The study raises awareness of the political contexts in which social workers are employed and the importance of social workers being more engaged in challenging neoliberal organisational policies.

## INTRODUCTION

Western societies like Australia have undergone major economic and social change, from the Keynesian regulation of the post war era to neoliberalism, which involves the restructure of the welfare state (Chomsky 2010). Neoliberalism is a political ideology which extends market relations into the social sphere. Neoliberalism has political impact on social work through social policy changes, such as the privatisation and contracting out of services, mutual obligation and sanctioning policies such as welfare to work policies (Savelsberg 2011 p. 153), enacted through the institution of the welfare state (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2010, pp. 101-106; Jamrozik 2009). The practical outcomes of these changes mean that social services often are distributed on the basis of individual need or 'targeted service delivery' (Jamrozik 2009), which is operationalised by social workers. Government funding shapes organisational policies and how social work activity is exercised, through for example, managerial discourses that use the language of key performance indicators (KPIs), contracts, evidence based practice and 'core business' (Ferguson 2008; Garrett 2010; Harris 2003). Therefore, neoliberalism is influencing social work towards individualist approaches that are 'evidenced to be effective', which can impact on social workers' commitment to social action and social justice (Houston 2001; Clark 2006).

Internationally and nationally, social work professional bodies promote universal notions of social justice and human rights as key values and ethics to guide the profession, which advocates for social workers to develop self- reflexivity and culturally competent social work practice (AASW, 2010). The quest for culturally competent social work practice has existed in some form or another throughout social work's history and working with diverse populations is a fundamental knowledge base underpinning social work (Abrams and Moio 2009; Petrovich and Lowe 2005). Despite literature detailing that euro-centric and white knowledge bases have dominated understandings of social work (Dominelli 2008; Payne 2005), the mission for social workers to work in ways that are inclusive of all peoples across the world is a constant theme of critical, feminist and postmodern social work (Payne 2005). People from culturally diverse backgrounds often experience difficulties in accessing basic resources in society due to a number of factors, including poverty, cultural and linguistic barriers and institutional racism (Walter, Taylor and Habibis 2011). The rise of postmodern philosophy and Indigenous epistemologies (Dumbril and Green 2008; Gair, Miles and Thomson 2005), has led to the uncovering of hidden knowledges and understandings about the world, which has led to rich academic discourses. Research and literature indicates that people from culturally diverse backgrounds are more likely to experience systemic injustice and inequality, usually from deeply ingrained Western knowledges and racism that can underpin Australian institutions and social work practice (Walter, Taylor and Habibis 2011). However, despite social work's theoretical progression towards inclusivity, the ability to actually exercise such inclusive theories remains elusive for many social work practitioners (Williams 2006). There are many reasons for this inaction. However, one connection that has not been thoroughly explored within the literature is how the ability of social workers to work in inclusive ways has been affected by neoliberalism (Ferguson 2008).

An exploration of the literature highlights that there is a significant lack of research explicitly exploring the impacts that neoliberalism has had on the cultural competency of human service organisations, which shapes the practice of social workers. Whilst the macro

functioning of organisations is highlighted as presenting tensions for the social worker to exercise culturally competent practice, these observations tend to be associated with the organisational functioning and the 'culture' of the organisation (Hughes and Wearing 2007). A critical analysis of the economic and social environments that contribute to such a 'culture' developing is pertinent, enabling social workers to question the organisations within which they work. Without a critical analysis of the social, economic and political contexts of culturally competent practice, we risk individualising cultural competency to micro interactions between social worker and service user (Abram and Moio 2009). The individualist approach can attribute the inefficacy of a social worker's ability to engage with diverse populations as something pathological within the social worker or pathology in the individual service user (Abram and Moio 2009; Harris, 2004).

Whilst there is a long history of individual-structural debates in social work, literature about neoliberalism and social work in Britain and America argues that neoliberalism negatively impacts on social work practice. This is because neoliberalism promotes individualist discourses that blame service users (and social workers), and managerialist discourses that bureaucratise social work (Ferguson 2004; Ferguson 2007; Ferguson 2008; Ferguson and Lavalette 1999; Ferguson and Lavalette 2006; Ferguson, Lavalette and Whitmore 2005; Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Lavalette 2011). Arguing that social work is being influenced by neoliberal processes and increasingly politically silenced when challenging systemic oppression and inequalities created by social and economic policies (Ferguson 2008). Little research has specifically explored Australian social workers' experiences of such neoliberal restructuring (Wallace and Pease 2011), which was the motivation behind this research.

## METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the findings of a small, qualitative, exploratory pilot study are reported. The study focuses on the impact of neoliberalism on the practices of social workers employed in government and non-government services in Adelaide, South Australia. The main aims of the study were: i) to examine the impact of neoliberalism on social work practice with service users and ii) to document social workers' understandings of the causes of social issues and inequalities (McDonald 2005, p. 276). In particular, the theories and approaches that South Australian social workers used were explored, to highlight if and how critical and structural social work approaches were being used with service users (Mullaly 2007). The study also explored ways that neoliberalism has influenced South Australian human service organisations' approaches to social issues. The sub-questions of this project were:

- What discourses were available to social workers within their organisations to understand the nature of social work and the ontology of social problems?

- How were service users 'problematised' by the discourses used by the social worker, and did this problematisation change, depending on the contexts in which the answer was operationalised?

- How, and in what contexts, were radical/ structural discourses used by the social workers?

This research was approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. Seven social workers employed in government and non-government organisations were interviewed about various aspects of their practice, including their perceptions of why service users accessed services, what approach they as social workers used and the organisational contexts of their work. The social workers were recruited for the semi-structured, face to face interviews by contacting large non-government organisations and government services in Adelaide who employed social workers (Neuman, 2006). An email then was circulated by the researcher within these organisations and social workers responded directly to the researcher, expressing an interest in being interviewed. A time and venue was negotiated for interviews to occur, the study was explained to potential participants, any questions were answered and a consent was obtained. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. It must be acknowledged that these interviews are temporally and spatially located, representing participants' perspectives at one moment in time. The areas of practice that social workers were employed in were diverse, including working with children and families, employment services, mental health, child protection, disability, social policy and drug and alcohol services. The interview criteria included that social workers were currently practitioners and eligible for membership with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2010). The AASW Code of Ethics advocates that the role of social workers is to challenge social inequalities and promote social justice in Australian society (AASW 2010).

For the analysis of interviews, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) was used to explore the language used by the social workers, and to identify how and in what contexts neoliberalism had an impact on the activities of social workers. This analysis examined the language used by the social workers to describe their practice with service users and to see if the language of neoliberalism had influenced social workers' language and practice (Fairclough 2003). Critical discourse analysis is a well-known and evidenced method of analysing what and how discourses are used within language to support or undermine power relations (Fairclough 2003; Van Dijk, 1993). During the analysis process, the authors explored how neoliberalism has shaped social work responses to services users within their employing organisations, which is contrasted to social workers' personal and professional values. An unexpected finding was how social workers experienced difficulty practicing in culturally competent ways with diverse populations within a neoliberal environment.

## FINDINGS

The key themes emerging from these findings were: i) that neoliberalism did impact on social work practice; ii)that responding to diversity in a neoliberal environment is a major challenge; and iii) conceptualisations of culture and class are complex. These themes will be discussed in turn below.

### The impact of neoliberalism on social work practice

The major findings of the research demonstrated that neoliberal language did impact on the day to day practice with service users, which related to the restrictiveness of KPIs, and funding contracts in non-government organisations and to individualist theories used

within both government and non-government organisations. Whilst social workers had personal and professional commitments to activism and macro change, this was less evident when discussing their everyday practice with service users. For example, one government worker said that social work is about helping service users to 'fit in' with society:

> *It's essentially trying to help families to fit in society that we have because there is a whole lot of social difficulties in being a [service user] and it's trying to, not normalize in any way because that's rather trite and nobody can really tell you what normal is, but in the general scheme of things, given the way that society works, it's helping [service users] to actually fit, whichever way they want to, but nonetheless fit.*
> (Richard - Government sector social worker).

As indicated in the above quote, when talking about their work in their employing organisation, an individualist discourse was used to describe what and how the social worker practiced, what services were delivered by the organisation and how organisations understood the causality of social problems.

When asked about the work conducted within their organisations, all of the social workers stated they were not engaged in interventions that challenged social policy. All of the social workers argued that social work was politically silent when it came to injustices committed by the state, such as defunding important anti-poverty initiatives, as noted by the non-government worker below:

> *As far as I am aware, there's no sort of collective action to address [social injustice]…For example, the loss of the Anti-Poverty teams kind of went by without notice and I found that quite shocking at the time. I mean this was critical. If we're not addressing poverty, then forget it. I mean that has to be a key issue. It's something as social workers we should be jumping up and down about and really making a big fuss about, that didn't seem to happen.*
> (Mary – NGO Social Worker).

The social workers in this study argued that there was a discursive silence about the use of theories that problematise the social structures and institutions of an unequal society.

This contradiction between social work values related to advocating for social justice and the requirement for public servants not to speak up was mentioned by a government social worker, who stated that this created tensions for her policy practice:

> *Another barrier might be that social workers feel that they have been silenced by the organisation in which they work. For example, when you're a social worker that works in government, the question is occasionally asked, that when you're a manager within a government department, your political masters can ask you to change something at the drop of a hat and they do so. I'm a public servant so, when my political masters change, there's also the danger of enacting policies that I don't agree with. So, there becomes this point of conflict, this internal conflict between me as a social worker and the policy.*
> (Kirsty – Government Social Worker).

Therefore, the constraints of neoliberal funding policies affected the macro functioning of organisations and introduced pressures for social workers in the micro interactions of everyday social work practices.

However, when references to organisational contexts were removed, for example, when talking about their reasons for becoming a social worker, five out of the seven social workers came into the profession in order to change society, so that it was fairer and more 'just' to those who experience oppression. For example, one government social worker discussed her personal connection to social work as a 'family narrative' based in discourses of 'social justice':

> *One of my earliest memories was walking around the streets with my father assisting people who were homeless. So my whole family has come from a base where they were interested in issues of social justice. That was a very strong narrative in my family, and I suppose that was what led me into social work in 1986… so my love for it really came from doing something around the social justice aspects.* (Kirsty – Government social worker).

> *The above quote highlights how the underpinning values for this social worker may be placed under increasing pressure in a neoliberal environment. However, these social justice values could be revisited as a source of resistance, to challenge neoliberal policies, by promoting an alternative social justice perspective to the dominant language of neoliberalism* (Zufferey, 2008).

**Responses to diversity in a neoliberal environment**

An emerging theme of this study was that responding to diversity was one of the main challenges that social workers faced in their practice within a neoliberal environment. The key issue that social workers raised about working with diversity in a neoliberal environment was the difficulties of organisations in delivering culturally competent services, within a political environment that placed pressures on front-line staff to meet rigid contractual agreements with funding bodies. Social workers experienced difficulty practicing in culturally competent ways with diverse populations, within 'rationalised' resources. For example, a social worker in a non-government organisation (NGO) stated that they were not funded to respond to diversity:

> *'Another challenge is trying to ensure that our services are delivered in ways that are culturally appropriate and that we can reach out to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. It's a resources issue. We do try to keep on top of it to ensure that our services are as culturally accessible as possible in terms of access to interpreters, translation facilities and translated brochures, but that's a constant challenge. I think we're trying to improve on our cultural competency but we're not specifically funded for that. So again, it's down to resources. So I would suspect that it would be the greatest challenge – in both time and financially"* (Zoe-NGO Social Worker).

Whilst there are a number of factors that shape perceptions of what does and does not entail 'culturally competent practice', contractual agreements and the pressures of bidding for contracts within a competitive environment can limit access to resources that non-government workers are provided with. According to this social worker, this affects the

efficacy of social work organisations to work in culturally competent ways. That is, time and resource poor organisations that are funded for specific services, with performance indicators not relevant to working with culturally diverse communities, have limited access to resources that can assist them to creatively respond to the complex needs of diverse population groups.

As well, the imposition of narrow 'performance indicators' by funding bodies was conceptualised as a hindrance to empowering ways of working with service users. For example, an NGO worker interviewed explained that the indicators used to determine the "effectiveness" of the service measured secondary priorities, such as employment:

> *So the service is trying to get people back into employment. In a family where one or more persons have experienced long term unemployment the goal is that we must address this issue. It's very tricky, because often it's not the presenting issue – there's so many other factors operating there. Instability in their housing, chronic poverty that has impacted on them that actually suggests that getting a job is not the first step, there's other issues there. Accumulative stresses has done damage to that person, it's affected them and their families. So that goal [getting employment] is imposed. So it's difficult to actually promote or highlight these issues. I don't think it's part of any of our funding agreements to actually start talking about these issues, to talk about unemployment, talk about poverty, to look at the bigger issues that are impacting on families.* (Mary – NGO Social Worker).

> *Whilst responding to 'employment' can act as proxy for discussing other areas of disadvantage such as unemployment, poverty and housing, this non-government service was 'outcome-based funded' on the basis that workers assist service users to access employment. This social worker explained that the families she was working with were experiencing high levels of stress, disadvantage, poverty and inequality in their lives. The funding parameters that her service was working within did not allow for her service to start addressing the major issues that these families were experiencing because 'the services that we deliver are quite specific in their [employment] outcomes'* (Mary – NGO Social Worker).

However, diverse social justice issues of disadvantage particularly affect individuals, families and communities from culturally diverse backgrounds and an organisation has to commit time, resources and to promote an organisational culture that supports cultural competence and meaningful change for disadvantaged groups (Harrison and Turner, 2011). The social workers in this study felt that culturally competent practice is hindered within a service that is required to meet performance indicators that have little or no relevance to the material problems experienced by families.

Despite this, social workers were personally and professionally committed to engaging in practices that challenged b roader issues such as racism. As a government social worker said, he wanted to broaden his understanding of social work, to challenging oppression in different cultural contexts:

> *Part of my also working overseas meant that I was also engaged in with lots of different cultures and different cultural backgrounds. It was quite evident that I had a significant interest in the, well essentially the social element of the different cultures and the different*

> *peoples… Essentially it came down to a lot of issues around poverty, mental health, gender issues, racism and all the nasty things that go along with that. All parts and parcel with the people that I worked with in outback Australia.* (Richard – Government social worker)

However, despite the interest expressed by social workers in being culturally competent, when discussing their organisational practices and policies, there was a noticeable lack of theories used by the social workers that engaged in the macro levels of society, for example, which challenged systemic injustices such as racism. This raises important questions about how social workers can practice in culturally competent ways within neoliberal policies that promote individualist approaches. The theories and approaches used by the social workers interviewed were related to case-management, the strengths perspective and client centred approaches, which were individualist because they were designed to work primarily with the individual service user and their immediate family. Theories that placed causality of social problems within the systemic functioning of the structures and inequalities generated by a neoliberal capitalist social order were noticeable by their absence (Chomsky 2010; Harvey 2006; Ferguson and Woodward 2009). This raises concerns about the cultural competency of social workers whose organisational frameworks restricted macro interventions for systemic social problems.

Furthermore, in a neoliberal environment and in contemporary 'culture of poverty' discourses, 'culture' and 'diversity' can become signifiers that pathologise service users who are experiencing oppression (Fairclough, 2003). Organisations and social workers risk viewing 'culture' through a 'raced based' perspective that pathologises culturally and linguistically diverse groups who may experience structural oppression. 'Culturally competent' practice can become reduced to a psychological phenomenon of the social worker and their ability to be self-reflective, which makes invisible the structural inequalities experienced in the lives of service users (Harrison and Turner, 2011). In particular, radical social work activity aimed at challenging systemic injustices was invisible in all of the interviews, as interventions were geared towards working with individuals or families, and helping them to cope or 'fit in' better with their social environments. Nonetheless, social workers' definitions of 'culture' were broader than 'race' and 'ethnicity' and included class-based analyses.

**Conceptualisations of culture and class**

Another key theme of this study was related to social workers' conceptualisation of the term 'culture'. Four out of the seven social workers viewed 'culture' not as 'racial difference' but as a complex notion that also included experiences of class based oppression and exploitation. Social workers' understandings of culture included discourses of structural disadvantage and injustice. For example, when asked about the skills needed by social workers, one social worker highlighted the need to view service users within the structural contexts of Australian society and how a person's experiences in life are affected by such structures:

> *I think a value base that comes from the perspective that there by the grace of god, it could be any of us, and you know, life can throw you into certain social situations, where anybody could fall foul of structures and processes that support persons who actually have got resources and opportunities, to maintain themselves in a way that they can manage themselves without*

> *needing to access, of coming to the attention of social work authorities, or social work agencies. So I think skills that recognise core structural factors that impact on persons. So I think you have to have an understanding that we're [the social worker] no different from anybody else, no different from anybody we're working with.... you must come from that correct value base. I think that also the ability to listen really carefully and to take on board what's been said to you, but (also) an ability to look at the social and structural contexts, and how that person is experiencing disadvantages* (Mary - NGO Social Work).

This quote highlights that when understandings of culture are separated from the structures of society that oppress and marginalise people from diverse groups, social workers could unintentionally 'blame' service users for the social injustices that they experience. Thus, to consider class and structural disadvantage as a defining feature of diverse service users' lives would mean acknowledging that the social functioning of Australian society is based upon inequality between the rich and the poor, the working and upper classes. The evidence of the class divide is overwhelming, when 20% of the Australian population holds about 60% of the wealth (ABS 2007). When working with diversity, it is pertinent for social workers to take into account all forms of structural oppression.

## CONCLUSION

The constraints social workers experience when practicing within a neoliberal environment and the neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state, places pressures on organisations and frontline staff to deliver services within prescribed performance targets and funding budgets. When examining the discourses that were available to social workers within their organisations to understand the nature of social work and the ontology of social problems, these discourses and approaches primarily focused on individualist approaches to social problems. Within a neoliberal organisational context, social problems can therefore become individualised and pathologised, focusing on addressing particular service user's behaviour, whilst structural disadvantage and inequality are often ignored. This differed to the social workers' personal and professional commitment to social work values that promote social justice and structural approaches to working with service users, creating some tensions and possibilities for resistance to the dominant neoliberal environment of their practice. Social work's stated commitments to activism and social justice as well as 'cultural competency' (AASW, 2010; Harrison and Turner, 2011) provide a platform for the continuing analysis of the influence of neoliberalism on social work practice and the implications for developing culturally competent social work practice.

However, there are limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the study did not initially aim to examine culturally competent practice but this theme did emerge as a significant one. Second, it is likely that the practitioners who volunteered to become involved in the study have a particular interest in the topic of social work and neoliberalism, which means that their views are not necessarily representative of the broader population of social workers. Third, this is an exploratory study with a limited sample size and therefore it is not possible to generalise the findings. This study aimed to examine the influence of neoliberalism on social work from practitioner perspectives, opening new grounds for exploring social work in a neoliberal context and the impact of organisational barriers in responding to diversity.

The implications of this study for social work practitioners relate to findings ways to resist the neoliberal impact on social work practice within their employing organisations. Social work educators also could examine social work curriculum, to explore if and how structural and activist approaches are being taught across social work programs. South Australian social workers could benefit from a collective radical or anti-neoliberal contextual space (such as the Radical Social Work Group in the US or the Social Work Action Network in the UK), in which structural discourses that interrogate and challenge the neoliberal restructuring of social work can be debated and operationalised. This is to ensure that the neoliberal restructuring of social work and the re-contextualisation of organisational discourses that exclude and ignore structural inequalities does not become 'common sense' social work in South Australia (Wallace and Pease 2011). Further research would be required to explore how such a 'radical' space can be created, where social injustices can be resisted and activism operationalised, either within or outside the institutional structures of South Australian social work.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 4. Gender, agency and the sexual self: A theoretical model for social work

**Dr Priscilla Dunk-West**

Dr Priscilla Dunk-West, Social Work, University of South Australia. email: priscilla.dunk-west@unisa.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

The enduring agency and structure debate has in recent years become newly—and variously—fused via sociological theories of the self. Such scholarly work has entailed theorising that differing degrees of agency are embedded within practices, which in turn, constitute social structure. Such projects successfully unite these dichotomous concepts. However when the debate is applied to gender, notions of victimhood and survivorship proliferate. I argue that the application of sexual scripting theory to understanding the late- modern gendered, sexual self helps to move beyond the polarising structure/ agency debate. Understanding participants' gendered experiences through the lens of sexual scripting theory highlights the ongoing and day-to-day experiences of gendered inequality in contemporary life. Emerging from data, this theorising moves beyond individual victimisation and points instead to a broader sociocultural sexuality characterised by embedded inequality and injustice. Understanding this in social work opens up new possibilities for theorising about diversity, sexuality and social work education.

## EVERYDAY SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Many claims are made about the new social landscape in late modernity. While recent scholarship in social work points to an interest in the constraints to agency (Marston and McDonald 2012; Baker 2010) social work has yet to develop its critical literature and theory about agency itself. One of the key claims in social theory, which clearly is relevant to social work, relates to the relatively recent shifts in gender roles. The theory of detraditionalisation sees globalisation as a major force in setting actors free from lifestyles that historically would have been fixed to traditions such as the gender roles set through marriage, which reinforced women's subordination in the home environment.

Feminism has shaped actors' contemporary understandings of their identities, and prompted women to question how to 'liberate themselves from the home' (Giddens 1991, p. 216). However, his assumption that self-identity is exempt from class or gender (Adkins 2003; Skeggs 1997) fails to take into account the prevailing inequalities evident in late modern life. There is little evidence to suggest that gender has indeed been 'detraditionalized' (Brooks 2008, p.539). The problem with depicting detraditionalisation as permitting unbounded choice in self-making is that it not only fails to recognise continued material inequalities between men and women (Skeggs 1997) but it also threatens to disembody selfhood (McNay 2000).

Given the centrality of the agency versus structure debate in understanding the late modern self (Walklate and Mythen 2010, Leaker and Dunk-West 2011), moving beyond seeing gendered inequality as either an individual or social issue is a key concern in this paper which examines everyday sexuality and gender. Theoretical models of agency and self are important to sexuality in social work because they suggest ways to act (Dunk-West, in press, Dunk 2007; Dunk-West and Hafford-Letchfield 2011). Social work is beginning to engage with issues related to everyday sexuality (Dunk 2007) but there is much more work to be done to expand this knowledge base. Better understanding the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect in everyday life is crucial to this project. Theory is therefore inductively generated through the analysis of data. The finding of this research—that the sexual self is constituted through social processes—concurs with recent scholarship in which sexual self-making is placed within a Meadian framework (Jackson and Scott 2010a).

### Participant Accounts of Gender and Everyday Sexuality

My qualitative research into everyday sexuality was undertaken in Australia. A Schutzian phenomenological (Schutz 1967) approach was taken to yield rich data about the sexual self in late modernity in which thirty unstructured interviews were undertaken with the non-representative sample of fifteen men and fifteen women between the ages of 30-65. Basic identifiers were recorded, such as participants' occupations, highest education level and age. Occupation helps to frame people's responses since it is often associated with education level and increased reflexivity. This middle age range is under-represented in empirical work examining sexuality, particularly compared with the growing research which focuses on young people's and older people's sexualities (Gott 2006; Vares 2009). Schutzian phenomenology seeks to highlight individual meaning-making processes and underline the role of shared social meanings.

Examining gender is of central importance in understanding everyday sexuality, particularly in relation to the claims made by reflexivity theorists of late modernity where agency is ascribed to actors through detraditionalising forces, enabling them to reflexively create and recreate selfhood (Giddens 1992). The following accounts demonstrate how gender is intertwined with the sexual self as well as one's corporeal self. The complex and idiosyncratic ways in which gender is interlaced into one's everyday sexuality is particularly evident.

Davina is a 39-year-old social worker/counsellor. At age 22, Davina gave birth to her son. She and her son's father were in an open relationship for eight years. At age 30, Davina met a man with whom she '…wanted to be in a monogamous relationship', and was for a period of seven years. She is currently single and describes herself as '…still working out how to own my sexuality'.

During our interview, Davina told me about the struggles she had with feeling entitled to sexual pleasure as a young person, which led to a discussion about pregnancy and sexuality. Davina disclosed that she was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault as an adult, and that she 'was completely disconnected to my body as a result of that trauma'. Davina was pregnant twice while in her 30s but both children died. Her experiences of pregnancy were recalled as times when she was paradoxically less sexualised but more 'in synch' with her sexuality. Participant accounts of their sexual selves along with narratives about being a woman or a man raise the question: how does gender relate to sexuality for the late modern, everyday sexual self?

Davina's experience of sexuality is described as being very much tied up with her experience as a woman. Indeed, many women participants reported sexuality as being bound up with their gender, which perhaps is not surprising since gender and sexuality speak to both 'one's bodily and material existence' (Smith 1987, p. 97). Women are over-represented as survivors of sexual violence—both in adulthood and in childhood and for women in sexual minorities, the risk of sexual violence in adulthood is greater than for their heterosexual counterparts (Martin et al 2011).

For Davina, the effects of the violence take the form of recalling her feelings about both her body and her sexual self as experienced through being pregnant. She depicts a complex interplay between how her body was experienced at that time, and how connected to gender she was and the resultant sense of freedom this afforded her, manifesting as being more comfortable than ever with her sexuality:

> *… so it's been a really complex story, the whole sexual, reproductive overlapping thing. Um, when I was pregnant with my other two children, I, I felt so fantastic and I felt better in my body than I ever had and I felt really free and wanting to be sexual in in this really kind of organic, gorgeous, holistic kind of sense, in a way that I never really… had never really felt when I wasn't pregnant. I know lots of women feel really crap when they're pregnant but for me it was completely the opposite. I felt fantastic. And I've got photos of me like, you know, heavily pregnant, naked, and I don't feel naked, I don't feel naked, I just feel completely comfortable and in my absolute element as a woman and that did um and I felt more probably more comfortable with my sexuality than I ever have as well.* (Davina, 39-year-old social worker/counsellor)

Recent research highlights the ways in which women, as recipients of a 'discourse of empowerment' make sense of their experiences in ways that overly ascribe agency, 'claim volition and evade victimhood' (Baker 2010). How is Davina's account best understood? Gagnon and Simon (1973), in their classic text Sexual Conduct, provide a theoretical project in which agency and inequality can be understood in relation to gender and sexuality. Scripting theory applied to sexual conduct means that sexual interactions between individuals are shaped by tradition and 'routinized behavior', rather than spontaneity (Gagnon and Simon, 2011 (1973) p. 13). Sexual scripting involves invoking scripts relevant to the sexual encounter. The notion of scripting, as well as providing an understanding of how sexual scripts fit with embodiment (Jackson and Scott 2010a, p. 148), can help generate a better understanding of Davina's recounting of her body as a previously scripted source of arousal, but in its pregnant state 'naked' yet non-sexual. Scripting also helps explain Davina's reflection on her sexual self at this time as 'more comfortable with [her] sexuality than… ever'.

Importantly, however, it is interactionist accounts (such as Gagnon and Simon 1973; Jackson and Scott 2010a, 2010b; Plummer 2007) that elucidate the divisions and connections between sexuality and gender that facilitate a better understanding of Davina's narrative. In these explanations, first developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973), gender and sexuality can be viewed as separate (Jackson and Scott 2010a, p. 162), with gender being socially assigned from birth onwards (Kessler and McKenna 1978). This means that an understanding of one's gender is realised before the sexual self is formed from adolescence onwards. Therefore, sexuality is always viewed through the lens of one's gender:

*The period from twelve to sixteen is probably the period of priority in developing and integrating the sexual into general patterns of gender development in Western societies*
(Gagnon and Simon [1973)] 2011, p. 53).

In Davina's account, there is a clearly referenced set of socially prescribed gendered expectations driven by her pregnancy. To what extent does Davina feel able to challenge and shift those expectations that have been set upon her? Her description of feeling 'free' from the social expectations placed upon her as a sexual woman paradoxically enables her to engage with herself as 'sexual'; that is, with the feeling of freedom from those expectations comes the ability to develop a 'new' sexual self.

There are theoretical disjunctions between seeing social processes as constitutive of self-making and individual perceptions. Mead's response to this conundrum, which is essentially concerned with the agency and structure debate, is that one's 'unique standpoint' (Mead 1934, p. 201) enables individual interpretations of social acts. Davina's 'unique standpoint' involves a complex interplay between biography and the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect. Her example shows that her experience as a woman at the time she was pregnant intersected with a freedom from being sexual which, in turn, enabled her to feel sexual.

Davina's notion of being sexual and non-sexual and 'free' invoke a decidedly scripted dichotomy where one's choice as a woman is either to be sexual or non-sexual, whereas in reality these can overlap in biographical and temporal terms. This concurs with the

assertion that varying sociocultural scripts can coexist despite contradicting one another, and can be linked to the varying forms of sexuality available to actors in late modern social life (Jackson 2007, p. 12).

Another participant excerpt offers a related story of how one's sexuality is viewed through an understanding of one's own gender as well as a wider understanding of gender generally. For Charlie, a 49-year-old earthmoving contractor who has been married to a woman for 26 years, gender is socially assigned (Kessler and McKenna 1978). However, Charlie is able to reflect upon it from the perspective of the 'other' gender. Throughout our interview, Charlie described himself as 'feminine' despite noting that others see him as masculine because he is a tall 'truck driver … a crusty old fellow'. His wife's menopause was reflected on as potentially further damaging their infrequent sexual encounters. In line with recent research (see Dworkin and O'Sullivan 2007), his depiction of their interactions suggests a deeply embedded sexual script that draws from traditional gender norms.

