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# Practical and Political Approaches to Recontextualizing Social Work



Jacques Boulet and Linette Hawkins



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# Practical and Political Approaches to Recontextualizing Social Work

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# Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	xiv
<b>Preface</b> .....	xvi
<b>Acknowledgment</b> .....	xx

## **Section 1 Origins**

### **Chapter 1**

Recontextualization: Origin and Meaning for Social Work.....	1
<i>Linette Ann Hawkins, Action Research Issues Association, Melbourne, Australia</i>	

### **Chapter 2**

Social Working the Borderlands: Responding to Our Relational and Ecological Calling.....	13
<i>Jacques Boulet, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia &amp; Deakin University, Australia</i>	

## **Section 2 Beyond Spaces and Places**

### **Chapter 3**

Responding to the Natural World: Expanding the Scope of Social Work .....	38
<i>Tim Walsh, University of South Australia, Australia</i>	

### **Chapter 4**

Eco-Disasters: Social Work Space and Place .....	65
<i>Helen Goodman, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia</i>	

### **Chapter 5**

It's Like Felting: Reflections on Feminist Social and Community Practices.....	89
<i>Elizabeth Orr, Consultant and Social Work Teacher, Australia</i>	

### **Chapter 6**

Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context: Extending Socio-Legal Collaborations for Improved Client Outcomes .....	111
<i>Olga Gountras, Slater and Gordon Lawyers, Australia</i>	

<b>Chapter 7</b>	
Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training: Becoming Work-Ready in a Different Way.....	131
<i>Grant Holland, Holland Foundation, Melbourne, Australia</i>	
<i>Lesley Shuttleworth, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia</i>	

**Section 3**  
**Indigenous Discourse**

<b>Chapter 8</b>	
Ecological Social Work in South Africa and the Way Forward .....	151
<i>Linda Arkert, North-West University, South Africa</i>	
<i>Issie Jacobs, North-West University, South Africa</i>	

<b>Chapter 9</b>	
Social Workers Navigating a Colonial Bureaucratic System While Also Re-Kindling Obuntu-Led Relational Social Work in Uganda.....	175
<i>Sharlotte Tusasiirwe, Western Sydney University, Australia</i>	

<b>Chapter 10</b>	
Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World: Lessons From the Pacific .....	192
<i>Kate Saxton, Charles Darwin University, Australia</i>	

<b>Chapter 11</b>	
Advancing Local, Social, and Ecological Transitions Through Community Development.....	209
<i>Anne C. Jennings, Nulungu Research Institute, School of Arts and Sciences, The University of Notre Dame, Australia</i>	

**Section 4**  
**Post-Human/Global**

<b>Chapter 12</b>	
Power, Politics, and Social Work: The Need to Reinvent Social Work Around the World .....	229
<i>Silvana Martínez, International Federation of Social Workers, Argentina</i>	

<b>Chapter 13</b>	
Social Work in the Anthropocene .....	241
<i>Jim Ife, Western Sydney University, Australia</i>	

<b>Chapter 14</b>	
Looking Back to Keep Moving . . . And It May Not Be “Forward” .....	255
<i>Jacques Boulet, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia &amp; Deakin University, Australia</i>	

<b>Compilation of References .....</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>About the Contributors .....</b>	<b>303</b>
<b>Index.....</b>	<b>307</b>



# Detailed Table of Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	xiv
<b>Preface</b> .....	xvi
<b>Acknowledgment</b> .....	xx

## **Section 1 Origins**

### **Chapter 1**

Recontextualization: Origin and Meaning for Social Work.....	1
<i>Linette Ann Hawkins, Action Research Issues Association, Melbourne, Australia</i>	

The concept of recontextualization has received minimal attention in social work literature. Exploring the practical and political ways in which social work has been re-constructed in contexts different to mainstream human services is the focus of this chapter. By linking recontextualization with social work, the authors are extending its meaning beyond what it had come to mean to date. Reflecting upon the authors' lived praxis experience provides insights into how their wish to explore recontextualization in social work features at different stages in their own journeys. Contributions from social workers in Africa, Asia-Pacific, South America, and Australia provide a kaleidoscope of ways in which social work is being recontextualized. Some of the ways they achieve this is by reframing social work within the post-human space and integrating Ubuntu philosophy, which highlights Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and relationships encompassing all people and their environments, enabling interconnectedness and community solidarity for collective power in professional practice and political activism.

### **Chapter 2**

Social Working the Borderlands: Responding to Our Relational and Ecological Calling.....	13
<i>Jacques Boulet, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia &amp; Deakin University, Australia</i>	

This chapter describes why and how the author decided to leave his social work teaching position at an Australian university and start a cooperative that could more appropriately respond to the changing social and ecological context and could be more commensurate with the true values of the social work profession. The chapter moves from the author's experiences and philosophical motivations guiding his decision to move from the university context to the establishment of a social and ecological change cooperative and the invitation to colleagues and students to join the re-contextualizing experiment to the reasons why the cooperative format was chosen. The programs, projects, and partnerships, which have

been realized in the course of the 23 years since the start of the Borderlands Cooperative, are documented and reflected upon, leading to final recommendations for a social work practice that remains true to its historical mission whilst responding to the contemporary contextual challenges.

## **Section 2 Beyond Spaces and Places**

### **Chapter 3**

Responding to the Natural World: Expanding the Scope of Social Work .....	38
<i>Tim Walsh, University of South Australia, Australia</i>	

This chapter seeks to help social workers adopt a wider eco-centric perspective which affirms human connectedness to the natural world, with a dual focus on ecological and social justice. It examines when, where, and how humans came to see themselves as separate and superior to the rest of nature, and the disastrous consequences now evident on a global scale. The alienation from nature is found to begin within early western civilizations and exacerbated with the growth of commerce and empires and the displacement and destruction of peoples with deep knowledge and respect for the natural world. Social workers are well placed to work at the interface between people and the wider natural environment and to embrace the knowledge and contributions of other disciplines and groups working for just causes. It is concluded that help for humans is only possible within a wider remit of care for the natural world essential to all life. A local example of ecologically informed social work is shared, helping community gardeners to grow and share food.

### **Chapter 4**

Eco-Disasters: Social Work Space and Place .....	65
<i>Helen Goodman, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia</i>	

This chapter seeks to encourage social workers to review their often (enforced) siloed roles in relation to communities of place and to develop stronger senses about the relationships and networks in places where those they serve actually live. The author offers a picture of force fields, system tensions which shape organizational and community life in particular ways, ways which diminish community life, and those who seek to serve community, and she provides examples from her practice experience in pre and post disaster environments. Where social workers can contribute to strengthening community networks, this will contribute to a quality of life for those they serve and then strengthen the capability of community responsiveness to a disaster. Seeing, valuing, and using these links may allow social workers to make subtle but important contributions to the field of emergency management.

### **Chapter 5**

It's Like Felting: Reflections on Feminist Social and Community Practices.....	89
<i>Elizabeth Orr, Consultant and Social Work Teacher, Australia</i>	

This is a personal story describing the role and importance of local action whilst reflecting on collective and collaborative feminist community practices. The craft of felting is used as a metaphor for merging feminist social and community work theory and practices that encourage engagement with continuing cycles of activism aimed towards gender equality and Indigenous sovereignty. Following a rough chronology of engagement with movements for social change and respect for human and environmental rights, this chapter points to the value of post modernists' treatise of doubt, tension, and uncertainty.

It also contains a plea for a continuation of the modernist social work activism to decrease suffering and inequality. Narrating and evaluating the ideas and actions of real-time practice, the author will demonstrate how knowledge of place, process, and strength in work towards interpersonal peace and planetary survival was achieved.

**Chapter 6**

Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context: Extending Socio-Legal Collaborations for Improved Client Outcomes ..... 111  
*Olga Gountras, Slater and Gordon Lawyers, Australia*

There are multiple synergies between social work and the law, and the two professions have common goals. The law underpins social work practice via legislation and legal processes. Despite this, social work services in a plaintiff law firm remains a unique practice setting. This chapter provides a description of the establishment of such a service in Australia. It explains the reason for it, how it was established, the practice model, spheres of influence, and reasons for its success. The service is a role model for successful multidisciplinary practice for better client outcomes.

**Chapter 7**

Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training: Becoming Work-Ready in a Different Way ..... 131  
*Grant Holland, Holland Foundation, Melbourne, Australia*  
*Lesley Shuttleworth, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia*

Many disadvantaged young people and adults, long and short-term unemployed, overseas arrivals/refugees, people with mental health issues, mothers returning to the workforce, and those disconnected from their communities have lost hope of ever getting employment. Numerous employment-training programs are narrowly-focused classroom-based simulations provided on a sessional basis, while real-world job training opportunities with flexible entry/exit points and on-site professional social work support for those disconnected from employment opportunities are uncommon. The STEP program, an innovative and engaging real-world training program in an opportunity shop (op-shop), gives hope and job success to disaffected people, offering life-changing training in every aspect of running a business in the retail and office administration sector as well as teaching valuable life skills, including job interviews, accounts and administration, and customer service.

**Section 3  
 Indigenous Discourse**

**Chapter 8**

Ecological Social Work in South Africa and the Way Forward ..... 151  
*Linda Arkert, North-West University, South Africa*  
*Issie Jacobs, North-West University, South Africa*

Internationally, social work has been delayed in engaging with ecological social work. The delay is reflected in South Africa, which is predicted to be a hot spot where the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are already being experienced. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation are social and environmental justice issues as the marginalized and poor in this country and the world have already been experiencing dire consequences. Social work practitioners and academics, in their roles as advocates for the marginalized and the poor, are therefore duty-bound

to act for a sustainable environment for both people and the planet. In this chapter, the authors examine ecological social work in South Africa, its importance, and how it could become part of the global call for an ecological social work approach.

### **Chapter 9**

Social Workers Navigating a Colonial Bureaucratic System While Also Re-Kindling Ubuntu-Led Relational Social Work in Uganda..... 175

*Sharlotte Tusasiirwe, Western Sydney University, Australia*

Diverse contexts present to us diverse philosophies on being and knowing, which would inform diverse but equally valid ways of constructing social work around the world. However, due to enlightenment modernity and Western colonialism, social work remains resistant to embracing this diversity as, often uncritically, a social work defined from a privileged white Western perspective is imposed. The purpose of this chapter is to disrupt ongoing colonization in social work: reclaim and theorize social work as conceptualized from Ubuntu/Ubuntu philosophies central in most African Bantu communities. Ubuntu or Ubuntu, as it is used in different African languages, defines what being human (person/omuntu) entails including embracing values like interconnectedness, collectivism, solidarity, caring for and about others, and the environment. This chapter will first explore experiences of social workers as they navigate a colonial bureaucracy, with frustrations forcing them to re-ignite indigenous models of social work. Implications for social work in Uganda and Australian contexts are then discussed.

### **Chapter 10**

Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World: Lessons From the Pacific ..... 192

*Kate Saxton, Charles Darwin University, Australia*

As the professional agenda of social work continues to spread globally, certain voices are privileged in the construction of what constitutes valid social work practice and education. Within the South Pacific Islands, the ongoing colonial legacy, engagement with foreign aid, and influence of globalization contribute to an environment where Western models of social work may supersede or drown out efforts to integrate models of Western and non-Western practice. Despite the trend to adopt Western models of practice, the neo-liberal prerogative underpinning many such approaches fails to address issues of social and ecological injustice. In response, Pacific constructions of social work encourage a more relational and collaborative model of practice with a focus on social connection rather than 'outcome'. Ultimately, in the context of increasing globalization, the social work profession should foster a rich and diverse understanding of social work practice by embracing indigenous and localized understandings of research, education, and practice.

### **Chapter 11**

Advancing Local, Social, and Ecological Transitions Through Community Development ..... 209

*Anne C. Jennings, Nulungu Research Institute, School of Arts and Sciences, The University of Notre Dame, Australia*

This chapter explores social work and community development practices in light of the urgent social, economic, and environmental issues facing the world today. Can those professions, established to support individuals and communities, overcome social disadvantage, evolve into new, alternative roles that seek combined human and non-human (animals, plants, living organisms) understandings leading towards transformative practices? Those professions are viewed within their own constructs and environmental

agendas. Ancient and contemporary Indigenous knowledges are then considered, as they relate to the First Law of caring for their living country and living lifestyles. Two community development case studies are examined, involving non-Indigenous people in their community, and Indigenous traditional owners across a whole river catchment to address key questions: How can those disciplines contribute to ecological transformation? Can they appreciate and include non-humans in their practice? and How can Indigenous ancient and current knowledges contribute to social justice practice?

## **Section 4 Post-Human/Global**

### **Chapter 12**

Power, Politics, and Social Work: The Need to Reinvent Social Work Around the World ..... 229  
*Silvana Martínez, International Federation of Social Workers, Argentina*

In this chapter some reflections are examined linking social work with power and politics. These reflections are raised from a Latin American and decolonial perspective. The urgency and the need to reinvent social work around the world is argued in view of the deepening of social inequalities caused by a capitalist-colonial-patriarchal social order. Likewise, the need to build a political view of social work is argued, as well as a greater commitment to social movements and their struggles to transform these social inequalities and the current social order. Theoretical reflections are accompanied by historical evidence that illustrates these struggles, as well as experiences of professional practices of social work. These reflections are also linked to the themes of the global agenda for social work and social development, as well as the world definition of social work by the International Federation of Social Workers.

### **Chapter 13**

Social Work in the Anthropocene ..... 241  
*Jim Ife, Western Sydney University, Australia*

The reality of the Anthropocene hangs over our heads as we enter the 2020s. Humanity is facing multiple crises, and it has become clear that political and government structures are incapable of dealing with them adequately and equitably. We are seeing the erosion of the liberal democratic state and its institutions, the appeal of populism, mistrust both of politicians and of political institutions, and powerful interests responding by increasing surveillance, secrecy, and control. The Anthropocene also challenges the anthropocentrism that has been taken for granted in the world view of Western modernity, but is proving to be unsustainable and indeed harmful to human and non-human flourishing. This presents a new set of challenges for social work, if it is to remain relevant to the needs of the society, and also to remain true to its value base. This chapter argues that social work needs to explore and adopt theory/practice that is community-based, political, anarchistic, decolonised, matriarchal, and grounded in an ecological epistemology that is both Indigenous and post-human.

### **Chapter 14**

Looking Back to Keep Moving . . . And It May Not Be “Forward” ..... 255  
*Jacques Boulet, Borderlands Cooperative, Australia & Deakin University, Australia*

In this concluding chapter, the author looks back over the content of the 13 preceding chapters of the volume and reflects on the process of assembling them. Rather than offer an interpretative summary that would dilute their contextual specificity, the various “recontextualization stories” should be read on their

own. Instead, five global “predicaments” with which all social work practice accounts in the volume directly, indirectly, and intersectionally are addressed: the pandemic, the crises in global capitalism, racism and other “embodied” social antagonisms, war and conflict, and the ecology. A second section briefly speculates about the consequences of the convergence of the several predicaments whilst the final section offers thoughts about the need to evolve a “relational” approach to professional social work, proposing that the real meaning of the “social” that refers to the authors’ “work” entails their professional attempts across all their intervention modes to restore people’s relational capabilities.

<b>Compilation of References .....</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>About the Contributors .....</b>	<b>303</b>
<b>Index.....</b>	<b>307</b>

## Foreword

I first met Jacques Boulet when he was my social work professor at university in the early 1980s. I met Linette Hawkins 15 years later when we were all social work colleagues together at RMIT University. What impressed me most about both Linette and Jacques, was their passion and commitment to social and community development which inspired my own approach to social inclusion.

I saw Jacques and Linette become increasingly frustrated and disheartened by government neo-liberal policies that saw the increased demise of local community services through amalgamations and privatization. At the same time, we were all increasingly constrained by the corporate models driving change in the university sector. Jacques decided to do something about it and together with Linette and others established an alternative approach in the community co-operative Borderlands. Borderlands is committed to a collectivist and regenerative approach to community development; an approach concerned with environment, people and community.

Jacques, Linette and colleagues at Borderlands engage in dialogue and community-building action that draws upon diverse knowledges, cultures and technologies, inviting us to engage in a whole systems analysis to consider how individual actions impact upon others and the world we live in. This extends to being “good ancestors” in the legacy we leave for those who follow us.

As Editor in Chief for the IGI *Advances in Human Services and Public Health series*, I asked Linette and Jacques if they would like to contribute, and I was thrilled when they both agreed to collaborate on a book project.

The title of the book came as no surprise, *Practical and Political Approaches to Recontextualizing Social Work* as it encapsulates the regenerative and collectivist approaches that signify Jacques and Linette’s approach to their social work and community development and the way they live their lives. Both Linette and Jacques are now at a point in their lives where they can share with us their immense knowledge and wisdom in social and community development that encapsulates a local and global perspective. When researching this book, Linette and Jacques have drawn upon their extensive networks around the world who share their commitment to developing sustainable and thriving communities that leave a positive ecological footprint.

This is a timely book that calls upon social workers and community development workers to engage in questioning, exploring and re-imagining how we can live, work and play in ways that enhance our own lives and those of others while supporting ecology. The book provides opportunities for deep thinking and reflection on key topics and issues while at the same time providing practical responses for implementation moving forwards. In this sense, the book creates opportunities for new ways of thinking and being for social workers and community development workers. This is an approach that facilitates careful analysis of contemporary and historical issues and ethical dilemmas. At the same time the book provides

## **Foreword**

a sense of hope and direction in practical strategies to influence others and bring about personal, social, economic, political and environmental change.

Writing this book has come with many challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. This caused considerable disruption and required careful and thoughtful discussion and negotiations with authors of chapters and the editor. Linette and Jacques, and the contributing authors, have worked tirelessly over the past 18-months to bring this important book to fruition. They have done so in a timely manner characterized by good will, support, understanding and appreciation. I am forever grateful to Linette and Jacques for such an important groundbreaking book, and I imagine you as the reader will be too.

*Jennifer Martin*

*Federation University, Australia*



## Preface

Finding social workers with unique experience *recontextualizing* social work was an early step in the journey towards bringing this book to fruition. We were excited to eventually discover practitioners and educators across four continents committed to this concept and the experience of implementing it is being shared in this volume. It was a steep learning curve for us as editors, who had been *exploring* ways whereby social work might be recontextualized, primarily in Australia where we live.

The chapters of the book are grouped into four sections: (1) Origins, (2) Beyond Spaces and Places, (3) Indigenous Discourses, and (4) Post-Human and Global.

In Section 1, “Origins”, the editors reflect upon their different journeys leading to realization of the need for recontextualization in present and future social work. Jacques, drawing upon his experience as practitioner, researcher and educator across five continents, Linette benefiting from valuable opportunities in diverse contexts, especially during the exciting period of innovations, challenges and changes in the 1970s and 80s. Integral to the pathways leading to the collection of the chapters for this book were, and are, opportunities arising from the foundation of Borderlands Cooperative, providing the auspice for us to find new ways of engaging with communities.

Section 2, “Beyond Spaces and Places”, presents different ways in which social workers in Australia envisioned and ventured outside mainstream practice. The first three chapters in this section provide cameos, engaging significant sections of society by acknowledging their operation within the broader environmental context (Walsh); crisis intervention in eco-disasters (Goodman) and philosophy and processes underlying prevention strategies with vulnerable sectors of the general population (Orr). Gountras, in Chapter 6, documents how social work has been introduced and become integral to a specialist department in a large nation-wide legal corporation. As a contrast Holland and Shuttleworth (Chapter 7) describe a new kind of *Opportunity Shop* which provides training and employment for disadvantaged people who are unable to access the government-funded programs provided by private for-profit employment/training agencies.

In Section 3, passionate, committed, holistic affinity with social work and the communities they are engaging with is portrayed by authors articulating their experience in recontextualizing social work with Indigenous communities. Whilst authors communicate certain concepts in different ways, they share a common meaning regarding decolonizing social work education and practice and working towards a culturally appropriate and contextually relevant profession. Integral to this is the “Ubuntu” philosophy, Indigenous models of knowledge and community development processes, core to the curriculum. These chapters contain valuable case studies which highlight the Indigenous relational and collective ways of working, interconnection and relational process being prioritized over outcome. Authors, in this section, Arkert, Jacobs, Tusasiirwe, Saxton and Jennings, acknowledge the need to reclaim and theorize social

## **Preface**

work as it is conceptualized when based on Ubuntu philosophies of Indigenous people in each of their countries (South Africa, Uganda, Pacific Islands, Australia). They remember and articulate the wisdom acquired over thousands of years and understand it as the way ahead.

From the above perspective authors in the final section (4) envision the global and post-human frameworks for social work. Martinez foresees the need to “reinvent social work around the world” whilst Ife projects a future vision in which social work recognizes our post-human identity “grounded in an ecological epistemology that is both Indigenous and post-human”.

## **Section 1: Origins**

Introduction to *recontextualization*, the central concept of the book is the focus of Chapter 1. A literature review covering the ways in which the concept has been (initially) unconsciously re-constructed by social workers sets the background to themes which feature throughout the other chapters: post-human, global, eco-social-justice, Indigenous discourses, Ubuntu philosophy and local spaces and places.

Although the title of Chapter 2 features “Social Working the Borderlands”, it extends beyond this, reflecting on the institutional and political landscapes in which Boulet’s professional journey was situated prior to founding Borderlands Cooperative. As a secure zone for “incubating” numerous groups, Borderlands provides an ideal auspice for many seeking new places and spaces to explore their ideas outside the mainstream and its tendency to reproduce systemic contradictions to social work values.

## **Section 2: Beyond Spaces and Places**

In Chapter 3, Walsh challenges readers to acquire a deeper understanding of the world and where they live, reframing their practice within the natural environment. With a more meaningful understanding of “relatedness”, eco-social work becomes more viable to the natural world. Walsh provides examples of how this is currently occurring in several local practice initiatives in South Australia.

The relationships and interdependence between community and environment are central to professional involvement in social services delivery, community engagement, policy and research and in response to bushfire disasters feature prominently in Chapter 4. Such experience has led Goodman to envision social workers acknowledging the importance of becoming integral to the communities, engaging in environmental strategies to prevent such crises or to be crisis ready. Goodman’s adaptation of Boxer’s Compass model provides a useful framework in which to examine and assess the concept of community in emergency management and the place of social work in this.

Orr, using the metaphor of *felt* in Chapter 5, highlights the necessity of collective and collaborative processes in working with diverse communities to improve prevention strategies for women and children affected by violence, inequality and exclusion. She shares stories of her professional employment and personal activism in movements for social change, acknowledging “the value of (a) post-modernist treatise of doubt, tension and uncertainty”.

Chapter 6 portrays an excellent example of “interconnectedness”, of social workers in partnership, rather than as ancillary workers in the socio-legal compensation field. Gountras points out the multiple

synergies between the two professions. Organizationally situated, she portrays the unique opportunity to integrate a social work service for a specific client sector into a national law firm.

In contrast to this, Holland and Shuttleworth (Chapter 7) describe a unique “Opportunity Shop”, selling donated goods and providing a business model in which volunteers are trained for all the roles required to access and work in the retail industry. The features which distinguish this model from mainstream opportunity shops and employment training programs include the increased access for disadvantaged people, who have been excluded from programs primarily provided by private for-profit enterprises.

### Section 3: Indigenous Discourse

Some themes resonating with those referred to in Walsh’s writing about social workers responding to ecologically responsive work (Chapter 3) also feature in Chapter 8 by Arkert and Jacobs, concerning the South African environment. Their understanding of the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are grounded in their involvement in the anti-fracking and anti-uranium movement in South Africa. As in the Ugandan experience (Chapter 9, Tusasiirwe) Arkert and Jacobs point out that the Ubuntu philosophy is rooted in the South African cultural framework and interconnectedness. Drawing on knowledge from their colleagues, research and lived experience the authors they provide an argument, framework and vision integrating ecological literacy, justice, Indigenous perspective, feminism, sustainability and de-growth in the South African environment. This analysis provides a blueprint for other countries and cultures.

In Chapter 9, Tusasiirwe reminds us that Western colonialist social work imposed on many societies is continuing to resist the equal, alternative ways of conceptualizing social work in other cultures. Having studied and taught social work in Uganda and Australia, she is critically aware of the need to recontextualize social work education and practice, well beyond the western individualist paradigm. With Ubuntu-led social work the individual cannot develop outside the community. The case studies tap into local wisdom and experiences of communities over time and challenge the relevance of western social work in Uganda. The chapter provides substance supporting her conclusion about the presence of diverse but equal ways of doing social work, all depending on the context in which a social worker is situated.

Drawing on her awareness of the need to recontextualize social work in the Pacific (Chapter 10), Saxton highlights the colonial legacy and ongoing influence of intrusive globalization and social and ecological injustice in the South Pacific Islands. Pacific social work seeks to “encourage a more relational and collaborative model of practice”, the focus being upon social connection rather than ‘outcome’. Whilst acknowledging that she espouses an “insider-outsider” perspective she provides an evidence-based portrayal of how Pacific Island practice, influenced by colonial and eastern epistemology, is devaluing Indigenous knowledge. This confirms the need for recontextualization of social work with cross-cultural relevance beyond the Pacific (Islands). Saxton articulates that there are overt differences, contradictions and tensions still resulting from colonial legacy. She then follows with strategies to address these tensions, introducing *Talanoa* as “a framework for recontextualizing approaches to social work” suggesting relevant pathways across other cultures.

Acknowledging that real community development is an integral part of Indigenous ways of being, Jennings, in Chapter 11, highlights the importance for western social work to learn from this and shift its focus from individualism to interdependence. Her case studies relating to common ecological/environmental challenges provide rich profiles of how, using “whole-of-community” approaches, with “settler Australian” citizens listening to Indigenous insight, a third space emerges providing common ground.

## **Section 4: Post-Human/Global**

In Chapter 12 Martinez reminds us that social work, mainstream or otherwise recontextualized may only achieve lasting impact beyond the individual/micro level if we understand where power lies, how it is exercised and that a “social relationship” is required for long term strategies. Demonstrating how the “personal is political” in local activism in Latin America, and in using her global influence as President of the International Federation of Social Work, Martinez offers an exemplary role model from which social workers universally may learn.

Building upon the diversity of places and ways in which others have found or created new spaces, locally and globally, to recontextualize social work, Ife makes us realize, in Chapter 13, that a post-human paradigm is required for a new society. Founded upon the Indigenous understanding of humanity and interconnectedness with nature, Ife confirms principles also expressed in the chapters of Arkert and Jacobs, Tusasiirwe, Saxton and Jennings, that westernized social work is challenged and is needing to face and espouse a future focus of working with, and learning from, communities.

In the final chapter, Boulet shares the insights we, as editors, have gained from reading and reflecting on the diversity of the contextualized insights of the contributors to this volume. Rather than offering a *summary* of the specific stories, the chapter offers a brief elaboration of five contextual spheres requiring attention when attempting to *upgrade* the professional praxis facing the challenges of the present and a possible future. Also, he proposes a few general thoughts about what this may mean for the praxis of social work as a profession. The chapter concludes with suggested paradigmatic changes to social work(ers’) values, our “intervention” modalities, and a call for a commitment to accountability and personal/professional responsibility that moves beyond the “cases assigned” to us by our respective “systems”.

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# Section 1

# Origins

# Chapter 1

## Recontextualization: Origin and Meaning for Social Work

**Linette Ann Hawkins**

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### ABSTRACT

*The concept of recontextualization has received minimal attention in social work literature. Exploring the practical and political ways in which social work has been re-constructed in contexts different to mainstream human services is the focus of this chapter. By linking recontextualization with social work, the authors are extending its meaning beyond what it had come to mean to date. Reflecting upon the authors' lived praxis experience provides insights into how their wish to explore recontextualization in social work features at different stages in their own journeys. Contributions from social workers in Africa, Asia-Pacific, South America, and Australia provide a kaleidoscope of ways in which social work is being recontextualized. Some of the ways they achieve this is by reframing social work within the post-human space and integrating Ubuntu philosophy, which highlights Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and relationships encompassing all people and their environments, enabling interconnectedness and community solidarity for collective power in professional practice and political activism.*

### INTRODUCTION

Whilst employed in my first welfare position in a government department, alongside the institutionalized, individualized residual service delivery I was participating in the final course towards my undergraduate degree. Neutrally named “Social Organization B” was sociology for social work students. This awakening to new theories which challenged many previously taught in micro intervention courses, provided an overall understanding of the context in, and with which I was struggling. Out of this learning emerged a crudely conceived *structural approach* to social work (1967-9).

A few years later in 1973, I was involved in organizing a state-wide conference at which the newly elected Australian Labor government announced the *Australian Assistance Plan*. Aimed at bringing about cooperative social planning on a regional basis (Graycar, 1974), the government's national strategy was for “citizen engagement and local determination” (Hall, 2020: p.8). Introducing “the Plan”, as part of my

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next social work role in a rural region (1974–5), provided opportunities to operate innovatively, engaging in strategies facilitating access for small groups and communities to resources previously unforeseen.

During this period an introduction to participatory action research by Yoland Wadsworth, a pioneer in the use of integral and transformative social research and evaluation in health and human services, demystified research for me. Yoland's popular best-selling books *Do It Yourself Social Research* (1984) and *Everyday Evaluation on the Run* (1991) as well as her workshop teaching showed, how engaging in collaborative social research could “build in” inquiry as part of social work per se. Integrating participatory action research into my everyday practice resulted in personalizing my research whilst politicizing my social work. This had a considerable impact upon my involvement in a later project that included a structured qualitative longitudinal study.

The need for a greater diversity of post-secondary, para-professional training courses to meet the increasing demand for workers in the social and community services industry in Australia in the 1980s led to the formation of an Advisory Committee to oversee this process in the state of Victoria. Whereas the training needs of workers with clearly defined sectors of the population (for example, child-care) were easier to ascertain statistically, those engaged with broader sections of the community (for example welfare workers or community workers) were less visible and quantifiable. As a member of the planning team in this area of tertiary training and further education (Technical and Further Education Board, Victoria) we used a modified participatory action research (PAR) approach to ascertain the nature of, and demand for, the more general courses. A key finding of this study was the widespread need for flexible access to education for workers, many of whom were involved in community centers, neighborhood houses, linked closely with local communities, or some active in social change and social development.

The relevant union at that time (Australian Social Welfare Union), a major player in the human services industry and key consultant with the planners, used the findings of this research as evidence to support their case to establish a *Community Development Worker* award. Major achievements, especially for mature aged workers without qualifications, included the case won by the union in conjunction with colleagues at two local universities, towards articulation, and establishment of the award distinguishing the roles and responsibilities of community development workers from those of welfare and social workers. This award was aligned with an Associate Diploma (Community Development) course at the (TAFE) Colleges, articulating into the third year of a Degree in Community Development at some universities. PAR was integrated into the curriculum as a core component in both programs. Acquiring an overview of the expanding social and community services industry increased my awareness of the need to question the social work education programs taught at the majority of social work schools in Australia.

Further insights into social work education were gained assistance in a five-year longitudinal study (1990-1994) of social work education and professional expertise between 1990 and 1994 at a university in Australia. The longitudinal component involved the journey of cohort of 30 social work students during the final two years of their social work study program, followed by their first three years of professional practice. On completion of their degree, the majority were employed in the social and community services field. Approximately one third were in positions for which a degree in social work was a pre-requisite. The majority of remaining graduates were in work for which social work qualifications were likely to be preferred, but not essential. (Fook et al, 2000, pp. 61-2). This reflected the significant restructuring of community services, creating uncertainty in the social and community services labor market in Australia at that time. Complementing the longitudinal study were interviews with thirty experienced practitioners, nominated as “expert” by colleagues, examining their specific practices.

## **Recontextualization**

A review of employment opportunities and outcomes for social work graduates ensued with five Victorian schools of social work collaborating to research the employment paths of graduates in 1995 and 1996. Alongside this, an analysis of advertisements for social work and social work-related positions was carried out, less than half (43%) of the positions obtained by graduates required eligibility for membership of the professional social work association (AASW). The majority of graduates were employed in positions for which their social work skills were particularly relevant, but a degree in social work was not a pre-requisite. During that same period newspaper advertising was still the major source of information for positions available in the social and community services job market. Advertised positions analyzed during 1995 and 1996 found that employment opportunities in this sector in Victoria were no longer primarily occupationally defined. An increasing proportion of advertised jobs called for appropriate broad ranging tertiary qualifications, specific abilities and/or relevant experience, a small proportion (less than 12%) requiring vocation-specific qualifications. (Hawkins et al, 2000).

My work as a field education coordinator for undergraduate social work students at one university, as well as final year community development students at another for more than a decade (1992 – 2004) provided a broader spectrum of an increasingly diverse, overlapping and contested area of employment across a number of human services sectors.

Acknowledging the challenges to social work reflected in their findings we concurred with Ife's view (1997) at that time, of the need to find a way through complex and contested areas. The ways ahead would require social work to incorporate "a theory of social justice, a commitment to the values of humanity, a feminist analysis, an understanding of the post-modernist critique, and an internationalism" with creativity, imagination, persistence and commitment in "redefining and recontextualising that vision within a new and rapidly changing environment" (Hawkins et al, 2000, p. 42). Ife's chapter in this volume, "Social Work in the Anthropocene" now extends this earlier vision, recontextualising future social work in (a) space beyond the parameters of most other authors to date.

The trends reflected in findings of earlier research, together with increasing awareness of social workers transferring into positions outside of the delivery of mainstream community services, led to a qualitative study of a small number of social work graduates in Victoria, identified through a "snowballing" process, and selected according to their relatively high public profile and significant seniority. Participants were chosen if their work was outside the human services sector, or if in a position distinctly different from that of mainstream community service delivery. In 2002, interviews were carried out with eight prominent professionals initially educated in social work and who were still comfortable with identifying as social workers.

The title of the book with their stories, *The Chancellor, CEO, Consultant, Director, Publisher and President – People in significant positions reflect on their social work education*, portrays the journeys leading to the positions that interviewees occupied or had occupied before. Retrospectively we see them as social workers recontextualizing their social work values, knowledge and skills in fields such as hospitality, publishing, public administration, equal opportunity, philanthropy, community planning and the arts. So began an ongoing journey in exploring social work that extends beyond the conventional boundaries of the community service field.

In bringing this book to fruition one realizes the ways in which Borderlands Cooperative has provided a path for recontextualizing our social work since it was founded in 1997, over twenty years ago as an "open house" for individuals and groups to recontextualize, outside the mainstream institutions, for exploring, meeting, learning, teaching, working. As "a place where people can develop other ways of doing things together" (Boulet, 2015:144). Borderlands provided placements for students seeking

experiences that were different to those able to be made in mainstream organizations, with opportunities to follow their own ideas as well as participating in contracted projects, enabling recontextualizing the social work they were studying at university.

An everlasting tension emerges for social work in reflecting upon the above-described stages and experiences I lived and worked through as a social worker myself. This is portrayed in the ongoing protection of territories claimed as professional ownership and expertise by social work through its established institutions. This is quite different to the challenges to venture proactively into newly emerging environments for which the recontextualization of social work offers the only way forward.

In contrast to the small exploratory study of social workers recontextualizing social work *individually* by moving into alternative contexts, it was inspiring to learn from a social worker who created a distinctly new operational context. This venture provided greater freedom to apply his commitment to social work without the restrictions he had experienced in government and non-government organizations during his social work career. Drawing on the philanthropic trust set up by his parents, Grant Holland, co-author of the chapter in this book, “Holland Foundation: Op Shop—Comprehensive alternate transition to preparation for the workforce”, developed a unique *place* for volunteer trainees to acquire the knowledge and skills required to manage a small business. Within the “opportunity shopfront” he could demonstrate a new meaning to recontextualizing social work. This reactivated our desire to explore other places and spaces where social workers had ventured outside the mainstream parameters to recontextualize and practice their social work. Holland created a new context within which he recontextualized his social work theories and practices. Hence, it was appropriate to link the Holland Foundation Opportunity Shop with Borderlands Cooperative when they sought appropriate people to evaluate their program. This is reflected in the chapter in this volume.

## **DEFINING RECONTEXTUALIZATION**

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary offers a relatively minimalist definition of the word; “recontextualization” to recontextualize being “(as verb) to place (something, such as literary or artistic work) in a different context”. Drawing on the definition of the linguist Per Linnell “the dynamic transfer – and-transformation of something from one discourse / text-in-context...to another”. (Linnell,1998, p.154), Wikipedia refers to recontextualization as:

*a process that extracts text, signs or meaning from its original context (decontextualization) and re uses it in another context. Since the meaning of texts, signs and content is dependent on its context, recontextualization implies a change of meaning and redefinition.*

Similarly, for Bauman and Briggs, recontextualization (and contextualization) are informed by “the political economy of texts”, hence culturally and socially situated (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 4).

However, the interpretation of recontextualization by social work educators in China (Yan & Cheung, 2006) and Africa (Mupedziswa & Sinkamba, 2014), who appear to be social work pioneers in this area, is closer to the meaning we associate with the purpose of this volume. Yan and Cheung (2006) draw upon Bernstein’s theory of recontextualization,

## **Recontextualization**

*... a dynamic process in which different discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relationship with each other, for the purpose of their selective transmission and acquisition (Bernstein, 2000, pp. 46–7).*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Early acknowledgement of recontextualization in western social work features in an article by Wright and Anderson (1998) researching clinical social work practice with African American families. Recontextualization is identified as one of the six central components of the strengths-oriented and competency-based model which their research found as most relevant for practice that linked with the living context of their clients.

The relevance of *context* features often in the writing of Fook (2000, 2002, 2007, 2012).

Having assisted Fook and Ryan in the longitudinal study previously discussed I became significantly aware of the increasing power, and hence, control of context exercised over the social worker's role and values. Findings from this research indicate that social workers with expertise worked within the whole context in which they are situated, "the true 'client' of the social worker is the *context*" (Fook et al., 2000, p.193).

*An expert practitioner in a sense sees their professional (and personal) responsibility as extending beyond the parameters of any one job or their professional status, they can contribute to social justice ideals, or other value-based principles, in ways that extend far beyond the boundaries of a particular job at a particular time e.g., through professional networks, community and public activities, or an ongoing commitment to social activism. These values and activities transcend the requirements and restrictions of any one employment setting and set of requirements (Fook et al., 2000, p. 194).*

In his article on "Social work: A profession in search of its identity" (2014), Gitterman believes that, "Social work with its historic liaison function is the only profession to identify that both people and environments require equal attention" (p. 601) which some may view as contentious, especially the extent to which Gitterman's claim is demonstrated in social work practice generally.

Healy, an Australian academic and professional activist, points out that what distinguishes social work from most other disciplines is that the profession has no "primary institutional base" (2005, p.2). Its focus differed according to the practice context and owing to the "deeply contextual nature of social work" its "professional practice foundations...are substantially constructed in, and through, the environments in which we work" (p. 4). The meaning of "environments" here extends beyond the institutional context of workplaces. Building on Fook's approach, "reframing our practice as contextual... means we reframe our practice as working with environments, rather than working despite environments. We see ourselves as part of a context, ourselves responsible for aspects of that context" (2002, p. 162). Whilst not using the term "recontextualization", Fook's theorizing about social work in context further stimulated my interest in the need to explore the recontextualization of social work. This was indicated in the writing of authors who ventured beyond working with only the environment, to being an integral player in the process of recontextualizing social work thus being holistically in that context and enabling them to work alongside the whole community. Healy articulates this as, "Social workers are active participants

in, and subjects of, the practice contexts in which they work” (2005, p.15). To which some authors in this book would add “the practice contexts in which they work” *and live*.

Mupedziswa and Yan and Cheung acknowledged the significance of social work *recontextualization*, particularly in non-western societies much earlier than social work writers in the west. Drawing upon Bernstein’s theory of recontextualization, (referred to earlier) in 2006 Yan and Cheung analyzed how “the imported discourse of social work” was re-contextualized in China (2006 pp. 65–66). They write about how “Indigenization is understood as a process for recontextualization” (p. 66), a process whereby Western social work “is selectively and discursively appropriated by various parties in the local context” (Yan & Cheung, 2006, p.68). This presents an interesting contrast to the meaning given to recontextualization and Indigenization in Sharlotte Tusasiirwe’s “Social workers navigating colonial bureaucratic systems while also re-kindling *Obuntu*-led relational social work in Uganda” included in this volume.

In a keynote presentation at the Fifth International Conference on Sociology and Social Work (2015) Stephen Webb refers to the fluidity of professional work “shaped by contextual workplace factors” (p. 3). Whilst acknowledging the interactive nature of the formation of identity, he focuses upon social work as being “shaped” by the context. But his contextual parameters remain confined to the organization and professional life, ignoring the broader context of communities, governments and countries in which the professionals live, as well as work.

Western social work education, imported and imposed upon Africa during the latter colonial times, brought significant challenges to African educators. In 1992 Mupedziswa pointed out the critical need for recontextualization of social work education. By reframing social work education in Africa and replacing the westernized individualist remedial focus with a social development paradigm, Mupedziswa addressed the recontextualization of social work holistically. Reflecting at a later stage upon this in social work education and training in southern and east Africa Mupedziswa and Sinkamba claim that this approach “encourages the maximum participation of people...is preventative and proactive... aiming at long-term change for the benefit of the majority of the population” (2014, p. 147).

The concept of recontextualization of social work in Africa,

*...urges social workers to consider alternative forms of operation, based on an analysis of various factors in the local social system including power and the constellation of forces at work in a given situation. It further urges the profession in Africa (as elsewhere) to select those alternatives that are likely to deal most effectively with a particular situation and circumstances (Molina, 1992). Recontextualization calls for vigilance on the part of the social work profession in Africa, to ensure the profession is not caught unprepared for this. The term also implies that practice is determined by theoretical considerations based on having put each problem in its proper context in terms of social, economic, cultural and political considerations (Mupedziswa & Sinkamba, 2014, p.149).*

Recontextualization is one of the six concepts they strongly encourage social work educators to integrate into their teaching, alongside Indigenization, authentication, radicalization and reconceptualization (Mupedziswa & Sinkamba, 2014, p.147).

In her chapter on decolonizing social work in Uganda, Tusasiirwe provides painful evidence of how “Social work education continues to uncritically perpetuate and celebrate that triumph of colonialism by continuing to marginalize non-western ways of doing and helping”.

## **Recontextualization**

### **POST-HUMAN**

In his challenge for social work to be recontextualized in the post human/anthropocene era/environment, Ife points out, in the chapter in this volume, that,

*What is needed is...a different world view of the place of humans on the earth, our relationship to other species, and to the earth itself (Eisenstein 2018). This would be a world view more consistent with what First Nations people have been trying to tell the 'civilised' West for a very long time about how to live as part of nature respecting the natural world, its limits, and our responsibilities to it [(Sveiby & Skuthorpe 2006, Yunkaporta 2019)]*

Ife's recontextualization in social work is located in the post human space. In so doing he proposes a new paradigm for the formation of an alternate society. Through participation with others and beyond, alongside social work's specific learning from indigenous interconnectedness with nature, strong sustainable communities may enable the future survival of human civilization.

### **ECO-SOCIAL-JUSTICE**

Sharing Ife's acknowledgement of our need to learn from Indigenous interconnectedness with nature, Walsh focuses on locating social work within an "universal framework of reference", a paradigm which extends beyond the traditional individual/personal level of operation. This may only come about by extending our human relationships to include a binding relationship with the natural world, raising social work awareness of the need to extend the concept of citizenship to include the obligation of stewardship. Rather than continuing intervention in eco-disasters, then addressing the related degradation of the environment, the hope is that social work will be actively engaged in the communities contributing to the prevention of these disasters. This can be achieved by combining 'eco-justice' with 'social justice', an approach recommended by Goodman in her chapter, in this volume, on "Eco-disasters: Social work space and place".

### **GLOBAL**

Acknowledging how globally interconnected the world has become, together with the increasing need for greater local sustainability, Martinez draws upon her extensive international knowledge of social work to highlight the urgency to reinvent and recontextualize social work in the global space, whilst becoming integral to local power and politics. Reinvention of social work globally requires recognition of the meaning and value of politics for social work. Martinez draws attention to the significance of *relationship* in social work which critically transcends the traditional western individual/family focus to participate in the collective use of power required at all community levels, to change the social order, examples of which she offers in her chapter in focusing on Latin America during the last three decades. This is the world to which Arkert and Jacobs, Tusasiirwe, Saxton and Jennings refer as the space in which First Nations people are recontextualizing social work.

## UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY

The first theme of the International Federation of Social Work Global agenda for the 2020-2030 social work and social development framework, “co-building inclusive social transformation” (IFSW News, 2 November 2020), is based upon the Ubuntu philosophy, “Strengthening social solidarity and global connectedness”. The Ubuntu philosophy is embedded in the Indigenous communities which Arkert and Jacobs, Jennings, Saxton and Tusasiirwe have been involved whilst attempting to recontextualize social work.

*Ubuntu as a principle for enhancing social solidarity and recognizing global connectedness is central to shared and sustainable futures that highlight responsibility between all people and the environment. It lays the foundation for the promotion of an inclusive process of developing new social agreements between governments and the populations they service. The new social agreement to emerge is aimed at facilitating universal rights, opportunities, freedom and sustainable well-being for all people nationally, regionally and globally.*

*Ubuntu has been popularised across the world by Nelson Mandela and is generally interpreted as meaning ‘I am because we are’, a word, concept and philosophy that resonates with the social work and social development perspectives of the interconnectedness of all peoples and their environments. Ubuntu also highlights indigenous knowledge and wisdom, and we invite all nations and populations to use an equivalent word or concept that speaks to your culture in promoting this theme: ‘Ubuntu: I am because we are’ (IFSW News, 2 November 2020).*

This is integral to the experience reflected in the writing of several authors engaged with Indigenous communities. Arkert and Jacobs refer to how the Ubuntu concept extends beyond human relationships to interconnectedness of the community with environment and sustainability. For this reason, they consider Indigenous Ubuntu theory and philosophy integral to recontextualization of social work in South Africa. Ubuntu philosophy is viewed as core to recontextualizing social work beyond South Africa, by authors reflecting upon this in Uganda (Tusasiirwe), the Pacific Islands (Saxton) and Australia (Jennings). How, and the extent to which this recontextualization of social work may be achieved, differs amongst contributors to this volume in the various regions. For Tusasiirwe the impact of colonialization in Uganda requires a re-creation of social work, emerging from the people and communities and she offers convincing and validating examples of how this can be achieved. Alternative to re-creating social work Arkert and Jacobs propose a more holistic, environmentally grounded expansion of the current social work paradigm in South Africa. In contrast to Tusasiirwe’s model, Saxton invites a “more nuanced” way, viewing western and pacific approaches as not necessarily oppositional or competitive paradigms.

Tusasiirwe provides two examples of communities engaging in meaningful ways of recontextualizing social work, by embedding social work in the language, cultural values and philosophies of the people rather than those “imposed professionally”.

*There are diverse but equal ways of doing social work which all depend on the context where a social worker is working.*

## **Recontextualization**

*To decolonise and re-contextualise social work involves...us beginning to question and disrupt this teaching and practicing of social work from a largely European and North American perspective...acknowledging that there are other ways in which people in other contexts are responding to social problems outside of what formal welfare institutions can provide.*

## **COVID-19**

Jennings relationship with Indigenous people in Northern Australia has given her insight into how community development is integral to Indigenous ways of being and living. This is demonstrated in how, early in their awareness of the pandemic, the Indigenous people in Northern Australia took precautionary measures to prevent COVID-19 getting into their communities. This is a valuable example of UNESCO's realization that:

*The call to move from individualism to interdependence has led to exploration of Indigenous knowledges, those "understandings, skills and philosophies developed with long histories of interaction with their natural surrounds" (UNESCO, 2020), including their cultural and spiritual beliefs.*

During the latter stage of bringing this volume to fruition the impact of COVID-19 upon individuals, families, communities and nations required social workers in many places to speedily recontextualize their space and ways of relating. An online survey (April 2020) by the International Federation of Social Work in partnership with Durham University (UK) received responses from 607 social workers from 54 countries. Providing a kaleidoscope of profiles about where (and how) social work has responded during the recent past, the pandemic has necessitated unforeseen recontextualization in many countries. Within forty-eight hours social workers in Wuhan were obliged to innovate new models requiring involvement in "high intensity work of community construction", from which the Chinese government drew as a model for the rest of the country. In Italy, social work has been engaged in restructuring around community-based models. Truell and Crompton, the researchers, concluded that "social workers around the world are reclaiming their community development heritage and demonstrating that this is the best approach not only to address the immediate consequences of the pandemic but also to face the longer-term challenges it brings" (2020, p. 34).

## **INNOVATIVE LOCAL SPACES**

Innovative social workspaces at local, regional, state and national levels are portrayed in the reflection of authors who have recontextualized social work outside the usual institutional frameworks in which the profession operates in Australia. Newly created approaches are located in sites of eco-disasters, women's services and rights, employment training for marginalized citizens and integration of a holistic approach to worker's compensation.

The above quote encompasses the diverse cross-cultural environments in several countries, upon which Boulet draws, during evolution of the Borderlands Cooperative. By recontextualizing social work "in a framework of relational capability and socio-ecological responsibility" Borderlands has provided the opportunity for an extensive range of participants to find a place for individuals and groups, to share,



learn, teach, reflect, connect together in processes with their communities. Whilst also promoting ecologically sustainable local living, international and intercultural learning, critical reflection, participatory research, and spiritual exploration.

In her analysis of social work's space and place in responding to eco-disasters, Goodman questions mainstream social work paradoxes in which "community", heralded as central in emergency management policies, evaporates. In practice, the services are more individual/family focused. Minimal attention is paid to "relational place", the environment, networks, groups and organizations comprising the building blocks from which community capacity may re-develop. Critically reflecting on her experience in various roles during bush fire crises, leads Goodman to recommend that social workers need to acquire generalizable practice knowledge about community resilience, recontextualizing their "places and spaces for resistance and growth in community work", and enabling a more holistic eco-social rather than eco-disaster approach.

Orr frames the beginning of her journey in working with women within a more personal story, providing *cameos* portraying the development of structures, avenues "to give women back power over sexual, reproductive and health rights". Contextualizing this within Australian feminist and community practices, she describes "how individual personal issues were shaped into collective practice concerns and shared troubles". Her participation in local newly emerging services for women regarding violence and sexual assault leads to profiling the development of new policies and frameworks extending beyond the local/regional, to state and national context. Orr's acknowledgement that it is imperative for social work "to de-center androcentrism, to decolonize our beingness, and to promote First Nations teachings" may only be achieved by recontextualizing social work education programs for current and future students.

Goutras articulates "how social work can be successfully embedded and fully integrated into a personal injury law firm...(when) presented with a 'blank canvas'... to create a vision, service model and program of free social work delivery that would best meet the needs of the firm's clients". This unique, multi-faceted, multi layered role of the social work team is further distinguished by its *holistic* approach. The operation with individuals and families provides significant material to draw upon when contributing to education, policy, government enquiries, legislation and Royal Commissions. The social work team, located in three states, provides an Australia-wide service. With no parameters imposed: decisions regarding the extent and depth of the service provided are within their professional responsibility.

Initiated and developed by a social worker, the director-coordinator operating as "facilitator" in the Holland Foundation recontextualizes the preparation for work for marginalized individuals in an Opportunity Shop created to empower disadvantaged individuals seeking access to employment. The uniqueness of this agency is depicted in several dimensions. Mainstream opportunity shops primarily focus upon fund-raising usually for non-government organizations, the labor to achieve this considerably dependent upon volunteers. The purpose of the Holland Op-Shop is to provide an innovative and engaging real-world training program for disadvantaged unemployed people who are less likely to be accommodated in training programs contracted by the government with profit driven private enterprises. Focus of the Holland Foundation Op-Shop is upon the development of the power inherent in every person, rather than on profit from the sale of goods. Factors distinguishing the real-life experience of this training include access to all aspects of the business, learning based on the adult education approach and peer-to-peer model. Whereas western social work service systems operate to a considerable extent in addressing the "social and psychological consequences of unemployment" Holland and Shuttleworth articulate how the STEP program also establishes a precedent for social work's place being "at the systemic locus of work and employment itself". Here the social work role encompasses a more empowering, holistic approach

## **Recontextualization**

in that it “transforms the relationship between client and helping professional from one of subordinates and dependency to one of contribution, mutuality and parity”.

## **A SHARED AND EVOLVING OUTLOOK**

Our intention to explore the recontextualization of social work was laced by uncertainty about whether, and if so, in which places and spaces social workers were engaged in processes of recontextualization. Finding and encountering the contributors to this volume, willing to share their experiences in Australia and other countries and in a variety of contexts, has greatly increased our awareness of the concept’s similar but diverse meanings and interpretations in social work settings all over the world. Our understanding of “recontextualizing social work” thus being confirmed has also widened to encompass both the *adaptive-transformative* idea that social work has a role to play in critically responding to the socio-ecological changes occurring continually on all levels in our societies, and the *pre-figurative* idea to create contexts that are enabling—rather than hindering—the realization of the most fundamental values social work espouses: equality, social and ecological justice, relational rather than individualistic community capability, and holistic loving care.

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## Chapter 2

# Social Working the Borderlands: Responding to Our Relational and Ecological Calling

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter describes why and how the author decided to leave his social work teaching position at an Australian university and start a cooperative that could more appropriately respond to the changing social and ecological context and could be more commensurate with the true values of the social work profession. The chapter moves from the author's experiences and philosophical motivations guiding his decision to move from the university context to the establishment of a social and ecological change cooperative and the invitation to colleagues and students to join the re-contextualizing experiment to the reasons why the cooperative format was chosen. The programs, projects, and partnerships, which have been realized in the course of the 23 years since the start of the Borderlands Cooperative, are documented and reflected upon, leading to final recommendations for a social work practice that remains true to its historical mission whilst responding to the contemporary contextual challenges.*

### INTRODUCTION

The past 50 years of evolving feminist and other critical praxis taught us that the “personal is political” (<http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>); so, stories about “re-contextualizing social work” could be expected to acknowledge and demonstrate that correspondence. Since its emergence in Europe and North America as the 19th century turned into the 20th, Social Work has struggled with this correspondence, admittedly with variable commitment, let alone success. Jane Addams and Bertha Reynolds, early US flagbearers (<https://anzswjournal.nz/anzsw/article/view/478>), were both blacklisted when they tried to profess it and were periodically shunned by the profession itself. During the late 1960s and 70s, when *Radical Social Work* (Brake & Bailey, 1980) appeared to become an accepted discursive figure, at

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least in academic discourses, it turned out to remain an “all-too-brief revolution in Social Work education, research and practice...” as i<sup>1</sup> argued in an earlier contribution (Boulet, 2018).

Indeed, during the conservative regression of the 1980s–90s, “the changes that have occurred... within the framework of neoliberalism... have impacted on social work in negative ways... [its potential] constrained... or nullified in the individualistic, free market world we currently inhabit” (Rogowski, 2020, p. 22). Social work, both in practice and in education, turned its professional focus away from the complementary contextual vision of its legacy, to a narrow “person-centred” one (Noble et al., 2018), therewith largely forsaking its social/societal change perspective and the associated theoretical, policy and *intervention* modalities it had honed, in the course of the preceding century.

As the new millennium gained speed, it gradually became clear that the promised *trickle-down* effects from the *supply-side* neo-liberal policies and impositions were not going to happen. Still, politicians and their econometric wisecracks continued to justify their *balanced budget* and *scarcity* arguments and rejected distributional approaches to *collectively produced wealth* as examples of *bankrupt socialism*. British PM Thatcher’s infamous “There Is No Alternative” (or ‘TINA’) to the neoliberal doctrine—resonating across the world, enforced by World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization global mechanisms—continues to represent the contemporary version of what Piketty’s *Capital and Ideology* (2020) identifies as the necessity for “[e]very human society [to] justify its inequalities”.

It is worthwhile to fully quote the introductory paragraph of Piketty’s book:

*Every human society must justify its inequalities: unless reasons for them are found, the whole political and social edifice stands in danger of collapse. Every epoch therefore develops a range of contradictory discourses and ideologies for the purpose of legitimizing the inequality that already exists or that people believe should exist. From these discourses emerge certain economic, social, and political rules, which people then use to make sense of the ambient social structure. Out of the clash of contradictory discourses – a clash that is at once economic, social, and political – comes a dominant narrative or narratives, which bolster the existing inequality regime. (Piketty, 2020, p.1)*

In such seemingly ubiquitous context, social work is called to help *bolster* the inequality regimes by softening the consequences for those at their *suffering bottom*—mediated by institutions *delivering* health, welfare, education, correctional and care services (Boulet & Oelschlägel, 1976). Applying this logic to the effects of neoliberalism on social work (as adopted through “spending-cuts” required by the “austerity” policies of conservative and “third way” social-democratic parties and governments), Rogowski (2020, p.88) suggests:

*Social work’s role in society has become circumscribed and limited to a residual fulfilment of statutory functions... it was reduced to bureaucratic, standardised and largely technocratic approaches often focusing on the management of risk ... Top-down enactment of procedures and electronic technologies significantly constrains practice because at its heart are a range of moral rationalities to do with care, trust, kindness and respect, all of which can stray significantly from simple calculation of the negatives or positives of this or that decision or action... Adherence to neoliberalism, including the private sector’s managerial ethos, has amounted to the de-professionalisation of social work.*

Several other factors have eventuated to make the deceptive simplicity of the *personal being political* call with which i started the chapter much more complex. ‘*Identity politics*’ and ‘*intersectionality*’

## **Social Working the Borderlands**

(Collins & Bilge, 2020) have entered our vocabulary, giving names to our growing consciousness about the complex and complicated overlapping contradictions that the call to make the *personal political* now needs to contextualize itself and its commensurate practices in. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2020, p.186) illustrates for the intersection between race and gender in her powerful *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*:

*... the real challenge for white feminism is to theorise the relinquishment of power so that feminist practice can contribute to changing the racial order. Until this challenge is addressed, the subject position middle-class white woman will remain centred as a site of dominance.*

In addition, the neoliberal regression and its consequences for social work practice emerged at a moment in our planet's evolution when the need to recognize that the *personal is primarily relational and therefore political and ecological* becomes more urgent by the day. Whilst being rather clumsy as a slogan, we have moved on quite a bit and become more than aware—and slightly panicked—about the growing ecological precariousness of humans' earthly survival, adding to the complexity of contextual thinking about critically informed social work (Bozalek & Pease, 2021; Boulet, 2021).

During the half-century since graduating as a social worker in my native Flemish Belgium, in 1965, in- and outsiders to the profession have asked me numerous times “what that political and ecological stuff has to do with social work”, my answers evolve with the changing contexts and geographies i have meandered through over time. This chapter will, therefore, interweave fragments of my personal story as a social worker, educator and activist, sharing how my experiences and learning often occurred in, and derived from, contexts outside the usual institutional frameworks in which the profession operates. Experiencing the value of working and living in cross-cultural environments in several countries and continents sharpened my awareness of the importance of context, and moving through phases of enchantment, disenchantment and re-enchantment with what social work and tertiary education could be.

In the next section i will briefly relate my personal trajectory; the evolving story of Borderlands Cooperative will then be recounted as evidence of a contextual attempt at freeing social work from its institutional and professional constraints and opening it up to its relational and ecological essence and responsibilities. Whilst it is my story interwoven with that of Borderlands, many social workers, students and others across the ages, genders, cultures, sexually diverse orientations and ethnicities have been part of imagining, shaping and animating the cooperative and helping to hold and evolve it for 23 years.

The contextual and situated moments in which the *dream* of Borderlands was rooted up to its launch in 1997 introduces the third section of the chapter, including a discussion of why a cooperative format was chosen. A *hind-sighted* summary of the projects, programs, events and activism the cooperative has been involved in, for almost a quarter-century, are the focus of the fourth section. I conclude with learnings and suggestions for a re-contextualized social work in a framework of relational capability and socio-ecological responsibility, understood in the personal-political hyphenated embodiment in which i try to frame this chapter.

## **PERSONAL BEGINNINGS...**

I entered the world of Australian social work education in 1985, twenty years after graduation. My formative years were in the early to mid-60s when the groundwork was laid for my wholehearted commitment to the political and professional upheavals and enchantments of the late-sixties and seventies.

The activist core of this commitment inserted itself layer by layer in the profound epistemological and ontological transformations lifting the veil of certainties wrapped around my early childhood upbringing in post-war, still wall-to-wall Catholic-Flemish-Belgium. Indeed, witnessing three major contextual changes during the end of the 1950s and early 60s eventually uncovered the duplicity of the inward-looking petty-bourgeois meddling-class attitude I had grown up with:

- In 1960, the violent end of Belgian colonial power in Congo was quite a personal affair. Family members had worked for 15 years in the colonial administration, their return trips to and from their three-year *terms* punctuated teary extended family events (Turner, 2007; Vanthemsche, 2012).
- Pope John XXIII's *aggiornamento* (*bringing up-to-date*) shake-up of the Catholic Church ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope\\_John\\_XXIII](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_John_XXIII)) urging young people to take possession of “our” church, filling it with life, inspiring deep transformations in community and spirituality (with my 14 years as an altar boy and chorister in the local church and leader in the youth group, again a very personal experience).
- The 1964–5 demonstrations against the Vietnam War, urging me into pacifism and a refusal to serve the obligatory 18-months of military service (<https://www.timetoast.com/timelines/the-vietnam-anti-war-movement>)

Studying at an activist Catholic workers' movement institute helped me frame social work within these contextual changes (the curriculum imbued with the *Young Christian Workers'* philosophy based on J. Cardijn's '*See – Judge – Act*' methodology, an early version of Participatory Action Research (Mathews, 2017, p.18; (<http://jedo.perthcatholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/20140415-Relection-Action-See-Judge-Act-booklet.pdf>). Experiencing two practice placements at the formation center and general office of the International Building Companions ('IBO'), a post-WWII volunteer organization responding to housing and other needs of refugees from Eastern Europe, confirmed for me the existence of alternatives to the professional social work mainstream and to starting a career.

After graduation, volunteering in a pacifist alternative to military service in Congo from 1966–69, i encountered, practiced and lived *community*, involved in what we then thought of as *development*. Community development had become '*de rigueur*' in international development circles, with working principles of *self-help*, *felt needs*, *local leadership* and *participation* intending to bring the “masses” in newly independent former colonies into processes of self-determined *progress*. Being immersed in community and a still *relationally saturated culture* certainly affected me, even if it took me twenty years to understand what it meant for the dominant individualist and self-centered culture i returned to after three years (Verhaeghe, 2014; Manne, 2014).

A year of post-graduate studies in the company of 120 students from 80 developing countries grounded and contextualized my understanding of (community) development, and i encountered radical critiques of the *development* hubris i was part of. They offered a heady mixture of (neo-) Marxism, critical theory, feminism and early ecological considerations. Paulo Freire's (1970) *consciousness raising* entered debates and practices and Ivan Illich's (1973) writing unmasked institutional structures and processes maintaining inequality, elite and professional power, maldistribution of resources and the assumed benefits of technological and material advancement (Schumacher, 1973; Max-Neef, 1982; Waring, 1988; Trainer, 1989).

Stumbling into a lecturer job in 1970 (in West Germany) introduced me to the vagaries of tertiary education, pedagogy, theory-practice integration, the content of “contextual” and “structural” disciplines to be connected with theoretical and everyday languages about ways to relate with people also known

as “clients”. Central preoccupations of that time included conceptualizing *practice methods* in social work (then still understood as case, group and community work and policy development) and *integrating* their theoretical underpinnings, their practical process modalities and relational reach and making sure they weren’t used as mere *recipes*.

Ripple effects of the 1968 and 1970s events and movements, then informed social work discourses in Europe, generated a myriad of activist involvements in areas like homelessness and housing, corrections, welfare and social security, (mental) health (deinstitutionalization) and work with children, youth and “outsider” or disadvantaged groups. Developing an innovative social work curriculum, grounded in a *generic* understanding of social work and practiced through *project work*, generated and collaboratively controlled by students, practitioners and academics (Boulet, 2018; <https://www.schoology.com/blog/project-based-learning-pbl-benefits-examples-and-resources>), integrating emancipatory social practice and critical theories, contributed to a view of the profession as a *holistic* undertaking (Rogowski, 2020, pp. 39-45; Boulet & Oelschlägel, 1976; Boulet et al, 1980,2019).