As a man, Charlie notes that he believes that women are more aware of their gender because of the bodily presence of menstruation. The complex relationship he has with his gender is reflected in his statement in which he talks about being 'less' male than other men. This is because, he says, interacting with women is more enjoyable than interacting with other men. He is ambivalent about how this relates to his sexuality:

> *I don't enjoy male company to the degree I enjoy female company. And I don't know whether that's because I am more sexually driven than other men or whether it's because I am not as male as they are. It's a bit of a paradox …with women I think it's a sort of, it's an everyday subject, or every month subject with them.* (Charlie, 49-year-old earthmoving contractor)

In the same way that participants described intimate relationships as influencing their sexual selves, relationships with others also allowed for a reflexive examination of others' genders along with their own, which Charlie's narrative suggests. Thus, participants described being led to a sense of curiosity about not only one's own culturally or bodily assigned gender or sex, but also of how this interrelates with one's sexual self and others' sexualised and gendered selves.

In line with interactionist (Plummer 2007) and feminist accounts (for example, see Alexander's (1988) examination of gender and prostitution) in sexuality studies that argue that women's experience is sequestered to a category of difference from the dominant gender of male, Jane and Marijka referenced both being a woman and not being a man, and linked this with traditional social notions of both genders. Jane, a 53-year-old counsellor articulates this:

> *You know that that being female and what it means to be a woman is intrinsically linked with the fact that I'm not a man and so what it means to be a man in our culture certainly affects how I am as a woman sexually speaking.* (Jane, 53-year-old counsellor)

Similarly, Marijka said she 'see[s] the world through female eyes':

> *I am a woman and a sexual being, okay, woman first, a sexual being and on top of that, and in addition I am a lesbian as well. So it's those kind of three all melded into one. I couldn't, I haven't had the experience of being a man […]Because I think as I see it, I was raised a woman so I see the world through female eyes.* (Marijka, 53-year-old program manager)

Both Marijka and Jane highlight the fact that gender inequality continues to shape women's experiences of themselves and their social interactions. Specifically, participants also reported gender as influencing their experience of their sexual selves. In contrast to the claims made by theorists of late modernity, in which gender is part of a detraditionalizing process, traditional gender roles were reflected upon by participants as being present in their everyday experiences. Given this clear manifestation of traditional gender roles in everyday life, to what extent did participants feel they were able to contest tradition in the ongoing process of sexual self-making? This is examined in the next section, in which I consider the role of gender and agency in the making of the sexual self.

## THE INTERACTIONIST PRODUCTION OF GENDER

Mead's thesis of socialisation through childhood play and games is that these allow for the life-long use of the imagination and provide a mechanism for engaging with the life worlds of others. Integral to participation in games is the understanding of others' roles. Thus, games and play enable learning about others' perspectives, which is central to taking on the view of the generalised other (Mead 1934, p. 155). Childhood gender socialisation is learned through participation in games, as evidenced in Lever's famous study which found that childhood play prepared actors for traditional adult gender roles (Lever 1976). Recent studies have highlighted the role of play in facilitating adult learning (West et al 2011).

Gender cannot be examined without considering the body (Grosz 1994). In some participant accounts, the body was reflected upon as being closely aligned with both gender and sexuality. Importantly, participants described seeking to understand their (opposite gender) partner's embodied gender as well as their own. In doing so, they recruited 'imaginative' accounts that interlaced relevant to aspects of their life stories with reflexivity, an activity akin to learning about the values and 'attitudes' of what Mead would call the 'generalised other'. The embodied and emotive consideration of gender, understood through taking others' perspectives, was evident in participant accounts. The ability to empathically take the perspectives of others has more recently been popularised through the helping professions, notably through the work of humanist Carl Rogers (1957). Appreciating the use of empathy alongside Mead's generalised other helps provide a better understanding of these accounts. For example, participants' imaginative accounts of their partners enabled them to predict and make sense of their partners' responses to events. This enabled participants to understand the responses to others as well as the broader gender scripts through which social interaction was shaped.

The following excerpts illustrate how knowledge of the generalised other is drawn on to recall general understandings of 'femininity' and what it means to be a woman in an intimate relationship. In particular, these participants reflect upon making sense out of relationships that had ended and demonstrate wondering how the need to fulfill

traditional gender roles might contribute to understanding the everyday event of relationship breakdown.

Ramon is a 45-year-old man who works in the education sector. In this excerpt, Ramon is telling me about the breakdown of an intimate, long-term relationship. He references what he believes are his ex-partner's sexual desires and offers an explanation of these being present because of her physical, embodied presence as a woman, and her need to fulfill the traditional expectation of being less physically powerful than a man:

> *Probably what she needed was the excitement of a big, strong man who could take control of the situation, as much as anything because she is quite tall and she is a fairly, you know, statuesque woman and I think that that plays into her psyche about having somebody that could dominate her, you know, not in an abusive way of course, but to make her feel more feminine […]* (Ramon, 45-year-old working in the education sector)

Mead (1934, p. 158) proposes that two processes are central to the making of the self. Firstly, one must engage in 'social acts' with others with an understanding of the 'attitudes' of others towards oneself. Secondly,

*… the self is constituted not only by an organization of these particular individual attitudes, but also by an organization of the social attitudes of the generalized other or the social group as a whole to which he [sic] belongs* (Mead 1934, p. 158).

Not only does Ramon individualise the stereotyped gender attitudes of the generalised other onto his former partner, but he makes sense of their breakup by attributing it to her 'psyche', which yearns for 'domination' through the physical presence of her 'tall … statuesque' embodied self. Such an account offers new possibilities for appreciating the importance of the 'other' in late modern sexual self-making because it is not only in person-to-person interaction that the self is made; sense-making occurs when individuals creatively bring together their imagined notion of the 'other' person and the attitudes of the broader society or generalized other.

Mead's 'perspectivism' accounts for 'the emergence of agency within sociality, and to the nature of the self-societal dialectic' (Martin 2006, p. 233). This is relevant to late modern social life, which is 'marked by both diversity and contestation' (Martin 2006, p. 233). Participants made sense of the breakdown of significant relationships through imagining their former partners' perspectives, emotions and physical experiences of gender.

Similar to Ramon, Walter, a 54-year-old man working in the human services, speaks about a former relationship. He talks about how he experienced the sexual, embodied aspect of their physical selves in relation to one another, and also about how he imagines his then partner experienced this. Walter relates that he is unsure of how much women can disentangle themselves, or feel 'unbound', from their gender during sexual activity.

> *So that was, but that was really more about her than about me. So, it wasn't something I found very difficult. But probably never quite felt relaxed enough to be completely unbound*

> *physically. And of course not having been a woman I don't know how unbound women ever feel as a gender as opposed to men. That's hard to judge.* (Walter, 45-year-old working in the human services)

Both Ramon and Walter describe traditional gender roles in a way that draws upon their ability to 'imagine' what it must be like to be a woman. They describe what Mead (1934, p. 158) would call the 'attitudes' of the individual (in this case, their previous partners as women) as well as talk more generally about the limitations they feel are bound up with being a woman in late modern Western society. Ramon and Walter demonstrate that while some negotiation away from traditional gender 'scripts' is possible, the generalised other maintains clear 'attitudes' about sex roles.

Some participants highlighted what Giddens would claim as evidence that traditional roles are able to be challenged by individuals in late modernity. Whilst Giddens goes some way to account for late modern detraditionalisation based on gender roles, he overemphasises this process, citing the so called emancipation of women through their entry into the workforce (see Giddens 1991, p. 216). Critics of Mead claim that his theories of social interaction are not compatible with the diversified and fragmented nature of late modern social life (Elliott 2001). Alexander (1996) criticises Giddens' dichotomous understanding of tradition and post-tradition, noting that these are conceptualised too simplistically. Yet participants in the study clearly described some complexities inherent in making sense of gender roles, particularly through intimate relationships.

Indeed, it should be noted that the study participants highlighted engaging in a more complex relationship with previously accepted gender categories. This goes some way to underscore that for some, detraditionalisation is manifest in everyday interactions. This also reinforces the importance of understanding the meaning of interactions with others, both person-to-person and imagined interactions, in relation to sexual self-making. For example, 47-year-old Stephen told me that because he is a full time parent of school age children he has… *gone from the traditional sex model of being the bread winner and the father figure of the house to almost the woman's role.*

He hastened to add that whilst individually he has been able to take on a caring role in unpaid work, which is often associated with women's work, when he goes to 'barbecues … you get the divided conversation between male and female' and he does not 'feel like [he] fit[s] in between either of them'. Here, Stephen describes the liminality of his role and identity with the 'attitudes' of the generalised other:

> *I think image wise, I don't think I fit the male stereotype. I feel, I don't feel different, I don't prance around or anything like that but I don't, as in, how can I put it. To, to isolate how your sexuality affects you through all those processes, I think it's got to affect you to a point that I still think, in my case, you have control, you have a choice about how you want to be.* (Stephen, a 47-year-old full time parent)

## SEXUAL SELF CONSTITUTION AS AGENTIAL?

Given the continuation of gender inequalities in late modern life, to what extent can one exercise agency? Participants noted that whilst there were some constraining characteristics of social notions of gender, there were ways in which these could be mitigated through conscious individual action/interaction. For example, Louisa, a 53-year-old nurse in a long-term relationship with a woman, told me she felt that there was some 'typicality or typicalness' around her choice of dress in relation to her age group but that her sexuality involved her 'community' and her sense of dress. Louisa said that she 'very definitely identif[ies] as lesbian' and this sets her apart from other women her age. Louisa was able to clearly articulate how her appearance differed from other women in her age group:

> … *so here I am with jeans and a vest on and my hair is short and I like it that way. And I like to wear a belt and flat shoes. Perhaps around the way that I am interested in fitness and health and physical activities. So perhaps more than women of my age.* (Louisa, 53-year-old nurse)

Louisa depicts her 'choice' of clothing and interest in physical activities and sports as setting her apart from her heterosexual peers.

The extent to which agency exists in relation to gender is something that arises given the varying degrees to which gender stereotypes affected participants' sexualities. Daniel, a 41-year-old social worker, told me that others often found he failed to fit in with accepted notions of masculinity. This was said to have affected the sexual identity category others assigned to him:

> *But many people don't see me as what they would consider heterosexual. Gay people try and say, 'Oh, you must be gay'. 'No I am not'. So, yeah, for me I describe myself as heterosexual[…]But then they would also talk about, how do I put this, my, not hyper masculinity, but the whole issue of sexuality and prowess with women and that side of my sexuality.* (Daniel, 41-year-old social worker)

Participants' ability to act against tradition is evident in their accounts. Jackson and Scott (2011, p. 94) argue that 'the idea of the social self, originating from the work of Mead, provides a view of the self as social while allowing for agency through the emphasis on interpretive practices'. As Jackson and Scott (2010, p. 155) suggest, social inequality and individual agency are not mutually exclusive. Mead argues that it is through individual thought processes that the 'attitudes of the generalized other' are internalised—a mental representation of the attitudes and values of the wider community is necessary for individuals to be able to achieve social competence (Mead 1934, pp. 155–156).

Maxwell describes the specific ways in which he is able to exercise agency through a kind of 'playing' with the degree to which he projects—or performs—a stereotypically masculine persona, noting that if he felt 'uncomfortable or unsafe', this performance would be 'happily put…on'. Recently, Maxwell said he had begun to think about being a man and how that related to himself as a human being:

> *I think recently I have discovered that being a man springs from me being a person. And not the other way around. And so if I can choose to identify strongly as being a man, and sometimes I will take that role on, you know, really strong, if I am in a place where I feel either uncomfortable or unsafe without being a classic gender male, then I would happily put that on.* (Maxwell, 46-year-old sexual health educator)

In Maxwell's narrative, the ease with which he reports changing his behaviour is clearly seen. Whilst he is aware of the generalised other attitude of the 'classic gender male', he does not feel the need to conform to it—only to pass at being the 'classic gender male'.

The notion of late modern reflexivity does not fully account for the choices relating to gender that participants reported. While it may appear that Maxwell—and others' accounts—are explained through the 'extended' (Adams 2006) late modern reflexivity thesis (see Giddens 1992) in which identity is reflected upon (for Maxwell, this involves reflecting on being a 'man') and subsequent behaviour altered as a result of the reflection ('choosing' to project the 'classic gender male'), late modern theories of the self do not fully appreciate the social, or Mead's generalized other.

The late modern sexual self has become de-differentiated from other aspects of social life (Dunk-West 2011). Participants' narratives reveal that although they have a clear conception of the social expectations around gender, they were unable to transcend these fully. As noted previously, agency is overstated in late modern theories of detraditionalisation (King 2009).

The placement of 'the social in the form of the generalized other' (Gronow 2008, p. 252) within Mead's theory of sociality of selfhood instead offers insight into how individual interpretations characterise sexual self-making. Mead was a pragmatist: his personal involvement in addressing inequality, for example, points to the 'inseparability of thought and action' (Bushman 1998, p. 264). This suggests that turning towards Mead's theoretical work helps in understanding the mechanisms through which inequalities are made. Although interactionist conceptualisations of the ways in which actors come to imagine the lives of others are critiqued for being overly theoretical and outside the everyday realm of experience (Shilling 1999, p. 551; Smith 1992) Mead's theory of self offers an explanation of the prevalence of inequalities in everyday life. This is because the generalised other:

> *… refers to the general social process and does not say anything about its particular contents, which certainly can, in many cases, be repressive. However, there is always the creative output of the individual 'I' that reacts to the habitual and conservative 'me'* (Gronow 2008, p. 251).

The ways in which participants think about themselves in relation to the generalised other come through in their accounts. Considering Edward's account, for example, I note the way he describes not only how he thinks of himself, but how he does not think of himself. The way he does not think of himself is a reference to a more generalised conception of men as 'purely … male driven sexual being[s]'; an image he sees in opposition to himself:

> *[…] now I don't think of myself as purely a male driven sexual being. And I just think of myself as a person. And sexuality is connected to that but it's not the driving force.* (Edward, 57-year-old working in education)

## RELIGION, AGENCY AND THE SEXUAL SCRIPT

Finally, the question of agency is also relevant to narratives in which institutionalised religion, and in particular, the interactions that occurred in childhood were reported to have influenced sexual self-making. In particular, religious discourse was depicted as being an important source for normative scripts about gender and sexuality. In understanding these narratives, a greater appreciation of the ways in which social structure limits sexual self-making emerges.

For example, Edward described his experience of being taught about gender roles through participation in religion classes. Edward reported that his beliefs about women were shaped through these interactions, but that subsequent engagement in the 'blunt sexual environment of school' further challenged these ideas. He said that it was not until he reflexively traced back those ideas to religious dogma that he could challenge and transform his traditionally held views that women were to be 'put on a pedestal'. Edward reported feeling able to think through gender roles through the disparate experiences from:

> *…my schooling and religious teaching. Although I could never actually marry the two in terms of what I was taught in my religion was that women were, not necessarily equal but, in fact they were quite the opposite, I think they were to be put on a pedestal. And so, going into this sort of blunt sexual environment was, it stripped that away from me. But I would never really go back to the religious stuff. I never really understood why women should be put in a pedestal anyway, as a kid.* (Edward, 57-year-old worker in education)

There are two points to be made about Edward's account. Firstly, his engagement with the utility of religiously-influenced ideas about gender reflects the broadly late modern preoccupation with religion's meaningfulness in all aspects of everyday life (Carol 2007). Secondly, Edward's reflection upon the religiously held traditional role of the woman being at odds with other aspects of society (school) highlights the tensions between religious and secular society. The rise of fundamentalism can be linked to the need for clearly defined roles in an increasingly complex and disordered world (Bauman 2000) yet is it problematic to assume that the secular world is differentiated from the religious order. This is because cultural scripts relating the subordination of women continue to flourish in the secular landscape and this is manifest in everyday life.

Charlotte's account, for example, demonstrates how the interactions which took place at her church shaped her sexual self. Here she tells the story about a young man who had been found to have been watching pornographic movies. The evangelical tradition Charlotte said she was brought up in dealt with such matters very publically. Charlotte said that at the time she thought 'you dirty… man' whereas now she enjoys watching pornography but this is sometimes punctuated with feelings of guilt.

> *...I remember in particular one guy was brought up to the front of the church, and everyone found out that he was into pornographic movies and it was almost: lay your hands on this man, get the devil out of you! I mean I only, I didn't really get what that was at the time, all I remember thinking was: you dirty, disgusting man, get the devil out of you. And now I look back and I think, and there are occasions when I think: I'm the devil, because I like it! [laughs].* (Charlotte, 36-year-old PhD candidate)

Like Edward's account, Charlotte's story helps us to better understand the ways in which religious engagement shapes the sexual self. Recalling the interactions that occurred in participants' past was a way to convey both the exercising of agency as well as the constraints to complete gender re-imagining. Agency is exercised through the rejection of religiously-defined gender roles; yet their very presence and subsequent manifestation in later life provide evidence of the prevalence of cultural scripts relating to gender. Distinguishing cultural scripts from religious ones is increasingly of interest to scholars of gender and religion 'although much literature in feminist geography recognises the dialectical relationship between gender, identity and space, relatively little attention has been given in this regard to religious spheres' (Bhimji 2009, p. 377). In this study, it is clear that the impact of interactions through participation in religious settings limited the possibilities for sexual self-making and sexual behaviour.

The ways in which institutionalised religion obfuscated other ideas about sexuality was also evident for Jane. Jane described not 'having available' to her alternative gender scripts. Her engagement with Catholicism was cited as affecting her decisions about sexual partners. Had Catholicism not been available, Jane said this might have altered her current sexual identity.

> *You know if I had available to me different ideas of um same sex attraction as a younger person as a child or teenager or I think that um I would have explored those attractions which I clearly had. Um in my life for other women, very deep, you know, love and attraction to other women. Yeah, I didn't… have available to me any of those frameworks, you know, that were available perhaps to other people but they certainly weren't to me at that stage in in my life, having grown up in my life in a very protected sort of arena, you know in the Catholic church and the sort of family I was in…* (Jane, 53-year-old counsellor)

Jane's account resonates with the view that 'heterosexuality has its grave expectations. They are not articulated all at once—some are never openly articulated—but we all know that a lack of articulation of norms doesn't mean they don't exist' (Schwartz 2007, p. 81). Similarly, institutionalised religion in late modernity has clearly limited women's choices and impacted upon their interactions, sexual and otherwise, in everyday life. Two broad examples are in relation to birth control and choice about terminations/ abortions. Yet the distinction between agency and religion has been challenged as more complexly related to the framing of agency. Sarah White's (2010) work on Muslim women's agency, for example, seeks to disrupt the differentiation between religion and the other, complexly intertwining factors which include temporality, spatiality and individual and cultural contexts. She argues that:

*It is now clearly established that the West has no privileged claim over modernity, and that there are many possible trajectories. From the stance of many of the people whose worlds this paper*

*describes, a modernity where women's economic and political empowerment is accompanied by their pervasive sexualisation is at least as 'paradoxical' as one in which religion is valued* (White 2010, p. 342).

White's argument resonates with the assertion that divergent and competing discourses thrive in the complex landscape that the sexual self is made within (Jackson 2007) and helps to better understand Louisa's account. Despite the constraints to agency engagement in religion imposed, for Louisa, religion provided an opportunity to disengage from sexual self-making. A 53-year-old nurse, Louisa said that rejecting religion enabled her to move beyond heterosexual assumptions made by Christianity and more towards a process whereby her own sexual identity as a lesbian could be explored. Appreciating the complex landscape within which the sexual self is constituted helps to contextualise Louisa's account alongside the other accounts that position religion as clearly constraining or limiting sexual choices and identity. Whilst Louisa acknowledges that being 'caught up with a lot of Christians' is less than ideal to expressions of sexuality, the 'no sex before marriage' edict protected her 'lesbianism'.

> *… I was actually caught up with quite a lot of Christians back then. And I, well I am an absolute atheist now and have come to terms with that in the last two years probably. I guess that I have always thought that being Christian, having been baptised as an adult and gone through some various churches and spent some time in, spent a year in Israel actually, I think that, so I had decisions that I wasn't going to have sex before marriage. And I think well, well it's probably just my lesbianism saying why would you want to do that.*
> (Louisa, 53-year-old nurse)

For another participant, the coming together of complex social and biographical contexts drew together spirituality and sexuality through the ageing process. The rise of novel religions (see Melton 2007) including an interest in the pursuit of spirituality (as opposed to engagement in institutionalised religions) can be explained through the 'culture of individualism' (Elliott and Lemert, 2006, p. 7) in which spirituality is able to accommodate individual needs and desires. In an account where we can see the ways in which various roles in social life converge, Charlie describes how his unique spiritual beliefs need to 'fit' with his embodied self as well as his sexual self. Further, in advancing in age, Charlie has seen a diminishing of the need for immediacy of sexual behaviour: he speaks now of a need for a more spiritual connection through intimacy that takes the form of cuddling, kissing and hugging. In the following account we can track the shifting priorities Charlie affords to spirituality or intellect, his 'physical' sexual 'needs', his body, and his age as well as their complex, unique interplay.

> *… perhaps the physical side of it has sort of started to wane a little bit. But at the same time, as it's waned I find that perhaps the intellectual side or the spiritual side of my sexuality has sort of started to take precedent. It has probably always been there and always been evident but I, prior to that, but the physical, while my body has sort of been, what would you call it, yeah, I suppose, while I was younger, just the physical side of it overshadowed everything else. It's only now that, and I find I am not so interested in physical sex so much as like I said, the spiritual side, just having someone sort of put their arms around you and say you*

*are a beautiful person, give you a kiss and a hug or something like that, would be very nice.* (Charlie, 49-year-old earthmoving contractor)

## CONCLUSIONS

The structure versus agency debate is manifest in the late modern project of detraditionalisation and individualisation. Developing theories of agency in relation to sexuality and social work are central to understanding the complexities involved in this project. Originating in participant accounts into this empirical project exploring everyday sexuality in contemporary social life, a more complex state of play emerges which sees agency constrained by broader, gendered sexual scripts. As we have seen, sexual scripting theory applied to G H Mead's generative sociality provides a theoretical viewpoint that emerges from individual biographical 'standpoints' as well as highlights the continuing prevalence of gendered and sexual inequality. This new orientation moves away from the question of either agency or structure or the ways in which the two are interrelated. Instead, the question becomes one which is oriented towards understanding why and how gendered inequality continues to manifest in everyday life for the sexual self in late modernity. New theorising about agency in relation to gender and sexuality has much to offer social work education and practice. Further research in this area is required to better engage with the nuanced ways in which the everyday sexual self is expressed and experienced in late modernity.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 5. Decolonising field education - challenging Australian social work praxis

**Ines Zuchowski, Dorothy Savage, Debra Miles and Susan Gair**

Ines Zuchowski, Department of Social Work and Human Services, James Cook University, Douglas, Qld.
email: ines.zuchowski@jcu.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

Social Work's contribution to Australia's legacy of colonisation, the Stolen Generation and ongoing child welfare interventions, may make entering the profession a contentious issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Yet the profession is poorer for their absence, and closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work graduates is a quest aligned with social justice, and with social work as a human rights profession. Field education is considered a significant and important process through which students are socialised into the profession. Questions arise about how professional enculturation might occur for Indigenous students as they put theory into practice, when this theory and practice derives from dominant western frameworks.

In this article we present findings from research exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in field placements. The findings identify racism as ever-present, highlight the impact of Eurocentricsm on practice, and reveal the disregard of Aboriginal cultural ways of helping and the potential for disempowerment. These findings have implications for social work praxis and social work education. Recommendations for improved practice and further research are made.

***Keywords:*** *field education; Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; decolonisation; social work education; theory to practice*

## INTRODUCTION

*Field education is one of the sites where classroom theories get translated into practice. For this reason it is imperative to explore practical strategies to decolonize field education policies and practices.* (Clark et al. 2010, p. 22)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the most disadvantaged peoples in Australia on almost all social dimensions, and they are over-represented as recipients of social work and welfare services (Behrandt 2006; Healey 2008).More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates in social work could make a significant contribution to addressing social in justice on many dimensions. In recent years, social work education has gradually become more inclusive of Indigenous peoples, their history and ways of working. While more needs to be done, these moves respond to consistent recommendations that the profession find more inclusive, respectful and culturally appropriate ways of helping rather than continue to perpetuate deficit models of western intervention that have dominated past social work education and practice (see for example Hart 2001; Gray and Coates 2010; Green and Baldry 2008; Weaver1998; Yellow Bird 2008).A focus on decolonisation has emerged as a key tool in these processes. According to Weaver (1998, p.222) ' decolonisation involves recognising, then shedding the mindset associated with colonial processes by which one culture subjugates another and defines it as inferior' .Yellow Bird (2008, p.284) describes decolonisation as including a process of 'restoration of cultural practices' including thinking, beliefs and values that were abandoned but are still relevant or necessary.Muller (2010) identifies that decolonisation is a process with which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must engage.Recognising the need for change, the Australian Association Social Workers has developed a new Code of Ethics, Professional Standards and special Journal editions to contribute to the development of inclusive education and practice with Indigenous Australians. However, not all areas of the social work curriculum have attracted the same level of attention, and the field education needs of Indigenous students require further exploration.

Field education is the practice arm of social work programs; it provides real world preparation and discipline enculturation in a human service organization under expert supervision from an experienced social work supervisor.While affirmative action for the needs of some minority groups on field placement has been established internationally (Gladstein and Mailick 1986; Messinger 2004), there has been minimal exploration about whether Australian social work field education serves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students well.

As critically reflective educators we were seeking to decolonise our curricula, and develop programs that were more meaningful, inclusive and authentic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In this article we present findings from our research project that explored the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in field placements. We use 'praxis' to mean reflective theory in practice that

challenges us to go beyond an examination of values, ideologies and frameworks that shape our practice, to take informed, committed action in ensuring that socially just practices permeate, and are reflected in, our work (Desai 2009).

## CLOSING THE GAP IN SOCIAL WORK – THE JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY JOURNEY

Work to close the gap between numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduates from our social work and welfare programs has been in progress for over 15 years.Lynn, Thorpe, Miles at al. (1998) were awarded ARC funds to look at a 'Murri Way' of working in social welfare work, and in 2001 staff members undertook an action research project entitled 'Indigenising the curriculum' (Gair, Thomson, Miles and Harris2003) under the guidance and mentoring of traditional owner and elder, Mrs Dorothy Savage. In 2003 a small industry grant funded research to explore barriers to completing a Bachelor of Social Work for Indigenous students (Gair, Thomson and Savage 2005).

In 2006 our Department undertook a subject audit to examine the Indigenous content of the subjects taught and as an outcome rewrote subjects and purchased resources to enhance the Indigenous content.From 2005-2011, the program 'Towards Critical Mass' embodied our quest to employ Indigenous Student Support Officers within our Department to provide targeted support for Indigenous students.

On reflection, we realised that field education was an area that needed our attention, although we had limited data to guide the necessary change. Most recently we received an AASW practitioner research grant to explore the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in field education. The following literature review acknowledges the role of field education within the social work curriculum, highlights the contentious nature of social work as a profession for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, recognises the limited inclusion of Indigenous knowledges particularly in social work field education literature, and exposes the potential for Indigenous students to be highly challenged when undertaking their field education placement.

## GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE – THE AVAILABLE LITERATURE

Limited literature explores Australian Indigenous social work, although recent publications highlight it as a contentious subject due to social work's participation and complicity in 'racist, patronising and unjust practices' (Green and Baldry,2008, p. 389), and to ongoing disadvantage, where the profession's stated commitment to social justice has not translated well into structural equality for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians.Equally, there is a lack of acknowledgement of the skills, knowledge, ways of working, leadership, community work, research and theories from an Indigenous Australian perspective that can inform social work practice and education (Gair,2007; Green and Baldry,2008).A corresponding reliance on Euro-Western social work theories, skills, knowledge and ways of working is evident.

Green and Baldry (2008) argue that it is important to build frameworks and theories relevant to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They recommend that

Indigenous ways of being and thinking need to be embraced in Australian social work and that ' [i]t is vital that Australian Social Work education develops courses and practicums that reflect an understanding of Indigenous needs, approaches and world views' (Green and Baldry 2008, p. 396). Moreover, Furlong and Wight (2011, p. 50) stress the need to go beyond cultural competence as an appendage to social work education and stress the need for critical self-reflection ' to recognise the historical specificity, and the colonising effects, of one's own discipline's knowledge and premises'.

Literature on 'Indigenisation' of social work'holds that social work knowledge should arise from within the culture, reflect local behaviours and practices, be interpreted within a local frame of reference and thus be locally relevant'(Gray and Coates 2010, p. 615).Similarly, Gair, et al.'s (2005) explorative study on what's 'stopping' Indigenous Australian social work students from completing their degree identified the invisibility of Indigenous knowledges in social work education as a key disincentive. This resonates with recent research that explores what Aboriginal clients want from social workers, highlighting the need to equip students with skills that reflect an understanding of Aboriginal history, cultural knowledge, and the impact of social work interventions. Participants stressed the importance of understanding 'how profoundly this history continues to be lived on a daily basis by Aboriginal people, rather than to be something merely noted as part of a family's history' (Harms et al 2011, p. 164).