In 1980, i moved to Ann Arbor in the US with my partner and three small children, for five years experiencing Ronald Reagan’s version of neo-liberal impositions (previously referred to). I completed my doctoral thesis (Boulet, 1985; 1988), which represented an attempt at summarizing and synthesizing my various learnings of twenty years. The doctorate allowed me in 1985, to stumble into an academic job in Australia, at the University of Melbourne. The thesis expressed in the many thousands of words, and carried along in our continent-hopping journey, a sense of the importance of *context* for understanding social work; or rather for *working the social*. As Corina Tarnita, Princeton biological mathematician, expressed in a succinct paragraph in *Quanta Magazine* ([https://getpocket.com/explore/item/a-mathematician-who-decodes-the-patterns-stamped-out-by-life?utm\\_source=pocket-newtab-intl-en](https://getpocket.com/explore/item/a-mathematician-who-decodes-the-patterns-stamped-out-by-life?utm_source=pocket-newtab-intl-en)):

*I was looking at evolutionary questions, like the evolution of social behavior and of cooperation...and I realized you need to understand ecology to understand behavior. That’s how I started to get interested in termites, and their way of spatially organizing themselves. (my emphasis)*

## **AUSTRALIA’S “TINA”—A “DOWN-UNDER” VERSION OF NEO-LIBERALISM**

In Australia during the late 1980s, Labor Party governments at Federal and Victorian State levels left us with some hope that the drastic consequences of the imposition of neo-liberalism in the US and the UK could be minimized if not avoided. Idle hope, of course (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world>). In 1992, the conservative Kennett Coalition government swept into power in Victoria, introducing a brutal privatization regime accompanied by radical spending cuts in education, social and health services, public housing; outsourcing services tied to government functions to the lowest bidder, often without proper checks about capabilities and adequate experiences (<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/how-kennett-gets-away-it>).

This caused the demise of numerous small, local and special-interest-based community organizations and action groups who survived thanks to small community development funds and a lot of volunteer sweat. The *divide and rule* strategy employed by government (masked as “competitive tendering”) worked its way into the hearts and souls of the diverse movements, the struggle for survival by organizations and individuals alike doing the rest. Scores of people experienced-in community and social work lost their jobs, program funding regimes became fully calibrated with the ideologies and practicalities of the



imposed neo-classical economic modalities. Independent agencies—mostly associated with religious groups—only survived by amalgamating and growing large and hierarchical, thus mimicking the operations of state and commercial entities.

Federally, the conservative Howard government came to power in 1995, exploiting to the hilt the economic-rationalist ideology and governance infrastructure already gradually introduced by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments since the late 1980s. Indeed, Labor Treasurer Paul Keating had already declared that without such measures, Australia would soon become a “banana republic”; under his watch, the infamous “restructuring” of public government functions and services had started, and the Keynes-inspired post-WWII democratic welfare state was in for a drubbing (Rogowski, 2020; Harvey, 2007; Denniss, 2018; Wallace & Pease, 2011).

Given previous experiences and commitments, a particular worry for me was the initially imperceptible withdrawal from community development by governments and community agencies, both in funding and in program formulations and job descriptions. Particularly in Victoria, where community development had been a generic ingredient in established social work practice, policy and institutional contexts, this slash-and-burn demise hit hard. References to the “community-based” imperative had been ubiquitous in policies and programs related to health (<https://www.cohealth.org.au/about/our-history/brief-history-community-health-australia/>), education, neighborhood houses and community centers, public housing and homelessness, bushfire and other disaster areas, in advocacy work with people with disabilities and other forms of disadvantage, as documented in the *New Community*, ([www.nc.org.au](http://www.nc.org.au)) and as debated in regular conferences.

Similar to ideas developed in Germany (Boulet et al, 1980, 2019; Boulet, 2017), in *generic* understandings of social work rather than as a *specialization*, community development is understood as one of several relational *working principles* across all areas of social and community practice and engagement, its core intention presented as *empowerment, inclusion, participation, and emancipation*. Most social work positions and community service descriptions included reference to relevant community work skills—even if often quite perfunctorily—and they were replicated in course descriptions in social work curricula, in practice research and were part of the conversations during liaison visits with students on placement and then reflected in their placement reports.

Yet, my early years in social work education in Melbourne seemed to offer the potential to reconnect with some of the social change praxis i had been involved in, in Germany in the seventies. Leaving the rather conservative environment of the University of Melbourne after three years, i joined a more activist environment at Philip Institute of Technology ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phillip\\_Institute\\_of\\_Technology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phillip_Institute_of_Technology)). Its curriculum was dedicated to critical, if not radical, social work practice and education (Moureau & Leonard, 1989; Mullaly, 1993; Fook, 1993; Chamberlain, 1988; Ife et al., 1994). Also based on feminist principles (Marchant & Wearing, 1986; Weeks, 1980), the teaching and learning culture and content remained faithful to social change and reflective praxis. Across the four years of study, a consistent focus on social research was maintained, featuring its philosophical, methodological and practical aspects, culminating in a substantial final research project based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and engagement with a social or community issue. Indeed, PAR was the preferred research approach, Wadsworth’s seminal work (2010, 2011a, b) a constant inspiration and guidance.

The proclaimed end of the Cold War, assumed to signal the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992), weaponized the neo-liberal involution and implosion already erupting across the institutional governmental landscapes and it presented the political-economic and ideological context in which the Borderlands Cooperative came about. Indeed, universities and non-university post-secondary colleges were forced

## **Social Working the Borderlands**

to apply the market-utilitarian approach to education and training, hollowing-out and destroying many time-and experience-honored educational programs and approaches. These approaches had led to the development of capabilities which enabled graduates to responsibly, reflectively and ethically perform in their chosen professions. The existing programs were replaced by shortened “credit-point-measured” study units, leading to narrowly defined “learning outcomes” or “competencies”, the acquisition of which presumed to assure compatibility between vocational and occupational systems and smooth allocation of “properly trained” graduates to well-defined job-descriptions in the respective “industry sectors”. A few years later, Paul James (2000, p.6) had this to say:

*Universities today are in deep trouble...[they] are steadily being hollowed out, left to the mercy of both state and market. The Australian Labor Party under John Dawkins began the process. The Liberal-National Parties' government has by thousand slow cuts set the context for a new stage. Despite the continuing commitment of many of its staff to the dual purpose of learning and research, the universities are now setting fire to their old selves. Out of the ashes they are making themselves into big, prefabricated, empty corporations. Education is business, classroom-time is money; progress is measured in terms of performance indicators; the vice-chancellor is a chief executive officer.*

And so it went on... and so it still is.... until the COVID-19 pandemic virtually destroyed that business model as applied to Australian universities and as the remedies cooked up by its managers derive from the same recipes that caused the disaster, it can only get worse before it may get better or different (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/04/australian-universities-to-close-campuses-and-shed-thousands-of-jobs-as-revenue-plummets-due-to-covid-19-crisis>).

But i shouldn't run ahead of myself. In 1995-96, after a quarter-century in academia, i found the growing and encroaching restrictions prohibitive of real learning and of the reciprocal gift exchanges education entails; so i resigned from the university. A few months before the resignation took effect, the university, in true economic-rationalist fashion, decided to downsize, offering voluntary redundancy packages (really, asking remaining staff to produce more with less resources); so, i put my hand up and to my surprise i was successful. The money allowed me to spend a year living on the income of a part-time job and prepare for more precarious but hopefully more creative years.

## **BORDERLANDS COOPERATIVE ENTERS THE STORY**

Melbourne used to have a colorful tradition of community-based alternatives, a dense network of neighborhood houses and community centers, and strong community-based health centers. At that time Victoria was considered the state with the most established culture and reasonably resourced community initiatives, groups and agencies. In meetings, discussions and projects with activists across the networks since arriving in 1985, we wondered about possibilities to resist the growing conservative “onslaught” referred to before. Networks included people from across the community, ecological and international solidarity movements, critical social work, community development, participatory action research, community health and tertiary education. The idea emerged to create a place where we could re-group and consolidate a united defense against the neo-liberal impositions. We thought about experimenting with other ways of being, doing, working, relating and connecting and of ways more commensurate with what *social working* and community-based work could mean. We thought about activities which would

be responsive to what we perceived as an increasingly precarious socio-ecological local, national and global context.

With a group of committed enthusiasts, our conversations turned practical. We started to look for places where we could affordably establish ourselves and by mid-1997, a social work doctoral student told me that her father-in-law had just been appointed Anglican vicar to a congregation shrinking in numbers but with lots of space, particularly two large classrooms left unused, after the school originally occupying them had moved. Earlier, the vicar had led an Anglican welfare agency and worked with World Vision, two areas where our interests met and partly overlapped.

We were offered the two upstairs ex-classrooms, the larger one seven by ten meters, became our meeting and gathering place. It could easily seat 50 persons, so we filled it with donated couches, low tables, chairs, beanbags and the books i had assembled during my 25 years of academic life. The books were re-socialized to become the library, a resource for the activists we hoped to attract. The second similar-sized space was subdivided in three rooms. They became offices and a kitchen/lunch area, again, filled with re-purposed furniture from the households of our growing group. Our first computer was a laptop i was allowed to keep when leaving university. The laptop had been declared “outdated” and “surplus to requirements”. The remainder of my severance payment covered our rent for the first two years and a few necessary extras like shelves for the library, a phone, a fax machine and a post office box...

Obviously, auspicious beginnings to change the world.

Launching the real-life start of our dream happened on the 21st of December 1997, a hot, humid Sunday afternoon and the last shopping day for presents before Christmas. In an invitation letter to the networks, friends, former colleagues and students, organizations and agencies, i had condensed several years of thinking, reading, listening, planning, dreaming, conversing and presenting into describing the impetus to create the “place” and the imagined “mission” of our (ad)venture. The following edited excerpts re-state what moved us/me then, and what continues to contextualize our/my intention to *working the social*, chiefly by changing the world one conversation at a time.

*The idea of establishing **Borderlands subversity** stems from a growing awareness about the sorry state the human community momentarily finds itself in on many levels: local and global, personal and societal. Despair not only seems to reside inside me and the friends and colleagues i talk with, but it crept into our conversations about the political, economic, social and environmental messes surrounding and engulfing us. It also threatens us – activists, politically and spiritually committed people - with cynicism, just one notch down from more despair. It entraps us in (mega-) institutions that are so much part of the problem that they can't be part of the solution. The idea of Borderlands also grew from a sense of resistance to (self-)imposed paralysis and the need to try and do something practical, positive and concrete about it.*

*The plan is to create a place where people can meet, talk, reflect, learn and teach, read and study, do ‘cultured’ things together, organise, administer and manage networks or activities, where consultation, consulting and counselling happens, resources are available and accessible, a ‘node’ of intersecting local, national and international networks concerned about any or all the issues discussed below; a place where people experiment with other ways of doing things and have fun doing them.*

*Dreams of together (re-)creating suburban living spaces with like-and-other-minded/shaped/coloured people, transforming the soul-killing fields our thoroughfare-cum-dormitory sitcom-suburbs have turned into. If in 50 years (according to the 1996 UN-Habitat Summit) 80% of humanity will live suburban lives*

## **Social Working the Borderlands**

*(56% in cities of a million and more!) and if we agree that such life-form is already now psychologically, socially and ecologically unsustainable, we have a bit of work on our hands! In addition, anyone's hopes that alternatives will somehow descend or trickle-down from where-ever one calls 'above' (governments, the 'economy', policy, the UN, the goddess ...) may have become somewhat disappointed about that prospect. It seems to be up to us to try out different ways of living, precisely what Borderlands hopes to become an experimental space for.*

### **But Why "Borderlands"? And Why 'Sub-Versity'?**

I "pinched" the name "**Borderlands**" from Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) book title. The name captures so well the many aspects of our present living condition. Let me quote her attempts at circumscribing the concept:

*The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas/U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.*

*Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the future evolution of humankind, in being 'worked' on. I have the sense that certain 'faculties'—not just in me but in every border resident ... and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. And yes, the 'alien' element has become familiar - never comfortable, not with society's clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. **No, not comfortable but home.** (1987, p. 3)*

She calls the U.S.-Mexican border an "open wound"

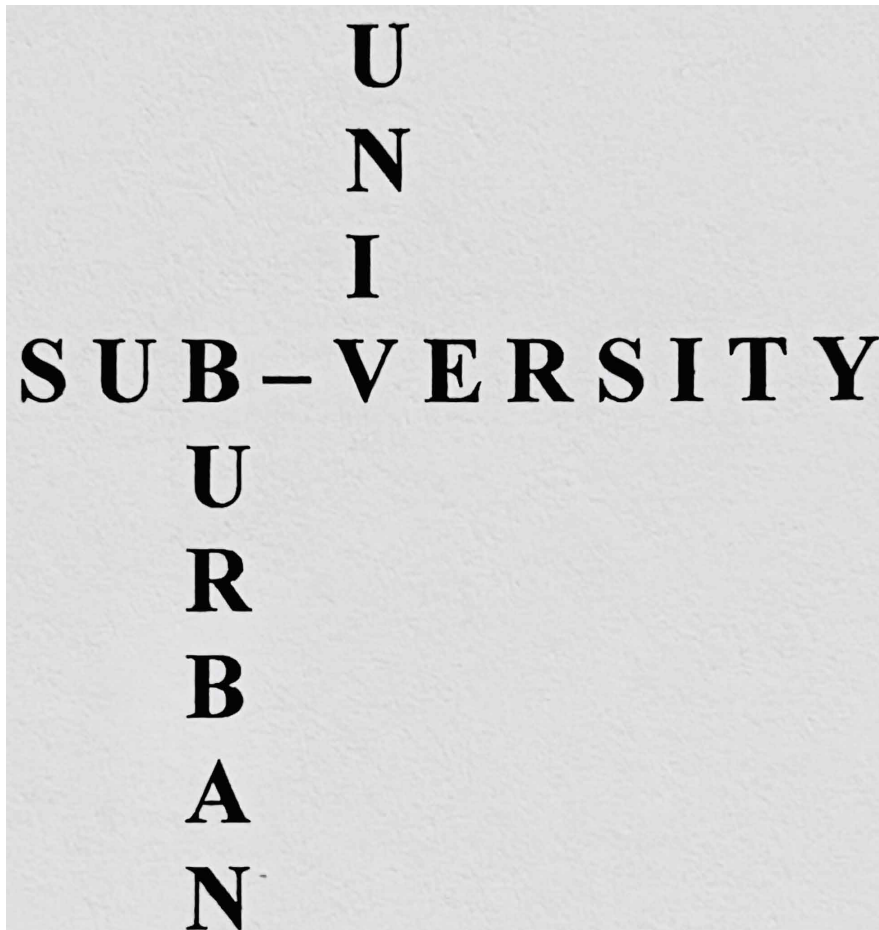
*...where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish 'us' from 'them'. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (ibid. p. 25)*

Suburbs are borderlands. We live and move through them as we do through the fragments of our waking and sleeping, days and nights. From bed/birth, to school, to work, to shop, to play, to consume, to produce, to vote, to garden, to drive, to rest and to bed/death again. We try to merge and integrate nature with the non-nature of stone, concrete, asphalt, wood and plastic, tending to the native plants in our front-back gardens, watering our indoor pot plants and keeping the dust off the African drum in the corner of the lounge. Domesticating the "wild", giving a touch of the "wild" to the domestic. Mingling Indigenous with first-second-third generation invaders/migrants/refugees as next-door neighbors, or brushing past one another at crossroads, or as salespersons-customers-workers-students-teachers-bosses and as wives/husbands/parents/children. We try to settle locally, but the global lurks to unsettle. We try to communicate globally, but various hungers hold us down-to-earth.

If global is local is global, and if periphery is center is periphery, claims of authenticity, purity, normality of identity, of origin and descent, claims out of which so much disaster, murder and war keep evolving; claims one clings to in vain attempts at personal and social certainty, security and independence; futile claims and distracting illusions that somehow serve other purposes.... To enter the *suburban borderlands* then is an invitation to embrace our hybridities and forge active participation in the *future evolution of humankind*.

“**Subversity**” also has a story to it. Half my life was spent in universities doing what academics do in such places. I there encountered many close friends and loved ones, and some for whom i had less time. Universities provided the platforms for much of my 70s and early-80s activism, always intending to make them relevant places for *real* people, for those suffering from various kinds and degrees of oppression, exclusion and disadvantage. Universities initially seemed to provide adequate niches for allowing such activities, especially in social work, welfare and community development. We seemed to make progress on some fronts. The canons of “proper” research were challenged, and we managed to get critical content into our curricula. We experimented with other modes of subject delivery, other knowledges and ways-of-seeing-the-world were explored and restored to legitimacy. Some age-old and wilted ivy got off the university walls and the cracks in the sandstone were there to see for all. And what we did felt good and right, until universities became markets.

So, playing with alternative possibilities started naturally, given my/our commitment to participatory processes, the idea of creating small learning places in the suburbs, where people lived, suffered and enjoyed themselves occupied our fantasies. *University-of-the-suburbs, multiversity, adversity, controversy, diversity*, even *conversity* were jokingly and seriously pondered and scribbled on pieces of paper and



just *happened* as a scribble. People said “great”. We talked about the need to do and think “countercyclical” things; to “go against the tide”; to develop “small” and “local” places, subverting the ever-increasing big-ness and centrality/remoteness of our institutions; indeed, discovering that small is not only beautiful (as Schumacher (1973) would have it) but feasible and possibly our best bet at survival.

Coincidentally, in *The Post-Development Reader* (1997, p. IX), editors Rahnema and Bawtree talk about the “three qualities” its chapters have in common. Their first quality is that they are,

*subversive, not in the sense attributed to this adjective by modern inquisitors, but as Cardinal Arns, of Sao Paulo, defined it in his courageous statement before an annual meeting of the Society for International Development in 1983: ‘Subvert’, he said, ‘means to turn a situation round and look at it from the other side’; that is, the side of ‘people who have to die so that the system can go on’.*”

And there are many ways of “dying”.

Hence, indeed and affirmatively: Borderland–Sub–versity!

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Over one hundred people attended the launch. There was a small band led by a former social work student and a choir from singing medieval protest songs, speeches were held and a lot of good conversations amongst people who had not seen one another since the end of the sixties which created the atmosphere we had hoped for. We invited people to use, promote and meet at Borderlands and participate in a process to form a not-for-profit cooperative as the formal “body” to “run” and administer the place and the activities we hoped to organize, all revolving around five interrelated concerns:

1. The need for a profound re-development of our local communities. In many ways, processes of globalization and individualism eroded whatever was left of our local communities. All over the world, efforts are made to maintain what’s left of them and/or to restore or reinvent them in appropriate ways.
2. The need for ecologically sustainable local (suburban) living. It is necessary to develop sustainable forms of suburban living – “sustainable” not only materially, but spiritually and ethically in how we (should) deal and connect with the spaces/places we inhabit.
3. The need for international and inter-cultural learning, exchange and awareness. As the world has become “smaller,” distance between individuals expands and inequalities and injustices in all relationship terms worsen. In addition to respectfully listen to those who have in the past been oppressed, exploited, neglected or worse, ‘westerners’ need to do our own “homework” to better understand “where we come from”, our identities and engage in the necessary (re-)conciliations.
4. The need for critical (self-)reflection and participatory research. Science, research and academia have grown remote from people’s every-day awareness. Whatever ‘experts’ (especially the economic kind) tell us is the “truth”, powerfully reinforced by media (mis)information, remains unchallenged; every-day communication has acquired a consumerist shallowness powerfully preventing critical consciousness and undermining intentional change based on it.
5. The need for a (re)new(ed) spirituality, a newer/older understanding of “spirit” as that which stitches the parts into the whole; as that which connects and acknowledges the ravages undue divisions of labor and “expert” specialism and rampant individualism have done to us and the world. Borderlands should be about all-at-once.

Over 40 launch-participants agreed to participate in a process to form a cooperative; another 50 asked to be kept informed about “happenings” and possibilities for collaboration or partnership. After several well-attended meetings, a committed core group started to form and our application to establish Borderlands Cooperative was accepted by the State Regulator of Cooperatives in August 1998; the ‘*Cooperative Rules*’ ([www.borderlands.org.au](http://www.borderlands.org.au)) detailed aims and objectives, concluding this section of the chapter:

*The VISION of the co-operative is to be part of a world that values ecological, social and cultural justice and acts in accordance with these values.*

*In working towards this vision the MISSION of the co-operative is to support ecological, social and cultural regeneration and sustainability through collaborative endeavours and critical inquiry.*

*In fulfilling this mission the **primary VALUES** of the co-operative are:*

## ***Social Working the Borderlands***

- 1) To create and sustain a network of local and other interested people concerned about and working in the fields of ecology, community development and international and intercultural learning and exchange;
- 2) To develop alternative and innovative modes of collaboration and mutual support in a spirit of collective and participatory learning and critical enquiry;
- 3) To develop and maintain a local space where such interaction can be sustained and supported by appropriate physical facilities and resources and where there is opportunity for reflection on a range of ecological, social and cultural issues;
- 4) To explore and develop means by which the shared information, knowledge and skills of the co-operative can be translated into public debate and action that is supportive of ecological, social and cultural regeneration and sustainability;
- 5) To promote the flow of information regarding ecological, social and cultural regeneration and sustainability through publications, forums, workshops and conferences and to provide access to administration and information resources;
- 6) To organise events and engage in professional, voluntary and other joint and collaborative activities, both independently and in partnership with like-minded individuals, groups and organisations active in ecology, community development and international and intercultural learning and exchange;
- 7) To make the physical, social and spiritual assets of the co-operative available to its members, the local community and other interested groups;
- 8) To promote the spiritual and social ideas and practices basic to the Co-operative and, mindful of the need to maintain the network on a human scale, to support the establishment of similar spaces and groups.

### **But why a “Cooperative”?**

Studying social work in the early-60s, in a school with strong social justice values, introduced me to cooperatives as workers’ resistance to the exploitations they experienced. In 1844, close to Manchester in the UK, the “Brotherly Weavers of Rochdale” established the first cooperative to fight their double exploitation in the textile industry. They were not only paid miserly wages, but their pay came in part as “vouchers” they then redeemed for food and other items available in the shop also owned by the factory bosses. The workers organized themselves and created the cooperative to procure quality food and other items in bulk or wholesale and then selling them to members at honest prices. In the process, they developed the cooperative principles that are still the backbone of the philosophy of the international cooperative movement.

Cooperatives have meanwhile spread worldwide also in the “developing” world. After a period of retreat after World War II and with neoliberalism bringing about the demutualization of numbers of mutually owned institutions and credit unions, the early 2000s saw them rebounding strongly. Credit unions, agricultural production, distribution and consumption coops, purchasing, production and worker-owned cooperatives, consumer and housing cooperatives have since grown worldwide, including in Australia. This growth continues to be part of multiplying and sustained attempts to find localized, ecologically-responsible and democratic alternatives to an increasingly unequal and crisis-prone capitalist model ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228272144\\_History\\_and\\_Theory\\_of\\_Cooperatives](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228272144_History_and_Theory_of_Cooperatives) and <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/lang--en/index.htm>; Streeck, 2016).



Inspired by the *Mondragon* cooperatives in the Spanish Bask region (<https://medium.com/fifty-by-fifty/mondragon-through-a-critical-lens-b29de8c6049>) and the *Antigonish* initiatives in Canada's Nova Scotia (<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/antigonish-movement>), i had introduced co-operatives as possible models for social and community service delivery and other localized alternatives in community development classes and the community projects i was involved in. I saw them as early blueprints for alternative, democratic ways of developing local economies and of distributing community-generated social wealth more fairly and more sustainably. Labor politician and Fabians' leader (<https://www.fabians.org.au/library>) Race Mathews, had published and publicly spoken about Mondragon and the cooperative movement (1999). He also published his doctoral research about the Catholic workers movement's philosophy (2017), which i mentioned before as having been part of my own formative years. Hence, cooperatives, for me, were the way to go and several participants in our initial Borderlands formative group were eager to try it out (Scholz, 2016a; 2016b). Finally, there had been a growing international interest in the "commons" and, in later years, this has materialized into a global movement supported by a lot of solid research ([https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Mutualizing\\_Urban\\_Provisioning\\_Systems?fbclid=IwAR0P9THsa707-T6qhGzbW4uxo\\_U\\_ly9jfnrBU5HPAP5cToFFtFPQsJ-cVDk](https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Mutualizing_Urban_Provisioning_Systems?fbclid=IwAR0P9THsa707-T6qhGzbW4uxo_U_ly9jfnrBU5HPAP5cToFFtFPQsJ-cVDk)).

More contextually and contemporarily, when establishing Borderlands during the late 90s, the arrogant and blatant display of power and righteousness at the yearly World Economic Forums at Davos ([www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org)) had begun to attract an organized response and not a minute too early! The *World Social Forums* (WSF) became a feature of the resistance, initially in Porto Alegre in Brazil and then replicated in regional areas across the world ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Social\\_Forum#2001\\_World\\_Social\\_Forum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum#2001_World_Social_Forum)). After two decades of worldwide neo-liberal impositions, the WSFs generated a sense of global solidarity and activism: they also created space for novel ways to initiate, develop and sustain alternative movements (e.g. <http://www.ripess.org/what-is-sse/what-is-social-solidarity-economy/?lang=en>). As well, the *Transition Town* initiative had started up in Totnes in the UK ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transition\\_town](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transition_town)), inspired and supported by the nearby Schumacher College (<https://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/>). Its founders wrote about the consequences of "peak oil", the use of fossil fuels and the need to "transition" to other (local) ways of producing, consuming, exchanging services and goods and in general, of living.

So, we felt part of something larger than just "us" and the *co-operative principles*, as stated by the *Brotherly Weavers* a century and a half earlier and reaffirmed by the International Cooperative Alliance (<https://www.ica.coop/en>), appeared to offer an appropriate collective and democratic framework within which to organize Borderlands' activities:

1. Voluntary and open membership: open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender/sex, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.
2. Democratic member control: members actively participate in setting policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives accountable to the membership.
3. Member economic participation: members contribute equitably to and democratically control the capital of their co-operative; they allocate surpluses for developing the co-operative, benefiting members and supporting other approved activities.
4. Autonomy and independence: autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by members.
5. Education, training and information: provide education and training for members, elected representatives, managers and employees to contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives.

## **Social Working the Borderlands**

6. Co-operation among co-operatives: co-operatives serve members and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.
7. Concern for the community: co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their members.

## **Borderlands Socially Working: Projects, Programs, Events and Activism<sup>2</sup>**

The first months of 1998 saw us organize workshops, invite speakers and welcome networks to hold their regular meetings in our premises and use them as their office or official address. We immediately started a monthly series of “Post-Graduate Conversations” for students working on their master’s or doctoral research and given the changes in that sector, not receiving the necessary assistance from their universities. Another monthly gathering, we initiated was about “Ethics Conversations”.

From the onset, Melbourne-based Schools of Social Work were keen to use the cooperative as a site for student placements, not really surprising as the news of our launch had spread widely and the need for placements grew every year (especially for community development or, as they were quaintly referred to, “indirect” or “macro practice”). So, early in 1998, we welcomed our first students, and it was obvious that their energy and enthusiasm for a more unstructured and cooperative learning experience was to become a real asset. With the hindsight of 23 years and well over 100 students’ contributions to our work and very existence, without their *apprenticeship labor* and dedication, Borderlands would not have been able to subsist as well as we have. Students came from social work (the majority), community and international development, education, vocational-level welfare and community studies, and several overseas students. All brought their knowledge, relational energy and a sense of possibilities beyond the usual.

We attracted people with good, sometimes wild, ideas, eager to start working on a project, a campaign or a program they always wanted to do, but never found a suitable place or practical support to bring it to fruition. Among the groups to join us at our premises in the course of the first few years were an anti-gambling group ([gamblershelp.com.au/learn-about-gambling/know-the-odds](http://gamblershelp.com.au/learn-about-gambling/know-the-odds)); Permaculture ([www.permaculturemelbourne.org.au](http://www.permaculturemelbourne.org.au)); the Peace Brigades ([www.peacebrigades.org](http://www.peacebrigades.org)); the Sustainable Living Festival initiative group, preparing to launch the first of their yearly (now national) festivals (<http://www.slf.org.au/>); *Men Against Sexual Assault* activists (<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/men-against-sexual-assault-group-formed>); a group of West Papuan refugees; *Student Partnership Worldwide (Restless Development)* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restless\\_Development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restless_Development)); and a Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) (Lietaer, 2001; Boyle, 1999) initiative soon attracting over one hundred members exchanging goods and services in our local area and beyond, using a community currency to facilitate accountability ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local\\_exchange\\_trading\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_exchange_trading_system)).

At last count, in our 23 years, more than 70 groups, initiatives or organizations were “incubated” at Borderlands by members or others partnering with us or just sharing our spaces. They helped with covering costs (rent, utilities and an expanding computer system) also bringing the dynamics of their membership, their energy and purposes to bear on the place. They also helped us practice and achieve the holistic mission expressed in our value statement. Several organizations and groups spent many years with us. Others were short-lived or one-off initiatives and events passing through and enriching our cooperative lives, offering a glimpse to students of what social work could *also* be about. Altogether, thousands of people attended and participated in events, activities or actions. A number of them were *birds of passage*, people just coming for a rest, finding some inspiration, cooperating for a while and

moving on. Others stayed for many years and several founding members still take part in cooperative life whilst we also farewelled a number of friends and companions to their final resting places.

Via our quarterly newsletter, website, flyers and word of mouth, we stay in touch with thousands of people and are regularly approached to present and tell other organizations or gatherings “what we’re on about”. From mid-2019, two Borderlands members, social workers, started a weekly half-hour program on 3CR Radical Radio ([www.3cr.org.au](http://www.3cr.org.au)), a local community station. They were inviting people to “Think Again” about critical societal issues and events; podcasts of all past programs are available via the 3CR website.

Regarding its formal structure, Borderlands is a not-for-profit co-operative with about 120 shareholders (paying \$A100 per share) and a number of annually subscribing members (\$A25 pa or \$A15 pa concession). At Annual General Meetings, the membership elects directors (at least five). A core of 20 to 25 people are regularly present at Borderlands, working on projects or just having a chat. We’re flexible and pragmatic about the status of “membership” when it comes to access and decision-making and we rejoice when we see the place and our resources being used and put to work to achieve the ends of those who, like us, want to change the world a bit for the better.

Financially, the co-operative has developed a loose formula for *distributing the income* from the projects and programs we run (e.g., workshops, publication, events, markets, etc.). Twenty percent remains with the co-operative to pay the bills and leave us with some reserves and eighty percent is distributed amongst those who do the work. The latter decide *how* that income is distributed amongst the workers. We have been lucky to receive some donations and try to create “resources overlap” with other organizations, capitalizing on our joint human and material resources.

In general, we experiment with mixing and matching paid, voluntary, “apprenticeship” (e.g., students on placement) and “bartering” work between us and our partners. A founding idea underlying the cooperative was to evolve other ways of valuing work and of making a living, both to sustain the co-operative and to secure a personal income for those engaging in project or consulting work activities. We looked for projects allowing us to achieve this double purpose. Indeed, after the disappointments with the growing size and internal transformations of the institutions and agencies we worked for in the past (including universities), we were reluctant to join the growing numbers of self-employed competing individuals and the vain dream of independence. We hoped for collaborative income generation through the cooperative, aiming to distribute it according to the needs of co-operators, rather than the assumed intrinsic meritocratic or professional value of their work. We also remain wary of joining the many non-governmental agencies, including the now fashionable “social enterprises”, to chase government grants or the philanthropic dollar because of the strings that are attached. Rather than pursuing the cooperative aims and purposes, we fear we’d be forced to deliver governments or granting bodies intended “outcomes” (in today’s social policy vocabulary) with all their inherent contradictions.

Indeed, many formal processes operating in the “regular” economy and its work settings are part of the problem we want to address and, where possible, alter. Existing and surviving in this *in-between* space—indeed, a borderland—of complying with workplace formalities and labor regulations, accounting obligations, taxation and overheads whilst also problematizing and changing these asks for a pragmatic approach; dealing with issues as they come and not letting formalities defeat purpose. The friendship and love we have for one another and our commonality of purpose carries us more safely than setting up rigid structures and processes aiming to anticipate and cover all eventualities and vagaries of unfolding human relationships. Embracing *precariousness* as a “normal” feature of human/ earthly existence

## **Social Working the Borderlands**

helps in not even trying to find security and certainty where there are none and not letting possible risks getting in the way of the adventures we need to engage in for the better.

We decided to use the research, evaluation and consultancy experience and capacity of several early members (former academics myself included) and looked for tenders and requests for projects. Our approach to research and consulting is *participatory* and closely linked to the practice and activities central to the project we are contracted for. Participatory Action Research, deliberate use of relevant theory, “reiterative” reporting and discussion of preliminary results and seeking assurance that our interpretations of the realities of those we work with, for and about, are aligned with those of the “actors” themselves (Wadsworth, 2010; Boulet, 2018).

Waxing and waning groups and teams of former academics, students on placement and interested members have together worked on over 130 small-to-medium projects during the 23 years of the cooperative’s existence, the first projects coming to us because of existing relationships and connections. We meanwhile have developed a recognized experience in researching and evaluating in the areas of problem gambling (Borrell & Boulet, 2007; Borrell, 2008); violence against women and children; volunteering (Healey, Boulet & Boulet, 2006; Boulet, Healy & Helton, 2008); community and international development (Lane, 2013; Boulet, 2009); collaborating with Aboriginal groups, communities and organizations (Bear & Hoskin, 2017; Hoskin, 2020); ecology and sustainability (Boulet, 2021); an array of welfare and social work issues including health, housing, work and employment, disability, mental health (Epstein & Boulet, 2015; Boulet, 2015; Boulet, 2020) and work with the Australian Association of Social Workers.

Borderlands organized several major conferences, usually in partnership with other organizations and networks. Many courses and subjects which added critical content to social work and social services-related professional and vocational courses were disappearing or under threat, so we organized three well-attended community development conferences with Deakin University (linking community development with human rights (2004), global risks (2006) and ecology (2008); Clarke et al, 2008). With the *Action Learning, Action Research Association* (ALARA <https://www.alarassociation.org/>), we organized the 2010 Global Congress, attracting 300 Australian and international participants (<https://www.alarassociation.org/?q=publications/other-alara-publications/world-congress-proceedings-2010>). With the international *Local Futures* (formerly *Economics of Happiness*) network, we organized a conference *Local Lives – Global Matters* in Castlemaine, a regional center (120 km north of Melbourne), connecting the local/regional community, social and ecological alternative initiatives with one another and with globally renowned speakers. It attracted almost 300 participants engaging with a plethora of local-to-global activities and initiatives, making the Castlemaine region a magnet for people wanting to live their various alternative(s) ([https://www.localfutures.org/past-conference/castlemaine-australia-2015/and New Community, 2016](https://www.localfutures.org/past-conference/castlemaine-australia-2015/and-New-Community,2016)).

In 2002, after moving to another church-owned site, Borderlands’ interests converged with the resident Uniting Church congregation’s involvement in education, awareness and consciousness-building. From the moment of moving in, we together organized events, conferences and learning opportunities in cross-disciplinary and wholistic philosophies and practices. By 2004, together with an expanding group of people critical of what was being eroded in tertiary education, the idea to develop a formal educational program just “popped up”. Two years and many meetings later, we launched a Graduate School, offering *Integrative and Transformative Studies*, a four-year part-time master’s by Project, state-accredited course, named OASES (an acronym denoting the transdisciplinary intention of the course: (the) *Organic integration of the Aesthetic, the Spiritual, the Ecological and the Social*).

The curriculum and pedagogy aimed at integrating experiential and life-practice moments with trans-disciplinary theories, deep reflection and dedicated integrative sessions where participants gave account to everyone of their learning. We graduated almost 50 participants during the ten years of the School's existence. Unfortunately, the newly established Australian Federal Regulator of Tertiary Education, in true neoliberal fashion, expected us to "grow" after our re-accreditation in 2012, as any "respectable operator" in the "education industry" needed to do; not easy for a not-for-profit organization attempting to keep study fees low and not being able to provide financial help for its students (Boulet, 2017). And we're still smarting the loss.

Since 2003, Borderlands has supported the publication of the only community development journal in Australia; the journal had existed since 1983 as the *Community Quarterly*, eventually running out of (volunteer) steam in 2000. A group of Borderlands associates decided to bring it out again as the *New Community Quarterly* and the journal (now called *New Community*) keeps the idea of community development alive, offering many social workers and academics opportunities to publish and let the world know that working in and with communities is part of the social work remit. Finally, some of us assisted peace activists to create an online *Australian Living Peace Museum* (<http://www.livingpeacemuseum.org.au/omeka/search-browse>), documenting peace-making in the midst of a national culture celebrating war efforts.

## **LEARNINGS FOR A RE-CONTEXTUALISING SOCIAL WORK**

Much personal learning has been documented in the publications included in the references. I will mention them in this all-too-brief summary of the many lessons we learned together whilst "social working the Borderlands". Indeed, "my" learning is not just "my" learning, it is part of the gift-relationship Borderlands was and is (Boulet et al, 2008) and writing is just a rather limited expression thereof.

Starting with "**interdependence**". Our culture's fascination and dedication to the assumed virtue of personal "independence" and its application in so many social work axioms about the purpose of its "interventions" needs to be abandoned. Nothing human and nothing earthly and nothing in the universe is "independent". "**Interdependent Autonomy**" is the best and necessary for us to pursue as individuals and collectives. Macy and Johnstone (2012) suggest that for humans, "playing our role as part of the larger team of life on Earth" should replace our present "battling for supremacy". And our western individualist ethos needs urgent substitution by a "relational responsibility" ethos (Barad, 2007; Manne, 2014; Verhaeghe, 2014; Boulet, 2018, 2021)

We need to *extend our notion of community to include the non-human* and decenter "I/we-humans" from our understanding of the world and the universe, embracing post-anthropocentric and post-human conceptions of "our" place in the totality of "matter". Braidotti (2018, p.1) says it best:

*My working definition of the posthuman predicament is the convergence, across the spectrum of cognitive capitalism, of posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other. The former focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things, while the latter criticizes species hierarchy and human exceptionalism.*

Importantly, "post"-humanism is not "de-humanizing" or "anti" humanism. Nor does it suggest the promise of a world of technological wonders and artificial intelligence or the regression into some pure

## **Social Working the Borderlands**

“animalistic” essence. It simply urges us to *start wondering how the earth wants us to live with her* and what the nature of that relationship might be, for which we need to urgently consult with those who have been here for longer than western imaginations of the start of “civilization” (Boulet, 2021).

Another lesson we learned is the need to ***decolonize our thinking and practice***, especially for the “whites” amongst us (and not just social work(ers)). Being part of the power and culture of former and present empires and colonial powers clouds our perception and understanding. There is a lot the western world is responsible for (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2020), but just reading and “hearing” Martin Luther King’s *1963 Letter from Birmingham Jail* (<https://letterfromjail.com/>) unmasks the tendency of white people, even those who sympathized with African Americans, the *white moderate*, to too quickly and with too much relief declare success and head home smiling. Indeed, King suggests,

*The white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice...[because] shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will...*”

And reflective social workers will know how widely spread this attitude still is amongst members of our profession.

Last but not least, social work is a ***relationally focused and care-full (full of care) profession***. I have long argued that rather than “person-focused”, social work should follow Martin Buber’s suggestion in *I and Thou* (1970): “In the beginning is the relation.” For all of us, damaged by hyper-individualism, anthropocentrism and civilizatory hubris, the question of reclaiming our *relational capabilities* (knowledges and skills) for social work practice should be paramount, especially in the face of the growing precariousness of our own and so many other species’ existence on an increasingly damaged Earth (Gergen, 2009). Elsewhere I shared four elements of the relational gifts we can offer in our work in “case”, group, community or organizational *situated contexts* (Boulet, 2018; 2021):

- **Time/duration:** social/ecological informed relating and caring needs time, needs to last and endure.
- **Shared place/space:** social/ecological informed relating and caring needs to occur in shared places.
- **Reciprocity:** to care and being taken care of... the gift relationship of “service delivering” where gift-giving is only possible through the gift of receiving/accepting the ‘service’; social workers thanking “clients” for accepting gifts of care we offer.
- **Sacrifice:** contrary to the assumed primacy of “self-interest”, relating contributes to the social body/community, so that our individual-selves can “be” in their necessary diversity and autonomy: the recovery of our ‘social, cooperative, common selves.

All this requires a regenerative approach to learning to “social” working as “social” being, modeling what it means to caringly and healingly relate in the situated practice contexts we inhabit as social workers; remembering always that good contexts are rarely created by first seeing where “funding could come from”, but by good relational energy.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Except at the start of a sentence and in quotes—I resist the capitalisation of the first personal pronoun - the '*perpendicular pronoun*'—in recognition of the rather pretentious and simply wrong cultural assumption in western writing about the centrality of the speaking, writing or thinking author/subject—or more generally, of the individual person—in the entirety of the living and changing context and the complexity of the interconnections s-he reports on.

This exercise in humility and modesty can obviously be questioned by readers, pointing at the overabundance of references to my own written work. Partly i find solace in the fact that i have been at the origins of the cooperative even before its formal launch and have been with it all of its 23 years. As an academic, part of my gift in the reciprocal gift economy of the initiative was, from the onset, that along the way i had learned how to write... so, in addition to the immense learning i was privileged to enjoy with many others, somehow i turned into the semi-official narrator of our collective and my personal learning. Hence, readers should know that 'behind' my name as the author—or one of the authors—of the several referenced works live a great many co-learners and teachers whose voice and presence i hope has been adequately rendered... and i hope for forgiveness if it feels like a lack of modesty.
- <sup>2</sup> The story of Borderlands has been told elsewhere; see Boulet, 2003; 2015; 2017. Quarterly Newsletters can be accessed via the Borderlands website as can the festive booklets we published at our tenth and twentieth anniversaries ([www.borderlands.org.au](http://www.borderlands.org.au)).

Section 2

# Beyond Spaces and Places

# Chapter 3

## Responding to the Natural World: Expanding the Scope of Social Work

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter seeks to help social workers adopt a wider eco-centric perspective which affirms human connectedness to the natural world, with a dual focus on ecological and social justice. It examines when, where, and how humans came to see themselves as separate and superior to the rest of nature, and the disastrous consequences now evident on a global scale. The alienation from nature is found to begin within early western civilizations and exacerbated with the growth of commerce and empires and the displacement and destruction of peoples with deep knowledge and respect for the natural world. Social workers are well placed to work at the interface between people and the wider natural environment and to embrace the knowledge and contributions of other disciplines and groups working for just causes. It is concluded that help for humans is only possible within a wider remit of care for the natural world essential to all life. A local example of ecologically informed social work is shared, helping community gardeners to grow and share food.*

### HUMAN CONNECTION TO NATURE

*It takes a universe to make a child (Thomas Berry, 2011).*

This chapter examines how social workers can make a greater impact upon human wellbeing, by adopting a critically wider perspective, that will benefit people as well as the planet that holds us.

We are all a part of nature and our social needs cannot be meaningfully abstracted from the daily necessities to eat and drink and breathe and keep warm enough for our bodies and communities to live and prosper. Addressing the human induced global ecological crisis, and our relationship to the natural world is essential to wellbeing of humans, indeed essential to our identities as humans.

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## ***Responding to the Natural World***

I attempt a broad sweep of historical, cultural, religious, economic and scientific developments to understand how humans have come to see themselves or ourselves so separately from the rest nature. I show that modern urban industrial world and our predominant economic systems, have been especially harmful to the rest of nature and indeed to human welfare.

It will also be shown how human separation from nature, in western cultures at least, preceded the industrial and scientific revolutions, the enclosures of land and removal of forests, is linked to the foundation creation stories and spiritual beliefs as to how and why we are here. We find that our path away from nature is certainly deep seated. Yet the desire and need to “reconnect with nature” is also most in evidence at this time, when human harm to the whole planet is finally inescapable.

Human alienation from the rest of the natural world was well advanced before the roles of social workers would emerge. They appeared in modern developed countries, where social workers sought to remedy the social harms resulting from industrialized capitalist political economies.

I examine the potential of social workers to help redress the dislocated relationships between humans and the wider natural world. I suggest there is indeed very much for social workers to do in concert with people with wide ranging commitments, skills and knowledge and including peoples with the longest histories of living sustainably on country.

I report some local practice initiatives with school and community gardens in South Australia working with an eco-social work perspective and they illustrate some places to start.

It is suggested that social work acknowledges a wider understanding of *relatedness*. A call for eco-justice will not be at expense of the social justice goals that have guided this profession, but which now needs to be expanded for the health and welfare of all on this planet.

## **HUMAN ALIENATION FROM NATURE**

To understand the vital importance of nature in human life, we need to go back in history, well before the emergence of modern social work, before industrialization and the emergence of capitalism, the era of cities and civilizations, before the gods ascended into heaven and even before fields were tilled. The pathways away from nature have been many and varied, with connections lost with each of the above “developmental” steps. Recovering a sense of our interdependence with the natural requires us to ask a range of questions about the moments when, and the reasons why, humans lost that sense. Was it:

- When we started to grow food and clear land?
- When some lands were seen as more prized and were taken by force?
- When trade started and some products of nature became over-exploited?
- When empires usurped whole regions and ruled from afar?
- When one nation would colonize and displace the peoples of another?
- When machines were invented that required mass excavation for raw materials and fuel?
- When these machines and the land became the property of corporations?

Furthermore, did specific inventions, knowledge and beliefs play critical roles, such as the discovery of particular tools, or a critical loss of skills, or perhaps religious beliefs or practices that have helped or hindered human connections to nature? And, if humans lost connections to the natural world, how can

lost knowledge and links be re-established? Why is such connection important? Will it mean that we will live better lives, live simply and sustainably, with less conflict, less inequality, with less suffering?

We cannot do justice to such a broad set of questions in one chapter. However, humans are causing harms to the natural world on such a scale, destroying habitats, resulting in mass extinctions of plants and animals critical to our own existence. We cannot help each other without valuing our complex bonds with other life on this planet. We need to consider the many paths, old and new, that can help restore our links to the natural world, to recover knowledge and practices that could literally help save a world, valuable to ourselves and other life on this planet.

## **EARLY HUMAN SOCIETIES AND NATURE**

All societies hold explanations about the arrival of humans on earth, suggesting a particular relationship with the natural world, drawing upon creation stories, beliefs and theories with real consequences for the practice of living, even if often revised or reinterpreted. Belief systems are buried within cultural memories as archetypes. For the Abrahamic monotheistic civilizations, for example, it is reported in Genesis that humans were made by God on the sixth day of creation, only after everything else in the universe had already been created, confirming humans as the end point, the pinnacle of creation. The world was created for the use of humans, a gift to be used thereafter, as best they (we) wish

*1:28 And God blessed them; and God said unto them: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth”.*

*1:29 And God said: “Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed – to you it shall be for food.*

*1:30 and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is a living soul, [I have given] every green herb for food”. And it was so. [attributed to Moses, Genesis, Old Testament].*

As Carolyn Merchant (2013, p. 22) explains, meaning can change depending on the readings chosen.

*Genesis 2 presents stewardship as an ethical alternative to the domination of nature. God puts “man” into the Garden of Eden and instructs him “to dress it and to keep it.” The Genesis 2:15 ethic is often interpreted as the stewardship of nature, as opposed to the Genesis 1:28 ethic of dominion or mastery.*

It may be that each era re-reads or recreates the creation stories to suit their times. However, some texts and messages endure with impacts accumulating over millennia.

Examining earlier western beliefs systems, the world was inhabited by many gods, Merchant finds female gods representing fertility, peace, equality and, earlier still, non-human creatures and natural elements being revered and respected. But in the time of the Old Testament, there is a civilization with established agriculture and metal tools. Human societies had already adapted to major climate changes

## **Responding to the Natural World**

during the last Ice Age, ending some 12,000 years ago, and adjusted to the drying of lands in the Middle East, likely due to human settlement and agriculture:

*Climate changes and environmental degradation in the ancient world ominously shadows the present and speaks to the humanocentric conduct evident in ecological relations to this day (Chew & Sarabia, 2016, p. 24).*

Merchant draws from scholars of western antiquity, including philosopher Max Oelschlager, who suggests that agriculture marks a decline from an Edenic past:

*If the thesis that agriculture underlies humankind's turn upon the environment, even if out of climatological exigency, is cogent, then the ancient Mediterranean theater is where the 'fall from Paradise' was staged ... (Oelschlager, in Merchant 2013, p. 24).*

The Western story of *the fall* is linked to conceptions of redemption and recovery, Merchant finding religious records and art works with archetypal images absorbed into most subsequent “western” civilizations. She shows how patriarchy was a key element in historic alienation from the “Garden of Eden”, when life appeared more peaceful and equal, female gods being revered and women having a social status not seen for the millennia since:

*Horticulturists who lived during the period from 7000 to 3500 BCE in Old Europe—the area of present-day Greece and the former Yugoslavia—were, according to archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, apparently peaceful groups who did not develop destructive weapons. Men and women were buried side by side, indicating equal status. Their lives revolved around fertility rituals based on the female principle. Birth, death, and regeneration were reflected in statues of female deities with large buttocks, pregnant bellies, and cylindrical necks. The concepts of male and female, animal and human, were fused. Nature was venerated (Merchant, 2013, p. 27).*

All peoples inherit stories and explanations as to why and how humans exist. I am not contesting here the veracity of these accounts or whether deities and supernatural entities lie within or beyond the natural realm. What is at stake are the attitudes and dispositions passed down historically; how these morph over time; when new technologies emerge or are transferred across cultures, imposed through conquest and war, or by colonization, via missionaries, scientific expeditions, economic interventions characterized as “trade”, by laws of ownership of land and waterways, and all that lives these. Slavery and genocide were accepted in past eras. We now witness ecocide.

## **RECOVERING FROM OUR ALIENATION FROM NATURE: WORK TO BE DONE!**

In order to understand the human dislocation from the natural world, we can examine flaws in foundational beliefs and attitudes in specific societies or look for inherent traits in human nature (e.g., competition, greed or aggression). We can appraise the impacts of historic inventions technologies used to exploit natural resources, or the results of specific social, economic or political arrangements to grow crops, hunt



specific species, clear forests, burn fuels. We are interested here in the origins and extent and consequence of human alienation from nature. We hope that knowing the causes will help to identify some remedies.

Will we need to recover and adopt historic practices and worldviews to restore our connections to nature? Will we have to somehow transform ourselves to be agents of change and reconnection? Or, if we can somehow reconnect to nature and utilize nature as the catalyst for human change, can the natural world, under some conditions, intervene in our lives? Can we actually change who we are by changing our relationship to nature? These are the epistemological (knowing), ontological (being) and methodological (action) components of Boetto's eco-social model for transformation (Boetto, 2017). We search for all three dimensions here by discovering a deeper understanding of our natural and social histories, and especially from peoples who have long lived in close accord with the natural world.

## **LISTENING TO FIRST NATIONS' VOICES**

Mary Graham (2019), member of the Kombumerri Peoples and Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Queensland, describes how human laws are also the laws of nature:

*A fundamental element of Aboriginal first laws, the laws between people and land, is the law of obligation. As the land created us, so we are always going to be obligated to it. Not just our life but our existence, the whole of our existence and all meaning that underpins and surrounds it, that lives through us. All the flora and fauna, every living thing, all the landforms and features of the land, they are all our ancestors, because they all came before us. They helped us emerge and helped us to become human and to stay human, to develop us further as human beings and to create culture. Literally the grass we walk on, the soil we walk on, the plants and animals we eat – these all made us human and gave us meaning and identity. And it all came about through our relationship with the land (Graham, 2019, p. 3).*

Dr Anne Poelina, Nyikina, Traditional Custodian and leader of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council in North-Western Australia, who champions *New Economy* opportunities for Indigenous people in “green-collar” jobs across diverse science, culture, heritage and conservation economies, asserts:

*Traditional ecological knowledge is Indigenous science. The evidence suggests that culture – the beliefs, practices and ethics of law and custom – is the mechanism that Indigenous people use to participate in the world around us as guardians. A more extensive understanding of environmental justice requires linking the rights of human beings with nature's natural rights. Indigenous communities' traditions and practices protect the essential relationship between Indigenous peoples' human rights and our ancestral lands and living waters. Indigenous people are key to reimagining sustainable development and sustainable life on country around the globe (Poelina, 2020, p. ix).*

Reporting on traditional childrearing practices, Yorta Yorta woman Dr Mishel McMahon explains how the natural world assists communities to look over a child for example through providing a special tree offering shelter.

## **Responding to the Natural World**

*Australian First Nations for thousands of years have held and continue to hold, from their own worldviews ways of knowing for engineering, science, agriculture, fisheries, health, astrology, governance, wellbeing, land management and childrearing (McMahon, 2020).*

When we reach out and listen for other sources of knowledge, we can rediscover ancient knowledge positing *relatedness* as a core attribute of life, and a code for how to live.

## **READING ABOUT EARLY SETTLERS AND REPORTS OF FIRST CONTACT**

The worldviews of early colonial “settlers” offers another source of lived experience we can critically investigate. Don Watson (2014) examines the traditions of his ancestors in clearing the forests and subduing the land in Victoria (Australia), home to First Nations Peoples for millennia.

*The environmental chaos wrought in the two centuries of white settler occupation testifies not only to their equally profound ignorance of the scientific reality but to a cosmology uncoupled from the land (Watson, 2014, p. 77).*

Watson later wonders about the settlers’ ringbarking whole forests with hands and axe “to let the light in”: He reflects “Can you kill so many trees, remove a whole forest, without some effect on the mind?” (Adams, 2014)

Where oral histories are lost, some researchers have sought out the records of early explorers, or very early pre-settlement encounters, such as with whalers and seal hunters, as found within a collection of *First Wave* stories (Dooley & Clode, 2019).

Through careful research of explorer journals and after discovering his own Aboriginal heritage, Bruce Pascoe, historian, storyteller, regenerative farmer and environmental advocate and survivor of the extreme bushfires, finds details of extensive and elaborate agricultural and fish-farming practices and large established settlements amongst Australian First Nations peoples (Dark Emu, 2018). His findings challenge entrenched colonial attitudes about Aboriginal peoples “just being opportunistic nomadic hunters” and thus ignoring their deep knowledge and complex cultural-biological practices and systems of law. Though such revelations are increasingly appreciated, Pascoe concludes that this historic forgetting was willful.

*Colonial Australia sought to forget the advanced nature of the Aboriginal society and economy, and this amnesia was entrenched when settlers who arrived after the depopulation of whole districts found no structure more substantial than a windbreak and no population that was not humiliated, debased and diseased. This is understandable because, as is evidenced by the earlier first-hand reports, villages were burnt, the foundations stolen for other buildings, the occupants killed by warfare, murder and disease, and the country usurped. It is no wonder that after 1860 most people saw no evidence of any prior complex civilisation (Pascoe, 2018, p. 15).*

The Indigenous people’s care for land and soil was destroyed after a few seasons; sheep made the lush yam pastures disappear; the English pastoralists ignored the fact that the fertility they encountered

on entering the country resulted from careful management, and prejudices ensured that they would never perceive their own (colonial) agriculture was to cause the degradation of the land.

Other research (Tobler et al 2017) has shown that over the longest known periods of habitation, Aboriginal settlement persisted within specific regions, adapting to gradual but extensive changes in climate, including during the last ice age, after which sea levels rose by over 100 meters.

*Human genome testing has shown Aboriginal people have been continuously present in their home regions for at least 50,000 years. This is some of the longest continual connection to country known to exist anywhere in the world and has resulted in people developing specific characteristics connected to their regions – such as desert dwellers having a greater physical capacity to cope with freezing night-time temperatures than other peoples (Graham, 2019, p. 5).*

Elsewhere, scientists and ecologists and philosophers are seeking other lessons or laws that helped sustain societies without harming the natural worlds to which they belong (Mickey, Tucker & Grim, 2020).

## **ECOLOGICAL DAMAGE THROUGH COLONISATION**

Selectively focusing on the story of the British empire, Merchant (1989, p39) tracks the colonization of a “new world”, covering four centuries of settlement in the New England districts of North America from 1610 onwards; First Nation peoples there were forced off their lands, to be replaced by Pilgrim and Puritan settlers bringing new land use practices and beliefs. Peoples from at least ten First Nations inhabited New England until this invasion, including the Abenaki, Pennacook and Wappinger Confederacy. Similarly, two centuries later, British interests would colonize the Australian continent, the Torres Strait and many Pacific Islands.

The colonial invasions included ecological upheavals, civil wars, religious migrations, industrialization, the emergence of capitalism and accompanied by revolutions in science and philosophy. Merchant examines the ecological impacts of the revolution in thought known as *The Enlightenment*, also emerging in Europe before spreading to the colonies, but well before the transformations that would arrive with industrialization and capitalist enterprises. Enlightenment scientists and philosophers heralded new thinking and discoveries, including the perceived liberation from human dependency on nature and its entire vicissitudes.

*The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century accepted this philosophy of domination and turned it into tremendous optimism over the capacity of the human beings to control their own destinies (Merchant, 2018, p. 243).*

The modern western world adopted a belief in inevitable endless progress and prosperity, what is described as the “pretense of transcendence” (Solomon 1988), a stubbornly persisting exceptionalist illusion. Seventeenth century scientists believed they would expand empirical knowledge with experimentation and finally afford humans mastery over nature, thus converging with the earlier discussed biblical cosmologies of divine creation of the world and nature for the flourishing of humans.

## **Responding to the Natural World**

This human-centric perspective was not daunted by earlier Copernican demonstrations that Earth was not in the center of the universe, nor that—ironically—early Greek philosophers already knew that earth orbited sun, this knowledge was lost during the Roman reign of Europe (Russell, 1961).

Merchant integrates human and environmental history and captures the first displacement by subsistence farmers unable to produce significant surplus food nor afford to import goods or services. In New England, we see pre-industrial colonization of people and country, and the subsequent impact of industrialization and capitalism, with mass production creating goods surplus to those that have “use value”, resulting in farmers becoming dependent on markets.

Tracking the accompanying revolutions in thought and perception, Merchant posits:

*Viewed as a social construction, “nature” (as it was conceptualized in each social epoch— Indian, colonial and capitalist) is not some ultimate truth that was gradually discovered through the scientific processes of observation, experimentation, and mathematics. Rather, it was a relative, changing structure of human representations of “reality.” Ecological revolutions are processes through which different societies change their relationship to nature. They arise from tensions between production and ecology, and between production and reproduction. The results are new constructions of nature, both materially and in human consciousness (Merchant, 1987, p. 273).*

Merchant later reports on the Third (Post Industrial) Global Ecological Revolution, where she imagines as much as she describes a *Post-industrial Society* where nature is (again) seen as an active partner, knowledge being used to restore relationships damaged by domination and exploitation.

*An ecological transformation in the deepest sense entails changes in ecology, production, reproduction, and forms of consciousness. Ecology as a new worldview could help resolve environmental problems rooted in the industrial-mechanistic mode of representing nature. In opposition to the subject/object, mind/body, and nature/culture dichotomies of mechanistic science, ecological consciousness sees complexity and process in both nature and culture. In the ecological model, humans are not helpless victims nor arrogant’ dominators of nature, but active participants in the destiny of the webs of which they are a part. (1989, p. 270)*

## **ALIENATIONS GENERATED THROUGH THE ELEVATION OF PRIVATE PROPERTY AS THE “NORMAL” RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS AND EARTHLY “THINGS”**

In the quest for a (green) social theory that recognizes human connection to the environment, Peter Dickens (1992) builds upon the concept of alienation from nature, which in turn is a result of our alienation from land and labor caused by acceptance and legalization of the norm of private ownership or property:

*Under capitalism, nature is privately owned and exploited. People therefore find themselves becoming alienated or estranged from the nature on which they work. They also become alienated from their own species (Dickens 1992, xiv).*

The wealth created through private ownership and alienation of human labor is also at the expense of environmental harms. Natural resources—air, water, soils—are often harnessed at minimal or no cost to the enterprise, but leave a legacy of polluted air and waterways, sick lungs, lost habitats, all of which are excluded from economic balance sheets as “externalities”. Efforts to regulate or restrict the freedoms associated with the “private” markets are resisted in the name of the profit-generating, “growth” rationales and in the interests of those who own the means of production and, hence the political-economic systems based on these principles and axioms.

Historical and dialectic materialism further suggest that in the context of a capitalist political economy, our relationship to those who employ us, who own the land and machinery, will determine how we think and feel and relate to the world as a whole. Indeed, if we are alienated from the *means of production*, we will also be alienated from our true selves and from nature. Whilst this may sound deterministic, I do not think we can deny a material base to life, and that the conditions of life will shape our thoughts. It is hard to dismiss what Karl Marx first wrote in 1859,

*It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx, 1859, Preface).*

Even if alienation from nature began long before markets entered every aspect of life, it can be said that global capitalism made it harder. Freya Mathews explains the dilemma:

*... historical materialism might go a long way towards explaining why particular value-sets prevail in particular societies, it does not in itself solve the problem of how actually to bring about a new value regime. For to replace the underlying praxes of our present society with praxes that would, according to historical materialism, induce ecological consciousness would require massive economic and political investment in new eco-compatible modes of production. Such investment could presumably not occur unless those very ecological values were already in place. It is this vexing circularity that makes the problem of moral reform in relation to the environment so intransigent. This is why I call it the “Hard Problem” of environmental reform (Mathews, 2019, p. 15)*

The social work profession and the welfare systems that employ us are embedded within these social-economic-political contexts and they are designed to deal with the human problems and other consequences of a model of economic development predicated on endless growth and exploitation of every available resource. Indeed, in many ways, the social services provided by governments and charities are regarded as dependent on the wealth of a market-based economy. It would seem that welfare goals will always be secondary to the priority of markets and other facets of the capitalist economy and its growth assumptions, leaving at best a *remedial* social welfare context to deal with their worst impacts.

So how can we as individuals and as a profession join those who have started to drive positive change? Mathews sees hope for this “hard problem”:

*Perhaps in the human context there are other forces, further to materialist ones, that also determine our survival. The imperative to affiliate, for instance. The need to belong to a community or group or troupe is perhaps as core to our survival, in evolutionary terms, as our need for food and shelter (2019, pp. 15–16).*

## **Responding to the Natural World**

At this precarious time, a change of consciousness is arising by our exposure to the growing and multiplying evidence of climate change, loss of forests and reefs and glaciers, “natural” disasters of fires, floods, droughts, blizzards and wild weather. Young people, with no direct memory of life in safer or better conditions, have grasped that there must be alternatives to the catastrophic pathways. The contradictions are becoming more obvious, when political supporters of free market capitalism insist that continuous economic growth is essential, whilst the materials required for production are finite and their extraction is necessarily destructive.

## **RECONNECTING WITH NATURE: DEEP ECOLOGY AND ECOFEMINISM**

Alienation, exploitation, oppression and hierarchical power relations have clearly existed and persisted between humans, with power being unequally distributed between men and women. We can't expect benevolence, nor respect where unequal power relations endure.

Without examining the extent of patriarchy across all societies, the scientific revolutions reinforced a mechanistic view of a world that could be mastered in the service of industry and competitive capitalist relations of ownership. Merchant (quoted above) reports on the widening division of labor and experience, following industrialization, when men and boys increasingly left their homes and gardens to produce for others, with women increasingly providing informal care, support and reproductive roles, not immediately evidenced in the market economies, when few commodities are traded amidst an intensity of relationships and experience.

Women and nature were not recognized for the essential value in sustaining the new economic relations and the concomitant impacts of “ecological revolutions”, in the New World and beyond. It has taken a century for the feminist claim for equality to be properly heard and accepted in some places. Yet the exploitative worldview that supports the modern global economy is stubbornly obscured. Nature was increasingly seen as external and inferior to human affairs. It was not us: and “seeing nature as *other* is commonly associated with viewing it as an adversary” (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002, p. 223, italics added).