The literature overwhelmingly identifies field education as central, vital and critical to social work education (Abram, Hartung, and Wernet 2000; Barton, Bell, and Bowles 2005; Patford 2000).Relevant research identifies that social work students are benefiting from field education (Patford 2000) although Maidment (2003; 2006) exposed incongruent experiences for students on placement when significant professional learning co-exists alongsidesignificant stress, and this may be particularly the case for minority students. Ornstein and Moses (2010) also observe that field education in social work is both complicated and challenging. These authors argue that field education is a key experience challenging students' sense of self and personal identity and they suggest that the relationship between field educator and student is central to the placement learning experience (Ornstein and Moses 2010).

Strategies for meeting the needs of Indigenous Australian students on placement remains an under-investigated area,however some literature identifying the placement supports necessary for minority groups is evident.For example, Gladstein and Mailick (1986) identified that minority students experienced unfair treatment in field education. Importantly they found if the client group was of the same minority background as the student, and was devalued by the agency, then the student felt similar disrespect. Additionally, Gladstein and Mailick (1986) identified that minority group students might be hindered in developing their professional role when organisations, eager to use their cultural insight, or language skills, only assigning them cases from the same ethnic group as themselves. This may suit the client and /or agency staff needs, but not necessarily the learning needs of the student, however, students felt powerless to refuse such cases. They recommended the use of cultural role models and mentors to meet students' unique needs and identified the need for specifically designed, culturally sensitive programs, with

increased support for the strengths of the minority students and their culture (Gladstein and Mailik 1986).

Most recently, Clark et al. (2010) undertook a collaborative study examining the experience of Aboriginal (First Nations) and non-Aboriginal students on field placement in Aboriginal organisations in Canada.The authors highlighted the importance of developing field education that is culturally safe and suggest that 'first, the educator must be culturally competent; and second, the student culturally safe in the learning relationship' (NAHO 2006 cited in Clark et al. 2010, p. 12). Their findings called for Elders involvement in students' education, anti-oppressive practices, and supports such as strength and wellness plans.Clark et al. (2010) outlined a number of strategies to decolonise field education, including student access to Elders on campus, Aboriginal faculty liaison and the introduction of cultural safety preparation seminars.They explored a number of other recommendations including the importance of creating 'ongoing dialogue about the power relationships inherent in field education experiences' and listening to students' requests for preferences in field educators (Clark et al. 2010, p. 17). The research found that students experienced pain and distress caused by oppressive practices within their field education and recommended mentor support for students.

As the available literature on Indigenous Australian social work suggests, if non-Indigenous Australian social workers, educators and clinical placement supervisors have absorbed colonist attitudes to Indigenous Australians (Green and Baldry 2008), then how are the professional skills, knowledge, and identity of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students advanced without targeted strategies to do so. What is being role-modelled, and whether it is relevant and within a culturally safe context, are pertinent questions to be answered. Lynn et al. (1998) pointed out that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander helping styles contrast most strongly with traditional social work literature' (p. 64) and emphasise 'a relationship based on familiar/ cultural connection rather than individualisation' (p65). This is further exemplified by Atkinson's research into the transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia.Atkinson (2002) stresses that Aboriginal world views are relationship-centred, and she highlights the concepts of dadirri, or listening to one another. In particular, sharing information and stories may be a core communication practice that cannot be modelled by non-Indigenous field educator supervisors.

In field education the supervisory relationship is seen as crucial. One model for supervision presented by Ornstein and Moses (2010) proposes the acknowledgement of power, the role of mutual feedback, reflection on process, the quality and nature of field instruction and the leadership role of the field educator in initiating and role-modelling processes. On the notion of power, Green and Baldry (2008) argued that non-Indigenous social workers need to 'give up their power and position as 'experts' in relation to Indigenous people'(p. 398).Therefore, the 'expert socialising the novice' notion of field education may need further examination when Australian Indigenous social work students are placed with non-Indigenous supervisors.How cultural knowledge and expertise is conceptualised, accessed, shared and advanced in supervision does not appear to be evident from available literature. Research by Zon (2004, cited in Ban 2005) showed that bi-cultural staffing models may have inherent unequal power relationships and that Aboriginal staff 'can feel,

and be, disempowered unless the cultural context of knowledge development from within both groups is addressed' (Ban 2005, p. 392). Of significance, Maidment and Beddoe (2012) speak of the substantial task still ahead to include Indigenous approaches, cultural knowledge and ways of working into social work supervision models for Indigenous students and graduates.

With Australia's legacy of colonisation, the Stolen Generation, and ongoing child removals into care, entering the profession of social work may cause ambivalence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout their study. These historical tensions and potential conflicts may remain uncritically present and ignored in social work education for Indigenous students, providing a backdrop and a context for challenging and stressful placement experiences. Research on the unique learning needs, professional identity, and support needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work students on field placement appears conspicuous by its absence, and urgently needed.

## METHOD

### Theoretical Frameworks

This project was undertaken by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers committed to processes of collaborative research. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the James Cook University Human Ethics Committee.Our collective understanding of 'collaborative research' reflects principles of genuine, respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and is characterised by a strong commitment to research that is participatory and which brings tangible benefits to the research participants (Bennett et al. 2011).Implicit in the processes of collaborative research is an understanding of the social and historical reality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the application of implicit and explicit cultural knowledge, values, beliefs and priorities (Lynn, et al. 1998).

In practice the commitment to these principles was evidenced in the research team's discussions and reflections. Indigenous research team members were involved in every stage of this research process: from the early conceptualisation of the research; as joint authors of the grant application; as interviewers and transcribers; and most recently as conference presenters and co-authors as we disseminate the results. Every stage of the research process was scrutinised through a lens which highlighted Indigenous knowledge, values, and assumptions and the ways in which these aspects could inform the non-Indigenous researchers and the procedures and practicalities of the research process. Further the specific recommendations of participants are prioritised as we seek the actions that must emanate as outcomes of the research.

### Research Aims and Research Question

This was an exploratory project, supported by a small AASW research grant, reflecting the absence of literature and knowledge in the area of inquiry. The research question guiding this project was 'what are experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in social work and welfare field education?'With this goal, we developed three core aims:

- To explore the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students in field education placements;
- To identify gaps, barriers and practices that inhibit positive placement experiences;
- To identify strategies and resources that can be used to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait social work and welfare students in field education placements.

To achieve the aims identified above, the team sought the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and welfare students or graduates who had completed at least one social work or social welfare field education experience.Letters were sent to potential participants inviting them to contact the Indigenous research team members to indicate their interest in participating in an interview.

**Participants**

Eleven participants responded to the invitation to participate in this study and ten of these engaged in face to face interviews.One participant completed a questionnaire writing her responses to the same prompts posed to other participants.Ten of the project participants were women, broadly reflecting the gender distribution of social work students at James Cook University. Similarly all were aged between 29 and 55 years of age. Two participants were current students having completed their first field education experience within the last two years.The other nine participants were graduates with between 2 and 25 years' experience in the field.Eight participants were employed in the social work sector, three in non-government organisations and the other five employed in government organisations. Fields of practice included health, mental health, child safety, women's services and family services.While all were asked to reflect on their field placement experiences it was clear from the interviews that participants considered their experiences holistically, drawing on aspects of life and work as well as placement experiences.This has contributed to an understanding of field education experiences as they are embedded in, and reflective of, whole-of-life experiences.

**Interviews**

Information and data was collected through semi structured interviews with individual participants and through a focus group where participants reflected collectively on the de-identified comments and ideas gathered in interviews. Interviews were conducted primarily by Aboriginal members of the research team and while general prompts guided the direction, interview participants were encouraged to share their experiences as they chose. Clark et al. (2010, p. 12) claim that 'oral storytelling and narrative analysis are best situated to listen to the stories and experiences of Aboriginal students' and this research affirms this process.Participants were encouraged to share experiences and relate stories of their field education experiences. In addition their views on solutions and strategies for improvement were sought as the research team aimed to not only give voice to the issues that arise for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students during field education but to also facilitate change in policies and practices that impact on those experiences.

### Focus Group

All participants were invited to join the research team in an informal group discussion conducted at a local venue with lunch and other refreshments provided.While only three participants were available to join the group due to distance and prior commitments, the discussion was robust. The focus group was facilitated by an Aboriginal member of the research team and the two non-Indigenous research team members who attended listened, acknowledged and contributed to the recording of the group discussions.A de-identified summary of the issues raised by participants during the interviews was shared with the group for further dialogue and debate.One of the primary aims of introducing the focus group method to the study was to provide the opportunity for participants to further reflect on the events described during individual interviews, perhaps highlighting previously unexplored or taken for granted aspects of the experience (Acocella 2012). This proved to be the case as participants supported each other to unpack the nature and characteristics of their field education placements with particular emphasis on the strategies and supports which could have or did encourage their success.New data resulted from these processes as the interaction between participants prompted their thoughts, encouraged an expansion of their stories and created a sense of safety to share critiques and suggestions.

### Data Analysis

The process of drawing interpretations and perspectives from the stories, ideas and suggestions presented in interviews and the focus group was complex and intertwined with an ongoing recognition of the subjectivity of the process and the presence of ourselves as researchers in the data and in our interpretations.The analysis was developed as a team and the differing perspectives and understandings drawn together over many group discussions.The process was guided by the Aboriginal members of the team who shared their interpretations of language, thoughts and feelings all apparent during the interviews or in their understanding of the participants' intent but not immediately discernible in written transcripts or through non-Indigenous eyes. Where non-Indigenous members of the research team highlighted certain contexts or frameworks as possibly influencing the perception of the event, the Aboriginal team members were able to confirm or challenge such interpretations from shared understandings of lived experience and social worlds such as those inhabited by participants (Frost, Holt, Shinebourne, Esin, Nolas, Mehdiadeh, and Brooks-Gordon 2011).

## FINDINGS

The experiences of field education, shared by participants in this study, mirrored their own life stories and the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Their social work/ welfare placement experience was no different to everyday life, much of which is impacted by both direct and indirect racism, discrimination and a lack of recognition and valuing of their cultural identity. The findings described in detail below reveal that students experienced significant racism, however they also developed important survival strategies and unique practice skills, and they identified recommendations for positive change.These themes are further developed using the words of participants, whose identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms.

## EXPERIENCES OF RACISM

The participants clearly identified that their experience in field education, and often their subsequent practice as professional social workers, mirrored their broader life experience of racism. Student felt vulnerable in field education placements where there was a culture of bullying and injustice:

> *That whole heap of bullying and standover that goes on there all the time. And just the way they talk about their clients …and Aboriginal and Islander people.…they don't say it to your face, 'oh them f-ing blacks...They'll say it to another worker, and they'll say it in an undertone.* (David)

> *I've been through the migaloo system. I've been through it before and I know it and they will get you, they shift the goal posts …they hear you, they listen, they know what you're saying, but they always gotta shift the goal posts to prove you're wrong.* (Jody)

When students raised issues of racism their experiences were disbelieved or reframed creating or increasing the sense of isolation and invisibility:

> *I said to her 'This is completely inappropriate…' and she said things like… 'y' know she's not racist because she has Aboriginal friends'… So I was pretty much on my own.* (Kimberly)

Racism was not confined to interactions in field education placements and a number of students described classroom based experiences where lecturers and/ or other students made or ignored racist comments and assumptions.For some students, the impact was intensified by prior experiences of racism and violence:

> *[The lecturer] stereotyped Aboriginals and it was her statements and another non-Indigenous person in group work who pushed me down …that triggered my traumatic experience… Y'know, and so in the end I had to reveal to them, I said 'look, I have had an attempted murder on my life as a child because in those days it was acceptable for white people to kill Abbos.* (Jody)

It seemed apparent that these experiences linked closely with aspects of their personal lives. Placement was not just a place where they undertook an academic subject and integrated learning, it connected with their individual lived experience and their collective lived history. These students captured how the issues that arose in placement resonated with their cultural identity:

> *All of those issues and particularly given my personal background…my great grandmother was stolen, and then taken out to Palm Island and yeah, I think that really hit home to look at it from a professional perspective.* (Carla)

> *When we go to visit, to see how they are going and the mother is asking for her children back, and then they are saying no, …So the parents are going through this traumatic, it's like stolen generation stuff… And here I am looking at this and I thought, this is what happen to our people, you know. Because they have the children taken off them and I don't know how people can do that…*(Juliet)

So Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were expected to participate in placement activities that often connected adversely to the history and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without this personal parallel reality being acknowledged. Further this lack of cultural awareness was demonstrated when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students found their cultural skills and abilities dismissed, ignored or misunderstood, or when broader relationships were assumed:

> *Sometimes you have the non-Indigenous staff, they just think that because of the colour of your skin, you can communicate but you might be from say a totally different country that can't even relate.* (Denise)

> *Yeah well she said, 'I bloody told you - you shouldn't be doing that. That's not your role.'And I was like 'I was talking language … What if this one wanna sit down here and talk'.* (David)

While not the focus of direct questions within this research, several students noted that racism continued into their professional social work practice. Juliet described how she witnessed the Indigenous manager being disrespected by the white staff in her office during her placement and how this experience was later repeated in her own working life:

> *I thought is this how am I going to get treated? I suppose it dawned on me that you might have to work through that sort of stuff, you know, you might be put in charge here and that did happen to me a couple of times… the white people used to come in - they would be looking for the manager and I had to say, 'well, I'm the manager' or they would say,' oh we are after the manager' , and I would have to say, 'yes I'm the manager', as if we are not able to do…the leadership job.* (Juliet)

As inferred above, participants highlighted that racism is a significant part of their lives. These experiences were no different on placement and continued into their professional working life.

## STUDENTS' SURVIVAL

Racism was clearly linked to the idea of student survival. Faced with the challenging encounters described above, students were forced to develop a range of strategies to get through placement. Most often an important source of support came from other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

> *I was not in my home town, but I was working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait I slander colleagues, I socialised with them a lot and was able to have some kind of cultural healing.* (Mary)

Juliet identifies support she received from her family, as well as the encouragement provided by Indigenous graduates during her studies:

> *The lady that came down from Thursday Island that had already done this community welfare, and we all looked up to her… it was lovely to see someone that had already got the degree, and she was coming back to talk to us, you know, and encourage us.* (Juliet)

While some students found support outside the organisation, others stressed the value of support within their placement organisation:

> *She's gotta have a mate. Y'know this is where the non-Indigenous people get us, by numbers. They know when they get one Indigenous person on their own, they can break em.But if they get a bundle, they can't break them.* (Jody)

> *I think having them there really buffers me, really buffers my role as a worker, but also as a student. And cos the Aunties can do most of the advocating (laughs) and the talking and it's good, because they not only offer that support, but that knowledge.* (David)

In the interviews and focus group meetings students identified a number of other strategies to assist student survival in placements, including support from peers, the university, the organisation and specific, culturally-relevant professional support.Participants highlighted the importance of cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous people as some students found themselves unwittingly providing such training on placements and in classrooms. Students talked about preparing for practice and at times walking in two worlds. They outlined approaches to dealing with conflict and racism that ranged from avoidance to directly confronting issues. Most commonly they expressed a strong determination to just get through placement:

> *you got to get this done to get to here, so and I suppose that's where you dust your feet, [laughter], dust your feet and move on.* (Juliet)

**Developing a unique professional practice**

Students talked about wanting to, and at times needing to, develop a unique professional identity that incorporated non-Indigenous social work practice models and cultural knowledge.This unique professional identity was identified by students who found themselves wanting to integrate their learning in different culturally relevant ways:

> *When women used to come up to the service, I used to go up and meet them and start sitting there and just yarning with them.I just didn't want to sit behind a desk and look at books and think, what am I supposed to do? Just go out and do it.It sort of comes natural I suppose…* (Tara)

> *I was saying, 'look I'm really struggling to understand the clinical stuff from a cultural point of view. I just dunno where you're going with all the theory'.* (David)

Finding a way to integrate the academic knowledge, social work practice and cultural skills and identity was not an easy process and a number of participants identified the support that was provided, often within the field education placement, to help them develop their own practice:

> *That's what [liaison person] actually said to me, he was really good.He said, 'Watch for the undertones, all the time in your placement.'And I started to pick it up …then it got me thinking about my other work experiences as well. And I thought, 'That's just wrong'….If*

> *we're over represented in the criminal justice system and the health system, …you gotta have ones in there that have a bit of an open mind to that stuff.* (David)

> *[I didn't want to] just say, this is the theories they were using, this is the framework I'm developing, I wanted to talk about how I was feeling with it all and I found that my supervisors were really supportive of that, and even if I could just go through in detail, blow by blow what happened that day, or something significant that happened that I thought impacted on me, I felt really supported.* (Carla)

In the focus group meeting the theme of developing unique practice frameworks which integrated social work knowledge and practice with cultural identity and understandings was similarly highlighted.Participants discussed their strategies as developing relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, learning from their own people and suggested processes for including bringing Indigenous theory and cultural knowledge into the learning and teaching processes.Of significance was the revelation that most often, despite some supports the development of a culturally relevant and responsive practice occurred in an environment where they were the only Indigenous person.

> *It prepared me for working, whether or not to choose to work in a mental health unit, whether to work in the field or not but I really liked working in …a multidisciplinary team although some members of the team were a little bit funny because I think I must have been the first Indigenous social worker in there.* (Denise)

> *Being an Indigenous person, coming in to all white faces, that was a bit daunting.* (Juliet)

**Students' Recommendations for Change**

Key to the participants' recommendations for change and improvement was increasing the cultural awareness and competence of staff in placement agencies and universities. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to teach, guide and support students was seen as important. Mary, for example, recommended having an Aboriginal lecturer on staff, who would take the time to listen to students' stories and ensure placements were well prepared for Indigenous students:

> *Take them out, [do an] introduction to the workplace, their policy, how they can be supported, how they work culturally in that organisation. Because you know, realistically, with social work, you're going out and working with a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.So having that understanding of culture.* (Tara)

> *I believe that they [placement organisations] should be screened appropriately for what their cultural competence is, what their cultural supervision expertise is, and what their cultural knowledge is and just their general outlook on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.* (David)

Participants identified that additional strategies were requiredto support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studentsincluding the provision of cultural mentors , the development of cultural support plans, thepreparation of field supervisors about the intrinsic value of

culture and what this might meanwhen they accept an Indigenous student on placement. Risk management and ensuring culturally appropriate matching of student and supervisor was also highlighted.

## DISCUSSION

It is evident from the findings presented above that ensuring cultural safety for Indigenous students on placement is an imperative. Key recommendations from participants included increased placement preparation, and the provision of cultural mentors and culturally aware field educators.Sadly, racism reflective of participants' broader life experiences was another dominant experience on placement.

Being in the minority was noted by several students including Juliet, who identified the intimidating nature of '…coming in to all the white faces…', and this comment from Jody '…it's where the non-Indigenous people get us. By numbers…'It appears that these Indigenous students felt vulnerable and outnumbered on placement.It is speculated here that in many organisations where students are on placement, the majority of management, trained professionals and administration staff would be non-Indigenous.In contrast, Indigenous students may be the same cultural background as a majority of the service users.Therefore, it could be perceived that some students and clients are stuck in a shared, colonised space that does not feel safe and is not shared by the field educator. Particularly if the student and the clients are aware of their devalued positioning by the agency and are poorly served by the agency, then they will share the same felt disrespect (Gladstein and Mailick 1986).

Participants in this research highlighted that their placement experience powerfully connected with their personal lived experience of being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. Students' experiences were not disconnected from the experience of clients in their field of practice, so when Juliet is taken along to a child safety investigation she feels pain (this is what happened to our people..); when discussion turns to the history of Aboriginal persecution for Jody it is her history (I have had an attempted murder on my life) and when Carla observes family law at work echoes of her personal story reverberate (my great grandmother was stolen). Thus, in field education, where we know students' sense of selfand identity is challenged (Ornstein and Moses 2010) and students are exposed to stress (Maidment 2003, 2006), we must be vigilant in creating culturally safe environments where students can be appropriately nurtured, supported and guided to develop their practice. We need safe spaces that recognise and hear students' stories.

According to Laenui (2000, 2007) there are five stages of colonisation (Denial and Withdrawal; Destruction/Eradication; Denigration/Belittlement; Surface Accommodation/ Tokenism; and Transformation/Exploitation).Striving to overcome colonisation can include embracing five stages of decolonisation. Muller (2010) added a sixth stage.These stages are Rediscovery and Recovery; Mourning; Healing/Forgiveness (Muller 2010); Dreaming, Commitment; and Action.Colonisation has changed the lives of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples forever, and the role social work practitioners have played, including the removal of children, would rest heavily on the minds of Indigenous students.

As they seek to link theory to practice in field education in order to play their unique role in decolonising social work practice, much more cultural support seems needed. Equally, Decolonisation theory is a theory and a practice that non-Indigenous social work educators and practitioners also must embrace. Currently, these research findings have been presented in supervision training for the field and in departmental workshops to further develop our own curriculum, advance teaching and increase Indigenous student support. Findings have been presented at local and national conferences.

## CONCLUSION

While all stages in the decolonisation process are vital and ongoing, in particular it is the stages of Commitment and Action that we sought to take up and enact.We wanted to gain awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experiences, and facilitate their increased safety and success.Key recommendations from participants included increased placement preparation, and the provision of cultural mentors and culturally aware field educators. Assurance that recommendations would be implemented was our pledge to Mrs Dorothy Savage when she became involved in the project and developing strategies to enact the recommendations is a significant priority for our program.Our strategies for change include increased cultural awareness for field educators through training; increased cultural support for our Indigenous students, and increased preparations of educators and placement agencies to better ensure students' cultural safety.While the findings specifically relate to students from the social work program, we believe the findings have relevance beyond our students and our field education program, to offer direction to all academic and practitioner colleagues who seek to grow the field of Indigenous social workers and embrace their unique and desperately needed contribution.Perhaps their relevance extends even further as noted by Dorothy Savage, local elder and second author who presented this research at a recent racism conference 'The findings of this social work research are relevant for all academic disciplines that have Indigenous students' (Savage, et al. 2012).

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 6. From 'chopping up chicken' to 'cap and gown': A university initiative to increase pathways to employment for skilled migrants and refugees

**Caroline Lenette and Ann Ingamells**

Dr Caroline Lenette, School of Human Services & Social Work Griffith University, Logan. Email: c.lenette@griffith.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

Equity policies enable individuals from low SES backgrounds to enter University, yet do not facilitate their engagement as members of groups. These selected individuals enter a broader cohort, where they are expected (with support) to meet the same graduate attributes as everyone else. Rather than the diverse experiences of such students being seen as strengths to be built on, the focus tends to be placed on remedying their learning disadvantage. Thus, university poses as a neutral pathway to jobs and status, and effectively, a pathway out of low SES communities, rather than a gateway into greater community involvement. This paper presents a case study of a graduate certificate which offered fee scholarships to a group of overseas skilled refugees and migrants. In contrast to usual equity experiences, these students progressed as a cohort, were often the majority group in class, bent the curriculum to their own needs and applied the learning to their community involvements. Such engagement constituted a rich adult learning experience, which challenged conventional teaching–learning processes and curriculum, and raised questions about academic standards. Examining learnings from this project, the paper asks how Schools of Social Work can draw on their professional values to enhance equity processes

within the academy.

***Keywords:*** *Overseas Skilled Refugees; University Equity Policies; Learning and Teaching.*

*Ema came from Burundi, with her husband and five children, after 12 years in a refugee camp. She was a trained nurse in Burundi, but Skills Recognition was unable to verify her qualifications. Her husband spent some time working in a chicken factory, and both now could not face the smell of raw chicken. In 2010, Ema enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Community and Youth Work at Griffith University. She studied at home after 10 pm when the children had gone to bed, and it became very clear that she loved to study. She was an enthusiastic learner and her English language skills improved rapidly. Ema did her professional work experience placement in a domestic violence refuge and her supervisor was glowing in her commendation. However, no job flowed on from this, or from the many applications Ema wrote. Uplifted by her university experience and undeterred by job rejections, Ema returned to study nursing full-time. She shared: "Opening my mind to University has opened the possibility to my children and to other members of my community. It has increased my confidence in study, and given me skills for work. It has enabled me to work with my community in many different ways".*

## INTRODUCTION

Across Australia, people who have arrived as migrants and refugees, and who had status and qualifications at home, are underemployed and find themselves driving cabs, cleaning offices, working in meat factories, and generally doing work that is 'dirty, dangerous and difficult' (Colic-Peisker 2009; Watt 2010). Colic-Peisker (2009) argues that refugees have a higher unemployment rate than other residents, and when employed, are often isolated from the wider community in low-status, low-paid jobs, with poor job security, requiring long hours of work. Well-educated refugees, when competing for jobs with Australian-born applicants, will rarely be as successful because of systemic issues such as persistent discrimination in the Australian employment market (Colic-Peisker 2009; Fozdar and Torezani 2008; Fozdar 2012).

In Fozdar's (2012) study, half a group of 150 skilled refugees surveyed about their employment experiences reported facing discrimination in the field of employment. Employers remain unaware of the systemic barriers overseas-skilled migrants face, preferring to blame the latter's lack of job-relevant skills and assuming that such workers would not 'fit in' (Fozdar 2012). Yet barriers to sustainable employment include: lack of Australian work experience; limited language skills relevant to industry; limited knowledge of Australian labour markets; and limited experience impacting on ability to complete registration for regulated occupations (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). Furthermore, there are very weak arrangements in place in terms of macro and meso frameworks to promote and manage cultural diversity in Australian workplaces (Syed and Kramer 2010). Anecdotal evidence suggests that multicultural non-government agencies tend to have stronger frameworks for employing and managing diversity. For skilled refugees in Australia, issues of unemployment and underemployment remain critical to positive resettlement experiences.

This paper presents a case study of a Graduate Certificate in Community and Youth Work, led by the second author and offered by the School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, to overseas-qualified refugees and migrants. The program ran in 2010 & 2011, and the evaluation data was collected in 2010 (stage 1), 2011 (further interviews) and 2012 (via phone calls). The discussion draws on a range of sources, including staff reflections, program materials, descriptive content and evaluation material collected at program completion, and nine months after completion. The evaluation had ethics clearance from Griffith University, and a research assistant who had no prior engagement with the students conducted interviews. It should be noted, however, that this paper is not the report of that research, but is a consideration of the tensions involved in creating a successful learning environment in a diverse classroom, and the inadequacy of current equity discourse in supporting this.

A total of 14 students commenced the program as part of the scholarship scheme (10 in Semester 1, and four in Semester 2). Skills Recognition, a unit with Queensland Department of Education and Training, provided the scholarships. As an enhanced pathway to employment in health and human services, this project achieved some success, with seven of the 10 graduates securing work in a human service role, three enrolled in Masters degrees and one enrolled in a fulltime Bachelors degree. As will be discussed, graduates also reported a range of other important outcomes including increased confidence, leadership in their communities and a greater understanding of the culture of their new country.

An analysis of factors influencing the success of the program suggests that access to university is not enough to effect change. The classroom dynamics, teaching and learning styles and the curriculum all needed to change if the cohort of students are to be met in ways that acknowledge their status and existing strengths. In the contemporary university, units of study and their curricula are developed in advance of the teaching semester, and teaching loads are based on expectations of staff delivering lectures and tutorials with little redesign along the way. It can then come as a shock to face a classroom in which the majority of students do not recognise the historical, cultural and discursive references embedded in the curricula (du Plessis and Gisschoff 2007).

## EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Bradley Report (Commonwealth of Australia 2008) emphasised that increasing the pool of well-qualified people is essential if Australia is to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global economy. Yet overseas-qualified and skilled people are often settling for jobs that are below their capacities. University programs should therefore be part of opening pathways for skilled migrants.

The participation targets and funding criteria arising from the Bradley Report, however, do not differentiate between equity groups, referring to people from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds as if they are a homogenous group. Similarly, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) guidelines outline funding criteria for 'people from low SES backgrounds' as a whole, while higher education participation targets also fail to differentiate groups within this broad cohort. There is no mention of the specific

needs of migrants and refugees in these key documents. Gale (2009, p. 4), reflecting on this, says that 'low socioeconomic status appears to have become an umbrella term for all under-represented groups. There are in fact distinct differences within this grouping that again are derived from their different social and cultural differences' (see also James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause and McInnis 2004, for an analysis of equity groups in higher education).

In a Sydney-based study by Hannah (1999), colleges and universities argued that once refugees become Australian citizens, they have the same entitlements and are treated the same as all other citizens. Refugees can access support services, study skills and language support on an individual-need basis. However, refugee students from Victorian higher education institutions reported that support was inadequate or non-existent, and that they would benefit from academics having more understanding of refugees and their experiences (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori and Silvagni 2010). Similarly, whilst it is well known that 'facilitating the early engagement of students with their studies and campus life is linked to greater student satisfaction, improved retention rates' (Silburn, Earnest, Butcher and de Mori 2008, p. 3) and better educational outcomes, refugees attending some Australian universities felt that their institution did not understand their needs and offered little support. The experiences of African refugees in a South Australian university were characterised by pressures to adapt to tertiary education, and meet community expectations while experiencing difficult home situations (Harris and Marlowe 2011).