*The oppression that keeps realization of a dynamic, harmonious human/nature relationship out of consciousness is connected to other forms of human oppression including economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and patriarchy. Oppressive social institutions are an expression of an alienated collective psyche but also structure and maintain an alienated collective psyche. Though human oppression and oppression of nature appear to exist in separate form, struggle against any one in isolation cannot be effective. Concern for any oppression necessitates concern for all oppression (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002, p. 227).*

*Compassion and caring for nature are part of ecofeminist processes because all of nature is seen as intimately connected with humans and as having inherent value. Nature has an existence and voice worth hearing and experiencing (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002, p. 226).*

*Without such a consciousness, the science of social work will perpetuate Western society's domination over nature and limit our opportunities to develop a sustainable relationship with the earth (Klemmer & McNamara, 2020, p. 512).*

## RECONNECTING WITH NATURE: AWAKENINGS IN THINKING AND PRACTICE

Still, there are signs of a growing sense of possibilities; with many voices seeking to avert ecological and thus economic disaster. The possibility that humans could harm the whole planet has been evident for at least 50 years. A Club of Rome author, Paul Ehrlich, lamented recently that in his lifetime the world population has increased four-fold, the accessible fossil fuels, that took millions of years to form, are close to exhausted (2019). Also from the 70s, we heard of Schumacher's insight that "Small is Beautiful" (1973) and that markets should be designed for the long-term needs of people. Working for the British Coal Board, he argued that small coalmines that had been part of village life for generations should not be abandoned when markets aimed for larger returns by transferring capital to other sites. Coal being a finite resource, mines could need to be re-opened with all the start-up costs, but perhaps no workforce left. Schumacher in 1960 advises, "Best seams first is not a principle of economics" (Kirk, 1983 p. 6). As a conservationist, Schumacher would also advise that energy sources were not renewable, but instead,

*(a) once-for-all endowment which cannot be increased, only diminished... Although energy can be bought and sold like any other commodity it is 'not just another commodity', but the precondition of all commodities, a basic factor equal with air, water, and earth (Schumacher 1964, in Kirk, 1983, p. 1-2).*

We know today that the remaining fossil fuels cannot be burned, that multiple abandoned mines are problematic and that we cannot disregard impacted communities. But still, nearly 50 years later, orthodox market economics still need to be challenged and social work leaders now join in. Powers & Rinkel, for example, challenge the growth model:

*Competition and scarcity undergird the growth ideology, where sustainable development is located, and in that model profit will always prevail over the aspirations of meeting the supposed competing needs of people and planet. Ultimately this framework will only serve to further perpetuate ecological injustices and power imbalances. Degrowth involves localizing solutions and is not only about a shift in economic ideology, but in a revisioned society that lives cooperation, sharing the abundance, and reciprocity-based relationships among people and the planet. (2019, pp. 32-33).*

But we also learn that we are not doing enough, when then 15-year-old Greta Thunberg addressed the UN Climate Change Conference:

*We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis. We need to keep the fossil fuels in the ground, and we need to focus on equity. And if solutions within the system are so impossible to find then maybe we should change the system itself? (Thunberg, 2019, p. 14)*

Rejecting the mantras of endless growth and the competitive market paradigm appears radical, but unless social workers together take this position, we become co-culpable of further harms, more extreme climate changes and fewer livable regions to share or fight over (Powers, Rambaree & Peeters, 2019). If, therefore, alienation from nature is part of the problem, how can we instigate new relationships with the natural world and amongst us humans? Are there opportunities for disengagement—however small—that will foster and support the broad systemic changes so desperately needed? In reporting on Peter Dickens' work, Ormrod suggests the possibility of "escape attempts" as,

## **Responding to the Natural World**

*a means of creating individual identity in a society which is seen as threatening ... to establish social or spatial zones of autonomy and self-management or self-determination (Ormrod, 2016, pp. 37–38).*

Creation/reclamation of independent spheres is found in a new *commons*,

*defined as social or natural resources not owned by anyone, but over which a community has shared and equal rights, the commons go back many centuries in agrarian history, their enclosures marking a crucial juncture in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. (Montenegro de Wit, 2020, p. 150)*

*Commoning* is a process of sharing not necessarily linked to specific resources, governed by emerging social protocols and managed locally and building on traditions of co-operatives and associations, clubs and guilds that have survived the enclosures and appropriations of capitalist markets. The impetus is found in the creation and sharing of “open source” technologies, gifting communities, food swaps, repair cafes, community gardens and seed libraries; according to Bollier (2020, p. 228).

*...an emerging generation of activists and younger scholars has developed a very different narrative of the commons, with different ontological premises. They have rediscovered the commons as a social system. In open-source software communities and community forests, for example, people realize that the heart of commoning consists of peer governance, provisioning, and social life.*

*This is the essential conclusion of Elinor Ostrom’s landmark 1990 book, *Governing the Commons*, which painstakingly documents how human communities have created effective social institutions for the stewardship of shared wealth. Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for this work in 2009.*

Local shared economies are prevalent in every home, kitchen and garden, and where meals are prepared, children are cared for and food is sometimes grown in yards or balconies. Instincts of cooperation are more fundamental than competition; food is grown on footpaths in cities, sometimes with a sign confirming the obvious: that its gardener is happy to share produce. Rather than *producing* goods for market, commoners assist with *provisioning* within and across communities. Bollier (2020) reports:

*...history shows that commoning is something that human beings inevitably, irresistibly do. While the culture of market industrialism and the modern state has eclipsed the very idea of the commons for nearly two centuries, the general social form remains remarkably persistent and alive. Its practices, ethical commitments and traditions are still enacted by billions of people around the world, especially in subsistence and indigenous cultures. An estimated 2.5 billion people around the world manage about eight billion hectares of land through community-based ownership systems (Bollier, 2020, pp. 228–9).*

There are growing numbers of attempts to redirect economies towards green industries and circular economies, and debates within corporations about creating and protecting values other than profits; it is the national polity permeating organizations and institutions that needs to become more “commons-oriented” and support the transformations we need to prefigure. How can we make sure that the daily rituals and connections most of us can undertake are beneficial in the short- and long-term to ourselves and the rest of nature?



## URBAN GARDENS: RECLAIMING THE COMMONS

Widening and deepening the commons offers fertile spheres for “working the social” by building soils, gardens and community (Bailey, Hendrick & Palmer, 2018) and reducing the burden on the planet, consciously working in concert with the forces of nature.

The economic models of individual competition for scarce non-renewable resources are replaced by cooperative relationships sharing time, skills and goodwill many communities have in abundance and the scale of initiatives has grown fast with little official support. A steadily growing register maintained by the Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network includes some 800 community gardens, all welcoming new members. Melbourne-based Cultivating Community Inc supports over 700 tenants in 20 Public Housing Community Gardens and their related (free) food swaps and community composts, attracting social workers amongst an eclectic mix of staff, residents and volunteers (Christensen, 2018).

Meanwhile elsewhere:

*Community garden organizers in New York City have created a network of some 500 gardens that provide an estimated 39,000kg of food to neighborhoods, empowering locals to eat healthily, maintain autonomy over public space, resist racist, capitalist and statist food systems, and organize community (Izlar, 2019).*

The New York gardens offer numerous social economic and environmental benefits, but their security only came from concerted creative community organizing and explicit social work supports (Shepard, 2012). The social activism that coalesced to win over City Hall has resulted in an even more committed and connected set of citizens and gardeners.

Home and community gardens offer skill development and social connections as well as *Tranquility and Timeout*. For many, they also provide an important measure of food security, which is multiplied when known to other gardeners. Pollard and her research team in Australia surveyed food values, water, time and other inputs, showing that for many, time in the garden has material rewards equivalent to time spent in paid work (Pollard et al., 2018).

The Permaculture movement, initiated in Tasmania by Mollison and Holmgren (1978), urges us to travel less and spend more productive time close to home; its principles include codes to “share fairly”, to live more simply, drawing less energy from the grid and harnessing natural resources and skills to full advantage (Holmgren, 2018). Its holistic design incorporates biological, structural (built forms) and social dimensions to maximize adaptiveness and sustainability. Permaculture offers a clear “degrowth” design approach resting on *commons* principles, seeks to minimize energy inputs, and has been widely applied in “developing” countries where subsistence food production and sharing are common.

It is not accidental that such new systems of provisioning are seemingly emerging synchronously; the *men’s shed movement* is growing and now progressing into *women’s sheds*, community workshops and repair cafés. A regional Council library in Western Adelaide recently added a *seed library* to its books and other media collections, a life-gifting service accepting and offering free seeds. This is the opposite of the corporatization and hybridization of seeds that create dependencies and costs on farmers and gardeners worldwide. The community resistance against such appropriations and monopolies reflects globally operating *commons* principles (Montenegro de Wit, 2020). Social systems of sharing seeds, commonplace amongst gardeners everywhere, also evidence symbiotic and mutually beneficial relations between people and between people and plants, when allowed to flourish.

## THEORY INTO PRACTICE: COMMUNITY GARDENS IN ADELAIDE

I now draw upon some of my mostly voluntary social work experiences with local school and community gardens and community composting initiatives: some of these experiences and initiatives have been reported elsewhere (Walsh et al., 2019a). Opportunities to participate have been extended to social work and occupational therapy students undertaking community development projects as part of their courses at the University of South Australia. These activities are also informed by a small *Green Social Work Practice Group*, established in 2018 and auspiced by the South Australian Branch of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). Regular reports about these activities are presented to the Branch and have been offered at a national social work conference in Adelaide (Walsh et al., 2019b).

In 2014, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) called upon

*social workers and their representative bodies to recognise the importance of the natural and built environment to the social environment, to develop environmental responsibility and care for the environment in social work practice and management today and for future generations. (IFSW, 2014).*

Within our local practice, *green eco-social work* is demonstrated and drawn from the available time and commitments of practitioners and students, without requiring extra funds; trialing new practice approaches not yet widely understood or supported.

Not all students and practitioners are interested in social and community work focusing on gardening, food security and resource recovery. We are however able to show that these social initiatives afford with additional environmental and economic benefits, and that these activities are gaining increasing community support, with new gardens being planned continually in South Australia.

Innovative community work is best attempted by students who have some degree of agency or choice over their placement. Voluntary and student-led social work extends the scope of practice that can be seen as a form of *commoning* and, as permaculture would suggest, drawing a *yield*.

I have supported environmental community work and activism in the past, but not recognized or claimed as social work, but which were clearly “ecological interventions” including protesting effluent going into the river, planting trees in local reserves, preparing submissions on environmental policies of State and local governments. The environmental work has been voluntary but inherently collaborative and social. Contracting and decision making would be undertaken with local resident groups and community leaders. However, my previous conception of social work was that it needed to be paid and sponsored and would not include environmental outcomes. From an eco-social work perspective, it is legitimate to seek good water quality in the local rivers and coastline. Humans need good quality water, as do the fish. The environmental eco social work draws upon a quite “open system” drawing upon specialized knowledge of other disciplines, along with lived experience of local people. The social work professional ethics should be moving into a direction of *eco-justice*, extending our traditional principles of *social justice* (Besthorn, 2013).

As green/eco/environmental social work started to be recognized by leading practitioners, researchers and educators, I began viewing my environmental involvements in the community as social work. The duality of voluntary environmental organizing versus paid (aged care) social work service became more evident when I supported two students to undertake some program development in a dementia day program, as part of my paid day job. Our *appreciative inquiry approach* led one student to restore a food garden in a dementia day-program, harnessing many natural and community assets, including

expertise amongst the gardeners with dementia, and nearby community garden leaders showing interest rarely received previously at the center. The student write-ups reported community work, program development practices but also referenced Green Social Work theory (Corso, Li & Walsh, 2017). To my surprise, starting to name and claim other environmental activities as social work has since been well received. Initially some community members cannot understand how the green (+) social work combination might work. However, I would witness others grasp the practice in context; the emergent theory visualized in the fertile soils, witnessed when introducing new gardeners, when planning educational activities, or sharing food and seedlings at the Produce Swaps. It is assuring also to read of similar conclusions in far off places.

*Today, gardens are ideal spaces for social work students interested in community practice to engage in service learning, community organizing, and sustainable development practices (Shepard, 2012, p. 133).*

## **“PERSON IN ENVIRONMENT” AND THE NEED TO ADJUST THE SOCIAL WORK PARADIGM**

Undertaking green/eco/environmental social work in new sites helps us expand horizons and impact for social workers. Humans have a need to connect to their natural environment, so, should we accept that challenge to connect with nature into all spheres of practice in some ways? Certainly, for Rambaree and her collaborators,

*Ecosocial work is social work, ... ecosocial work is not a specialty within social work, rather all social work can, and we argue should, be ecosocial work. (Rambaree, et al., 2019, p. 1)*

If we are all connected with and dependent on a troubled natural world, it is upon us to consider how to acknowledge/address this in all our public and private relationships and more particularly in prescribed social work roles; as Boetto, et al., (2018, pp. 46–57) affirm:

*...transformative change requires that conventional methods in social work practice are undertaken differently. This change involves a paradigmatic shift in orientation about the place of humans in the natural world from being human-centred (which prioritises human needs and wants) towards a transformative ecosocial approach (which understands Earth as a holistic entity) ... Rather than viewing humans as the centre of development in the world, humans represent just one part of a much larger, holistic, and interdependent system. At the core of this philosophical shift is understanding the interdependence between the natural environment and human wellbeing.*

New pathways may not be easy to consider where roles and protocols are long established, and service recipients and providers do not see many choices available. A core freedom and duty of professionals is to think clearly and critically and to be vigilant as to how we can positively engage in the lives of others. Our reflected intentions need to be negotiated with those we work with of course. Relational approaches foster mutuality, shared meanings, and rewards. Giving and receiving co-exist. Sharing a flower in a vase or a picture of a pet can make a difference if responding to a person in their environment. An eco-social work perspective recognizes that there is agency in the natural world where a tree has value. A

## **Responding to the Natural World**

*discharge plan* may involve being re-united with a companion cat, representing cross-species benefits, and where we also want what is best for the cat. I sometimes noticed that a meeting is saved when a window is opened for fresh air. And it always adds significance to reflect upon the living history of lands upon which we meet.

In seeking out the arenas for innovation and greatest application Matthies et al., (2019) identify five integrative practices for ecosocial work: *diversity of activities, successful networking, addressing new livelihood, focus on food and explicit conceptual work on sustainability*. Elsewhere, social workers are responding to disaster, crises and recovery (Dominelli, 2012) and we should expect more challenges as the climate changes which is likely in unpredictable ways. For example, bushfire and flood recovery efforts in Australia and elsewhere are continuous and any effort that helps prepare to mitigate or prevent future disasters is valid social work. Many policy and advocacy contributions are to be developed and implemented via our professional bodies, one step removed from the agencies and governments that employ, sponsor or fund social work services. The AASW for example supports the Climate and Health Alliance and industry endorsed *Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Wellbeing for Australia* (Horsburgh, N. et al., 2017).

This chapter has identified foundational sources of our alienation from nature and its consequences, a recognition of the human and planetary predicament, and recent efforts to incorporate nature into social work, I now move to an examination of the more discursive ways in which social work has been making sense of our place in the world and how we need to evolve that discourse.

The *Person in Environment* (PiE) lens has been a cornerstone concept for social work, especially from the 1970s onwards. The *dual focus* confirmed that humans always exist within a specific context and relationship to a wider world. *Ecological* concepts were adopted from the biological and social sciences to understand social connectivity, however initially omitting the most vital of relationships, our relationship with the physical natural world, not surprising given the *enlightenment* interpretations discussed in the first section of this chapter.

As an umbrella framework, PiE does encourage an examination of people's social context, the cultural, economic and political aspects of life, including values, customs, beliefs, social supports, structures of opportunity or exploitation, material wealth and poverty. The scope is broad, requiring additional frameworks to adequately understand needs or problems faced by individuals, communities, specific populations, whole nations or even globally. PiE was expressed in Germain's (1973) *ecological social work*, and described by Ungar as "only a short step from the psychological ecology formula, with which Kurt Lewin (1951) showed that  $B = f(P, E)$  - behavior is a function of persons in interaction with their environment" (Ungar, 2002).

More than a century ago, Flexner (1915) advised that social work could not be considered a "full" profession without a distinctive method adopted by all who shared the title. Whilst others accept that some branches of the profession rely on incommensurate worldviews that we shouldn't pretend to reconcile (Brady & Moxley, 2016), especially when adopting a *personal is political* standpoint. In any case, social work is a *connected* if not *hybrid* discipline, drawing ideas and supports that assist in addressing major social problems, driven by disparate and powerful historic forces, economic and political interest groups.

Social workers and the wider public may agree on some of the individual and social problems to be addressed including homelessness, unemployment, poverty, intergenerational conflicts, vulnerable children, abusive relationships, exploitation, patriarchy, racism, addictions, refugees of war and disasters, trauma, grief and loss, alienation, mental distress, however, perspectives diverge as to the primary causes of the problems, the goals that should be pursued and the methods to adopt. There are competing

accounts as to causes and remedies, with diverse values and competing or contested interests by the public, the sponsors and within the populations considered “targets” of “interventions”.

So, the question arises as to whether a reforming profession can seek to change or transform the world. The planetary crisis requires just such a response and leadership and collaboration within and between occupational groups able to comprehend the true challenges. So, what could the discipline of ecology and a generalist theory of systems offer a fractured profession, seeking to foster human dignity and social justice and needing a knowledge base firm enough to change the world?

## A WORLD OF SYSTEMS

Relationships are integral to social work and whilst many texts, commensurate with the individualist orientation in western culture, posit the need for a *person-centered* approach, the profession embraces *holism*. Holism has an ancient western heritage, from the time of Aristotle when it was thought that reality could not be readily observed but was inherent within and behind matter. The character of a person might be revealed in a picture by artist, a doctor would help healing from within (Merchant, 2018, pp. 228–9). The early gestalt psychology might be said to help us “see the forest as well as the trees” and understand that the “whole is more than the sum of the parts”. The “whole” has to be “more” once we accept that there are numerous intricate *relationships* between the “parts”. The whole is indeed something else if all the bits combine to be a living entity, with life (or spirit) being the most elusive variable.

*Earth* and the *cosmos* can be comprehended as systems of systems; a tree and a forest can each be understood as systems, one embedded within the other, with overlapping and exclusive features. For example, the tree being host to a nest of birds as well as a source of energy and shade for humans. Systems’ boundaries can be open or closed or they could be undergoing change but also have a tendency to reach and maintain equilibrium. Systems may be regulated from within or externally, they may attract or dissipate energy or information or other outputs, until a new equilibrium is reached. *Living systems*, from the single cell organism to the tree or a family of birds are considered to be *self-organizing*, having the potential for *autopoiesis*. Living systems prevent entropy and systems with complex interdependencies are not expected to reflect simplistic linear cause-and-effects.

Rapoport offers a “soft” definition of system as “a portion of the world that is perceived as a unit and that is able to maintain its ‘identity’ in spite of changes going on it”, which equally provides “a sort of generalization of a definition of an organism” (Rapoport, 1968, 1970, in Pouvreau, 2014, p. 200). The development and dissemination of the *General Systems Theory* is attributed to Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901–1972), an Austrian biologist who held academic positions in Europe and the United States after World War II. The theory/philosophy is also associated with *cybernetics* and is more recently referred to as *general systemology* (Pouvreau, 2014):

*With systems theory, Bertalanffy ‘deduced the possibility of a new multidisciplinary approach...which should lead to the ‘unity of science’ (François, 1999, p. 209).*

Bertalanffy left us with a great promise, his approach adapted and adopted worldwide by systems architects, engineers and project managers. Yet David Rousseau, Director of the Bertalanffy Center for the Study of Systems Science, reports that “systems science is still very young, and has no unifying general theory of systems”. He suggests that knowledge is here and in use, that we just need to “survey

## **Responding to the Natural World**

and classify the principles and methods currently in use in systemology” and to “map vocabularies” (Rousseau, 2018, p. 1).

It may be that systemology is not the breakthrough perspective to guide everything. Or that the knowledge of living, human and social sciences is truly too complex to be “systemically captured”. We are left with the axiom of the one Earth, but struggle to affirm knowledge or wisdom as to how to live with her. Yet after 70 years, the systems perspective is widely used as an umbrella approach, open to numerous disciplines seeking solutions of too complex problems, not least at the interface of social and ecological sciences.

Living systems are meant to be self-organizing, with the capacity to reproduce. It is evident that we cannot await the return to a simple social equilibrium, especially if it means losing almost all that is valued in the human and natural world to date. The Earth will endure but at what cost?

It appears that the most complex systems, comprising billions of self-organizing life forms (systems like us) are not controllable. Instead, at the “edge of chaos”, where change is most likely, we need to work with all living things. It is life that brings order, trees that perpetually extract energy, re-circulate water and air, organisms that can rebuild soil. Humans have lived in accord with the needs of soil and plants and other creatures before. Rather than own or control life, humans need to start with respect for all life, for the systems that are capable of self-organization, if we can truly learn how to be here.

## **AN EMERGING ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

*Like a stranger who has just blown into town, ecology seems a presence without a past (Worster, 1985, xiii)*

Systems thinkers perceive a hierarchy of systems: whilst all living things having a life of their own, whether as single cells, as animals, or as forests full of creatures. Some suggest the planet acts like a large self-regulating living system, referred to as “Gaia” by James Lovelock, after the ancient Greek goddess for Earth.

Lovelock played a vital role in the phasing-out hydrofluorocarbons when almost 200 countries “signed the world’s most successful environmental treaty, the Montreal Protocol...that saved the ozone layer, saved millions of lives, and avoided a global catastrophe” (Doniger, 2019). Earth as a self-correcting organism was not embraced when proposed 50 years ago, but it did not impede the Earth-saving intervention regarding the ozone layer and the earth did heal itself in that regard when poisons were reduced. Since then, numerous international organizations now identify *planetary health* as a goal for humans to embrace (Whitmee et al., 2015). The *Gaia Hypothesis* remains useful as system theorists and modelers evaluate scenarios regarding the earth’s carrying capacity, unstable equilibriums, and tipping points.

Climate scientists agree that humans have altered the living conditions for the entire planet, ecologists now seeing Earth, including all life and material here, as a single unit:

*The Earth System is defined as the integrated biophysical and socioeconomic processes and interactions (cycles) among the atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, biosphere, geosphere, and anthroposphere (human enterprise) in both spatial—from local to global—and temporal scales, which determine the environmental state of the planet within its current position in the universe. Thus, humans and their activities are fully part of the Earth System, interacting with other components (Rockström, 2009, p. 2).*

If reason and science are to guide us, we need to distinguish between knowledge designed to elucidate and free us, versus that which is used to control, what Worster refers to as “arcadian” vs “imperialist” sciences. Ecology is not a new discovery, and needs to be considered critically

*as a struggle between rival views of the relationship between humans and nature: one view devoted to the discovery of intrinsic value and its preservation, the other to an instrumentalised world and its exploitation (Worster, 1985, xi)*

## **A MODEL FOR LIFE**

Mathematics and physics offered logic and laws less evident in the bio and social sciences and the values that govern people and societies. Disciplines wedded to ethical principles and social values have long been sites of contestation, requiring commitment to normative theories. Social work grew out of concerns for people in need, in societies with complex sets of duties and entitlements. The quest to define and deliver sets of rights has been unending, yet hunger, enslavement, poverty, homelessness, statelessness, exclusion, preventable diseases and violence remain seemingly intractable. Now adding the unequal impacts of climate change, the existing ‘wicked’ problems are just becoming more wicked.

Systems theories have integrated ecological and social work disciplines, each seeking a more reliable framework to build knowledge and guide practice; benefits and limitations of this approach are described by Närhi & Matthies (2016, p.3):

*...the systems theoretical perspective (the ecosystems approach) highlights the significance of the social environment as a key framework for human growth and wellbeing, as well as emphasising the holistic and systemic thinking in the interventions of social work...*

*Systems theory was influential in social work particularly in the 1970s. In addition to providing a conceptual framework, it was then understood as a symbol of the unification of social work, which was supposed to strengthen the profession’s authority ... The systems theoretical perspective has been criticised in ecosocial debates because it has been seen to ignore the broad living environment and nature as parts of its theory and activity.*

The *Life Model* developed by Gitterman & Germain (1976, p.602–5) sought an *ecological perspective* where,

*...human beings are conceived as evolving and adapting through transactions with all elements of their environments. In these adaptive processes the human being and the environment reciprocally shape each other... This area of help is concerned with adaptive issues arising from the nature of the social and physical environments.*

*The social environment, which man (sic) has created and to which he must then adapt, includes institutions, organizations and social networks. The physical environment includes both natural and man-made structures and objects, and time and space.*

## **Responding to the Natural World**

Though, such concerns for natural *structures and objects* did not lead social workers to value and incorporate the *natural world* in their considerations. The quest for an integrated generic model was attractive to social workers to contribute to interdisciplinary collaborative strategies, but also in the hope of resolving incommensurate approaches within social work during the 1970s and 80s. The person-environment connection seemed to offer a comprehensive common framework/strategy amidst competing groups with differing ideological commitments and preferred modalities as the following excerpt demonstrates:

*...a model of practice that attempts to integrate two historic social work positions: emphasis on knowledge and skill to effect change in persons, and emphasis on knowledge and skill to effect change in environments. An ecological/reciprocal perspective not only integrates these positions but the methodological specializations of casework, group work, and community organization as well. Through an ecological theoretical perspective and a reciprocal conception of social work function, people and their environments receive simultaneous professional attention (Gitterman & Germain, 1976, p. 601)*

The model did permit an examination of the structural “determinants” of social problems, but little more, and the limited regard for the natural world failed to highlight the serious impacts on nature being then felt in North America, a land where wilderness is revered, but where wars were fought over who “owned” the lands. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck reveals how the colonizing settlers would end up as economic and environmental refugees. This followed the Great Depression and showed how the Oklahoma dust bowl was destroyed by a cultural and economic model which was foreign to those lands and its earlier inhabitants and stewards.

## **THE PERSON IN ECOSPHERE**

Social work grew in the developed world amidst 19th century cities and after a conquering science and exploitative extractive economy were well underway. The social work perspective has been restricted by modern and even postmodern views of *the environment* as a humans-only world, capturing the social context or perhaps the subjective perception of that “environment” (Boetto, 2017; Jones, 2010).

*If social work is to find a place in the environmental movement, its expanded person-in-environment perspective must find a way to overcome its embeddedness in modern, individualistic and anthropocentric thinking (Gray & Coates, 2012, p. 240)*

Whilst *environment* has clear meanings in other fields of practice, as social workers, we could just as well consider PiE as *Person in Ecosphere*, ensuring that our scope for interventions and evaluations extends beyond the human world. The notion of (social) environment afforded a wider view than that used by those only looking for physiological or psychological “inner” traits to explain “issues” they were expected to deal with in their professional practice.

The concept of ecology has been explicitly borrowed from the biological and natural sciences:

*...ecology derives from the Greek word oikos which literally means home or household – and was first used by a German natural philosopher, Ernst Haeckel, to describe ‘the scientific study of the relation-*



*ships among organisms and between them and their environments' (Curry, 2006, p. 4, cited in Gray & Coates, 2012, p. 240)*

Humans' dependence on a complex biosphere is confirmed yet also "denied", with every occurring crisis of supply of food and water and energy and soil and finally, the quality of air. It is evident that other life on earth is increasingly impacted by human societies, such that the composition and temperature of oceans and atmosphere have been altered in ways not seen since the humans emerged on Earth. Indeed, they are being transformed at a pace not seen since the last *mass extinction* over 60 million years ago, when a massive meteor is thought to have crashed into the Gulf of Mexico (Greshko, 2019). As we enter the 6th mass extinction (Washington, 2019), we now *know* we are having an impact greater than any previous species ever had. Now it is only humans that could possibly avert further extinctions and only if new relationships can be forged between humans, us and the rest of life on Earth, the new "other". We have created our own era, foreshortened the Holocene and imposed the Anthropocene on ourselves and on Earth (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000), which, in effect has been colonized completely.

This human *dependence* is inherent in our relationship with Earth and our wellbeing is linked completely to the "health" of an intricately connected natural environment and on how humans treat one another as human beings. The *interdependence* with all life on the planet necessitates that we respect the non-human world, a shared socio-ecological duty that affirms our humanness (humanity) and connectedness (sociability) and our ethical duty to revere and restore our damaged and damaging existing relationships to the natural world.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE OR ECO JUSTICE**

There is no merit in being born where greater wealth and opportunities exist. Recognizing our duties to the non-human world does not diminish duties amongst humans. With the best climate modelling, we do not know where the next drought, or flood, or fire, or pandemic, will have the greatest impact. We might all need help at some time. Fertile lands and resources need to be shared sustainably or restored as a shared endeavor. If current economic models, and the welfare states they necessitate, depend upon perpetual growth, then we need to find or invent alternatives.

Much hope is being placed upon Ecology, the science of relationality, as the remedy for the devastations of continuous growth, and the alienation of forests, of farms and gardens and habitat for human and non-human life. If we cannot peacefully transform, by, for example reducing global consumption and emissions, conserving and restoring vital ecosystems, then we will need to respond to more extreme weather, hotter and dryer climates, crop failures, rising seas, the displacement of the most vulnerable peoples, or worse. At best, vast resources will need to be directed to respond in the aftermath of unmanageable disasters, droughts, fires, hurricanes, floods and much of the world (developed or otherwise) already suffers from insufficient social protection.

*The (Asia & Pacific) region's extensive gains in economic growth in recent decades have not led to proportionate gains in the population's well-being. Many countries face high levels of inequality, both in outcomes and opportunities, which the pandemic has exacerbated. Poverty rates are stubbornly high in some countries and the pandemic risks reversing progress towards poverty reduction by almost a decade. (ESCAP, 2020, pp. iv-v)*

## **Responding to the Natural World**

There are good forces on earth and humans have found ways to confer rights that can be defended. A river has already been given legal standing in New Zealand (Tanasescu, 2017), whilst forests are constitutionally or legally recognized by several nations (Besthorn, 2013). European governments have been sanctioned for not protecting future generations and our First Nations advisors share with us:

*What we know is that the role of custodial species is to sustain creation, which is formed from complexity and connectedness (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020, p. 2).*

## **HUMANS ARE PART OF NATURE...AND SO SHOULD SOCIAL WORK**

A truly “re-contextualized” and connected ecological perspective for social work offers solutions to theory and practice akin to the scientific revolutions described by Thomas Kuhn (1962). The new paradigm simply sees humans *living within and as part of* a natural world, rather than separate to or above that world. This distinction is a social correlate of the Copernican scientific revolution of the late-middle ages and the early elements of the emerging “modern” times, when it was shown that Earth was not the center of the universe, but merely a planet itself revolving around a sun.

Until recently, “environment” was considered a *sociological* concept, a “context” with little reference to the natural world, a human “construct” barely existing without a human observer. Like fish in a bowl do not “see” the water, we sometimes cannot sense nature because we are *in* it. As it is *in* us.

Ecosocial work can offer a new foundation, based on the knowledge of our “relational being” (Gergen, 2009), of connectedness and interdependence, still so elusive in the social sciences. In fact, social work is well-suited to develop and employ strategies valuing a diversity of actors and the knowledges they bring. Our duty to care for nature is embedded in our care for each other and the universal need to nurture and be nurtured.

If social workers are to truly seek social and ecological just lives, the scope for intervention has been broadened and extended enormously, as well as the need to build new skills and relationships to work with diverse disciplines and communities, across and beyond our own species.

The eco-philosopher earth lawyer and theologian, Thomas Berry, suggests it actually “takes a universe to make a child” (Berry, cited by Cashford in Burdon, 2011, p. 10) and it is the Universe with which we should form a Covenant.

*The planet Earth is a single community bound together with interdependent relationships. No living being nourishes itself. Each component of the Earth community is immediately or mediately dependent on every other member of the community for the nourishment and assistance it needs for its own survival (Thomas Berry, 10 Principles of Jurisprudence, cited by Cashford, 2011, p. 9).*

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# Chapter 4

## Eco–Disasters: Social Work Space and Place

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter seeks to encourage social workers to review their often (enforced) siloed roles in relation to communities of place and to develop stronger senses about the relationships and networks in places where those they serve actually live. The author offers a picture of force fields, system tensions which shape organizational and community life in particular ways, ways which diminish community life, and those who seek to serve community, and she provides examples from her practice experience in pre and post disaster environments. Where social workers can contribute to strengthening community networks, this will contribute to a quality of life for those they serve and then strengthen the capability of community responsiveness to a disaster. Seeing, valuing, and using these links may allow social workers to make subtle but important contributions to the field of emergency management.*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I interrogate mainstream social work paradoxes in which *community* is heralded as central in Emergency Management policies, but whose centrality, on closer examination, evaporates. I shift the focus to the *prevention* and *preparedness* end of the Emergency Management continuum, and claim that the central question requiring attention is the capability of a community be able to think and act together collectively, thereby assisting to place community as a more tangible *figure* in the *figure/ground* picture.

*Community* also figures as a central piece in social work, though the reality is that in the main, services are more individually and family-focused, siloed, and often given inadequate attention to matters of “relational place”. I argue that social workers can use their practice base, however narrowly that may be defined for them, to look more closely at the context in which those they serve live, look at what constitutes that *place* in terms of environment, including relationships, networks, groups and organizations, that is, those bodies which create the capacity for community care and provide the building blocks

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which materialize community capacity to speak collectively. I suggest these community capabilities can be strengthened by social work's generative presence and support.

## BOXER'S COMPASS MODEL

### Introduction

In seeking to highlight how our societal and work systems' tensions confound the *community led* and *shared responsibility* ideas central in emergency management policy, I adapt Boxer's (2004) compass model, which he shaped as two axes, a north-south axis, and an (intersecting) east-west axis. I have broadly labeled the tensions within the north-south axis as *performative*, and the tensions across the east-west axis, as *relational*.

The north-south axis represents the key overt policy axis, such as the administrative arm of societal operations including government, together with the cultural contexts, which drive an understanding of how certain policies are operationalized. Along the east-west axis, are found those elements of both civil society—the community in its manifestations, as well as the smaller scale programs and projects which are funded and implemented to seek to impact on the targeted aspect of community life (e.g. community safety). These axes constitute *force fields*. The key *performative* force field keeping the north-south orientation in place, is made up of the myriad of governmental and societal pressures infused by neoliberal policies, together with the mechanisms for checking the agreements that what is proposed will be done. The east-west force field (the *relational* axis) is of an essentially different nature: it comprises the individuals, programs, community groups, seeking to work together, essentially through personal and work relationships, to achieve the ends shaped in the north-south axis. These two axes reflect fundamentally different approaches to thinking about the business of government in public sector programs.

Next I outline the main descriptors of the compass.

### North

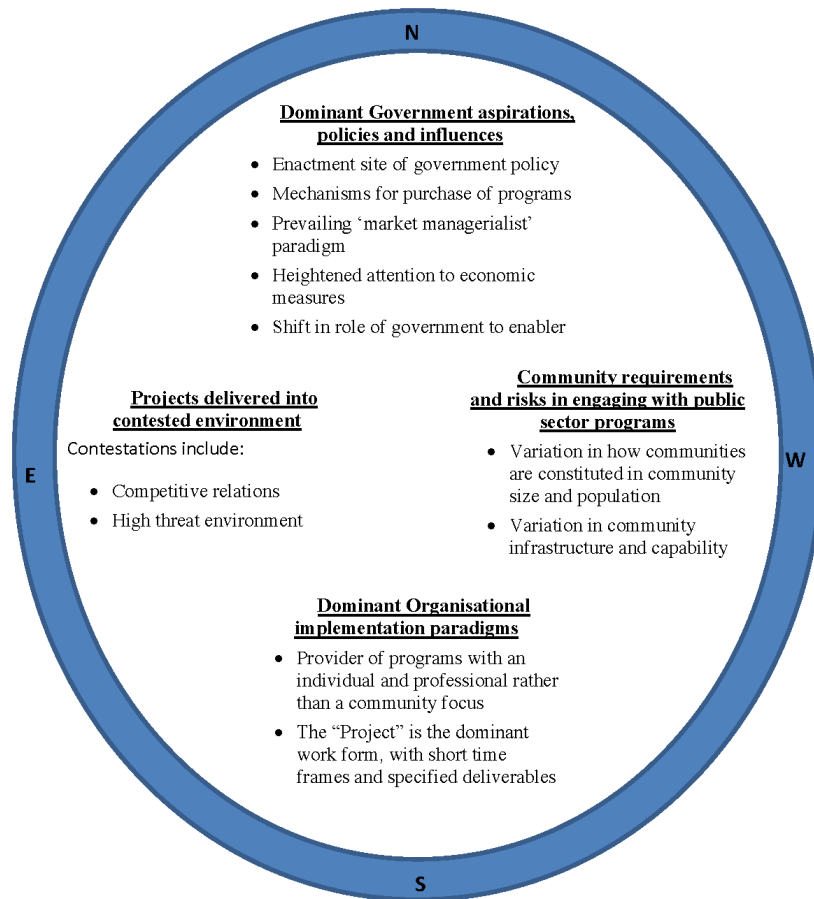
The market ideology has incrementally, but also fundamentally, infused us with its dominant modus operandi, which I have named *performativity*.<sup>1</sup> Alongside the distortions of market mechanisms is what Stone (1988) calls the *rationality project*. Here, weight is selectively given to phenomena such as the valorizing of *evidence-based policy*, the dominant, authoritative rational choice model which emphasizes a sequenced, objectively definable and agreed upon policy process, and constituted by causally related elements, often with overt or covert economic ends as measures. This is not the realm for subjectivity and moral arguments.

### South

Within the market model, time frames are shortened, *value* is formulated in particular ways (a greater emphasis on outcome than process), choices are made around what programs are to be created and supported. Ideas of public good are diminished, with economic measures narrowing perspectives.

This axis and its associated drivers, in programmatic terms, keeps the pressure on the individual. The individual is a consumer (of goods, of services)<sup>2</sup> and in social work terms, there is a pressure to maintain

Figure 1. Contradictory tensions: public sector governance and communities



a focus on client-oriented (individualized) service delivery. A culture of coercion (and compliance) is required to maintain this axis.

## East

In the often-toxic mix of the coercion required to keep the north-south axis in place, people come together along the east-west axis, seeking to connect with each other and try and make good. We bring with us what we think makes up our identities, our professional and other values, and our needs.

While ostensibly a relational axis, Emergency Management in general necessitates a command and control culture, where the hierarchies need to be vertical and strong. Often programs along this axis are both in competition with one another, while seeking to be relational. Tensions along this axis are palpable, with frequent reference to the speed of disaster programs ("short term quick fix solutions") and the failure to surface long term vulnerabilities, both factors which give rise to "peripheral blindness" (Walker and Westley, 2011, p. 2).

There is a sense now that we are living in a permanent crisis. The centrality of family life within a *community* context (and its associated healing properties), a feature more pronounced in policies in

Victoria in the 1970s and early-1980s, has become submerged into more rigid amalgamated systems, a decrease in the number of small place-based organizations (Lynch, Forde & Lathouras, 2020), significant cuts in the community services sector<sup>3</sup>, in cultural contexts of decreasing transparency<sup>4</sup>, decreasing presence of investigative journalism, a closing down of regional and local presses. Volunteer commitment to the emergency services is stretched and becoming unsustainable given the increase in extreme weather events. The parameters of the disaster of the current global (Covid-19) pandemic are yet to form.

## **West**

The person's *context of use* cannot be a focus of the north-south axis, which by definition, has to apply an intellectual filter, as Scott (1998) so convincingly argues, to reduce complexity to manageable dimensions. While the forces driving climate change and destruction of our natural environment are in large part produced in the tensions of the north-south axis (for example the market economy's need for high production environments and our associated consumption patterns), the impact on the ground across the east-west axis has been, in Pam Stavropoulos's words (2008), to "privatize, individualize and depoliticize issues and realms that are collective and shared" (p.241).

## **Summary**

As social workers, we work in systems which are dominated by the *rationality project*; coercive organizational climates inhibit speaking up; we are shaped (and we shape our services) to continue with our eye on the individual and we cannot afford to explore alternative systems of care which may mean losses of budget, our identity, and our self-worth. We can fail to share assumptions with one another, can tend to operate from our own (or the dominant) world view, collude with agreements which risk distorting relationships, and create illusory performance stories of our work in the effort to catch the next bit of passing funding. We often have to do these things to survive.

## **COMMUNITY: EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVES**

### **Community in Emergency Management Terms**

There are many references to the centrality of community in Emergency Management.<sup>5</sup> However the policy resources in terms of the preparedness phase have typically gone into instruments of community education, whereas supported informal community building and knowledge sharing efforts, a tenet of community development oriented programs, have seen a reduction in recent years.

Emergency Management, perhaps more so than any other sector, is replete with volunteers. These people are by definition, in the main, part of the community they live and volunteer in. This adds great richness to the domain, but also considerable fuzziness, a discomfort in the chain of command culture of the north-south axis. These volunteers are also part of the institutional arrangements in Emergency Management. So they are part of the community, but in a somewhat different sense than other community members.

## **Eco-Disasters**

In a small study (Sewell et al., 2009) of (fire service, largely volunteer) brigade members who lived in the area in which they volunteered, one volunteer research participant, (speaking of “we the volunteers” and “they’ the community) put it this way:

*We need them and they need us. To engage the support of the public/community, we must remain involved. Increased presence creates increased awareness; we still need to be seen/ remain high profile to remain meaningful and establish personal connections. I would love to just fight fires, but we need that involvement at a community level (p.31).*

Inherent in these words are nuanced references to diverse aspects of the volunteer role—the deliverer of community education programs expected of some brigade members, the fighting of fires, and the covert roles which would never form part of formal *reports*, or often even of recognition, but are part of the fabric of community life: the *presence*, such as the conversations in supermarket queues.

So while aspects of *community* are evident at the micro level, the *community is central* policy struggles to find expression in practice (Harms & Alston, 2018). These gaps need to be named. As noted by Taylor and Goodman (2015).

*With the plethora of policy references across different national and state documents, one might expect to see more tangible and operationalised examples of government public- community partnerships, of policy co-development, co-design, co-implementation and co-evaluation around “placed based”, “community led” and “community central” ideas (p.175).*

McLennan and Handmer (2012) noted that government can find ideas of *community-led* policies challenging, due to the need for government accountability for decision-making and spending. However I think the avoidance is deeper than that, avoidance which finds expression in the responsibility slippage subtly encountered where one sees the lists of matters *communities* must attend to in order to reduce the risks they face. Norman’s (2004) comment (which applies equally to preparedness as it does to recovery) is salient: “While consensus may not be possible, recovery cannot succeed if the aims, priorities and processes do not have community support” (p.40). I would extend Norman’s statement from “community support” to that of a “greater level of real community collaboration”.

While there is considerable literature on post-disaster event responses, there is little *critical* literature looking at institutional/community relations. What exists is typically from an institutional lens.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult for communities to create the conditions for themselves where they can be at the table and participating with authorities on a playing field, much less a level one, especially where there wasn’t a nucleus of collective experience prior to an event. This imbalance makes for great tension and distress across the east-west relational axis.

## **Community in Social Work and Emergency Management**

Social work has, by definition, a very broad base.

*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.*

*Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.*<sup>7</sup>

The above broad definition leaves open the role for social work in any one of the many phases of emergency management. Winkworth et al (2009) refer to three modes of intervention for social workers in emergency management, including preventive, protective and therapeutic, with the weight of the contribution having been in therapeutic intervention, most evident in the recovery phase (Chapter 6 of Alston et al., (2019), is an exception). The fabric of community life is sorely tested after a disaster, as has been well documented (Gordon & Wraith, 1993). In writing about disaster management in Australia, Rowlands (2013) states that she is writing about the *psychosocial aspects* of disaster *recovery*, which is the area she sees the social work contribution as most needed. Also, writing again about the recovery end of the spectrum, Steigenberger (2016) refers to the difficulties encountered particularly when it comes to coordination of human services in emergency management and critiques the insufficient attention to leadership roles in human services. What keeps the focus on recovery? One factor, I argue, is path dependence.

A desk top overview of web-based information showing the initial framing of the service system by Victorian Government at the end of the (East Coast) Australian 2019/2020 fires, revealed the following categorization:

- For Individuals and Families
- For Business, Farmers, and Organizations
- Help Your Community
- Factsheets and Updates
- Emergency Contacts
- About Us<sup>8</sup>

My critique is that, in the main, these service system elements focus not only largely on the post-event end of the spectrum, but also on individuals, rather than on the difficult work of assisting communities to build their own capabilities to act collectively. Path dependence, the idea simply being (from the perspective of program planning and implementation) that what has occurred in the past is what persists; it generally suggests an absence of learning from experience and has an inherent bias toward cautious decision-making. This path dependence is problematic. In continuing with certain (particularly individualized) service patterns, Raphael and Stevens (2007) speak of the risk of pathologizing normal distress, and of diverting resources to separate specialist trauma focused treatment services. In seeking to widen the lens, they put forward the case for a stronger integrated *public health* approach. Harms (2015), also seeking to widen the lens, emphasizes the need to attend to details regarding the nature of the post-traumatic *environment* (emphasis added) (p.158).

The *hazard paradigm* (Hilhorst, 2004), which can be thought about as the trajectory of *normal life... then hazard ... then return to normal life*, has as a backdrop what Rowlands (2013, p.24) refers to as the (core) service system operating in non-disaster periods. The idea of the core service system needs to be problematized. In many rural and regional areas, this *system* may be very skeletal. Community centers/ neighborhood houses in isolated areas can be paid small amounts to *be open* for weekly or fortnightly visits from officers from Government and other departments (e.g. departments responsible for income security, roads, health and human services). *Core* service system can be read as porous service system,

## **Eco-Disasters**

often siloed, with boundaries, which often do not align with citizens' place-based orientation. While the Department of Health and Human Services in Victoria is starting a conversation about place-based approaches, they cite set-up instruments as policy papers, learning forums, communities of practice, etc.<sup>9</sup> These are all very laudable instruments, but they could also be read as defensive "gearing-up" before one even begins to partner (with community). This immense imbalance in power relations inbuilt at the start is one of many matters social workers can question.

While the force field direction in Emergency Management is *toward community* in policy but *away from* community in practice, perhaps the force field in social work at one end encompasses the broad base of the IFSW definition cited above, but the other polarity is constituted by a narrower reality of where social work is evident in practice. Rowlands (2013, p.132) does refer to community development approaches within Emergency Management as including information dissemination, needs assessment, advocacy for needed recovery services and social planning post-disaster; however, these tasks have more of a *service* focus, though Rowlands does go on speaking of the importance of community members interacting and rebuilding social bonds. Once again, it would depend on how these activities were carried out as to the degree to which they were leading toward the likelihood of strengthening community-led structures and processes.

Howard et al (2019) argue for "the development of more diverse and inclusive local networks that have the capacity to address social isolation and support cooperative efforts in communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters". They continue: "This must become a core activity of services already working with those experiencing disadvantage and social isolation... Planning for safety during a disaster event and recovery post-disaster must be included in core social work practice." And, I would argue, in everyday community work toward community strengthening.

Community can be brushed over in multiple ways; Rob Gordon (2004), a psychologist whose contribution to (Victorian) Emergency Management, in particular in recovery, has extended over decades, states that

*Social relationships provide more than emotional support and comfort to individuals. People only function effectively when part of a functional social system. Emotion, cognition, attitudes, identity and other essential aspects of personal functioning are inherently social (Harré 1993)... **The informal social system is most important in this process but is often overwhelmed** (emphasis added) and people have to draw on their neighbourhood and the formal social systems of their community, often for the first time (p.12).*

Here, we have the hallmarks of a paradox: an informal system hidden from view, but not so hidden that it can't be noted as getting *overwhelmed*, and a *state*, the provider of human service interventions which have a sameness about them, including a more professional flavor. In going down this route, the path dependence constructs conditions in which community relations and networks are made further invisible, and often weakened in the process.

## 2009 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

### Introduction

This section draws on my experience during the Victorian 2009 bushfires.<sup>10</sup> In one of my roles during this period, I worked with a community member, Daryl Taylor, who while working as a Community Development officer for an NGO between June and August 2011, conducted an interactive research project. We co-authored the report of this research three years later, completing our first draft in 2014. The research sought views from three groups of individuals in the recovery period: Local Government, Community Recovery Committees and Community Service Organizations. I draw on data from this report alongside published perspectives of the Victorian Bushfire Rebuilding and Recovery Agency (VBRRA) and two Case Studies composed for study within the Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG, Case Study 123.1 & 123.2).

### VBRRA's Creation, and Emphasis on Community

The scale of the disaster was such that a new body, VBRRA, was established within the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, adopting the model of an Administrative Office, rather than a State Authority with enabling legislation. It reported directly to the Premier (VBRRA, 2011, p. 8).

The promotion of the idea of *community* was clearly uppermost in the minds of those who set up the Agency. While there are a few clues in the case study material as to what their mental map of community was, in the main, as in most endeavors where *community* is invoked as a *good thing*, the detail of how the community *idea* gets materialized remains blurred.

Ms. Nixon (Chief Commissioner of Police at the time) was offered the position to head up the new Authority, established on 10 February 2009 and given responsibility for the coordination of the recovery and rebuilding program. At the time of VBRRA's report to the Victorian Parliament in February 2010, VBRRA had 102 staff (37 fixed term, 52 secondees, 3 pro bono and 10 consultants/contractors) and 14 Department of Human Services (DHS) staff co-located with VBRRA but remaining DHS employees).<sup>11</sup>

The VBRRA Legacy Report (June 2011), under the heading: "A Community-Led Recovery", stated:

*With experience showing that community-led recovery delivers the best overall outcomes, one of the Authority's most important tasks was to engage the community in the recovery process. The Authority developed a comprehensive community engagement strategy to guide its work with bushfire-affected communities (p.13).*

The key elements of the strategy included large public meetings with communities, setting up Community Recovery Committees, employment of Community Engagement Coordinators and funding the employment of Community Development Officers within Local Councils. Case Study 123.1 notes that Ms. Nixon was keen to get an "unvarnished and accurate account of what people actually wanted"; that she encouraged communities to form new groups with as "little political and historical baggage as possible"; that she didn't want to rely on Councils or pre-existing interest groups, whose views, she was quoted as saying in the Case Study, may not be "particularly representative", which was seen as a factor which would hinder the healing process.

There is nothing modest or humble about these claims. They appear to exude a genuine belief that *they*, the VBRRA representatives, could do better than “simply relying on Councils or pre-existing interest groups” to gain “representative views”. The Legacy Report notes that the large public meetings were essential to the Authority, “establishing a good relationship with communities and understanding their immediate concerns”. While I do not mean to be disrespectful to the Authority’s good intentions, it’s hard to see these claims being realized, rendering their claims of inferred superiority concerning. It is highly possible that these meetings were critically important in relation to public support, affirming leadership, imbuing confidence, letting people know they were recognized; but to claim that they were about establishing *good relationships with communities*, seems unhelpful, self-aggrandizing and not actually achievable (in a true *relational* sense).

One task for the six statewide (VBRRA) Community Engagement Officers was to ensure community voices were heard within government. Again, no six people on a statewide basis can do that. The claim that the community-focused approach gave bushfire-affected communities a clear role in making choices and decisions about their futures (and that these approaches could restore a sense of empowerment and control) is excessive and harmful, given the inability to then meet these aspirations.

Taylor and Goodman (2015) noted that in the recovery environment, while Community Recovery Committees were accorded a status after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, they were typically newly formed and temporary structures, inadequately resourced, and given advisory status only. As one respondent noted: “Community self-organisation and spontaneous leadership benefits from supportive and empowering agencies and government departments – this was rarely the case” (p.206).

In addition to coordinating recovery and rebuilding efforts undertaken by other entities (Case Study 123.2), VBRRA took the lead on three particular projects: clean up, donations management and the construction of temporary villages.

There is little *critical* appraisal of the State response; VBRRA reports are often cited in articles about the aftermath of the fires (in the absence I think of other institutional responses), but what is typically quoted are rather embellished accounts.<sup>12</sup> Various parties have conducted rigorous research, but they seldom look at the machinery of government. In an area of newish policy, such as community-led initiatives in Emergency Management, being exposed to material which is so unproblematised feels oppressive to new readers, whilst it deepens a sense of cynicism about the *system* for more experienced readers. I offer below a *critical* case example of the tensions between institutional and community perspectives, citing differing perspectives on *clean up*.

### Clean Up

The Case Studies (123.1 & 123.2) claim that they “explore the challenge of working across governments and departments to meet the immediate and recovery needs of traumatized communities,” citing the example of VBRAA’s lead in the clean up process.

Case Study 123.1 does refer to the complexity of the task—that the task was reported as requiring “sensitivity and patience” and that the \$30-\$40 million-dollar (clean up) contract could put VBRRA at risk. Both case studies were short, excluding opportunity for recounting other important and relevant detail, such as pressure from some members of the public for a quick response, the genuine desire of those in government to act as promptly as possible, and the public safety issues seen to require operators with some degree of experience. However, somewhere between noting a few elements of the complexity, the second Case Study cheerily states: “The clean-up operation was so successful it finished months ahead



of schedule despite the fact that the task was much bigger than originally anticipated” (C 123.2, p 6). One of the tensions noted above in the north-south *performativity* axis is that one of the key functions of that axis is to have in place mechanisms to ensure that what was promised (a speedy clean up) was in fact what was done. Other considerations are occluded in this process.

Alston et al. (2018) conducted individual interviews with service providers and local residents on a range of matters in recovery, five years after February 2009. Some research participants reported in relation to block clearing, that

*this had the unfortunate outcome of barring people from their properties, making it difficult or impossible for people to comb through the remains of their homes for mementos, nor even to sit on their home sites and reflect on things lost. Local focus group participants noted that this added to the critical sense of loss and also cut across the community’s ability to self-organise and to be involved in their own healing processes of rebuilding and renewal... (p.410)<sup>13</sup>... Women in the focus group noted that the bureaucratic directive to locals to keep away from the clean-up particularly affected the motivation of male survivors and undermined their capacity to feel as if they were assisting to restore their community. As women in the focus group noted, “so many men just withdrew home... so many men were shut down” (p. 410).*

Alston et al. (2018) summarized participants’ responses to what they called the “bureaucratic response:<sup>14</sup>

*[It] challenged and alienated people adding to their profound sense of loss—of community, of place, and indeed of autonomy. A common response from community people in focus groups conducted five years after the event was that they were rendered “passive” in this immediate response process (p.411).*

One local research participant termed this period the “secondary injury” of the immediate response.

What concerns me is the erasure of a critical voice from the government narrative. Reading the case studies, the pressures on government are obvious, threatening and risky for the individuals playing roles in good faith, seeking to do their best for communities. But forces conspire so that they cannot hold this position and stay with the grey, the difficult, the *non cookie cutter* approach, much less report on it in a less-biased (image saving) way.

This is not a conscious conspiracy of government. Public servants are caught, as we all are, in a range of dysfunctional positions, relations and practices. But there is an obligation to take note of the inherent oppression in these dynamics and to interrogate claims about the centrality of *community* in Emergency Management (and other fields of government and NGO) policy and practice, and in doing so, looking for opportunities to assist in stemming this sort of narrative tidal flow which is endemic and imbalanced, misleading and harmful.

## The Conscious and Unconscious Exercise of Power

This section provides a brief overview of some of the conscious and unconscious strategies used by those in positions of power and which I have experienced in post-disaster work and that can render communities (individual members and groups) both less visible, less able to speak and act. I highlight four here.

- Pressures not to push back
- The State’s need for legibility, image management and speed

## Eco-Disasters

- Bullying
- Self-censoring

Firstly, pressures not to push back. One clear issue is that those impacted are often in what Klein (2007) calls a “collective state of shock, disorientation and regression” and that this frame of mind can be exploited by “top down initiatives” (p. 412). Words can’t be found for the stark imbalance on this playing field. How indeed could a collective voice emerge, where formal interventions separate people, especially while shocked and somewhat dependent, and likely experiencing some internal pressure to feel grateful for what was being done.<sup>15</sup> Interwoven with this pressure to not speak up, are the research findings Freudenberg (1993) draws attention to, that it wasn’t uncommon for “quarrelsome” community members to be labeled (after a disaster) as showing “ignorance and irrationality” by authorities (p.910). This constitutes another silencing force.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, there was a need for the State to provide legibility, ensure image management and be seen to be acting with speed. Taylor and Goodman (2015), using ideas drawn from the work of Scott (1998), noted that

*The deep failure in thinking lies in the mistaken assumption that thriving, successful and functional realities must necessarily be legible, or at least more legible to the all-seeing aerial view of the statist eye in the sky than to the local, embedded, ear to the ground. This imposed simplification, in service of legibility to the state’s eye, makes the rich reality brittle, and failure follows. The imagined improvements are not realised. The big mistake in this pattern of failure is projecting one’s subjective lack of comprehension onto the object one is looking at, labelling it irrationality (p.214).*

Within days of the (2009) disaster, the then Prime Minister announced that members of the public would be allocated a case manager within 24 hours. This caused immeasurable distress to both community members and those services, which were to be the service providers; in fielding community calls, the latter were not able to say that the time frame was unachievable and were therefore required to mislead the public. Image management of this sort (a key requirement in the north-south axis) is only one such driver of this harmful behavior.

Alston et al (2018) reported that, “survivors spoke of ‘bushfire brain’ and the need to take time to make decisions, to absorb the nature not only of their tangible losses but also the intangible qualities of loss—their loss of community, of place, of the taken-for-granted certainties of life” (p.406). They also interviewed service providers, who reported a sense of urgency in addressing the enormity of the fire impacts—of needing to get in and fix things quickly, of high-pressure decision making overriding pre-existing planning and established relationships. These sorts of experiences diminish the likelihood of genuine participation in planning for future shared responsibility efforts.

The State’s need for *legibility* leads to another strategy (conscious or not), the use of centralized systems with little capacity to *see, hear*, much less respond to, the variance in the local circumstances. As noted in Case Study 123.1, quoting a senior VBRRA official: “Local governments were overwhelmed and DHS was pretty stretched and having real trouble dealing with these emerging issues and *it really needed a strong central figure to crack through* (emphasis added)” (p 6). There is some consensus that not all Local Governments were in fact overwhelmed and the failure of decision makers to distinguish between the levels of assistance required led to a *one size fits all* approach. “Cracking through” came at a cost.<sup>17</sup>

A third strategy in use in the exercise of power is that of bullying. A culture of bullying was seen to permeate all levels of government, between sectors and across and between community groups. As one of the local government study participants noted (Taylor and Goodman, 2015), “When you talk to the State they say the Commonwealth always does the same thing... ‘power over’ politics... that bullying is sanctioned all the way to the top” (p.206). Inherent in bullying is disrespect. It was our view at the time of writing in 2015, that “the disrespect and disregard Local Government officers experienced in their roles, and accompanying loss of status, triggered by intergovernmental relations above them still reverberates today” (p.227).

The final mechanism of exertion of control raised here is perhaps the most insidious; it’s the self-censoring, which occurs in contexts where the climate is coercive, where prevailing forces minimize, marginalize or obscure in other ways those matters that cannot be spoken about. As noted in Taylor and Goodman (2015), some of the study participants confessed to a tendency to over-personalize and internalize their experiences, leaving them vulnerable to the consequences of disproportionate self-incrimination and self-blame. We saw these unacknowledged dynamics of stigma, self-blame and shame as endemic and worthy of serious attention.

The above are only some of the tensions disasters shape in particular ways. It is not hard to see why it is difficult to engage in learning and reflection, in challenging community and organizational environments, moving at a frantic pace, with an existing ideological certainty that hampers the emergence of collective community capacity and harms service systems.

## **WAYS AHEAD**

### **Linking to Already Available Knowledge**

Before I develop my final points, I cite three of the many fields, not for elaboration here, but one’s I would encourage social workers to give their attention to:

1. Creative service and community responses; further accounts are available in Taylor and Goodman, 2015; Urbis, 2010a; Webber and Jones, 2013. Sadly, little documentation of the extraordinary and creative responses some communities mustered while dealing with their devastation exists.
2. Family violence: the Gender and Disaster Pod has rich resources; <https://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/>
3. Conflict resolution: in Taylor and Goodman (2015) we made a call for assistance to communities with independent dispute resolution and restorative processes after disasters to assist all parties involved.

In the remaining section of the chapter I highlight two key ideas to encourage social workers to be open to modifying how they may perceive Emergency Management and the community level work their everyday practice can offer, as a contribution to this field.

- The idea of generalizable community resilience.
- Locating places and spaces for resistance and growth in community work.

## **Generalizable Community Resilience**

There is a voluminous literature on resilience, though I have to agree that the term is “somehow so conveniently vacant that it manages to be profound and profoundly hollow”.<sup>18</sup>

Magis (2010) (in Cavallo 2014) says that, “community resilience is ...the engagement of community resources by its members to face uncertainty, unpredictability, surprise and change” (p.47). Walker & Salt (2012) emphasize the general idea that we need to see the world as consisting of a large number of different systems—systems which combine in some obvious and some concealed ways. Self-organizing systems are seen to probe their boundaries and are subject to feedback loops which reinforce or alter their identities. This way of thinking emphasizes the need for us to recognize multiple interdependencies.

Cavallo and Ireland (2014) speak of “*instrumental* specific disaster preparedness” and “highly adaptive *generalizable* community resilience”. Very broadly, they critique the weight given to specific disaster preparedness, with its focus on a linear process involving identification of and assessment of individual risks, their likelihood and consequences. They argue that these processes cannot take into account the breadth of local differences, and the uncertainty of future disasters. They argue that risk reducing opportunities often come from factors which do not appear in disaster management plans. I am arguing here for more attention to aspects of community resilience to disaster, which are “generalizable”<sup>19</sup>, and take into account (and seek to enhance) the *general* community relationships, networks, organizations, and capabilities to mobilize. Taylor and Goodman (2015) observed (using rather mechanistic language!):

*It is much easier to bolt specific disaster preparedness on to a pre-existing generalizable resilient community, than it is to get any real ‘buy in’ for disaster preparedness action in a community with little pre-existing integrative capacity (p.234).*

It is this broader idea of generalizable community resilience to which social workers can make considerable and varied contributions.

Social workers from child and family welfare may see the parallels with these ideas in the work of Fabio Folgheraiter (2003), whose social work research and practice focuses directly on the social networks of those social workers work with. By making these connections, “social workers open up the possibility of releasing the energies and potential of networks within civil society to effect positive change” (p 1). He speaks of social workers fostering creativity in others—and really believing in the notion that “care” is truly a social relation (p.24) and advocates a very democratic, respectful basis for interaction, with deep belief in the centrality of the unique, situated experience of the people one is working with, whose knowledge of their own circumstances, networks and strengths is essential. I argue that serious attention to these matters will promote generalizable community resilience.

## **Places and Spaces for Resilience and Growth**

Given the self-evident merit of valuing existing situated community knowledge and strengths, the field of disaster preparedness provides a window for thinking and acting with greater clarity as to the barriers minimizing a community focus. I mention only three—which can be seen as both barriers and enablers.

- The discomfort of inquiry

- Strengthening the focus on ‘place’, highlighting four particular areas for further place focused social work
- Enhancing professional and peer-to-peer relations

## The Discomfort of Inquiry and Finding Spaces for Thinking

Firstly, the discomfort of resisting the status quo; in reviewing social work curricula on social justice advocacy, Cox et al (2020) noted how managerialist working environments silence the focus on inequality and poverty and can work against social work ethics. While social work students are taught approaches designed to challenge the current social order, there was limited evidence of environments in which groups are able to focus on social change through surfacing “oppressive discourses and injurious relationships”. (Cox et al, 2020, citing Melekis and Woodhouse, 2015, p 580).

Opportunities exist for social workers to keep an open ear for community level concerns. They can be attuned to and affirm them while providing a space to act as a sounding board and offer support to developing a community infrastructure to further their concerns. Given the prevalence of service systems silos in which social workers often operate, finding such spaces to engage in critical reflection is a key task in an already contested, confusing environment that triggers formal systems to exude an organizational persona or appearance of *professional knowing*. This “persona” itself serves as a defense against the reality of *not knowing* and against critical inquiry. How we continue to nourish ourselves in a critically reflexive way is a key issue in aspiring to regenerative social work practice.

## Approaches to Strengthening the Focus on Place

I make four suggestions for place-focused social work:

- Attending to how centralist policies play out in local areas
- Approaches to greater environmental awareness
- Being mindful of professional and local knowledge
- Looking for community networks and structures

## Attending to how Centralist Policies Play out in Local Areas

Some formal services see community members as *targets* for professional messages. This has been a trend in Emergency Management, where the educative focus, where it has existed, has been to target community members with specific messages typically about what is regarded as necessary knowledge in order to survive an emergency incident. As path dependence requires, follow-up evaluation in such systems focuses on whether the right messages were received and, where possible, some research around whether the delivered messages were acted on in an event. The underlying presumption is how the *agencies* need to get the *community* to wake-up, listen and act appropriately. Resource allocation into these top-down messaging programs often precludes more participatory, democratic approaches to community building and enhancing understanding. Adopting an inquiring approach to how centralist or regional policies play out in specific communities can bring greater sensitivity to, and awareness of, local detail (be that relational awareness, service concerns, matters of connectivity such as access to internet and mobile phone services).

## Approaches to Greater Environmental Awareness

What questions, inquiries or comments might social workers put forward in their daily work, to increase their *sensing* of the context in which people live? What are the descriptors of these communities? Are they located in some of the areas of inappropriate urban and urban-interface development, fragmented and under-resourced communities whose members live in increasingly vulnerable dormitory style settlements and face increased disaster risk as well as the risks associated with impoverished social, economic and ecological environments (Buxton et al, 2011)? What are the flow-on effects of the inequities and power imbalances constituting our social relations and the communities in which those who social workers serve live? We know disaster performs a sleight of hand—it briefly throws light on how critical inequities and power imbalances are, while at the same time serving to entrench them.

What is the sense of place people have about their environment? For some who are deeply connected to nature and hold a love of place, Oliver (2012) found that when this sense of self is shattered by disaster, this can be restored. As a social worker, she used her creative writing abilities and those of community members to assist people to reconnect with their sense of place and hence, their sense of self.

Coates (2003) argues that placing more emphasis on an ecological model for social work would “help bring about a transformation of society into one with a vision and mandate that recognizes that we are intimately and symbiotically connected with nature and all people” (p. 97). He states that the social purpose of such a model could be simply stated as “living well in place”. His perspective is firmly put: “Social work has the choice of continuing to support a self-defeating social order or recreating itself to work toward a just and sustainable society” (p. 159). There are many levels at which this work can be carried out—particularly relationally: with whom does social work partner to seek to expand the perspectives on how people are prevented from “living well”?

## Being Mindful of Professional and Local Knowledge(s)

In examining the transformative potential around sustainability, the Stockholm Resilience Centre (Sustainability Science for Biosphere Stewardship) recently reported that one key barrier has been the negative influence of western scientific knowledge, which has failed to give due attention to other knowledge systems such as Indigenous and local knowledge.<sup>20</sup> These knowledge systems are increasingly sought for their holistic understanding of social-ecological systems (Lam et al, 2020).

There are some strong ideas coming out of Australian rural and regional health literature around the benefits for an increased focus on “relational place” that social work could consider further. Farmer et al (2012) cite the work of Cummins et al (2007) who advocate a “relational” understanding of space and place. Their emphasis on the intersecting and multidirectional relationships between the various spheres and domains of community life provides opportunities for greater understanding of localities. Massey (2005) refers to “the event of place”, highlighting the “*throwntogetherness*” of place that unites a host of human and nonhuman features in time.

Shergold’s (2015) review of community services argued for a reorganization of services around geographic areas small enough to enable “the intimacy of relationship and depth of communication required” (p.42) between relevant services and community members. These place-based issues are best considered by communities and authorities in a non-disaster period for their capacity to throw light on critical relational and systemic strengths and gaps.

## Looking for Community Networks and Structures

If communities are to *share responsibility* with government for community safety, some form of collaboration with local entities is required to materialize that. McLennan and Handmer (2012) have contributed valuable work on elucidating what mechanisms exist for “shared responsibility”, noting that their work is around modeling responsibility between those “at risk” and those in authority, that is, on mechanisms in the emergency domain. The lens I use in this chapter is more local than the mechanisms McLennan and Handmer (2012) highlight, seeking to extend the domain of social work concern *outside* the hazard frame of reference, and finer grained in terms of (pre-existing) community and “primary sociality.”<sup>21</sup>

Writing *for* community groups (which makes her contribution unique and particularly valuable for this chapter) after the New Zealand earthquakes in 2010, Vallance (2011-2) spoke of the importance of community groups *self-organizing* in order to be seen or heard and to be in place with working relationships with formal bodies prior to disasters.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, those communities that had some coherence around a form or structure that could become an umbrella for community dialogue and action after the Victorian fires (e.g. Leadbeater, 2013) seemed able to find their voice and their feet and negotiate with government, while keeping their members engaged in democratic processes.

Vallance (2011-2) spoke of the time required after the earthquake for pre-existing groups to then establish “more enduring governance and financial structures, such as becoming an Incorporated Society or setting up their own charitable trusts” (p.22) in order to manage with their communities. For some, NGOs acted as both a funding repository and (loosely) “overseer” until some of the longer-term governance and accountability issues could be addressed. “Pre-existing community groups, including Residents’ Associations, Neighborhood Support, and a diverse range of garden clubs, drama societies and the like have proved useful in terms of information provision, labor, and general encouragement” (p.22).

These are critical links — the links between community infrastructure and the question of how a community sees itself and whether it wishes to, or can act in a self-organizing manner and hence, whether it is “visible” to others as an entity to be reckoned with.<sup>23</sup> Participants in the Taylor and Goodman study (2015) spoke of a vacuum in what we called an “authorizing environment” (following Moore, 1995) for community to take up their role, but also for the other service providers to know when they could act with authority. The absence of such authorizing environments for community groups was particularly stark, given the rhetoric of a community-led recovery. Some of these absences led O’Neill & Handmer (2012) to call for transformative change in governance approaches to allow community to collectively frame experiences and assess and engage in critical analysis, capabilities best considered before a disaster event.

It was our contention, and still is, that if communities can develop structures and processes enabling them to communicate with each other, and develop priorities, visions for their communities, understandings of where their vulnerabilities lie, these deliberations would at least form the basis for, or as we stated in the report, “set in train the necessary conditions for the development of ‘community-owned’ participatory and deliberative local leadership processes for both disaster preparedness and community resilience” (Taylor & Goodman, 2015, p.208).

The absence of community structures (in the eyes of formal authorities) leaves open the opportunity in post-disaster environments for roles to be taken over by professionals and bureaucrats, triggering what Wildman (2002) calls “structural theft”, theft of roles which communities would once have played themselves or shared among each other. One repercussion of such intended and unintended acts includes a deepening sense of learned helplessness.

As we saw in the 2009 Victorian fires, some local governments were stretched beyond measure by the vast impact of the fires and others were less so, but, according to our research (Taylor and Goodman, 2015), the State found it difficult to distinguish where its footprint could have been lighter. Some local governments had worked extensively and productively with local communities prior to the fires and their officers told of great harm being done to their community relationships through State intervention after the fires. Conversely, in the 2019/2020 fires, stories are circulating of a Local Government stepping in prematurely and anointing certain people to hold particular community recovery committee roles, without engaging in a wider community discussion. Another anecdotal account<sup>24</sup> is of a fire-impacted community where the Local Government is in a difficult negotiation with an NGO who is acting from a singular agency position rather than a collective basis. Some of these missteps, often taken in the heightened stress of the immediate post-event, can be reversed. Sometimes they leave an enduring negative legacy.

Social workers can be critical inquirers; they can use their lack of knowledge about emergency management in positive ways—using their curiosity to ask questions about how others see (in their mind’s eye) what particular phrases mean (*shared responsibility*, for example), both with authorities and community members; they can advocate for and encourage communities to tell their own stories about what is important to them. Boulet, (2018) quoting Pound<sup>25</sup>, uses the phrase “alongsidedness” as the desirable stance to take when learning about, seeking to engender, or directly supporting community-based initiatives. Every bit of local capacity and self-determination is to be valued. Social workers can remind each other of the opportunities embedded in their everyday practice, to share information and resources with people who do have capability to use any such resources in their own community roles.

### Enhancing Professional and Peer-To-Peer Relations

Some characteristics of professionalization have not served *community* well. As social workers in particular, we need to be especially mindful of how, in different guises, the pull of the *superior knowledge and skill* of the *professional*, can occlude the very essence of the capabilities of others, the antithesis of what we are seeking to recognize and support.

Probably the most vivid depiction of the polarities of professional and community comes in the form of the peer-to-peer developments, which began to grow in the fire-impacted area I worked in after the Victorian 2009 fires. While I offered my support locally and became a mentor in the program, I didn’t appreciate, as I do now 10 years later, two particular aspects of this: what pressures this group of organizers (including the single NGO who supported this development) must have gone through to organize in this way, and secondly, how I wish now that these sorts of programs could be developed enough to constitute roles as partners not only in the recovery process, but in other aspects of community life. Yes, there is a tension for government in needing to be accountable and be seen to be accountable for government decision-making and spending (McLennan & Handmer, 2012, p 19), but this can act as a defense against the anxiety of risking and allowing a community group to offer healing to its members, and against the risk of loss of esteem and professional role. We are a long way from the call by Coaffee & Clarke (2017), drawing on Surowiecki (2005), to recognize and use the wisdom of the public.

Finally, a note of aspiration to end on; Boyle et al (2010)<sup>26</sup> write about the transformative power of change when policy and services can be *co-produced* in an equal partnership, “delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbors” (p.28).



## CONCLUSION

I hope the reader has stayed with me as I shifted lens across a wide range of ideas, writing *into* the Emergency Management space, across its various areas from prevention to response and recovery, but trying to hold as a backdrop the community lens and not only a community as constituted after a disaster, but one seeking to be recognized and respected in its everyday life and work.

Of course, questions as to whether *community* as a collective concept does exist in reality have attracted attention for a long time; what we do know is that the field of disaster represents an area of growing interest (Buxton et al, 2011), creating the risk that the pull toward the more tangible hazard reduction will lead to a diminished focus on everyday life in communities. Meerow (2016) warns that “enacting resilience is a contested process in which diverse stakeholders are involved, and their motivations, power dynamics, and trade-offs play out across spatial and temporal scales” (p.46). Steigenberger (2016) notes that we have—at best—a very fragmented idea of how individuals and agencies responsible for disaster response activities arrive at a clear understanding of their roles.

I would say there is a paucity of real dialogue about what is achievable at the local level in terms of roles. A prior step is to heighten the focus on *community*, its capabilities, and its means to connect with its members. We know that a sense of belonging, bonds between individuals and external support, are all components enhancing a sense of community (Dinh & Pearson, 2015). The heralding of community can occur from a centralist, utilitarian perspective, which, if accepted uncritically, acts to silence and disempower. If social workers are listening closely to those they serve, they can assist in heightening awareness, cut through the rhetoric of community resilience and offer their support to communities, as they develop their capacities to find their own voice. Even small, respectful steps which seek to offer opportunities to link people more *locally* will represent a contribution to civil society and, in particular, to community safety.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> My use of the idea of ‘performativity’ follows Lyotard (1984) who speaks of it as a mode of legitimizing certain knowledge and types of relating. In our terms here, the particular mechanisms of the market state for example, legitimize segmentation, competitiveness, and measurement in economic terms.
- <sup>2</sup> Neocleous (2013) warns of the devolution of responsibility regarding crisis management (inter alia) to the local level by various authorities, which he says can create ‘neoliberal citizenship’: a requirement that individually, we should be able to be resilient.

## Eco-Disasters

- 3 37% of community service organisations reported a decrease in funding in 2018/2019: <https://www.acoss.org.au/the-profile-and-pulse-of-the-sector-findings-from-the-2019-australian-community-sector-survey/>
- 4 Australia's international ranking was 8th in 2010; in 2020 it was 13th. [https://www.transparency.org/cpi2019\\_](https://www.transparency.org/cpi2019_)
- 5 See Dibley et al., (2019) for further detail on the specific references to community principles in the various policies and plans.
- 6 McAllam et al., (2011) is one exception.
- 7 International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2014).
- 8 <https://www.vic.gov.au/bushfire-recovery-victoria>; accessed 17/1/2020 and 30/4/2020 showing minor modifications between these periods.
- 9 [https://www.vic.gov.au/framework-place-based-approaches/place\\_](https://www.vic.gov.au/framework-place-based-approaches/place_)
- 10 The 2009 Victorian bushfires were the worst in Australia's history, 173 people losing their lives and many others seriously injured. Across the State, 109 towns and 33 communities were devastated, over 4,600 properties destroyed or damaged and more than 430,000 hectares of land burnt. <http://static.placestories.com/pool/story/0010/0026305/lo/doc.pdf?1348704773>
- 11 <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/archive/council/SCFPA/DAPO/Transcripts/Presentation.pdf>
- 12 Kellett's 2019 PhD (currently embargoed) thesis, Experiences of anger following the Black Saturday bushfires: Implications for post-disaster service provision, will provide important critical material when available.
- 13 There was considerable scepticism from some community members about the VBRRRA claims that 69% of the work was undertaken by local contractors and that over 50% of the workforce was local.
- 14 The findings of Ritchie et al., (2013) are of interest here: that some of the post disaster processes (eg legal and claims issues) were considered worse than the disaster by research participants in that they were considered to be preventable. Tasone et al., (2012) refer to certain post disaster environments as 'traumatogenic'.
- 15 Long's (2018) contribution to the systems psychodynamics of this field expands lucidly on these matters, including forces which give rise to unrealizable policies created as defences against anxiety.
- 16 Clarke et al., (2006) call for greater consideration of emotion as a societal and political phenomenon rather than a purely psychological one.
- 17 Davis & Davidson (2018) refer to the messiness and ugliness of the dynamics of policy making, so plagued with internal dynamics and bureaucracy, to be an unreliable source of optimal solution for societal problems.
- 18 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/the-profound-emptiness-of-resilience.htm>.
- 19 This idea is held more obliquely in the work of Coren et al., (2011) who, when writing about health inequalities, put the view that social workers would be well served to address underlying threats to wellbeing, where there is no obvious risk to *immediate* harm but where wellbeing and quality of life is threatened. The threats posed in Boxer's (2004) compass model are manifest.
- 20 <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2020-05-05-why-we-need-a-more-inclusive-approach-to-transformation-research.html>.
- 21 See Goodman et al (2007) to elaborate on the notion of "primary sociality".
- 22 Caniglia and Trotman (2011) also highlight the importance of existing community structures.
- 23 Social workers would be familiar with the darker side of *place* as itself a vehicle for further marginalising, already excluded individuals and groups (see Rose, (1993) cited in Larter et al., 2019).

- <sup>24</sup> Personal communication with a key role holder.
- <sup>25</sup> 'A health visitors along sidedness' by Dr Robyn Pound, at <https://www.actionresearch.net/living/pound/robynpondcw.pdf>.
- <sup>26</sup> See Wildman's (2002) critiques of 'over-professionalisation' (p. 571- 581).
- <sup>27</sup> [https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/public\\_services\\_inside\\_out.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/public_services_inside_out.pdf).

## Chapter 5

# It's Like Felting: Reflections on Feminist Social and Community Practices

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This is a personal story describing the role and importance of local action whilst reflecting on collective and collaborative feminist community practices. The craft of felting is used as a metaphor for merging feminist social and community work theory and practices that encourage engagement with continuing cycles of activism aimed towards gender equality and Indigenous sovereignty. Following a rough chronology of engagement with movements for social change and respect for human and environmental rights, this chapter points to the value of post modernists' treatise of doubt, tension, and uncertainty. It also contains a plea for a continuation of the modernist social work activism to decrease suffering and inequality. Narrating and evaluating the ideas and actions of real-time practice, the author will demonstrate how knowledge of place, process, and strength in work towards interpersonal peace and planetary survival was achieved.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Felt is a textile material that is produced by matting, condensing and pressing fibers together... Felt has special properties that allow it to be used for a wide variety of purposes. It is fire-retardant and self-extinguishing; it dampens vibration and absorbs sound; and it can hold large amounts of fluid without feeling wet (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felt>, accessed 13.07.2020).*

There are several types of felt and felting practices including needle felting, dry and wet thread and my favorite, felting onto other natural fibers, nuno felting. Felt is created from many materials and through a process of cross layering and agitation that literally knits the threads together. The felting process is organic, you get your hands wet rather than dirty, and it can be done individually or collectively. Ancient

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and contemporary at the same time, felt is one of the first forms of material used for shelter and clothing. Laying raw wool onto existing natural material such as cotton or silk, nuno felting builds a new fabric upon a pre-existing fabric. Additional threads of wool and silk can also be worked together, embroidered and shaped to create stronger more colorful and utilitarian fabric.

Looking back over forty years as a feminist social and community work practitioner, the metaphoric threads and materials in this *felt work* are represented by the mentors; formal and informal training; connections and involvements with community groups; engagement and dis-engagement with groups and communities; and a lived experience as a cis gendered woman raising two cis female born daughters as a sole parent. Growing up and mostly living and working on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin nations influenced my sense of belonging to this country. The processes and products of this working and living resemble the assembling of felt with layers upon layers of fiber being rubbed up against, into, over and under, each to create a giving, yet also resilient fabric that evokes a similar sensation of building and holding fabrics together.

Ever changing, growing, decomposing and recomposing, feminist community work practices involve local and contextual actors and events. But they also signal wider and perhaps even global movements, as is evident in the current #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements.

Using nuno felting as metaphor, the objectives of this paper are to build upon the base material of some Australian feminist social and community practices as outlined by Weeks, Hoatson and Dixon, (2003), Kenny (2011) and Ife (1997). Sharing examples of principles and practice, events and activities become the threads as do fibers, matted, patted, agitated into layers then brought together to become felted fabric and perhaps at times unified or solid(ish) practice.

Feminist community practice relies on engagement with the layers of women's experience. Sharing a personal and political perspective (Hinisch, 1969) on Australian feminist social and community practice in the inter-related fields of health, housing and violence against women, I describe how individual issues were shaped by and into collective practice concerns and shared troubles. These lived experiences also link to broader social action, which in Victoria, achieved some early state sanctioned legal reforms and feminist services. More recently the actions of women and allies led to *The Royal Commission into Family Violence* (2015) as struggles for gender justice and equality continue.

In discussing communities as the domain of practice I am referring to what Australian sociologist Dempsey (2002) exhorts as "the greater complexity of meanings for modern communities. Beyond but inclusive of geographic place, cultural and personal allegiance and identification and extending at times into the reality of 'virtual' communities". In the realm of community studies this includes a context of virtual communities Shoeh (2013), but as Hyde (2005) reminds us women's community practice and indeed women's diverse experiences of diverse communities is too rarely addressed in community studies. Notable exceptions to this in Australia are Kenny (2011) and Weeks et al., (2003) who center women's experiences.

## **Creating the Context: Laying it out**

I was raised as a Cis-gender<sup>1</sup> female on the lands of the Wurundjeri people in the beautiful temperate forests of the Dandenong ranges, 30 km from Melbourne. I did not learn of the people who belonged and cared for those lands until I was in my mid-teens. However, I did meet and go to school with Aboriginal people and I learnt to respect and value my curiosity, to know more about the land, its custodians, and all of us newcomers. The small school I attended had a Welsh school principal and included refugee

## ***It's Like Felting***

and migrant children from Finland, England, Hungary and Spain. I was a fifth generation Irish/Scottish Australian and I also grew up in a context of family violence and alcohol misuse. My mother was a courageous woman who found the strength to leave the family home with myself, aged ten, and two older siblings. The environment had become dangerous and my mother had independent paid work to support us. This significant experience had an impact on the development of my personal feminist social and community practice, as it meant I had both an interest and personal stake in understanding and addressing family violence and violence against women and children.

Due to the sudden death of my mother during my adolescence I found myself living between two families as I worked to complete a Bachelor of Arts and Social Work at La Trobe University. I was the first in the family to complete a university degree and this was in large part due to the assistance of the then Whitlam government's free tertiary education and income support.

La Trobe University aimed to engage local and diverse students and it had a very large and reputedly radical Sociology Department: I soaked it up. In particular its sociological research methods, training and the smart women lecturers, who merely by their presence, demonstrated that women could be academics, researchers, intellectual leaders and contributors. I had previously thought I would like to become a social worker and majoring in sociology confirmed to me that social work could be a way of putting some of that sociological theory and critique of inequalities in society into practice.

The social work degree at La Trobe at that time was relatively new and set up by several academics from the USA, but the community work and feminist teachers were considered radical and innovative, connected to social movements and their subjects included Australian materials. I completed an elective about women and social work with readings primarily from the UK, including Mayo (1977) and Wilson (1977). There were also guest speakers and information about the contemporary second wave of women's liberation in Australia including women's refuges, women in leadership, reproductive rights and women in the workforce. Publicly there were also strong women like Elizabeth Reid and Susan Ryan, the Minister for Women's Affairs and Education, who was often an outspoken member of the Labor cabinet. Simultaneously Renee Geyer was singing *It's a Man's World* and Helen Ready was still getting airplay for *I am Woman*.

The real connection and awakening that shaped all of my future work was a final year social work research for practice placement. It involved a study of the formation of a new community in a suburb near La Trobe University, the Mill Park Project. This led me to meet a group of women activists working in women's refuges and public housing, a women's housing sub-group and Shelter Victoria. With the encouragement of my fieldwork supervisor, who had been a student at an early innovative community development project called *The Family Centre Project* (Gilley, 1990), I wrote a short article for the shelter publication called *Home Ownership Dream or Nightmare*. The article described the economic trap low-income people had been caught up in as they borrowed bridging finance to purchase houses in the new housing estate of Mill Park.

During the early 1980s *community* was being celebrated and Neighborhood Houses were being established across Victoria. They acted as learning centers with pathways into formal education for many women. Community childcare and family day care were also providing acceptable and accessible ways for women with young children and babies to return to study and work, and in the process were also building communities amongst women. Later, in the mid 1990s, I personally met a group of other mothers through my children's childcare center and school and we enjoyed a book group and created informal networks of shared care of our children.

In my experience the decades of 1970s–1990s was a very active and connected time in the women's movement in Victoria and Australia. To give some context, there were strong links across housing, health, unions, women in parliament, women in government bureaucracy and in creating alternative community services for women and lower-income groups (Orr, 1994). Women's consciousness-raising groups had sprung up in the late 1960s–1970s across the inner city, suburbs and in some regional country centers. Activism around violence against women was strong and very public with regular media attention detailing squatting, marches, protests and feature articles calling for law and systems reforms. The *Herstory of the Women's Halfway House* and *War on Rape* (Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective, 1975, 1977, 2014) are key publications written about and by women active in health, housing and the violence against women initiatives in Victoria.

My first paid social work job was in a community-controlled Community Health Service in Doveton, an area of public housing built to house workers for local car making and tinned food factories, 25 km outside of Melbourne. Within a well-supervised social work framework, this agency introduced me to providing a generic client-driven casework, group work and community work practice. The *Time Out for Women* group grew from a caseload of working with young sole mothers and unemployed women. Co-workers and students from a local youth project also supported the group and together we grew a feminist group work practice. As a team, the social work staff at the community health center also facilitated tenants' groups and worked with a group of local older women to establish a drop-in center with facilitated outreach education classes as part of the Dandenong Tertiary and Further Education centre. The drop-in center offered supported childcare and there was a low-income food co-operative. During these two years, as a fresh social worker, I was reading the fortnightly/monthly Women's Liberation Newsletter and visiting city-based feminist and international bookshops.

## **Emerging Feminist Practice: Wetting it Down**

We did not have an actual textbook or map; but the formal written material that influenced my thinking included Summers *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975), Hargraves, *Women and Work* in Mercer (1977), Richards *Having Families* (1978) and from the USA, Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1977). We grew our group work practice through respectful discussion between all the group members. Guided by popular slogans of the day, “the personal is political”, the “individual is collective” and the “private is public”, we aimed to literally “start where the women were at”. For the *Time out for Women* group we had a room, some paid and supported childcare, access to refreshments and a regular meeting time. Facilitated discussions created a plan of what the group members would like to do during the three hours a week set aside for the meetings. The group was open to women between the ages of 15–20, with or without children and looking for work or further study.

We were clear that our role was as facilitators, not counselors or advisors, but with access to some resources such as transport and information. The first 12-week plan included guest speakers on agreed-on topics and outings. Clearly one of the key draw cards to participants was the opportunity to access free supported childcare. Topics ranged from the need for information about issues of daily survival and self care to crafts and arts. Networks of friendship and support grew for many of the women who attended. Several attended broader women's movement events such as the International Women's Day March and a second series of 12-week meetings was initiated. This was experiential learning and active reflective practice and I discussed the groups, the issues facing participants and what resourcing could be offered with both my co-facilitators and social worker supervisor.

## ***It's Like Felting***

My work in this area of community health taught me about the challenges of public housing particularly related to family violence, the power of the grass roots movements, the unions and politicians to assist in bringing these issues to public and political notice.

Following this I was fortunate to spend several years working and living in London. I met up with a working-class women's group, joined a housing co-operative that had been started after squatting in disused tenants' houses owned, but abandoned, by the Education Department in Kennington in the South of London. Later I worked at the socialist Borough of Islington where I was employed by the Housing Department to work with housing estate tenants' groups. This workplace had an active union and we supported the miners' strike of 1983–1984. Working alongside women who identified primarily as black, lesbian and working-class feminists I built an understanding of what solidarity across divides could be.

On return from London I took on a policy and research job with the Health Issues Centre. I brought a strong gender lens to the work of the organization. I facilitated a meeting of women from Women in Contraception and Health, a Nurses Action Group (Signal), the Royal Women's Hospital (RWH), the Health Promotion Unit of the Health Department, the Community Health Association, and Springvale Neighborhood House, to develop a paper for the 2nd National Women's Health Conference (Acuna, Ednie, McCarthy, McClure, McGowen, O'Brien, Orr, Seedsman & Wiesel 1985). We immersed ourselves and shaped our presentation around the book of Doyal and Pennell (1984) *The Political Economy of Health*.

During the next year I participated in a Victorian Government statewide consultation to draft a women's health policy, which also led to the establishment of several Women's Health Services and Centers Against Sexual Violence. A loose knit women's leadership group facilitated community participation in forums in central Melbourne. We brought together a wide diversity of women who provided written and verbal feedback about the proposed services and women's health policies.

## **Women's Activism in the 1980-90s in Victoria: Agitating and Pre-Felt**

Around this time, my work was with a committee of key local services and community members to devise a consultation process and model for a sexual assault crisis care service in the Western Region of Melbourne. In collaboration with local women's groups and women service's providers, the committee devised a series of sub-regional information giving and gathering forums. Held in Kensington, Footscray and Melton, we also engaged with a group of social work students to assist with organizing the forums. The Kensington consultation was held in several languages to accommodate the diversity of the local population, in particular newly arrived women living on the public housing estate. This is a brief story of that project.

Following years of regional lobbying, a working group was established in Bendigo in 1983 for women's health and services to address sexual violence against women and children. A review of sexual assault services was also commissioned in 1986 (Hewitt, 1986). The Victorian Labor Government conducted community consultations to inform a statewide women's health plan during 1986–1987. These initiatives were a result of ground-up women's movement agitation supported by top-down women's activism in government departments. As Sawer notes, nationally the Status of Women Committee of the ALP had to retrospectively legitimate women's services and policy initiatives into the party platform (1990, p.164).

The overall review was funded by the Victorian Government and administered through the Victorian Health Commission in conjunction with the Rape Study Committee, which had been re-located to the Health Commission and out of the Office for Women's Affairs in the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

A key task of the review was to make recommendations about replacing the existing service at the Queen Victoria Hospital (QVH) and relocating it to a new location in outer South Eastern Suburbs at Monash.

The Victorian Labor government devised the review rather than being asked by the community to initiate it, but it did not take long for local women workers to engage and take an active interest in the project.

As the project officer to develop a service model for a sexual assault service in the western region of Melbourne my work was significantly influenced by feminist principles and community development.

The feminist principles included:

1. Listening and responding to women's experience of the world and in this project specifically responding to sexual violence.
2. Engaging a diversity of women in the discussion, design and delivery of services and policies aimed to create greater equity and to address sexual violence.
3. Using a community-driven process that would keep women informed of the progress and outcomes of the project.
4. Using a feminist lens to analyze the issue of sexual violence, thus naming the gendered nature and individual and collective impact of creating fear and using such power in diverse ways, not only in a narrow physical sense of rape and sexual assault.

The community practice principles included:

1. Engaging existing community workers and community leaders in the planning of consultation and decision-making forums.
2. Developing inclusive and transparent strategies to engage women living in the geographic communities as the primary stakeholders in the project.
3. Developing strategies to also engage key service providers such as the police, health, education, drug and alcohol, housing and local governments and legal services.
4. Providing interpreters and translating key documents and consultation messages to encourage active engagement by women from non-English speaking backgrounds.
5. Planning forums in suitable, accessible venues, providing transport, childcare and food to create an inclusive and friendly environment for all participants.

The consultations were held in three different venues across the Western region providing the opportunity for both geographic spread and diverse settings to encourage participation by the diversity of women living and working in the western region of Melbourne. We consulted with over 120 women including feminist activists living or working in the western region and many of these women went on to have long and productive relationships with what became WestCASA, (Western Region Centre Against Sexual Assault).

Similar discussions were held at each forum. Speakers presented an overview of the two existing models of service from each service, one from Women Against Rape in Geelong and the other from the Sexual Assault Service at the QVH. We also ensured there were discussions about longer-term change, law reform and challenging gender stereotyping and the option to suggest the services address such public advocacy issues.

## ***It's Like Felting***

The project was funded initially for 12 months. **Stage one** saw the project officer deliver a draft project outline following a literature review, visits and meetings with existing sexual assault services, committee members and other key stakeholders such as police, mental and physical health and education services, multicultural services, children's services and drug and alcohol service providers. **Stage two** involved circulating a detailed questionnaire to both inform service providers of the project and gather indicative data about incidence of sexual assaults that may not be reflected in police statistics alone.

**Stage three** saw the results of the survey and visits drafted into an indicative report with service model options. A group of social work students were engaged to assist with organizing the three community forums. Working with local women community workers they arranged accessible and friendly venues with childcare, transport and in one location the employment of several interpreters to share the forum information in community languages. The students also assisted in recording community feedback, which was later written up.

The final project report, with recommendations and costings, outlined a new model of service that became WestCASA. It was presented to the project advisory committee to refine and then submitted to the Rape Study Committee. Due to budget restraints, volunteers initially ran the 24-hour service and later funding was found for the service. The goodwill of local women, in recognizing the need for support and interest to develop local services, were critical assets harnessed in this work. Knowledge of local women's networks, student needs for learning opportunities and a ground-swell of the women's movement breaking the silence about sexual violence were additional values that enabled the achievement of a locally owned service.

## **Women's Voice and Experience were Harnessed**

The Western Region project demonstrated the power and confidence of a diverse range of women in the socio-economically disadvantaged west of Melbourne. The foundations of this service provided a unity and strength for the service to attract both government and non-government funding and committed, highly skilled staff.

Involving local community-based female workers was instrumental in successfully engaging a broad range of women and supportive men in what might now be termed the co-design of the WestCASA service model. Regular community advisory group meetings were held, and the group was expanded to include representatives from the outer areas of the region following the forums. That group gave continual updates via local networks and there was a transparent accountability to the Rape Study Committee and Health Commission as a higher authority. This became pivotal as the local hospital representative did not think there were enough resources or skills in the region to establish such a specialist service and would have advised the hospital to refuse to be involved if it were not for this higher accountability. An additional leverage was that a local businesswoman also provided additional philanthropic funding early in the life of the service that enabled the payment and up skilling of after-hours workers. The model of service agreed upon from the community forums included community education and legal advocacy elements, so that WestCASA was always envisaged as more than 24-hour crisis work.

The strengths of this project were that the three geographic areas within the region were willing to listen to each other's needs and to some extent compromise in order to prove that there was both a need and a community willingness to put in unpaid work and develop additional skills of workers already committed to working in the region. The model of service that was initially established and later refined at WestCASA was largely a result of what we now term *co-design for co-production*. Similar processes

in community practice often take on new names, and the feminist community practice described above can fit such a definition. “Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours” (Coote & Slay, 2010).

Three mentors influenced my feminist community research practice: David Green, an experienced bureaucrat and community organizer who worked at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Yolland Wadsworth, an experienced action researcher, and Wendy Weeks a feminist social work academic. They stretched my thinking and in particular reminded me that I was working with and for, the communities in the Western Region, and NOT the Department of Health. My accountability was clearly to facilitate community decision-making about a woman-centered model of service.

Staff in the Social Work Department at the QVH and at the Rape Crisis Service in Geelong both offered crisis care to survivors of sexual violence and received referrals from police and hospital staff, but they each had distinct frameworks. The practice of the QVH social workers was informed by the hospital-based model from the USA, which developed and used the *rape trauma syndrome* framework. The Geelong Rape Crisis Service worked with a radical feminist framework, which was influenced by rape crisis services in the UK and similar Australian feminist collectives. I saw benefits in both approaches and advised the Western Region committee I was working with, that we should present both models during the consultation meetings, alongside the results of the rudimentary incidence survey and feedback we had compiled from local service providers. Local feminist groups and social and community workers were engaged via a survey with an invitation to give feedback and comments about the needs such a service might address and a further invitation into the planning space by attending the community forums. This was aimed at hearing, understanding and elevating women’s voices (Gilligan 1982).

At a similar time, the RWH was preparing to pick up the work of the QVH because of its relocation. A progressive gynecologist had convinced the RWH they needed a new model and an advisory committee of women’s health experts to support the new way of working. Both the gynecologist and the first coordinator did a study tour of services and attended a conference in the USA, and this informed the woman-centered feminist model of service that emerged at CASA House. I was poached into the first team of workers at CASA House, bringing with me knowledge of the local women’s networks and diverse models of service and approaches already operational in Victoria.

The feminist community practice, in which I was mentored and gleaned through years in housing and women’s health, contributed a voice that encouraged engagement with other newly forming CASAs, the refuges and the Women Against Rape collectives in Melbourne and Geelong, the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (now DVRC), women’s health services and women working in law reform and community legal support. The local geographic experience drafting the model for WestCASA supported me in talking to what were then described as separatist feminist and liberal feminist mainstream services, and to present the diverse models and craft a hybrid with the best of both, but this work also involved talking with politicians and policy makers. As well as this local networking, there was also a direct line of communication to higher authorities such as the statewide Rape Study Committee, at which high-ranking health, police and education officials sat beside service providers from both the QVH and Women Against Rape.

I later completed a Master’s thesis about the development of the feminist model of practice in the CASA’s. Research for that thesis included interviews with key activists and influencers but it was largely descriptive in retrospect. I had naively wanted women’s voices to speak for themselves, but that work would benefit from more analysis to interpret the narratives. The intellectual rigor and commitment of

## ***It's Like Felting***

my thesis supervisor, Wendy Weeks, prodded me to at least share some of the findings of the research in several chapters in books about women's services (Weeks 1994; Weeks & Quinn 2001). Around this time I also participated in a fund raising fashion parade at Footscray Town Hall in support of the Heather Osland campaign. A digital story *Frocks on the Docks* that elucidates the links between this action and the Maritime Workers Union of Australia strike in the 1990s is another story that deserves a full article in its own right.

Reflecting upon these practices now, I visualize them like nuno felting, bringing together the threads or vital links in feminist social work and community practice to build upon existing layers of community connections and networks. Between what is generically termed casework, community work, advocacy for feminist informed practice and services and community research, the links between them and the matting or patting together, create stronger fabric and lasting results.

Part of the women's social and political activism that influenced me during the 1980s–1990s was a very modernist project to reform legislation; to give women power over sexual, reproductive and health rights; and to develop new feminist services that would address individual or personal social and economic troubles. We aimed to create collective structural processes and practices, which would promote equality for all women. Continued interest and privileged learning in regional and remote areas of Australia with non-English mentors both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Orr, 2018) and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background women of varying ages and abilities have further grown my practice together with the experience of being a mother and stepmother of female children.

## **Context in the Wider Herstory of Social Work: Feeling the Felt**

Lived experience as a way of knowing has been a constant companion and is re-visited, re-accessed and seems to be continually evolving. In many ways I still carry the seeing and feeling of terror and uncertainty that was part of my childhood. But I also carry the courage and resilience to keep growing despite that. Whilst that experience and seeing was traumatic, it became non-defining because of the many ways of healing. Mostly verbal but also written, through song and through reflective practices, all undertaken both as a soloist and in alliance with teams of colleagues, with counsellors and supervisors, and with family and friends over many different contexts and years. Those processes and practices have built understanding and resilience, undone and re-built my sense of selfhood and confidence, but primarily spurred me to undertake re-search and find meaning and action to reduce gender based violence. Curiosity into my parents', siblings' and personal childhood stories led me to take an elective about the place of women in the private and public world when a student of social work. It gave me the courage and boldness to engage in community work with very stigmatized communities such as in Doveton, Archway and Finsbury Park and Alice Springs, and to feed my activism on women's health. This work inevitably dovetailed into or involved working to prevent and respond to violence against women, girls and children and lobbying for services because there were either none or those that were available were inadequate, inappropriate or gender and race blind.

Defining feminisms is an ongoing project as they are *isms* that are contextual, herstorical and intersectional. I continually attempted to reflect upon and to make sense of my own experience with divergent groups and to boldly define and link several forms of feminism in my Masters thesis about the development of feminist services against sexual assault in Victoria (Orr, 1997). Researched in the late 1980s and written over a number of childbearing years. I was fortunate enough to be supported to complete and submit that thesis by several diverse feminist mentors and friends.



Sarah Wendt notes that like the “eclecticism” of feminism, social work is something that is constantly changing (2016). Feminist theory includes a number of principles, foremost that *the personal is political* (Hinisch, 1969), *the individual is collective* (Freeman, 1972–73 who discusses issues with collective decision making structures), *nothing about us without us*, and *the private is public*. Other principles include respecting diversity amongst women, equalizing social relationships, and the aim to transform the social order (Dominelli, 2002; Chen 2017). Further work, to de-center androcentrism, to decolonize our beingness, and to promote First Nations teachings (Bennet et al., 2012; Mueller 2013; King 2014; Land 2017) for the ways out of the current messes and ways back into solidarity and community, are imperative to relevant social work.

Applying feminist theory in diverse settings involves education of co-workers, and advocacy on behalf of women both as individual clients, as collective groups of specific women and a gendered group. Acknowledgement of intersectionality, and the different needs of marginalized groups, underpins both feminist theory and critical approaches.

In general, feminism(s) and feminist social work practice aim to center the lived experiences of women giving them the subjective place and agency rather than the secondary place in the world in relation to men, a world “where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (de Beauvoir, 1952, p. 29). But feminism(s) also consider the intersections of power, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, faith and class (Crenshaw 1986). Prioritizing the marginalized over the privileged, the power dynamic in feminist social work counseling is directly challenged, and clients receive a stronger focus on their personal situation. For example, as part of the first team at CASA House we re-shaped social work practice and re-named positions as counselor-advocates to better describe, or perhaps even to prescribe, a new feminist social work role.

Like nuno felting, these ideas did not come out of nowhere. The first workers and coordinator at the RWH CASA House looked at the practice of services in the USA and both the rape crisis service at QVH and the work of Women Against Rape in Geelong and Melbourne. We discussed those models of practice and stepped through the legal and medical requirements required at the service, and then ourselves, and envisaged how it might feel to step into the shoes of a women experiencing the crisis of rape and sexual assault. We discussed what women might need and want and drew from the nursing, child protection, public housing advocacy, teaching, domestic violence switchboard and refuges, and rape crisis backgrounds of the team. An agreed feminist crisis practice approach included the provision of clear information, the offer to be physically present during forensic or other health examinations; discussion of legal and medical options and contacting significant others. The CASA model and associated approaches are explained in Gilmore (1994) and Orr (1997). Whilst the first team at CASA House had only two non-Anglo white background members, we quickly built an understanding of our limitations because of this and recruited for greater diversity and built alliances with diverse women’s services and groups. Questioning our Anglo binary lens and failures to engage formally with members of the LGBTQI communities about their rights and service needs was eventually, and thankfully, initiated by those who came later.

Existing models of care provided at the QVH and the Geelong Rape Crisis Service informed the early CASA feminist-counseling model at CASA House and WestCASA. That included the practice and theory informed *Rape Trauma Syndrome* (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974), the *Courage to Heal* (Bass & Davis, 1988) framework, and later Herman’s (1992) trauma informed recovery model. Due to organizational constraints and high demand, a limited model of ten counseling sessions was implemented at CASA House. However, many counselor advocates found creative ways to extend our counseling relationships

## ***It's Like Felting***

beyond this limit and ensure referral to further support for women if needed. It is instructive to unpack how a feminist service became captive to a neoliberal philosophy of rationing crisis support under the guise of not wanting to encourage *dependency*. But that again is a bigger story for another time and worthy of many perspectives and narratives.

## **Where are the Origins of Social Work in this Context?**

The feminist social and community work practice referenced here is primarily linked to and influenced by, the radical and socialist modernist first and second wave western women's movements and radical community work in Australia and the UK.

The first wave of work included the USA social worker Jane Addams with settlement houses, Hull House in Chicago in 1889 and Lyra Taylor's work from the 1940s–1960s in Australia. Taylor was a founding member of the Australian Association of Social Workers. In 1946 and from 1947–1952 she served as a member of the board of social studies, University of Melbourne. In addition, Miller credits Jocelyn Hyslop as defining a specific Australian Social Work.

*In Melbourne Jocelyn Hyslop did much more than inaugurate professional social work education she promoted social work ideas and values to the community at large. She held a consistent underlying set of beliefs about the work of the social worker as encompassing the individual and their situation in society (what social workers now refer to as "person in environment"). She was as interested in the causes of social dysfunction as in its remedies (2015, p.189).*

At the tail end of the second wave of the women's movement in Australia were the establishment of Family Violence Outreach services, Children's support services and No to Violence programs for perpetrators and male behavior change programs. A couple of decades later, under the Gillard Labor Government a National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022 was introduced. Several organizations and programs were associated with the plan, key amongst them Australia's National Research Organization for Women's Safety (ANROWS) with the overall aim to build the evidence-base about what works to reduce violence against women and children and *Our Watch* with a brief to prevent gender-based violence. Together with VicHealth these organizations developed a national primary prevention of violence against women framework called *Change the Story* (Our Watch, 2015).

Nationally and historically much work about violence against women focused on safety, crisis support, and the psychological impact and effects of violence. Liberal feminist therapeutic approaches such as the "battered woman syndrome" and "learned helplessness" (Walker 1977, Burgess & Holmstrom 1974), which featured during the 1970s and radical feminist structural analysis which called for legal reform (Brownmiller, 1977; Carter, Couchman, Windsor & Scutt, 1980; Allen, 1986) gave way to a deeper analysis and understanding of the impact of trauma, healing from family violence and sexual assault, and the need to address criminal justice and health and educational systems change (Bass & Davis 1987; Kelly 1988; Hopkins & McGregor 1991; Herman 1992 ; Laing 1992).

## **My “place” in this work**

Sharing this personal and political perspective, with practice examples, the aim is to provide some *herstory* context to Australian feminist community practice. The herstory of women’s activism is to create feminist service models that respond empathically and effectively to individual acts of sexual violence against women and girls, and to include advocacy to affect change to the legal, political and social impacts of such violence upon all women and girls. Feminist analysis and action sought to bring about broader social change, thus demonstrating a collective agency and connectedness of women that can be celebrated. Services are not perfect and the struggle to prevent sexual violence continues horizontally across political and cultural divides and vertically from grass roots to leaders at political and socio-economic levels. Women continue to support each other, and feminist social and community practice has played, and continues to hold, a significant part in transformative community practices. Sometimes I’ve thought “Ah well, I’ve done my bit it is time for the next generation of feminists”. Indeed the next generations are doing a mighty job. But the reality of feminist community practice is that you can never just leave—this field of practice is everywhere you go—it is a part of your critical consciousness, a part of your beingness that just doesn’t turn off. Conservative attacks on social programs in Australia during the 1990’s onward had a disproportionate and negative effect on women.

I worked another three-and-a-half years of co-design and co-production (Coote & Slay 2010; Boyle & Harris 2008; ALARAJ, 2013) and action research capacity development with over 60 community-based groups working to prevent family violence across Australia (Orr et. al., 2016; Orr, 2017). Drawing on the skills and knowledge of how to work alongside community groups and facilitate their use of action research evaluation, gained whilst working with the Stronger Families Learning Exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), the community practice mantra “one size does not fit all” and the disability mantra “nothing about us without us” were additional guides in my feminist action research practice.

## **My Underlying Philosophical and Theoretical Approaches in this Context**

Radical and socialist feminist theory, intersectionality, social and cultural determinants of health, political economy, critical race theory and critical reflective casework are the theoretical approaches that I have found useful for interpreting the large-scale impacts of gender based and structural violence. Much of early women-centered feminist social work focused attention on the psychological impacts and effects of violence against women resulting in theories of the *rape trauma syndrome* (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1974) and the *battered women syndrome* and *learned helplessness* (Walker, 1977). Later more nuanced feminist theories grew in the work of Base and Davis (1988), Kelly (1988) and Herman (1992).

Australian feminist models of services and policies against violence against women and children developed at the Education Centre Against Violence in NSW (Laing, 1992; Carmody, 1995; Costello, 2007) the QVH (Hewitt, 1986) and CASA House (Anderson & Dean, 1989; Gilmore, 1994; Orr, 1994). Therapeutic intervention is of course critical, but it has always had the potential to discourage the agency of those subjected to such violence to use their own skills in making sense of their lives and to connect their individual experience with the collective gender impact of such violence. Understanding the myriad of underlying factors relating to individuals, their relationships, their community, and the socio-economic and cultural processes that form the context of their lives and how these interact with one another are foundational elements of feminist therapeutic practices. With a view to changing attitudes and behavior

## ***It's Like Felting***

at a population level, primary prevention approaches consider socio-economic and cultural processes and gender drivers as the central factors contributing to violence. Importantly, there is also now greater recognition that some individuals and groups *are* at greater risk of interpersonal and structural violence. Whilst at a policy and program level therapeutic interventions have generally taken priority over law reform and primary prevention of violence in Victoria, following *The Royal Commission into Family Violence*, this is no longer the case.

Practice alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, in most of my social and community paid and unpaid work, has both challenged and enriched my feminist community practice. Specific First Nations' work includes four years at the Secretariat National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care (SNAICC), with the AIFS based strengthening families and communities' projects at La Perouse and Tasmania, and with Building Safe Communities for Women projects in all States and Territories.

A PhD on good practice in hospitals by Aboriginal Hospital Liaison Officers and Social Workers in hospitals across Victoria was guided by an Aboriginal reference group and informed by Indigenous research methodologies (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2012; Chilisa, 2012; Martin 2012; Smith 1999; Wilson 2008). From the community health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector my practice grew as I learnt through trial and error how respectful research requires relational accountability that promotes reciprocity, and respectful representation and the rights of the people participating in the research. I continue to learn from reflecting upon those projects and through deep listening to place.

In keeping with the success of the global women's movement in getting violence against women defined as a violation of human rights, feminist focus has shifted to demanding State accountability for action to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls. This shift has arguably enabled human rights discourse and practice to become more "inclusive" of the experiences of women whereas recent feminist work in Australia calls for a deeper understanding of the diverse impacts of gender, race, ability and sexuality upon interpersonal violence by starting from these diverse standpoints (Chen, 2017; Women and Disability Victoria, 2017; Fitzgibbon, et al., 2018; Cripps & Davis 2013).

Also informing my practice were radical feminist approaches,<sup>2</sup> socialist and political economy approaches<sup>3</sup> and Indigenous feminists and community activists<sup>4</sup>. Dedicated and radical action linked the Women Against Rape collective(s), Women's Health Collective(s) and Women in Refuges and Housing groups with lobbying for law reform and high profile lawyers' and academics' publications<sup>5</sup> provide diverse perspectives about the breadth and depth of the women's movement and its predominantly white Anglo context and exclusion of diverse voices in publications up until the late 1990s and 2000s.

Building on lessons in the housing and women's health sectors, my community based practice was enhanced by work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community health planning organizations and working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in health and early years settings. This included work at the Alice Springs Hospital, Central Australia Aboriginal CONGRESS, Alukura Women's' Health and Birthing Service, and the Central Australian Regional Indigenous Health Planning Committee.

Introduced to specific Aboriginal values of kinship, Tjukurpa and lore practiced by the fourteen or so Aboriginal language groups living/working in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Central Australia, led me to a way of working and viewing the world that later could be named as Allyship informed by concepts such as *cultural safety*, *social and cultural determinants of health* and *Indigenous ways of knowing being and doing* (Martin, 2009). These lessons were shared at work with the Stronger Families Learning Exchange, an action research and evaluation project based at the AIFS and later at SNAICC. Similarly

work at AIFS and SNAICC informed the feminist community action research practice undertaken with ANROWS that is now outlined.

Acknowledging and valuing feminist practice wisdom and research evidence that was simultaneously being articulated as the National Primary Prevention Framework to Address Violence Against Women, Change the Story (Our Watch et al., 2015) an action research training model and a community of practice were co-developed with input from project workers in the Building Safe Communities for Women initiative. Writing a narrative about project aims, actions and results, was offered as a way for project workers to both make sense of and reflect on their own project work and findings. A “project story template” was co-designed and discussed at a workshop and an online webinar, and further discussions were held during the community of practice meetings. The idea for the story template came from an Indigenous health project called *Sharing the true stories* (Lowell, et al., 2005).

The aim was to engage project workers in a non-threatening, seemingly less academic process that could further develop reflective practice through the use of narrative writing. The project story or narrative is a method, which considers both the specific situational issues and aspects of communities, and the broader evidence about preventing violence against women. At the same time, it encourages reflecting on how to change aspects of these. The template was tested and refined with projects during workshops (see <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/action-research-support/>).

A second iteration of this action research approach involved offering support to 26 projects working with CALD communities across the south east coast of Australia. In recognition that film can be a more accessible way of reaching communities with languages other than English, and because it allows inclusion of non-English languages, a digital storytelling social enterprise in NSW was engaged to work with the projects to make digital stories about their work and to share messages about the underlying drivers of violence against women (see <https://www.anrows.org.au/research-program/culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-projects-with-action-research/>).

I found narrative, digital and written, an invaluable and respectful method for feminist community practice. It encouraged project staff to involve participants in the sharing of project findings about what worked, and the challenges encountered in local preventing violence against women work. At the same time, project activities and the intended changes, in and with the community, were described, leaving a record, and in some instances a baseline, for planning and evaluating current and future practice. Tolodano and Anderson (2017) describe narrative as both an individual and social process for sense making and note that, “Narratives are also knowledge producing devices, since they make sense of personal experiences and share that sense giving with others” (2017, p.1).

In the context of the ANROWS action research initiatives, documenting action research activities through the use of the “project story template” aimed to make the diverse perspectives, from which knowledge is created, explicit to the BSCW project staff and other workers in the field. Encouraging projects to co-create and document learnings with participants was central in the action research capacity building, and the BSCW projects were invited to actively share information about their work with each other through “stories from the field” presentations and updates at the action research workshops and during community of practice meetings.

Globally there has been increasing attention to reducing violence against women. Similar yet specific feminist service development and primary prevention is evident in Scotland, the UK and Canada. Scotland in particular has worked closely with feminist service providers to co-design policy, research and services. The ongoing context of colonizing First Nations, extreme health disparities, racism and

## ***It's Like Felting***

high levels of migration and re-actions against humanitarian refugees sees some synergies and similar challenges of respectful inclusion and separate services between Australia and Canada.

However, effective feminist community actions against violence resembles felting in that it brings together threads and strands, and layers them (or not) upon previous and existing campaigns, actions and services.

## **The Contribution of Social Work Knowledge, Skills, Experience and Values to Evolving Practice: Felted**

For many years I was happy to NOT identify with social work because of the stereotype of conservative and social control roles that most people saw as the practice of social workers. Accepting a role as the Senior Social Worker at the Alice Springs Hospital not long after reading Ife's *Re-thinking Social Work* (1997) changed that position. Also, I have mostly been a member of the AASW because I understood the potential of a collective voice.

Social work education needs to continue meaningfully and positively responding to the changes and transformations in this work and our mantra for social justice needs to expand to include the environmental crisis. Social work education that develops research skills, reflective practice and skills for workers to participate in prevention and response services will likely expand to meet workforce needs. I would like to see greater attention given to the inclusion of local practice examples at the policy implementation, evaluation and workforce development fields. Social work education in Australia seeks to address the need for "self-care" but has it prepared us for the global crisis of COVID 19 or addressed the level of burnout and compassion fatigue that may emerge in the next year or so? An increase in violence against women was reported by ANROWS (2020), as illustrated by the use of 1800Respect's chat line which increased by 20 percent in April 2020; a MensLine saw a 34 percent increase in callers who reported family violence concern between February and March 2020. In a global context, COVID 19 impacts our sisters and brothers and non-binary social workers and community members in other countries even more gravely, and there are larger post disaster rises in gender-based violence than currently experienced in Australia.

We social workers need to engage in cross-discipline and international work and contribute to the development of practice resources. There are now a lot of organizations and compelling reports, as discussed above, to promote change.<sup>6</sup> Feminist community practice is an eclectic approach that can link diverse networks, research, action, crisis and direct service, and prevention services.

The majority of social workers continue to be women, but it is naive to equate gender with this standpoint. The challenge for feminist social work is to continue to be actively and consciously immersed in the diversity of women's concerns and support allied issues whilst also staying informed of the new and changing structures of social, economic, and technological globalization. Social media has proven valuable for organizing social action and building alliances across feminist, ecological and humanitarian and anti-racist action. But virtual relationships cannot replace the tacit experience of people communing, meeting and experiencing each other and the environment. There will continue to be alternative and evolving new social work roles.

My practice grew and changed through work in a variety of fields of practice, work in diverse agencies with diverse governance and accountabilities, but maintaining focus on values of gender equality, social justice and women's rights as human rights anchored my work in feminist social and community

practice. Appreciating the tension-laden characteristics of feminist community practice, and in life more generally in our unequal society, paradoxically, creates some certainty and grounding.

## **Issues, Controversies and Problems: Refining the Fabric**

Feminist social and community practice between the 1970-2000 mostly “othered” all men and was dominated by white western women’s analysis. It was part of the process of strengthening women’s shared experiences to “other” men, but it was arguably naive and became counter-productive as the movement needed all the energies it could muster to achieve lasting change. Today there is a clearer role for male allies and indeed Australia has several key anti-violence male academics and practitioners (Pease 2019; VicHealth 2018). The community practice and academic work of the full diversity of women in Australia is more visible and accessible, though this continues as work in progress. Ecofeminism, Indigenous knowledges, intersectionality and violence in LGBTQIA+ communities are areas that can grow social workers practice and to which we can contribute both paid and unpaid work. My energy and attention spread across local ecological issues and literally looking after my own backyard, being part of an organic fruit and vegetable co-operative for over 15 years, contributing as an Indigenous and First Nations ally, and co-producing knowledge and teaching skills in community and academic settings.

The climate emergency and the inequitable impact of its negative consequences on the ecology, sentient and human beings, render feminist and green social work critical. Social work needs to redefine its central “person-in-environment” mantra to embrace the natural world more fully. Concepts of empathy and empowerment are important ideas to integrate into systems change theories in order to promote deeper awareness of the parallels between the oppression of women and domination of nature. Such messages have been put forward by a plethora of First Nations scholars for decades (see Simpson 2011; Bennet, Green, Gilbert & Bessarab 2011; Arabena 2015).

The institutional configurations of the Violence Against Women sector are many and varied with immense reforms in Victoria in response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Family Violence and the establishment of the Australian Government National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010–2022. In this context the women’s movement(s) effectively enhance the agenda to reform legislation, improve response services, champion a primary prevention agenda and engage the Australian public to address gender equality.

Hospitals, women’s services, housing and refuges, legal services, children’s services, women in Asylum seeking communities, women with disabilities and members of LGBTQIA+ communities are involved or on the radar of prevention and reform agendas.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Looking back and looking forward, I hope I have honored the women relatives and mentors who grew me up and young women who continue to educate me. I acknowledge the artists, the carers, and I particularly acknowledge the shoulders of the warrior women academics, Wendy Weeks and Marcia Langton, Lesley Doyal, Yoland Wadsworth, Karen Martin, Judy Atkinson, Kerry Arabena, Liz Kelly, Veronica Johns and Aileen Morton-Robinson, for their courage of tried and even “failed” areas of theory, practice and policy.

Whilst gender equality retains currency as a goal in today’s western world and on the United Nations’ global agenda (Bunch 2006), we can expect the resistance and backlash to the #Metoo and the Black

## ***It's Like Felting***

Lives Matter movements to escalate or not abate. We need stronger advocacy to resource anti-racist work, to acknowledge and support women, and support for LGBTQIA+ survivors of intimate partner violence. Feminist social and community practice requires ever-evolving skills and tools to counter misogyny, violence and resistance. Future research opportunities within the domain of the topic are vast and include evaluation of new initiatives in Victoria, the Orange Door and Family Safety, plus evaluation and reflections about the new organizations such as Our Watch and ANROWS and the National plan to reduce violence against women and their children.

We must welcome the growing acknowledgement and understanding from Indigenous knowledges about links between environmental destruction, disrespect of women, andocentrism and the impact of the colossal impact of extraction industries. Openness to seeing these connections give reason for hope.

## **CONCLUSION**

Diverse and evolving feminist and holistic Indigenous community and social work practice are, I believe, good company. Reflecting on collaborative feminist community practice to establish West CASA and CASA house, the ground work for linking activism with the broader actions towards gender equality are linked to today's feminist social and community practices and initiatives such as the Building Safer Communities for Women (Orr et al., 2018). Pointing towards the tremendous value of Indigenous ways and making visible some of my own listening experience and findings through such connectedness (Bnads, Orr and Clements 2020), aims to show that such respect for human and environmental rights is a good track towards decreasing suffering and inequality as well as potential healing for all. These real time stories of practice I hope show how I have come to know place, found existing fabrics and threads and strands of activism for needed change, and joined in processes and strength in work towards interpersonal peace and planetary survival.

Describing how the political issue of violence against women is still a personal issue, and why addressing the nuances of collective gender and race issues are both private and public domains of feminist community practice, has also shown the layering of social change. The current COVID 19 pandemic is seeing a spike in reported violence and has been dubbed the "pink recession" because women are impacted unequally by loss of jobs and reduced working conditions. There are many moments of incremental moving forward and backward and stasis and repetitions towards gender equality and feminist social work and community practice must continue to champion socio-economic equity. Interpersonal relationships between adults, and between adults and children, must remain open to public scrutiny if we are to build respectful relationships. State sponsored and structural forms of violence must also be challenged. At times I had thought that early lived experience and professional training would somehow immunize me and the people I care for from the scourge of gender-based violence, but I was wrong. However, building layers of further experience, layers of further training and continuing to felt and agitate all of those layers and threads has created a fabric—and a community practice—that is reasonably solid but always able to expand, take in more water, shrink into tighter fabric and be embellished with new knowledge, extra strength and skills. This is how feminist community practice is like felting.



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## ***It's Like Felting***

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## ***It's Like Felting***

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cisgender is a term for people whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.
- <sup>2</sup> Brownmiller (*Against Our Will*, 1977.) Ward (*Father Daughter Rape*, 1984) WAR on Rape Victoria
- <sup>3</sup> Doyal & Pennell (1984), Watson (1990), Broome (1991), Hopkins & Mc Gregor (1991), Weeks (1994), and Webster (2016).
- <sup>4</sup> Langton et al, (2020), Watson (1986), Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Arabena (2015).
- <sup>5</sup> Carter et al. (1980), Franzaway, Court and Connell (1989), Broom (1991) Hopkins & McGregor (1991), Morton Robinson (1994), Weeks (1994, 2002) and PhD theses by Melville (1994) and Carmody (1995).
- <sup>6</sup> *The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*, the work of ANROWS, Our Watch, Family Safety, Respect Victoria, Orange Door, InTouch, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health.

## Chapter 6

# Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context: Extending Socio–Legal Collaborations for Improved Client Outcomes

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### **ABSTRACT**

*There are multiple synergies between social work and the law, and the two professions have common goals. The law underpins social work practice via legislation and legal processes. Despite this, social work services in a plaintiff law firm remains a unique practice setting. This chapter provides a description of the establishment of such a service in Australia. It explains the reason for it, how it was established, the practice model, spheres of influence, and reasons for its success. The service is a role model for successful multidisciplinary practice for better client outcomes.*

### **THE INTERSECT BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AND THE LAW**

Social Work practice in Australia cannot be separated from the law. Our practice is underpinned by legislation and legal processes and we cannot escape it. It often guides and directs our practice with our clients. For example: social security legislation; child protection; family violence; mental health; debt or homelessness; privacy; and, capacity and guardianship. As Slater and Finck (2012, ix) contend, “[the] actions and options of social workers and their clients are constantly being shaped, mandated, and regulated by law”.

Swain (2018, p. 5) draws on the work of Charlesworth et al., (2000) when he states:

*While the particular legal issues which need to be confronted will vary with the field of social work practice or employment – and specialisation brings with it the obligation to maintain and extend appropriate*

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*knowledge and competencies – all social work practitioners deal with the law, lawyers and legal systems; in truth, ‘no social work practice or welfare work of any description takes place in a legal vacuum’.*

In today’s risk-averse environment, social workers are required to have an in-depth knowledge of law and its regulations, policy, best practices and accompanying responsibilities. This is essential to enable them to carry out complex jobs and be accountable to both their clients and their organizations.

In my experience, social work and legal professions have more in common than one may think. Both professions are underpinned by their ethics. For social workers in Australia, it is the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2013) and for lawyers, it is the Legal Profession Uniform Law Australian Solicitors’ Conduct Rules 2015. Both professions demand integrity, confidentiality, client respect, advocate on their clients’ behalf and seek to act in the best interest of their clients; assisting them to improve their quality of life and to redress social injustice. Swain (2018, p. 5) also states that, “both professions bring frameworks of understanding and approaches to problem resolution which, appropriately utilised, are valid and relevant to the difficulties faced by those marginalised in the community”. Fehn (2015) adds that both professions see clients because they are expected to find solutions to the problems that have “disrupted” their lives, are a resource to people and need to think about the bigger picture of clients’ needs (p. 3).

In the USA, Galowitz (1999) noted the first example of collaborative practice was in the 1960s when a legal service was established in a multi-service social service agency. In Australia, community legal center lawyers have been working with social workers since the 1970s (2012). Over the years since, social workers can increasingly be found working in legal settings in government and not-for-profit organizations. For example: organizations for child abuse survivors; women’s legal services; the Office of Public Prosecutions in Melbourne. Zifcak (2018) discusses two relatively recent positive developments that may have contributed to this. He noted a move for a significant number of lawyers away from large commercial firms to the not-for-profit community sector to practice “relational lawyering”. He stated that this “is primarily concerned with lawyers’ responsibility to their clients, their clients’ relationships and with their community as a whole” (Zifcak, 2018, p.19). He noted, agencies such as community legal centers may be co-located with services from social welfare disciplines. This then provides a greater opportunity for cross-fertilization and intersection of professional approaches. The second development he cited related to the emergent practice of “therapeutic jurisprudence”, which “explores the ways in which, consistent with the principles of justice, the theory and practice of mental health and related disciplines can inform and sensitise the practice of law” (Zifcak, 2018, p. 20).

The limited research that has been undertaken in the area of social worker and lawyer collaborations, consistently identify similar benefits and conflicts with this practice. When it works well, the collaborative relationship creates a “wider, strong web of support” (Fehn, 2015, p. 3), which helps clients navigate complex, large systems. It can increase problem solving, teamwork and content knowledge/professional development. It can enable an understanding of broader social, legal and policy issues and debates and diversify workers’ perspectives on social justice (Foster 2014). It can also lead to better outcomes for clients in their legal processes as well as a better experience of the legal process itself; improved results with non-legal issues; and better access to the law (Maylea et al, 2018). According to Walsh (2012) where collaboration works well—each professional group is aware of the each other’s skills, genuinely values their input, and roles are clearly delineated. The common objective is then focused on empowering the client to cope with their circumstances, to address as many of their issues as possible and to use the legal and other systems to work in the best interest of the client.