Gale's (2009, p. 2) critique is that equity in Australian policy and university practice has become a numbers game, which deals bureaucratically with student recruitment but pays little attention to what happens once 'bums are on seats'. The 'numbers game' has the appearance of equity, yet contributes to maintaining the status quo in terms of broader systemic approaches that locate all curricula within one knowledge paradigm. Gale (2009, p. 10) argues that in current equity thinking:

> *Effectively, students are not just 'supported' but positioned as requiring change, adjustment, upskilling, additional resources, and so on, in order to fit into established patterns of participation. In its most positive sense, support services provide students with ways of coping with university, even mastering it.*

Gale (2009, p. 10) says that academic processes 'context-strip' students. This is a very similar concept to Freire's (1972) notion that learners are seen as empty vessels to be filled with authorised knowledges. The wealth of experience-based knowledge that all students bring, and the cultural and professional knowledge that adult, educated migrants and refugees hold, are at risk of being discounted in contemporary learning and teaching processes. Whilst the very necessary co-curricular activities provided by student support can help with study skills, writing and even counselling, the complex processes whereby learners negotiate new content and link it to their existing reservoir of knowledge and experience, is arguably central to curricula and part of academic processes.

Bourdieu (1977) used the term cultural capital to analyse the ways in which inequality is reproduced. The valued knowledge and cues of one class (or culture) become the measure for all. In higher education, the legitimised knowledge of that class or culture becomes the

basis of the curriculum. In the literature on the internationalisation of higher education, there is significant debate about the exchange of culture and values, mutual understanding and respect for difference (Gu 2001) with the intent of academic cultures and the individuals engaged with them becoming part of a mutual and respectful exchange of ideas 'rather than the simple integration of knowledge from one culture into another' (Ryan 2012, p. 58). In practice however, this is much more complex than it seems. The logic of most academic curricula (as pointed out by du Plessis and Bisschoff 2007) is likely to be 'sequential, verbal, deductive and reflective' (p. 249), with expectation that students will draw consequences from the provided information and work out how to apply it. This is fine for students who share a similar logic, but can leave behind equally intelligent students whose scaffolding of concepts, thoughts and learning is quite different.

Equity, as practised, is a double-edged sword. It lets students into university, but then sets up a trajectory that inevitably privileges mainstream students. Whilst systemic approaches to equity are necessary, the narrative they are embedded in will shape overall outcomes. The grand narrative, now well critiqued by Lyotard (1984), Rose (1999) and others, is one of development and progress via which all populations across the world enter into the individualistic, materialist, aspirational lifestyle of the western middle class (Sellar and Gale 2009). In this narrative, universities are construed as culturally and class-neutral pathways for higher learning. Inherent to this narrative are notions that students, in all their diversity, are transformed through the educational process to reach their full potential, as (culturally-neutral) employees, professionals and leaders to actively contribute to economic development and enhance the competitive position of their countries in both national and world affairs (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). We might ask whether and how this dynamic can be altered.

To approach equity in a more meaningful way, or, as Gale (2009) says, through a more sophisticated understanding, requires a re-imagining of what higher education is about and how it takes place. The small case study in this paper makes no pretence of having achieved an alternative to the dominant teaching paradigm. Rather, it argues that when we try to re-imagine and enact what respectful higher education is, or might be, students may benefit significantly, but staff will be challenged on many fronts and will be likely to find that existing institutional supports are of little help, since they are designed for a different conception of higher education.

## CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

### The Logan Campus

Logan City is the most culturally diverse community in Queensland (Logan City Council [LCC] 2008). Its demographics reflect every wave of migration of the 20th and 21st centuries. Located in South East Queensland, this city is now home to some 180 ethnic communities, and is one of the fastest growing Local Government Areas (LGA) in the region (LCC 2008). Between 2002 and 2006, over 2,500 migrants and over 300 refugees from various backgrounds resettled in Logan (LCC 2008). Each incoming community has struggled to find employment (despite this factor being widely identified as critical to the settlement process (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007)), and has eventually settled and made

a significant contribution to social and economic life. Current groups resettling in Logan city include people from Burma, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and Horn of Africa countries. The process of war, danger, abruptly leaving home, long periods in refugee camps, loss of the status one had at home, the settlement experience of living in a low socioeconomic area, being unable to find a job, and of having one's children struggle with discriminatory attitudes in schools, can rob one of confidence and can undermine aspiration. Therefore, although people may have attended university in their home country, it is not necessarily easy for them to embrace that option in their new country.

Since the establishment of the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University in 1998, it has developed strong relations with the Logan community and its human services industry. Professional work experience placements are part of most courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and key strengths of the School. Indeed, the School aims to provide a combination of high academic standards with real world practice. Human services agencies are under increased pressures (mainly funding-based) and thus, supervising students can add to this. Nevertheless, field placements as well as shorter work experiences were found for all students discussed in this paper.

## THE GRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN COMMUNITY AND YOUTH WORK

The Graduate Certificate was originally conceptualised as a pathway for those employed in the human services industry who wanted a formal qualification, or for those with formal qualifications but seeking a change in career paths into human services. A core philosophy of this program is the integration of academic and practical knowledge to tackle contemporary human services issues. The Graduate Certificate was chosen as the vehicle for enhancing skilled migrant and refugee pathways for three reasons: firstly, it was a short program (40 Credit Points (CP) across two semesters); secondly, there was some flexibility around eligibility requirements (for instance, language prerequisites and the nature of prior qualifications); and thirdly, the program could be modified for the cohort relatively quickly and with minimal impact on related qualifications and programs.

## PURPOSE AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

This joint initiative by Skills Recognition (Queensland Department of Employment, Training and Employment) and Griffith University aimed to facilitate the transition of skilled migrants with overseas professional qualifications in health and community services occupations to health-related employment in Australia. The purpose of this partnership was to improve labour market participation through assisting participants to develop the community skills necessary to gain employment, orienting participants to the health and community workforce, and providing practice experiences and access to networks. It was hoped that the group of students would develop an enhanced understanding of Australian workplace culture to increase their employment prospects. Concurrently, the project would also expand and enhance Queensland's skills base and qualifications profile, encourage a culture of productive diversity in workplaces, as well as reduce delays in skills recognition and sustainable employment.

Skills Recognition made fee scholarships available for 10 students with health-related

professional qualifications. The funds were used to support students through an intensive English language and academic skills course provided by Griffith English Language Institute (GELI), which was taught around the program content. The scholarships also enabled the inclusion of a 200-hour work placement, as well as two core postgraduate academic courses introducing the Australian health and welfare systems to students. The group discussed here originated from a range of countries such as Afghanistan, Burundi, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Sudan, Serbia, Korea, Rwanda, Cook Islands, and Romania. They also came from diverse professional backgrounds including Science, Nursing, Social Work, Community Work, Psychology, Law, Medicine, and Literary Studies. Table 1 summarises the key issues the academic program sought to address:

Table 1: Issues addressed by the program.

| **Issues** | **Course would address by:** |
|---|---|
| Lack of English language skills. | Intensive English language support (verbal and written). |
| Lack of local work experience and lack of familiarity with Australian workplace and industry culture. | Exposure through course learnings, placement and industry visits. |
| Underdeveloped social networks. | Expanded networks through university and placement contexts. |
| Low confidence in applying for jobs. | Build confidence through skills, knowledge and practical experience. |
| Low awareness of employment opportunities, limited experience in seeking professional registration. | Build broader awareness through course content, field visits and student sharing. |

## PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The Graduate Certificate program structure (see Table 2) was modified to include GELI's intensive English language course, a one-week work experience placement in Semester 1, and a 200-hour work placement in Semester 2. The two core courses retained their usual curriculum.

| | **20 CP Courses** | **20 CP Courses** |
|---|---|---|
| **Semester 1** | Workplace Communication for Health Professionals<br><br>Language, academic skills and Communication– (taught by GELI) | Human Service Knowledge and Practice (core)<br><br>(Incorporating a one week workplace experience) |
| **Semester 2** | Community Work Practice (core). | 200 hour work placement. |

## RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Letters containing information on the program were sent to all people on Skills Recognition's contacts list. All employment as well as multicultural agencies in the Logan area, were approached as part of the marketing strategy. Community networks were accessed extensively. All eligible applicants were interviewed. In Semester 1, 10 students commenced the program and six completed their courses. In Semester 2, four commenced and all completed.

Several issues impacted on recruitment. Despite the offer of 10 complete fee scholarships, the initial response was relatively low. Whilst the idea of a targeted recruitment strategy was sound, the issue was linked to potential students' aspirations, which did not include university qualifications at the time. People knew they were overlooked for jobs despite having relevant skills; however, they had friends who had regained degrees in Australia and still could not get professional positions. Hence, they were not convinced that the outcomes of studying would justify the commitment. In some cases, they had settled for earning money through low-status jobs and were reluctant to reorganise their hopes and lives to attend university. Nevertheless, 10 people did enrol and although some pulled out in the first intake, 10 people completed the program.

## THE PROCESS OF STUDYING

This section discusses teaching staff reflections and student feedback. The overall experience required significant staff involvement:

> *I organised the program modifications, the marketing, fielded the inquiries, processed the applications, interviewed candidates, organised the induction and taught the two core courses* (staff member).

This staff member goes on to reflect on the pros and cons of having one person teaching the two core courses:

> *For this group of students – it might have benefitted them, because once we had a relationship, it provided a level of comfort and support. At the same time, it would have been beneficial to expose students to a broader range of staff teaching styles and values. Students probably would have loved to have a staff member whose own ethnic identity was something other than Anglo-Australian* (staff member).

Graduate Certificate courses are small, and the cohort formed the majority in the core courses, and the totality of GELI's English language course runs just for these students. This gave them a strong sense of themselves, and the confidence to bend the learning to their own needs:

> *I've often taught classes where one or two international students or one or two students who came to Australia as refugees form a minority in the class. They often sit silently, and face a*

> *fair bit of exclusion from other students, as they try to accommodate the learning processes of a new culture* (staff member).

By contrast, these students, already enlivened by the opportunity to study, were buoyed by each other and came as active learners to the classroom:

> *My first impression – the classroom was alive – vibrant – and keen to engage… We began with a map of the world, and people introduced themselves, their lives, their journey. They suggested we begin with greetings in the language of each group present. I knew from the start there would be no passive engagement here* (staff member).

The extent to which the core courses curricula were steeped in a western culture's way of viewing the world became immediately obvious. The students wanted to explore topics that linked to their lives. Assumptions could not be made about the baseline of shared understanding that provides a starting point for new learning. This group of students was not going to engage in learning in any way that was detached from their reality:

> *I quickly realised that the course materials were pegged at a conceptual or abstract level that was unacceptable as a starting point for these students. I needed to reassess what concepts were central to the curriculum and find ways into them that began with student experiences* (staff member).

Although this approach is, of course, central to any adult education program, the lecturer realised that pre-prepared lectures, web materials and even readings, whilst paying tribute to culture, were ill fitted to students' frames of reference:

> *Every week was a rush to re-frame materials, find ways of linking them to student stories, tease out key concepts, and find ways for students to explore them. For example: I made cards reflecting a human service scenario, that I knew from their personal stories they would understand, and getting them to discuss with each other how they could respond to the scenario in ways that reflected certain human service values or concepts. We used video triggers and role plays to explore the links between everyday issues they raised and key concepts* (staff member).

The students wanted to explore relationships, parenting, conflict, world issues, rights, power, ways of using authority, and the notion of change. They were using the opportunity to meet much wider learning needs than had been anticipated. Fortunately, this was all relevant to human services:

> *We had fathers role playing in class how they talk to their daughters about the ways they dress – and the class analysing the feelings, concepts, power dynamics and interpersonal skills evident in the role play* (staff member).

There was involvement at emotional, social and cultural levels as well as academic and work-related levels:

> *I could see that people were weighing up different cultural ways of doing things and testing them out. For example, we did many role plays around the concept of rights, particularly*

> *individual rights and how they do or can play out in marriage, in raising children and in public relations between authorities and families and individuals. Issues like domestic violence led to heated debate* (staff member).

Several students said that reading and thinking critically about what they read were the most challenging aspects:

> *In my country, study was about learning what the notes and lectures said. Here I find there are different ways of thinking about things and you have to read more and think through what the consequences are* (student).

Many found language the biggest challenge. Despite the intensive English language support, none of the students achieved an IELTS score of 6:

> *The language teacher was very helpful, she made it seem easy. But still reading the texts and writing papers was hard* (student).

The lecturer reflected that students' attempts to access student administration and support required lots of brokering from a supportive lecturer:

> *I found I had to anticipate admin deadlines, and prepare students because they somehow always missed them and at one time we had to muster the funds to pay a heap of late enrolment fees to a very unsympathetic administrative body* (staff member).

Walking alongside a less resourced group made it obvious how geared the system is to a more resourced student body. For example, at graduation time, buying tickets for families of spouses, siblings, five, six or seven children represented an overwhelming cost. Yet, the benefit of bringing family has lasting effects.

Students had different levels of experience and skill in relation to technology. For some, accessing material online and using computers for assessment was very challenging, while others were already adept.

The practicum was concurrently the most challenging and rewarding experience for students:

> *I was terrified of answering the phone. But before we went out we did a lot of work around what we feared and what strategies we could us to manage our fears. I worked out I could take a pause, think about what I would say, pick up the phone and speak slowly. If I could not understand I could ask the person to repeat it. So I soon overcame that fear* (student).

Many students brought family or community members to class, as they were keen to break down the barriers between their everyday lives and university. They also regularly planned celebrations and invited lecturers and other students.

Many of the students were already involved in their respective communities before commencing university. However, this intensified as students found they could draw on a

broader repertoire of skills as well as a wider network of potentially supportive people to enrich their community work. Several assumed significant leadership positions by the time they graduated. They sought the lecturer's support for community activities, and wanted to discuss their community work in class:

> *Having encouraged an adult learning environment, I was running to keep up with the students and struggling to manage the heightened classroom dynamics which overflowed the time allowance for classes, and meant other curricula items dropped off the agenda* (staff member).

Each member of the group was simultaneously struggling with significant responsibilities and demands at home. Maintaining stable housing, earning an income, supporting children through school, managing childcare, family relationships and community obligations both here and overseas, meant there was little time for study and reading. While all students face such challenges, the personal narratives shared in class offered glimpses of just how resilient those who arrive as refugees need to be:

> *I was breathless before the enormity of the stories people told, of their journeys, their losses, the hurts inflicted on them by other human beings* (staff member).

Students' own acculturation struggles became a core part of class discussions, and for the lecturer,

> *I learned from students of their experiences: with human service agencies – good and bad; of the mental health struggles in their families; of the impact of different rates of acculturation within families; and of the ways in which family members who have suffered such abuse, can turn abuse and exploitation on each other. A student, mother of six, rang to consult me about her assignment on the day her seventh baby was due. Three hours later she rang from hospital to say the baby was here and she would complete the assignment tomorrow* (staff member).

## FIELD PLACEMENTS

Four participants completed their practicums in community centres, two with the Queensland Department of Child Safety, two with MultiLink Community Services, one with a domestic violence refuge, and one with Southbank Institute of TAFE. All students received glowing reports. University staff made visits to all ten placements to ensure students were supported to make the most of the practicum opportunity. However, only one student secured employment from the work placement. It was hoped that this would eventuate for more students from this cohort. Enquiries with agencies and placement supervisors revealed how they were so short-staffed that, if a vacancy did come up, they would choose the most skilled person who could work with the least support across the most dimensions. Overall, the agencies most likely to employ graduates were multicultural organisations.

## OUTCOMES

*Anton came to the program as a father of four, unemployed, and a science graduate who had worked in a medical laboratory and clinic in his central African hometown. After many years in a refugee camp, he came to Australia and worked in a meat factory for a while, but had little stomach for it. Anton enrolled in the Graduate Certificate program. He struggled throughout the learning journey, not so much because of English language skills, but more because course concepts challenged his values and modus operandi. He wanted to apply rules to most situations and assert his authority as a way of addressing challenging situations. By the end of the program, and after many classroom discussions, much reading, assignment writing and significant exposure in the field, he admitted that the program had changed how he operated as a worker, husband, father, community member and human being. He said, "I now do not have to control everything. I know the value of communication, listening, and I can work things out with others, rather than insisting on one right way". He secured a full-time position as a case manager from his work experience placement and is still working and learning in that position. He is also studying for a Masters of Mental Health Practice at Griffith University.*

While four students dropped out, 10 completed the program. There have been three further enrolments of overseas-qualified students since the scholarship scheme was removed. These students are still completing the program. Six further students (from New Zealand, Afghanistan, Sudan and Samoa) were supported by another Griffith University partnership to complete the course.

Students were interviewed after completion and again nine months later. Several students are now studying and working, thus appear twice in Table 3 below. As can be seen, outcomes do not necessarily happen immediately. The students were supported with job applications, resumes and references well beyond their graduation. Two students were also seeking registration, one in psychology and the other in law. Both are still working on improving their English language skills to gain such registration.

Table 3: Graduate outcomes

| **Graduate outcomes N=10** | **Prior to program** | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Working full-time in professional human service role | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Studying at Masters level | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Studying at Bachelors level | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Part-time work in professional human service role | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Working but not in human service role | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Seeking Work | 9 | 7 | 4 | 1 |
| Accreditation | 0 | 0 | 1 | |
| Not Seeking Work | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

All students reported a range of outcomes: improved fluency in English, interpersonal skills and critical thinking; improved self-expression, self-esteem, self-confidence leading to improved quality of life; exposure to computer skills; and improved leadership skills to contribute effectively to their own community. Children of these students are now studying at the University.

Students felt that the program had a significant impact on their lives. They are now more inclined to listen and communicate much better in all contexts (home, community, and work). They have learned to work with young people, understand their issues, and help in family and community relationships. Students had an improved understanding of service systems and developed better networks overall.

Students also reported lasting family and community outcomes, thanks to their exposure to the course content and their involvement at university. The intensifying sense of achievement leading to their graduation ceremony indicated how much this event meant to these students, their families and communities. It was a time for rejoicing, and there was no question for any of them, despite the expense, that this was a very publicly celebrated event. Indeed, the students were well aware that their own achievement had opened previously unconsidered pathways for other family and community members.

All graduates felt that their lives in Australia benefitted from their participation in the course and their increased capacity to understand the mainstream culture. They developed an increased respect for social institutions from class discussions and readings. They have progressed to different stages of their lives, even if still seeking work.

During the second interviews, students who were studying further at university made the comparison, that they are now a minority, often the only, African (or other) student in their class. They find the environment less supportive, less enjoyable, and less receptive to their efforts to link learning to life experiences.

## DISCUSSION: TEACH THEM OUR WAY OR CO-CONSTRUCT NEW WAYS ?

Gale (2009, p. 11) challenges academia to re-imagine equity, by focusing on what happens between entry and outputs. He says:

- *First and foremost, student learning environments and experiences are such that students are appreciated for who they are and for how they identify themselves;*
- *Second, there are opportunities in these environments and experiences for all students to make knowledge contributions as well as to develop their understandings and skills;*
- *Third, all students are provided with genuine opportunities to shape how their learning environments and experiences are structured.*

The experience of this project brought home to us how challenging it is to translate pre-prepared curricula materials into learning experiences that communicate to students, and that what they bring, and who they are, really do matter. Staff members made particular

efforts to meet this cohort at their starting point, hear their stories and aspirations, acknowledge their concerns about embedded western cultural values in curricula and readings, work intensively with topics they were excited by, and vary assessments to allow for their capacities and interests. Staff learned a great deal.

On the second point, staff gradually understood that social work and human service curricula are deeply imbued with knowledge emerging from one culture's ways of life, and struggles to deal with the inequities and injustices embodied in that way of life. Yet these students came from different backgrounds, organised to address different internal struggles. Exploring together how different cultures address familiar life issues enabled students to contribute to knowledge and provided a pathway into analysis.

The third of Gale's propositions is the most difficult. On reflection, the learning and assessment environment is increasingly shaped by centralised university concerns for quality assurance and efficiency. Timetables do not allow for negotiations over how the learning environment will operate, and tight time schedules ensure that attempts to re-shape on the run are more likely to produce chaos than exciting learning environments. We often, not always, found that mainstream students demanded the learning environment they were familiar with, were impatient with the learning struggles of others, and disinterested in the biographical processes and the cultural learning they potentially offered. We struggled to manage these dynamics.

Our attempts to re-imagine equity in this small project were shaped by the tension between respect for what the students brought with them, and demands of an existing curriculum, all within the tight constraints of contemporary university practices. Our experience was that despite the goodwill of many people across the equity and student support domain, we were largely on our own with these tensions. Co-curricular supports, such as learning services, were essential in helping students with the academic skills required to meet the pre-established curriculum, but were not structured to assist the processes by which students hear, process, and apply information across quite different cultural domains.

For all of the energy invested into the project, staff felt they had created a short term 'pocket of change' within a wider system that was untouched by those changes (a phrase used to make this exact point in Magro and Ghorayshi's (2011) research). It would be very difficult to replicate the successful components of this program in the wider university setting, given large classes, heavy teaching, administration and research loads, and increasingly inflexible curricula. Yet, to the extent that we structure education in ways that require students to suspend who they are in order to engage effectively, we contribute to a context in which people's experiences do not matter, and in which those students who enter under equity recruitment processes, seem to matter least. Inadvertently, the micropolitics within a mainstream program can reproduce the discriminations and inequities students experience beyond university.

Structurally, support for small programs diminished over the period of this project. The Commonwealth Government ceased its fee support for graduate certificates, and program fees increased from $3,200 to $7,900. Once the fee scholarships ended, there was little

incentive for this program to be considered a viable equity pathway. The School was forced by low enrolments to combine small programs into one Graduate Certificate. There is still a potential equity pathway for overseas-qualified refugees, but it will cost them more, and will be likely to support them less.

If the equity paradigm embraced not only recruitment and outcomes, but also what happens along the way, higher education itself would have to change, bringing it more into line with social justice and social work and human service values and ethics. This is what Gale (2009, p. 10) refers to as a sophisticated approach to equity. It would result in: 'increased social justice', changed 'centre-periphery relations in the realm of knowledge', and 'multiple payoffs', including better educational processes, better educated students, more teaching satisfaction, better outcomes for universities, better outcomes for equity groups, diverse community benefits, a more dynamic social sphere, and vastly improved industry outcomes in terms of creativity and innovation. Would it cost more? Certainly, but a shift in paradigm implies cost savings as well as new costs.

## CONCLUSION

Small equity projects can operate outside dominant equity paradigms only through the efforts and commitment of staff. This can be as exhausting as it is rewarding. Nevertheless, at any one time, there are a number of small innovative initiatives through which universities link to struggling communities and to industry. The more we can join the dots between these initiatives, the easier it becomes to imagine equity differently. Perhaps these small projects, and the literature we produce from them, are a way of keeping a light burning until the pendulum swings in favour of a more expansive adult education system and a more sophisticated understanding of equity.

The transformation from 'chopping up chicken' to 'cap and gown' provided opportunity for this cohort of people to reclaim dignity and status and had multiple outcomes including increased confidence, greater contribution to their communities, changed appreciation of their new social setting, and more satisfying employment and career pathways for this cohort of skilled migrants and refugees.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 7. Connecting with students from new and emerging communities in social work education

**Dale Wache and Carole Zufferey**

Ms Dale Wache, Academic Development, Learning and Teaching Unit, University of South Australia.
email: Dale.Wache@unisa.edu.au

Dr Carole Zufferey, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

Students from new and emerging communities enrolled in university can face a number of barriers to learning in the context of Australian higher education. It is important for social work educators to understand the challenges faced by these students as they work to improve their education and employment opportunities with the ultimate goal of helping their communities, and the Australian society.In the study reported here, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2011-2012 with seven African students. Key findings from the study included that students were committed to improving their education for the betterment of their communities; their prior educational experiences did not always equip them for tertiary learning; computer use and online technology were particular challenges; and the formal supports provided by the university were not well accessed. However, informal peer learning groups were useful. The findings suggest that social and academic support and learning spaces provided by tertiary education institutions could be more inclusive of students from new and emerging communities. This aim of this article is to discuss the findings in order to increase understanding and improve teaching practices when working with students from new and emerging communities

**Keywords:** *social work education; new and emerging communities; African students; learning expectations; refugee experiences*

## INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, there are increasing numbers of migrants and refugees forced to leave their homes because of conflict, disaster and persecution (Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia 2010). In 2011, 42.5 million people became refugees (15.2 million); were internally displaced peoples (26.4 million); or were in the process of seeking asylum (895, 000). The majority were women and children. In Australia, in 2009-2010, 13,770 refugee and humanitarian visas were issued, divided between 9,236 offshore refugee and humanitarian visas and 4,534 onshore visas. Within Australia, the main source regions for offshore refugee and humanitarian visas were Asia (38.6%), Middle East and South-West Asia (31.8%) and Africa (29.2%). This article reports on a study that specifically explored the expectations and experiences of students from African backgrounds in social work and welfare education, drawing out implication for students from new and emerging communities.

## NEW AND EMERGING COMMUNITIES

The Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA) define new and emerging communities as communities who are small in number and newly arrived to Australia with a significant increase in numbers over the last five years. People from new and emerging communities may have limited established family networks, support systems, community structures and resources (compared with more established communities). They may be from a refugee background and may have experienced displacement and trauma as a result of civil unrest. They may have had limited access to education and skills due to displacement and can have limited English language skills (FECCA 2010). Furthermore, community members may be unfamiliar with mainstream government services available in Australia (FECCA 2010). Therefore it is acknowledged that new and emerging communities have particular educational support needs, in comparison to communities who have settled in Australia in previous decades.

The 2008 Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales 2008) set the sector a target of 40% for Australian 25 to 34 year olds to achieve a bachelor degree, with 20% of undergraduate enrolments in higher education to come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley et al. 2008). An interesting feature of the current student diversity in higher education is growing numbers of students from refugee backgrounds. Within the last ten years, students from refugee backgrounds have steadily increased at Australian universities (Earnest, Housen, and Gilleatt 2007; Harris and Marlowe 2011). There is a dearth of academic literature about the experiences of people from new and emerging communities and refugee backgrounds in higher education, particularly students from African backgrounds (Harris and Marlowe 2011). Overall, small numbers of African students on humanitarian visas enrolled at Australian universities.

Table 1: Numbers of African student enrolments on a humanitarian visa

| Name of University | Number of Students in Africa on humanitarian Visas | Date | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Flinders University | 56 | 2007 | Harris and Marlowe 2011 |
| Queensland University of Technolgy | 50 | 2011 | Lawson et al 2011 |
| Murdoch University | 49 (additional 13 in 2008-2009) | 2007, 2008, 2009 | Silburn et al 2010 |
| Curtin University | Yearly student intake: 9 in 2007 18 in 2008 12 in 2009 | 2007, 2008, 2009 | Silburn et al 2010 |

In 2012, at the University of South Australia, the total number of African students with Permanent Humanitarian Visas was 48. Students born in Africa with permanent residency, who were Australian citizens, totalled 335 (University of South Australia 2012). In 2012, the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, at the University of South Australia, had 61 students enrolled from African countries in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and 36 of these students were enrolled in undergraduate Social Work programs. These students came from 13 African countries (Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and similar to other universities, the majority of students were from Sudan (21 students).

Within the African student refugee population there is significant diversity, including mature-aged students (Silburn et al. 2010, p.21), students who have suffered considerable trauma as a result of conditions leading up to their refugee status (Lawson et al 2011), students who were educated professionals prior to fleeing their home country (Morrice 2009), students who have incomplete education due to civil, political and military instability (Burnett and Peel 2001; Davies and Webb 2000) and students who have experienced ad hoc educational opportunities such as short workshops provided in refugee camps (Jeppsson and Hjern 2005). As humanitarian visa holders and new Australians, many African students with a refugee background experience unemployment (Harris and Marlowe 2011) or if employed, work in low status jobs (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). They often are committed to sending money back to their country of origin (RiakAkuei 2005).

There is limited Australian research on the experiences of students from African and refugee backgrounds engaged in tertiary education. Earnest et al (2010) conducted

research with students from refugee backgrounds (Afghanistan and Africa) at Curtin University in Western Australia and Monash, Deakin and RMIT in Victoria. That study found that students experienced barriers including accessing tertiary education, they were unprepared for university 'academic writing', and had trouble adapting to the different styles of teaching (where Australian styles were more student centred, requiring more independent learning). They had limited English language proficiency skills, were not skilled in the use of technology, were unfamiliar with services provided at university, and they experienced exclusion or culturally inappropriate responses to their needs (Earnest et al. 2010). These findings complement studies in Perth by Earnest et al. (2007, 2010), and recommendations by Joyce et al (2010) and Silburn et al. (2010). In South Australia, Harris and Marlowe (2011) conducted a study on the encounter between academic staff and students from African refugee backgrounds. That study found that students experienced external pressures, such as transport issues, disruptive home environments, financial pressures, high community expectations, and worry about family left behind (Harris and Marlowe 2011). Staff expressed concerns that existing support services were not meeting the needs of students who needed additional support for English language writing skills and comprehension, resulting in significant pressures on students and misunderstandings between educators and students (Harris and Marlowe 2011). However, no Australian research was found which specifically examined the experiences and expectations of African students in social work education in tertiary education.

## AFRICAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This article focuses on a study that explored the experiences of African students in social work education as a case study for examining the teaching and learning issues affecting many students from new and emerging communities. The main aim of the project reported here was to gain a deeper understanding of African students' expectations and experiences of higher education and to inform teaching and learning approaches in social work education. The project was designed around three unknowns:

- Why African students from refugee backgrounds came to university to study social work and human services
- What their experience was once they were studying
- What they thought could be done to better support their learning.