## ***Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context***

Walsh (2012), Fehn (2015), Galowitz (1999) and Maylea et al (2018) all indicate that social workers can also train or influence the lawyers they work with to be more empathic and attuned to clients' issues beyond the legal. For example, they can assist them to modify their language and communication style accordingly, to further enhance engagement and the legal experience itself. Retkin et al. in Galowitz (1999) notes that collaborative practice can also reduce the stress and burden on the lawyer because presenting non-legal issues are addressed by another professional and they can focus on the legal work to hand. Kennedy et al. (2016) also argue that collaborative practice can enable human service workers to learn from the law to strengthen their own practice and procedures. By developing some understanding of how the law operates it places them in a stronger position to navigate and challenge issues of risk, in the interest of their work and their clients.

A number of areas of contention within collaborative practice have consistently been reported. The first is: operating under different ethical and practice imperatives regarding values, ethics, knowledge, training and methodologies (Kennedy et al 2016). Secondly, differing professional approaches—lawyers representing the interests of the client only and taking and acting upon their legal instruction versus, a social work systems and “best interests” approach (Walsh 2012, Maylea et al., 2018, Fehn 2015). Thirdly, are the differing standards of practice and obligation for a social worker, with regard to client confidentiality, as opposed to a lawyer with regard to client legal privilege (Galowitz 1999). It is acknowledged that these conflicts will differ across and within organizations depending on the individuals within it, the organization's focus and culture.

Although integrated practice between lawyers and social workers has increasingly become regarded as an effective practice model, the provision of social work services in a plaintiff law firm remains a relatively unique phenomenon in Australia. To date I have been unable to locate another law firm in Australia that employs social workers that use the title, “Social Worker”, to provide social work services to its clients. Another plaintiff law firm in Melbourne employed a social worker in 2010, however, the social work service ceased in 2017. A social worker was employed by a firm in Sydney approximately 9 years ago, however, remained in the position only a few months and was not replaced. Although there are some law firms in the United States of America that employ social workers, they all appear to work with different client groups (such as in elder law), and the model of service delivery also differs. It is unknown whether there is a service fee for the assistance provided. This appears to be similar in the United Kingdom.

## **SLATER AND GORDON IN CONTEXT**

Slater and Gordon Lawyers was established in 1935 and has its origins in Melbourne, Australia, providing legal assistance to the railway's union and its members. It has a long history of representing the rights of its clients through individual personal injury civil cases, as well as through class action cases, a number of them landmark achievements.

With regard to civil law, people become clients of the firm because they have sustained serious physical and/or psychological injury or illness either from: motor vehicle accidents; or, as a result of medical negligence; or, public liability or work-related accidents or situations; or, because they have been adversely affected by asbestos related diseases. Secondary to this, a number of clients also have entitlements to claim total and permanent disability lump-sum payments through their superannuation insurance.



For years, lawyers at the firm were seeing clients and their families distressed by injury or illness trying to grapple with, not only the emotional effects, but also social consequences of their situations. In the years prior to the establishment of a social work service, lawyers were increasingly seeing clients who were not only presenting with legal issues, but also contacting their lawyers when they were in crisis. The crisis would most likely be emotional distress or social issues, usually related to financial problems, issues with housing, service provision, care or treatment. As a personal injury claim would usually take between one to three years to resolve, the client often developed a trusting supportive relationship, not only with their lawyer, but other members of the legal team. Clients who were presenting in crisis, often did not have formal or informal supports in place, so it is not surprising that they contacted their legal team members when they needed help, as they had nowhere else to turn.

Senior management noted that significant time was being taken up by lawyers and their legal assistants trying to assist their clients with these issues, but not knowing how. They also hypothesized that a client would be less able to participate in the legal claims process (for example, be unable to attend legal or medico-legal appointments) if their psychosocial issues were not addressed. Hence the legal claim could not proceed to resolution or resolution was significantly delayed.

A senior lawyer at the firm had been a nurse before she became a lawyer. Hence, she had worked with social workers and had some understanding of the type of assistance social workers could provide to people who were injured or ill. As a result of her advocating the benefits of providing a more holistic service for its clients, senior management made the pioneering decision in late 2008 to employ a social worker. It was decided that the social work service would be provided, at no additional cost, to its injured and ill clients, in recognition of the psychosocial difficulties that clients can face during the course of their legal claims.

## **MY INTRODUCTION TO LAW IN THE HEALTH SETTING**

Prior to being approached by Slater and Gordon to establish a social work service, I worked in acute and rehabilitation hospitals for twenty-one years in Melbourne. In my first job on a spinal injuries' unit, I worked on the readmission's ward. The patients referred to me were often angry and distressed because: they had to live with the disability of spinal cord injury; there were inadequate care services or accessible housing options; they were financially compromised; relationships and roles were lost; and their futures were not what they had planned prior to their injury.

As a new graduate, I was, at times, overwhelmed by these issues and my inability to "fix" them. For newly injured patients on the spinal unit, I also became acutely aware of the difference an accident-circumstance can make for someone who has access to financial compensation through a legal claim as opposed to someone who does not.

There was almost a collective sigh of relief from the hospital treating team if someone had been injured in a car accident and was covered by the Victorian State Government insurer the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) for accident-related needs. For those injured in a non-compensable accident circumstance, the social worker then had to rally the support of a local Lions' Club to raise money for an electric wheelchair or basic home modifications.

Most of my hospital career, however, was primarily in orthopedic rehabilitation at two hospitals in Melbourne. All of the patients struggled with some loss of function, temporarily or permanently. For those who worked, there was a significant change in income. Life roles and established routines were

## ***Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context***

altered. The sense of self and one's place in the world were challenged. I enjoyed working in rehabilitation, however, because the focus was on "restoration"—restoring people to their maximum function and facilitating the start of their re-engagement with their former lives or the beginning of a different life.

For those with debility, we provided counseling to assist them to adjust emotionally to their permanently changed lives. For the majority, however, while they were in rehabilitation they maintained the beacon of hope that a miracle would occur, and they would fully recover and get their old lives back. They could not embrace a new or different life, particularly when it was one they had not asked for—accident, trauma and injury had been thrust upon them. Yet post-discharge, we did not see or know what the vast majority of our patients experienced.

While working at the second rehabilitation hospital, I routinely informed my patients of the importance of obtaining legal advice and assistance in relation to making a compensation claim. Although I knew this was important, I did not fully appreciate the role of a lawyer in this process. I was also unaware of other types of personal injury claims people could make. I regularly obtained my patients' consent to sit in on appointments with them and their lawyer. This increased my knowledge and understanding of the legal compensation schemes and the entitlements that may be accessed under the law, while supporting my patients through the process. As I became familiar with the lawyers, I would also contact them when I had legal questions. Through this process, I developed valuable informal professional relationships with the lawyers. Although an accident can happen to anyone, many of my patients were from lower socio-economic backgrounds, a number spoke limited or no English, some had problems with drugs or alcohol or had pre-existing mental health conditions. Through my hospital experience, and more so at Slater and Gordon, I became aware that consideration of personal injury legal issues was not well integrated within the psychosocial assessment framework to meet the needs of these vulnerable and marginalized people.

## **ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SOCIAL WORK SERVICE**

When I commenced at Slater and Gordon in May 2009, I was in the very daunting, yet enviable, position of being presented with a "blank canvas" and told to create a vision, service model and program of free social work delivery that would best meet the needs of the firm's clients. As this was the first known social work position of its kind in an Australian law firm and possibly the world, I had no point of reference.

It is worth noting that although there are some law firms in the United States of America that employ social workers, they all appear to work with different client groups (such as in elder law) and the model of service delivery also differs. It is unknown whether there is a service fee for the assistance provided. I was also unable to locate equivalent social work services in law firms in the United Kingdom. In attending the International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health in Dublin in 2010, my poster presentation raised interest from social workers around the world who had not heard of a service like this.

Due to the uniqueness of the role, my time was initially spent on meeting with the lawyers of the different practice groups of the firm, to understand the work they did, the clients they had and the types of non-legal issues the clients would contact them for and possible reasons for this. In creating my role, I also spent time educating the lawyers and legal assistants about social workers, my experience and what I could offer their clients so that they could make appropriate referrals to me.

As my client group were injured and ill clients, I drew on my hospital knowledge and experience as a reference point. Also, through supervision with a hospital social work manager who had previously established a service in a different type of organization, I began to develop a clear vision of the type of

service I could provide and establish procedures and processes. Although Slater and Gordon is a national law firm, as a solo social worker my catchment area was initially limited to the state of Victoria. Given the large geographical area, I had to adapt my way of working with clients to be primarily telephone-based. As the lawyers became increasingly familiar with my role and me, the referral rate increased substantially, and the social work service and team grew nationally. Two additional social workers commenced in early 2011, and since January 2016, we have been a team of four. There are two of us in Melbourne, one in Sydney and one in Brisbane.

When someone is seriously injured or ill, they will most likely become patients of an acute hospital, many will need rehabilitation, and some will need on-going services and supports in the community. A number of these people get “lost” in the community as they deal with the significant chronic impact of their illness or injury, unable to navigate through systems to access assistance.

In our context, our vision espouses that psychosocial issues should not be a barrier to clients accessing appropriate legal assistance to ensure their rights are protected and their maximum entitlements are obtained. We complement the work of our lawyers by providing psychosocial support to clients and our service has two overarching clinical goals:

- Reduce or eliminate the negative emotional and social factors that have arisen as a direct result of the client’s injury or illness.
- Reduce or eliminate the pre-existing psychosocial factors that interfere with the individual’s ability to participate in the legal process.

Although we regularly review our practice and procedures and make modifications to these, the basis of our model of practice has not changed significantly over the past 10 plus years. The social work services team assists current Slater and Gordon personal injury clients anywhere in Australia who have a psychosocial issue of concern, or are in crisis as they move through the process of claiming compensation for their illness or injuries. Where appropriate, referrals can be accepted from other practice areas. The service is provided on referral from a Slater and Gordon legal team member.

As our social work service is free, we have kept the scope of our service quite broad. The reason for referral covers a broad spectrum of issues and complex situations. Typically, our clients have a significant debility or terminal illness. Layered upon this are pre-existing factors, such as:

- Socio-economic status.
- Mental health issues.
- Disability issues.
- Language and cultural differences.

The next layer is the emotional, physical, functional, cognitive, social and economic impact of the injury or illness and the circumstances surrounding these. As we are typically working with clients, months or years post the event, many of these issues have become chronic problems. Loss is the issue that transcends through all of our clients’ lives: loss of control, happiness, independence, physical capabilities, function, roles, meaningful or enjoyable activity, friend and family relationships, money, housing, material possessions, dignity, self-esteem and self-worth, loss of loved ones, brain function and for some, loss of life.

## ***Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context***

We address a wide range of referral issues that include: financial difficulties and distress, including social security issues; housing and homelessness; difficulties managing at home and/or in the community; emotional distress; mental health issues; suicidal ideation or intent; difficulty accessing care, treatment and support services; grief and loss; drug and alcohol issues; guardianship and administration; refugee and immigration issues; relationship/family issues; family violence; and, social isolation.

The Social Work Service is usually provided as a telephone-based service. Hence, we have the ability to provide assistance to clients in rural and regional areas and interstate. We do not conduct home visits for personal safety reasons, but also because travelling to attend in-person appointments is time consuming. This would significantly impact on our ability to service a large number of clients and there are already many organizations that provide in-person services. On occasion we may need to see a client in person, and, in this case, we will see them at their local legal office. We have, however, also met with them at court, legal mediations, social security, medical appointments and various tribunal hearings.

Telephone-based intervention was a novelty to me, as it was for the rest of the team, when each of us started. I quickly came to appreciate that it enabled our service to be accessible to a larger number of clients, no matter where they were geographically. Given our team is spread across three states and we are an Australia-wide service, it also means that we can easily provide cover for each other during leave periods, but also assist each other when workloads are high. As the team is mostly part-time this is particularly critical when a client is referred for suicidal ideation or intent, as it means the first available social worker can “action” the referral. It also means that issues such as debility, illness, pain, financial constraints or lack of transport do not create a barrier for clients to access our service.

Telephone based interventions are effective and efficient to address practical issues, provide counseling, mobilize mental health crisis services and to assist clients to navigate digital processes to access information and services. We use conference calls with organizations such as Centrelink with our clients, to overcome privacy and consent issues. Centrelink is an organization, which delivers social security payments and services to Australians. We complete application forms with clients over the phone and send these to them to sign. We also communicate with our clients via text messages and email. This enables us to provide further engagement and support with our clients and provide immediately accessible service information and documents. At times we may have a single contact with a client, at other times contact could be over weeks or months with varying periods of intensity. Sometimes there are gaps of months or years between contact with a client. They are re-referred to us as a new need arises.

In regard to our interventions, we provide short-term assistance such as: negotiation and advocacy with services; crisis assessment and intervention; provision of community information and resources; referral to local community or specialized services regarding financial, accommodation, support and care issues. We also provide advice and assistance regarding benefits and applications with community agencies, such as Centrelink and housing; and, brief intervention telephone counseling and support. In addition to direct service provision to clients, we also provide consultation and advice to legal team members regarding their clients when they want some advice regarding an issue, but do not feel a referral is required. For example, our lawyers will consult with us in relation to managing client behavior and situations when the person has significant mental health or cognitive issues; how to communicate difficult information such as non-viability of a claim; managing crisis situations such as suicidal behavior; and aggressive threats from clients. Our knowledge and experience enable us to assist and support legal team members, which in turn contributes positively to their wellbeing.

As the organization has thousands of personal injury clients at any one time and we are a small team who work part-time, it is important to also be clear about our service limits and boundaries. Our social

work service aims to assist clients who do not otherwise have access to appropriate services. This may be because the client does not have knowledge of services or how to access them or because they do not exist. We meet a need when there is a gap; whenever there are local or specialized services to link clients to, that is our focus of intervention. If clients are current hospital patients, they should have access to a social worker. We advise legal team members to encourage their clients to access the hospital social worker rather than our service. The majority of our clients are months or one to three years down the track from inpatient care. If the client is already seeing a psychologist or social worker for counseling, it is not appropriate for them to be referred to our service for additional counseling or as a substitute for the counselor. Every client finds living with injury, disability, illness and dealing with the impact of this difficult, but we do not have the resource capacity to assist every client.

We do not provide an “on-call” or after-hours service. Our service is available Monday to Friday during business hours, however, with differences in time zones across Australia this will vary, for example Perth is three hours behind Melbourne during summer. We cannot guarantee there will always be a social worker available to action a referral the day it is received. For this reason, we have provided crisis service information on our social work page on the organization’s intranet. This webpage also provides brief information about our service and who we are, a referral form that can be downloaded, state-based crisis service information sheets and a Client Suicide Risk Response Guide our team developed for when we are unavailable.

Referrals are not accepted for medico-legal assessments as this is not our role or area of expertise. If a medico-legal assessment and report are required, the lawyer must access external professionals. The insurer is not privy to our involvement with a client, nor is our interventions, clinical notes or correspondence back to our lawyers in the compensation context: as these are confidential. We do, however, advocate and negotiate with, for example, workers’ compensation insurance agents for our clients on all appropriate issues not related to their compensation claim. An example of this is ringing the insurer to request they process a payment urgently because of the client’s financial situation. Unlike lawyers, we are also able to contact a client’s employer and negotiate with them if they are being slow or inconsistent in making workers’ compensation weekly payments to clients. Although we have gained some legal knowledge along the way, we are always clear on our boundaries and continue to redirect legal questions back to our lawyers.

We also cannot accept referrals for people who are not signed clients or who are post-claim settlement, they must be a current client of Slater and Gordon. Again, this is due to resourcing but also because we are not a community service and there are potential professional risk liability issues with assisting people who are not legal clients of the firm.

We do not provide counseling or support to staff. If we are contacted, staff are encouraged to access the organization’s employee assistance provider. We do, however, provide education sessions to our legal staff on topics such as: the social work service and its role with clients; working with vulnerable clients in challenging situations; vicarious trauma and self-care.

## **CLIENT PROFILE**

In the ten-year period since the service started in May 2009, 3,041 clients have been referred to the service. Referral averages per month were in the 20s but, with the expansion of the social work team and service in Queensland, averages have been in the 30s. Some months we have received more than 40 referrals

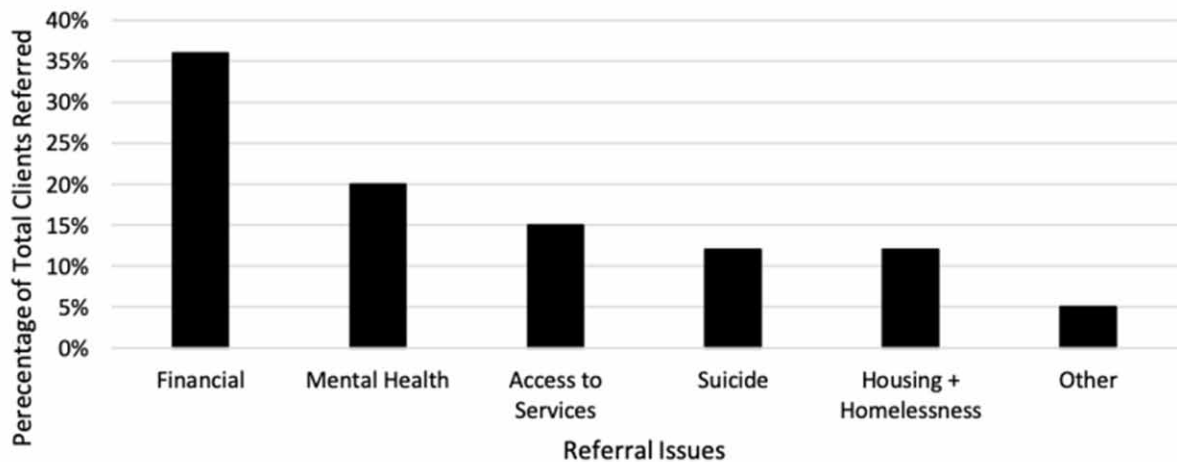
## Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context

and in July 2019 we inexplicably received 60 referrals. These numbers do not reflect the total caseload any of us can be carrying at any one time and does not reflect case complexity or time requirements.

When the team expanded in 2011, we commenced keeping more detailed statistics about our client work. This was not a requirement of the organization. We had no targets to meet, no curtailment of number of contacts or length of contact. We collected the information to assist us to look for trends, review our service provision and monitor staffing requirements.

To assist with statistics collection, we allocate reason for referral to key broad categories and document the primary reason. Obviously, the issues are intertwined, however, we document the prime or initial reason for referral as documented on the referral form. In analyzing statistics from May 2011 – April 2019 for 2,361 client referrals, the breakdown has consistently been as follows:

Figure 1. Client referral issues



Towards the end of 2012 our team noticed a steady increase in referrals of clients who were at risk of self-harm or harm to others. People reach that point for a number of reasons and there may be a combination of issues related and not related to their injury or illness.

In reading Euan Donley's (2013) article 'Suicide Risk of Your Client', our team was struck by how many of our clients fit into the high suicide risk category. When you read the statistics, however, it is not surprising suicidal ideation and intent have become increasingly common referral reasons. Donley noted that people with physical illness have two- or three-times higher risk of completed suicide than those without. He also identified a number of other risk features common to our clients.

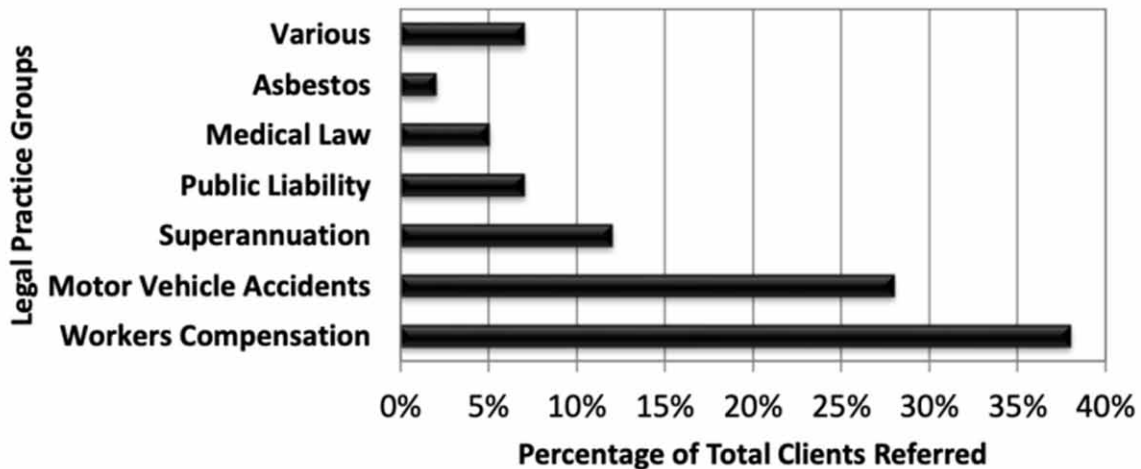
Our lawyers often become the central or consistent thread in their clients' lives and, as a result, they are often the ones the clients contact when they are emotionally vulnerable and feeling suicidal. Clients have expressed their suicidal ideation and intent in person, on the phone and via email.

In early 2013 our social work team developed a "Client Suicide Risk Response Guide", as a reference point of what to do when staff are faced with these types of presentations, calls or emails. Every staff member across our Australian offices who has any contact with clients was given a copy of the document and new legal team members receive this also. Communications and articles have been writ-

ten and training provided for staff at different times to raise awareness of the issues and increase their level of comfort in asking their clients directly if they intend to kill themselves that day. That has had the desired outcome of a significant increase in clients referred to our service for suicidal ideation or intent.

Although our work is primarily with clients from the personal injury practice groups, over the years we have received referrals from 18 different practice groups and other sources across Australia, including New Client Services, family law, industrial, estate planning, class actions, criminal, and commercial & project litigation. Two thirds of referrals, however, come from our Motor Vehicle Accident and Workers Compensation practice groups.

*Figure 2. Referrals by Legal Practice Group*



In regard to documentation, we do not keep separate social work files. Our communication back to legal team members is via email regarding our assessments, interventions and plans. These are then saved to the legal files. We also include any correspondence written or received from clients or external agencies. We believe our client interactions are covered by “legal privilege”. Our notes are integrated with that of the legal file. Certainly, some insurers are aware of our service as we directly communicate with them and, as we commonly write to clients’ treating doctors, subpoenaed medical records would contain this correspondence. As neither our team members nor our notes have ever been subpoenaed, this notion has not been challenged to date.

We obtain client consent to disclose information to other organizations and inform them of our communication to their legal team. At times we have had to consult with our internal Professional Standards and Risk legal team for advice about breaking confidentiality when threats have been made to legal staff or external organizations. Our two teams are in agreement, and law, policy and good practice demand, that when there is the risk of self-harm or harm to others, this overrides client privilege. Whenever possible, we will still inform the client we are disclosing their information.

## **THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES THAT UNDERLIE OUR SERVICE**

Our service, and indeed the profession of social work, is underpinned by a social justice framework, respect for human dignity and human rights. Our organization promotes its social justice values, which enables us to work toward common goals for best client outcomes at the individual and in the broader socio-political context. This definition offered by Craig (2002) resonates with the team:

*[Social justice is] a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental and political policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with: achieving fairness, and equality of outcomes and treatment; recognising the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self-esteem of all; the meeting of basic needs; maximizing the reduction of inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged (pp. 671–672).*

All clients, regardless of their socio-economic, intellectual, health, mental health or culturally and linguistically diverse status, have a right to be provided with appropriate legal information and options to ensure their legal rights are protected. Ensuring clients understand their compensation entitlements and obtaining appropriate assistance to access their maximum entitlements is a common goal for the social workers and lawyers at our organization. This fits with the social work profession's commitment to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual in society. In conjunction with this, there are related benefits to family members and the community if the client's emotional and social well-being can be improved through accessing their compensation entitlements.

Through our social work practice, we reduce or remove barriers to access justice to enable clients to receive their full entitlements under the law and, in turn, assist to mitigate poverty and social disadvantage through socio-legal collaboration. This is not only in the form of lump sum compensation payments but through advocacy and dispute resolution processes that our lawyers undertake when insurers deny payment for treatment, services, aides and equipment, vehicle and home modifications and so forth.

Within an advocacy framework we recognize the vulnerability of our clients and the risk of or actual disadvantage that they experience as a result of the serious injury and consequent disability they sustain or the serious illness they experience. Many of the clients referred to us feel powerless in their interactions with insurers, large bureaucracies such as Centrelink and even with some community agencies. This powerlessness may be due to individual factors such as the impact of severe chronic pain, cognitive deficits due to an acquired brain injury, literacy issues, mental health issues or because English is a second language. It may also be due to organizational or systemic issues or the attitudes and beliefs of the individual within an organization. Think of the person who was fully fit, active and independent, able to make their own life choices and has not been hampered by financial worries. That person then becomes seriously injured and a claimant of an insurance scheme, where one is now dependent on decisions made by another person in an organization regarding their income, the type and duration of treatment they can receive, the medication they can have, the home and personal services they can receive and under what circumstances they can return to work, if they are fortunate enough to be able to do so. A significant part of our role is advocating on our clients' behalf to external organizations and giving them a voice when they cannot articulate their concern or need.



Our team takes a strengths-based, trauma-informed, person-centered, solution-focused approach to address clients' emotional and practical issues of concern. Our social work practice is underpinned by social work theories: systems theory, grief and loss theories, developmental theories, trauma and anti-oppressive theories. We also draw on a number of practice models and interventions such as problem solving and task centered. The crisis intervention model guides our assessments and interventions with clients who express suicidal ideation or intent. Our assessments range from targeted and brief specific-needs analysis of the referral issue through to a more detailed psychosocial assessment of the issues that are impacting on the client, and where appropriate, a risk assessment. When initial counseling is required, we draw upon psychological focused strategies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Much of our work is single session or brief intervention.

We work with clients who do not fully recover; are seriously injured, ill and debilitated and, therefore, have chronic psychosocial problems. Not only do they have to cope with debility, they are often in debt with unstable housing because their income does not adequately cover their living expenses. Realistically, not every psychosocial issue a client experiences can be "fixed" by our service because solutions are dependent on factors beyond clients' or our control, such as, over stretched and under-resourced community services, or ineligibility for a service, or because there just is not a bucket of money anyone can access. Our service can and does, however, make a difference to many clients' lives, whether it be to assist a client to remain housed or facilitating mental health assistance to prevent suicide. Just recently an ex-client contacted me. Her claim settled in 2015 and she had been referred to the Social Work Service during that time. She was having a problem with the insurer, which was still liable to fund services, medication and treatment for her. She still had my telephone number in her mobile phone contacts list and reached out for assistance, as she did not know where else to get help. Though not a current client, I had the knowledge to assist her and knew this was not available in the general community and we addressed the issue together and "fixed" the problem.

Our work at Slater and Gordon provides us with opportunities to go beyond the conventional service delivery role and we have flexible ways of working and structuring our time. There are no parameters imposed upon us about how and when to address clients' issues, how many contacts we can have, or the length of time we can work with a client. The organization does not require us to keep or submit statistics, as our service is free and inherently valued by the organization and, as permanent employees, we are not seeking funding for our ongoing positions. The parameters of our service are the ones our team decide upon and place upon ourselves. Our parameters ensure we can: effectively manage our caseloads within our employed hours; contact the clients referred to us within the targets we set (same day for suicidal clients and within three business days for other clients); maintain our boundaries regarding the issues appropriate for us to address within our areas of social work knowledge and expertise; and, ensure our personal safety by never conducting lone home visits. For example: a client of our service who had sustained a severe brain injury received our assistance at various points over a seven-year period. The social worker met with this client and/or his parents at a Slater and Gordon office local to the family; at an appointment with an external criminal lawyer; at the Magistrates' Court in regard to a criminal matter; at State Trustees when the parents were appointed Financial Administrators for the client; and in hospital when he was physically assaulted. Seeing the long-term impact of serious injury on this client and family system highlights for the team the inadequacy of services in the community to meet their complex, ongoing needs and the continuous grief the parents feel for their son's lost pre-accident future.

One of the team worked with another client and her husband consistently for nearly one year. She too had sustained a brain injury from an accident. When her compensation settlement was determined, it

## **Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context**

was paid into Funds in Court (FIC), which is an office of the Supreme Court of Victoria. Funds are paid into FIC by a court order, usually because a person is under a *legal disability*. She was very unhappy with this decision because it placed her in a position of powerlessness, as the goals of FIC were at odds with her own. She wanted to use her money to buy a modest house for herself and her husband, as they had rented their whole lives, and buy a newer second-hand car. FIC determines that it needs to ensure, as far as possible, the compensation amount awarded is available to spend over a person's lifetime by investing the funds on the person's behalf. Spending the bulk of her money on a house and car would not enable this. A judge determined that the client had a *legal disability* and was unable to manage her funds based on a comment written in a neuropsychology report. This case required an unraveling of the reasoning behind the decisions made; an understanding of legal systems and organizations such as FIC and the TAC; liaison and strong verbal and written advocacy with those organizations, the client's medical general practitioner and new neuropsychologist. As a result of this work, FIC accepted that the client did not in fact have a *legal disability* and released her funds to her, to spend as she wished. This gave the client control back of an important aspect of her life and in turn contributed to positive feelings of self-worth.

## **SPHERES OF ADVOCACY AND INFLUENCE**

Just like the rest of the social work profession, our practice is impacted by changes to legislation and government policy at state and federal levels. We keep ourselves updated with changes related to our casework to enable us to inform our clients, assist them to navigate through these to access the assistance they require, and advocate on their behalf when they are faced with barriers. I came to see that our role extends beyond the individual clinical work we provide to clients and that we could have spheres of influence in multiple ways.

We have opportunities to advocate for changes to legislation and policy at the broader level through our organization and at times through the social work groups and organizations of which we are members. We have also focused on raising the awareness of insurers, insurance agents and health practitioners on the psychosocial impact of serious injury in the compensation context. Our team members have been involved with advocating for change through contributing to submissions and campaigns such as: legislative changes introduced by the TAC in 2013 that would disadvantage people with mental health conditions; the inadequacy of Centrelink's Newstart Allowance payment rates; assisting the Social Workers in Brain Injury (SWIBI) practice group and the AASW with lobbying and writing a submission regarding the impact that changes to NSW Motor Accident Compulsory Third Party (CTP) claims would have on children and families; assisting the AASW and Palliative Care Practice Group (PCPG) in a submission regarding the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill in NSW; a submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System; and a submission for the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Mental Health. At times we have also provided education via meetings and presentations. For example: I once presented to Victorian Workcover insurance agents and defendant lawyers on the chronic psychosocial impact of workplace injuries to highlight these issues to them.

As each new member of the social work team commenced, we quickly recognized the value of working together with lawyers for improved client outcomes. Sharing knowledge, opinions and insights were of immense reciprocal benefit. It was through my attendance at lawyer training days I realized that I had significant gaps in my legal knowledge and reflected on how this could have disadvantaged my patients

as a hospital social worker. In speaking to many social workers across Melbourne when I commenced at Slater and Gordon to inform them of my role, it was welcomed wholeheartedly as innovative and much needed, and I was heralded as a “pioneer”. I soon realized, however, that many social workers remained wary of lawyers.

There appears to be common misconceptions about lawyers and legal processes in Australia in general. For example, many social workers were surprised when I told them it is illegal in Australia to charge a percentage of a client’s settlement as a fee for service. Even today, social workers will tell me that it is not “ethical” to give their clients names of lawyers or law firms that specialize in the area of law that relates to their client’s personal injury issue as they do not want to be seen to be favoring any one of them. Or, it is their hospital or department’s policy or practice not to do so. If they do make a suggestion, it is usually for the client to see their family or local lawyer if they have one, or they suggest going to a community legal center. For people who have sustained a compensable injury or medical condition, they will not obtain the expert legal assistance they need from these services.

Many times, therefore, social workers do not even tell a person they should see a lawyer or seek legal advice let alone assist them to understand how they may find an appropriate lawyer or law firm. Clients are left to make sense of the myriad of differences between areas of practice, law firms and lawyers. Many clients are scared to see lawyers because they are afraid of costs and the legal world in general.

Many social workers do not understand how legal processes work, or law firms operate, to explain these to clients, and dispel myths and fears that the social workers may have themselves. They, therefore, continue to perpetuate those myths. Many clients, therefore, will not seek legal advice and are legally and/or financially disadvantaged as a result. It is not uncommon for our lawyers to tell us that when a client meets them for the first time, they may have had a viable compensation claim, however, missed important time limits to access this because they were unaware of their entitlements. For example, a client, who was a child and an inpatient for almost a year from a near drowning incident in a public pool, missed out on entitlements because their parents were unaware they were able to make a public liability claim on the child’s behalf. The hospital social worker had not raised the possibility of a claim, and was probably unaware, hence did not suggest the parents seek legal advice. Trying to gather evidence to support the claim after such a long time period proved extremely challenging.

Most people have little or no contact with lawyers and the legal system. Their main source of information and influence, therefore, is through the media and popular culture. Stereotypically, lawyers are at times portrayed as dishonest, greedy, villainous and uncaring. Trach (2003) states:

*When one takes an informed look at the way popular culture characterizes the justice system, it becomes evident that there are misrepresentations and inaccuracies that lead to bias. Therefore, although entertaining, information about the justice system in popular culture should be accepted with skepticism, and judgments upon the system and the legal community should be left to the truly informed citizen (paragraph 9).*

Some social workers, as gatekeepers, may be restricting their clients’ ability to access effective legal assistance because of their own bias against lawyers. They then hide behind the profession’s ethics to justify this. These concerns are given voice in Mattison’s (2000) article which explores ethical decision-making. It states that stereotypes and biases, which are not made explicit by the practitioner, undoubtedly will influence decision-making. It calls for us to use ethical self-reflection in order to be ethically

## ***Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context***

aware regarding how our assessments, interventions and decisions may be influenced by our character, conscience, personal philosophy, attitudes and biases.

Kennedy & Richards (2007) and Zifcak (2009) discuss these issues. They encourage social workers to work collaboratively with lawyers, recognizing that, “good practice is not in conflict with the law and that in fact they can utilize the law to support and sustain their own positions in the face of poor processes elsewhere (Kennedy & Richards, 2007, p. 26). They say that “both professions bring frameworks of understanding and approaches to problem resolution which, appropriately utilized, are valid and relevant to the difficulties faced by those marginalized in the community” (Swain, 2018, p. 5). They also state that, at both the practice and policy levels, social workers need to acknowledge the points at which legal interventions and remedies can prove effective and to seek them for the benefit of the community as a whole and their clients in particular. And finally, they say that social workers who have a good understanding of legal issues will make better-informed assessments and service or treatment plans with their clients. They propose that “enterprising” social workers should cultivate resources and relationships, including legal ones, wherever possible. They state that legal connections and the law are integral to our work, not just optional extras.

I read these authors’ work in my first year at the organization and it encouraged me to consider how we could raise social workers’ awareness of the legal issues that impact on social work practice and facilitate a positive intersect between social work and the law. Although there have been subjects on social work and the law on university curriculum for decades, there still seems to be a disconnect for many social workers when it comes to understanding personal injury law and the role of lawyers and insurers in this process. In conjunction with our lawyers, I initially developed a legal education program for social workers based on our personal injury practice areas and on practice issues such as privacy and confidentiality and legal issues of capacity. Our personal injury topics focus on increasing the understanding of legal entitlements so that social workers can inform their clients of their legal rights to access these entitlements, which can ultimately provide better access and options for treatment and support for some and ease financial burdens for others. This education program was, and continues to be, endorsed by the AASW and replicated in the other states as the service expanded. Our education is provided free of charge and obligation free and thousands of social workers have attended sessions over the years.

We also created a publication now called *Social Work and the Law* and this contains articles written by our lawyers that we consider relevant to social work practice. This is sent to more than 2,500 social workers nationally three times per year. We have developed legal glossaries, information sheets and other resource materials. We write articles and present to social workers and other professionals on the work of our service and how it is integrated within the organization. Our team provides an access point to legal information that other social workers feel safe to utilize. They will contact us with their practice issues or queries on behalf of their clients and we will either liaise with our lawyers to obtain information for them, or connect them to our legal professionals for more complex issues. At times we have also been able to facilitate social workers’ access to lawyers outside of our organization if the issue is beyond the scope of our organization’s legal practice areas.

Our team are all members of multiple social work special interest and practice groups that meet on a regular basis. We attend social work conferences, workshops and events. We are on social work committees, contributing our time and knowledge. For example: I was on the Branch Committee of Management of the AASW Victorian Branch for approximately six years; I was on a university social work program advisory committee; and I am national secretary for Oncology Social Work Australia & New Zealand. A relatively new group in Victoria is the Specialist Support Professionals in Legal Settings special interest

group. The majority of members are social workers, and all except my colleague, Lorraine, and I work in not-for-profit legal settings such as community legal settings and the Women's Legal Service. This has afforded worthwhile insights and discussions on topics such as privacy, documentation and risk and how each person and organization manage this. These opportunities allow us to bring new knowledge back to our organization, develop networks so we can reach out to other social workers as a resource in our casework and enable us to share the strong body of knowledge that we have developed.

Our team members write and present at conferences, at universities to social work students and at education seminars to various groups of social workers but also to our legal staff. Each time this affords us the opportunity to reflect on our practice and how we can improve upon our service provision.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE LONGEVITY OF THIS SERVICE**

From the time our Social Work Service commenced in 2009, two other law firms in Australia subsequently employed social workers and then terminated their services. Our service has become embedded within the organization. It has survived a financial crisis and major restructure which led to a change in Board and management and a reduction in staff and the number of legal areas of practice overall. Although it was a difficult time for the organization, the reduction in legal staff across the organization provided an opportunity, as it enabled our team to expand our full client service to Western Australia, whereas prior to this, we could only respond to their clients at risk of suicide, due to resourcing issues. How was our team's "survival" able to occur? There is a combination of factors that all contribute to, not only the survival of the service, but its success: individual, team, organizational and economic.

At an individual level, I believe my previous work experience was of assistance beyond the clinical knowledge and skills I acquired. For me, seven years of public hospital social work provided an environment of traditional social work practice that was well structured, had a defined role and support in place through supervision and professional development. It was a starting point to develop my identity as a social worker, but also showed me how undervalued social work's role could be within the health team and organization, if the value and contribution of social work was not clearly articulated. In my second year as a social worker I became the union delegate which afforded me rare insights into the organization and its managers, their strategic direction and their agendas and how this aligned to its staff, or not. Participating in meetings to negotiate improved conditions of employment and wage increases taught me the value and worth of social work as I sat alongside my allied health and other hospital colleagues.

I worked for fourteen years in a private rehabilitation hospital where ownership changed multiple times and general managers changed more so. With every change the existence of social work and other allied health disciplines had to be justified. This strengthened my ability to understand and articulate the value of social work in this setting. My roles during that time as social worker, Head of Social Work, Allied Health Unit Manager and union delegate allowed me to understand the organization from multiple perspectives. As a private hospital, it focused on profits for shareholders, which was at odds with why we worked with our patients. My colleagues and I learnt how to meet the needs of the organization without compromising quality patient care and safe discharge.

Arriving at Slater and Gordon as a solo social worker was daunting. All I had were my clinical knowledge and skills, my values and ethics, my strong moral compass and my belief in justice to draw upon. I was already familiar with working in a "for-profit" organization and Slater and Gordon had floated on the share market the previous year, the first Australian law firm to do so. I had been asked, when

### ***Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context***

interviewed, whether I had any ethical concerns working for a business. As the social work service was free, I felt more comfortable with working at the firm than I did at the private hospital where we relied on insurer funding of our time to enable us to assist patients.

A different experience for me was commencing work in an organization that had identified a need that could not adequately be met within its current staff mix, and recognizing the abilities of a social worker to meet that need. They did not employ a psychologist because it was already understood that social work can address a much broader range of issues, emotional and practical, and this is what the legal staff were being confronted with on a regular basis. I did not have to justify my existence. The service was embraced by the legal staff, in part because it was strongly endorsed by executive management, but also because the service was not only of benefit to the clients, but it was a relief to staff to be able to easily refer their clients for assistance and refocus on their legal work.

As National Manager of Social Work Services I report to a lawyer. There have been four managers in this time and all have been at a state manager level and on the executive leadership team. Our team has had the benefit throughout our existence of each one of these managers being a “champion” of our service and team. The first manager was the lawyer who conceived the idea of a social work service and subsequent managers were promoted within the organization. All had a strong understanding of the role of the service and its benefits. All have been very supportive and strong advocates of the service at executive level, across the organization and external to it.

Although the service was welcomed, based on my previous work experience, I knew I had to be able to articulate the value of what the team and I did, and communicate this on a regular basis. Our work, as is most others, is invisible unless it is communicated. It was not enough that the legal team members whose clients we helped appreciated our service, it was vital that my direct manager and those above were regularly updated. Communication was not only about client work, but promoting ourselves as a point of difference, and explaining how our multi-faceted approach added value to the organization. To achieve this it was, and remains, important to participate in broader management meetings and training in order to understand and align our service to the organization’s strategic direction and core components of the brand. Being able to translate what the social work service provides in a language that aligns with this is imperative. Under the helm of a new Chief Executive Officer, who takes genuine interest in the mental health issues our clients’ experience; there is an even greater emphasis to all staff on the importance of “client at center” and “client care”. Social work’s very existence clearly aligns with the focus on empathy, care, expertise, dependability and responsiveness across the organization.

Vital to the success of our service is that we have a team who are very experienced, highly skilled social workers and we have had the benefit of stable staffing. The team is mutually supportive and respectful, and everyone is committed to what we do and we work hard to achieve this. We are clear in our vision and are able to articulate this to the organization and externally. Being clear on our boundaries has been particularly important over the years as, at times, we have been asked to participate in activities beyond the scope of our practice. Being a very strong advocate for the service and the team has meant other managers know they will always get a clearly communicated but carefully considered answer to requests made. Applying a social work lens and being strategic thinkers allows changes, requests and decisions to be considered at multiple levels by the team—will this be in the best interests of the client, the social work service, the team, the organization, the broader social work community. Working within a non-traditional social work setting has given us an even stronger sense of social work identity and a clear vision of our service and what it can achieve. This has been further facilitated by the opportunities our team has to engage with other social workers and reflect on our practice.

Within the organization we are identified as ‘Social Work Services’ and each of us contains “social work” in our job titles. It was important, however, for the team not to consider ourselves a “stand-alone” service, separate from the organization or to behave that way. When a team is so small, separating oneself off can lead to vulnerability and can be viewed as an added extra or luxury, perhaps not required in a time of economic restraint. Our team continuously reinforces that we play a critical part in the delivery of quality client service through a number of ways. We provide an integrated service and identify ourselves to clients and colleagues as being part of the team providing direct client assistance; developing positive working relationships with all colleagues. We communicate openly and regularly in a respectful and supportive manner; and we are willing to share our knowledge about our vulnerable client population, and educate staff on how to work effectively with clients, and how to practice self-care. Each year our organization acknowledges World Social Work Day and we receive recognition for the work that we do. The ten-year anniversary of our service was celebrated across the organization.

Since 2009 there has been a significant increase in plaintiff law firms in Australia, particularly in Melbourne. Many are smaller “boutique” firms, but medium sized firms have expanded their businesses, opening multiple offices in suburban and regional areas. This has resulted in more competition for clients. Our social work service provides a point of difference in the market. Once hidden, our service now appears on the first page of the company website. Our service is important to the firm’s client care strategy and the service offering to clients. Our service is promoted by management to external key stakeholders and there is genuine pride when our service is spoken about. It was interesting that, when our organization was going through its restructure, a number of staff approached me, from a broad range of departments, to say that management’s decision to retain our service gave them hope that there was still a positive future for the organization, and that the firm’s values, its commitment to social justice and the best outcomes for its clients had not changed.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

What is the future of social work practice in the compensation context? I continue to hope this will expand to other law firms as an area of practice. Certainly, the value of social workers in not-for-profit legal settings has been long held and continues to grow. In the for-profit legal sector, there needs to be law firms that not only want to take a holistic perspective in relation to their clients and their issues, but they need to understand the role of a social worker and the benefit of having issues beyond the legal addressed, and be prepared to fund such a service.

If firms see the benefits of social work intervention but choose instead to refer clients out to private practice social workers, the issue of funding arises, and the firm also misses out on the enhancements internal social workers can provide. For example: provision of training to staff; consultation on improved communication and empathy with clients; reducing risk for vulnerable clients. For a social worker to best contribute, they need to fully understand the organization so working within the organization is mutually beneficial for best practice.

Our firm operates in a competitive market and our social work service is a point of difference. However, that competition means that there is a limited ability to share intellectual property and hence it would not be easy for another social worker to replicate this service elsewhere.

For our own service, given the unique combination of factors that have contributed to the success of the service, this in turn may potentially place the service at risk. At some point team members will

## ***Social Work Practice in the Compensation Context***

inevitably leave and need to be replaced. These are not traditional social work positions, so recruitment is more challenging. The organization's Board, management and shareholders are also likely to change over time. New management may take a different view of the value of the social work service and may decide to take the organization in a different direction. There have been significant changes in statutory schemes in some states that have impacted on the compensation process and the role of the lawyer. Further changes could have flow on effects to our team if areas of practice and client numbers are significantly reduced or cease. There are no guarantees and I will need to see what the next 10 years brings. In the interim, we will keep collaborating with our lawyers to improve clients' outcomes, and explore how undertaking research in regard to our practice can benefit our clients and the knowledge base of the social work profession.

## **CONCLUSION**

The social work service at Slater and Gordon is an example of how social work can be successfully embedded and fully integrated into a personal injury law firm. The strength of our service and, hence our practice, is that it is provided free of charge so that there are no parameters imposed upon us from the organization or other funding bodies in regard to who we assist and how we do so. Maintaining and promoting our strong social work identity, ethics, values, clinical knowledge and skills within the organization enables it to understand the unique contribution of our profession to the enhancement of the client experience in the legal claim process, and regularly leads to improved client outcomes.

Some social workers, as gatekeepers, may be restricting their clients' ability to access effective legal assistance because of their own bias against lawyers, based on myths and unfounded fears. Our team will continue to strive to enhance social workers' understanding about lawyers, the legal system and how legal processes work, and law firms operate. With this knowledge, social workers can make better-informed psychosocial assessments; service or treatment plans with their clients. They can knowledgeably explain to them when and why they should seek expert legal advice and assistance. They will be able to give them appropriate information to enable them to make an informed choice to select a lawyer or law firm that will best meet their needs, thereby contributing to the minimization of financial and social disadvantage.

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# Chapter 7

## Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training: Becoming Work-Ready in a Different Way

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Many disadvantaged young people and adults, long and short-term unemployed, overseas arrivals/refugees, people with mental health issues, mothers returning to the workforce, and those disconnected from their communities have lost hope of ever getting employment. Numerous employment-training programs are narrowly-focused classroom-based simulations provided on a sessional basis, while real-world job training opportunities with flexible entry/exit points and on-site professional social work support for those disconnected from employment opportunities are uncommon. The STEP program, an innovative and engaging real-world training program in an opportunity shop (op-shop), gives hope and job success to disaffected people, offering life-changing training in every aspect of running a business in the retail and office administration sector as well as teaching valuable life skills, including job interviews, accounts and administration, and customer service.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Developed by a social worker, the Holland Foundation Op-Shop operates the STEP program, offering participants broad-based training in retail, office administration, job search/resume writing/interview skills; embedded in a strength-based community development approach. All dimensions of the running of the shop are integrated in the training program and participants are guided along all the steps involved in successfully running a business. Referred to as volunteers, they are involved in every aspect of keeping the Op-Shop open and flourishing; learning is experiential and based on a peer-to-peer/skill-

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share STEP training approach, while the social work educated Director and volunteer mentors provide oversight and guidance.

The genesis of this chapter is reflected in the way it has been visually structured for this publication; on the one hand, it draws from the reflections by Grant Holland, founder and Executive Officer of the Holland Foundation Op-Shop, as elicited in an extended interview by the editors of this chapter and on the other hand, from the independent evaluation carried out in 2017 by the Borderlands Cooperative (Shuttleworth & Boulet, 2017, p. 13) In order to illustrate the convergence and dialogue between Grant's motivation towards and recontextualizing of alternative ways of practicing social work, and the story of the workings of the Op Shop, his reflections have been kept separate from the more descriptive and evaluative sections dealing with the work of the Op Shop itself.

This structure also assists in appropriately identifying the rather unique genesis and situation of the Holland Foundation and illustrates how from a relatively privileged position, social work and social workers can reconfigure their advantage towards the empowerment of those less fortunate and marginalized. In an Australian environment in which privatized but government funded employment services rake in multiple millions for their owners and shareholders for rather dubious on-the-ground results, it is hoped that this small initiative illustrates that small alternative projects can be more successful, however precarious their sustainability may appear to be.

### **Grant: My Personal and Professional Trajectory Towards the Op-Shop**

As a young relatively privileged white male person with a certain range of values and ideals, some of which may work, some of which do not, one's life takes different and sometimes unpredictable directions. For a range of reasons, I had a great interest in working with people. Like many young people, I also was very naïve.

My first job was as an apprentice motor mechanic. I earned \$64 AUD a week and thought I was rich. After a very short time, I realized the job was not in my heart and all the older mechanics told me to get out while I could. I did, and went back to school.

After completing Year 12, I was fortunate to get a position as a Trainee Clerk of Courts with (what is now known as) the Department of Justice. This was a formative period in my life that doubtlessly led to where I am today. I felt a strong connection to the human services field I was exposed to in this role. I got to understand a little about human suffering, disadvantage, disconnection, the loss of hope and the dilemmas present in the case sentencing submissions to the Court. I was particularly drawn to hearing stories of young people at the Children's Court who had gone through considerable trauma in their young lives.

I next was employed in a Youth Training Centre for children aged 10–15 years, many also being outside those age parameters, however. During my first week in the Centre, I was the first responder finding a young man attempting to suicide. Nothing like that had ever confronted me before. I managed to prevent him to kill himself but I still remember it as if it happened yesterday and I remember his name. Thankfully, he ended up being OK and although he had a reputation for aggression against staff, we always got on well. There was no debriefing; supervisors just said, "let's move on". There was no counseling for the young man, nor was there anything for me.

After many years in that big inflexible system, I struggled to find ways to initiate positive and innovative projects. It felt as if we were always battling to get great projects up and running, of which we

## **Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training**

knew or hoped they would help the kids. The old adage to just “keep doing what we are doing because we have always done it that way” was never more accurate.

I then transitioned to Youth Justice, Child Protection, outreach and various youth programs with young people usually in the state care system. Growing older and increasingly realizing that it is hard to be innovative within the confines of the system and state, I eventually started to understand and wanted to gain qualifications that might allow me to access more senior roles in an organization and thus allow some leeway to be creative and innovative. Given the nature of organizational structures, however, I found that one can pay a big price for promoting change, the problem of how to actually implement structural change still remaining. Admiring the pioneers of Social Pioneers, including several of my lecturers, who had made a difference in the world, I personally felt constrained in my own quest to promote positive change.

On a personal level, I had always cherished and wanted to honor my late grandparents who were both very committed to contributing to the community, publicly and discretely in private. They were quite innovative and some of their initiatives stimulated me to explore roles in a number of charitable programs also balancing my restrictions in my paid work. In 2004, I set up a Charitable Foundation in my grandparents' name; we involved ourselves in many activities, including mentoring and providing material and financial aid to young people and families. After some time, it became clear to me why my grandfather had always emphasized the importance of employment in bringing real change for people. I never fully understood why he was so focused on employment support programs, but then encountered people – young and adult - who experienced a 180-degree turn-around when getting a job, realizing that gaining employment could be unbelievably life changing. And so the next journey began, for which the evaluation has provided a more formal context.

## **Employment and Unemployment in a Changing Context**

In most liberal-democratic welfare states and with different degrees of emphases and foci, the receipt of welfare has remained a stigmatized experience. The belief being that it should only be available to those who deserve it, lest (so the usual rationale goes) the poor become dependent on others' charity (Castles et al., 2010; Esping-Anderson, 1990). Commenting on government welfare, Bauman (1998a p. 89) suggests that since the conception of the Poor Laws we have continued to deny the general and historic futility of:

*...our stubborn insistence, in spite of the massive evidence to the contrary, that breaking the norm of universal work-for-living is...the prime cause of poverty and that the cure must be sought in leading the unemployed back to the labour market.*

In Australia, and other politically-conservative industrial welfare states, the tendency to install restrictive and punitive legislation and regulations for those who become welfare recipients because of being unemployed, is well-known, reappearing regularly in policy debates, media messages and not only during economic downturns. Un and under-employed persons are persistently reminded of their mutual obligation to contribute to society (Shuttleworth & Boulet, 2017, p. 15)

It is instructive to note the willingness to reframe the so-called New Start Program to a Job Seeker arrangement in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. The increase in the fortnightly payment by nearly

50% gives the lie to repeated claims over many years by Australian governments that this was simply unaffordable. Further, it raises questions as to who suddenly, as a consequence of the pandemic, have become the *deserving* poor?

One first needs to posit that the human activity referred to as work, as Ela Bhatt (2006), founder of India's Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) reminds us, is so much more than just earning a living. The valuing of work depends on more than just the distorted and artificial norms generated by the labor market. Healey & Boulet (2006, p.39) approach the issue from an examination of the meaning and value of volunteering and state:

*The first unexamined assumption we should have a look at relates to the most common identification of voluntary work as 'non-paid work' within the context of capitalist political economies. This is so obviously a profoundly limiting way of viewing a range of meaningful and indispensable forms of work, indeed, forms of work without which humanity, as we know it would rapidly cease to exist. By implication, it devalues voluntary work itself and reaffirms that the only work that is truly 'of value' is that of the paid variety and that any human activity that occurs outside the formal accounting systems of the capitalist economy is inherently of less or no value... as so much of (women's) unpaid (and coincidentally, paid) work – as in Marilyn Waring's (1988) eponymous book titled 'Counting for Nothing'- and therein lies the inherent paradox of the 'real' value of the human activity we refer to as 'work'.*

The role of states and their political systems towards addressing the (un) employment phenomenon has historically waxed and waned in Australia, moving from a policy commitment to full employment up until the 1960s, to an increasingly reluctant and gradually more punitive approach; the latter certainly inspired by the dominance of a neo-liberal and socially conservative policy (Streeck, 2014). As Frank (2012, p. 2) comments:

*More troubling, our political system seems almost completely paralyzed, even in the face of... genuinely urgent problems ... A case in point is our failure to deal with the stubborn unemployment spawned by the financial crisis of 2008... Government, Keynes concluded, is the only actor with both the ability and the motive to stimulate spending sufficiently to put people back to work. Each new day of widespread unemployment is like a plane that takes off with many empty seats. In each case, an opportunity to produce something of value is lost forever.*

André Gorz had already predicted in the 1980s and 90s that “from the macro-economic point of view, an economy which, because it uses less and less labour distributes less and less wages, inexorably descends the slippery slope of unemployment and pauperization” (1989, p.200) and, as recent well-known research (e.g. Piketty, 2014, 2020) has indeed convincingly shown, widens the inequality gap. In the introduction to *Capital and Ideology* (2020, p.1) Piketty summarizes it well in his more than 1000 pages long book where he painstakingly documents the persistent but changing shape of social inequality across a large number of societies, employment and unemployment being both reason and consequence:

*Indeed, socioeconomic inequality has increased in all regions of the world since the 1980s. In some cases it has become so extreme that it is difficult to justify in terms of the general interest. Nearly everywhere a gaping chasm divides the official meritocratic discourse from the reality of access to education and wealth for society's least favoured classes. The discourse of meritocracy and entrepreneurship often*

## Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training

*seems to serve primarily as a way for the winners in today's economy to justify any level of inequality whatsoever while peremptorily blaming the losers for lacking talent, virtue, and diligence. In previous inequality regimes, the poor were not blamed for their own poverty, or at any rate, not to the same extent; earlier justificatory narratives stressed instead the functional complementarity of different social groups. Modern inequality also exhibits a range of discriminatory practices based on status, race and religion, practices pursued with a violence that the meritocratic fairy tale utterly fails to acknowledge.*

Similarly, as Bellamy Foster and McChesney (2012, p.150) remind us, *precarization* and *precarity*, originally part of Marx's discussion of the most pauperized sectors of the working class, have been rediscovered and have again become part of the poverty and welfare vocabulary. Precarity increasingly denotes and explicates the conceptual and experiential space between the objective living conditions of disenfranchised and excluded groups and individuals and their subjective and relational experiences of living in them. Gorz (1980, 1999), Bauman (1998a &b), Sennett (in most of his writings over four decades from *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972, written with Cobb) to his more recent *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) and *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006)), Beck (2000), Wilkinson & Pickett (2009) and Doogan (2009), variously describe and analyze this in-between territory. They theorize it in terms of the *Post-Fordist Society*, where they conceptualize a change in the fundamental nature and character of work, from the system formulated in Henry Ford's automotive production factories to the dominant system of economic production and consumption in most industrialized countries since the late 20th century.

Deranty describes in detail the

*...impact of the fragmentation of work collectives and of the flexibilization of work practice on subjectivities and on social bonds... A shared diagnosis has emerged... (including) the insoluble conflict between the fragmented and flexibilized temporality of current work practices and the demand for longer timeframes in subjects' ethical lives... the impact of the de-structuration of the old institutions of labour on contemporary individuals and communities... the sense of identity becomes problematic when the social protections that were required to ward-off the threat of the uncertain future have been dismantled. Fully individual security is a chimera and everyone senses it (2008, pp. 455–6).*

Deranty goes on to refer to French sociologist and social psychologist, Dejours, whose vision

*...contradicts optimistic views of work changes, as allowing for increased amounts of responsibility, autonomy and creativity for the workers, as well as the more ambivalent judgments that highlight the greater concern with workers' health but insist on the increase in individual autonomy... The crux of Dejours' diagnosis is that the new organisation of work and the new techniques of management weaken, and in many cases render impossible, the possibility of individual hope... to be able to deal with the suffering incurred at and through work. Neoliberal society is for him intrinsically **pathogenic** because the organization of work (it) is based on, is itself a direct challenge to psychic economies...The affect that arises at work and from work, to subsequently vitiate all social bonds is **fear**...Given the... importance of work for subjective identity... different types of fear ask workers the same, terrible question: will you be able to cope, and for how long? (The) flexibilised, fluidified, individualised organisation of work produces massive amounts of anxiety (2008, pp.455–7).*

The anxiety of which Deranty and Dejours speak, confirms the increasing precarisation or precariousness of existence, both in the conditions and in the personal and relational experience of living (Deranty, 2009). Referring to the philosophy undergirding the neoliberal approach to welfare and work dependency, Deranty concludes:

*Neoliberal discourse is thus caught in a contradiction of its own making, between its utopian vision of the fully autonomous, self-realized individual and the reality of its politics of fear. The way out for it lies in concepts like that of the 'aspirational' classes, or in arguments such as 'the political battler ground is in the middle classes'...(and) some will have to be sacrificed... a whole class of individuals must be abandoned to their own fate for the economic order (identified with society), to maintain itself. The premise becomes acceptable for the majority if to the 'necessity' that some be sacrificed is added the other premise: but it won't be you... unless you don't adapt. The new social hope is therefore the hope of not being one of the sacrificed. The new social hope is for strictly individual salvation (2008, p.461).*

This serves to make the point that much is taken for granted and uncritically assumed, or simply not considered, in many discussions about work, employment, labor, their meaning in people's lives and what it means to not have it. Add to this the vastly different values accorded to the variety of activities referred to as work or labor. Waring's, *Counting for Nothing* (1998) is an indictment of the lack of value and recognition given to women's work. Think about the ambiguities surrounding what we call child labor, and the curious distinctions established by several adjectives intending to qualify or specify the nature of work activities, notions like voluntary, paid, free labor or work (Healey & Boulet, 2006). Generally, it is paid work that is meant, when having conversations about what it takes to *make a living*, never mind those who do household work or try to bring kids up under rather difficult conditions, nor all of those whose voluntary work sustains so many aspects of community life and living.

Further, it deserves serious consideration of whether being your own boss, as a self-employed person, or being involved in a social enterprise or cooperative, could make a difference to the conditions and experiences of employed or salaried work under the present political-economic and ecological conditions. Indeed, alternatives to the normal model of working have emerged in recent decades in the context of the sustainability, regenerativity and circular-economy movements; the localization, commons and peer-to-peer initiatives; the de-growth and simplicity alternatives; and as the solidarity economy approaches. Establishing a broadly inclusive framework, with a genuine appreciation of what useful work may mean including the principles associated with it, and how these could inform the new shape and orientation of employment services and work training opportunities, will be necessary. The future of work-as-we-know-it is by no means assured. Entire industry sectors are disappearing. Full-time jobs have become a rarity, especially for young people. Casual work and work in the so-called gig economy, rather than permanent jobs, are becoming the norm, so that the required capabilities and attitudes for such new types of, and approaches to, work and labor are imperative.

Just one example from the US illustrates these changes. The traditional coal-mining industries in the Appalachians have closed and the local environment has been destroyed by open-cut mining dynamiting-off the hilltops under which coal remained buried. Even these surface mines don't have coal anymore and projects have been developed to transform the devastated and poisoned earth into arable land. A former miner now farmer shares:

## **Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training**

*On a surface-mine-turned-farm in Mingo County, West Virginia, former coal miner Wilburn Jude plunks down three objects on the bed of his work truck: a piece of coal, a sponge, and a peach. He's been tasked with bringing in items that represent his life's past, present, and future. "This is my heritage right here," he says, picking up the coal. Since the time of his Irish immigrant great-grandfathers, all the males in his family have been miners. "Right now I'm a sponge," he says, pointing to the next object, "learning up here on this job, in school, everywhere, and doing the best I can to change everything around me." Then he holds up the peach. "And then my future. I'm going to be a piece of fruit. I'm going to be able to put out good things to help other people (Moore, 2017).*

A bit bombastic, but illustrates the various factors, which contribute to the background against which the STEP program should be seen. These factors include: the perennial discussion about employment and appropriate responses to the lack thereof in Australia and elsewhere; the often unquestioned and undifferentiated centrality accorded to the need for salaried or self-employed work in capitalist-liberal-democratic societies. These issues require serious consideration so that they can inform an appropriate valuation of programs like the STEP training program approach presented here. It may indeed be that training for generic capabilities and attitudes to work in rapidly changing political-economies like Australia will become of essence, rather than narrow training for specific skills or jobs; and when a dose of critical awareness, self-reflection and cooperative intent can be integrated, a gold-standard of employment preparation would have been reached.

It also poses interesting questions for the place of social work. Usually, social work deals with the social and psychological consequences of unemployment. The STEP program suggests that the profession's place could be at the systemic locus of work and employment itself.

### **Grant: The Origins of the Op-Shop**

During my work as a Clerk of Courts and meeting many young people, I heard their stories and wondered about their background; this motivated me to work untrained in a Youth Training Centre, soon realising however, that to reach positions from which one can positively influence the "big machine" and treat people with dignity and respect required a qualification. As a mature-aged student, in 1994, I started a Bachelor in Social Work course, where I met amazing people, whose inspiring experiential stories propelled me to pursue post-graduate studies, including family therapy and a MA in social science. Generating change in many organisations remains challenging, many still feeling like "big immovable machines", not receptive to innovation or directional change.

Organisations suffer from systemic, historical and philosophical boundaries, requiring one to follow the line. If not conforming, they will find ways to make it work. For example, in one agency, being expected to work Christmas days or nights for five years in a row was partly due to me trying to buck the system. I had tried to run a healthy food shopping and cooking program with young people in detention, rather than spending their pocket money on cigarette rations. Questioning the status quo was considered an act of rebellion, no matter how respectfully it was done. Having observed and listened to people who had changed the world a bit, I was inspired to venture out, take a risk and started the Op-Shop project, around 2013.

The Holland Foundation received a lot of donations, people frequently offering goods such as antiques and other items we initially rejected, as we could not meaningfully pass them on to people experiencing homelessness, for that matter, anyone experiencing a form of disadvantage. That was when the idea of



starting an Op-Shop came about, selling these items and offering an opportunity for people to train in a range of retail activities. The Op-Shop opened in February 2013 and with the support of a progressive Committee of Management, we decided to throw all the rules out of the window and to train the unemployed in all aspects of the Foundation and its business, nothing off-limits. Even if we won't create an economic system that is equal for all with our modest Op-Shop project, we want to make sure that all our participants could learn everything, from how to do the payroll, to run for a position on the Board... and they still do.

During the early days of my practice as a social worker, the professional badge allowed me to move ahead and collaborate, be innovative, creative and generate ways of empowering people to help themselves. Inspirations generated by our social work thinking and imaginations in turn influenced the Board's decision-making and my education and experience in that field has been invaluable. The wide range of social work skills and approaches translates into many avenues that can be taken and at various levels and in conjunction with one another. Family therapy has also provided me with a toolbox of approaches and strategies. With up to sixty people in the organisation at any time, we need to find what fits and how we are going to work at whatever the issue is they arrive with.

Social work students, whose contributions on their practice placement we have welcomed over the years, want to have an impact on the world and on people. They usually leave inspired because they had life-changing experiences with people who had lost hope, who felt they could never get a job. A woman with a myriad of issues who had come to the Op Shop for quite a while returned later, proudly wearing her cleaner's uniform, to show us how proud she was of getting a job; inspiring the students. As their placement supervisor, I help them see that if we can build a life-changing program from scratch, they can achieve similar. One has to be able to work in the system, with the system, but always being able to question it. Students are encouraged to respectfully but assertively question me about things we do. It is so important to question the system and ask why do we do it this way? Can we do better or different? We accept students from many disciplines. Some academic institutions still do not understand what a Social Worker is doing in an Op-Shop, in fact, until one spends a few weeks at the shop, participating in what is happening with the side-by-side learning and mentoring, one really cannot get what it is all about. So it is time to share what is going on in the shop.

## **Profile and Parameters of Social Work in the Op-Shop Context**

Given the importance of reflecting on social work's orientation to structural and personal change as the dual foundation for its approaches, the link between the STEP training program and theories and practices of welfare and social/community services provision needs to be established. Edgar Cahn's advice in his *No More Throw-Away People* applies to the Op-Shop program; the *Co-Production Imperative*:

- Supplies a critically important missing element needed for a program to succeed.
- Transforms the relationship between client and helping professional from one of subordination and dependency to one of contribution, mutuality and parity.
- Secures critical resources for financially strapped programs.
- Effects system change.
- Advances social justice (2004, pp. 209-212).

## ***Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training***

Participants at the Holland Foundation Op-Shop are referred to as volunteers or trainees, matching the positive program narrative and they are provided with opportunities to gain real world experience in a genuine work environment. Not being referred to and labeled as unemployed (or worse) offers participants a constructive and non-stigmatizing starting point and establishes a positive self-identity.

The program also empowers women of all ages into leadership/management roles and they are given special training for this. The program is widely advertised and no restrictions are placed on applicants. People with a wide range of schooling and prior employment experience and from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds are accepted; if agreeing to commute and eager to learn. A panel, consisting of the Director and Trainee Manager and other trainees, interviews applicants. The trainees are offered an opportunity to explore the role of interviewer and develop observational and interviewing skills.

A feature of the STEP program is that applicants are provided immediate feedback on their interview performance, ranging from feedback on presentation, timeliness, how questions are answered, and feedback is offered; the panel members taking the perspective of future potential interviewers or employers. Learning is experienced starting from the applicant's first contact with the Op-Shop. It is rare for applicants not to be accepted to the program. But if they are refused entry, it is generally because the panel determines that applicants are not yet ready to accept the need to change their attitudes and behavior when intending to apply for a job. After the interview, applicants complete a form providing their contact details; their availability and referee details; and they sign a contract. The panel members debrief after the interview and assess the applicant's suitability for the program, which provides yet another opportunity for the volunteer-trainees to gain insights into all aspects of the job interview process.

Work at the shop is based on a roster system managed by participants under the supervision of the trainee manager. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the shop opened seven days a week, weekdays from nine to five and weekends from ten to four. With a pool of up to sixty trainees, eight or nine are on-duty per shift; they learn work ethics, cash handling, banking, office administration, accounts payable/receivable, pricing, display, merchandising, stock control, inventory, customer service, sales, working in a team and management skills.

A typical working/training day sees trainees meeting the nominated team leader for the morning session outside the shop prior to opening at 9 am. Using a checklist with the tasks requiring completion at each session, the team leader allocates roles and tasks to the participants rostered on for the particular session. A morning and afternoon session or shift are run daily with the afternoon team leader taking responsibility for ensuring that cash reconciliations are completed and the shop is tidied and locked for the night.

During the day, more experienced participants work with those who are new, sharing skills and knowledge. Every opportunity is exploited to transform questions and incidents into learning moments. One such moment occurred when a trainee alerted the coordinator to a shoplifting incident. The coordinator quickly and purposefully entered the shop, phone-in-hand and ready to address the matter. Immediately after the incident, trainees were asked to reflect on the coordinator's approach and why they had acted as they did. Constantly returning the enquiry to the trainees themselves strengthens their belief that they are capable, further developing their sense of personal power and agency.

Critically, the program is not simply a training program but represents a real life work experience, where learning opportunities abound at every level and that operates in a culture with human-centric workplace practices. On acceptance into the program, volunteer-trainees are asked to develop their own learning goals, thus ensuring that the adult education intentional learning principle is considered and acknowledged. Adults are goal and relevance-oriented when deciding to engage in training, especially

work oriented training. In this process, personal responsibility in the workplace learning community is affirmed and it becomes clear that relationships are to be conducted in adult-to-adult terms of equality and respect. This encourages volunteer-trainees to consider what they want to achieve rather than simply following a training agenda determined by others. It also allows them to think about the roles they really want to undertake within the program, intend to perfect themselves whilst there, but also with a view to future work choices and options.

The Op-Shop operates with complete transparency; all trainees-volunteers have access to all aspects of the business including all documentation. This is important as they move from role to role engaging in every retail function, from customer service, to stock control, cleaning and presentation of goods, banking and bookkeeping through to group leader and management roles. Based on the skill-sharing approach, volunteer-trainees learn through a peer-to-peer model and through behavior modeled by the Director/Program Coordinator and by using careful questioning techniques. The culture of the organization allows for mistakes and learning occurs through the process of reflection as people explore other options and share experiences. Poor behavior choices are confronted as opportunities for learning and reflection.

A key feature of the program is the development of mutually beneficial inter-dependent relationships, a central tenet of community development approaches when working with people from disadvantaged life contexts. People learn from each other, help each other, they come to know one another and make friends often extending beyond the op-shop and the time spent at the training program. One of the most important foundations for community-building is embracing diversity and this program plays a key role in exposing participants to other cultures and ways of being in a work environment where it is expected that everyone will be treated with respect. Thus, volunteer trainees learn to interact with a broad cross-section of people, valuing their difference and the ways in which they share their common humanity, succinctly expressed by one participant, “when learning with and from others, you learn more than the task you are doing”.

An evaluation of the Op-Shop’s work found that the focus on relating is supported by an emphasis on communication skills, providing an opportunity to learn the importance of making sure that one is understood, rather than simply telling people what to do. It is also a place where people appear to develop a sense of responsibility; the ability to respond, deriving from overseeing the work of others; also providing an insight into the need for both listening and talking; and the importance of asking clarifying questions. Proficiency in the English language; developing courage to make and learn from errors; dealing with different kinds of people; managing difficult customers; and building self-confidence; enable participants to navigate a range of employment opportunities as opposed to offering just task-centered vocational training, which certainly would limit their options.

As mentioned, particular emphasis is placed on training women for leadership roles by building their confidence and offering them opportunities to succeed in a supportive environment. The egalitarian and respectful culture in which people work and learn also underpins this focus, as considered in Folbre’s (2001) work, as it shifts the focus of women’s work into leadership rather than predominantly caring roles.

It is up to the volunteer-trainees to determine when they feel ready to look for paid work: this is rather unusual in the field of job training but it turns into a very supportive learning process. This approach reduces participants’ stress, especially when being forced into job search activities while they are still feeling at their most vulnerable. The program also enables them to take steps towards looking for work from a solidly supportive base. Access to a template for writing their résumé, interview training and tips, and reflections on positive and negative interview experiences, provides additional support to that offered by the learning/workplace community itself.

## **Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training**

Grant shares an example of where the combined characteristics of the STEP program may lead:

*In terms of the philosophical underpinnings of the STEP program, some people who are accepted into the program are not going to get a job, probably never. One gentleman had been attending the Op-Shop for about three years. He was a person with a former dependence on drugs, living a high life, but now with physical disabilities and some years ago being brain-dead, for quite a while, a lost soul. He kept coming back. He enjoys presenting at the front counter, cracking jokes with customers. He loves the interaction with the customers. In the early stages of his visiting, he would say, "I wished they hadn't revived me". Now, having accommodation and a disability pension, he finds life OK. A major plank of social work as we understand it in the program is that we presume we can deal with whatever pops-up; if not, we refer on. At the Op-Shop, there are many doors, offering front, back and sideways access.*

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE FOUNDATION**

The Holland Foundation is an Incorporated Association, registered with the Australian Taxation Office and with Consumer Affairs Victoria. The elected Board has responsibility for governance of the organization and for supporting the Executive Director/Training Coordinator. There are a few significant mentors, trainees who perform at a higher level and who are allocated higher management responsibilities. An in-built flaw of the program occurs when there is a high turnover of trainees; indeed, when trainees become quite skilled, they leave as they get a job or try further training elsewhere. So they move on and when several reach this stage and leave around the same time, the resulting gap leads to temporary chaos until other trainees advance their skill levels.

But it's a good problem to have as it indicates the success of the program, confirmed by many appreciative and positive expressions of gratitude received from former trainees now having satisfying employment or undertaking further training or tertiary education.

## **Grant Reflects**

It's crucial to have an insightful Board that allows some leeway and space about how the Op-Shop and the Foundation more generally spends its money. Fundraising is essential for our survival, including charity balls, barbecues and other events. A grant from the Australian Association of Social Workers, the Lyra Taylor Fund<sup>1</sup> enabled us to engage an independent evaluator to help us better understand the work of the Op-Shop. This provides us with an important document to supplement our grant submissions to several philanthropic trusts. We are in an environment in which funding-organizations have become more stringent, they apply more conditions, set higher bars and expectations, and have many more and stricter selection and performance criteria.

Our volunteer-trainees themselves ARE the program and Op-Shop administrators, learning everything necessary to run the business, including being involved in funding submissions. They have access to examples of submissions and work out how to write one; they also are provided with a list of financial expenditures and incomes, introducing them to the actual costs of running the shop. They are often dumbfounded to discover, for example, that yearly around \$40,000 AUD is required just for renting the shop in a busy shopping street. They thus become familiar with all aspects of the program and of running the business.

Administratively we half operate as a charitable foundation and half as a business. In 2004 we were established as a Foundation, a name that gives philanthropic and other funding bodies a wrong impression of affluence, but we are anything but affluent. Our original concept was to “build a foundation from a solid community”. So in reality, we are a not-for-profit shop front run as a business, but officially and for registration and taxation purposes, the Foundation is an incorporated association. When we first registered, the Australian Tax Office refused to give us tax deductibility status, which did not help us when trying to attract donations from philanthropic groups or other donors who require their donations to reduce their taxes. Luckily, we successfully fought this and can now claim this status.

## **PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

The overarching vision of the Holland Foundation is to be a (modest) leader in the provision of innovative child, youth and family welfare services; offering practical and creative solutions to those in need of support and relief including individuals and families suffering from structural disadvantages. Solution-focused strategies are deployed, aiming to empower service users, strengthening their connections to local community resources and building confidence in their own problem-solving skills.

### **Grant Declares his ‘Critical Eclecticism’ and his Concerns about the Future**

At university, in the social work and other courses I attended, some lecturers strongly encouraged even pushed us to align ourselves with a particular philosophical ethos, whilst other lecturers seemed to promote a “toolbox” approach. Many theoretical concepts and approaches as taught or described in textbooks incorporate some wonderful elements, but I have always been eclectic rather than strictly adhere to a particular approach, whether theoretical or practical. If the primary issue of a particular volunteer-trainee is the need for a job, we will adopt a strengths-based approach. In contrast, for someone who cannot look another person in the eye and who has their head down all the time, one might draw on a developmental approach, exploring the family history, and previous negative relational experiences. Whatever seems appropriate given the circumstances, presentation and initial capabilities and attitudes, we will try and experiment with. Being not aligned with one particular approach or even a specific practice philosophy, we are pragmatic and if one practice approach does not work, we draw upon another.

Family therapeutic perspectives and insights have been especially valuable; for example, one female trainee seemed unable to communicate with anyone beyond offering standard monotone and monochrome responses such as “I’m fine, thanks” and other simple three to four word answers to all questions. One of our other volunteer-trainees traveling on the same train observed her talking and even laughing animatedly on her mobile. Her blockages in life social situations derived from previous traumatic experiences, indicating a need for a longer period in training and supporting her in the long road back to her full capabilities.

The evaluation of the program mentioned before incorporated feedback from a social work student, who positively identified the Strengths-Based Community Development approach underpinning the STEP program. That became apparent to her through the manner in which mentors distinguished between participant trainees and their problems; rather than defining the former in terms of the latter, in the program people are not perceived to have deficits. The entry into the program is as a volunteer worker in an Op-Shop, which is a positive way to start helping someone with the notion that they are valued

## **Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training**

rather than pitied. The Op-Shop thus also attempts to provide real-life work experiences for social work students on placement, infusing their understanding of what they encounter and the lessons to be learned for their future social work practice, acknowledging the interpenetration of the structural, personal and relational dimensions of professional practice.

Research by social work students on placement at the Op-Shop revealed that a diversity of other comparable models of work in the pre-employment training area exist in Europe and North-America; there are community gardens and cafes, different vocational areas and community development and engagement projects. In Australia, however, whilst innovative alternative employment training programs do exist, nothing closely comparable to the STEP program approach has been found and certainly not in Opportunity Shops or other instances of a local *circular economy*, an economic system aimed at eliminating waste and the continual use of resources.

About the changes in the political and economic context, the Op-Shop is a very small lean organization assisting many people. Recently, we received an email from a local politician, referring to three organizations involved in distributing food and other material goods and questioning our reason for existence. As it turned out, it is us who donate the food to two of these organizations, which thus creates the appearance of competition. The economic race to survive is cut throat, pitting us as welfare organizations against each other. This needs to be addressed, allowing us to pursue different initiatives without being seen to be in competition and being questioned as to our legitimacy. Whilst the STEP program can be replicated, it is quite unlikely that it will. It is a good system that has evolved from trial and error and it work. But I cannot see any not-for-profit organization having the extensive human resources and personal/professional commitment to do so at scale.

Apart from the COVID-19 disaster this year, each year has been a struggle, as costs continue to increase. We work in the employment sector, which is dominated by some large NGOs (positively and otherwise); interestingly, we have a small contract with one of those employment providers and, given the structure of the unemployment services system, when one of our volunteers gets a job, it is the employment provider that receives the rather large bonus! Still, I remain hopeful that we will never lose sight of locally based small organizations. The importance of being local, grassroots-based and part of the shopping strip facilitates connectedness with the local community and its resources and that is critical for a program like this.

Returning to Cahn's (2004) work and his co-production approach, through the running of the Op-Shop, the Holland Foundation contributes a critically important element to the success of the STEP program through consistently offering genuine love and care for people and community. Through careful reflection and planning of each STEP, the entire program is saturated with the deepest consideration of the needs of those who have been marginalized and disenfranchised, often in multiple and intersecting ways. The concept of co-production fully applies to the processes and relationships upon which the operations of the Op-Shop and the STEP program rest. As the volunteer-trainees learn and become trained in all the requisite skills and attitudes to run a shop, they are indeed the co-producers of all the necessary undertakings to keep their Op-Shop running and—at least—remaining in operation. Together with the resources provided by the Foundation and the income generated by the several fundraising events and some occasional and modest government grants, they can thus also be considered the co-producers of their own training and broader learning.

Throughout the evaluation, it became apparent that the work of the Op-Shop was primarily the practice of love in the sense that is embodied in the words of Cornell West (2011), “Never forget that **justice** is what **love looks like in public**”. Every aspect of the program seeks to address matters of injustice

as it is manifested at all levels of society. Starting with the basic principles of how we treat each other with kindness, honesty and respect; offer access to knowledge and information; value multiple intelligences, diversity and autonomy, the work of the Op-Shop models them all and imbues this culture in the participants.

Another connection can be made with Paulo Freire's approach to learning and education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). While the notion of "oppression" may not easily be associated with the situation of the unemployed in liberal-democratic systems like Australia, where self-determination and freedom are usually assumed to govern personal decision-making – even if probably too quickly taken for granted – disadvantage, exclusion and discrimination do come in structural and systemic ways that subjectively feel oppressive and paralyze individuals. Freire reacted strongly against forms of teaching and learning he coined "banking education", based as they were on the assumption that learners come to school as "empty vessels" to be "filled" with the knowledge created by the powerful and provided by the teacher. Against this, he strongly posited that true "empowerment" starts with recognizing the power and knowledge that the poor or disenfranchised bring with them and then integrating the new skills, attitudes and knowledge with those already present. It requires respect and interest by the teacher or instructor and suggests that teacher and learner are on an "alongside one another" trajectory of reciprocal learning, rather than a one-way injection of knowing and docile "proof" of adequate comprehension in the other direction.

This approach also confirms the powerful statement of Meridian, the central African-American heroine in Alice Walker's realistic story with the same title when challenged with whether she thinks that she could teach people how to live, she answers:

*I don't know. I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don't see it as a handing down of answers. So much of what passes for teaching is merely a pointing out of what items to want (1976, p.192).*

Social justice goals are achieved through, and reflected in, the opportunities created for, and with, those who are likely to be excluded from employment, for them to learn and develop skills to allow them to access employment and to feel included through their participation in meaningful work. The program is based on an egalitarian strength-based and holistic approach. Volunteer trainees build on prior learning and life experience, building knowledge and skills as required, whilst also making a contribution through sharing their learning with others and contributing to the overall work of the Foundation. Adult learning and community development principles are embedded throughout the stages and the dimensions of the training program.

As the evaluation revealed, based on participant observation, interviews and other testimonial evidence, the STEP program has over the years provided evidence of the powerful and transformational shift in the relationship between volunteer-trainees and the social worker and social work students as well as the mentors. As a social worker, the director/coordinator understands his role as *the holder of the place*, assuring the safety necessary for good relationships to evolve. Rather than assuming a position commensurate with traditional hierarchical power, as a *facilitator* he tries to make things easier but not by solving problems on behalf of the trainees. His open style allows him to challenge trainees to face the difficulties by themselves whilst always being ready to support them and assist in figuring things out. His attitude and demeanor clearly reveal his own learning on a day-to-day basis and this, in turn, inspires others through a mutual learning experience, where people are humans first rather than

## **Social Work, Op-Shops, and Job Training**

being cloaked in assigned roles. The approach to securing financial resources has been creative with volunteer-trainees learning and committing to generating funding to cover their own learning and to making a contribution to other work in which the Holland Foundation is engaged, including fundraising and other welfare programs.

Hence, the STEP program also meets another of Cahn's recommendations, suggesting the need to "Transform the relationship between client and helping professional from one of subordination and dependency to one of contribution, mutuality and parity" (2004, pp. 209-212). Indeed, the retail-training program delivered through the Op-Shop provides both training and a real-life work experience. This does much to alleviate the stigma attached to receiving welfare. Whilst some participants are in receipt of unemployment benefits, they also make a social contribution, validated by the constructive and collaborative environment in which the Op-Shop operates and by contributing to other aspects of the Foundation's work. For example, in fundraising efforts and by being involved in supporting other social service agencies as mentioned before.

The Op-Shop STEP program reveals a unique approach, involving volunteer-trainees themselves in the interviewing process with new applicants, their potential peers, providing a rare opportunity to observe others in this often nerve-racking experience and allowing them to reflect on their own performance in interviews. It also addresses a major structural obstacle as so many people have little or no idea about how an interview panel would proceed in making a selection from a variety of applicants. Finally, it presents an interesting experience for the new program recruits, allowing them to experience the Op-Shop culture early on, adding an aspiration to their learning which for most unemployed and disadvantaged people would be utterly unexpected.

On a macro-level, and given the vagaries of the job market and other potential predicaments leading to precarity, the retail-training program represents a model which could become part of the alternative locality-based economy where people are not just cogs in a production-based profit-making consumption machine. Moreover, the retail-training program maintains the dual focus of social work, in that it addresses both structural change and personal development through relational approaches that nurture and encourage those who seek help in finding a way into work.

As Kenneth Gergen suggests in his important *Relational Being*:

*Consider first the new recruit into an organization – a business, a team, a club, or a non-profit. It is not the rules, laws, or directives that will bring about vitality of action. Nor is it necessarily the process of formal training, mentoring, or modelling. The individual may learn to perform correctly, but without desire, care, or enthusiasm. The significant question is how to bring about fully engaged participation (2009, p. 313).*

Gergen further elaborates how, through affirmation, life in employing-organizations becomes productive:

*When affirmed, the individual is more likely to share ideas, values, and logics. In this way, the organization becomes both richer in potential and more fully connected to the web of meaning outside its walls... Affirmation also sets in motion the possibility of reciprocation. If you find my ideas interesting, for example, you also invite my caring attendance to your ideas (2009, p.315).*



And as Gergen concludes, such relational learning “is not only based on an appreciation of what may be wrought by human connection, but (it may) actively increase the flow of co-action in the worlds.... [also pointing to] the necessity of relational well-being for the world’s future.” (pp. 400–401)

## CHALLENGES

Robotics, artificial intelligence, automation of labor and even on-line shopping will mean that many traditional work roles will not only change fundamentally, but will disappear from the human landscape of daily activities. This has significant ramifications for Australia, where workers have been paid relatively high wages, compared to other countries now actively competing with Australian workers in a way that was not possible or relevant until very recently. Thus, previously comfortable groups and even classes of workers and, by implication, their families, are now experiencing increased vulnerability and anxiety. These social and economic challenges will demand more of programs such as the Op-Shop STEP program as the question will increasingly become: “what can people *do* rather than how can people enter into the job market?” Two emerging areas are being offered as potential growth areas; service-related roles, and the manufacture or creation of bespoke items, and both of those should be increasingly linked and integrated in localized circular and distributive economic systems. Whilst both of these areas present dilemmas as they are likely to be low-paid work performed for those who have accumulated excess capital, the additional problem will consist in making sure that the local and global production and consumption spheres are creatively and sustainably interconnected. Already in the 1980s and 90s André Gorz predicted that:

*...from the macro-economic point of view, an economy which, because it uses less and less labour, distributes less and less wages, inexorably descend the slippery slope of unemployment and pauperization (1989, p. 200).*

And, indeed, as well known and widely debated research (Piketty, 2014 and 2020; Milanovic, 2019) have convincingly shown, this is a process that also widens the *inequality gap*. The gap is already more than evident and growing at a frightening rate. Whilst we are told that future work opportunities lie in the service industries and the making of bespoke items, this should ring alarm bells as we face a return to the labor of the masses being in service to a narrowing elite class. Evidence that our workplaces are becoming increasingly hostile environments continues to emerge. The focus on outputs or outcomes, benchmarks, key performance indicators and the like leave little room for the development of human-centric working communities and as workplaces become more and more competitive and jobs disappear for a range of reasons, workers are forced to compete rather than co-operate.

In a Guardian article *Neoliberalism has brought out the worst in us*, Paul Verhaeghe, author of *What about me?* (2014), a critical examination of contemporary narcissism, explores how psychopathic traits are encouraged and reminds us that self-respect “largely depends on the recognition we receive from others, as thinkers from Hegel to Lacan have shown”. He also quotes Richard Sennett who sees “...the main question for employees these days as being “who needs me?” He says that for a growing group of people, the answer in “no-one”!

Much has been written about human resource management and its impacts in the modern workplace, one suggestion being that recruitment and management techniques draw out the psychopathic tenden-

cies, which are latent in all of us. Together with the emergence of what Anne Manne (2014) describes as the new narcissistic personality, this means that those entering the contemporary workplace can face increasingly complex and toxic work environments. We should note that this all takes place in the context of a world facing growing complex and interwoven challenges, not the least of which is climate change, gaining pace in a world lacking the political will to do what is required to prevent its occurrence and its effects and rather turning to populist and protectionist nationalistic approaches. Many are now advocating a focus on localization linked to global movements and the re-creation of inter-dependent local communities.

For the Holland Foundation and the Op-Shop program, the challenge in working for social justice in this new world will be to consider how to support those already most vulnerable and disenfranchised, to become capable of living sustaining and sustainable lives in an increasingly uncertain world, a world where we need to consider much more than how to just help people into a job which will provide them with the wherewithal to support themselves and their families. Indeed, we may have to enlarge our imagination to encompass questions of more existential gravitas as life on earth becomes more precarious.

### **Grant's Final Thoughts: Social Work Identity and the Needed Response from Social Work Education**

Inspirational, critically eclectic and imaginative people with a bit of a passion and willing to STEP outside the boundaries of conformity are critical to the future of social work. The economic challenges we are facing require greater involvement with other sectors, expanding our strategies, with other professions; disciplines and an understanding of how they work to more refine our strategies. It is not an easy road to keep the program afloat. If we follow our passion and heart, we can cut through this, but one is still lying awake at night wondering if we are going to survive, dreaming of further resources, to somehow make a different and easier path for small, not-for-profits.

Harnessing the energy of youth can be life changing. We need more doors to open and re-open again and again. The people coming to the Op-Shop have often lost hope, then found hope and connection and are so grateful when re-discovering their own value and worth in their communities via employment. Many keep in touch, move up the ranks in their employment settings due to the way we train them. They are universally very thankful and often wish to also contribute by giving back to others, often as mentors. They are on a new journey of hope and I feel privileged to have been in a profession that allows me to help their lives change for the better.

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## **ENDNOTE**

- <sup>1</sup> Born in New Zealand Lyra Taylor was engaged as the first social worker in the Australian Federal Department of Human Services and helped change how governments delivered their social services programs. After her death in 1979 the Victorian Branch of the Australian Association of Social Work, to whom she bequeathed her estate, established the Lyra Taylor Fund, to advance the professionalism and standing of social work through research, development and training.

Section 3

# Indigenous Discourse

# Chapter 8

## Ecological Social Work in South Africa and the Way Forward

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Internationally, social work has been delayed in engaging with ecological social work. The delay is reflected in South Africa, which is predicted to be a hot spot where the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are already being experienced. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation are social and environmental justice issues as the marginalized and poor in this country and the world have already been experiencing dire consequences. Social work practitioners and academics, in their roles as advocates for the marginalized and the poor, are therefore duty-bound to act for a sustainable environment for both people and the planet. In this chapter, the authors examine ecological social work in South Africa, its importance, and how it could become part of the global call for an ecological social work approach.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Humankind stands at the brink of a major catastrophe as life on earth is in jeopardy. Rising CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases due to the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and habitat destruction are causing climate change and extreme weather around the world. The ocean is absorbing vast quantities of this CO<sub>2</sub>, which is leading to acidification and rising sea levels that are being compounded by melting polar ice caps which are threatening coastal areas around the world. Extreme weather patterns such as flooding, severe drought, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and heat waves appear to be on the rise (Carrington, 2020; Hausfather, 2019; The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 2017; Kelley et al., 2015; Mann & Emanuel, 2006; Stevens-Rumann et al., 2018; United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2007; Wehner et al., 2017). Habitat destruction caused by mining, deforestation, destructive

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farming techniques, and invading alien species is causing grave damage to the already fragile planet and its inhabitants (Wallace-Wells, 2019). This is causing pressure on water and food resources (Cho, 2018) and is leading to a 6<sup>th</sup> mass extinction event (Ceballos et al., 2017).

In the past three years, numerous groundbreaking scientific reports have been released. These all conclude that if drastic action is not taken urgently to mitigate climate change, calamitous and life-threatening impacts will result. These reports include:

- The United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2018),
- A 2019 report signed by 11 000 scientists (Ripple et al., 2020), and
- A 2018 *Lancet* report which speaks of major threats to human health and wellbeing (Watts et al., 2018).

From the above reports and the plethora of peer-reviewed scientific data, one can conclude that humankind is now fighting its most important existential battle yet.

Although discussions around ecological social work date back to as early as the 1970's when "social work theorists began stressing the importance of the person-in-environment perspective" (Pardeck, 1988, p. 133) social work has been delayed in engaging with the issue of ecological social work (Besthorn, 2012; Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2013; Lysack, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). As it becomes clear that the effects of climate change and environmental degradation are magnified on the marginalized and the poor, social workers internationally and nationally are becoming duty bound to care for the environment. Bowles, Boetto, Jones and McKinnon (2018) asserted that climate change and the degradation of the environment are posing an existential threat to the planet and mankind. They argue that there needs to be an explicit and unambiguous international definition of social work that includes concern for the environment and sustainability.

To act in an ecologically sensitive manner, social workers need to have a deeper understanding of the context and crisis that is facing the world as well as the power structures that uphold and cause these problems (Dominelli, 2012). Social workers also need to reflect on what it means to be a social worker during such times. This, the authors contend, is the reason why there needs to be a paradigm shift in thinking, both in the world and within social work.

## **A Paradigm Shift in Thinking**

Thomas Berry, a leading cultural historian and visionary, states that mankind stands at a defining moment in history, where a paradigm shift in human consciousness will lead away from the "Scientific and Technological Age", to what he calls the "Ecological Age" (Berry, 1999). This will lead to a new way of thinking and being. For Berry (1999) it involves humans moving from being a disrupting force on the earth to a benign presence.

Coates (2003) describes this new paradigm of thinking as a move from modernism to sustainability. Sustainability for Mary (2008, p. 2) is the belief that "humans need to live congruently and harmoniously with all life forms and the planet". This needs to be done in a "congruent and harmonious way ensuring that current generations can meet their needs, but not in a way that will threaten future generations" (Mary, 2008, p. 2). Dominelli, who incorporates "a critique of consumerism, hyper-urbanization, neo-liberalism and expert-led solutions to the social challenges that currently face humanity" (2013, p. 438), is therefore of the opinion that social-political power structures need to be reformed.

## **Ecological Social Work in South Africa and the Way Forward**

Modernism and sustainability cannot exist together as the Westernized focus on modernism and globalization has resulted in social workers being currently rooted in this kind of thinking too. Alston (2015, p. 359) suggests that

*our focus on seeing humans as the center of all ecosystems (anthropocentrism) essentially results in humankind being unable to attain spiritual, psychological, and social fulfillment, and therefore results in us being disconnected and isolated from ourselves and the world. It appears that environmental issues are challenging social work's understanding of society and hampering our understanding that social justice and environmental justice are inextricably linked.*

If social workers are trapped in an anthropocentric view of the world, they will be unable to understand the need for sustainable development, nor be able to play a role in advancing it.

### **Social Work and Sustainability**

Much effort has been put in place to include environmental and sustainability thinking into social work. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (The Global Agenda), brings together the three global organizations: the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). Lombard (2015) writes that the Global Agenda (2012) is aligned with the UN 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development. Its objective is to recognize and respond to the profoundly unjust and unsustainable political, social, and economic systems of the modern world. In addition to this, social workers need to recognize the role of power relations, leading to competition for scarce resources, and the increasing gap between rich and poor.

The Global Agenda has four pillars to guide social workers. According to Lombard (2015), the third pillar is set in the context of social, political, economic, and environmental realities and is titled "Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability". As part of the third report of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development on community and environmental sustainability, South African academics, Lombard and Tsiskaridze (2018) completed the Africa section in the report. Social workers and social work academics were interviewed throughout Africa and Lombard and Twokirize (2018) concluded that integrating social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development will ultimately involve that social workers will have to include the physical environment in the future. The perspective that all client systems such as individuals, groups and communities are influenced by multiple systems is fundamental to the social work approach. It can thus be argued that there are deep similarities between the ecological and social work approaches and that incorporating the issue of sustainability is now key.

Peeters argues that social work can contribute to sustainable development if it includes the ecological environment into its way of thinking (2012). By doing so, the concepts of empowerment, social capital formation, and resilience-building are incorporated. Peeters' (2012) social-ecological practice model is therefore being put forward as a political tool for social change. In the fluctuating world of climate change, unexpected deviations may occur, and it will be difficult to predict what will be needed to maintain sustainability. Peeters states that even in uncertain situations, social workers can play a role in the context of an eco-social approach based on social-ecological systems thinking and framed within a



broad critical, political-ethical agenda (2012). Also developing new social-economic relations through bottom-up economic projects is crucial for a just and sustainable future.

Whether the focus should be on sustainability or resiliency, social workers need to be aware that if tipping points are reached, they will be operating in a world where certainties cannot be guaranteed.

One aspect the authors want to caution about is involving the resilience theory in ecological social work. Working towards building resilience in people and communities is a concept that social workers adopt regularly in their service delivery to individuals and communities (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Palma-García & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2013; Van Breda, 2011). The impact due to climate change may however be so severe, and people's ability to cope so compromised, that being resilient might be extremely difficult to accomplish and maybe something that might leave the individual and community even more vulnerable. For example, the flooding in Mozambique from the cyclone Idai has left communities destitute, and they are still trying to recover (Holmes, 2019).

Whilst resilience is a fine word and idea, Van Breda (2018) explains that initially the theory was criticized for being part of the neo-liberal agenda and the modernist approach, with a focus on the individual. It has expanded somewhat to include broader social systems and to engage with issues of power and social justice. More research needs to be done in terms of resilience to climate change, as one of the key debates in resilience theory is around building agency. Having agency means that individuals have the power to change and cope with their lives and their social environments, as well as to change structures that are causing problems. Social workers, therefore, need to address structural issues and become activists so that people are not disempowered, nor communities oppressed and unfairly disadvantaged as is happening in the climate change arena.

One area which could be of use in South Africa is cultural resilience which celebrates local and indigenous knowledge and of which the concept of Ubuntu is one such framework to explore (Van Breda, 2018). Ubuntu is a philosophy rooted in Southern African culture and provides a framework for profound inter-connectedness (Sekudu, 2019). It means "humanness" (Metz, 2014, p. 6761) and the belief that there is a universal bond of sharing that connects all people and is often translated as "I am because we are, and because we are, I am" (Ngunjiri, 2016, p. 224). Part of ecological social work is the respect and acknowledgment of indigenous wisdom, and Ubuntu provides valuable insights for understanding and even helping to reshape the way the world is viewed (Van Breda, 2018).

In the next section, the authors examine the importance of pursuing ecological social work in South Africa, and how social work in South Africa could contribute to the global call for an ecological social work approach.

## **ECOLOGICAL SOCIAL WORK WITHIN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT**

South Africa is part of the global south, which suffers high levels of poverty and inequality. Marginalized and poor communities are less able to withstand the impacts of climate change and global warming, and their resilience may be compromised. Added to this, there is evidence that Southern Africa has been identified as a climate change hot spot.

## **South Africa as a Hot Spot**

Professor Francois Engelbrecht, a professor of climate change at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and a member of the Global Change Institute, stressed that the increasing risk of climate change is exacerbating regional tipping points in the African water-energy-food interconnection (Engelbrecht, 2019). He commented on the 2018 IPCC report that identified Southern Africa as a climate change hot spot, meaning that the southern section of the country would become increasingly arid, and would warm at about twice the predicted average of the global surface temperature, which is believed to be 3 °C (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

A global average of 3 °C of warming implies that Southern Africa would experience an increase of up to 6 °C which would result in catastrophic droughts that would compromise food and water security (Engelbrecht, 2019). An increase of 1.5 °C is already causing multi-year droughts, which have wreaked destruction to the western provinces of South Africa. During 2018 Cape Town experienced severe drought conditions and severe water rationing was introduced by the authorities to avoid “day zero” occurring, where the city almost ran out of water. Limited or even no access to water is, however, not unusual for residents of many smaller towns in South Africa, where water is delivered by tanker every week. The community of Beaufort West, in the Western Cape, has become accustomed to the local reservoirs running dry (Miller, 2019).

Extreme weather events have also caused devastating storms and floods which have destroyed lives, homes, and infrastructure whilst coastal communities are facing sea-level rise and storm surges. Increasingly animals and plant species confront new diseases and pest infestations. Chersich, Wright, Venter, Rees, Scorgie and Erasmus (2018) mention that the risks of excessive heat could prove dangerous to pregnant women, children and the elderly. South Africans already struggle with multiple social and health stressors and they argue that climate change will also impact indirectly on mental health.

The South African government is aware of the challenge that climate change poses to the country. The Minister of Environmental Affairs, Barbara Creecy, speaking at the State of the Nation debate at the National Assembly in February 2020, pronounced that it was very important to address the issue head-on and work towards mitigating and adapting to climate change. She said there needs to be a transition to low carbon growth, whilst keeping in mind the existing high levels of inequality, unemployment and under-development. Creecy went on to say that:

*The ultimate injustice that developing nations such as South Africa face is that they have historically contributed the least greenhouse gas emissions, but today are the most affected. Climate change poses significant risks to our country's current and future socio-economic development (Creecy, 2020).*

It is envisaged that a *Climate Change Bill* will be tabled during 2020 and the National Adaptation Strategy will be finalized. It would appear, however, that climate change and its associated consequences will only be addressed if the world's nations work together and geopolitical interests are set aside and all nations support the Paris Agreement.

It has become increasingly obvious that environmental degradation, excessive and destructive extraction mining, water scarcity, food insecurity and air pollution, which are considered as direct consequences of climate change, place millions of South Africans at risk.

On the positive side, South Africa enjoys some of the best environmental legislation in the world. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No. 108, section 24 of 1996, states that South African citizens are granted:

- The right to an environment that is not harmful to human health or wellbeing,
- The right to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that prevent pollution and ecological degradation, promote conservation, and secure ecologically sensitive places, and
- The right to sustainable development and uses of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development.

Although this legislation is world-class, it takes the efforts of civic society to make sure that it is being enforced, like corruption, lack of skills and vested interests often undermine the intent of the environmental laws.

After 1994, social work in post-apartheid South Africa adopted a developmental social work approach (Lombard & Twokirize, 2018). The social development approach emphasized human development through empowerment and strength-based strategies, to strengthen communities and develop sustainable projects. This focus was important at the time, but role players and stakeholders in policy development in social work did not keep track of the changes that were happening on the ground where social workers were rendering services. Social workers currently find themselves dealing with matters in communities that may be caused by climate change or environmental degradation, while not necessarily linking social issues. Some examples are included here.

## **The Need for an Ecological Social Work Approach in South Africa**

Social workers are positioned to offer hope, using their skills and training to work together with communities to engender courage and optimism (Boddy et al., 2017). In this section, we share examples of the different areas in which social work knowledge and expertise have been of value in dealing with the challenges that a sustainable developmental approach is asking of social work in SA.

### **Environmental Impact Assessments**

Professor Catherine Schenk, a social work academic at the University of the Western Cape, was asked to contribute to the Scientific Assessment of the opportunities and risks of shale gas development in the Central Karoo. This formed part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment for fracking in the Karoo (Scholes et al., 2016). Schenk's contribution to the substantive Strategic Environmental Assessment document is titled "The Impact on the Social Fabric of the communities in the Karoo" (Schenk, 2016). Fracking is a very controversial process of mining, which now, after many years in the United States of America, has been shown through peer-reviewed scientific research to have many detrimental impacts on the environment and affected communities (Partridge et al., 2016; Short & Szolucha, 2017). Also, fracked gas (methane) is a fossil fuel, which will continue to contribute to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. As has been mentioned before, the release of greenhouse gases must be reduced and these need to decrease if the goals of the Paris Agreement are to be met, namely limiting global temperature rise to less than 1.5 degrees centigrade. The Karoo is a vast arid and water scarce area in the center of South Africa which

has perfect climatic conditions to support renewable energy such as wind and solar. Fracking uses vast quantities of water, which would further stress this near-desert environment.

Schenk's involvement in the multidisciplinary project is a good example of what might be expected of social workers in South Africa in the future. Arkert, co-author of this chapter, has been involved in advocacy and educational work in the Karoo to assist communities in better understanding the threat they may face if fracking goes ahead. She has also been involved in responding to Environmental Impact Assessment reports on the social impacts of the mining of uranium in the Karoo, and the mining of offshore oil and gas off the South African coast. She works in a multidisciplinary team, which includes scientists and legal experts.

### **Support in the Face of Severe Drought**

South Africa has been declared a water-scarce country, with the possibility of a big area in the central and southern parts of the country, degenerating into desert. The drought of the past five years (2014–2019) was so severe that the reservoirs of many towns dried up. In one such town, Graaff Reinet, located in the Eastern Cape, a social worker was tasked with accessing water supply to the poorest and most marginalized members of the community. The more affluent parts of town, including the business areas, were provided water through boreholes which had been sponsored and drilled by an NGO. The poorest and least resilient members of the community, however, did not derive the same benefits and the social worker was appointed to obtain and distribute bottled water to this community. This case study raises human rights issues and also issues of social and environmental justice. This is one example of many more towns that have run out of water and where social workers are no longer able to only focus on sustainable community projects but must think creatively to serve the basic needs of communities.

Another example of social workers who needed to develop new skills and ideas to support their communities came from the far North-Western Cape. These communities were being severely impacted by unprecedented droughts. Farmers were facing bankruptcy and seasonal farmworkers had not had work during this time, starvation was a very real threat. Three million food parcels were handed out over this time and the social workers wanted to give more than handouts but were at a loss to help their clients build future resistance in the middle of this catastrophe. They contacted the North-West University Centre for Child, Youth, and Family Studies (CCYF), a research platform for community-based research whose aim is to create reciprocal partnerships with communities. The CCYF visited one of the most affected towns, Vredendal, and engaged with multiple stakeholders including the local municipality. They then proceeded to attempt to assist the community. This illustrated the need for social workers to engage in finding different ways to help communities impacted by climate change.

### **Support in the Face of Flooding**

South Africa, as in other parts of the world, is experiencing more “climate-change-induced disasters” such as floods, heavy storms, tornadoes and extreme lightning (Skokane, 2019, p. 1). These floods affect the marginalized and the poor communities as these communities most often are in the low lying areas of the country. A South African social work academic interviewed by the authors, who had previously worked with flood victims in KwaZulu-Natal as a government social worker, said the following:

*Okay, let me tell you about my experience. I have worked in Durban as a social worker. And I have worked with victims of floods. You find that they are displaced and need a lot of assistance. Because we did not do it in class or our under-graduate, it was sort of like a trial and error in trying to help.*

She indicated feelings of being unprepared and unsure of how to proceed to best assist the community. She suggested that appropriate training would have helped her to be better prepared.

### **Advocates for Both Human Rights and Environmental Justice**

John Clarke, a social worker, writer, and human rights activist has been working with the Xolobeni community in Pondoland on the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape for the last 20 years (Clarke, 2014). The Xolobeni community has been opposing the proposal to mine for titanium on their ancestral land, which is a rich and diverse ecological coastal region of Pondoland. They are subsistence farmers who are also actively trying to promote tourism in the area. Titanium is a common material that can be found in many areas in South Africa and the community feels passionately that titanium mining will destroy their traditional agricultural way of life. They also argue that mining will not be able to provide a sustainable living. Clarke's approach to the community is quintessentially from a social work perspective:

*The only authentic path would be one chosen by the local Mpondo themselves. The community must be encouraged to become more fully itself. This happens when people discover their innate creative potential. It is not simply about creating jobs for the unemployed as mining in the area might promise, but affirming the right to self-determination, and supporting communities experiencing poverty and deprivation, to develop synergic satisfiers of their fundamental human needs. I explained that the first obligation of a social worker was to challenge social and environmental injustice by affirming and protecting the constitutional rights of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged and ensure that they were able meaningfully to participate in decisions that affected them (2014, p. 80).*

Even though communities may not have scientific knowledge, Clarke found that they had innate wisdom and a sense of what was happening in their community, with the threat of mining hanging over their heads. One such community member was George Cilo, an old Induna (a tribal headman and person of authority) of his tribe, who had the following to say when severe flooding occurred in the area:

*We have not had this much rain ever in Pondoland before. People are asking why? People have noticed that it is since the mining company has come to the area that all this rain has come, which is now too much for us. People are saying that it is because the mining company is disturbing the earth, the animal inside the earth has been upset, and is sending all this rain. My people believe, and I believe too, that all this rain is falling because the earth animal is angry with the disturbance of the earth by the mining company (Cilo in Clarke, 2014, p. 75).*

Clarke responded by saying that although the Induna's warning may have been mistaken, it was strangely prophetic (2014, p. 76). The essential truth of what he was saying could not be denied. The extreme weather events, which the Induna had said were unparalleled in his lifetime were possibly due to the beginning impacts of climate change. Clarke reiterates the importance of building relationships

## **Ecological Social Work in South Africa and the Way Forward**

with all stakeholders, including the government and the mining company, but this is made difficult by the conflict that sometimes arises between the State, business, and civil society.

In an interview with Clarke in 2019, he said the following about his role and the fact that he only got involved with the work because he had made a paradigm shift in his thinking about man and the environment as a young man whilst attending a wilderness school, where he was profoundly impacted by a community member who was teaching them about their ways of seeing the world.

*I suppose that most young social workers would think ... well John got his degree, found stuff in textbooks, and is now very learned and (the) next step was to go and apply one's learning. I am somewhat amused because that is not how it happened in my work on the Wild Coast in that sense. It wasn't in any way ... no ways could it be described as a conventional thing, but the paradox, the irony of it all is that as I found myself drawn in because of my strong environmental conditioning if I can call it that, which goes back from when I was seventeen years old going to a wilderness leadership trail with the Wilderness Leadership School with Ian Player. And just suddenly moving my way of thinking and making a big paradigm shift and realizing that you cannot have an economy without ecology. And that the wonderful discovery of how nature works, and the incredible way which nature constantly optimizes, rather than maximizes. And it started off, me basically sitting under a tree with our game ranger and me and about eight other boy scouts learning from a pile of ...— a dunghill, where our ranger was explaining to us the whole ecology of how these rhinos would have these middens and how the dung beetles would come and break them down and how the soil would get nitrated and the trees would grow and ... this web of life, which is astounding. I share that because social workers are there to try and work yourselves out of a job, not to create dependency.*

*In an ideal world, we are there to make sure that we promote self-reliance, self-confidence, help people who are marginalized, who for whatever reasons, need to be affirmed. To help them own their stories, etcetera, to kind of heal in so far as to deal with prejudice, to deal with stigma, so that they can take their place in society. We are not there about wealthy dependency, so I say apply that as a rationale. That means that you got to have an economy that encourages that. You have to have an ecology that one recognizes. That is the basis for self-reliance—are people finding mutually beneficial relationships within themselves and in their natural environment. I believe social workers, because of our training in systems thinking, in understanding complexity, can understand the central place of human agency in any transformation and development process.*

*We are the ideal profession to be getting involved in championing environmental rights. This is not to disparage the role of lawyers, but life is not a law court. Life is about living and being in touch with the full context of your environment.*

*I do see myself as an ecological practitioner. Our great inspiration was a kind of a quote, which Oliver ... I forget his name (the game ranger) said that "in times of rapid change, it is the ones who continue to learn who will inherit the future. The learned will be preparing for a world that does not exist yet."*

Clarke continued to talk about how working with the people of Xolobeni changed him, how he realized that the people there had so much wisdom and that it is very important to take indigenous knowledge into account.

*This idea that indigenous knowledge can be frozen out of history, that only if it is true and verified scientifically—then its knowledge. We live in an age of complexity where you have got to be constantly on your toes in terms of learning. And that's really I suppose why for me, getting out of my comfort zone of living in Gauteng, in a big city, and going out to the Wild Coast and seeing how the people there exemplified wisdom and were constantly educating me.*

*It was not this clever white man coming from Johannesburg to wave a magic wand. All I did was basically introducing people to each other, to their lawyers, to the media and all that, I facilitated. So, in that sense, it's also important that we understand that you, me, individually, we are part of an ecology of human consciousness, if I can use that term, where we share and we debate.*

The journey continues to be a long one for the community and Clarke. Conflict has been bought into the community, where some members were allegedly bribed to support the mining, including one of the community leaders. The King of Amapondo, King Mpondombini Justice Sigcau, and his wife Queen Lombikiso Masobhuza Sigcau and their daughters also lived under threats to their lives, because of opposition to the mining. It is a long and complex story, more of which can be read about in Clarke's book (2014). Although the community remains strong and most community members are opposed to mining, in 2016 the community was dealt a devastating blow when Bazooka Radebe, the leader of their anti-mining group, the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC), was assassinated (Nicolson, 2016). The current chair of the ACC, Nonhle Mbuthuma continues to live in fear of her life (Business and Human Rights Resource Center, 2018).

Because he spoke out about the mining, Clarke was charged by the mining company with a defamation suit, known as a SLAPP suit (Strategic Litigation against Public Participation). This is a common strategy adopted by mining companies to constrain environmental activists' actions and is a means by which mining companies attempt to limit the opposition to their development plans. It is also believed that these suits have been instituted as part of the mining company's deliberate strategy to bully, stifle, and harass critics of its other operations in South Africa. Clarke has been sued for 12 million South African Rand by the company and, additionally, the mining company has launched defamation cases involving 4.25 million Rand against three South African environmental lawyers; Cormac Cullinan, Christine Redell and Tracey Davies, a Xolobeni community activist Mzamo Dlamini, and a Lutzville community activist Davine Cloete. At the time of writing the court cases are ongoing (Yeld, 2019).

In November 2018, the coastal Amadiba communities won the right to say "No" to mining on their land (Mitchley, 2018). On 14 September 2020, the ACC gained another court victory for Xolobeni and for all rural communities in South Africa, where the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy must give a copy of the mining application to interested and affected parties on demand, this allows communities to be able to make informed decisions (Ellis, 2020). This means that communities can engage in meaningful consultation on an equal footing, and ensure no secrets are being kept from the communities.

## COVID-19

In 2020 the world was confronted by the COVID-19 crisis. Although not necessarily linked directly to climate change, the pandemic has demonstrated that threats faced by humanity need to be engaged in a multi-disciplinary way and that social workers can play an important role in it (Rasool, 2020). The lockdown in South Africa has laid bare the serious food crisis faced by poor communities in the country and

social workers, as frontline workers must be equipped to deal with similar crises and other far-ranging disasters, that are symptomatic of climate change (Dominelli, 2012).

The cases cited above are examples of social workers in South Africa being confronted by issues in communities that are linked to the climate crisis and environmental destruction. From these accounts it seems as if social workers are more and more open to a paradigm shift towards a sustainable approach that would take people, the environment, and the planet into account in social work practice.

Social workers in South Africa need to find ways to integrate sustainability into the academic curriculum if we are to be able to engage meaningfully in this area.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Although social work in South Africa has not embraced environmental social work, it is part of the agenda for social work's mandate to commit to sustainable development, and along with other countries, needs to find ways to become fully engaged in the struggle for environmental justice. South Africa is also well represented internationally with the Africa section of The Global Agenda being headed by Professor Lombard from the social work department at the University of Pretoria.

For social workers world-wide to continue being relevant "in this new reality", its values, principles and philosophical base need to be transformed. The aim of the transformation should be that social workers would understand the interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural environment. For this to be possible a holistic approach to social work is necessary, which is described as:

*A glimpse at the environment of life, and as a concrete way of involving individuals in local politics and urbanism, as well as an attempt to achieve theoretical conceptions of social work that would be compatible with sustainability (Rocha, 2018, p 2).*

Boetto's "Transformative Eco-social Model for Social Work" proposes this possibility which has been found to be beneficial (2017). According to this model transformational change within social work essentially needs to shift from an anthropogenic worldview to an ecologically centered world view, which incorporates conservation, de-growth, diversity, sustainability, spirituality, and restoration (Boetto, 2017). Within this world view all humans, non-sentient beings, and natural systems are equal (Besthorn, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2015). Boetto (2017) claims that there are major contradictions in the profession's philosophical base and that there is a paradoxical contradiction in that the profession continues to sustain modernism, which has unintentionally contributed to the devastation that has been caused to the natural world (Coates, 2003). The transformative eco-social model for social work acknowledges that the social work profession was born out of industrialist and capitalist roots, with an associated belief that humans govern and dominate the natural world (Boetto, 2017). Boetto draws from Bell's (2012) work which speaks of a post-conventional philosophical base for social work, which is presently seeped in modernist thinking. Boetto's model attempts to disrupt this dominant modernistic paradigm, through a paradigm shift which brings together other authors in the field of ecological social work such as: green social work (Dominelli, 2012), environmental social work (Gray & Coates, 2013), eco-social work (Peeters, 2012) and the holistic environmental perspective (Gray & Coates, 2015).



## **Characteristics of Boetto's Transformative Change**

The characteristics of the transformative change that Boetto (2017) proposes, contain the following elements:

### **Ecological Literacy**

Ecological literacy requires a knowledge and understanding of natural systems, ecology, and an understanding of how humans fit into the natural world. It suggests a holistic worldview, where all life is interconnected within a much larger system, and an understanding of how human activity has contributed to the present crisis. It also means expanding the activities of social workers to include environmentally related work and, in addition, social workers need to be taught ecological literacy, which means social workers need to understand issues around ecology and the environment. Jones (2013) states that the challenge for social workers is to stay abreast of the new developments which involve ecological knowledge or “eco-literacy” and to include this in practice.

### **Ecological Justice**

Ecological justice differs from environmental justice, in that it includes all forms of life, not just humanity (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). Environmental justice appears to represent a more anthropocentric view of justice, although both terms share common elements. Ecological justice is more radical and challenges contemporary industrialist and consumerist culture which exploits the natural environment (Besthorn, 2013). The community in Xolobeni in Pondoland on the Wild Coast of South Africa is fighting for a different outcome and questioning the narrative that growth and money in the fiscus is the most important factor. They are struggling for their land, and for a say in how it should be used.

### **Indigenous Perspectives**

Spiritual beliefs, holism, collectivism, and connection with the land, that form part of traditional indigenous cultural perspectives have, according to Besthorn (2002) and Coates (2003) been lost through European incursions. Indigenous approaches however have similarities with the holistic approach of Boetto (2017) and Baskin (2016). It is therefore important to incorporate indigenous perspectives into social work academia and practice (Harms Smith & Nathane, 2018; Mogorosi & Thabedy, 2018; Ross, 2018; Shokane & Masoga, 2018) to learn from traditional indigenous cultures who have been able to live in harmony with the natural world. The Xolobeni community in Pondoland is one such an example (Clarke, 2014). Another instance is from a social work educator who gave an example of how, as a child growing up in Zambia, he was taught to carefully select which fish was to be kept when they went fishing for food. The community did not keep the female fish which were returned to the river, thereby sustainability was maintained.

### **Eco-Feminism and Criticality**

A critical and anti-oppressive theoretical approach is promulgated by Dominelli (2013), where an understanding of the connections between the patriarchal domination of nature and the exploitation of

## ***Ecological Social Work in South Africa and the Way Forward***

women, as well as, unequal power relations, which cause exploitation and disadvantage to the poor and marginalized, is recognized.

By incorporating a critical and anti-oppressive approach to the eco-social model would thus question structural inequalities, relating to gender, poverty, and the unequal distribution of resources, and be able to provide alternative explanations for environmental crises and illustrate an understanding of power relations (Dominelli, 2013).

When referring to eco-feminism within a South African context it goes without saying that thoughts and theories of African feminism should be involved as “African feminisms provide the space for African norms and values to be recognized” (Rasool, 2019, p. 162). Rasool (2019) goes further to say that “African feminisms challenged the ways in which Western feminists depicted African women and are concerned with accentuating the concerns and interests of African women” (p. 162).

### **Global Perspectives**

The need to be part of a global citizenship within social work, where there is respect for cultural diversity, and an acknowledgment of contributions made by the global south, and not just the assumption that what the west contributes is somehow more correct and more useful. This would also include culturally located community-based approaches (Dominelli, 2015; Ku & Ma, 2015). This requires an understanding of the unequal effects of the environmental crisis on the marginalized and poor, who are mostly located in the southern hemisphere. There needs to be a recognition that the global north carries a large responsibility for environmental injustice in the global south.

### **Sustainability and De-Growth**

Max-Neef (2010) and Pilling (2018) remind the reader that humans find themselves on a finite planet where ecological resources are finite, and where unrestrained growth is not sustainable. Values that incorporate sustainability and de-growth therefore need to be in place, instead of the present economic model which equates growth as the measurement for success (Max-Neef, 2010). Pilling (2018) also questions whether it is possible to continue with an economic system that only looks at the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of countries to judge how well they are doing. A whole forest may be cut down, and this would reflect positively in the GDP, but continue to destroy the environment. Pilling (2018) suggests that countries need to find other ways to judge how well they are doing. For the authors this would entail that countries would implement holistic approaches and models to measure their success.

### **Rethinking the Concept of Wellbeing**

Wellbeing, which includes not only human wellbeing but the wellbeing of all living creatures on the planet as well as the earth itself is suggested by Boetto (2017). The stance of approaching the concept of wellbeing from this point of view, is supported by Powers, Willett, Matthias and Haywood (2018), who put forward that green social work means an eco-centric approach that respects the rights of both humans and the natural environment (Dominelli, 2013).

If a transformative eco-social model is to be introduced, then the professional knowledge and values of social workers need to be consistent with this. Issues such as white privilege and colonization within the profession need to be examined, so that the profession can be decolonized (Bennett, 2015; Harms

Smith & Nathane, 2018; Mogorosi & Thabedy, 2018; Shokane & Masoga, 2018). It would include respecting and incorporating indigenous thinking, and not seeing them as inferior (Coates & Leahy, 2006).

The application of knowledge holds that social workers need to incorporate indigenous social work authors and begin to deconstruct and decolonize their modernist roots. This is the value that the much needed book by Van Breda and Sekudu, titled “Theories for decolonial social work practice in South Africa” and published in 2019, has brought to the table. The intention of the book was to offer theories that the authors believed will be specifically applicable “for decolonial social work practice in post-1994 South Africa (Van Breda, 2019, p. 10). For the authors two well-developed indigenous social work theories already exist in South Africa, which is the Developmental Social Work Theory and the Ubuntu-based Practice Theory (Van Breda, 2019).

By involving well developed indigenous theories into social work practice and research, might give non-Western approaches such as indigenous healing and knowing (Boetto, 2017) their rightful standing against the often preferred Western humanist-centred models. An eco-social way of thinking therefore needs to challenge individualist and modernist conceptualization. This includes the term wellbeing, which indigenous writers say lacks spiritual, communal, and collective characteristics. It is considered particularly important as the concept of wellbeing is so embedded into social work at every level, such as in the global definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). Boetto (2017) argues that a more healthy and vigorous definition of wellbeing, which includes environmental, social, political, and economic dimensions is needed.

## **More Approaches to Consider**

In conjunction with the characteristics of Boetto’s Transformative Eco-social Model for Social Workers, the authors suggest that the following approaches should also be incorporated namely, applying specific knowledge to the eco-social model, the re-evaluation of professional values, and to include a discussion on environmental justice as a broadening around the idea of social justice and ecological justice as referred to by Melekis and Woodhouse (2015).

### **Applying Specific Knowledge to the Eco-Social Model**

The application of knowledge in the eco-social model would include eco-feminism, which would unite ecological and women’s movements by identifying the links and associations between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women.

The application of knowledge would also involve a critical understanding of sustainability. The current definition which refers to sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future development” (WCED, 1987), is not only questioned by Boetto (2017), but is also opposed by activists. Activists for instance claim that governments and businesses in the Global North over-emphasize and exploit economic development at the cost of broader issues relevant to sustainability, such as global poverty, social justice, and depletion of the natural environment (Blewitt, 2015).

The dominant paradigm (neo-liberal capitalism) clearly links success with an individual’s degree of wealth. This is in contradiction with the concept of sustainability, and thus informs the logic for a change in thinking, where sustainability is understood in a more complex way. It is for instance believed that

sustainable development should include respect for ecological limits, give priority to the poor, and have respect for diversity (Peeters, 2012).

## **The Re-Evaluation of Professional Values**

A change in thinking about sustainability for Boetto (2017) involves that professional values would include valuing the belief of pursuing de-growth, where sustainability can only be maintained if there is less over-production and over-consumption of goods. Boetto (2017) also argues that there needs to be an emphasis on collectivism as an important social work value, and a move away from neo-liberal, profit motivated values, where the individual is encouraged to pursue acquiring wealth, through competition, which is then seen as a success.

Boetto (2017) believes that a transformative eco-social model must involve action (doing) from a person, or group, at a community level. There needs to be personal growth and action towards sustainability, a holistic approach to human wellbeing, the establishment of communities of practice and organizational changes, culturally sensitive community-based approaches, and social action to facilitate economic and political change (Boetto, 2017). A change in thinking about sustainability for Boetto (2017) is important as social workers operate in a global world, where how they act locally affects those in other parts of the world. This has led to the poorest being most impacted by environmental damage.

## **Environmental Justice**

Environmental justice is a broadening of the idea of social justice, and the inclusion of environmental social work, but emphasizing that it is the poorest and most marginalized communities that are the most badly impacted by environmental degradation and climate change (Gray & Coates, 2015; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Mary, 2008; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). Just as social justice is an integral part of social work ethics and values, so must environmental justice be. This has raised a serious challenge for social work (Gray & Coates, 2012), because, while social workers are comfortable with social justice for the poor and vulnerable, environmental justice also needs to include justice for the earth, animals, plants and everything that makes up the ecological world. It has become clear that a focus only on what is justice for humans is insufficient. Social workers need to be convinced that the non-human world has value and that they have a role to play in protecting non-human life forms; natural systems that include plants, trees, rivers, landscapes, and all biological life forms. For Gray and Coates (2012) environmental justice therefore involves the following commitment from social workers:

- To acknowledge that human activity is destroying the earth,
- To acknowledge the need for coordinated action,
- To care about endangered species, forests, and degradation of land,
- To be critical of big business and profit motives that drive the overutilization of resources,
- To highlight the value of environmental education,
- To be aware of the need to reduce dependence on fossil fuels,
- To protect rainforests, wetlands, and watersheds,
- To encourage the increase of green urban spaces, and the value of food gardens,
- To challenge destructive mining,

- To be knowledgeable about specific policies on human development and environmental justice, and
- To have some knowledge of the law and be prepared for the potential of suits against them.

The authors come back to their argument that unless there is a paradigm shift where people and the planet are on equal footing in terms of importance, the issue of climate change will not be able to be dealt with by social workers. Besthorn (2013, p. 31) advocates for a “radical equalitarian ecological approach, where all humans and non-sentient beings and natural systems are equal”. This means that the concept of “environment” in the person-in-environment (Besthorn, 2004; Coates, 2003; Norton, 2009; Zapf, 2010), must find a way to overcome its embeddedness in modern, individualistic and anthropocentric thinking (Lombard, 2015; Norton, 2009).

Boetto’s model is just a starting point, which together with a collective effort from social work scholars and practitioners, appropriate education as a means to advance transformative change, and an emphasis on activism within the profession, may influence the establishment of ecological social work that can contribute to halting and dealing with the impacts of climate change and ecological destruction.

## **Transforming the Social Work Curriculum in South Africa**

Dominelli (2012) has explored the need to incorporate ecological social work into social work education and her viewpoint strongly supports what Fogel et al. (2015) referred to by saying that a transformation in social work education needs to take place if social work is going to fulfill its quest to be involved in sustainable development.

Ecological social work currently does not form a major part of the social work curricula at any of the 16 mainstream South African universities. It is apparent from the interviews conducted that there is an increasing awareness of its importance, both in academia and in practice (Arkert & Jacobs, 2021). Even though educators expressed an opinion that ecological social work was important and ought to be included in the teaching program, all but two heads of departments of social work schools concurred that there might not be many possibilities that ecological social work would be included in the curricula in the near future. As a motivation for this, these heads highlighted the reality of what social workers in South Africa already have to deal with namely poverty, gender-based violence, child abuse, crime, unemployment, and other human injustices.

Some educators felt that if ecological social work is to be introduced into the social work curriculum, then it could be introduced at a post-graduate level. Further suggestions include conducting extra-curricular specialized courses for social workers. One university does offer a short course in environmental social work to fourth-year students, while other universities see that the subject can be integrated into their current programs (Arkert & Jacobs, 2021).