The University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee approved this study and the research was made possible by a University of South Australia Teaching and Learning Grant. Initially, three information sessions were held, advertised by circulating flyers and emails (with variable attendance from 1 student to over 15 students). In one of the information sessions, a student noted that the language and cultural barriers expressed and experienced by African students also were relevant to students from other non-English backgrounds and new and emerging communities. After the information sessions, and repeated emails being circulated to invite students to participate, in 2011 and 2012, a small number of students volunteered to participate in individual interviews. There were

a number of ethical dilemmas for the research team, primarily related to interviewing students who were known to the researchers in another capacity, such as lecturer, program director or tutor. The power dynamics between student and teacher were taken into account, by deciding that members of the team who had taught the students were not to be involved in the face to face interviews. The sample consisted of six male participants and one female. After the information sessions, and emails being circulated to invite students to participate, the sample consisted of six male participants and one female. All of the even face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted by a member of the research team who did not know the students. Participants were from Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Congo, Burundi, Liberia and Rwanda. The semi-structured interviews explored areas related to the educational aspirations of participants, students' learning experiences at the University, and sought recommendations for responding to the learning needs of African students. Whilst there were a number of diverse barriers facing students from African backgrounds, the findings reported relate specifically to the teaching and learning needs of the students.

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) describe six stages of the thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. The face to face interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were analysed thematically, by identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The interviews were analysed inductively and coded into main themes that were relevant to the research questions. In the transcribing process, responses were listed under each question asked to the participants, such as, why they enrolled in the social work program, what had been their experiences of studying at university, what supports them in their learning and what barriers they had experienced. Connolly (2003, p.106) provides a qualitative data analysis model that includes three phases: the Generative, Interpretative and Theorising phase. Using this model to explain the data analysis process, the initial phase of the data analysis involved examining each sentence and paragraph and coding data to generate themes, such as expectations, employment, education, supports, and barriers. These themes were then grouped and translated into more general and abstract conceptual categories, such as 'improving future employment prospects' and 'creating a better society', which reflected patterns found across the interview data (Connolly 2003, p.109). Finally, drawing on previous studies and literature as well as our knowledge of university policies and resources, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings were highlighted (Connolly 2003, p. 110).

Prior to the interviews, students completed a questionnaire to provide information about their educational background, languages spoken, basis for applying to university and the degree they were enrolled in. The findings from the paper questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews are discussed below.

## FINDINGS

The responses to the paper questionnaire revealed that:

- Participants came to Australia on migrant as well as humanitarian visas after living for many years in refugee camps

- Their main form of entry into the University was via TAFE once they had completed either a Certificate 4 in Community Services, a Diploma in Counselling or a Diploma in Community Welfare

- Most had participated in the 510 hours of free English language instruction which is offered to them during the first 2 years of their stay (Refugee Council of Australia 2012)

- A few participants had completed the equivalent of Year 12 in another language or country

- They were enrolled in a double degree with the Bachelor of Social Work, Social Work as a single degree, or a Bachelor of Social Science

- All students were bilingual and some students spoke up to five different languages

- Students were, in the main, Australian citizens.

The students who participated in this study had a range of expectations and experiences of university life, social work education and supports provided for students, both positive and negative.

**Expectations and experiences of African students in social work education**

The students interviewed had a number of expectations that tertiary education would improve their future prospects and opportunities and positively contribute to their own communities and a better society. Students were studying social work or human services, to have a 'better future':

> *'I wanted to change my education, be more positive. I wanted to educate myself so I could have a better future and opportunities'* (Interview 1)

This included improving educational and employment opportunities:

> *'[I want to] upgrade my skills; get the knowledge, to get a good career'* (Interview 3)

As well, the students interviewed were keen to help their own communities, in Australia and internationally:

> *'It is important for the African diaspora to help with issues like literacy and health back home but I am an Australian citizen so if I went to Africa to teach, it would be through an Australian organisation or NGO'* (Interview 1)

However, educational systems in Africa and prior education and learning did not always prepare students for the 'academic' and independent learning requirements of tertiary education:

> *'The system of learning here is different. There are no assignments in Africa only exams.'* (Interview 1)

*'I thought coming from TAFE I would be able to do it OK…'* (Interview 5);

*'At TAFE you are told exactly what to do but here you have to understand it in your own way'* (Interview 6)

All students interviewed explained that they had little experience with computers and online technology and found they needed computer literacy assistance:

*'Most African students come from refugee backgrounds, they have been living in camps where there is no computer technology'* (Interview 5)

Furthermore, institutional learning support from the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) was not well accessed (or understood):

*'I don't really see the role of the learning adviser compared to what I get from lecturers and tutors'* (Interview 3)

*'When you go there are only certain times you can see someone and they don't match people'* (Interview 3)

*'You have to book in advance…I need to have time to do the assignment…but then there isn't enough time to get help from them…'* (Interview 5)

In contrast, informal peer support was found to be useful:

*'We are non-English speaking background…you can have an idea but the way you interpret it is different…unless you have information from different people…we try to have a lot of friends and have group work and work together'* (Interview 1)

*'If we really don't understand a question we discuss it…with Australian and African students'* (Interview 5)

Despite connecting with peers, African students did not feel that the University provided culturally appropriate social experiences, for example,

*'…the Uni is supposed to be inclusive but it wasn't what I expected – Western society is not like the African way, African people are very social. I joined Unilife but they didn't organise anything to bring people together. It's not very multicultural really. They should invite people from different ethnic groups to get involved in organising events, not just put things in place and invite them'* (Interview 3)

Furthermore, some students felt excluded in student study groups such as tutorials due to prejudice:

*'There is some prejudice if you are someone who looks different'* (Interview 5)

> *'Sometimes in group work my contributions aren't listened to, this is hard, it makes the motivation go down, it makes it hard to get back up and contribute'* (Interview 6)

**Supports for learning**

In relation to the supports that could assist African students, interview participants raised issues such as more equitable assessment processes that focused less on written academic English expression, computer literacy workshops specific to each course, ability to 'get help' early, and clarity on assignments and on the different roles of the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) and tutors in the School.

Some students felt that academic staff could provide extra assistance to African students by considering whether the student has understood key concepts, rather than focusing only on English language proficiency.

> *'When marking assignments from African students, tutors should consider the strength of the argument and not just focus on grammar'* (Interview 5)

This finding also was evident in Harris and Marlowe's 2011 study in which students felt that some staff members did go out of their way to help them but others did not respond to their request for clarification. Some felt 'silenced' and that lecturers 'could take time to understand the needs of particular students' coming from backgrounds (who have not gone through the Australian education system), by not only focusing on grammar and written expression but whether or not they understood the content such as application of legislation (Harris and Marlowe 2011, p.190).

With regard to support for computer literacy, students felt that their knowledge improved over time but one student suggested that workshops could be course based:

> *'Computer workshops are useful but there should be more of them and perhaps a separate one for each course'* (Interview 6)

The technology, English language, and academic barriers experienced by students impacted on their abilities to progress through their studies. Early intervention was suggested by this student:

> *'Help needs to start from the outset of your studies so you can get yourself prepared and know exactly what you need to do. Otherwise your GPA will be down and you can't do things like Honours'* (Interview 6)

In regards to the Learning and Teaching Unit, it was suggested that:

*'It would be useful if the different roles of the Learning Advisers and the tutors/lecturers at the School were made clearer'* (Interview 4)

Overall, the findings of this small exploratory study have implications for developing institutional strategies to improve the transition from TAFE to university, for providing English language and computer literacy support and to further develop academic literacies

across university programs. With regard to teaching styles and strategies, it is important for academic lecturers and tutors to consider how group work is arranged to ensure inclusivity and the preparation of students for group work. Furthermore, when social events and activities are provided to involve students in life on campus, the participation of students from culturally diverse backgrounds in the development of these social events would assist to address the cultural differences of students at the university.

**Limitations of the study**

This pilot study has obvious limitations such as sample size. The findings are not generalisable to the experiences of all students from new and emerging communities in social work education. However, although the sample group was small (seven students), the study provided enough data/information to build a picture that provides an understanding of African students' experience and expectations of Australian higher education. This is an exploratory study that begins to examine the teaching and learning needs of students from new and emerging African communities and may highlight potential areas for improvement in supporting culturally diverse students.

**Implications for supporting students from new and emerging communities**

The barriers found in this study involving African students also are relevant to students from other new and emerging communities. The Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA) advocates for a number of strategies to support the re-settlement of people from new and emerging communities in Australia. These include recognising the diverse needs of new and emerging communities, providing effective settlement services, eradicating racism, discrimination and bullying, providing appropriate healthcare, improving education and training outcomes and enhancing workforce capabilities, which includes cross cultural training for staff and inclusive recruitment strategies (FECCA 2010). These suggestions by FECCA are broader than teaching and learning strategies but foundational to working towards an inclusive society and community.

This project gathers the perspectives of minority students in a predominantly white and Western educational environment. Implications for social work education that emerged from the findings of this project are fundamental social justice issues. They are primarily concerned with equity, access, support and inclusive practices. Social work academics seek to critically reflection on ways of improving social work practice and social work education. As Noble (2003, p.95) notes, multiculturalism 'poses social work with one of its greatest challenges in the 21st century' because social work education needs to embrace the changing cultural landscape in Australian society'. All social work students need to be prepared for practice and placements in an 'increasingly multicultural community' (Noble, 2003, p.95).However, contemporary Western based curricula in social work education continue to raise questions about whose values, traditions, practices and knowledges are being privileged (Holtzhausen, 2011). The production of knowledge in academia has been contained within normative, predominantly white, masculine and middle class institutional structures (Dill and Kohlman 2012), which can create an 'illusion of inclusion' in social work education because the Eurocentric organisational culture often remains the same (Roberts and Smith 2002, p. 196).'Transformative' strategies can include building cross-

cultural relationships, changing thought processes, building community strengths and developing cross-cultural mutuality (Roberts and Smith 2002 p. 205).

This study suggests that the teaching and learning environment of universities as well as teaching staff and students may not be culturally prepared to engage with difference. The implications for social work educators are that teaching and learning activities should be culturally inclusive and enable all students to develop intercultural practice. All students need to be valued for the knowledge and experience they bring with them and encouraged to broaden their understandings of the intercultural aspects of social work by actively engaging with students from diverse cultures (Noble 2003; Gair et al. 2003). Equally, the internationalisation of the social work curriculum ideally would prepare students for practice in a multicultural environment and develop both students' and educators' intercultural understandings.

## CONCLUSION

Social work and welfare educators are working in increasingly culturally diverse classrooms. This diversity requires us to reflect on our current teaching practices, to ensure we provide supportive learning environments, where all student, and particularly disadvantaged students from new and emerging communities, can be successful at university and in tertiary studies. This purpose of this research was to improve the learning outcomes of students from new and emerging communities, by outlining potential learning supports identified by students themselves, to improve services provided by tertiary education sectors such as Australian universities. Whilst this study was small, and focussed primarily on African students, the findings resonate with findings from studies in other Australian universities that highlight similar areas for improvement (Earnest et al. 2007, 2010; Joyce et al. 2010; Silburn et al. 2010; Harris and Marlowe 2011). These areas of improvement are broadly related to providing culturally appropriate supports in the first years of study, for developing 'academic' English and computer literacy skills as well as focusing on transitioning from TAFE and other educational settings, where expectations are different to university. Further research with a larger sample of students from new and emerging communities, and gathering the perspectives of other stakeholders such as social work academics across Australian universities seems implicated. Researching the perspectives of social work educators would complement this study, to further discuss and develop inclusive teaching strategies that would support students from new and emerging communities in their learning. Furthermore, the issues encountered by African students whilst completing their social work placement could be an area for further research.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 8. Social work supervision and discrimination

**Norah Hosken**

Norah Hosken, Social Work, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria. email: nhosken@deakin.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

This article outlines a 'mutual inquiry' based approach to supervision using techniques, concepts and insights drawn from social work supervision experience, a current Ph.D. institutional ethnographic research project and intersectionality. Good supervision of social work students and staff can progress efforts towards identifying and combatting discrimination, important steps towards a more socially just society. Reducing discrimination also improves the quality of service provision with clients, often members of the most marginalised groups in the community. Supervision to reduce discrimination needs to be shaped by humility rather than the more popular goal of competence. Humility is fostered when a supervisor and supervisee consider their work together from the standpoints of clients, and purposefully contemplate their complicities in the creation and maintenance of discriminatory practices. This supervision approach aims to create the vision, and ability, to challenge discriminatory policies and practices as they are normalised and inflect at individual, supervision, organisational and societal levels.

***Keywords:*** *Social Work Supervision; Cultural Humility; Intersectionality; Discriminatory Practices; Institutional Ethnography*

## INTRODUCTION

A mutual inquiry approach to supervision to reduce discrimination is based on humility using concepts and practices drawn from experience, intersectionality and institutional ethnography. The 'mutual respect inquiry approach' (Hosken 2010, p.3) developed from my welfare and social work education, teaching and supervision practice with many students and supervisees across similarities and differences. This approach is useful in learning-based relationships, acknowledging the reciprocal exchange of information and knowledge, and the two-way experience of the vulnerabilities and growth inherent in that exchange (Hosken 2012). This approach invites a supervisor and supervisee to consider their work together from the standpoints of clients, and to purposefully contemplate their complicities in the creation and maintenance of discriminatory practices. Supervision to reduce discrimination needs to be shaped by humility rather than the more popular goal of competence, particularly for those supervisors and supervisees from dominant ethnic/cultural locations. This approach assists supervisors to foster a climate of questioning and reflection with supervisees necessary to co-create insights into racialised, gendered, classed, ableist, heterosexist, ageist, urbanist and other discriminatory policies and practices as they are normalised and inflect at individual, supervision, organisational and societal levels.

I present this article without certainty, valuing the place of doubt in written communication, in the same way I value doubt in social work supervision and practice. The evolving approach described here aims to inspire, support and raise questions for discussion. The article seeks to complement and augment some of the excellent resources relevant for social work supervision in Australia (see, e.g., Cooper 2002, Maidment and Cooper 2002, Ung 2002, Cousins 2004, Moreton-Robinson 2004, Hair and O'Donoghue 2009, Noble and Irwin 2009, Davys and Beddoe 2010, Bennett, Zubrzycki, and Bacon 2011, Cleak and Wilson 2013).

## AN APPROACH TO SUPERVISION THAT CONNECTS THE PERSONAL, CULTURAL/ORGANISATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL/POLITICAL LEVELS

### Supervision to acknowledge the links between discrimination and disadvantage

My 30 years of experience as an Anglo social worker, supervisor and educator across three Australian states resonates with research documenting that discrimination and oppression, particularly based on race/ethnicity/culture (AIHW 2009, Hosken 2010, Markus 2011, VicHealth 2012b, a); gender (AHRC 2009, Mitchell 2011); social class (Di Bartolo 2005, Pearce, Down, and Moore 2008, Goldingay and Hosken 2012); disability (Lamont 2009; VEOHRC 2012); and sexual orientation (AHRC 2011) are primary, or contributing, causes of the inequality, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, violence and disadvantage that restrict people's life chances, often resulting in their welfare service contact. This calibrates with the finding of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission of 'the well-established link between discrimination and disadvantage …and life chances' (2012, p.17) .

I also observed that many social workers in government and non-government organisations, including me, were often not good at seeing and challenging our own, and our employing agency's, discriminatory supervision and direct service practices. Recent changes in the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2010) Code of Ethics commit social workers to:

*Prevent and eliminate negative discrimination and oppression based on grounds such as: national origin, ethnicity, culture, appearance, language, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation or preference, ability, age, place of residence, religion, spirituality, political affiliation and social, economic, health/genetic, immigration or relationship status'(AASW 2010, p.19) [and to use] 'culturally competent, safe and sensitive practice' [to achieve greater social justice]* (AASW 2010, p. 5).

This is a generally positive, yet challenging, development for many social work supervisors and practitioners as they attempt to engage with theory and practice across a range of similarities, differences, oppressions and privileges. In this article, I suggest that although introduced into the AASW Code of Ethics with good intentions, cultural competence is, perhaps, not the best practice goal for Anglo/Euro Western, middle-classed, able-bodied, heterosexual, urban, social work supervisors in Australia. The concern is that requiring cultural competence can unwittingly invite unwarranted arrogance across cultural, class, ability, sexual orientation and geographical social locations, particularly in my ethnic/racial/cultural group. For those social workers who are Anglo or Euro Australians, invitations to cultural competence can affirm ingrained, often unexamined, colonialist attitudes that 'white' people have the ability, and right, to learn and become competent in another's culture.

## SUPERVISION AND THE VALUE OF DOUBT

In supervision I have found introducing new ideas through discussion based on stories of experience, often has more impact than only suggesting supervisees to read articles, reports, policy manuals, or by commencing with prescriptive definitions. Through sharing of experiences that highlights how problems were explored and understood in different ways, supervisors can model for supervisees a willingness to expose their own learning journeys of doubt, imperfection and vulnerability. This can set a tone for supervision that encourages honest and mutual exploration in a climate of safety where doubt and 'mistakes' can be acknowledged and discussed, rather than hidden to avoid supervisor, team leader or agency detection . In a risk-averse society, the significant pressure on social workers to not make 'mistakes', to make 'defensible' (Beddoe 2010, p.1282), rather than good, decisions and plans for/with clients contributes to poor practice. Supervisors who are willing to acknowledge the 'best guess' nature of social work challenge and resist the push for certainty that is ideologically entrenched in the neo-liberal, marketised, risk averse, consumerist, society which shapes the Australian human service sector (Wallace and Pease 2011).

## SUPERVISION, RESISTANCE AND A REVITALISED PROFESSIONALISM

In a supervision space that challenges the limitations, and associated damages, required by the pretence of certainty, it is possible to voice doubts, and admit that social workers are often in positions of considering the least worst, rather than the best, options with

clients. 'Options' are rationed in the racialised, gendered, classed, heterosexist, ableist and urbanist Australian welfare, social, political and economic systems. Supervisors who share their imperfections enable a relationship space that can encourage dialogue to co-develop and deepen understandings of discriminatory practices for supervisor and supervisee, and clients. Supervisors and supervisees who find discriminatory practices are then ethically bound to challenge and change them (AASW 2010). My experience is that this form of resistance provides social workers with a 'revitalised professionalism' (Wallace and Pease 2011, p.139) enabling them to work 'in and against' (LEWRG 1980) the neo-liberal business model that shapes their employing organisations. This supervision approach also encourages building alliances with other workers in the same organisation, and in other agencies, who seek change to improve social work practice and social justice. With a focus on genuine client-participatory client-feedback mechanisms, alliances with clients, self-help, community, advocacy and service user people, groups and organisations is encouraged. This, then, is an approach to social work supervision, and social justice, which connects across the personal, cultural/ organisational and structural/ political domains.

## DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES

Three inter-related stories are used, based on supervision and practice experiences, to introduce the concept of discriminatory practices, concentrating on racialised practices as an illustrative example. All, or parts, of these stories have been used in my supervision sessions with supervisees. By the time I worked in women's refuges I had already learned something about discrimination for women and for low-income people, from my own working-class girlhood. Despite my experiences of harassment, abuse and discrimination, and my university education, at 22 years of age, I had difficulty countering the popular proposition that women brought discriminatory outcomes (such as sexual harassment, abuse, rape, violence, lower income levels, less decision making power, higher rates of diagnosed mental illness, less access to good jobs, lack of representation in senior government or corporate positions) on themselves. My experience of discovering how practices are racialised assisted me to understand gendered practices.

### One: The story of seeing a white woman

After graduating, I worked several years in the women's refuge sector in Western Australia. As workers, we helped women and children secure housing when they were ready to leave the refuge, and would visit to help with settling into their new residences. After returning from one of these follow-up visits to the dilapidated state housing commission high rise flats, my co-worker, in an exasperated and sad voice said, 'Norah, you need to do something about your people, it is just not right that you leave each other all alone'. I did not initially comprehend who 'my people' were. I remember thinking that perhaps my Aboriginal co-worker thought I was leaving my mother alone too much. It then occurred to me that my co-worker was referring to 'my people' as the white, Anglo women and children in the flats, and that, to my co-worker, this was my racial/ethnic group and therefore my responsibility. I had emerged from a social work degree without realising that I was a member of a racial/ethnic group in Australia that was dominant, and whose cultural practices and values regarding family might have some systemic deficiencies. The ideology of the Western nuclear family was the only, overtly or subtly considered the 'norm' or best, model for

family life embedded in every institution and practice that we, as refuge workers and residents, encountered and advocated against. As a young social worker in a non-traditional setting I did not have any formal supervision in those years, so used what I could learn from service users and co-workers to improve understandings of myself, my practice and how society worked.

**Two: The story of seeing racialised practices**

After realising that I belonged to a racial/ethnic group that was dominant in Australia whose own customs, and ways of doing things, were privileged and normalised, I was a little more aware of the impact of my own ingrained understandings on people who were culturally different to me. The particular women's refuges in which I worked in city and remote areas had between 20 to 50% usage by Aboriginal women, 10 to 20% usage by minority cultural background women, and the remainder by women of Anglo backgrounds. The women from Aboriginal and minority culture backgrounds usually had more children than the Anglo women, and waited much longer for state housing as a result. It took me a while to comprehend that the design, stock and allocation of housing was predicated on the white Anglo family ideology that valorised and normalised a nuclear family with two or three children. There were hardly any four or more bedroom dwellings, and state housing policy and practice did not allow Aboriginal and minority culture background women to choose to be 'under housed' in dwellings with fewer bedrooms than the authorities deemed appropriate. The women from Aboriginal and minority culture backgrounds and their children waited, watched and despaired as the white women and their children moved out of the refuge, and they were left behind. From the everyday experience of witnessing despair I saw and understood the construction and allocation of public housing as a racialised practice in action. I considered this a racialised practise as the Indigenous and minority culture women and children were more adversely affected, than the Anglo Australian women and children in the same situation. This view is consistent with the United Nations and the Australian Human Rights Commission view that practices can be gendered, racialised and classed and therefore sexist, racist and classist with, or without, intent being present on behalf of those designing them to be so. The measure is if these practices have 'an unequal effect on the rights and freedoms of the individual or group involved' (HREOC 2000).

**Three: The story of how discriminatory practices inflect**

Some years later, employed in a community legal centre, I was working with a homeless, single, older Indigenous man with significant health problems who said he needed a stable income, housing and health care. At our first meeting I mentally estimated his age to be about 70, and was surprised to find out he was aged 51. For many reasons he could not live with family or kin in his community. He did not meet the Commonwealth and State policy eligibility criteria for the aged pension or a 'pensioner flat' as he was not 65 years of age. I calculated that this required age limit of 65 years for pensions and housing was predicated on an eight year gap to the 'average' life expectancy for Anglo Australians which for males in 1987 was about 73 years, contrasted with Indigenous Australian males at about 57 years (Thomson 1984). Applying this rationale and evidence I calculated my client, with a life expectancy of 57 years, should have been eligible for the age pension, and a pensioner flat, at 49 years of age. The state housing commission and social security did not accept this

argument on application, or at review and appeal. This client died at 52 years of age, not long after one of the unsuccessful reviews by the state housing commission. He was a man originally from a rural community, where the life expectancy was not even the 'average' for Indigenous Australians. My client was never surprised at this normalisation of whiteness. However, this was a vivid, painful and enduring memory of realisation for me as a young, Anglo-social worker of the discriminatory impact of the racialised, and inflecting, nature of Australian housing and income security policy.

## SOCIAL WORK ORGANISATIONS AND THE 'MYTHICAL NORM'

Intersectionality using critical, feminist and post-colonial perspectives offers ways to conceptualise supervision, privilege and power to see and understand discrimination. This can encourage supervisors to develop their own understandings and practices to address the normalisation of whiteness, middle-classedness, able-bodiedness, urbanism, and heterosexuality in Australian institutions (the family, marriage, law, etc.) and in social work organisations, policy, theory and practice. This is particularly important for those supervisors and supervisees who experience racial, and other, privileges in Australia. Supervisors can then use, and share, their own tools of exploration to foster this process with supervisees.

The need to invite the views of all those involved and affected by social work supervision, and to privilege the views of those with the least power in those situations, is advocated. This is a participatory social justice measure which can also contribute to the opportunities for people who experience privileges to develop their capacity to comprehend the existence and nuances of discriminatory practices. Discriminatory practices are usually not easily visible to those with the most privileges, those who are closest to societal and organisational 'mythical norms'. Lorde (1999, p.362) describes a mythical norm as 'a stereotype that is perpetuated by society, against which everyone else is measured'. Samuels (2003, p.8) expanding on Lorde's concept explains:

*This myth is perpetuated and believed, creating a hierarchy under which everyone else falls… The norm is mythical because it is a social construction, the particular traits in that myth arguably do not inherently represent power, rather it is only because we have been taught to believe that they do, that those who hold power in our society tend to possess those characteristics.*

When I have asked social work students over the past three years to describe to me what people look like who are normal, and what people look like who have the most power in Australia, they consistently respond with some or all of: white, middle-classed, heterosexual, able-bodied, urban, city dwelling, Christian acceptable, male. This is the mythical norm for Australian society. The interaction of societal and welfare discourses and mythical norms (among other factors) produce ideologies and expectations about what a 'good' Australian, a 'good' social worker, and a 'good' welfare client should be. These ideologies and expectations are then enacted, often without intent, to produce racialised, gendered, classed, heterosexist, ableist and urbanist practices in the context of social work agencies and services.

### Developing maps to trace discriminatory practices

In my current Ph.D. research project I have learned how institutional ethnography (Smith 2005) can provide the conceptual framework and tools to identify and map discriminatory practices at the organisational level. I intend to provide details of this research approach and mapping tool as relevant for human service welfare organisations in a further publication, as it is beyond the word limit here. In short, this research and mapping commences from the lived experiences of clients and workers. It investigates and details what the work of being a client and staff member of the agency involves, from which connections are then traced to the organisations, policies and practices (DeVault and McCoy 2002 p. 755). From clients' and workers' narratives, and from organisational texts, it is possible to identify what the norms of an ideal client and worker are, and how the standardising operations that arise from government policies, laws, regulations, professional, administrative and managerial discourses institutionally organise the exercise of power to shape the work of being a client or staff member.

This map of discrimination can then be used by individual supervisors, supervisees, teams, and managers to improve practices to become non-discriminatory. In addition, the map of discriminatory practices can be useful to challenge claims by dominant group members that discriminated-against group members are somehow more responsible for their own poorer life opportunities and outcomes, than those with the power to create or perpetuate discriminatory practices.

## BEING ACCOUNTABLE TO SUPERVISEES AND CLIENTS

I suggest that supervision and practice that is grounded in, and focused on, social justice is more likely to occur, and be maintained, when accountability for deciding what is good practice commences from the views and experiences of those with the least privileges and/or power in those particular situations - usually supervisees and clients. In some situations, of course, supervisees or clients may have, and exercise, situational power related to aspects of privilege such as a male supervisee using greater physical size and strength embedded in patriarchal values of dominance, to intimidate a female supervisor.

When I have supervised, or am in direct client and community practice, I find the easiest method for feedback is to listen and try to change those aspects that require the least risk or change for me at the personal/professional level. When supervisee or client feedback has been confrontational; created embarrassment; said with anger; created disappointment; assessed as unfair or wrong; and/or painfully accurate; it can be difficult to hear, accept and act on. Often work colleagues, out of kindness and loyalty, support a social worker's own assessments of supervisee or client feedback. An example is when a client who was very angry with a decision I had made yelled at me that I was racist. I did not initially think that I had been racist and felt hurt and embarrassed. My co-workers who had witnessed the event supported me by agreeing I had not been racist, and they problematised the client's behaviour. It took me almost 18 months to allow myself to see that, in fact, I had been racist and that I needed to work to change myself, and some of the agency practices, that allowed my own racist practice to be normalised. Supervisors can assist supervisees to consider how to invite and receive feedback from clients at an individual and organisational

level; how to process and decide on the merit of solicited and unsolicited feedback; and how to act on it.

There are ongoing challenges and barriers at personal, organisational and structural levels that impede genuine accountability and change. This is an example of what Harrison and Turner (2011, p. 347) identify as one of the weaknesses of the cultural competence approach in practice, where, although there is a theoretical recognition of an integrated systemic approach:

*It tends to be depicted as something that individual workers do well or badly, in turn overlooking resource constraints and the role of the organisation and broader systems. Viewed in this way, a lack of cultural competence can easily be addressed via training, and the growth of the cross-cultural training industry suggests a contemporary boom in this field of work.*

Although I did not undertake a comprehensive literature review, after a brief search, there appears to be surprisingly little recent Australian research and literature providing client views on the quality of the social work practice and services they receive ( some exceptions include Frederick and Goddard 2008, Bessell 2011, Buckley, Carr, and Whelan 2011). Most government funding arrangements require Australian human service agencies to develop client feedback systems. However, Neylon's (2011) caution here is instructive about the value or use of this feedback in the current business model that dominates welfare agency administration and professional contexts:

*When collecting client feedback [as] a process to satisfy accreditation auditors then the danger is we lose sight of why it is seen as good practice, and why auditors use it as a measure of quality.*

**Accountability by 'imagine and hold in the room'**

Incorporating direct client feedback, which is gathered through improved agency feedback processes, into supervision , and prioritising action on this feedback, would be useful in developing a greater sense of social work supervisor and supervisee accountability to clients. I have also used another method—'imagine and hold in the room'—in my own supervision practice. I have found that using this increases my focus as a supervisor, and the focus of the supervisee, on clients, and on reducing discrimination to achieve more socially just practices and organisations.

Although supervision usually only involves the supervisor and supervisee(s), we can use a technique of 'imagining and trying to hold in the room' the needs, responses and perspectives of clients, or the views or perspectives of other people who are affected, often in less powerful positions, who are not physically there.

One example was when a supervisee was working with a man who used violence against his estranged partner. In order to encourage the supervisee to think more broadly beyond her client, I asked her to 'imagine and hold in the room' the needs and perspective of the victim(s) of this violence the next time she worked with him. Another supervisee used this technique working with an adult who was frustrated at his elderly mother's refusal to enter an aged care facility. The supervisee asked the client to imagine his mother's daily life, and

to then talk from her perspective about her desires to stay at home and her concerns about entering a care facility.

In a different context, a supervisee expressed frustration and indignation regarding a client's decision that came 'out of no-where' to decline the state housing commission flat the worker and client had been advocating for over a lengthy period. We used the method of 'imagining this man was in the room' thinking about his life circumstances and what he might say to the supervisee about his reasons for not wanting the flat, and for not having told the worker earlier of his unease about the flat. Using this method the supervisee was able to consider possible reasons including claustrophobia, the flat's significant distance from the areas the man was homeless in and familiar with, his fear of moving away from the public transport systems and people in shops and services that he knew. The worker realised, using the method, that the client may have felt unable to tell him about not wanting the flat because he did not want to disappoint the worker who had been so enthusiastic about advocating to secure him the permanent accommodation the worker thought he should have.

In supervision practice I have found 'imagine and hold in the room' an effective strategy and mindset to enhance social justice supervision by introducing ongoing feelings in supervisors and supervisees of accountability to clients, as those most affected by how the quality of supervision contributes to the standard of social work practice.

## SUPERVISION AND WHITENESS

In identifying as a 50-year-old social work educator, community worker and supervisor in Australia, I am saddened, sometimes astounded, and quietly ashamed, at how much I do not yet know about whiteness, colonialism and migration. On occasions, in my ignorance, I have offended a number of individuals from Aboriginal and minority culture backgrounds with my lack of understanding, and I sit uncomfortably in that reality. It is important for supervisors to model how to move beyond the protective retreat modes that often follow embarrassing and painful errors. In this spirit, I choose to continue to realise and acknowledge:

- The privileges that are associated with my white skin;
- The reality and continuing effect of the violent invasion of Australia and dispossession of Indigenous people by my British colonial ancestors, and colonial Australia's denial of full and meaningful recognition to the land's original caretakers and owners;
- The history and currency of white social work's complicity in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families as an attempted means to destroy culture; and
- The ongoing benefits I derive from (among other things) living rent free on Aboriginal lands.

I continue to deepen my understandings and actively try to see more every day how, as Moreton-Robinson (2004, p. 2) explains, 'whiteness and race must shape ways of knowing,

acting and producing knowledge'. Involvement in research, community work, teaching, and supervision fosters my capacity to see, and try to change, more of my own complicities, privileges and oppressions in the creation, perpetuation and effect of discriminatory practices.

In this environment, I sometimes share with supervisees my own experiences of error, shame and inevitable imperfection in my journey towards understanding the ingrained nature and effect of whiteness and racialised practices in a colonised country, and how other privileges intersect with my own oppressions, as this relates to becoming a social worker. My supervision and teaching experience resonates with the research that critical reflection that fosters changes in awareness and attitudes must:

- Move beyond theoretical to experiential engagement;
- Happen over time, not just as a one-off session;
- Provide ways to deal with guilt, shame and fear; and
- Create spaces to acknowledge a deepening in understanding and improvement in attitudes and behaviours along a continuum or cycle as worthwhile (Grote 2008, Ancis and Marshall 2010, Hosken 2010, Kowal, Franklin, and Paradies 2011, Hosken 2012).

I have used and extended Young and Zubrzycki's concept of 'cultural courage' to encourage and work with supervisees around the guilt, fear and shame about privileges and complicity in oppressions in a way that:

*Names and challenges this fear response and places the responsibility on those who are privileged to move beyond the development of self-awareness of their Whiteness to develop the necessary skills and knowledge required to engender collaborative working relationships with Indigenous people* (2011 p.168).

In learning and undertaking this process as supervisors, we can then model and practice the knowledge, values and skills to support social work practice with colleagues, supervisees and clients across similarities and differences. If it is 'what we do that defines us', (Nolan 2005) then it is important that we, as supervisors, try to 'do it' ourselves, and be honest about our struggles in the personal, organisational and structural domains as they influence each other. Otherwise, it seems unreasonable to expect supervisees, who are generally in less powerful positions, to deliver practice that is aware of and responsive to our own and others' dimensions of intra- and inter-diversity, privilege and oppression.

## CONCLUSION

My own thinking, at this stage, is that 'cultural competence' may not be the best short form descriptor or 'goal' for workers from the dominant Anglo racial/ethnic group in Australia. Young and Zubrzycki's (2011 p.162) caution in regard to the dangers of moving from learning to 'colonizing' and 'incorporating' cultural ways, I think, also applies to other social locations. Hearing this caution, I prefer, as an Anglo-Australian, instead of cultural competence, an ongoing professional process of working towards 'cultural humility'

(Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998); using critical awareness (Furlong and Wight 2011, p. 39); being informed not knowing (Laird 1998); and undertaking mutual respect inquiry (Hosken 2010, 2012).

Building on the way Williams and Parrot (2012, p.5) consider whiteness, I agree with Christensen and Jensen (2012, p.121), who suggest that intersectionality should be understood and responsive to its 'specific historical, social and geographical contexts' that involve particular power relations. I suggest that an intersectional approach is useful for social work supervision to develop and use awareness of classed, gendered, racialised, ableist, ageist and heterosexist practices as they inflect and reinforce across personal/professional, cultural/organisational and structural/political levels. However, I suggest that if the intersectional approach is responsive to power relations and divisions in particular locations and contexts, it can allow for the privileging of views from the (shifting) standpoints of those worst affected by privilege/oppression practices in that locality. In the Australian social work contexts, then, we are at the beginning of understanding, confronting and implementing our localised doing/actions in consideration of how:

*Historically, whiteness erupts and transforms itself depending on the colonising nature of its arrival and relationship to the British empire* (Moreton-Robinson 2004 p. viii).

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 9. From being 'caught in the middle of a war' to being 'in a really safe space'- social work field education with external supervision

**Ines Zuchowski**

Department of Social Work and Human Services, James Cook University, Douglas.

email: Ines.zuchowski@jcu.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

Social work placements are vital to the students' learning regarding the application of theory to practice. Placements with external supervision are becoming more prevalent, but may be considered to be less desirable than placements with internal supervision. Literature on student placements with external supervision emphasises the importance of establishing and maintaining the triad relationship of student, on-site and off-site supervisor and the provision of continued support. This article reports on a recent study exploring student perspectives on placement involving external supervision. The study shows that students identify a range of experiences, challenges and opportunities in placements with external supervision. From the students' point of view placement preparation, the matching of students to placements and supervisors, the potential benefits of receiving supervision external to the agency and the lack of relationships between the parties involved may need to be considered more carefully in placements with external supervision.

## INTRODUCTION

Social work practitioners and organisations are exposed to global, economic, social and political changes that impact social work education and practice including the provision of student placements (Barton, Bell and Bowles 2005). The current context of practice is framed by workplace ideologies and neo-liberal market principles that put strain on social workers and their ability to support field education programs (Agllias 2010). Social work field education is the practice arm of an academic degree where what has been learnt in theory is applied in practice (Zuchowski 2011). Social work educators see field education as a 'culminating and vital component' of social work education (Unger 2003, p. 107), pivotal for the integration and practice knowledge (Barton, Bell and Bowles 2005), and 'a cornerstone for social work education' (Abram, Hartung and Wernet, 2000, p. 171). Similarly, students have identified field education as the single most important factor of social work education (Wayne, Bogo and Raskin 2010) and a critical transition point to professional practice (Patford 2000).

Field education in Australia was developed around the apprenticeship idea of learning, with students allocated to individual social work supervisors who act as role models and provide students with the opportunity to engage in learning by doing (Camilleri 2001; Cleak and Smith 2012). However, this model is under strain in the current context of social work practice because '[g]enerating enough field education placements relies on the voluntary participation of industry to accept students for field education and provide educational resources' (Egan 2005, p. 37). Student placements in Australia need to be supervised by a qualified social worker (AASW 2010), yet, due to a range of factors, including the current economic climate, it can be difficult to find student placements supported by social work practitioners working in the placement organisation (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000; Barton, Bell and Bowles 2005; Unger 2003).

This study investigates student placement arrangements that are conceptualised as 'outside the norm', albeit an acceptable alternative. Students undertake their social work field education with a social work supervisor that is external to their placement, mostly because there is no social work qualified, in-house supervision available. It is generally assumed that socialising students into the profession involves transmission of professional knowledge, values and skills ideally via a field education model that includes an onsite qualified social work supervisor (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000). However, the Australian Association of Social Work allows for student placements with external social work supervision ' where the host organisation has no suitable social work educator' providing that arrangements are made ' that the appropriate professional formation and supervision takes place by a qualified social work field educator' (AASW 2010, p. 16). Little research has been conducted in regard to external supervision in field education.

## FIELD EDUCATION: CENTRAL, CRUCIAL AND CHALLENGING

Social work field education is intense and complex, providing both opportunities and challenges for students. Field education is a place of holistic learning which ' involves the exploration of a complex web of factors: personal, relational, cultural, political, and organisational. Learners access and utilise knowledge, emotion, behaviour and prior

experience in the learning context' (Chinnery and Beddoe 2011, p. 129). Field education provides a range of learning opportunities for students, including regulating strong emotions, reconsidering the commitment to social work, and operating solo (Patford 2001). For students, field education is often a dual experience of significant professional learning and coexisting associated stress (Maidment 2003, 2006). The complexities of students' lives where many juggle work, studies and family life impact on the field education experience (Ryan, Barns and McAucliffe 2011). Field Education itself is complex, demanding and can potentially expose students to unsafe and/ or challenging situations. It is the context in which the student's capacity for practice leaning and development in the professional social work role is tested. Here students' learning and their fitness for professional practice is examined. Field education is ' the place where significant issues pertaining students' abilities and competencies for professional practice become evident' , and thus it plays a gate-keeping role for the profession (Razack 2000, p. 196). Furthermore, field education takes place in service sectors that have been recognised ' as being at increased risk of violence'(Bowie 2002 cited in Gair and Thomas 2008, p. 44). The experience of violence has been reported by social work placement students (Gair and Thomas 2008; Tully, Kropf and Price 1999).

Moreover, students' sense of self and personal identity is challenged in field education (Lam, Wong and Leung 2005; Ornstein and Moses 2010). Ornstein and Moses argue that the relationship between the field educator and student becomes a focal point of the field placement learning experience. Ornstein and Moses (2010) highlight the complexities and ambiguities that are part of supervisory relationships and encourage continued negotiation and dialogue around matching students and supervisors, or, as they term it, 'the goodness of fit' (p. 102) issues.

## FIELD EDUCATORS: FACILITATING LEARNING

Field education introduces social work students to the concept of professional supervision (McAucliffe and Sudbery 2005). The student- supervisor relationship is recognised as facilitating social work learning on placement (Cleak and Smith 2012) and students want field educators to 'provide opportunity to be observed, and facilitate professional development' (Barretti 2007, p. 51). Students want supervisors who are 'available, respectful, responsive, supportive, fair, objective, and that are knowledgeable and able to directly communicate their knowledge and provide feedback' (Barretti 2007, p. 50). These desired characteristics connect with the idea that students can learn directly from field educators (Zuchowski 2011). The reality of current workplaces however is that internal supervision is not always possible and moreover, even in models with onsite supervision, field educators are not always available to be observed (Barretti 2007), or accessible for supervision (Patford 2000). Many placement supervisors experience high workloads in crisis driven workplaces with high staff turnovers that impact their ability to meet the educational requirements of placement students, often resulting in student supervision being more task focused and limiting the opportunities of integrating theory into practice (Chinnery and Beddoe 2011).

**Field Education: External Supervision**

The significance and complexity of social work field education consequently invokes questions about social work field education with external supervision. The research discussed here takes up a focus on external placement supervision experiences. The research question posed is 'What are the experiences of all key stakeholders in field education with external supervision?' The aims of the research are to review what is known about supervision for social work students on placements, to ascertain the experience of students, task supervisors and field educators in social work field education with external supervision; to explore, in particular, the four-way relationship of external supervisor, internal supervisor, student and liaison person; to investigate what external field education brings to field education; and to develop a model/ framework or principles of external supervision on field education.

Literature about external supervision in field education highlights the importance of the triad relationship (Abram, Hartung and Werne 2000) between the student, the external field educator, also referred to as external supervisor, and the on-site supervisor, generally referred to as task supervisor. Literature suggests that extra support is needed for field educators, task supervisors and students in triad relationships (Clare 2001; Henderson 2010). In this research study, the learning and teaching relationship is conceptualised as a four-way relationship which includes the student, the external field educator, the task supervisor and the University liaison. Research identifies that supervisors in general, and students particularly when problems arise, value regular contact with the university liaison person (Cleak and Wilson 2013). Universities generally have assessment and reporting requirements that are monitored by liaison persons (Carthwait 2011). Thus the university liaison person becomes part of the placement and this research is interested in exploring the relationship between the four parties.

Literature on placements with external supervision identifies the potential for power imbalances between the on-site and off-site supervisors (Henderson 2010), the need to look at the differing responsibilities of the supervisors (Karban 1999) and the characteristics that external supervisors should bring to field education (Maidment and Woodward 2002). Some models for practice in this area are identified (Clare 2001; Maidment and Woodward 2002). Placements with external supervision are often seen as a last resort (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000), and while this outlook has been challenged (Abram, Hartung and Wernet 2000; Plath 2003; Zuchowski 2011), a recent comparative survey suggests that students are generally 'more satisfied across all aspects of their placements where there is a strong onsite social work presence' (Cleak and Smith 2012, p. 256). Cleak and Smith (2012) identify social work identity, learning opportunities on placements and feeling competent as key issues for student satisfaction in placements with internal supervision.

This article provides interim findings exclusively focusing on the experiences of students in placements with external supervision. Placements with external supervision in this research encompass social work field education where students have received social work supervision from a qualified social work supervisor external to the placement agency. Future publications will consider the experiences of other key stakeholders, the interconnectivity between those stakeholders and models for practice.

## METHOD

The data reported here has been collected as part of the author's PhD research. This research is framed by a feminist paradigm, with phenomenological (Creswell 2007; Moustakas 1994) and social constructivist (Schwandt 1994) underpinnings. In line with feminist thinking the aim is to position the participants as experts. Equally, the research needs to be conscious of the importance of process, any inherent biases, and be willing to be instrumental in achieving change (Klein 1994). Ultimately, it is envisioned that, through the insights of and with input from the students, external supervisors, task supervisors and liaison persons, a model for practice will be developed.

In the larger PhD research project semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 32 participants exploring their experience as students, field educators, task supervisors and/or liaison persons involved in social work field education placements with external supervision. There was no relationship between these participants, with all participants exploring unrelated experiences within field education. The interviews were conducted in 2011/ 2012. The data discussed in this paper specifically considers the participants' experiences as students.

### Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive method of sampling (Creswell 2007) was used to invite participation in this research from social workers, university staff, placement agencies and students via Australian universities and through national social work conference presentations. Participants in this research were associated with a number of social work programs in Australian universities in Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, Victoria and South Australia. Of the thirty two interviews, 13 involved participants who either identified as having experienced the role of student only in the context of this research (9) or they had experienced a number of roles including that of student (4). In the latter case participants talked about a number of roles and combination of roles in addition to their student perspective, including the role of external supervisor, liaison person, and task supervisor. Only the parts of the interview that clearly related to their personal experience as students on placement with external supervision were considered in the data analysis here.

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences and views about field education placements with external supervision, using a recursive approach to interviewing (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008). All of the participants who talked about their experiences as students were female, although males participated in the larger study.

### Data Analysis

All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Participants were provided with copies of their interview. During the data analysis process consideration was given to recurring themes within individual interviews and across the collective interviews (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008). Data analysis involved a process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Neuman 2006), utilising the function of 'memos' in NVivo to explore themes and their links. Data analysis in line with phenomenology was undertaken with a process of 'reducing the information to significant statements or quotes' combining the statements into themes and developing textural and structural descriptions (Creswell 2007,

p. 60). In the process of creating pseudonyms for participants the gender of the participant, their experience, background information and their role has remained unaltered.

**Limitations**

Qualitative research relies on the recollection and reflection of subjective experience, and the interest of this study is not 'on finding out the truth per se but rather the truth as the informant sees it' (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008, p. 111) in line with social constructivism (Schwandt 1994). This study is based on a small number of participants who have self-selected into the study and have chosen what they want to share in the interviews. The data presented here is only one aspect of the range of experiences discussed in the broader interviews and larger research project. This article privileges the students' voices to allow reflection on their experiences before exploring the broader context of field education with external supervision. My own position as an insider in this research impacts the choice of focus, the interviews and the analysis (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008) and as feminist researcher I need to acknowledge the subjectivity of the interviewing and meaning making (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008), although I have tried to come at this with fresh eyes in line with phenomenological research, by attempting to bracket my own experiences and positions (LeVasseur 2003).

**Findings**

In this section, insights into the rich data that emerged from the student voices will be provided. Themes included students' general experience in field education, their experiences and expectations in placements with external supervision, the challenges and opportunities of placements with external supervision, the four way relationships and ideal placements.

**General Experiences: Struggles, Power, Lack of Choice and Being Lucky**

For a number of participants completing field education itself was a struggle. Participants talked about the need to give up employment to undertake placement, a lack of child care, and the multiple roles of working, raising small children and the massive investment of time that placement required in their lives. A number of students said that they felt chaotic or worried about their sanity, as this quote exemplifies:

> *….and if I put myself back completely in context I …had two small children and my husband worked away and I was working full-time, …completing my degree, and I was probably semi-insane by that time.* (Shelly)

> *Some participants experienced power struggles, the bullying culture of an organisation and receiving put downs related to gender, echoing research that placement can expose student to violence and feeling unsafe* (Gair and Thomas 2008).

> *…we are students in this environment and we want to fit in a very comfortable space, so… I think we are mindful of that and the power imbalance (laughs) I suppose with students… (Laura)*

> *…a bit of name calling and all of that stuff went on…*(Jennifer)

> *…he took me in the kitchen and gave me that whole lecture about, men and women's brains and how, …we regurgitate, we are like cows chewing apart, we do this, we chew all over it, we vomit it up, whereas men are action people, they make the plans and they do it, that's why I have to listen to him and just do as he says (laughs).* (Jamie)

Some participants pointed to their lack of choice about the field of practice and supervisors, and to the limited placements and supervisors as reasons for staying in unsafe situations.

> *…we hear a lot of how hard it is to get supervisors and how …placements… and that kind of censors us a bit, God, I am so thankful to have somewhere.* (Laura)

> *If it had been actively promoted that, ok, …that is the nature, you know, not everybody in the industry puts their hand up for a student, no matter, we want to provide that safe space for you for you to do that, this is important, still let us know, then I would have spoken up much sooner.* (Denise)

A prominent concept used in all but two interviews regarding the student experience on placement was 'being lucky'. Participants referred to the ways things worked out, to getting another placement quickly, to having a good supervisor or to others stepping in to support them.

> *I remember feeling very anxious to start with, but I was lucky that [co-worker] was there… and she kind of really took me under her wing.* (Kelly)

**Experiences and Expectations of Students with External Supervision**

From the students' perspective the experiences and expectations of what the external supervisors and the internal task supervisors needed to bring to their placement experience were different. While there were common attributes that they thought the different parties should bring, such as being available and supportive, participants had many more concrete expectations of external supervisors and were more detailed about their experiences with them. Though asked specifically to comment on the qualities the different parties should bring to supervision, only one student, who had a particularly negative experience with her external supervisor, further expressed concrete expectations for internal task supervisors. Yet, all participants but one outlined that external supervisors needed to bring experience and knowledge, and generally, participants wanted external supervisors to be able to link theory to practice, have contextual knowledge and help and guide them to develop their own practice. Participants identified a range of interpersonal skills that external supervisors needed, including the ability to establish relationships, listen and communicate. They wanted them to be motivated, warm, caring, encouraging and challenging.

> *able to listen and certainly learn about the context of which the student is doing their placement … to be able to contextualise the setting and so on, because from that the supervisor is able to build and extend the student's thinking… it's having a core understanding of where they are… looking for the strengths within the student and what they bring. To get to know the student is really important.* (Belinda)

Some but not all participants had supervision with both supervisors. A number of participants felt that the task supervisor lost interest or had no real input in their placement. Other participants who had supervision with their task supervisor commented on receiving supervision around specific skills, organisational issues and the provision of practice opportunities. Most participants explored the outcomes of their supervisory relationship with the external supervisor in the interviews and these included gaining perspectives and new layers of learning, the ability to critique and explore practice and skills as well as value and ideological positions. Laura highlights the experience of receiving support from more than one source.

> *I think the whole package has kind of worked quite well, because she [task supervisor] just makes time and sees the importance of that… and I have a motivated external supervisor, …I feel quite supported in my learning which has been great and also knowing that I have a liaison person …, who … is incredibly available as well, so (laughs) I have been absolutely blessed or just maybe it's working.* (Laura)

Challenges of Placements with External Supervision: Access, Burden, Differing Ideas and Limitations of Supervision

Participants highlighted some of the specific challenges of placements with external supervision. One concern was the limited access to the social work supervisor and the inability to debrief immediately with them. Overall, however, this was not presented as the major challenge. The concerns about external supervision were expressed more in terms of the quality of the supervision: the external social work supervisor's lack of understanding of the context of the work of the agency, the limitations of task supervision and the differing ideas between supervisors. Participants expressed that they felt burdened by the responsibility of coordinating the communication between supervisors.

Seven participants raised the lack of contextual knowledge of the external supervisor as challenging, highlighting the lack of insight into the organisation and the field of practice as impacting their placement, supervision and assessment.

> *I guess some of the challenges were at times, because the external supervisor didn't have a knowledge of the agency, besides what I gave them, so their background clashed a little bit with what the task supervisor might want.* (Stephanie)

> *And my experience with her… was not very good…, she didn't have any real insight into homelessness and that proved a big barrier to… me being able to … discuss my learning and plans and goals, and… generally sort of base my ideas around theories and things like that.* (Denise)

Six participants raised concerns specifically about task supervision. These concerns included lack of task supervision, task supervisors not holding social work values and a resulting concern of not being able to develop social work competence. Many participants thought that task supervisors did not value supervision.

*I would look at it from the task supervisor, she has a lot of background in case management, and… you know, … so I get to almost do it, how she is, or how I think it should be done, and then sometimes I look back and oh, is that done like a social worker?* (Kelly)

A further challenge raised by participants was dealing with differing ideas between two supervisors and feeling that the supervisors were not on the same page. Samantha stated

> *I felt I had to make the decision, it was being left to me because I couldn't get, I was like caught in the middle of a war.* (Samantha)

Six participants relayed a sense of burden that the onus of making placement work was on them, that they had to push the learning forward and connect everybody.

> *I guess it was more stressful,... just to arrange things and sometimes you think well, it would be easier if everybody just worked in the organisation or was involved more, or was around more.* (Kelly)

> *I think that it made me feel a bit like the placement was entirely my responsibility to make work. And I had had a little bit of experience in my third year placement when I, … gone to the uni to say that … there may be some issues and this isn't working very well. It was just made very clear to me, when I left the uni that day, that, … you are on your own.* (Shelly)

Opportunities of Placements with External Supervision: Supervision, Safe Space, New Layers of Learning, Objectivity and Developing the Field

Most participants highlighted the advantages of receiving supervision separately from the organisation. This related to a number of concepts including safe space, a separate space to sit and reflect, scheduling time specific for supervision, an independent look at issues, keeping an eye on things, providing a new layer of learning and exploring issues of concern outside the agency.

Laura, for example, talked about how external supervision provided an extra layer of learning to her placement that she might not have got otherwise. She considered how external supervision provides a safe space where she can pull things apart, and how she was challenged and stretched in supervision.

> *to me the external supervision is a really safe space, a 100%, where I can really pull it apart, and really… go for it, I suppose… whereas it is a lot more contained, I feel a lot more contained within the organisational context.* (Laura)

Other participants talked about how external supervision has meant that they could complete placement, or helped them withdraw from an unsafe one. Receiving external supervision had enabled them to identify and name the violence they experienced in the workplace.

> *the professional supervisor said, do you want to continue with this placement? And I hadn't even considered that that was an option for me, that this was actually not ok to be treated like this…* (Jamie)

The ability to take issues of concerns outside the agency was discussed by six participants, often multiple times. This related to the ability of being honest and open, sitting with their own sense of social justice, getting a clear perspective, including encouraging them to look at what they were responsible for, and how this exploration can flow back into the organisation. In this context some student raised that they did not want to upset others.

> *There is that sensitivity around this is where someone has chosen to work and in my case, my task supervisor has been in here 8 years and, you know, why would you explore certain things … it is easier to critique a workplace if, when you not challenge someone who works in it (laughs), that's probably hard.* (Shelly)

Participants highlighted that placements with external supervision can bring about changed attitudes, both for non-Government organisations that do not have social workers on staff, but also the flow-back that undertaking a placement in this sector can have for the Government sector. Denise, for example, points out that her knowledge of and experience in the non-Government sector facilitated colleagues in the Government sector gaining an understanding of that sector and facilitated collaboration with non-Government organisations that did not exist previously.

> *when I finished that placement my line manager was really interested in asking for social work qualification when she did future employment. And that was a shift for her, because she saw the value in that.....and I found the same when I got into the hospital system.... I have seen a bit of a bridge build there, and in terms of referrals to the community sector… I went across to the Government sector and now they increasingly seem to go out to the community …. So I saw a little bit of a benefit both ways…, I have actually taken away my learning from that community organisation and brought it with me as I have travelled through…* (Denise)

**The four way relationship: A disjointed picture**

A specific query was made with participants about the relationships and the interconnectivity between the different parties, with the aim of exploring the four- way relationship. Very little information was forthcoming about this topic and the majority of participants talked about relationships that were not close, were fractured or disjointed.

> *It's just that it is sometimes …disjointed to me in that way, … there hasn't been a time where the four of us have sat down, the manager, the task supervisor, the field educator and myself … I sit with the task supervisor, I sit (laughs) with the manager, I sit with the social worker, social worker talks to the manager…* (Kelly)

Participants at times were not sure about who had been involved in the placement and that people were only getting together at the meetings and then not always all parties. Only two participants talked positively about a strong four-way relationship.

> *they are quite committed and flexible at times, and it comes together quite well and certainly the energy, I suppose, at meetings have been one of support and one of working together as a team.* (Laura)

It appears that there was not much to be said about a four way relationship from a students' perspective, because it seems that many did not experience a coherent four way relationship. Yet, students did refer to the three other parties when talking about their experiences in placements with external supervision. They refer to the relationships they have with their external supervisor, their task supervisor and their liaison person, and the relationships the supervisors and/ or liaison people had between them. These individual relationships have been described according to how the students experienced or observed them, varying from supportive, reciprocal, strong, positive and wonderful to antagonistic and detrimental, but they are mostly described as two way relationships rather than relationships that include all parties.

**Ideal Placement: not about external or internal supervision?**

When asked about the ideal placement, students did not necessarily foreground the external or internal supervision. Rather, participants talked about good placement preparation, the importance of matching students to placements and supervisors and that you can learn from any placement.

Seven participants pondered that placements with external or internal supervision could be ideal, depending on the circumstances and their learning needs.

> *as a first experience of a placement it could have been a really totally negative thing, but it hasn't been because of this field supervisor's skills and stuff around supporting me in my learning, but also about helping me to focus on other things that were going well or my ability and resourcefulness to go and seek help from others. So that was good.* (Carmen)

Five students expressed that the ideal placement would be with internal supervision, and participants noted that it would need to be with trained field educators. Participants reasoned that the context of the work would be clearer and it would make things flow better.

> *I think the ideal placement is actually to have a field supervisor … in the organisation, but … an experienced field educator that had the training, that goes to the university and finds out what the university wants from their students and the skills that they want to have developed.* (Carmen)

Five participants discussed placements with external supervision could be ideal, reasoning, for instance, that they provide distance to reflect and students can get double supervision. This was qualified with the proviso that people have connections and supervisors have contextual knowledge.

> *I think, just that particular set-up, where the supervisor had a very good working knowledge of the organisation, the supervisor … was a lecturer at university, … he has worked in the field,…. I actually found, and I do find external supervision a really, really positive, … experience.* (Jennifer)

## DISCUSSION

The voices of the participants who have experienced external supervision as students in social work field education suggest that one of the messages students are hearing from social work educators is that social work placements and social work supervisors are difficult to secure and that therefore placements with external supervision are set up as an alternative. Participants shared their sense of being 'lucky' that they had positive placement experiences or that they survived this placement or that nothing worse happened. Yet, there were a number of students who experienced unsafe placements, which is consistent with the research literature on health and safety issues impacting field education. (Gair and Thomas 2008; Tully, Kropf and Price 1999). While external supervision seemed to have assisted them in leaving unsafe placements, students talked about staying in unsafe placements, just putting their head down and getting through this experience as they believed they may not get another placement. This 'should be grateful' tenet of placement may need closer examination by social work educators, if messages of 'hard to come by placements' are keeping students in unsafe placements. As Denise points out above, students need to hear that no matter how difficult it is to find placements, 'we still want to provide that safe space for you '.