The authors however are of the opinion that if social work in South Africa is to address the sustainable development of humans, communities and the environment, then the social work curriculum must be transformed, sooner rather than later (Fogel et al., 2015; Lombard, 2015). This should not be considered as an emergent issue in social work, but rather a “long overdue reconnection”. It is however sadly predicted that the incorporation will be slow in happening, as is the case in other countries world wide (Drolet et al., 2015; Lombard, 2015; Phillip & Reisch, 2015).

Lombard and Twokirize (2018) have identified a need for more forums in South Africa where discussions and exchange of ideas can take place between educators and practitioners on the subject of ecological

social work. Such engagements will share the experiences of those in the field with the knowledge and expertise of those in academia, and in this way, awareness could be created and solutions can be found. The fact that South Africa is a hot spot means that such engagements have become essential if social workers in the country are to play a meaningful role in protecting vulnerable people and the environment.

Considering the urgency of the issue, illustrated by the climate emergency being an existential threat to humankind, it would make sense that social workers both in South Africa and elsewhere, prepare themselves adequately to deal with the unknown future. Addressing the climate crisis and environmental degradation will be impossible if social workers do not understand the place of humans in the world and if they continue to conceptualize humans as more important than the rest of the planet (Gray & Coates, 2015).

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

As ecological social work in South Africa is in its infancy, research must take on many different directions. However, in light of the urgency around the impact and influence that climate change already has on vulnerable and marginalized communities in South Africa, as well as on the service delivery of social workers, the authors would like to suggest that the following areas are researched:

- Explore the needs of social work practitioners who work with communities in drought-stricken areas of South Africa.
- Explore ways of addressing the impact of climate change on the psycho-social wellbeing of individuals and communities in the drought-stricken areas of South Africa from an ecological social work perspective.
- Investigate existing indigenous cultural perspectives on sustainable development that could inform ecological social work practice and academia within a South African context.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the past 15 years, there has been a new generation of social workers such as Besthom, Boddy, Coates, Dominelli, Gray, Hetherington, Lombard, Lysack, Mary, Norton, Peeters, and Zapf who have been able to bring social work into the environmental debate, from which it was conspicuously absent. Through the work of this new generation of social workers, an increasingly important role is being envisioned for social work to play its part in this most pressing global issue.

The authors believe that social workers in South Africa have the experience, knowledge, and skills, and academic institutions that have the talent and innovation to integrate ecological social work with social work as it is currently practiced and taught within South Africa. Both academics and practitioners need to co-operate in appropriate ways to find solutions to these pressing issues. Considering the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation already experienced, South African social workers could make a significant contribution, that may be beneficial globally.

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## Chapter 9

# Social Workers Navigating a Colonial Bureaucratic System While Also Re-Kindling *Obuntu*-Led Relational Social Work in Uganda

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### ABSTRACT

*Diverse contexts present to us diverse philosophies on being and knowing, which would inform diverse but equally valid ways of constructing social work around the world. However, due to enlightenment modernity and Western colonialism, social work remains resistant to embracing this diversity as, often uncritically, a social work defined from a privileged white Western perspective is imposed. The purpose of this chapter is to disrupt ongoing colonization in social work: reclaim and theorize social work as conceptualized from Obuntu/Ubuntu philosophies central in most African Bantu communities. Obuntu or Ubuntu, as it is used in different African languages, defines what being human (person/omuntu) entails including embracing values like interconnectedness, collectivism, solidarity, caring for and about others, and the environment. This chapter will first explore experiences of social workers as they navigate a colonial bureaucracy, with frustrations forcing them to re-ignite indigenous models of social work. Implications for social work in Uganda and Australian contexts are then discussed.*

### INTRODUCTION

Few will disagree that professional social work as a project of western enlightenment modernity has resulted into the imposition of white western ways of knowing and doing social work and consequently has marginalized non-western traditions and the social work they inform. Enlightenment modernity is characterized by preoccupation with classification of things, order, bureaucracy, and binaries, and

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seeks out one ‘right’ or one ‘best’ way to do things. It therefore stamps out diversity in worldviews, knowledges, and ways of doing something like social work (Ife, 2016). The stamping out of diversity in conceptualizing and doing social work has resulted in the justification of white western superiority and hence colonialism. When I was asked to contribute a chapter to this book, I have pondered on the relevance of including our *Obuntu* ways of being and doing and how they help us conceptualize and define social work in a book being written in Australia. I have concluded that indeed this work is very relevant in the current multi-cultural cosmopolitan Australian society, which is comprised of people from diverse cultures, bringing with them diverse worldviews, diverse good knowledges and traditions that can enrich social work. However, I am also very aware of social work in the Australian context continuing in the perpetuation of cultural and epistemological genocide through its imposition of white western worldview of conceptualizing social work as if it were universal or the only right way of defining, doing and imagining social work (Tascon & Ife, 2020; Tusasiirwe, 2019; 2020; Walter, Taylor, & Habibis, 2011). Therefore, for the *Obuntu*-led social work that I share in this chapter to make sense as legitimate social work, social workers must adopt a decolonizing perspective where they recognize that social work in Australia and globally cannot continue to reinforce the dominance of western enlightenment worldview of a one-right way of doing or thinking about social work which is imposed on diverse communities. The main aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that there are diverse ways of being and doing which result in diverse ways of conceptualizing and doing social work and this means that social work in Australia needs to embrace and advance this diversity including valuing epistemological diversity that comes with those varied cultures that comprise cosmopolitan Australia. Valuing diversity of cultures and epistemologies and challenging the thinking that reinforces that white western worldviews are the right, legitimate or best way of defining social work is only the starting point. This will result into valuing and centering knowledges, stories, and voices spoken and written in languages and drawn from ways of knowing and being of people from collectivist communities. In this chapter, adopting a decolonized social work perspective allows for conceptualization of *obuntu*-led social work so it can occupy a central place as a one among the many right and legitimate ways of doing social work as determined by the context.

While one would assume that it is common sense that the context (that is the worldviews, philosophies, cultures and ways of knowing of people in that context) define what kind of social work is regarded as the best in that area, this is not the case especially for contexts like Uganda where, as a result of past and ongoing colonization, western social work continues to be imposed through established institutions of western modernity including government bureaucracies, NGOs and universities. Western in particular UK and US theories, models and worldviews continue to dominate social work education ignoring clarion calls that western social work is inappropriate, inapplicable, irrelevant to Ugandan context (Twikirize, 2014a; Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019, Tusasiirwe, 2020).

Concerns about western social work’s inappropriateness to African context are not new but over 27 years ago, renowned African social worker Osei-Hwedie (1993) lamented that the social work profession in Africa is “heavily influenced by Western theory and no meaningful attempts have been made to ensure that the profession fits into the social, economic and practical environment in which it operates” (p.19). Communities especially those in the rural areas have different ways of being, knowing, characterized by the collectivist traditions and yet western social work imposes its individualistic traditions. Western social work is packaged in English language, which does not easily translate into indigenous languages in Uganda. The lack of translation is problematic for social workers who struggle to explain their professional

## ***Social Workers Navigating a Colonial Bureaucratic System While Also Re-Kindling Ubuntu-Led***

social work in local languages to lay people in the communities, but also for international social work students who often flock to the country on north-south student exchange programs (Twikirize, 2014a).

Most of the students on exchange especially from a European context come to Uganda with the colonial thinking that western social work is the legitimate and universal way of doing social work. When they are presented with different expectations and worldviews from the people and communities with whom they work, they say that what they are doing or what they are being asked to do by their 'clients' or even agency supervisors is "not social work" (Twikirize, 2014a). Many European contexts are yet to learn from what some of the Pacific social workers have done in Australia where they arrange pre-field placement workshops where this colonial thinking of west-as-best or west-to-the rest is disrupted so that students recognize that they will be taken to contexts where there are different but equally valid worldviews and ways of doing social work (Ravulo, 2020). The statements from international students on placement that what they are being asked to do is not really social work provides a challenge but also an opportunity to begin to question and critique most of our pre-held assumptions and biases about what social work really is and how it operates.

I have discussed the current context of enlightenment modernity in social work that must change to allow diverse epistemologies in social work to take center stage. I now discuss how western social work imposed in Uganda during colonization has left social workers to navigate barriers of a colonial bureaucratic system, causing some to rekindle indigenous social work in order to meaningfully serve their communities. What characterizes *Ubuntu*-led indigenous social work is discussed after which I conclude the chapter with implications for social work practice and education in Ugandan and Australian contexts.

## **COLONIAL ORIGINS OF TODAY'S PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK IN UGANDA**

Professional social work in Ugandan context is a product of European enlightenment modernity and western colonialism. Colonizers, in around the 1950s, established the supposedly 'legitimate' or 'superior', 'modern' or 'enlightened' professional social work fashioned after the British ways of centralized planning and implementation of social welfare programs. The British ignored, trivialized, devalued *Ubuntu*-led social work (explained later in the chapter) that was strongly embedded in traditional systems like extended family, clans, mutual aid groups, kingdoms, which existed in the communities. The social work services and systems introduced during colonization were focused on protecting the interests of colonialists and not of the indigenous masses (Omolo-Okalebo, Haas, Werner, & Sengendo, 2010). The strategy used by colonizers included working through African local agents to pursue the colonial mission of economic, racial, European self-aggrandizement and cultural domination (Bulhan, 2015). The British established hybrid systems of the Westminster model of governance to ease their colonial administration and planning. As stipulated in the *African Native Authority Ordinance of 1919*, a decentralization approach was adopted where local chiefs were appointed at the village, sub-county and county levels and given the responsibility of collecting taxes imposed by the British on Ugandan peasants and their crops. The chiefs had to maintain law and order on behalf of the colonial government centered in Kampala (Ojambo, 2012). Important for social workers to note was that remedial welfare services were to be provided only "if serious distress with possible grave political consequences was to be avoided" (Ministry of Social Development, 1959, p. 2). Social work practice "aimed at dealing with the social problems of children living on the streets, delinquents and rehabilitation of drug addicts in order to minimize disruptions to the smooth running of the colonial government's programme" (Twikirize, 2014b, p. 138). Social



security was provided only to the white settler community and a few African elites serving in colonial administration (Barya, 2011). In all, the British-imposed professional social work was “a tool to ensure law enforcement” (Mabeyo, 2014, p. 127).

The British colonial government introduced centralized entities for planning and decision-making, in Kampala the capital city, which displaced and derailed the long-existing precolonial systems such as the chiefdoms (Twikirize, 2014a). Centralized planning took place at national level in Kampala with the establishment, in the 1950s, of the Ministry of Planning and Community Development. A permanent secretary headed the ministry, with heads of sections and officers dealing with specific aspects of urban welfare and community development (Ministry of Planning and Community Development, 1965; Ministry of Social Development, 1959). The ministry designed policies and field service delivery. The Ministry of Planning and Community Development spearheaded planning and program-making as well as the training of welfare workers in local government and voluntary or nongovernment organizations (NGOs), including co-ordination of their work, while the districts, headed by the Community Development Officer, implemented field services. Upon independence from British rule in 1962, rather than dismantle or transform these colonial systems that largely served colonial interests, exploited the people and denigrated their indigenous models of being and doing, the local Ugandan elites inherited the colonial systems and sought to govern in the same way, using the same colonial laws, English language, policies and institutions.

These are the colonial, highly hierarchical and bureaucratic systems that professional social workers in Uganda operate under today. The central government in Kampala makes policies, designs programs while, implementation of these policies and programs is carried out by the local government at district level. What has changed has been in the naming of the Ministry from the then Ministry of Planning and Community Development to today’s Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, incorporating gender-related reforms. However, the top-down mode of operation remains the same with the ministry responsible for policy making and planning, while the implementation of the policies and programs remains a responsibility of local governments at district level, headed by the Chief Administrative Officer and the Community Development Officers.

In this chapter, I will share stories of two community development workers employed in local government and involved in implementation of some of the policies and programs of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. The two community workers (Harriet and Jeremy) described the dilemma where they felt “caught in the middle of the systems”. That is, they saw themselves as part of, and advocates for, communities they worked with but then they also had to serve in the colonial bureaucratic system originally established to exclude and exploit rather than serve these very communities. The barriers and frustrations posed by the colonial bureaucratic system will be shared, but also the work done to re-ignite and build on indigenous models. These models are responsive to the problems in the community and will be shared in order to draw lessons for understanding relational collaborative social work with the people we work with.

## **NAVIGATING THE COLONIAL BUREAUCRACY: EXPERIENCES FROM COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORK**

During my doctoral research (2016-2020), I observed the work of two community development officers (Harriet and Jeremy) operating in a rural community in Western Uganda. This indigenous observation

research method that I followed was drawing on the long-held African indigenous way of learning through observing what others do, in particular, work done by respected community elders or people in positions of authority. In Africa ways of knowing, learning and teaching are intertwined within the context of everyday interactions (Wane, 2008). Thus, while observing and talking about everyday interactions, I spent ten working days with Harriet and three days with Jeremy, following them around at their workplace and in the communities they were working with. I observed what community workers did or did not do in their everyday practices. I observed and interacted with the people coming to the community workers' offices to seek help. After the clients had left, we talked about the problems presented and the help that the workers provided. I discussed with the community workers the clashes between indigenous and non-indigenous ways of being and doing, the enablers and barriers to their practice. We talked about the community workers' experiences and feelings about their work and the type of help they were providing to the communities and the clients. This kind of interaction enabled cooperative co-production of knowledge shared in this chapter.

Harriet and Jeremy are both graduates with bachelor's degree in social sciences majoring in social administration. They have over ten years of experience in community development work and they had all grown up in the rural community they returned to work in after their university education in the city of Kampala. While the formal education system, which is a colonial product still privileges teaching of western knowledge, theories and models of doing things, growing up in the community especially a rural one is likely to expose someone to indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing like *Ubuntu* philosophies, which are not the major focus of the colonial formal education.

### **Experiences in Implementing Central Government's National Programs: Barriers and Frustrations**

At the time of PhD fieldwork (2017-2018), Harriet and Jeremy as sub-county community development officers were implementing a women's empowerment program (Uganda Women's Empowerment Programme, UWEP). In line with the top-down colonial approach to planning described earlier, the program was planned by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development in Kampala which decided what the target group of the program would be, how many loans would be provided, requirements to be met by applicants, and the approach to be used by local governments implementing the program in the whole country. The Ministry decided that refundable loans would be provided to women between 18–65 years, who have registered a group and have one agreed-on income generating project idea. The implementation role of the community workers involved them mobilizing women, supporting them to come to consensus about one project idea and to register their group, as per the requirements of the Ministry. I will discuss one of the frustrations that community workers had with this inherited centralized planning system, specialization of functions and the lack of consultation of community workers, and the impact this had on the local community.

#### **Specialization of Functions and the Lack of Consultation of Community Workers**

Community workers found it incredibly challenging to implement the top-down programs designed with their limited or non-involvement and consultation. Administrators who were situated hundreds of miles away from the local communities and those communities' realities planned the policies and programs.

## **Social Workers Navigating a Colonial Bureaucratic System While Also Re-Kindling Ubuntu-Led**

*Those interventions put up by the government, they just sit in Kampala and do the planning. They have not come here [in the community] like you [researcher] have come... But for them [the ministry], they sit there at the administrative level and design policies and programs (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017).*

According to Harriet and Jeremy, policy makers and administrators in Kampala never visited the local communities to know their local needs, priorities and resources, and there was limited involvement of community workers and people at the grassroots level.

*There is no input from the local government or even someone at the grassroots (Jeremy, Research conversation, 2017).*

The programs like UWEP come as “orders from above” or as “directives”, which community workers are supposed to implement as strictly stipulated by the ministry.

*For us we operate on directives, these programs are run on “orders from above”. For us we are just implementers... We are just directed, even in the meetings, we are just told what to do and how to do it (Jeremy, Research conversation, 2017).*

Community workers were bypassed during program design. The input community workers could give during policy and program design could be in relation to their knowledge and experience regarding what may or may not work in their communities, their knowledge of their communities’ priority needs and the indigenous models that could be incorporated by central government. However, the community workers’ practice wisdom and indigenous knowledge was not tapped into.

The top-down programs are very inflexible and any attempt by community workers to adapt the program to community’s needs and realities is framed as fraud and misappropriation or misallocation of funds. Harriet gave an example of when she tried to adapt the rules of the Ministry to fit the capabilities of her communities. She reported that when it came to evaluation and monitoring by the Ministry, such an “adaption to fit local context” was regarded as diversion of funds from the original purpose that the ministry had approved.

*The experience has been that you find that people want money, they are given up to 12 million UGX, [AUS 4800], so they make a joint proposal for their group enterprise. But in reality, the experience has been that ten people, they come together and let’s say they write in the proposal that they all want to rear poultry. The ministry will give them the money, but after getting the money, they share the money and everyone goes to do his/her own project. So, they do different projects than what was stated in the proposal approved by the ministry. So that is now diversion, according to government. They count that as misallocation, misappropriation of funds (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017).*

Rather than being seen as genuine and creative community work, and an appropriate attempt to incorporate local realities and build on traditional communal ways of organizing, this is “framed” as breaking the rules, something Harriet should be punished for, not applauded. Indeed, Harriet was very concerned that this bad report could stand in the way of her obtaining future funding from the ministry. This is a typical managerialist approach where the practice wisdom of community workers is not valued.

## ***Social Workers Navigating a Colonial Bureaucratic System While Also Re-Kindling Ubuntu-Led***

Thus, centralized programs allowed only limited flexibility to accommodate the local people's wisdom, abilities and interests.

The impact of such top-down approaches on the communities being targeted includes: perpetuation of structural oppression and disempowerment of local community. For example numerous conditions and complex bureaucratic requirements are placed on local communities and the onus is on those communities to demonstrate their eligibility for support from central government programs. The process for making applications and the complicated paper work expected of those applying for funds under the UWEP program is a clear example of imposing and privileging colonial bureaucratic requirements over traditional knowledge and practices.

Harriet and Jeremy spoke at some length of the arduous administrative work required of communities when applying for funding.

*For UWEP, the groups applying must prepare an Expanded Rural Appraisal Report together with minutes, attendance lists of the group meetings. The groups must attach business plans to their application to the ministry, a budget, loan repayment plans. They must fill in the application form in triplet [sic] copies. Their group needs to be registered, have a formally written group constitution, a bank account in a commercial bank (Jeremy, Research conversation, 2017).*

Fulfilling these requirements is beyond the experience, knowledge and expertise of the targeted communities who are knowledgeable and competent in their own language and in traditional practices, but neither speak nor are literate in the official language English, making it incredibly difficult for them to satisfy these requirements.

*The Ministry of Gender expects women who have never stepped in a school to produce these documents for their groups to access money (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017).*

This is just a tip of the iceberg in regard to the oppression and humiliation that local people endure. Community groups have been forced to hire consultants to help them prepare their documentation. The consultants are mostly located in towns meaning that a woman from Bwambara subcounty has to walk more than 32 km to Rukungiri town to find a consultant to prepare the group project documentation. In addition to difficulties accessing these consultants, the women have to pay these consultants.

*These things need money right from the process of filling in the application forms up to getting money from the ministry. A group must have put in around UGX 500,000 [AUD 200] before it gets the money from government. Now like these poor people they struggle to raise the money but they try and pool the money until they raise it (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017).*

This process causes financial and psychological hardship for those already struggling to survive. They struggle to find this money. They are seeking funds because they do not have enough money, but are required to spend what little money they have before they get any funding. Yet there is no guarantee that their application will be successful, leading to further disappointment. There have been several broken promises in terms of unfunded project proposals.

Once the community groups have invested the little money they have in making the application with the hope of getting funding to support projects, it is not uncommon for the groups to be informed by

the government that it no longer has the funds. This was the experience of women's groups in 2017 in Bwambara, where only two out of 24 groups were granted the funds applied for.

*Then comes the government announcement: There is no money!! That's what is happening, because in Bwambara we had submitted 24 groups, they only approved two, of which two, one group was given UGX 7 million (AUD 2,600) and another group was given, I think, UGX 12 million (AUD 4,450) (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017).*

Twenty-two of the 24 simply lost the UGX 500,000 [AUD 200] they had scraped together and invested. All the work and effort they had put into these applications in the hope of funding badly needed projects came to nothing. This was a very disappointing outcome for the community workers and the women, and fed further distrust towards this system that does not seem to center on the needs of the masses, prompting questions on how different it is from the colonial administration led by the British that just deprived the local community of the little resources they had. The lack of adequate funds for the community projects happened partly because of diversion of funds at ministry level. For example, in the financial year 2016/2017, the Ministry of Gender diverted funds allocated to women's group projects to establish infrastructure, systems and tools to ensure smooth administration of the UWEP program. The funds were used to buy computers and office stationery and fund the bureaucratic vetting process of women's groups (Campus Bee, 2018). This vetting process involved meetings of four committees at sub-county and district level before the application was sent to the ministry, where there were more committees to vet the applications. This bureaucratic system was prioritized over the needs of the 22 groups of women in Bwambara.

The lack of funding prioritization is not just an issue with community projects only but is also similar for community workers who operate in an environment where they are not given funding for transport to the communities in which they work yet they are given vast geographical areas to cover. The administrative offices of most of the community development workers were established in urban or peri-urban areas where colonizers mostly preferred to reside. Travelling to the communities they target therefore requires transportation like work vehicles which most of the workers do not have. For workers to go to the communities, they have to hire their own transport using their own resources. If their private resources run out, they are stuck in their offices while communities drown in the issues that require a community workers' help.

These frustrations of community workers are not at all new experiences. The effectiveness of colonial western social work in addressing the needs of local communities was, as far back as the 1950s, constrained by similar issues of "distance, transport, leadership..." (Ministry of Planning and Community Development, 1965 p. 3). These issues could have been inherent in the way the colonial systems and services were structured and located in specific areas outside the local communities, mostly in urban areas (Ministry of Planning and Community Development, 1965). While in the precolonial society there were traditional community elders located within walkable distances in communities, who could have been left in charge of administering their villages, these local leaders were devalued by colonisers as illiterate and displaced in favour of the colonial administrators. Perhaps if these community elders had been integrated into the formal community development work, the workload and work area to cover for community workers would have been minimised, resulting into maximum service for the local communities. However, complaints of unrealistic work load of community workers and staffing shortages have been noted elsewhere by Bukuluki, Mukuye, Mubiru, & Namuddu (2017) who explain that instead of

central government increasing staff resources, it has responded by putting a moratorium on recruitment and reduced funding to 65% of established positions. Therefore, at this rate, understaffing exacerbated by inadequate or reduced funding is likely to be a continual problem for community and social workers in the current colonial bureaucratic system. What then are some of the alternative approaches that community workers are adopting to support their communities they feel indebted to amidst these constraining bureaucratic systems and unfavourable working conditions?

### **Social Worker-Community-Led *Obuntu* Social Work: A Case of Using Indigenous Practice Of *Burungi Bw'ansi* to Establish a Community School and a Water Tank**

The focus of this subsection is on a successful story of a community worker working alongside the community to construct a much-needed community school and a water tank. Harriet used the indigenous *Burungi Bw'ansi* model, which espouses the values of self-help, volunteerism and working for the common good. *Burungi Bw'ansi* as its name suggests is an indigenous practice where everyone in the community is engaged in collective activities done for the “good of everyone in the village and for mother earth”. The activities include communal maintenance and ownership of social goods and services like roads, water sources, wells and springs, schools and hospitals (Ssonko, 2014). Everyone in the community was expected to participate and those who did not, without genuine reasons, would be ridiculed, ostracized and penalized by the elders. In the villages, elders mobilized communities on communally-agreed days. A drum or trumpet would be used to remind everyone that it was *Burungi Bw'ansi* day. In Buganda, a specific drum, *sagala agalamidde*, would be sounded very early in the morning to communicate time for *Burungi Bw'ansi*. *Gwanga Mugye* was a drum sounded to warn of trouble or danger, which required communal efforts (Davis, 2016). With the sound of such drums, individual activities were to be put aside to prioritize and engage in activities that benefited the community as a whole.

*Burungi Bw'ansi* thrived until the 1990s (Ssonko, 2014). In more recent times, the tradition has been weakened by the influence on governments of western capitalism. With the government taking over ownership of social goods and services like schools and hospitals, people in the community are instructed to wait for the government to pay workers to do the would-be *Burungi Bw'ansi* activities like clearing bushes around hospitals or paving roads (Ssonko, 2014). The devaluing of indigenous education through which *Burungi Bw'ansi* values were imparted is also exacerbating the weakening of these philosophies and models of helping.

The *Burungi Bw'ansi* pro-active model of helping was and is based on values including self-help, volunteerism, mutual respect and community spirit. Self-help meant that the people in the community solved communal problems without assistance from outsiders, such as colonial governments. Under volunteerism, people worked willingly to support each other and protect the environment and everything in it. There was no expectation of pay for the work done nor was the work done as a legal obligation. It affirmed the value of *I am because we all are*, that is, mutual respect for each other in the community, promoting community spirit as opposed to individualistic tendencies (Ssonko, 2014).

Through participating in *Burungi Bw'ansi*, the community member affirms, respects and is praised as having the much valued, *Obuntu*. *Obuntu/Ubuntu* originates from the *Bantu* peoples who comprise several indigenous ethnic groups spread across Uganda and Africa. *Bantu* means humans/people and *Obuntu* means the view or quality of being human or treating people in a way that respects them as human beings or centers their humanity. In Uganda, *Obuntu* denotes universal values among all people

in Uganda (UN Uganda, 2017). *Ubuntu* is difficult to translate into any western language, including English because it's an all-encompassing African worldview, philosophy, morality and ethics, a way of living and knowing. It is a way of living to which all Ugandans aspire.

*Ubuntu* means co-existence and interdependence of humans and the environment/nature. It is underpinned with values of solidarity and affirming the humanity of others.

*Those who are privileged at one point may become vulnerable at another point, hence the need to support relatives, neighbours, and community members ... [because] serving others is perceived as an investment for assistance in the future (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, & Mwansa, 2019, p. 23).*

The premise of *Ubuntu* is that everyone must make their contribution towards initiatives and aspirations of the community. The philosophy promotes teamwork and collaboration, which in turn promotes community cohesiveness, support and belongingness.

*Ubuntu* recognizes that

*...the individual cannot develop outside the context of the community and the welfare of the community requires the talents and initiatives of individual members...The individual has two responsibilities: one to the individual him/herself, and the other to the community (Osei-Hwedie, 2007, p. 5).*

Each individual has a responsibility to promote individual but also societal/communal wellbeing (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). This *Ubuntu*-value of bringing a human face and humane-ness into every aspect of life has prompted *Ubuntu* scholars like Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) to conclude that *Ubuntu* philosophy brings to the world what western civilization has failed to bring.

Harriet and the community members have drawn on *Ubuntu* philosophies and models like *Burungi Bwa'nsi* to work alongside each other to define and find a solution to the existing common problems of lack of education infrastructure and a chronic water shortage in the community. Having grown up in the rural community in Bwambara, Harriet has a lived experience of what it is like to struggle to access education, surviving on support from family, kin and community. She knew the struggles of her community especially in relation to basic services including clean water. Out of her private initiative but driven by the *Ubuntu* philosophies of everyone's responsibility to their community's wellbeing, Harriet mobilized and engaged her community to brainstorm ideas of what they can do to address the community's struggles.

The *Ubuntu*-led relational and collaborative approach of establishing a community school is the highlight of this chapter. Harriet describes how she worked collaboratively with the community to define the problem and set priorities to construct a community school:

*We started together with the community, a community-based organisation. We just called them [the community] and we asked them, "What do you think we can do?" Just dialogue. And the community members were like, "We have so many children, so even when we go to dig, where we are supposed to dig up to mid-day, we dig up to 10 am because we have to come back and take care of the children, we sometimes leave them at home crying, they do not have enough to eat." So, they [the community] were like, "We can start a community nursery school. We give the children a teacher and they stay there" (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017).*

## **Social Workers Navigating a Colonial Bureaucratic System While Also Re-Kindling Ubuntu-Led**

For the community, the most pressing problem was childcare, which they needed if they were to engage productively in cultivation. Establishing a community school would ensure that the children were cared for appropriately and were getting an education, while the women had time to do their cultivation to sustain the community.

As an outcome of this collaborative process, a consensus was reached where Harriet and the community members agreed to pool together the resources needed to construct the school. All the community members, including Harriet, contributed what they had, land, labor, money, building materials, timber, nails and food such as maize.

*So, we were like, "What do we do?" So, one of the community members said. "For me, I have given you a place/land where to put the nursery school." Another one gave us timber for building, another one said, "For me, I have contributed nails." That's how we started! And we said, "What do we do for the children, they will need food to eat." Then ideas came. We said that since it was the season for maize, every parent contribute 5 kilograms from their farms and they did! (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017)*

At the time of doing this fieldwork (2017), the community school had been running for over five years. The parents who made the initial contributions were exempted from paying school fees. A small fee to pay the teachers running the school is paid by those parents who did not contribute to the initial construction of the school. During the harvest, all parents bring maize, which is ground into maize flour that is used to prepare porridge and posho for the children and teachers. Harriet uses part of her salary to provide scholastic materials like books and pens to those children whose parents are struggling to raise fees and buy scholastic materials.

Children and parents have benefited from the community school with children attaining education as parents get time to engage in their farming activities uninterrupted. Harriet is also very satisfied that she has been able to fulfill her *Ubuntu* obligations of helping her community.

*Children are now taking porridge in school so the parent also has time to dig, they know that the child is being taken care of in the community! (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017)*

The same indigenous model, *Burungi Bw'ansi*, that uses and builds on traditional organization, skills and knowledge of the community, was drawn on to mobilize people to construct a community water tank. Access to clean water is one of the most critical needs in Bwambara. Harriet and the community pooled their resources to construct a 45,000 liter underground reservoir or water tank. Using her technical knowledge of proposal writing and resource mobilization, Harriet managed to secure a grant equal to 5 million UGX (2,000 AUD). However, this money was insufficient to hire a construction company for the entire project.

Harriet called a community meeting and based on community consensus, they decided to use the money to purchase those materials not locally available in the community, like cement and water pipes. Then the community would provide the locally available resources, such as labor, for digging and helping with the construction of the tank.

*We met with the community and we made [a] plan. They were going to provide Burungi Bw'ansi where they would do the digging that is required using the tools they have, generally provide the labour and whatever they have, like we did in the community school. We used the money to buy what we don't have*



*in the community, like cement, water pipes and also pay the plumbers. Now people drink water from a tap! (Harriet, Research conversation, 2017)*

The community came together to address a pressing need for clean water by working alongside each other, using the available resources. Having a community water tank has had a huge impact on the community, particularly for older women who were saved from walking very long distances to search for water. However, this is a drop in the ocean as the water tank's capacity supplies only 149 households in one community of Kanyankwanzi, Bwambara. Nevertheless the success of the project shows the potential of an indigenous model, where community workers work alongside communities, valuing local people's knowledges and ideas.

## **CHARACTERISTICS/PRINCIPLES OF OBUNTU-LED RELATIONAL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY WORK AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RECONTEXTUALIZING SOCIAL WORK**

### **Working in Solidarity**

In *Obuntu*-led relational approach, the social or community worker works in solidarity with the community. The worker can be a catalyst for action in the community but he/she works in dialogue with the community members. In this case, the community worker is seen as part of the community, living and sharing the concerns of the community, rather than being seen as an expert or outsider parachuting in the community to 'help' it with its problems.

In local interpretation, working in solidarity reflects human-ness or *Obuntu* where community members are expected to co-exist and support each other during both hard and good times. Such community workers like Harriet who are seen as part of the community would be praised by the community members as having '*Obuntu*' since they are able to work together with the community to address their struggles. Indeed, as other *Obuntu* scholars like Khomba have argued, "In a hostile environment, it is only through such community solidarity that hunger, isolation, deprivation, poverty and any emerging challenges can be survived, because of the community's brotherly and sisterly concern, cooperation, care, and sharing" (Khomba, n.d., p. 128). It is the quality of *Obuntu* that gives people resilience, enabling them to survive despite all efforts to dehumanize them (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013, citing Tutu, 2000). Working in solidarity with the community in Uganda is a culturally/contextually appropriate approach that nurtures rather than ignores the spirit of community and collectivism, which are often undermined by the colonial western social work that imposes individualistic ways of being, alien to the communities. The practical approach to recontextualizing social work requires social workers in such collective communities to embrace, validate and advance such communal ways of supporting each other to build cohesive and stronger communities where each one is there for another.

### **Valuing the Ideas, Knowledges, Experiences of the Community**

As Harriet worked with the communities in this relational approach, she did not operate by giving 'directives' or 'orders from above' as seen before in her experience in local government. In a relational approach, the community worker values the knowledges, ideas and accumulated wisdom of the com-

munity. He/she is not a detached professional who zooms in to tell community what to do because his/her knowledge or ideas are the best and most important and therefore the community must listen to them and follow them. The worker does not position his/her ideas and knowledge as superior to that of the community they are working with. Rather a platform is created where ideas from the community are shared together with the ideas of the community worker. Each one contributes what they have to work for the good of the community. Everyone's contribution is equally and genuinely valued because it is voluntarily given. There is appreciation that none is all-knowing or all-sufficient. The community had resources that the community workers did not have and the community workers had some resources that the communities did not have. None of the groups had sufficient resources to implement the projects singlehandedly. By valuing what they can do together, they were able to implement key projects that addressed the priority needs of all the members in the community. Note that when you come from a perspective of valuing the community's knowledge and ideas, you are taking a different approach from the individualized, professionalized and anthologizing approaches to the communities. It is about going beyond 'single stories' that we often tell about communities, where we tend to see only the needs/problems, ignoring the ideas, resilience, the ways of survival these communities would have put in place to address their struggles. In using the *Ubuntu*-relational or human approach, it is not about centering how poor, helpless, powerless the communities are but recognizing that there are resources, ideas, initiatives that could be built on in our work with the communities. Harriet did not start from what the community members lacked but rather she engaged with the resources they had available in their localities. Recontextualizing requires debunking the all-too-common deficit, pathologizing, 'savior' mentality or model/approach in our work with communities. It requires tapping into the local wisdom and experience of communities accumulated over time.

### **Valuing Indigenous Philosophies, Approaches and Language Community is Familiar With**

The philosophies of *Ubuntu* and *Burungi Bw'ansi* are local ways of life, well known to the community that community development workers were working with. It makes a very big difference when the community worker speaks or endeavors to learn the language and philosophies of the local community yet, in most of the community development work, rarely would an expert worker or donor bother to learn the language of the community they are helping. Rather it is the communities that have to learn the language of the donor or put up with being written about in reports that the locals cannot read or understand themselves.

Referring to *Ubuntu* or *Burungi Bwa'nsi* to any local person in the community or even a social work student in that community will create mental images, make connections, and create their imagination about collective ways of helping compared to when you use foreign terms, models, theories, developed in western contexts. These are examples of the indigenous philosophies that reflect the context as they developed from the experiences and indigenous languages of the local community itself. Language in community work is vital as it frames everything; it demonstrates value to the local culture and identity. It is empowering to be able to practice, teach and refer to familiar and understandable frames of reference and models that are embedded in the philosophies of one's local communities. Referring to and embedding social work in understandable *Ubuntu* philosophies will address the embarrassing challenge when social workers in Uganda cannot explain to the public in the local languages what their profession is all about. This may also improve the public's understanding of social work, which will improve the public

recognition and status of social work in Uganda as a profession of the people. Part of the process of decolonizing and thus recontextualizing social work includes reclaiming the right and capacity to define social work in concepts and terms that we are familiar with and that are embedded in our own cultures and societies (Chilisa, 2012). This could begin to address the psychological and epistemological genocide caused by colonialism by bringing to the fore the formerly marginalized and devalued ways of being and thinking. Although the precolonial philosophies and models were displaced, devalued and disorganized by colonization, they have remained resilient in local communities who have remained custodians of local culture. Although indigenous ways and models are still neglected in mainstream social work and policy, they could provide a grounding for social work that is embedded in cultural values and philosophies of people, rather than the models currently provided by professional social work that espouses western principles and philosophies but of which local communities have limited understanding. Reclaiming local philosophies will disrupt the current challenge of social work being a profession of the 'elite'.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, the origins of the professional western social work as a colonial product and tool to advance the interests of colonizers rather than serving the Ugandan people have been discussed. It has been highlighted that rather than dismantling the colonial bureaucratic system modeled after the British's top-down central planning approach, the colonial systems were inherited by African elites who currently rule their people perpetuating those colonial laws, English language, systems of central planning and program implementation. Using the narrative experiences of Harriet and Jeremy, community workers in local government implementing policies and programs of central government, the frustrations and limitations of this colonial hierarchical approach have been discussed. The discussion includes how programs come as directives or order from above due to lack of consultation and involvement of community workers and communities being targeted. Cumbersome requirements, paper work, are required of the local communities, which perpetuate structural oppression and disempowerment of local community while the constant lack of funding prioritization for community projects and lack of transportation for community workers. The understaffing issues which have exacerbated the frustrations and working conditions of workers who are caught in the middle of wanting to serve their communities, but are constrained by the limitations of the colonial bureaucracy. These barriers demonstrate the need to re-imagine social work beyond the institutions of western modernity including the government-funded programs and services. The revamping of some of the indigenous ways of being and models of helping embedded in local philosophies of *Ubuntu* provide some hope and shed some light on the persistence and resilience of indigenous ways of being. These models of helping have survived the onslaught of historical and continuing colonization from the so-called 'enlightened' former colonial powers, contemporary Eurocentric scholars and some African elites.

The indigenous and communal ways of doing things discussed in this chapter have always existed before colonization, during and 'after' colonization in Uganda. The number one problem is that they are not recognized as 'valid' or 'legitimate' ways of doing social work, in our context where social work is predominantly understood as professional work limited to institutions of western modernity that is associated with government bureaucracy or traditional NGOs. The precolonial models, which have been marginalized in professional or colonial social work, but have remained resilient and relevant, protected and passed on by local communities, represent the alternative relational social work embedded in con-

text, local language and philosophies. If such community-led ways of doing things as discussed in this chapter are to be strengthened, the colonization of the mind where social workers in Uganda themselves do not recognize them as valid ways of doing social work, must be disrupted. The colonial thinking of some social workers in the west, that western social work is the best way of doing social work and that it is universal, must also be debunked. There are diverse but equal ways of doing social work which all depend on the context where a social worker is working. Social work education and practice must value and embrace epistemological diversity in conceptualizing social work, which goes beyond the west-to-the-rest thinking.

What this chapter posits is that social work education and practice in Uganda and globally cannot continue to undermine and marginalize indigenous knowledge and therefore indigenous social work in different contexts. To continue with the status quo of the education system is to celebrate the triumph of colonization, to say the least. At the moment, social work university education is continuing the project of colonization through its privileging and imposition of western social work history, knowledge, theories, concepts and models of social work. To decolonize and therefore recontextualize social work involves each one of us beginning to question and disrupt this teaching and practicing of social work from a largely European and North American perspective, one that is largely shaped by western ideas, cultural values, and events, and is underrepresenting and silencing the teaching and learning about social work in diverse contexts shaped by local ways of doing and knowing.

As Garlock (2017) notes, in the west, there is a really specific idea about what social work is and what social workers do and this tends to be limited mostly to social welfare-related work by state and or traditional NGOs. There is a need to disrupt the western hegemonic thinking of social work only in specific ways and to develop new interpretations of social work by acknowledging that there are other ways in which people in other contexts are responding to social problems outside of what formal welfare institutions can provide. Social workers cannot continue to ignore real social work happening in the margins, led by people in the margins, drawing on their local philosophies and knowledge. Social workers working with communities could explore or create spaces for the voices of such people to be heard, spaces where communities could talk about their ways of survival and how they would like to be supported. Social workers would need to facilitate, validate and strengthen such indigenous ways of being and helping rather than impose their own agenda, expertise, models, procedure, rules as it is in most traditional hierarchical national and international community development.

It is empowering that social workers and the communities they serve can use terms, philosophies and concepts to describe what social work is and how it is done in the language understood by the community or people they work with. It is colonial to continue to impose western worldviews of social work on communities that have their own understandable ways of doing social work. The first role of social workers interested in recontextualized social work is to challenge colonial thinking that there is one 'enlightened' way or at worst the thinking that there is one right or best way of conceptualizing and doing social work which is imposed irrespective of context. There are diverse or different but equally valid ways or philosophies of conceptualizing and doing social work and these must be embraced and advanced to enrich rather than narrow social work.

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# Chapter 10

## Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World: Lessons From the Pacific

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### **ABSTRACT**

*As the professional agenda of social work continues to spread globally, certain voices are privileged in the construction of what constitutes valid social work practice and education. Within the South Pacific Islands, the ongoing colonial legacy, engagement with foreign aid, and influence of globalization contribute to an environment where Western models of social work may supersede or drown out efforts to integrate models of Western and non-Western practice. Despite the trend to adopt Western models of practice, the neo-liberal prerogative underpinning many such approaches fails to address issues of social and ecological injustice. In response, Pacific constructions of social work encourage a more relational and collaborative model of practice with a focus on social connection rather than 'outcome'. Ultimately, in the context of increasing globalization, the social work profession should foster a rich and diverse understanding of social work practice by embracing indigenous and localized understandings of research, education, and practice.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's globalized context, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2020) claims to represent over 3 million social workers globally. This large transnational membership suggests that there is some shared commonality to social work, or at least espoused sense of collective values (Nikku, 2015). Others intimate that a unified position of social work is unlikely, given the diverse cultural landscapes and contexts in which practice occurs (Morales et al, 2010; Dominelli, 2010b). It is within the global efforts to name, define, standardize and articulate social work that certain voices become privileged in constructions of what it is to do, or be a social worker (Staub-Bernasconi, 2017; Ravulo, 2016; Dominelli, 2014) This chapter presents specific examples of these tensions within the South Pacific context. It also

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highlights the role of colonial and neo-liberal forces in maintaining power and privilege within social work research, practice, policy and education. By providing lessons learned from Pacific approaches to social work, this chapter draws on a decolonizing position to examine ways in which practice can be recontextualized among the global community. Such recontextualizations, with an emphasis on relational interactions with self, environment and society, offer exciting possibilities for the ways in which social work can be constructed.

## **The Pacific Practice Context**

In the past few decades, the Pacific Islands have experienced rapid economic and cultural changes. Tourism has proved to be a source of revenue for many of the Island Nations, with their idyllic beaches and laid back lifestyle alluring for many international tourists (Cheer, et al., 2018). The influx of tourism has provided local employment and represents 40% of GDP for many Pacific communities (Chanel, 2020). This engagement with foreign tourists (the bulk of whom are from Australia and New Zealand) also brings with it the spread of social ideas and cultural exchange encapsulated within the processes of globalization (Movono et al., 2018; Marsella et al., 2005). While many governments view these economic benefits as positive, other sectors of the Pacific community are wary of foreign influence corrupting local values and damaging the environment (Marsella et al., 2005; Rapadas et al., 2005). Others fear that the Pacific Islands may simply lack the infrastructure to support a sustainable tourism industry (Xu, 2019; Connell, 2010). As it is, foreign investors own many large resorts with significant company profits being shared at disproportionate rates to indigenous staff and landowners (Cheer et al., 2018). This is not a criticism of the tourism industry per se, rather an example of how the tourism industry may reinforce historical colonial structures where 'black' Islanders wait on the white wealthy elite. Colonial influences are also strongly felt in the development of Pacific Island Nation States and the geographical areas of Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia named and divided as such during the period of French colonization (Ravulo, Mafile'o & Yeates, 2019). Prior to these contemporary geopolitical constructions of the Pacific Islands, the relationships, travel and trade between the diverse Island communities would have been more fluid and interconnected. Although tribal war and conflict would have occurred, history suggests there has been a continuous sense of collective responsibility to the land and the ocean that is shared by many Pacific Island cultures (Ravuvu, 1983).

Tourism and indeed globalization more broadly has also had strong influence on social and political structures across the Pacific Islands. This has resulted in rapid urbanization and a weakening of traditional values such as filial piety and communalism, in favor of the perceived Western values of economic rationalism and individualism (Movono et al., 2018; Shek, 2017). This has also led to exposure to foreign markets, trade and investment and the concept of formalized employment. Such mechanisms have diverged with subsistence farming practices and trade routes that were dominant means of survival for Pacific Island communities (Movono et al, 2018; Firth, 2007). The corollary to this is that the Pacific Islands also experience huge rates of unemployment (Malo, 2017) and are at risk of over-fishing and environmental degradation to meet growing export demands (Zgliczynski et al., 2013). The Pacific Islands are also the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Merone & Tait, 2018; Schroeder et al., 2012) despite their minimal contribution to greenhouse gas emissions.

These stark statistics may inadvertently paint the picture of the Pacific Islands as in deficit and give rise to the 'capacity development' agenda of foreign aid. Indeed significant sources of national income and basic social infrastructure are received from international donors; with Australia contributing over



60% of bilateral aid followed by the United States, New Zealand and China (Hayward-Jones, 2013). Another significant proportion of GDP comes from remittances sent back from family now living overseas (Petrou & Connell, 2017). The practice of remittances is also intertwined with the growing 'brain drain', where many of the formally educated or socially mobile citizens leave to obtain better-paid employment overseas (Dunn et al., 2018; Hugo, 2012). The unintended consequence of this is many of the Islands' most vulnerable persons; including the elderly, those living with a disability or of poor health, children, those with unsecure housing or in abject poverty now skew the population trends. This again may reinforce the idea of Pacific Island communities as being helpless or dependent on others for economic survival, capacity development and empowerment.

The consequences of capacity development rhetoric is that those who are employed in development roles (usually white westerners) are positioned as experts sent to assist 'un-informed' communities to work towards 'progress' often determined in terms of material growth and output (Thaman, 2013). The [white] elephant in the room is that it is these same colonial forces that seek to assist through international development agendas, are those which created the current social inequities to begin with! As such, the capacity development agendas of international aid have attracted critique in the way in which local Islander cultures are depicted as lacking capacity in some way (Ravulo, 2017; Thaman, 2013; Foleolo, 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Such criticism is noteworthy, particularly when linking both the nature of current social problems to ways in which social work practice may be understood and enacted across the Pacific region. Any understanding and approach to social work practice in the Pacific must acknowledge and appreciate the ongoing legacy of colonization. Although the Pacific Islands represent different cultural practices, beliefs, governance and history, all have experienced pre and post-colonial impacts at the behest of vast French, Dutch and British Empires (Ravulo, Mafile'o & Yeates, 2019; Shek, 2017).

## **LESSONS FROM THE PACIFIC**

Pacific Islanders have been informally involved in the service of helping one another for generations, however *Pacific social work* as a distinct body of professional knowledge is in early stages of development (Crichton-Hill, 2017). Part of the challenge in promoting Pacific approaches into practice, is the continued dominance of Western ideology in the spread of social work globally (Ravulo, 2017). Many of the books, language, "evidence base", professionalization agenda, international codes of conduct, definitions, education and training remain deeply rooted in Western frameworks of understanding (Dominelli, 2010a). However a core question remains as to the suitability of Western models within the Pacific Island context (Shek, 2017).

In response to this, social work educators have begun to focus more attention on context-specific practice and education that is happening in many indigenous communities and non-Western fields of practice (Ugiagbe, 2015; Faleolo, 2013; Dominelli, 2010b; Ling, 2007; Burkett & McDonald, 2005). In recent decades, Pacific (also sometimes referred to as Pasifika or Oceania) social work has begun to permeate social work literature as a culturally specific alternative to Western models or approaches (Ravulo, Mafile'o & Yeates, 2019). However, while the emergence of Pacific social work provides an opportunity for practice to be embedded in Pacific epistemology (Vakalahi & Goodinet, 2014), Pacific social work has also been largely developed across nation state borders by Pacific diaspora (Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2016). The challenge of this is that the social realities are very different for Pacific diaspora to those inhabiting the Pacific Island nations. As such, there is need for additional research and approaches

## ***Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World***

to social work informed and driven by local Pacific Island communities (Ravulo, Mafile'o & Yeates, 2019; Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2016).

The following lessons are based on the author's experiences of living, researching and working within the Pacific Island nations of Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu and Samoa. They are intended to contribute to discussions about the ways in which social work can be recontextualized to better suit local cultural milieu. The author overtly acknowledges her positionality as an "insider-outsider" (Crossley et al., 2016) within a cross-cultural context and the dangers of researching 'on' Pacific communities. These lessons are not intended to be a summative articulation of the way social work is, and should be practiced in the Pacific Islands. Rather, the lessons presented here are an invitation for reflection and an opportunity to collectively re-create social work in ways that are meaningful, transformative, and culturally informed. The contributions of Pacific social worker represent a central part of this process.

### **Lesson One: The Colonial Legacy Within Social Work**

Although attempts to define social work globally are contentious (Nikku, 2015) there appears to be a common thread that binds a drive to assist those in adversity. Whether these 'problems' are perceived as social injustices, personal inadequacies, or acts of providence depends on the socio-cultural and political context in which they are constructed (Askeland & Døhlie, 2015). Social constructionism suggests that both social work and culture are entities constructed by humans in an effort to interpret and understand the world around them (Morley et al., 2019). As such, any understanding of the ways in which social work is enacted, interpreted or indeed re-interpreted needs to factor in the historical and contemporary social forces at play. This also applies to understandings of social 'problems', or issues that reflect the nature, purpose and role of social work (Staub-Bernasconi, 2017). While the Pacific Islands represent a rich and diverse cultural groups, the Pacific region's engagement with Colonial forces has left a long lasting legacy in the way in which social care is conceptualized and delivered.

Some of the most overt examples of colonial influence are reflected in the systems and institutions established during Colonial rule. These include the imposition of parliamentary 'democracy' to supersede chiefly or clan-based rule, the division of land and islands into clearly demarcated areas of private ownership, formalized models of primary, secondary and tertiary education, judicial systems and penitentiaries, hospitals and asylums, new moral codes introduced via Christianity and the establishment of a formalized labor market (Connell, 2010). The inference of these processes is that pre-colonial systems were somehow lacking, or primitive in function and that colonialization represented a positive move to modernize island life (Faleolo, 2013). These tensions are still felt in the Islands, particularly in the dichotomy between urban and rural life, often pitted against each other in terms of modern versus traditional, with diverse opinions as to which is preferable. This creates tensions with regards to those who seek to protect traditional ways of living, with those who may wish to engage (either out of preference or necessity) with the forces of modernization. Although modernization is not necessarily synonymous with colonialism, globalization, or indeed Westernization, the unequal privileging of Western ideas remains a pervasive factor in the interpretation and response to social issues (Ravulo, 2016; Faleolo, 2013) and involves all three of these global forces. The reality is, for many Pacific Island nations, the mechanisms involved in the delivery of social care (e.g. social welfare, child protection, charity models) are microcosms of British or French civil society. The effectiveness of these systems in responding to social inequity and promoting peace is not irrefutable in any global setting and should not be unquestionably adopted as the status quo.

The colonial influence and rhetoric of Western Imperialism, however subtle this may be, further extends to the way in which many social services are funded and delivered in the Pacific Islands. Social service delivery (both formal and informal) and community development activities are heavily dependent on donor funding and underpinned by a foreign aid agenda. The heavy presence of international aid agencies, as well as a groundswell of regional bodies and grassroots NGOs, has led to the promotion of capacity development and empowerment magniloquence throughout the region. Faith-based programs and charities support these efforts and deliver material assistance and financial relief to *help those in need, the vulnerable and the poorest of the poor* (Foundation for the education of needy children in Fiji or FENC, 2020). Such organizations and efforts are valuable and play a worthy contribution to the livelihood of Pacific communities, however critical reflection is required as to the impact of this on the construction and delivery of social work efforts in the Pacific (Ravulo, Mafile'o & Yeats, 2019). Any project or movement that engages in the language of development likely assumes that a) the targeted community is lacking and/or deficit in some form; b) that [economic] development is a desirable and positive outcome; and/or c) some external and more educated force has a role to play in gifting knowledge, resources or power. Again, such normative positions render Pacific Islands as deficit and in need of saving from a wealthy and 'better educated' [read Western] foreign system.

Another challenge in the donor-funded context of the Pacific Islands is that many community groups are forced to contest for resources and compete to access funds. Such lateral processes reinforce competition and outcome driven agendas and distract attention from the underlying source of many modern day social ills affecting the Pacific Islands. These include, ongoing racial tensions as a result of black-birding and indentured labor during Colonial rule; the loss of traditional food sources in favor of low-cost, highly processed foods; the degradation of natural resources as a result of mining, forestry and over-fishing; and the importation of British and French educational systems in favor of indigenous learning models. In addition, stigmatization and devaluing of gender fluidity, inequitable access to global markets and political instability are by-products of the Colonial project. The process of devaluing local indigenous knowledge and then promoting 'capacity developing' initiatives needs to be earnestly questioned by social work in this space.

In addition to the colonial imposition on social structures and the delivery of social care, colonial forces have also been deeply influential in the delivery of social work education and training (Ravulo, 2016). In 1971, the Regional Adviser on Training for the South Pacific Commission recommended the establishment of a new university-level Diploma of Social Services program, loosely based on its British counterpart, the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (Yasas, 1971). This was offered via the University of the South Pacific, a public university jointly owned and managed by 12 Pacific Island nations (USP, 2020), and based out of the Fiji campus. Several decades of political instability and racial tensions between the i'Taukei (indigenous Fijians) and the Indo-Fijians, who had been brought to the Islands as indentured laborers during British colonial rule, led to a number of coups and calls by 'outspoken public figures' to discard the diploma course in favor of the traditional Fijian strengths of the extended family, kinship, and community (including the church) which advocates argued could, and should, take care of the social welfare needs of Fijian communities (Mills, 2002). Similar debates regarding social work education remain today, as the uncritical transfer of Western social work approaches to other nations does not take into account the issues of cultural relativity and the indigenization process (Nadan, 2017; Ugiagbe, 2015; Ling; 2007; Midgley, 2001; Tsang & Yan, 2001).

While the ideological debates about the appropriateness of Western-style professional social work continued within the Pacific Islands, so did the demand for formal training in social work services; Albeit

## ***Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World***

from workers in institutions such as courts, prisons, hospitals, and child protection, which are largely the consequence of Fiji's British colonial past. The 1990s also saw an influx of international aid activity as the drive to establish economic growth and development took a stronghold on the South-Pacific region. This drive for development saw a groundswell of grassroots social welfare initiatives in the Pacific Region and led to the establishments of many non-government organizations (NGOs) and community associations (Mills, 2002). The rapid expansion of civil society and grassroots responses to social care reunited calls for more formal social work qualifications and was accompanied by the creation of the region's first professional association, the Fiji Association of Social Workers (FASW). FASW was a key driver in voicing the need to develop training programs and the means of providing professional accreditation within the vast array of community and social services that had started operating within the Pacific Region. This professional concern, that social work services training was an essential element of social development, was subsequently endorsed by academic institutions. In 1997, the University of the South Pacific (USP) launched a Postgraduate Diploma in Social Policy offered within its Sociology faculty. The Sociology department has also gone on to provide courses on counseling, psychology, and sociology and has offered a Bachelor of Arts (Social Work) since 2007.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the introduction of these courses saw the university reliant on academic staff from Western institutions. For sparsely populated Pacific Islands, the imposition of a Western-based positioning towards tertiary education also highlights the dramatic differences in availability and access to resources between the West and "developing" nations. One example is the importation of social work competencies and standards that are often established in countries where resources are plentiful—this devalues social work education set in different traditions and in different stages of development (Faleolo, 2013; Payne & Askeland, 2008). There are also those who believe that social work is a modern invention that fits neo-liberal Western contexts and is not geared to the problems of lower-income countries, such as poverty, AIDS/HIV, hunger, drought, and conflict (Gray, 2005). This raises questions as to what should be the core-focus of social work, particularly as we seek to recontextualize practice for the contemporary global scene.

An additional component of contemporary social work practice is the idea of modernist rationality that is based on the belief that there is one best answer to any problem or question if the logical process of deductive reasoning is employed. This rational answer is then applied to populations in the belief that this is the best and most logical course of action. Unfortunately, this approach often ignores the importance of culture, religion, class, gender, and other diversities that are fundamental tenets of good social work practice (Dominelli & Moosa-Mitha, 2014; Mullaly, 2007). As the Pacific region continues to embark on the journey of promoting and developing professional notions of social work via the establishment of tertiary-level social work qualifications, models of social work developed in Western-liberal democracies are likely to be extremely influential in shaping the ways in which social work develops in the Pacific (Saxton, 2013). The manifestations of a professional category of social work may be seen as an application of the practice associated with twenty-first century Western 'professional' movement, but in a different context (Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017). On the basis that social work continues to assert itself as a global profession, there is also a risk that one kind of knowledge becomes so powerful as to dominate another culture's ways of understanding (Noble, 2013). In this manner, the uncritical importation of Western-models of practice into the Pacific can be viewed as a modern day act of colonialism (Ravulo, 2016).

## Lesson Two: Look for Opportunities to Create Shared Meaning Making.

In deliberations regarding the universal basis of social work practice, the Pacific Islands can offer some strategies to navigate these tensions. One such position encourages social work to move from binary, ‘either-or’ approaches to those which appreciate the interconnected nature of the world. Writings on the ontological positions of Tongan, Samoan, Hawaiian and Fijian communities describe the interrelated nature of people to one-another, the land and the greater cosmos (Koya-Vaka’uta, 2014, Thaman, 2006; Va’ai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017; Varani-Norton, 2017; Ravuvu, 1983; Nabobo-Baba, 2006a). In such conceptions, the sense of self cannot be understood as external, or separate to greater social forces as play, including the moment in time in which events occur (Varani-Norton, 2017; Koya-Vaka’uta, 2014). These Pacific concepts are applicable when attempting to articulate and reshape understandings of social work in a globalized context. Pacific ontological argument suggests that meaning cannot be created in a conceptual vacuum, and must take into consideration the impact ideas have on others (Tunufa’i, 2016). Such philosophical positions also show how meaning is co-created, fluid and representative of a particular point in time (Farely & Nabobo-Baba; 2014; Halapua, 2008). Greater appreciation and recognition of Pacific theorizing also rejects earlier suppositions of the Pacific Islands as primitive (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2015; Hau’ofa, 1994) and challenges the dominance of Western scientific rationalism as the starting point for which “other” ideas can be examined (Thaman, 2013).

As a white, formally educated social work academic, the author is fearful that promoting Pacific ontology only further embodies colonialism as Pacific theories become culturally appropriated. Part of this conundrum can be navigated by considering *for whose benefit* do retheorizing efforts within social work support? It is now well established that definitions and codes of social work developed in Western nations are likely to be influential in contexts where social work seeks to be professionalized, despite being ill-suited to meet the needs of the local community (Nikku, 2015; Beecher et al., 2012). As the push to embrace Western models of social work continues to be documented in the Pacific Islands (Faleolo, 2013), there is a very real threat of localized knowledge and approaches to social care being overthrown in the name of progress (Thaman, 2013; Varani-Norton, 2017; Payne & Askeland, 2008). This poses risks of intellectual discrimination and oppression through inequalities in people’s access to knowledge that might be fundamental to the [Pacific] cultural setting (Dominelli, 2010b). As such, it is paramount that local Pacific understandings and constructions of social work be supported in international theorizing efforts regarding the nature and purpose of social work (Ravulo, 2017).

Pacific understandings also show the value in celebrating and learning diverse ways of knowing and invite spaces for collaborative meaning making (Ravulo & Walsh-Tapiata, 2019). Emele Varani-Norton, an i’Taukei (indigenous Fijian) researcher and educator, uses the metaphor of *masi* (tapa cloth) to demonstrate the interconnected nature and opportunities presented by indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge. *Masi* is a traditional Fijian tapestry that is woven and constantly reworked in response to environmental changes (Colchester, 2001). Varani-Norton (2017) suggests that using the metaphor of the *masi* cloth can be useful in understanding the combining, filtering, and screening of ideas for the purpose of melding sustainable living. It offers a conceptual framework for reconciling diverse pedagogical and epistemological positions through adopting “the best of the old” with “the best of the new” (Varani-Norton, 2017, p. 142). In applying the *masi* metaphor to education, research, and practice, there is an emphasis on epistemological reflexivity to ensure the outcome is sustainable. Such processes within social work would require a commitment to actively question and challenge positionality, power, and privilege within meaning making processes.

## **Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World**

Excitingly, as social workers internationally begin to recognize the importance of local or indigenous systems of knowledge, awareness also raises of the need to avoid interpreting others actions solely through the worker's own cultural lens (Noble, 2013). Tunufa'i (2016) suggests that *talanoa* may present a space for this to occur. Talanoa is a Pacific way of constructing and building consensus within a community and is used widely in Pacific contexts to discuss matters of importance ('Otunuku, 2011). In more broad terms, talanoa can refer to a process of discussion, conversing, story telling and talking and has roots in the Islands' strong oral tradition (Tunufa'i, 2016). It is a process where stories are explored to unpack meaning and gain agreement on a course of action or set of ideas discussed collectively (Vaka et al, 2016). Halapua (2003; 2008), was one of the key contributors to write about the process of talanoa, offers a useful contribution to understandings of talanoa through his definition of the process as:

*...engaging in dialogue with, or telling stories to each other absent of concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds. Talanoa embraces our worldviews of how we can and ought to live and work together collectively, and relate to one another as members of society (Halapau, 2008 p.1).*

Halapau's definition highlights the way in which experience of social phenomenon cannot be understood within the Pacific context, without recognition of the way in which this impacts upon spirituality and relationships with others. Phenomena or issues under study cannot be viewed as objective or separated from the lived and personal experiences of those describing the situation (Halapau, 2008). Talanoa, therefore, is a way of meaning making underpinned by Pacific epistemological positions (Tunufa'i, 2016). As an approach to theorizing it is significant in that knowledge is shared to facilitate a collective understanding of an issue or phenomenon between all involved in talanoa (Vaka et al, 2016).

Talanoa provides a tool whereby the participants are mutual contributors to knowledge and provide scope for 'transformative intercultural communication' (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014, p. 323). For social work, talanoa may facilitate a space where understandings about practice can be co-imagined. This is provisional upon talanoa occurring with an understanding that it is culturally embedded within Pacific epistemologies which value reciprocity and thus the exchange between participants should be viewed as interpersonal and collaborative. Thus, talanoa should be an intentional process whereby the participant is both a learner and a co-contributor to knowledge (Vaka et al, 2016). In Pacific contexts where culture is relational, self-identity cannot be constructed without understanding of the interconnectivity to the world around you. Therefore the success of talanoa processes in conversations about social work depends on a genuine commitment to reciprocity and engagement within the dialogue processes (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Tamasese et al, 2005). Talanoa as a framework for recontextualizing approaches to social work can only be successful in so far as the dominant and established voices are willing to listen as much as to be heard.

### **Lesson Three: There is a Need to Put the 'Social' Back in Social Work**

In response to colonial forces, the influx of international aid and the weight of globalization, it is clear that Indigenous and Pacific models of knowledge risk being supplanted by Western and Eurocentric models of practice. Admittedly, the "West" has connotations of an all-encompassing ideological position and this also fails to account for diversity among Western nations. As such, a more fitting label could be to assign some of the changes within Pacific 'social work' practice to neo-liberal and capitalist paradigms.

Examples of neoliberal rhetoric include the shift to treat individuals, or “clients” and focus on individual and family *problems* by providing remedial interventions (McDonald, 2006). Such approaches reflect the behavioralist and psychodynamic orientation of Western scientific methods and an individualized focus on what are, arguably, social problems (Midgley, 2001; Morley et al., 2019; Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007). For decades, these same neoliberal forces have been dominant and destructive even in Western contexts (Morley et al, 2019), and yet have not translated to increased health and income equality.

Despite huge ideological disparities in the espoused value base of social work globally, there is strong evidence of the increasing domination in many areas of practice by neo-liberal ideology and the concept of market forces (Morley et al., 2019). Whether in the form of institutionalized competition, the dominance of case-management approaches, or the growth of social work as a profession to “manage” poverty and antisocial behavior, these approaches favor an individualized and problem-focused response to community needs (Morley et al., 2019; Burkett & McDonald, 2005). Such positions fail to acknowledge the significance of family, kinship and community within Pacific contexts, devalue indigenous knowledge and ways of engagement and place the burden of change on marginalized individuals rather than address unequal socio-political sources of inequity. In this sense, Pacific alternatives to practice are not only imperative for social work within the Pacific Island context, but offer refreshing alternatives to dominant social work discourse globally.