A further point to ponder is that social workers in professional practice often choose external supervision in light of increasing managerialism and 'the dominance of compliance and surveillance activities with public sector regimes of audit and quality management' (Beddoe 2012, p. 204). For social work graduates accessing external supervision, supervision that is away from their workplace, is a choice and a purposeful strategy (Beddoe 2012; Ung 2002). Yet, not only do participants in this study reported that they did not have a choice about being in placements with external supervision, when this choice was made for them, they also perceived that a sentiment existed that this was seen as less desirable for field education. Alternatively, however, placements with external supervision could be seen as opportunities to model supervision strategies for future professional practice. It seems to be the case that external supervision is only 'outside the norm' for field education, but not for graduate supervision. This anomaly seems worthy of further research and discussion.

Several participants highlighted that external supervision provided them with an opportunity to explore placement issues safely, away from the workplace. Students did experience power struggles, put downs and harassment and on a number of occasions the external supervision helped them to either finish placement or to leave an unsafe situation. External supervisors helped them to put things in perspective, highlighted when behaviour was not acceptable and supported students when bullying or harassment was present in the workplace thus identifying students' vulnerability to 'supervisors and senior staff members who simultaneously socialize and silence them' (Gair and Thomas 2008, p. 50). Participants in this study identified the importance of the safe space and support that external supervision can offer, corresponding with the major argument for external supervision in professional practice, 'that it provides an opportunity to offer emotional support that is untainted by power relations and issues of confidentiality' (Beddoe 2012, p. 205).

The study identifies that some participants did report concerns about the mismatch and inappropriateness of the external field educators. This supports the assertion by Wayne,

Bogo and Raskin that 'though field experiences have a powerful influence on a student's education, there is a less rigorous process for selecting field instructors than classroom teachers' (2010, p. 335). Participants did not have a choice who would be their supervisor, which at times mattered as the relationship between them and the external supervisor did not always work out. In other placement arrangements, students generally meet their supervisor in the replacement interview, whereas here students might have met the internal task supervisor, but then the other supervisor would generally be matched and appointed through university processes. This lack of choice seems to go against the grain of relational approaches to field education that facilitates a respectful exploration of the interpersonal world (Ornstein and Moses 2010). Selecting suitable external field educators and then matching them to students would seem important because the supervisory relationship is central in supervision (McMahon 2002) and field education (Karban, 1999; Ornstein and Moses 2010).

In conceptualising the idea of an apprentice model to field education (Cleak and Smith 2012), one would wonder how students in placements with external supervision would fare, considering they would likely spend most time with the task supervisor and learn from them. Yet, what seems to emerge from the data is the centrality of the external supervisor to their placement. While participants described the task supervisor's impact and contribution to their placement to some extent, not all of the task supervisors were actively engaged in the placement, and external supervision provided avenues for reflection on professional practice. Most participants were much clearer about expectations towards external supervisors and much more clearly articulated the qualities they are looking for in external supervisor. This needs to be explored further. One possible explanation is that task supervisors' contributions to social work education may not be seen or presented as critical to students' placement preparation, assessment and reporting. Some students in this study actually expressed concern that the task supervisor's input was not sought at the point of assessment. Is the value of the task supervisors' contributions to the student placement not recognised enough in social work education?

Cleak and Smith's (2012) recent survey indicated that students were more satisfied in placements with internal supervisors, yet, participants in this study did not generally put the internal/ external supervision placement structure in the foreground when considering the ideal placement. Rather they highlighted that it depended on what they wanted to learn, how they and their task and external supervisors were prepared for this placement, what they were bringing to the placement and how it was supported.

This is illustrated in Laura's experience, and here the last word will be left to her. Her first placement was supervised internally and was a positive experience. She talked about how the expectations were that this was the ideal placement, so when she found she had external supervision she was disappointed, but thought she could make it work. She was pleasantly surprised to experience the placement with external supervision as valuable, and adding a new layer of learning to her placement experience. She reflected that

> *I like to think that these people were handpicked (laughs), I think that can be really useful … I did request my liaison person and…I am really aware that she would really keep my*

*focus on my… practice and my ideology and that I can really expand my knowledge around that and … it would be lovely to think if that could happen for everyone, that …people were supported in areas that they needed to be supported in* (Laura)

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to present the voices of the participants who have experienced external supervision in their social work field education as students. Their contributions highlight the importance of the processes of matching, supporting and promoting placements for diverse experiences in field education. It is a reality that placements with external supervision are part of the diversity in Australian social work field education. As social work educators we need to be cautious about inadvertently devaluing placements with external supervision and presenting it as such to students. Rather we need to ensure best practice in this area and it seems that more has to be done to develop this. Considering best practice could be conceptualised as 'best fit' of preparation and support in the specific context.

External supervision has a number of challenges and we need to ensure that the students do not feel burdened and left alone to deal with these challenges. Students in this research describe and use the opportunities that external supervision offers. Our understanding of the positive elements of external supervision would benefit from further exploration. Importantly, external supervision could be embraced as a tailored, contemporary model for field education that reflects current practice in graduate supervision, but this should not come at a cost for students.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 10. Student diversity as grass roots internationalisation in social work education

**Marty Grace, Rob Townsend, Doris Testa, John Fox, Pauline O'Maley, Juanita Custance and Angela Daddow**

School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Victoria University, Melbourne.

VU College, Victoria University, Melbourne.

Professor Marty Grace, PhD, Social Work, School of Social Sciences and Psychology Victoria University.
email: Marty.Grace@vu.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

Internationalisation of social work education is driven by student diversity as well as by employer demand, the profession internationally, and by universities. Students from diverse backgrounds bring with them their own distinctive cultures, knowledges and ways of being. At Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia, this diversity has prompted us to explore and develop a grass roots approach to internationalisation. This paper gives details of three projects undertaken as part of this exploration. Our approach includes some exploratory research with students, and collaborations with the university's Curriculum Innovation Unit, Language, Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and Student Learning Unit. Our work focuses on understanding and embedding into the curriculum, students' own experiences and 'funds of knowledge'. At the same time we support students as they develop familiarity with the academic and professional discourses of social work, and advance their academic and professional literacy. This collaborative work is situated within critical social work, critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Social work is becoming increasingly international, bringing new perspectives and some revision of definitions of social work and social work ethics (Ife 2007). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) have recently set out a framework for global social work and a social development commitment to action (IFSW 2012). This internationalisation has an impact on social work education. In addition, universities in Australia and overseas increasingly expect internationalisation of the curriculum. For example, Killick (2006) of Leeds University in the United Kingdom sees the internationalisation of the curriculum as including cross-cultural capability and global perspectives, comprising three major elements:

1. Intercultural awareness and associated communication skills;

2. International and multicultural perspectives on one's discipline area; and

3. Application in practice. (Killick 2006, p.3)

At Victoria University, Melbourne, internationalisation of the curriculum is seen in the following way:

- Includes teaching methods that are diverse, inclusive and explicit and that do not disadvantage any student
- Is broadened by an internationally comparative approach
- Develops and assesses intercultural communications skills and critical thinking
- Is embedded in curriculum, but varies according to discipline and Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) standards
- Is achieved through collaboration with a diverse group of stakeholders in the development of a relevant range of resources
- Is based on a view of culture as complex, dynamic and evolving, and avoids stereotyping, generalisation and monolithic descriptions of cultures including our own (O'Rourke 2011)

In Social Work education, pressure to internationalise goes beyond professional and university imperatives. Employers want graduates with an understanding of diverse cultures and the ability to work cross-culturally. Many social work programs have very diverse student bodies, including international students, local students from diverse cultural backgrounds, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, mature age students, and students with disabilities. In this paper, we argue that student diversity provides opportunities for a kind of grass roots internationalisation of the curriculum. Our concept of grass roots internationalisation refers to the idea of drawing students' diverse experiences into the curriculum in ways that enrich and internationalise the learning of all students.

This approach is informed by both critical pedagogy and critical social work. It is based on the belief that social work education should not only transform the lives of students, but should also give them the tools and the opportunity to transform social work education and social work practice in the future.

In this article we describe and discuss three projects conducted at Victoria University, Melbourne. These three projects represent cycles of action and reflection that we are undertaking in order to develop our own practices. Before the first project, we observed particular challenges and opportunities for both our students and ourselves as educators associated with the diversity of our student cohort. The first project was a small piece of qualitative research that explored culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students' experiences with the Bachelor of Social Work program. The second project is ongoing, and is based on the findings of the first project, focussing on embedding language, literacy and numeracy support in tutorials. The third project is in the development stage and seeks to implement a 'funds of knowledge' approach within the curriculum. While we believe we have further work to do, these three projects together represent our developing approach to working dialogically with students to validate and value their own experience and funds of knowledge, and, at the same time, support their induction into the discourse of professional social work. We highlight the intentions we bring as educators to create the spaces for learning about social work theory and practice in a global context. We discuss some of the outcomes, tensions and implications of this work for social work education in diverse communities.

## CONTEXT

Victoria University is located in Melbourne's western region which is culturally diverse, with about 22% of our students from low socio-economic backgrounds (DEEWR 2010). Social Work has a diverse student body with many who are the first in their families to attend university and approximately 16% of our population who are international students. International and non-English speaking background (NESB) students together make up 44% of our students (Victoria University 2011). The Social Work Unit staff is predominantly White Anglo Celtic and includes only one of the six staff members from a bilingual and bicultural background. Social work's inclusion on the migration skills list has resulted in an increase in international enrolments. Diverse student populations such as ours reflect a growing diversity within diversity, of differing life experiences, ages, responsibilities, beliefs and understandings; this, along with global families and collectivist cultures, impact on social work curriculum, teaching and field education. The Social Work Unit at Victoria University takes an explicitly critical approach to social work education, teaching critical, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory approaches to social work (Adams, Dominelli and Payne 2009), and drawing on critical educational theory, in particular ideas about critical literacy (Lankshear and McLaren 1993) and critical pedagogy (Freire 1996).

### Critical social work education

The idea of 'critical social work education' encompasses ideas about critical social work (Allan, Briskman and Pease 2009), ideas about critical pedagogy (Freire 1996; Giroux 2011) and ideas about critical literacy (Lankshear and McLaren 1993). The concept of transformation is central to these approaches. Critical social work aims to transform not

only the lives of individual people, but the social conditions that contribute to oppression, discrimination, and unjust outcomes. Critical pedagogy is fundamental to democracy, and is shaped by 'pedagogical practices capable of creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable and willing to make moral judgements and act in a socially responsible way' (Giroux 2011, p.3). It is not unilateral but dialogical, focusing on knowledge transformation rather than knowledge consumption, and on addressing power relations and privilege. Critical pedagogy always relates 'to the specificity of particular contexts, students, communities, and available resources' (Giroux 2011, p 4). Similarly, critical literacy emphasises not only the functional reading of text, but the ability to understand how language works to reflect and reinforce existing power structures. Understanding social work education in this way, as an arena of intersecting critical practices, aims not only to educate future practitioners of critical social work, but to provide students with the conceptual tools to transform social work from within.

The practice of critical social work education underpins our grass roots approach to the internationalisation of the curriculum; it is not sufficient that a diverse group of students are simply represented in our classrooms, support must also be provided to foster genuinely democratic participation. Critical social work education encourages an understanding of learning and of classrooms as dialogical, creating space for all students to bring rich and varied cultural experiences to a shared construction of disciplinary knowledge. This practice is explicitly undertaken as an alternative to Western paradigm pedagogy that risks the 'othering' of non-Western students within social work programs. Walter, Taylor and Habibis (2011, p.17) suggest there is still an 'outward gaze' from social work on indigenous and cross-cultural practices, locating these practices as 'other than' mainstream social work practice. In contrast, critical social work education is situated within socio-cultural theories of learning, which argue for the adoption of academic pedagogies that recognise cultural identities and privilege a diversity of cultural, intellectual and technical expressions of learning (Jacobs 2005; Lave and Wenger 1991).

Discussing alternatives to Western paradigm pedagogy, Gonzalez and Moll (2002, p.623) maintain that effective pedagogy is connected with students' lives, their 'local histories and community contexts'. They argue that learning is a social process, sitting within larger contextual forces that impact on students' lives and identity formations. The dominant paradigms in learning environments often sit outside these contexts. Given that these paradigms are socially privileged, students sense that their own forms of knowledge are judged as lacking and deficient. This is pertinent when seeking a pedagogy that enables students to value their life-based cultural traditions and conventions: a pedagogy that avoids valorising the dominant cultural codes of the university (even as it teaches these), and invalidating previous experience and histories of students. 'Funds of knowledge' refers to the knowledge and skills used over generations to support family well-being, which tend to be ignored in the education of marginalised students. Hattam, Lucas, Prosser, and Sellar (2007) illustrate how funds of knowledge can be engaged in pedagogy by finding points of connection between students' everyday lives and their learning experience.

In this paper we describe three projects that represent our ongoing efforts at enacting critical social work education in a diverse community. The first was exploratory, asking

students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds about their experiences of social work education. The second took up some of the findings of the CALD research to embed learning support into the curriculum. While the first phase of this project is described in greater detail elsewhere (Grace, Daddow, Egan, Fox, Noble, O'Maley, Ridley and Testa 2011), here we reflect on its evolution over several teaching cycles. The third project is action research that focuses on designing and implementing curriculum and pedagogy that works with students' funds of knowledge. Please note that in reporting students' comments we have used pseudonyms.

## PROJECT 1: CALD STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

A small research project undertaken by social work staff at Victoria University explored the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work (Noble, Testa and Egan 2011). Twenty-two students were identified as potential participants. Nine students, five males, and four females accepted the invitation to participate in a single, 1.5 - 2 hour semi-structured interview. Six students were completing their fourth year and three were completing their third year of the social work course. Students had migrated from Somalia, Malaysia, China, Egypt, Sudan, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Columbia. With the exception of the Chinese student, all came to Australia as refugees.

The research explored two aspects of the CALD students' experiences. First, students were asked to present their story of coming to Australia and finding their way into the social work program, however they would like to tell it. The second question asked participants to provide comments on various aspects of the social work program. This included comments on the social work discourse and language, the course objectives, content, and use of references, assessments, and field education experiences. In relation to language, while International students who enrol in our course are generally required to have an IELTS score of at least 6 with no band less than 6, there are other groups for whom English is not their first language, and they have not in the past been required to provide the IELTS. These groups include locally born students, International students who have studied in English for at least two years, Australian citizens who were born overseas, and permanent residents who were born overseas. All of the participants in this study were migrants and refugees. Particular attention was given to comments about what teaching and learning strategies and what curricula changes would help with their study. While language was a part of this focus on teaching and learning strategies, it was not specifically foregrounded at this stage in our project.

Students described how they had left volatile and unstable political situations, typically entered Australia as refugees or in one instance had been sponsored by family to receive a western education thus ensuing greater opportunities for their families into the future. For example Abdi recounted his family's need to flee his home country:

> *When the war started, they started targeting people who were in the government. So we had to move, we were the same clan as the President and so they thought that we were really close to him.*

In contrast to Abdi, Bono travelled from his Middle Eastern village to Australia in pursuit of a better future for himself and his family:

> *I came here for better opportunities, there was not very much work in [home country] and there was difficulties with the government.*

Participants reported that there were several elements that hindered students' participation and progression through the BSW. The most prominent of these was a lack of English fluency, for example Anita found much of the vocabulary used in readings and texts was beyond her:

*I had to check the dictionary for so many words.*

Nazir reported that her accent made her 'nervous about speaking' and described sometimes feeling 'undermined' describing her advocacy for a client while on field placement as discriminatory:

> *'There was a Chinese client and she booked her mother in or something and I was calling the interpreter service and the person was like 'what language do you speak?' so he thought the service was for me, he judged by my accent.'* (Nazir)

Other barriers mentioned by participants included unfamiliarity with academic discourse:

> *It's a different system and a different way of learning. In [home country] you write everything and you memorise. Here you have to do a lot of studies on your own and your assignments so it's really good. Normally here, students have different opinions to teachers. In [home country] that doesn't happen. Whatever lecturer says is right.* (Benahzir)

Students also spoke about the need to have familiarity with local knowledge and values:

> *People would all have the same response and I didn't really understand. I was like, what? Why are people feeling that, why are they feeling sad about this? I can't respond the way they expected.* (Anita)

Some commented on a lack of grounding in or a conflict with Western conceptual frameworks:

> *Sometimes I wish they would ask us what would happen in your country … I would make all the staff be aware of students from CALD backgrounds and that we make sure all the rules are made clear.* (Afrina)

> *It doesn't agree with the ideas in my culture. If you took some of those ideas You really need to live here. I don't know what's the emotion you should to someone in (home country) they would disagree. An example I could give is feminism. Here they fight for women's rights – they should have employment out of the home, they should have rights to a lot of things – whereas in my culture they would say, no that's wrong, because a woman belongs in the house. That's her role, a housewife, and if she takes care of the children then that's her role. I find myself in*

> *the middle because I don't think a woman belongs in the house but at the same time I think there's a limit to how much a woman can do outside of the house as well.* (Romero)

These findings resonate with the insights of socio-cultural theories of learning (Jacobs 2005; Lave and Wenger 1991) in relation to the disempowering impacts of expecting students to conform to unfamiliar academic practices. The research, although small scale, indicated that traditional, individualistic teaching and learning pedagogy implemented exclusively through the lens of a Western paradigm could further disadvantage CALD students' progress through their undergraduate studies. The findings challenge those designing and delivering the social work curriculum to question the cultural assumptions underpinning social work practice, as well as the notion that learning is an individualistic endeavour. An examination of curriculum could expose the expectations that CALD students adjust to and adopt the discourse of the dominant culture. It could also challenge curriculum designers and lecturers to integrate CALD perspectives and experiences in curriculum, thus providing alternative voices in the understanding and application of social work theories and practice. Not to do so would be a missed opportunity for social work courses intent on developing student cohorts with culturally diverse professional identities and capabilities. Undertaking such an examination affirms and values CALD students' cultural identities and experiences.

The tension and challenge in this work is to draw subjugated knowledges into the academic space, and at the same time assist students to participate in the discourse community; to reject a deficit model while assisting students to improve their English language skills for professional social work practice. In responding to the findings of the CALD research, we drew on Northedge's (2010) work suggesting that academic support structures should be discipline specific and concentrate on the development of the discourse, language and sensibility rather than be decontextualised and generic. Not to offer such support thwarts rather than facilitates CALD students' engagement with social work education. The question then becomes how to provide targeted, well-resourced support that pays more than lip service to notions of access and equity for a group of students whom Universities have actively sought to enrol in their courses.

## PROJECT 2: EMBEDDED LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND NUMERACY SUPPORT

At the time when social work staff were seeking to respond to the findings of the CALD research project, we had the opportunity to participate in Victoria University's Language, Literacy and Numeracy pilot Strategy (LLN Strategy). The LLN Strategy has the following aims:

- To build the language, literacy and numeracy capabilities that underpin students' Victoria University course achievement and which provide a foundation for further learning and for future careers and life choices.

- To build the capacity of Victoria University teachers, curricula developers and LLN support mechanisms to identify and address the LLN development needs of students.

- To evaluate and document the impact of interventions, enabling sustained growth.

This project's partnership builds on the long standing relationship between social work and the Student Learning Unit (SLU). Since the 1990s, the SLU has worked with social work academic staff to deliver some in-class content on topics such as essay writing and avoiding plagiarism. In addition, students have the opportunity to make individual appointments for learning support consultations with SLU staff members, and to attend academic skills workshops offered generally to students in the Faculty. The utilisation of individual support services has been limited. It has often seemed to social work lecturers that the students most in need of personal assistance are those least likely to seek out that assistance by making appointments to see specialist staff.

In the first semester of 2011 the LLN staff member consulted with social work academic staff, and reviewed students' work. She found alarmingly low levels of academic literacy among CALD students, particularly those coming to us from private Registered Training Organisation (RTO)-delivered Diplomas. In response to her feedback, rather than simply advise these students to make individual appointments with the SLU, a decision was made to adopt more of an outreach model, bringing the support to the students instead of sending the students off to find the support. Additional weekly tutorials were offered to students who had failed, or nearly failed, their week 5 assignment. Four of these specific academic skills tutorials were delivered, with approximately half the students invited attending these tutorials.

The 50% attendance at academic skills tutorials was better engagement than we had achieved with the previous referral method. Feedback from students who did not attend suggested that these students struggled to attend additional classes. Following reflection, our next cycle of action towards integrating academic skills building into the curriculum took place during the Winter School unit of study where support was embedded by extending the length of one of the unit's tutorials by an hour and having that tutorial jointly taught by both the regular tutor and learning support tutor. Students at risk of failing were directed to attend this tutorial, although lecturers were somewhat concerned about possibly stigmatising CALD students. We decided to work with this issue rather than avoid it by failing to take any action. While some students were initially reluctant to see themselves as requiring support, by the mid-point of the unit of study, students from other tutorials were requesting transfers to the supported tutorial. Clearly, directing students to supported tutorials has the potential to create both resistance and stigma. However, it is possible to work with these issues, and this is necessary in a funding environment where intensive learning support cannot be embedded in every tutorial.

Student feedback indicates that these 'outreach' models increase students' confidence in seeking assistance. Students report that the ongoing relationship developed with SLU/LLN staff, together with the latter's familiarity with the unit content, make for a greater uptake of their services. It also operates to reduce any stigma, or at least the influence of any stigma, on their seeking help. It has relieved students of having to self-identify as needing help, as interaction with the SLU/LLN staff is part of the everyday interaction in class. The embedding has, in itself, helped relieve some of this burden as its transparency and prominence have normalised the need to strengthen a wide range of literacy skills for all students.

In semester 2, 2011, we continued the embedded support model and had both the SLU lecturer and the LLN Strategy project educational developer participate in the planning and teaching of the tutorial. Student participation in the extended portion of these tutorials was optional. A small number took advantage of the opportunity. Evaluation of the strategy through student surveys and reflection on learnings from the project led to refinements. In particular, we learned that many students had limited strategies and opportunity for critically reading academic materials, and gaining meaning from them. Improving students' engagement with the recommended readings was a major concern for social work academic staff.

In semester 1, 2012, we continued the embedded model, with an emphasis on developing reading strategies, and implementing further refinements based on student feedback and an analysis of student work. Our primary focus was to encourage engagement and extend the advantages of the normalisation of learning literacy skills. In particular, we made:

- The process of reading and related skills the central focus of our work in tutorials;
- The discussion of difficulties in reading (Salvatori 2002) an essential part of student presentations , together with a discussion of the manner in which those students overcame those difficulties; and
- characterised the unit as a 'learning community' with particular emphasis on all of us – staff included – being 'learners', making mistakes, and having the capacity to overcome those mistakes.

The work on promoting reading skills included tutorial activities that explicitly focused on critical reading strategies, such as:

- Working overtly with the epistemological implications related to engaging with the unit's readings (Lea and Street 2006);
- Concept mapping;
- Contextualisation strategies such as 'skimming and scanning' and linking content to prior knowledge (Munro 2002)
- Paragraph structure analysis (specifically, 'Topic sentence, Explanation, Evidence and Link back to the central question');
- Discussing how authors critically integrate sources; how this technique is used to advance an argument and how students can use these methods to make clear their own views and raise their own voices
- Studying the vocabulary of critical analysis;
- Focusing on reading behaviours and reading with purpose; and
- Sharing reading strategies.

Students' survey feedback indicates that they benefitted from an explicit focus on reading and critical reading strategies. In response to the question 'what (if any) change have you experienced in yourself as a reader during this semester?' students responded in this way:

> *At first I was very much struggling with the reading as I felt it was too long, hard and complicated in terms of language and structures. But now with the help of different ideas and techniques given by our tutor it is much easier to know the reading structure and what it is about. I have definitely improved my reading ability.*
>
> *I'm understanding the readings, I find myself reading for meaning and not just reading for the sake of it.*

Another student suggested she is now:

> *More aware of bias and motivation and writer's intentions and not accepting everything I read as the absolute truth!*

In order to encourage students to remain for the additional hour the content-focussed aspect of the tutorial, together with the work on literacy, were integrated into the entire length of the I read for meaning now, even if it means I read it several times tutorial and the coordinator remained for the first half hour of the additional time. It was hoped that the coordinator's continued presence would promote continued participation, given that many students had previously left immediately after the coordinator's departure from the tutorial room. The SLU/LLN staff then provided an additional half hour of support after the coordinator's departure, tailoring their activities to individual advice or small group exercises and discussions, depending upon what the remaining students desired. Examples of this work include modelling the use of a range of graphic organisers as tools for ordering, summarising, synthesising ideas, and also using writing templates as a way to transition into writing in an appropriate academic style. Some student responses to specific activities of this sort include:

> *I like to be part of this class because I have learnt a good number of techniques such as the use of concept mapping and the formulation of questions during the tutorial based on the readings*
>
> *I take this knowledge and share it with my friends and family as it is the reality and many people are not aware of it.*

Students could also seek individual support with the SLU/LLN staff.

In order to gain a better understanding of students' response to this focus on deep engagement with texts, surveys with both specific questions and open questions were conducted, along with focus groups. The next phase of this data gathering and reflection will be semi structured interviews with volunteer student participants. The staff participating in these tutorials have observed a much higher level of disclosure around reading difficulties and greater confidence in dealing with those difficulties, as compared with previous interactions. For several students who regularly participated, the coordinator reported an improvement of the quality of assessment of up to 10% over the second half

of the semester (that is, between the mid-and- end of semester assessments) In general as students grew more confident in grappling with the ideas and sharing difficulties, they engaged as a community of learners who together could build knowledge. In addition to participating in the embedded support, a significant number of students met with the SLU/ LLN staff on an individual basis. In some cases, this involved several meetings in relation to each assessment.

Attendance for the full duration of the supported tutorials has remained a challenge. In the current semester, students have been encouraged to attend through a variety of measures. They have been informed of the constructive impact of the tutorials by both the teaching staff and students who participated in last semester's tutorial. To promote informed decision making, the coordinator has reminded students that extensions on assignments' due dates and the exercise of other discretions will take into account attendance at both lectures and the extended tutorials. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has secured a higher level of attendance, although a significant proportion of those students most needing help continue to attend inconsistently.

It appears that to some degree the difficulty in securing attendance is a reflection of the complexity and diversity of the students' lives. Having regard to the first semester 2012 surveys and experience in this current semester, many students appear to find it difficult to regularly attend lectures and tutorials of the standard length. Many travel considerable distances to university. Many have substantial personal and community commitments, including employment and caring responsibilities that limit both the times they can attend university and how long they can spend on campus. These demands also impact on the time they have available to prepare for classes and undertake assignments when off campus. Responses to surveys of time spent in reading prior to class showed that a number of students allowed less than a few hours each week for reading and some read for a much shorter period while travelling to the tutorial.

It appears that embedding literacy learning in the usual structure of tutorials is an appropriate response to the increasing diversity of social work students and their commitments. It may be that it will also require us to limit the duration of those tutorials. To do that, however, would take us to a fresh frontier. It will raise issues as to how both the social work specific learning as well as the literacy learning can be addressed in or at about the same time. This has, to a significant degree, been achieved by the process of embedding and focussing the literacy learning on the readings assigned for the unit. The literacy activities are time consuming however, and there is a real risk that the social work specific learning could be compromised by the reduction of time spent on it. We continue to work towards finding that balance. However, when students come to university with limited experience of academic literacies their engagement with the complexities of the issues and learning encountered in the curriculum is limited. Without intervention they remain disadvantaged in their ability to participate in and, most importantly, to contribute their own voice to the discipline's discourse.

To conceive the two streams of learning as separate or competing then risks missing an opportunity that is central to the anti-oppressive endeavour we are engaged in. The anti-

oppressive tradition of social work has drawn deeply on the work of Freire and others who have continued his work of pedagogy as a critical project (Fairclough, 1992, 2001; Lankshear and McLaren 1993; Luke, O'Brien and Comber 2001), a project that supports students doing 'a "reading of the cultures" around, behind, underneath, alongside, after and within the text' (Luke et al. 2001, p.113, italics in original). Our approach equally seeks to value the knowledge and skills students bring with them, especially in understanding the dynamics of privilege and oppression. We share Foucault's belief in the emancipatory potential of the 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (cited in Pease 2002, p.135, p.141). The diversity of our students' backgrounds offers much to build on, if the appropriate environment for the sharing and exploration of that knowledge is created.

## PROJECT 3: FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE ACTION RESEARCH

In exploring curricular and pedagogic practices that seek to subvert academic, sociocultural and socio-economic stratification, the Social Work Unit has partnered with the University's Curriculum Innovation Unit to undertake an action research project that intentionally designs and implements curriculum and pedagogy to access students' funds of knowledge (Hattam et al. 2007) and enables them to traverse the multiple literacies required for success in their academic and professional lives. Harnessing the intersection between the familiar world of the non-traditional student and the new world of academia and disciplinary knowledge is the pedagogic challenge explored by this action research. Students who have not had prior access to privileged academic discourse or literacies can be disadvantaged in their participation and progress in tertiary education (Northedge 2005). Wheelahan (2010) refers to the socially differentiated access to knowledge and education that arises when some students have the privilege of congruence between their middle class home and education environments and others do not. Delpit (1993, p.122) argues that the codes inherent in predominant linguistic forms –ways of talking, writing and interacting – are supported by a 'culture of power' in learning environments. Furthermore, 'success in institutions is predicated upon acquiring the culture of those who are in power'. Some students from diverse backgrounds have not necessarily come from life-worlds that carry the cultural codes selected for and perpetuated in the university system and its disciplinary worlds. Collier and Morgan (2008) report that many students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not know that the unspoken requirements of these codes even exist, let alone their consequent need to understand and then respond appropriately to them. This lack of tacit knowledge can hinder their success and achievement at university. Delpit (1988, p.283) is clear that 'if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier'.

The research project acknowledges that literacy is not a singular skill that is easily transferred from context to context. Prior research indicates that university students are required to switch between many different types of written text and oral genres in disciplinary and workplace settings, juggling different department and academic staff expectations (Lea 2008). 'Multiple literacies' refers to the meaning-making systems (print and non-print) that are deeply enmeshed in culture and everyday lives of people (Gee 2000; Kist 2005, cited in Perry 2006). These include both visible and 'hidden' literacies. The visible literacies that are privileged in university education, and are often expected

of university entrants, include academic reading and writing, digital library research and textual literacies, to name a few. 'Hidden literacies' are the unrecognised and unknown literacies students bring with them to university based in their values, interests, cultural backgrounds and world views. These influence how they read the world and then read the word (Freire and Macedo 1987).

The collaborative action research project aims to design curricular and pedagogic practices that access these less privileged literacies and funds of knowledge, and in doing so, form a bridge to the more dominant literacies that students require to succeed at university and in their professional worlds. The project is currently designing curriculum for two units of study in the Bachelor of Social Work (to be taught in 2013), which will be researched and refined for implementation across semesters one and two. It is hoped that the research findings, which will be published in a peer reviewed journal, will inform the Bachelor of Social Work program as well as influence broader reflections on university curricular practices in the internationalised environment; particularly in valuing the 'hidden' literacies' and diverse 'ways of knowing' of diverse students.

This project, along with the other two we have described here, outlines our work in accounting for Killick's (2006) elements in the internationalisation of curriculum; awareness, diverse perspectives and adapted practice. We have taken up these elements, worked with our university to make our own teaching methods diverse, inclusive and explicit (O'Rourke 2011) and at the same time engaged with the rich opportunity for grass roots internationalism our students offer. This dialogical work is ongoing.

## CONCLUSION

Within social work and within universities there is considerable political will to move towards internationalisation. However, both social work and social work education have a tendency to be Western-centric. Transforming social work and social work education involves undermining privilege, and being prepared to challenge our own practices (Pease 2006). A certain amount of change can come from people currently in positions of privilege, but this change will have all of the limitations of any top-down approach. We suggest that grass roots internationalisation of social work and social work education can be facilitated by practices that embrace understandings from critical social work, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy. Our work in this regard is always dialogic, always a work in progress, and in this paper we have discussed some of the outcomes, tensions and implications of working with students to improve their academic literacy and at the same time respecting, supporting and valuing their life circumstances, multiple literacies and funds of knowledge that they bring with them to social work education.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# 11. Why and how: Critical thinking matters when teaching diverse student groups

**Fiona Buchanan**

Dr Fiona Buchanan, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy

University of South Australia. email: Fiona.Buchanan@unisa.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

Social work educators are teaching in an era of Western neoliberalism with an increasingly culturally diverse student group. This paper is the result of deliberations about teaching Australian students who may enter university with individualised perspectives and how these students are often challenged by community based principles held by students from other cultures. Some students also come from cultures which promote the role of students as passive recipients of education. Neoliberal individuality joined with passive approaches to education can lead to practitioners who do not stand with diverse groups in the community to challenge systems which represent the antithesis of social justice. Following the traditions of Habermas, this paper explores how the principles of Relational Empowerment (VanderPlaat, 1998) can be introduced in tutorials to establish a communicative space where educators and students explore concepts of critical thinking and embrace knowledge creation as a shared pursuit which addresses imbalances of power.

***Keywords:*** *diversity, critical thinking, empowerment, communicative space, neoliberalism*

## INTRODUCTION

As an experienced social work practitioner who has moved into social work and welfare education, I have found that the neoliberal, individualised perspectives of many Australian students' contrasts with values based in community that many overseas students bring. This has provided many challenges. In tutorial groups I often find one or other group to be silenced to some degree. This constrains all participants' ability to embrace critical thinking about differing perspectives and to enjoy healthy debate during tutorial time. Students from some cultural backgrounds also understand that absorbing knowledge is paramount to education, and would not question the value context of the host nation. Thus I find that it is more often overseas students who are silenced. This is of particular relevance to potential social work and welfare education graduates who may find themselves called upon to challenge unfair systems and a lack of social justice values in the community at large. If our graduates have not learned to think critically and debate alternative positions they will not be best placed to progress social work ideals and serve their client groups by redressing injustices which are embedded in unequal power relations (Tilbury, Osmond and Scott 2009).

This paper considers how critical sociological theory and empowerment methodologies can be brought into tutorial groups to promote critical thinking of social work and welfare students. I first briefly discuss the contemporary neoliberal context of social work and welfare education, and introduce some of the critical theoretical perspectives of Habermas, Foucault, and Bourdieu. Feminist critiques are then considered and a relational empowerment approach to constructing tutorials as a communicative space is outlined. How relational empowerment principles and a relational empowerment framework can be utilised to encourage critical thinking with diverse groups is discussed. To conclude, the aspirations for employing this framework are discussed and suggestions for furthering this approach are put forward.

## THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF NEOLIBERALISM

In neo-liberalist times within westernised societies individualism has become the norm, as competition rather than cooperation is lauded as admirable. As Raewyn Connell notes, within this arena, 'concepts of common interest and democratic deliberation decline' (2011 p.2). This is the state of play for students, particularly some of our younger students, who may not have been exposed to alternative systems and perspectives from other cultures. Further, we welcome them into university as paying guests whose job is to absorb skills for the workplace while gaining marks which are awarded in competition with each other. In universities we simultaneously welcome students from overseas who may come with expectations of community principles and concerns. Some also bring understandings that they will be receiving and absorbing knowledge. Against this background, teaching from an ethos of encouraging critical thinking can be challenging.

## DEFINING CRITICAL THINKING

In this paper critical thinking refers to questioning and considering received information

from both a subjective and an objective viewpoint. Subjective knowledge includes values, perspectives and traditions that have been acquired through life experience and as such are influenced by diverse cultures and traditions. Such views are often internalised and act as a filter for whether received knowledge is acquired or rejected. Procedural knowledge is the term used when received knowledge which is congruent with subjective knowledge is incorporated (Jordan, Kaplan, Baker Miller, Stiver and Surrey 1991).

This view of constructing procedural knowledge contrasts with present neoliberal discourses, where objective knowledge based in evidence accrued from scientific research is prized. Against this backdrop, Wade and Travis (2008 p. 7) claim that critical thinking is:

*The ability to assess claims and make objective judgements on the basis of well supported reasons and evidence rather than emotions and anecdote.*

It is suggested here that this definition excludes valuable critical perspectives from ideas and information informed by subjective experiences and values acquired in diverse cultures. It is important for critical thinking to be able to embrace alternative views and to develop knowledge through open debate. Critical thinking embraces more than 'scientific fact' when it allows different world views to emerge and be considered. Even when we speak of 'evidence' the case is not clear cut. In social work academic research, 'evidence based practice' is hotly debated and critical thinking about alternative research findings offer different perspectives (Tilbury et al. 2009). This brings me to consider what critical theory can bring to critical thinking in the tutorial classroom. Here I turn to Habermas to see how a wider construct can be embraced as the foundation for critical thinking that encourages the espousing of a multiplicity of views based in students' diverse subjective experiences of cultures, community, family, religious observations and educational practices.

## SOCIOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

Critical theory is situated within a structural framing of society where social structures are seen to hold dominance over human behaviour (Crotty, 1998). According to critical theory, the privileging of science and expert views silence people who are then persuaded that science defines the problems, provides answers and offers solutions (Habermas 1979). In westernised cultures, experiences are reframed by experts in terminology that is then used to mysticise those without power. This channels the requirement for social change into work for professionals and agencies (Fraser 1989). If an expert perspective is embraced by students of social and welfare work, knowledge is seen to depend exclusively on scientific 'fact' and ordinary people's perceptions, feelings and the context in which their views are formed, are excluded (Sprague 2005). In the application of expert opinion these deep, rich, complex and varied perceptions are missed and it becomes easy to objectify, categorise and pathologise (Lapierre 2010). If students of social and welfare work then take an uncritical view, they will expound received knowledge as expertise without considering their own subjective knowledge or valuing the subjective knowledge of others. An example of where this can happen is apparent in my own research area of attachment theory. When learning about attachment theory, if social work and welfare students apply a critical lens they can recognise when practices accommodate individualist perspectives without considering

societal pressures on mother/infant dyads (Buchanan 2008). If an uncritical view is taken the danger is that, as future practitioners, they may enter their professional career and follow neo-liberal conventions with regard to this area of practice and others. Within such practices it has been noted that: 'The person is transcribed into a needy but deserving client …such clients have few choices but to comply, assertiveness goes, passivity is expected' (Offe 1984 p. 156).

## TUTORIALS AS COMMUNICATIVE SPACES

Although Habermas did not address issues of multicultural groups in particular, his view that awareness in ordinary people may be muted by institutionalised expert opinions has relevance when we look to teach such groups within educational institutions. Habermas proposes that communicative spaces where people can meet and debate, lead to critical discussion on assumptions that have gained acceptance as 'the truth' (Habermas 1979, 1986; Rundell, Petherbridge, Bryant, Hewitt and Smith 2004). Habermas contests the dominance of existentialist perceptions which, in his view, promote an image of people without agency (McCarthy 1978). Building on the collection of works by Marx and Engels, Habermas proposes an ideal of communication based in the 'life world' where everyone's voice is held in equal value. Further, to deepen this perspective the concept of 'symbolic violence,' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p. 172) where students may have embedded attitudes of dominance and control hierarchies in the social world, can be kept in mind by the educator. The philosophies of Bourdieu regarding this issue can also be offered to students for debate. However it is to Habermas that I turn to consider how tutorial space could promote such discussions.

In Habermas's view, communicative action is epitomised by logical debate between equals who accept and reject arguments to reach collective consensus. This theory relies on a rational ethic of justice that promotes freedom and equality, with communicative spaces governed by accepted rules and the recognition of equal rights to speak (Habermas 1979, 2004). However, Habermas's perspective has been challenged by Foucault for its naivety in believing that one standard can be reached, which then creates the standard which other perspectives can be measured against (Flyvbjerg 1998). Foucault postulates instead that freedom to express and accept different views is the real measure of legitimate democratic processes (Foucault 1984). Within this debate, unequal power relations can be recognised and named. This is of particular relevance to students of social and welfare work who are encouraged to embrace awareness of social justice issues which disenfranchise some people in society. With regard to differing cultural perspectives in tutorials, students can be encouraged to embrace difference and perceive power differentials through debate informed by diverse subjective experiences.

If particular principles of empowerment are applied, the hope is that students will question their own subjective perspective, while gaining understanding and tolerance of alternative world views from which to form procedural knowledge. Procedural knowledge refers to understanding when knowledge received from others is incorporated with subjective knowledge to create new knowledge that enables new perspectives to evolve (Jordan, et al. 1991). This knowledge creation process has relevance for Australian and international

students from varied backgrounds because it enables the development of understandings of cultural differences.

Habermas's theory regarding communicative space is criticised by feminists as privileging the confident and articulate (Chambers 1995; Bickford 1996). His theory is described as too narrow in defining communication because it excludes emotional dimensions of lived experience (Pajnik 2006). In line with Foucault's position regarding power imbalances, from a feminist perspective communication needs to be based in a concept of care that counters the privileging of some, by incorporating encouragement of others, so that those who lack confidence and polished oratory skills are heard (Chambers 1995; Bickford 1996). Within this space diverse perspectives are encouraged by active listening, acceptance of difference and respect for the emotional content of others' lived experiences (Pajnik 2006). By incorporating the concept of communicative space based in caring into tutorials, we encourage mutual support and validation. Thus knowledge of diversity is accessed and appreciation of difference is encouraged. To follow Foucault (1984), there may be no consensus of opinion but open dialogue allows expression and understanding of different views.

The purpose of this paper is to consider how to encourage critical thinking through open debate amongst students from diverse backgrounds. This is an approach to education that embraces communicative spaces based in the practices of caring. Within these parameters, differing perspectives formed through diverse cultural experiences are sought. In light of the critical theoretical perspectives outlined above, an approach to teaching based in principles of relational empowerment which supports these premises is proposed.

## APPROACH AND PRINCIPLES OF RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

A relational empowerment approach assumes that empowerment has a relational component which enables empowerment-oriented community practice (Cristens 2012). The principles of relational empowerment were developed by feminist psychologists (Jordan et al. 1991a) and applied with individuals in therapy as well as in feminist evaluation research (VanderPlaat 1998). It is posited here that these principles are equally applicable to teaching diverse student groups because they aim to encourage open dialogue while acknowledging difference in a supportive environment. As a framework for teaching, relational empowerment looks to the creation of a communicative space, based in respect, to support students' ability to work together thereby gaining clarity about their own feelings and thinking (Surrey 1991). The following principles which underlie a relational empowerment approach are adapted from Surrey (1991) and VanderPlaat (1998) and discussed in relation to teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

### Everyone can contribute to the making of knowledge

A foundational premise of a relational empowerment approach is that the experiences of students from differing cultures, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds all hold knowledge about interactions and understandings. These understandings are drawn upon to question the assumptions students make about learning. Unpacking these assumptions promotes student awareness of how knowledge and opinions are formed. This perspective

acknowledges that knowledge is fluid and can incorporate diverse students' subjective knowledge which comes from a myriad of diverse experiences. For example, concerns re contrasting views about responsibility for children can be explored through reflection on the circumstances of students' own cultural experiences. While there is a need to include caveats concerning personal experiences of abuse for students' self-protection, individualised responsibility expected of parents in Australia can be contrasted with community responsibility for children in different cultures. Increased understanding of other cultural practices deepens reflection on the merits of diverse systems. Discussion about cultural differences regarding expectations of parenting roles and the use of corporal punishment are inherent in such discussions. Opportunities to include perspectives of children's rights arise through these debates.

**Knowledge acquisition needs to be based in emotional authenticity**

Furthermore, emotion can be perceived as an important component of students' cultural experiences. Acknowledging emotions helps define their experiences in relation to self and others (Maynard and Purvis 1994; Hesse-Biber 2007). As Jagger (1996) points out, emotions are interpretations of sensations and feelings, past and present, informed by relationships in the past and present. In naming emotions as important, students' feelings are taken seriously rather than ignored, trivialised, dismissed or discounted (Wylie 2007). For example, in class discussions, when a dominant idea which may cause discomfort to cultural norms is raised, a question may be posed: 'how do you feel when you hear that statement?' This allows room for discussion about the subjective experience that informs the foundation underlying the feeling. Following Bourdieu (1992), debate could include consideration of the societal concepts of domination and control that are held in the psyche. When issues such as termination of pregnancy are debated in class, uncomfortable feelings are raised and acknowledged. While students are not expected to change long-held views they can become aware of the rationales for outlooks which differ from their own. The strong feelings that are evoked are similar to those that are held in the broader community and debating these can help students to consider how they will respond to future colleagues and clients who hold strong views that may conflict with their own. In this way students are empowered as debating challenging subjects equips them with confidence to deal with situations which may eventuate in their future careers.

**Emotional authenticity can be voiced through a communication of care**

Relational empowerment can be utilised as a framework that supports engagement with students so that their feelings, experiences and ideas are acknowledged (Surrey 1991). Through an ethos of mutual care built into tutorials, students can discuss the emotions that inform their culturally embedded perspectives. By ensuring that the relevance of this is visible, a philosophy that brings emotions and relationships into the process of teaching and learning is encouraged. The purpose of this teaching strategy is to nurture respectful relationships with and between students. The shared acknowledgment of experiences can help students to define their experiences, compare and contrast these with the experiences of other students. This approach defines a space in tutorials where there is support for; 'open ended-ness, dialogue, explicitness, and reciprocity' (Apple 1991, p. x). A call for different perspectives and opinions can encourage open discussion and appreciation of cultural diversity. Questions such as 'are different views held in your country of origin?' and

'Is that a particularly "Australian" view point, do you think?' can help to bring different perspectives into debates.

**Achieving empowerment is defined as developing skills and resources to inform and make contributions to society**

Empowerment is defined as: 'a process that challenges our assumptions about the way things are and can be' (Page and Czuba 1999, p. 1). In having their knowledge respected, students further develop the skills to speak with conviction that their experiences hold knowledge that is of use to others. Relational empowerment honours students' diverse experiences, so that the ability to speak and have their knowledge respected leads to increased valuing of their own perceptions. Through the educator recognising that students hold differing perspectives imbued with emotions, students see that in speaking with emotional authenticity, their voices can contribute to helping other students understand cultural differences. When students speak up, the educator may take opportunities to acknowledge their contribution to the tutorial and to comment on the need to appreciate the authenticity of diverse cultural understandings. For instance, in my experience, some strong negative attitudes towards working with gay and lesbian clients have come to light when students' written assignments are submitted for marking. This has occurred without previous debate in class which would have offered opportunity to develop understanding of the underlying questions of human rights and practice ethics. A comment on a marking sheet is not conducive to addressing this issue in depth or to exploring the experiences and influences which inform such values. If a communicative space based in respect can allow open debate in class then an understanding that there are different beliefs based in different experiences could open the door for wider learning. In accord with Foucault, I do not expect consensus to be reached but all students present learn that there are diverse views and consider their own subjective views in relation to others. As such an opportunity to embrace concepts of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1992) inherent for all members of communities, cultures and gendered groups is presented.

**Empowerment emerges rather than being given or taken**

As Surrey (1991) states 'Each feels empowered through creating and sustaining a context that leads to increased awareness and understanding' (p. 167). Knowledge sharing is a communicative process where empowerment emerges as students find connections with each other. It is the role of the educator to construct a framework that 'provides the structure for the creative empowerment process' (Surrey 1991, p. 176). Within this view it is the responsibility of the educator to ensure that the tutorial norms support an ambiance which encourages empowerment, so students feel comfortable in expressing cultural differences. Critical thinking can emerge as students from diverse cultural backgrounds are valued for their insights and their contribution to the joint learning process. The setting of tutorial norms which are based in respect of difference calls for students to respectfully listen to each other, to connect and to consider others' perspectives (Belensky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule 1997). Within the norms, tutorial groups which consist of a diverse range of students schooled in ethics and values of social and welfare work can enable rich debate to inform, deepen and broaden perspectives through attending to input from others. As Bourdieu (2004 p. 23) states; 'rigorous analysis of situations and institutions is undoubtedly the best antidote against partial views'.

In tutorials, societal and cultural norms may influence students from diverse cultural backgrounds to preference the 'received' knowledge of experts at the expense of their own subjective knowledge. However, a relational empowerment approach privileges voices based in diverse experiences and encourages subjective knowledge to be voiced. When the 'received knowledge' from other voices is congruent with their own subjective knowledge, each student is able to feel validated and empowered. Alternatively, when the subjective knowledge of other students seems incongruent, students are encouraged to think critically about their own and other perspectives. This approach is embedded in adult learning principles as consideration is given to the wealth of experience that all students bring to the tutorial group, and also to confidentiality and respect as there is a focus on creating safety in the learning environment. (Enterprise Applications Documentation and Training Services 2012)

In this way, it is envisaged that procedural knowledge is accrued which enables students to put forward perspectives that lead to new viewpoints being created. A sense of awareness and understanding of self and others as availed in a context constructed and sustained in respectful relationships (Jordan et al. 1991). In this process, subjective knowledge and received knowledge from education is enhanced by the subjective and received knowledge of other students from diverse cultures.

**Knowledge sharing as a multifaceted process**

In designing tutorials from a relational empowerment perspective to enable students to access subjective and procedural knowledge, it is vital that the knowledge they receive about processes from the educator is respectful, clear and unambiguous. The educator would share information about the aims and processes of the approach, which includes consulting with students and 'feeding back' to students from observations. A concrete evaluation process about the application of these relational empowerment principles allows the processes to be adjusted, fine-tuned and adapted.

A relational empowerment approach is evolved in the spaces between all participants in the tutorial, between individual students from diverse backgrounds and the educator, as well as in the spaces between students as they discuss and work together. The educator is situated between experiences, linking one source with another and identifying patterns and differences which emerge. This includes the context, psychosocial constructs and the discourses which underpin diverse understandings. As such, the educator includes his/her experiences of learning from the 'life world', books, study and professional practice, so that the educator's procedural knowledge and received knowledge from others is also critically examined and contributes to the diversity of knowledge brought to the class.

Through encouraging open relationships between students the intention is to stimulate both the learning environment and enable students from diverse backgrounds to feel empowered through the tutorial process. Sensitivity to the needs of students requires that the educator enables the students who actively participate to feel empowered, while also reaching for opinions from more reticent students from a 'nonintrusive and non-impositional stance' (VanderPlaat 1999, p. 3). This may necessitate using small group work in class and working with each small group to encourage reticent participants to voice their opinions in the small group before asking for their opinion to be shared in the larger group.

**Everyone involved changes through a process of empowerment**

To follow VanderPlaat:

*At the very heart of the concept of relational empowerment is the principle that one can never be just an empowerer or a person in need of empowerment.* (1999, p.777)

Everyone involved and participating in respectful communicative space is changed through the process of empowerment. Students achieve clarity and empowerment through having their thoughts and feelings validated while the educator stays open and flexible to his/her own developing insight and clarity (VanderPlaat 1999). All participants bring knowledge to the classroom and this includes the educator's knowledge. However, during tutorials, the educator's perspective is only of use in relation to others. The educator is present both as an agent and as a subject. The educator's power is to act as an agent employing subjective, received and procedural knowledge, to design the tutorial, to guide discussion and to interpret the insights offered by students. Within the parameters of relational empowerment, the educator also contributes by respectfully presenting the topic material and encouraging open discussion. Simultaneously, as subject, the educator is a 'front-line' recipient of students' subjective knowledge from their various cultural perspectives. The educator receives knowledge from students and combines it with subjective and received understandings to encourage critical thinking in the tutorial. The educator needs to be open to new knowledge while contributing from their own. From a white Australian perspective there are many insights from other cultures which contribute to challenging assumptions and expanding learning. For example my own feminist beliefs about the status of women as homemakers has been challenged by some African students' insistence that it is women who hold power in the community because they have responsibility for the home. Social work knowledge and skills are used by educators to respectfully engage with students and to utilise their perceptions in the pursuit of learning but within this process the educator also needs to be open to new learnings.

**Mutual support within groups and between individuals is important**

When the educator creates expectations that students' subjective knowledge will interrelate, this enables students to share cultural experiences and to authenticate their own subjective knowledge. By sharing their experiences with others, students gain insight about how their world differs from others. However, the sharing of experiences is dependent on a foundation of principles which promote trusting relationships. Within relational empowerment principles, trust generates a space where students increase their personal power, including their power to speak with confidence that their subjective knowledge will be valued (VanderPlaat 1999). It is the educator's responsibility to inspire trust by being true to the principles of relational empowerment, through valuing and respecting the contributions of all students.

In addition, support and trust between students is important. According to Jagger (1996), experience connects to subjective knowledge that has been developed by the self in relationships and includes emotional reactions that help to form meaning. Subjective experience is validated by others reciprocally listening and understanding. Therefore, the sharing of experience creates a relationship which touches the emotions and can validate

subjective knowledge by promoting a mutual support between tutorial participants. It is the sharing of such interactions and the growth of self in connection with others that brings diverse lived experiences into philosophical and political debate (Ahmed 2004). Furthermore, when injustices towards others resonate with injustices done to self, students learn to trust their own subjective knowledge and can speak of what was hidden (Ahmed 2004). Mutual support, in a space where students affirm each other as they explore similarities and differences, enables empowerment to be created in the spaces between (Belensky et al. 1997).

## CONCLUSION

Surrey describes the prerequisite to relational empowerment as 'acting to create, sustain and deepen the connections that empower' (1991, p. 164). In this relational space, critical thinking evolves in an ethos of support where the outcome is increased understanding and broader awareness. This approach involves a commitment to support, to advance critical thinking and to enable empowerment. This can be achieved by inviting students to appreciate and reflect on the perspectives of their peers and encouraging explicit details of the origins of differing perspectives to be shared.

This paper offers a framework based in theoretical concepts of critical theory and relational empowerment, which can be used in tutorial groups to promote empowerment and engage students in practicing critical thinking about their subjective knowledge and experiences. By introducing relational empowerment principles as a structure for tutorial work with diverse student groups, teaching strategies can be developed to make these principles explicit, which involves devoting time to establish the principles in class. The process is adjunct to the subject content being taught and is offered as a guide to the process of running tutorials rather than a subject to be taught. The ideas encompassed in this paper have not been tested or evaluated and the next step is to formalise a research study in the classroom, so that the application of relational empowerment with student groups from diverse backgrounds can be evaluated.

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ADVANCES
IN SOCIAL WORK
& WELFARE EDUCATION

# BOOK REVIEW

## Critical Reflection in Context: Applications in Health and Social Care

**Jan Fook & Fiona Gardner**

Routledge, London, 2013

ISBN 978-0-415-68425-5, pp.265, Paperback, A$35.

This book comprises an edited range of case studies using the Fook/Gardner critical reflection framework in health and social care settings. Its aim is to highlight the flexibility and innovation this critical reflection model has in many areas and how it has been applied by different writers. The book's bright cover suggests growth, new and hidden pathways entirely appropriate for critical reflection. The title clearly summarises the book's purpose. The design of the book appeals to practitioners, students, educators and researchers.

The initial chapter by Jan Fook outlines the purpose of the book, the need for critical reflection and refreshes the Fook/Gardner model. Fook goes on to describe the book's structure and its contributors. The book consists of nineteen short chapters and is organised into four separate sections - critical reflection in professional practice, supervision and management, research, and education. Each section will attract readers from specific areas of practice or education. The reader is able to move easily to specific sections and chapters of interest. However, the temptation with this book is to become engrossed in reading the sections sequentially. Each chapter ends with the contributor's reference list. Jan Fook concludes the book with the common themes of implementing critical reflection in health and social care settings as well as future implications.

The contributors in this book use the Fook/Gardner model and describe the benefits of practising critical reflection in specific contexts. This provides a balanced perspective from a number of different professions and strong examples of the diversity critical reflection has. In the opening chapter, Jan Fook defines her approach to critical reflection as 'integrated' by 'learning from experience' through stages of deconstruction and reconstruction. In each chapter, the Fook/Gardner model is generically applied in context or specifically modified appropriate to the setting. The contributors provide an international flavour from countries -Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia and Israel. The narratives from contributors provide rich personal reflections, descriptions of practice, research findings and observations.

The areas of critical reflection in professional practice span mental health, palliative care, spirituality and community health in a rural setting. Kathleen McLoughlin and Sinead McGilloway's chapter demonstrates how critical reflection can be integrated into practice through a 'repertory grid' technique that reconstructs systems and assumptions around end-of-life care. Fiona Gardner develops'critical spirituality' and provides examples from her training group. Critical reflection is explored by Gavan Thomson in a group of health and community development workers and groups in the mental health setting by Fiona Gardner.

In the supervision and management section, critical reflection groups in statutory social work held in London are examined in chapters by Yolande Ferguson and Jeffrey Baker. Jeffrey Baker's chapter on 'cringe-ical reflection' is notable for the personal reflection he makes on his position of power as a manager over the workers in the team and the part he plays in the 'dehumanising' of statutory bureaucratic structures. His struggle to sustain critical reflection in such an environment is a theme no doubt familiar to many readers. Findings from peer supervision sessions are discussed by Fiona Gardner and Eddie Taalman from an interdisciplinary team health setting in Australia, as is Belinda Hearn's eye-catching chapter on playing 'hide and seek with pink elephants'.

The critical reflection in research section offers a refreshing alternative in research design that challenges dominant discourses and argues for transformative learning. Gurid Aga Askeland highlights the challenges of being a 'cultural novice' in piloting the use of critical reflection as a research method to explore social work in Ethiopia. Christine Morley highlights some thought provoking ethical tensions of being the researcher and participant using a critical reflection methodology to co-construct meaning and power relations with sexual assault practitioners working alongside victims and their experiences of the legal system in Australia. Janet Allen takes the reader on a personal journey to explore spirituality in her own clinical work with women survivors of sexual trauma.

Within education, critical reflection is discussed by Riki Savaya as developed for a course within a social work programme in Israel. Of interest to Australian readers, Roslyn Giles and Rosalie Pockett highlight their experiences in developing students who are critically reflective in their social work programme. An interesting chapter regarding online crucial reflection dialogue group with students is written by Gail Baikie and colleagues. This chapter tantalises the reader with how critical reflection can be applied electronically and to ponder future potential in this arena.

The book has a unique quality in the sharing of personal experiences of critical reflection from each writer. This engages the reader in the writer's world on an intimate level and invites the reader to consider their own experiences. The reader also learns that being critically reflective brings challenging dilemmas such as being open to vulnerability, being reflexive and sustaining participation of others in groups over time.

Jan Fook confides in the first chapter that it is her hope the book is successful in contributing towards the theory of critical reflection in a number of practical and organisational settings. Certainly the book captures the imagination of practitioners and academics alike around the application of critical reflection towards more effective individual and organisational learning. As the cover suggests, the invitation is made for readers to pave their own pathway towards critical reflection in their context.

**Matt Rankine**
Professional Teaching Fellow
University of Auckland, New Zealand