As a substitute to person-centered approaches, Pacific epistemological acknowledgement of the way in which an individual cannot be separated from the broader socio-cultural, political and spiritual whole invites a more nuanced approach to social work. How this translates into practice includes a consideration of the multiple components that make up a person and/or communities’ lived experience. A person is more than just their “problems” and acknowledging the diverse skills, attributes and collective resources shifts the focus from a deficit position to a space that encourages reflection, exploration and creativity. This also moves away from a focus on behavior change, a domain already populated by psychology, to a consideration of diverse, and sometimes competing, factors that shape a person’s lived reality. In this way, labeling and individual blame are removed in favor for an appreciation of locality, or place and time; in Samoan literally referred to as *va*—the space between (Koya-Vaka’uta, 2014). Opportunities to involve family and community are also encouraged in this space, as are consideration of spiritual connections and pathways for recovery (Child, Youth & Family Services, 2015; Ramacake, 2010). Although spirituality has often been disregarded in dominant social work discourse in favor of modernist scientific reason (Vanderwoerd, 2011), this is shifting as the recognition of potential for traditional healing; well-being, mindfulness and indigenous knowledge gain traction. This is further accompanied with the stark reality that scientific rationalism has thus far failed to solve the complex social problems of the world (Kumar & Pattanayak, 2018).

Another opportunity presented by a relational focus within social work, is a move away from top-down, hierarchical and “tick-flick” processes designed to ascertain a person’s eligibility against pre-determined and pre-constructed needs. Such assessment formulas reinforce the idea of social worker as expert and remove capacity for individual and community agency (Morley et al, 2019). This is even more pressing in post-colonial contexts where indigenous knowledge has been systematically devalued in the name of more “progressive” knowledge constructs (Faleolo, 2013). In efforts to ensure social work is decolonizing in these contexts, relational and Pacific frameworks for knowledge also encourage the concept of reciprocity (Vaka et al, 2016). That is, there is give and take, openness and honesty between all parties involved, which not only helps to foster meaningful engagement, but also helps to ensure open, transparent processes where all parties can be held accountable.

## ***Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World***

The time taken to focus on engagement is often forgone in neo-liberal contexts where social workers feel pressured to meet workload outcomes. In these settings, the time taken to form relationship, and indeed the nature and quality of these relationships can be lost to a formidable quest to achieve “outcomes”. The social and human relationship imperative in many modern day social work settings has been replaced by pressure to “deliver service”. The wisdom of Pacific, and indeed many indigenous communities, to focus on connection, serves as a poignant reminder to establishment social work. Indeed, the very nature of social work, arguably, requires a (re)focus on relationship, inter-connection and belonging. By nurturing the essence of humanity, the drive to form social connections, Pacific social work offers a beacon of light in an otherwise dreary neo-liberal landscape.

The imperative to nurture relationships also presents opportunities to forge new understandings and conceptualizations of social work in a globalized context. Stemming from Pacific ontological reasoning and a talanoa epistemology, Western, or dominant social work discourse and Pacific social work approaches do not have to be viewed as oppositional or competing paradigms. Obviously, there are differing ideological starting points and it is naive to assume that what works in one context can be easily transported to another. Rather the lesson, nay invitation, presented by the principles of talanoa, reciprocity and relationship building, is a collective approach to re-imagining the boundaries of social work. Naming, acknowledging and actively addressing colonial forces in social work, valuing diverse knowledge bases, engaging in authentic dialogue and forming reciprocal approaches to building and distributing social work “knowledge” are valuable mechanisms for informing future social work.

## **RECONTEXTUALISING SOCIAL WORK**

Globally, social workers are being forced to grapple with questions about how best to support social development and well-being (Nikku, 2015). With the rapid expansion of mobile phone and internet technology, globalized trade, increased accessibility to travel, regional and international structures of governance, foreign investment, voluntary and forced migration, transnational business and cross-cultural exchange in many ways, the world has never been so interconnected. This interconnection also extends to the shared challenges such as climate change, nuclear weapons, displaced persons, human trafficking and the spread of disease where calls for collective responses and joint action are more pertinent than ever. In such crisis, social work around the world is well positioned to mobilize its care army in the fight against shared threats to humanity. In such a way, having a united or shared vision of social work may help to drive this collective change. On the other hand, the process of having a universal approach to social work is likely to promote homogenization and privilege certain voices in debates about what is, or should be, the driving purpose behind social work activities. Again, evidence constantly shows that these dominant voices are likely to favor Western ideology and either marginalize, or further attempt to homogenous diverse indigenous populations (Faleolo, 2013; Thaman, 2013; Healy, 2005). Such challenges not only translate into the ways in which social work is practiced, but also the ways in which social work is conceptualized and delivered in diverse educational settings (Hawkins & Knox, 2014).

Despite a push to apply Western social work theories and methods, the question of whether these theories and methods are suited to the local socio-cultural context remain highly contentious (Ibrahim, 2017; Nikku, 2015; Ugiagbe, 2015). These globalization–localization and universal–indigenous debates have long been articulated by Jim Ife (2012), who outlines that within the process of globalization is a counter tendency towards the development of locally based solutions. Interestingly, in spite of the



history of social work and its emergence in non-Western contexts, to date, social work has not been able to overcome the social problems it seeks to redress. For over a decade, Finn and Jacobson (2008) have suggested that constructing a new social work paradigm is required if we are to adequately come to grips with, and consequently address, the changing globalized environment in which social work is now practiced. This chapter has highlighted these struggles by drawing on experiences observed in the Pacific Islands. By being open to these experience and lessons, the Pacific Islands also offer creative possibilities for recontextualizing social work globally.

Core features of Pacific societies include constructions of culture that are relationally driven, with both personal and collective identity assembled in relation to others (Nabobo-Baba, 2006b; Ravuvu, 1983). Understanding who others are in relationship to the physical realm, the spiritual realm and the metaphysical, encourages action to be taken in consideration of the way in which these elements interconnect (Varani-Norton, 2017; Va'ai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017). The focus on relationship as a core element of Pacific social and personal identity is a theme that also transcends into understandings of social work. This is in stark contrast to Western neo-liberal contexts that prioritize the individual (Morley et al., 2019). Within the Pacific context, the imperative is to build effective relationships with family (kinship), community and environment, even when attempting to enact change on an individual level. This alternative understanding of what it means to practice from a 'holistic' framework contributes to knowledge about effective social work in diverse international practice arenas (Ingram, 2013). It also highlights the person-in-environment imperative that underpins many current international definitions of social work.

The relationship-focused nature of Pacific social work provides a gentle nudge to the social work profession globally to reflect on the current focus within local and international practice efforts. As statistics about poor mental health and suicide skyrocket; violence against women is at pandemic proportions; the elderly and sick are often labeled as a 'burden' on economies; and rates of political mistrust, fear and social isolation intensify, never before has the urgency to nurture relationships been so important. By placing a focus on the "social" in social work, the profession has an opportunity to ground itself in ideological roots that may have been usurped by a neo-liberal agenda. A focus on relationships also recognizes the interconnected nature of the globalized world, which includes an acknowledgment of dominant ideologies and the impact this has on social work practice, policy, education and research. There is an acknowledgement of how these forces move and entwine to shape human experience, rather than an attempt to view individuals or communities as cases to be managed, or problems to be fixed. Again, this re-humanizing of social work offers a refreshing alternative to "tick and flick" approaches that drive many donor-dependent workplaces.

A final opportunity presented by Pacific epistemology, is an alternative to knowledge sources being privilege and possessed by the few. Rather than viewing any one way of practice as superior, a collective approach to knowledge creation invites equal and diverse contributions (Kumar & Pattanayak, 2018). This collective action would require honest and critical reflection on colonial imposition so as not to render such a process as idealistic, or tokenistic at best. Those beholden to any one "right" way need to question the intellectual superiority of such a position and acknowledge the systematic privileging of certain knowledge base. An arena, where alternative discourses are viewed as authentic, inherently valued, and not viewed as competition, is the starting point for reimagining social work. Ideas and views do not need to be seen as contrary, despite being ideologically or methodology diverse, but rather they need to be seen as threads of a bigger global social work cord. It is these combined, diverse and eclectic understandings that can enable social work to be respectful of cultural identity, adaptive to context, responsive to global forces with fluidity to address the local circumstance. The experiences and lessons

## **Recontextualizing Social Work in a Globalized World**

from the Pacific serve as a call to action for social workers globally to collectively re-imagine, re-define and recontextualize socially driven social work.

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# Chapter 11

## Advancing Local, Social, and Ecological Transitions Through Community Development

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores social work and community development practices in light of the urgent social, economic, and environmental issues facing the world today. Can those professions, established to support individuals and communities, overcome social disadvantage, evolve into new, alternative roles that seek combined human and non-human (animals, plants, living organisms) understandings leading towards transformative practices? Those professions are viewed within their own constructs and environmental agendas. Ancient and contemporary Indigenous knowledges are then considered, as they relate to the First Law of caring for their living country and living lifestyles. Two community development case studies are examined, involving non-Indigenous people in their community, and Indigenous traditional owners across a whole river catchment to address key questions: How can those disciplines contribute to ecological transformation? Can they appreciate and include non-humans in their practice? and How can Indigenous ancient and current knowledges contribute to social justice practice?*

### INTRODUCTION

I commence by acknowledging the Yawuru traditional custodians and native titleholders of the land on which I live and work, and pay respect to their Elders and leaders past, present and future. Acknowledgement of Indigenous custodians from all lands is likewise offered, respecting their ancient and current traditions and knowledges.

This chapter explores ways social work and community development, can contribute to ecological transformation. It commences with an outline of two global agendas, the United Nations' *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015a). Indigenous knowledges and spirituality are then highlighted; rec-

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ognizing the term community development has its foundations in Western civilization and ideology—the very same ideology that sanctioned colonization (Bessarab & Forrest, 2017).

The next section delves into social work and community development processes and practice, “looking back towards the present”, with both professions envisioning alternative ways to engage holistic pathways to locally initiated change. Activity from two Western Australian case studies, Cultivating Kulin and the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, are then offered as examples of different community development approaches.

Key questions are:

- How can social work and community development methods contribute to climate change related social, economic and ecological transformation?
- How can social science approaches based on individual and community justice include the non-human in its purview and practice?
- How can Indigenous ancient and current knowledges contribute to community development practice?

## **INTERNATIONAL ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE AGENDAS**

The first international document is the United Nations (UN) *2030 Agenda*. In 2015 the United Nations (UN) released *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, involving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN’s 2030 Agenda is a plan of action for people and the planet, while recognizing eliminating extreme poverty is the greatest global challenge when pursuing sustainable development.

Given the degree and complexity of issues facing the world today, the UN’s 2030 Agenda is an attempt to galvanize actions “for people, planet and prosperity”. The 17 SDGs are a declaration of aspirations, framed within a voluntary agreement rather than a binding accord. Governments however are expected to take ownership and establish frameworks for the achievements of outcomes of those goals. (UN, 2015)

The SDGs include ending poverty and hunger; ensuring healthy lives; equitable education, gender equality; sustainable energy, economy, human settlements and industrialization; conserving and sustainably using oceans, seas and marine resources; promoting peaceful and inclusive societies; and protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable ecosystems (UN, 2015)

To what extent uniting economic, social and ecological objectives can be transformative has been called to question by some commentators, who question whether social and climate justice goals could exist equitably with economic rationale (Capra, 2015; Sachs, 2017). However, it cannot be denied that most 2030 Agenda SDGs are goals to aim for, given the urgent social, economic and environmental issues facing everyone including people and nature, on our planet today (Jennings, 2017). The SDGs have been adopted by the combined international social work organizations (Jones, 2018), as well as the International Association for Community Development (IACD) in their future organizational directions, addressed later in this chapter (2020). The next section of this exploration attends to the environmental encyclical, which frames a radical approach to development.

In 2015 *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* by Pope Francis was released. Although coming from a Catholic Christian position, this extensive ‘encyclical’ (teaching letter) was introduced by the statement, “faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person

living on this planet” (Pope Francis, 2015, paragraph 3). To that end many other Christian and non-Christian faiths, belief systems and mainstream academics have supported this document, they include, the Faith Ecology Network (FEN) and the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC). Internationally Powell (2018) links Muslim-Catholic understanding and solidarity through *Laudato Si'*; as do Buddhists, according to Venerable Bodhi (2020).

Pope Francis was also guest speaker at the United Nations for the launch of the *2030 Agenda*, two months after releasing *Laudato Si'*, discussing ways both representations could work together, emphasizing:

*The misuse and destruction of the environment are also accompanied by a relentless process of exclusion. In effect, a selfish and boundless thirst for power and material prosperity leads both to the misuse of available natural resources and to the exclusion of the weak and disadvantaged [people] (The Guardian, 2015).*

While both agendas aim to create substantial change, there are important differences between the two documents—between the “business as usual” approach from the UN, “protecting the growth model, a model which has always been prioritized over protection of nature” (Sachs, 2017, p. 2581), as opposed to “the radical ethics championed by Pope Francis . . . the ethics of deep ecology” (Capra, 2015, p. 2). Lachapelle and Albrecht (2019) also acknowledge the social justice pressures associated with climate change, including the ethical and moral consequences as expressed by Pope Francis, which are unmistakable.

This year, on the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'*, the treatise has been consolidated into seven major goals, within an ‘Integral Ecology’ framework. Integral ecology is a union of ecological philosophy and social ecology that can fit with both social work and community development, and is the major perspective presented by Pope Francis. The *Laudato Si'* goals call for responses to the Cry of the Earth; Cry of the Poor, Ecological Economics; Adoption of Simple Lifestyles; Ecological Education; Ecological Spirituality and an emphasis on Community involvement and participatory action (Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 2020, p. 8).

In differing ways those two schemas provide goals for social work and community development agendas, and this chapter contends that Indigenous perspectives can strengthen both.

## **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES AND SPIRITUALITY**

People are calling for change “embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy” (Klein 2019, p. 98). One place to do this, it is proposed, is by and with local community (Albrecht & Lachapelle, 2019)—both human and non-human community (Poelina, Taylor & Perdrisat 2019; Wellington & Maloney, 2020). When exploring activity covered in this chapter, which refers to people and community, the non-human community is implied, recognizing their intrinsic importance as encapsulated in Indigenous “First Law”. Poelina explains First Law comprises people’s relationships, “with each other, our neighbours, and most importantly our family of non-human beings – animals and plants” (2019, p. 144). It recognizes local solutions are fundamental to empower Indigenous people to deliver real change. As Kickett-Tucker et al. identified, “[h]earing the voices of Aboriginal people is a necessity before any vision of community development can journey from a dream to reality” (2017, p. 226). One place to start this process is by

internalizing and adopting new ways of living based on Indigenous ways—ancient and still current ways (Jennings, 2019). This acknowledges:

*...the importance of Elders, families and communities working together to share knowledge, empowering and inspiring the next generation to hold onto notions of culture, kin, country and community. Finding the vision for Aboriginal community development lies in the silent voices closest to the ground. A vision for community development relies upon a grassroots, yet flexible approach that is governed and controlled by the community itself, and not the top-down approach so readily practised by many government departments for over more than two centuries (Kickett-Tucket et al, 2017, p. 226).*

Ife notes that “[f]or Indigenous People, the sacred and spiritual transcend all of life and all human experiences: unless understood within a spiritual context, life has no meaning and no purpose” (2013, p. 254). Ife concluded that the spiritual dimension, then, is important to community development.

Thus a sense of the sacred in place, interconnectedness, and a respect for spiritual values, is an essential part of re-establishing human community and providing meaning and purpose for people’s lives—in the spirit of Indigenous First Law. So how does social work reflect these perspectives? The following probes this question.

## **EXPLORING CURRENT AND FUTURE SOCIAL WORK METHODS**

In 2018, the global organizations overseeing professional social and welfare workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), jointly released their report, *Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability* [the SW Agenda] (Jones, 2018). As well as undertaking internal reviews, the international collectives’ work addressed social work policy and practice aligned to external international agendas, in particular the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The social work agenda concluded that the SDGs, which link economic and social development with sustaining the natural environment, have much in common with “The SW Agenda”.

Remarkably, “the explicit focus on the **physical** environment (both natural and built) alongside the **social** environment was, for some, the most surprising element of *The [social work] Agenda*” (Jones, 2018, p. 2-3). Overall, Jones reports that the professional attention to people being integrated within both physical and social environments now appears applicable to social work. In conclusion, the consideration that social work practices should move from individual approaches to embracing other forms of social, economic and environmental transformation clearly sets their future agenda. The bottom line, the social work Agenda noted, is that everything is interconnected.

The need for social work approaches to advance beyond responses seeking individual and family-led solutions to difficulties has, according to Narhi and Matthies (2018) become more apparent in times of societal crises. They propose adopting a structural social work method, with individual’s recovery associated with societal change that requires deepening of holistic eco-social transitional approaches through environmental and ecological justice.

As publications exploring social work crossing boundaries into ecological justice continue to be released, concern has also been expressed. Bell, for example, writes that, “despite [an] ‘explosion’ in eco-social publications, there has not been a corresponding growth in course content in the Australian

## **Advancing Local, Social, and Ecological Transitions Through Community Development**

higher education sector” (2019, p. 242). He consequently concluded that a diverse range of strategies are needed to adequately transform social work.

An extensive literature review of publications classified as “environmental social work” practice was undertaken by Ramsay and Boddy (2017). While most literature suggested ways social work should operate in the future, nearly all (99%) recognized the importance of having the theoretical focus of social work change to include an emphasis on the natural environment. Being interconnected, with alliances with cultural leaders, activists, community leaders, other professionals and spiritual advisors was likewise recommended in 85% of publications. Overall collaboration can lead to the new insights, knowledge and skills needed to install social with environmental change. Examples of changes that could be provided include, “community initiatives such as food cooperatives, combined purchase power for fuel or new technologies, co-housing, permaculture and local production” (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017, p. 76), considered community development goals (Jennings 2017).

Within the same purview, Ross (2020) seeks to re-orientate person-centered approaches to community work practice to include recognition of animals, eco-systems and planet Earth as beings of equal intrinsic worth and in equal relationship with people. Further suggestions for this theoretical reorientation are presented in *Eco-activism and Social Work: New Directions in Leadership and Group Work* (Ross, et al., 2020). It opens with the paper *First Law is the Natural Law of the Land* (Poelina, 2020, p. viii-xii). Poelina explains:

*Indigenous people are generous in sharing our rich lived experiences which comes from our deep inter-generational relationships with nature. When we are born, we are given a jarriny (totem) to give us a place in the universe from where we learn the ethics of care, we learn to have empathy for all other living things: people, animals, plants, river and landscape. Importantly, we learn to co-exist with nature and not to own, dominate or exploit it (2020, viii).*

Poelina also calls for social workers to adopt Indigenous people’s ideas and knowledges and incorporate them into their professional practices and personal lives as citizens on this planet.

In the same publication Brueckner and Ross (2020) propose eco-social work includes:

- Anti-oppressive and community development skills and processes
- Sustainability and de-growth
- Embracing the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world
- Learning from First Nations Peoples’ knowledge and ways
- Relational and collective approaches to wellbeing.

Calls to relocate social work with eco-justice have been made, seeking adoption of collaborative partnerships and creative pathways with people, animals and the environment, to encourage working towards ecological harmony (Ross, et al., 2020).

## EXPLORING SOCIAL WORK AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT METHODS

Broadly speaking community development involves working with communities on ideas/issues they identify as needing to be addressed, sometimes with community development practitioners assisting, as directed by that community.

In 1954 the United Nations (UN), through UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), supported community development as a process for social change based on local self-help, possibly assisted from outside, but resolutely based on the existing and emerging needs expressed by local constituencies. At that time UNESCO already had a broad interpretation of community development, describing it as being:

*...a generic term covering the various processes by which local communities can raise their standards of living. This process may include, separately or together, the organization or establishment of services for social welfare, health protection, education, improvement of agriculture, development of small-scale industries, housing, local government, co-operatives etc. (1954 p. 1).*

With this overview it's not hard to imagine if that definition was being framed in today's "climate": environment and ecological sustainability could easily be included along with their stated agriculture, small-scale industries and other areas. In contrast, a large social work conference in the USA in 1950 inadequately, according to a reviewer at the time, covered the "old debate between functional and diagnostic case work" (Bruno, 1951, p. 256). Furthermore, the discussion about connections between social work and community development practices has also been ongoing since the 1950s. At that time Younghusband identified the need for closer working partnerships between social work and community development practitioners. She "maintained that the use of community development could help in 'enlarging the horizon of social work'" (quoted in Heenan, 2004, p. 795).

It is recognized, however that community development was, and at times is, practiced within conservative growth agendas that inhibit local people/community's choice and ownership of projects (Kenyon, 2020). To varying degrees both fields have positively moved forward since the post-war period. This short history is provided to background discussion on current and projected pathways to social and ecological justice.

The *social work Agenda* recognizes community development is an element within social work, yet concern for the inter-relationship with the physical environment has not been a mainstream concern for most social workers nor their agencies (Jones, 2018). Awareness of community development does not necessarily involve adoption of community development philosophy and practice—the doing of community development.

The social work Agenda segment covering Australian consultation outcomes reported the Australian Association for Social Work (AASW) would be establishing a "Green Social Work Network", to advocate embedding sustainability and spirituality in the social work curriculum (Henderson, 2018). Interestingly, this mention of 'spirituality' is the only reference in over 250 pages of the international report. The Australian section also lacked Indigenous 'voices'. While it did acknowledge the Social Work Reconciliation Action Plan it omitted the people, their spirituality and culture, and what they can bring to the table.

## EXPLORING CURRENT AND FUTURE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT METHODS

The practice (ways of doing) framework adopted for the rest of this chapter is community development. This term includes “community of interest (motive or purpose), community of identity (self or group definition) and community of practice (habits or systems)”, as well as the more broadly defined community of place, that is, “geography (spatial scale)” (Lachapelle & Albrecht, 2019. p. 1). Within that framework community development is the process whereby people organize to inform, skill and empower each other to take collective action on jointly identified needs (Ife, 2013; Kenny, 2016). Those identified needs can involve a range of activity to overcome problems ranging from social disadvantage through to climate change mitigation and global Indigenous people’s community development activity (International Association for Community Development, 2020b).

An overview of community development characteristics (also applicable to social work) offered by Kenny (2018) identified the need to link practice to redressing power differences and social justice, with halting global warming and ensuring sustainable futures. Boulet (2013) also highlights the need for more sustainable lifestyles that embody spiritual and ethical dimensions connected to the living planet. Kenny (2018) does, however, offer a cautionary note—entreating community development activity to be sensitive to its colonial legacy.

Interestingly, there are also calls to recognize the speed of the changing global environment necessitates “renewed calls to position community development more centrally in social work” (Lynch, Forde & Lathouras, 2020, p.245), with Westoby, Lathouras and Shevellar calling for the “radicalising [of] community (CD) within social work” (2019, p. 2207). Heenan’s research, on the other hand, found “that there was a strong belief that developing and sustaining partnerships [was needed for] the successful integration of social work and community development” (2004, p. 804), while Newman and Goetz (2016) and Jennings (2020), call for reclaiming community from the ‘inside-out’. Kelly, Kickett-Tucker, & Bessarab, (2017) add to this understanding, recognizing postmodernism can inform and redefine community development praxis, incorporating Indigenous values, beliefs and expectations into community development.

Aligned with that vision, this chapter advocates for grassroots community development approaches to social and ecological change that promotes community development processes undertaken by local community members/volunteers, at times with community development practitioners, as the continuum (below) illustrates:

*Table 1. Continuum of engagement of communities in research and/or projects based on Mutch 2018, p. 243, ‘Projects’, added by the author 2020*

† Phase 1. †	† Phase 2. †	† Phase 3. †	† Phase 4.
Research/Projects <i>for</i> communities	Research/Projects <i>on</i> or <i>about</i> communities	Research/Projects <i>with</i> communities	Research/projects <i>by</i> communities
Community- <i>related</i> research/projects	Community- <i>focused</i> research/projects	Community - <i>centered</i> or - <i>guided</i> research/projects	Community- <i>driven</i> research/projects

Those points, particularly Phase 4, are not “new” views of community development. Chodorkoff (1990), for example, appraised the community development views of social ecology philosopher Murray

Bookchin [1921-2006], finding that community development should not be grounded in external professionals delivering services. Further use of outside expertise and resources can cultivate dependence, hindering local leadership, participation and self-reliance. It should be an integrative process that involves social, artistic, ethical and spiritual dimensions with other aspects of community living.

Research into what community development Officers felt about their roles and involvement in short-term community development disaster recovery programs offer an example. As one respondent explained:

*CD is years, it's lifetimes, it's not, "Here's a bucket of money for two years", it doesn't make an ongoing, sustainable community; it makes a short-term fix. It's been great, it's been a benefit and we've been able to do a lot but in some ways it's gone against those communities too because they haven't had to sit back and think about it ... two years isn't long enough, two years isn't anywhere near the time (Westoby & Shevellar, 2018, p. 259).*

To explore these phases further, the next section will examine case studies that demonstrate meaningful activity and outcomes—the first reflecting the Phase 4 continuum of community-*driven*, by communities, with the second case study introducing an additional Phase 5 way of listening to, and living with, the voice and lives of humans and non-humans. This researcher's involvement in these examples has been as an investigator and observer external to the projects. All activity was and is undertaken by local people in their own town and on Country.

## **CASE STUDY: CULTIVATING KULIN**

The Shire of Kulin, with a total population of 826 people, is a sheep and wheat-farming district 283 kilometers south east of Perth, Western Australia. Nearly half, 369 people from 94 families, live within the town of Kulin, with others living in small town sites and on farming properties (Shire of Kulin, 2020).

Twenty years ago this community was researched as it was reportedly overcoming the population exodus and economic downturn common across the region, when people were moving to metropolitan centres (Jennings, 2002; 2004). The change began in 1994 when the Shire of Kulin and community members, concerned by the recurrent pattern of decline of businesses and population (Kenyon & Black, 2001), engaged consultant Peter Kenyon to facilitate a Futures Workshop, themed, *Don't put your future in the hands of others – take control of your own destiny!* From that time local people set about redesigning their own future. A major stumbling block arose, when their last bank was closed in 1998, even though investigations by the local community showed that the branch was making a profit (Jennings, 2002; 2004).

Bank closures in rural areas significantly affect peoples' lives and livelihoods, as they not only lose their bank staff with their families, other organizations including schools, post offices, health services, community groups and sporting clubs, also lose members and clients, and often their viability.

What Kulin already had was a dedicated community that worked together, having formed the "Cultivating Kulin" revitalization association as a result of the earlier Future's Workshop. That group had heard about the formation of community banks in Victoria and, while there weren't any in Western Australia at the time, they set about investigating whether that model would suit Kulin.

Community Banks are a product of Bendigo Bank located in Victoria, Australia, which had its origins on the Bendigo goldfields in 1858. The successful building society reconstituted into a bank in 1995,

## ***Advancing Local, Social, and Ecological Transitions Through Community Development***

developing its Community Bank enterprise in response to bank branch closures across Australia. It recognized the effects of closure, which resulted in many disenfranchised communities (Bendigo Bank, 2000).

The Community Bank process involves participating communities managing a community-owned branch of Bendigo Bank, who holds the banking license. The community has ownership of management, which provides local residents and businesses incentives to conduct their financial affairs through their own bank branch, while Bendigo Bank provides financial registration. Sharing in branch revenues provides communities the opportunity to generate profits, which can be returned to support and develop the community (Jennings, 2002; 2004).

Kulin opened the first Community Bank in Western Australia in October 1999—improving the community’s long-term economic and social prospects by retaining greater control over the district’s capital resources (Robertson, 2000). This move was strongly supported by the Shire of Kulin, and in particular the Shire President at the time Mr. Graeme Robertson, who became the Chair of the Community Bank.

Since the facilitated Futures Workshop planning day in 1994 the following was instigated within the first five years:

- Relocation of a very large, disassembled waterslide from Queensland to Kulin and erected on the swimming pool grounds
- Kulin Bush Races—a revival of the old Kulin Country race meetings
- The Tin Horse Highway—local people create comical horse ‘statues’ (usually from old drums and scrap metal) that adorn their paddocks on the two roads leading to the Bush Races
- Creation of “Kaptain Kulin”, promotional material, including an adult sized costume based on a grain of wheat
- Establishment of the Multi-Purpose Health Service with the first tele-health unit in the State
- Setting up a multipurpose Emergency Services building housing the ambulance, fire brigade and sate emergency service
- Creation of a joint Landcare office and herbarium
- Establishment of the Kulin Community Bank
- Creating the large water slide playground, plus
- Other projects including: playground redevelopment, establishing a tele-centre, upgrading the Kulin Memorial Hall and the cemetery, setting up a newsletter and toy library, plus driver education programs and new medical facilities (Jennings 2002).

The accomplishments of this small community are huge. The town received a bequeath from a local farmer, to be expended on recreational activities, with local children asking for a water slide. “Cultivating Kulin” members explored costs and found a small pool slide was too expensive, then they found a large disassembled water slide was for sale in Queensland. They snapped it up for the bargain price of \$25,000 and locals volunteered to take the four trucks and five trailers across the Nullabor to collect the massive structure. After the 10,000 km return journey was complete, the structure was reassembled and refurbished. Kulin now has a 182 meter long water slide—the largest in the state outside of Perth (Mochan & Bennett, 2018). It not only fulfills local children’s dreams, people travel long distances, including from Perth, specifically to enjoy the slide, as well as the country hospitality.

When working in community development, practitioners and/or community members, often wonder about the longevity of their projects. Now, over 20 years later, the proof of the success of “Cultivating Kulin” is abundantly clear. The Kulin Community Bank has thrived, and has contributed \$500,000 in



sponsorship, community grants and dividends to the local community, including \$100,000 towards building the Kulin Retirement Homes and \$30,000 to the Kulin Aquatic Centre. The Bank also partnered with the WA Department of Transport to provide much needed licensing services to the district (Shire of Kulin, 2018).

Last year, in its 25th year, the Kulin Bush Races was attended by 4,000 people (remember the town only has 369 residents, adults and children) and the Tin Horse Highway now has a competition every year, so its “game on” between “opposing” properties leading to the race course, with both roads being upgraded due to increased vehicle usage by tourists (Shire of Kulin, 2020).

The water slide continues to attract people from around the state. Importantly for the local economy, this encourages visitors to enjoy other attractions the town and its people offer, while cooling off in the hot, dry climate of the region. The town has now commenced a new venture, local people have collectively purchased the vacant local hotel, and are now establishing another community owned venture.

## **CASE STUDY: MARTUWARRA FITZROY RIVER COUNCIL**

The Martuwarra (or Mardoowarra) Fitzroy River (MFR) is the longest river in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Its catchment area is almost 100,000 square kilometers and the floodplains can be up to 15 km across (Department of Water, 2008). In addition it is located within one of Australia’s 15 biodiversity hotspots (Poelina et al., 2019) and averages the greatest volume of annual flow and the largest floods within the state (Department of Water, 2008). The cultural and ecological significance of this river has been well documented, however this intelligence has not been transferred positively into state and national water policy and planning according to Jackson (2019) and Poelina et al. (2019).

Local Indigenous people understand the millennia of Indigenous history, knowledge and science relating to the MFR. Poelina et al. (2019) have recorded Traditional Custodian’s perspectives, based in First Law, the Indigenous system of governance and law that places the health and well-being of the land, water and biosphere over human interests. The MFR is understood as a sacred living ancestral being, with traditional Indigenous Law emphasizing its important role in maintaining the Earth’s balance. First Law calls for holistic approaches to river and water stewardship, framed around values and ethics of co-management and co-existence. These continue to facilitate inter-generational relationships between the shared boundaries through ancient and contemporary practices (Poelina et al., 2019). Traditional Owners regard the river as having its own life force and spiritual essence. As Poelina and McDuffie visually demonstrate, it “is the ‘River of Life’ and has a right to Life” (2017). Notably this is a different perception to the conservation work of settler Australians, usually based on the dominance of nature, involving “fixing the problem”, not co-existing with Earth.

For local communities, the waterway is the foundation that intrinsically links well-being and livelihoods (Poelina, 2019). Those livelihoods go back tens of thousands of years, a time when people lived and thrived, tapping into, and passing on, their deep and profound Indigenous knowledge and science—at one with nature and their spiritual ancestors (Griffiths & Kinnane, 2010).

Today the responsibilities Indigenous Custodians face are extensive, given the physical, social, ecological and political colonization people and Country have been, and continue to be, exposed to. Native Title groups along the MFR are facing pressures never before experienced. The river’s stories that, in the past described the river and its ecological and cultural roles, now contain threats to both people and Country.

These include:

## **Advancing Local, Social, and Ecological Transitions Through Community Development**

- Lack of recognition of the significance of the environmental, spiritual/cultural and economic values that the river provides/shares with its people
  - Proposals to dam sections of the river and large scale irrigation projects
  - Extractive industries—mining, fracking
  - Pastoral systems that are undertaken unsustainably, including beef production
  - Land uses that result in producing increased carbon emissions.
- (Jackson, 2015; Poelina et al., 2019; Poelina, 2020)

These, with other issues, negatively impact biodiversity and Indigenous socio-cultural lives simultaneously.

Attentive dialogue has been called for by Traditional Owners along the MFR. Citing Smith's 1999 work *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*, Poelina (2020) champions creating dialogue based on mutual respect, for building hope while enabling Indigenous people to reach their full potential. This approach recognizes the "Indigenous Australian story presents a new way of approaching knowledge-building and adaptive water management to promote Aboriginal people's well being through a co-operative regional earth-centred governance model" (p. 157).

The Traditional Owners and Custodians of the MFR have united, using their intrinsic First Law knowledge, processes and resultant actions to care for both their living Country and living lifestyle. So how does this fit within community development frameworks? As previously noted, it is acknowledged that community development has its foundations in Western civilization and ideology, the very same ideology that backed colonization. Bessarab and Forrest (2017) explored this by unpacking early Indigenous society through the lens of community development, concluding one can only speculate whether the notion of "community" was the same in pre-colonial Indigenous societies. However they did find commonalities, including:

- Groups of people linked through their identity of sharing a common language
- Small societies living in specific geographical locations
- Strong spiritual and ceremonial activities linking people to the land
- Quality of holding something in common
- A sense of common identity and characteristics (2017, p. 5).

An alternative community development theoretical approach has been offered, that of the "third space", based on the work of Bhabha in 1994 (Bessarab & Forrest, 2017). The third space is a place where:

*...different cultures intersect or meet;...a space of contestation, collision and often misunderstanding due to the different world views, beliefs and understandings that people bring to that space. [It has, however,] enormous potential for people to engage in conversation that can move them forward into a space of understanding and transformation, by not only identifying and acknowledging these different world views but focusing on the commonalities as a driver to move forward (2017, p. 10).*

The MFR Custodians activities offer compatibility with third space processes, building systems that combine Western sciences, traditional knowledge and industry practice (Poelina, 2019). Like most community activation this has taken considerable time and energy. After years of work, the West Kimberley

Place Report documenting Indigenous people's stories relating to the Fitzroy River Dreaming, cultural beliefs, landscape and artifacts, was adopted by the Australian Heritage Commission (2011).

A significant event occurred in 2016 when representatives from the Prescribed Body Corporates (PBC - Native Title Holders) who live along and with the river, met for two days. They collectively developed and signed off on the 'Fitzroy River Declaration'<sup>1</sup>. This Declaration documented their concern relating to emerging development proposals that had potential for cumulative impacts on the river's unique cultural and environmental values. The first point listed was to establish a joint decision-making process to establish ways to protect their river and its values.

Eighteen months later, after leaders consulted with their own PBCs, another combined meeting was held. This gathering initiated a catchment scale approach to manage the challenges, risks and opportunities by establishing the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council (MFRC)<sup>2</sup> involving all

Traditional Owner groups. They hold native title rights across the entire catchment area, the first in Australia. Notably they formed their Council to operate under First Law—not to stop development, but to strengthen moves to endorse development in the right and sustainable way. At the same time they have set a unique precedent for others to follow, for how government and industry engages with Traditional Owners,.

The MFRC is working closely with scientists around Australia, adding Indigenous knowledge and science to Western science. To this end 100 scientists have signed the Fitzroy River Science Statement<sup>3</sup> to protect the Fitzroy River. The hundreds of hours it took to arrive at this point is only the start. The MFRC has a huge role to play, including responding to the increasing pressure by the Commonwealth to 'develop' the catchment, under the government's agenda for northern development. The commodification of water, based on pricing water as a "resource", excludes Indigenous spirituality, culture, economy, law and intergenerational responsibilities.

## DISCUSSION

There is a call from various quarters, including Jones (2018) and Ross et al. (2020), for people in social work and community development to become more involved with learning, knowing, adapting and working with and for human and non-human inhabitants of this planet. Given this need, any old debates between social work and community development should be set aside. The urgent call is for transformational change to save our biodiverse planet.

The United Nations *2030 Agenda* (2015) and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015) provide guiding "blue (and green) prints" to support this process. The combined International Social Work agencies have included connection with the UN SDGs into their research and future direction (IFSW, 2017; Jones, 2018), as has membership of the International Association for Community Development reflecting how CD work can mirror the *2030 Agenda* and the teachings within *Laudato Si'* (Jennings, 2018). The key is everything is interconnected, an informed position on which to build the change required.

The call to move from individualism to interdependence has led to exploration of Indigenous knowledges, those "understandings, skills and philosophies developed with long histories of interaction with their natural surrounds" (UNESCO, 2020), including their cultural and spiritual beliefs. Relationships unite people; animals and plants; land, rivers and oceans; and all things—into a whole. Indigenous people's sense of the sacred and respect for spiritual values provides them meaning and purpose within First Law.

## Advancing Local, Social, and Ecological Transitions Through Community Development

The challenge is for social workers, community development and other community work practitioners to become engaged with future directions commencing with the UN 2030 Agenda (2015) and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (2015), and by Indigenous people through their ancient and contemporary knowledges. The challenge is here—what changes can these professions undertake to expand their current work ethic with humanity to include non-human living organisms and planet? For workers not familiar with this line of thinking it can be a daunting task. To assist understanding this challenge two case studies were provided and considered within a transformative context.

The first one, Cultivating Kulin, provides a credible example of community development within today's settler Australian world. In Table 1, the *Continuum of engagement of communities in research and/or projects*, Kulin's activities are identified as fulfilling Phase 4—by community and community- **driven**—seeking skilled assistance from outside, while retaining ownership and undertaking community-initiated, regenerative actions. Kulin has undertaken this approach, adopting whole-of-community approaches to social, economic and environmental change.

The Martuwarra Fitzroy River is provided as the second case study. As noted it is recognized that ancient and contemporary knowledges held by Traditional Custodians may be challenging to some non-Indigenous people. However this is the challenge Jones (2018), Poelina et al. (2019), Ross et al. (2020), Brueckner and Ross (2020) and Poelina (2017; 2020) are calling for professions, which are based on human rights and social justice to include the non-human in their purview and practice. To that end an additional section has been added to the *Continuum of engagement of communities in research and/or projects* (Table 2 below). The new Phase 5 involves research and project **inclusive** of living cultures and living country, with community affording **affinity** with non-human living systems.

Table 2. *Continuum of engagement of communities in research and/or projects based on Mutch 2018, p. 243 —'Projects' and 'Phase 5' added by the author, 2020*

† Phase 1 †	† Phase 2 †	† Phase 3 †	† Phase 4 †	† Phase 5
Research/ Projects <i>for</i> communities	Research/ Projects <i>on</i> or <i>about</i> communities	Research/ Projects <i>with</i> communities	Research/ Projects <i>by</i> communities	Research/ Projects <i>inclusive</i> of living cultures and living country
Community- <i>related</i> research/ projects	Community- <i>focused</i> research/ projects	Community- <i>centred</i> or - <i>guided</i> research/ projects	Community- <i>driven</i> research/ projects	Community- <i>affinity</i> with non-human living systems

Dr. Anne Poelina, a Nykina Traditional Custodian whose Country includes the MFR, is Chairperson of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council. In her words:

*Our culture has a word, Bookarrarra, which is the essence of our being, locating the past, present and future into this moment now, in which we must act. This land, and the life it supports, was created at the beginning of time by those of the spiritual forces. This is the Law, Bookarrarra. We must learn to have empathy in order to connect with all human and non-human life and we do this by listening to our liyan, our inner spirit (2017, p. 271).*

A diverse range of information and ways of working has been covered, starting with social work, aimed at advancing local social and ecological transitions through community development practice. Three key questions asked in the Introduction will now be considered against the material provided.

Firstly, *how can alternative social work and community development methods contribute to climate change related social, economic and ecological transformation?* The evidence points to the resolve of the international organizations to re-contextualize their professions towards engaging in change that involves social with economic and ecological transformation. This step is notable for social work, given its principal role has been to work with, and support, individuals within their community context. Community development, however, has a longer history of embracing broader social and economic change in social justice, housing, promotion of agriculture, development of small-scale industries, education, health and co-operatives, so the transformative extension into ecological areas may not be as challenging a prospect. The intent is certainly there for both social work and community development.

The next question probed is *how can social science approaches based on individual and community justice include non-human in its purview and practice?* As evidenced, social work is moving into environmental areas—however embracing awareness of, and working with, the non-human entities on the planet has only recently been recognized by Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics (see Ross et al., 2020). Bell (2019) acknowledged that, despite increases in eco-social publications, there have not been corresponding advances in social work course content in Australian universities. Community development practice, as evidenced in IACD’s Practice Insights magazine, does embrace Indigenous people’s global activities, however there is scope to progress the non-human approaches and/or “naming” the ones that happen in terms broader than just nature.

Lastly, *how can Indigenous ancient and current knowledges contribute to community development practice?* Indigenous people’s Earth-centered belief places non-human organisms and the Earth in functional systems with humans. Contributors to the publication *Eco-activism and Social Work: New Directions in Leadership and Group Work* (Ross et al., 2020) are breaking new ground by accepting this concept, however this is not an extensive understanding. There is so much settler- Australians can learn from Indigenous people, this is only the beginning!

## **CONCLUSION**

In *Mia Mia Aboriginal Community Development: Fostering cultural security*, Kickett-Tucker advises local solutions are essential to hear the voices of Indigenous people before any vision of community development can journey from a dream to reality. Part of that process is to understand that “colonization” is invasion, where a group of powerful people takes the land, imposing their own culture on Indigenous people. Decolonization processes that tackle restorative justice, while challenging both conscious and subconscious racism, needs to be fully embraced. As does learning from, and embracing, the complexity and wisdom of Indigenous ancient knowledges.

Community development, it is concluded, is one framework that can bring together the threads in this chapter to create a pathway for that ‘journey from that dream to reality’. Community development has strong linkages with other social sciences, particularly social work, and is strengthened by international ecological plans from the United Nations, Pope Francis and others. Importantly community development processes and practice can support links between Indigenous knowledges and spirituality with non-Indigenous understandings and beliefs. Thus postmodernism can inform and redefine community

development praxis, incorporating those Indigenous values, beliefs and expectations into community development, supporting this transformational journey.

Alternative approaches like the “third space” where different cultures intersect or meet, can also be incorporated within community development. Consequently, community development is considered an appropriate pathway “from dream to reality” due to reliance on grassroots, community controlled, flexible methods, governed by the community itself, not external top-down organizations.

For our planet and its inhabitants’ sake we should take heed of the Aboriginal proverb:

*We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love ... and then we return home. (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2017, p. 226)*

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## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Fitzroy River Declaration: <https://www.fitzroystatement.org/statement>

<sup>2</sup> Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council: (<https://www.klc.org.au/kimberley-traditional-owners-establish-martuwarra-fitzroy-river-council>)

<sup>3</sup> Fitzroy River Statement: <http://www.fitzroystatement.org>

Section 4  
**Post-Human/Global**

# Chapter 12

## Power, Politics, and Social Work: The Need to Reinvent Social Work Around the World

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*International Federation of Social Workers, Argentina*

### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter some reflections are examined linking social work with power and politics. These reflections are raised from a Latin American and decolonial perspective. The urgency and the need to reinvent social work around the world is argued in view of the deepening of social inequalities caused by a capitalist-colonial-patriarchal social order. Likewise, the need to build a political view of social work is argued, as well as a greater commitment to social movements and their struggles to transform these social inequalities and the current social order. Theoretical reflections are accompanied by historical evidence that illustrates these struggles, as well as experiences of professional practices of social work. These reflections are also linked to the themes of the global agenda for social work and social development, as well as the world definition of social work by the International Federation of Social Workers.*

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will refer, in a general way, to the four main themes of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development 2010-2020: Promoting social and economic equalities; Promoting dignity and worth of peoples; Promoting community and environmental sustainability; and Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships. As these themes can be interpreted in many ways, I will present a reflection on them from the richness and depth of Latin American thought. I will do so from my singular perspective as a woman, a salaried worker, an intellectual activist, a social militant, a former President of the Latin American and Caribbean Region of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2014-2018) and the current President of the IFSW (2018-2022).

Why this initial clarification? Because I do not believe in the neutrality of discourse and interpretation, since knowledge production and professional practice are always located and crossed by sex/gender,

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ethnic/cultural, historical, linguistic and political relations. All of us occupy a space and a time where we are constituted as social subjects. This rooting and construction as social subjects gives us a unique imprint, a particular way of being, living, feeling and inhabiting our world, which always expresses a difference for each of us.

However, this difference has also been interpreted and built up in many ways. In this chapter, I will refer to the way that power constructs this. And if we talk about power, we must talk about politics. So, my presentation will turn around assumptions of *power, politics* and *social work*.

But, what relations do we find between these three categories of thought? Why do we have to talk about these relationships? Is it important for social work that we speak about power and politics? What relationships do we find between power, politics and social work and the themes of the Global Agenda 2010-2020?

These are some of the questions that I will try to address and I will do it with a deep conviction that *we need to reinvent social work around the world*. We need to start thinking about a new agenda for social work. We need to dare to collectively build our own thinking that is distinctive to social work and is not an appendage to the agenda of other international organizations.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL ORDER AND POWER**

Social workers have history. We cannot deny or ignore our own history. We should recognize and appreciate it, because we are historical subjects, we have memory. This memory also allows us to observe that, for multiple reasons, we were not always able to question the *status quo*, the established order, with all the consequences that this entails, since what is not questioned cannot be transformed. This is obviously a paradox, because the aspiration of social work is precisely to transform reality, to change the social order.

Now, what are we talking about when we say social order? Why do we use the term social order? What do we mean about the concept of social order? There are so many interpretations because we can understand it in multiple ways. Concurring with Waldo Ansaldi, an Argentine thinker, the social order is for me a *historic, collective, political and controversial* construction. It involves a complex web of processes in which the relations of power, exploitation and domination are constitutive of these processes. That is why the construction of order always involves the building of an institutional matrix, which regulates the mode of exercising that power (Ansaldi & Giordano, 2012, p. 683).

If social order is a historical construction, then it is not something natural or attributable to some divinity. It is a human construction and therefore changeable. So, is the position “it was always this way” or “nothing can change”, acceptable for social work? I believe that it is not, as within all social practices, despite inertia, there is always the possibility of change as they are human constructions and therefore can be modified. If we deny this, we deny the possibility of social change and we also deny the possibilities of social work as a profession that aims for social change.

Therefore, to address the question of social order and the possibility of social change, we should refer first to power and to the way that power is exercised. This implies that we should refer to large-scale or macro factors of power that shape and sustain the order that today oppresses us and drowns us as human beings, societies, countries and peoples. Here I am referring to *capitalism, patriarchy and the coloniality of power*.

## **Power, Politics, and Social Work**

But before we move forward, we should ask ourselves about power itself: what is that power? It seems an obvious or redundant question because we all have some experience of power exercise in our daily lives. However, in this there are also many interpretations and it is necessary that there is some explanation of this.

At one time power was understood as a thing, which anyone could take on and appropriate. It was said for example someone could “take power”, or “be empowered”. However, today we know from philosophy, science or by our own life experiences that power is not a *thing* but a *social relationship*. It is always located and registered in historical conditions. It is fragile, ephemeral, and changeable, and circulates among social subjects, organizations and institutions.

Precisely because of this fragility, the powerful countries that govern the world increasingly invent sophisticated devices to oppress the rest of the world. They justify this oppression with discourses and unacceptable political practices of various kinds. In an extreme form it is often only where the state engages in genocide that this becomes unmasked and clear. This oppression especially stems from the governmental agencies of powerful countries as well as from powerful international organizations. Also it comes from transnational corporations, large media organizations, national bourgeoisies and oligarchies whose interests are aligned with those in authority.

The mode of power exercised by the more dominant countries in the world was historically based on a colonial matrix of power. In this regard, the Peruvian thinker Aníbal Quijano defines power as a *social relationship constituted by the permanent co-presence of domination, exploitation and conflict* (Quijano, 2000, p. 15). It is the result and expression of the struggle for control of the basic areas of human existence: nature, work, sex, collective/public authority and subjectivity/intersubjectivity, but also for the resources and available products. These areas of human existence make up an historical and specific structural complex and they configure an historical pattern of power.

To Quijano, the current pattern of global power consists in the articulation between *capitalism* as a universal pattern of control of nature and work; the *patriarchate* as a hegemonic control pattern on women around gender and sex; *euro-centrism* as a hegemonic form of control on subjectivity/intersubjectivity and the production of knowledge, and *coloniality of power* as a foundation of a universal pattern of classification and social domination around race and ethnicity.

These four devices of power configure the current world order and involve a variety of negative factors, including: the appropriation of economic profit; concentration of wealth in the hands of a few; plundering of resources; destruction of the environment; child exploitation; the arms sales business; drug trafficking; slavery; coups against democracies; repression of social protest; assassination of popular leaders; destabilization of democratic governments; suppression of basic rights; exploitation of workers; extreme poverty; famine; genocide; gender-based violence; racism and xenophobia, among others.

This situation affects millions of human beings and risks the survival of our planet Earth. However, this hegemonic, anthropocentric, monocultural, colonial and patriarchal pattern of unlimited growth and destruction on our planet is in terminal crisis.

Its dynamic of destruction and the marketization of all basic areas of human existence rapidly undermines the conditions that make it possible. It is self-destructive. As Venezuelan sociologist Edgardo Lander notes:

*...today, the issue is not whether capitalism can survive this terminal crisis. If we cannot stop this machinery of systematic destruction in a short time, what is at stake is humanity's survival in the face of the final collapse of capitalism (Lander, 2014, p. 80).*

## THE DEEP INEQUALITIES THAT THREATEN OUR PLANET

We observe daily, the possibilities of sustaining life on our planet face the profound alterations suffered by climate change, loss of biological diversity and fertile soils, deforestation and water pollution, among other things. Although these changes threaten the entire planet, their impacts are unequal, since poorer countries and regions do not have the resources and technological capacity necessary to neutralize or reduce the devastating consequences of these changes. For many populations, even migration is not an alternative, as already the anti-migratory policies applied by many governments severely limit this option.

However, millions of human beings are forced to migrate to other countries because of armed conflicts and political crises in their own countries, and thousands of them die before reaching their destination, as is occurring in the Mediterranean Sea. Those with luck will arrive at their destination, often finding very hard living conditions: without work, housing or family, and, according to Giorgio Agamben (1998), feeling disposable and undesirable. It seems that this type of power construction seriously threatens human solidarity, which is almost a global apartheid.

The *International Forum on Globalization* warns us that the current inequality in wealth distribution is unprecedented in the history of humanity. The growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a global financial oligarchy is obscene. The financial group *Credit Suisse* has begun to publish statistics on the wealth distribution around the world. According to this publication, the poorest half of the global adult population has only 1% of global wealth, while the richest 10% has 84% and the richest 1% has 44% of global wealth (O'Sullivan, M. & Kersley, R., 2011).

These deep inequalities affect not only the human beings that suffer from inequality, but they weaken, restrict and threaten the heart of democracy itself. This wealth concentration, and the political power that necessarily supports it, is the most dramatic expression on the limitations on democracy in the world in which we live. In many countries, unfortunately, and beyond the political regimes that govern all of us, public institutions respond more to interests of local and global economic and financial oligarchies than the interests of their citizens.

Edgardo Lander notes:

*All alternatives to the current civilization crisis and to the effects of destruction of the conditions that make life possible, should be incorporated as core dimensions in the fight against this obscene inequality. Otherwise, it is doomed to fail. Only radical redistribution, accompanied by an extraordinarily massive transfer of resources and access to common goods, will reduce the unsustainable human pressure on ecological systems that maintain life, and will permit the majority of the population access to worthy conditions of life (Lander, 2012, p. 88).*

Here I think it is very important to highlight that this tendency towards the growth of global financial oligarchy is not possible without the virtual unconditional support of economic academies, such as is found in the major universities of the world. Their practices and teachings constitute an important source of the scientific basis that legitimizes this trend, not only validated and supported by the academies themselves, but also by many other actors.

We can confirm this by reviewing the publications of the last three decades of international organizations and governmental agencies of the most powerful countries of the world. We find abundant documents with recommendations of public policies based on ideas, concepts, categories and even theories that have received Nobel awards. These publications have favored the growth of *global financial oligarchy* and

they have also stressed that governments, local communities, families, groups and individual subjects take responsibility for solving the problems and situations that they encounter.

## **SOCIAL WORK, POLITICS AND SOCIAL STRUGGLE**

In the face of a bleak, deeply unfair, hurtful, inhuman and highly troubling panorama in this global context that we all know and suffer, I ask you: can we talk in the social work about the topics of the Global Agenda 2010-2020? I think we cannot. Moreover, I believe that not reading the context and the deeper causes underlying these flagrant problems is naive. Clearly we are complicit in this situation since, as social workers, we have much to say, to propose and to demand of those who make decisions and are directly responsible for their implementation.

If we do not tackle these major issues from social work with a political perspective, we will surely fall into the mistake of blaming the social subjects with whom we interact. Our professional practices will be indisputably reduced to mere assistance and support, individually and in isolation. If we limit ourselves only to this type of practice, noble that it may be, we are hiding the reality rather than revealing it. We are only acting on the surface of an absolutely cruel and unequal social order. We will not expose the political nature of social inequalities and, therefore, the political nature of social work too. This makes our profession into more of an entertainment, with self-help practices that are fashionable, but lacking real meaning.

With these professional practices, what we are really doing is blaming the social subjects of the situations in which find themselves – i.e. “blaming the victim” – as if they could by themselves individually change their own situation. With this I am not denying or ignoring the potential and the capabilities of social subjects; neither am I locating them in a passive place in the process of social transformation. On the contrary, what I am saying is that there are powerful oppressive structures that support and reproduce this order. This means that without generating positive historical conditions that modify these structures, it is very difficult and even impossible for people to escape the situation in which they live and consequently be able to develop freely as human beings, as is their birthright.

But this situation, far from bringing us to discouragement and skepticism, must mobilize us and give us strength to keep fighting in pursuit of a more just, humane and democratic world. We are not alone in this fight. As the Argentinean philosopher Enrique Dussel (2014) says, the problem of social order transformation requires a formation of collective actors who engage with system injustices. So, this philosopher retrieves the political category of people, such as Gramsci understood it: as a social block of the oppressed, which admits contradictions, but which is central to the struggle for emancipation, in particular when they are constituted as a hegemonic power block.

History teaches us that social achievements have always been products of collective struggles. It is important and vital to support the actions that our people carry out in the face of deepening social inequality that affects not only democracy, peace and human dignity, but life itself. In recent years, mobilizations against this inequity have been growing around the globe, suggesting that *another world is possible*.

In this sense, Latin America has been the most active territory in this fight in the last three decades. In the case of Argentina, the most emblematic actions include social mobilizations against polluting mining and paper factories, job insecurity, mass layoffs and unemployment generated by adjustments and the systematic application of neoliberal policies. As an example of these struggles and mobilizations, I



am going to refer to two cases of recovered factories by their workers in Argentina in 2001: Cerámica Zanón and Brukman.

In order to understand these two cases, a brief reference to what was happening in Argentina at that time is necessary. The social protests of December 19 and 20, 2001 revolve around a central demand: “that they all go away”. This phrase constituted the motto of the Argentine citizens who, on December 19 and 20, 2001, gathered spontaneously in the Plaza de Mayo, in repudiation of the then government and the members of the legislative and judicial powers. These social protests involved the death of several citizens and the renunciation of the Argentine president and his officers.

As Martínez & Agüero (2008) point out, “that they all go away” expressed the anger, repudiation, indignation and satiety for the increase of corruption in the three branches of the State. It also expressed rejection of adjustment economic policies that severely punished the impoverished middle class and the popular sectors condemned to hunger and malnutrition. Discouragement and humiliation became tiresome and the people reacted with great vigor and determination. The saucepans became the modern symbol of social protest and it crossed the world through the mass media of social communication. In other geographical points very distant from Argentina, other people imitated this form of protest.

This protest was channeled through neighborhood assemblies, neighborhood commissions, pickets and other forms of social organization. The social groups, after so many years of fear and indifference, began to exercise their rights as citizens and realize their real power as a people. Neoliberal individualism was replaced by solidarity and collective action. New forms of social economy arise linked to swap, free fairs, cooperatives and mutuals, the associativism is rescued and 200 closed factories are recovered that the workers set up in solidarity (Martínez & Agüero, 2008).

The recovered companies and factories constituted a phenomenon that combined the occupation and self-management of companies by their workers as a form of struggle to maintain “the source of work” (Fernández Álvarez & Partenio, 2010). These experiences were mainly carried out in factories producing food, refrigerators, iron and steel, metallurgy, glass, electrical appliances, leather, wool washing, wood, paint, auto parts, electric motors, cosmetics, paper, transport, construction, printing, graphics and textiles.

The recovery and self-management processes of companies emerged spontaneously in the face of the crisis in different geographical locations in Argentina. Then they organized more systematically as the National Movement of Recovered Companies (MNER), the Movement of Recovered Factories (MNFR), the Federation of Worker Cooperatives (FECOOTRA) and the Argentine Federation of Self-Managed Workers Cooperatives (FACTA). In 2009 the National Confederation of Worker Cooperatives was founded, which includes 21 Cooperative Federations (Hudson, 2012).

The workers were leading processes of defense and recovery of their sources of work through various mechanisms of social struggle: assemblies, mobilizations, roadblocks, camps, and popular pots, among others. They sought to socially install the problem through social media in order to make the situation visible. They faced collective struggles to continue production to maintain their source of work and generate income for their families. They were collective struggles on which many political and economic pressures were exerted that sought to bend the workers.

Cerámica Zanón is one of the most emblematic cases of recovered factories. This company belonged to the Zanón family, which received all kinds of benefits to install the factory in the province of Neuquén. It was inaugurated in 1980 in the middle of the military dictatorship and had strong economic growth until the end of the 1990s. The problems began in 1998, when workers complained about wage problems, poor working conditions and lack of security conditions. Lack of safety led to one workplace accident per day and one death per year.

Workers organized and began the fight for their rights. The Zanón family argued that the company did not have money to buy the regulatory clothing that the workers needed and therefore could not guarantee security conditions. However, the workers analyzed the company's accounts and found that the company actually had millions in profits.

In 2001, the Zanón family decided to fire all the workers and close the factory. The 386 workers of the company mobilized and began the fight in defense of their source of work. They took control of the factory and restarted the production process, as conditions existed for doing so. The administration of the company in charge of the workers increased production, reaching a maximum of 450 workers.

On the other hand, Brukman is a textile factory located in a traditional neighborhood of the autonomous City of Buenos Aires. It is currently under the control of a Work Cooperative called "18 de Diciembre" and is among the best-known recovered companies in Argentina.

On December 18, the day before the crisis of December 19 and 20, 2001, Brukman's working women demanded that the company pay the wages owed them. In the absence of a response to their demand, the working women decided to remain in their workplaces to claim their rights. They decided to continue with production, to generate income and to pay electricity, gas and telephone debts of the company in order to continue working. There were several unsuccessful attempts at conciliation with the employers, as well as several eviction attempts.

This resistance of working women was supported by the National Movement of Recovered Companies with the proposal to form a cooperative. Likewise, they received the support and solidarity of the residents of the neighborhood, the Human Rights organizations, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and the workers of Cerámica Zanón, among others.

After a long process of struggle and resistance from working women, in October 2003, the bankruptcy of the company was declared and days later, the law of expropriation of the factory was approved in the legislature of the City of Buenos Aires. On December 29, 2003, Brukman working women re-entered the factory, but this time definitively and as associates of the "Cooperativa 18 de Diciembre".

In these two experiences of resistance and struggle of working men and women, as in so many other cases, social workers actively participated, not voluntarily or spontaneously, but as members of different organizations and social services of the State.

Social workers have accompanied these struggles and resistance to Neoliberalism and its necropolicies, defending and organizing workers; claiming the right to work; advising on the formation of cooperatives; organizing assistance and social containment in the most difficult moments of the conflict; preparing social reports, publicly speaking through professional organizations, among other actions.

This is what the political dimension of social work is all about. To understand that in situations of injustice and violation of rights we must assume political positions, to have a political view of social problems, to know that struggles are collective and also solutions, and that persons are not responsible for social inequalities but that they are product of a capitalist and patriarchal social order.

The Argentine experience of more than 200 recovered companies and factories was first replicated in Latin America and then became a source of inspiration for Europe, where the recovery of companies by their workers is increasingly an alternative to austerity policies. According to data from the European Confederation of Worker Cooperatives (CECOP), in 2013 more than 150 companies in bankruptcy were recovered and returned to work due to the self-management of workers.

In the case of Brazil, popular actions in defense of democracy were organized. In Peru, resistance against mining corporations was accomplished. In Chile, the miners' struggles for better working conditions, the struggle of the Mapuches for land tenure and of students for public and quality education continues.

Also in the Arab world, political changes unthinkable, until not so long ago, are also taking place. An example is the mass popular mobilizations during the so-called “Arab spring”. In Spain, the *indignant* movement combined actions for occupation of public spaces in the center of cities with mass demonstrations, especially in Madrid and Barcelona, demanding “*real democracy NOW*”. This is a broad, consistent and sustained movement that has implied a deep questioning of the Spanish political system and its political parties, even towards leftist parties.

In the United States, the movement, which started with *Occupy Wall Street*, has expanded to nearly one thousand urban locations around the country. The main slogan of the movement: “We are the 99%”, recognizes and visibly installs in the consciousness of American citizens, the existence and gravity of the conflict between “rich” and “poor”. In the public agenda of the movement were incorporated very important actions such as the struggle against racism and patriarchy, against inequality and for the right to work and collective bargaining.

The most important achievements of these struggles are, among others, the politicization of young people who do not find any sense in traditional politics in the context of public debate as it stands, in relation to basic and elemental questions of democracy, equality and the real value of persons. They have also opened other avenues of debate and political action, other ways of doing politics in the face of lack of options and alternatives for change with regard to traditional politics.

## **THE NEED FOR A POLITICAL FRAMEWORK IN SOCIAL WORK**

Considering this scenario of deep social inequalities, resistance and popular mobilization, I submit – once again – the need to reinvent social work around the world. Promoting the dignity and worth of people implies the need to incorporate a political dimension in global debates of social work. This means the inclusion of political dimensions in our meetings and gatherings, in our publications, in the fields of professional training and, of course, in our professional practice.

But, first and foremost, we should ask ourselves: What do we mean by politics? What does politics mean for us today and what does it mean for social work? And here, once again, we also have very different interpretations. Politics is understood in many different ways. For the German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1997), politics is the organizer of all areas of human life. Its origin is in the “*between-men*”, and therefore, it is a social relationship. It is especially concerned with arrangements between people; it is bio-policy, using the category created by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. It is always a social fact, something built by, for and among persons. Therefore, it also is a historical construction, subject to conditions that occur at one time or in one historic moment. From this the real possibilities and the limits of politics emerge. In short: we are born, live and die in conditions that are created by politics.

The American philosopher Iris Young links politics with justice. She says that this is the main theme of political philosophy. She conceives justice not in a distributive sense, as it is commonly understood, but as *social* justice. In this conception of justice, domination and oppression are more important than distribution, terms that the philosopher uses to conceptualize social injustice. For her, “the concept of justice is coextensive with the concept of politics” (Young, 2000, p. 22).

In this same line of thought, for Hannah Pitkin, politics is “the activity through which relatively large and permanent groups of people decide their future, what they will collectively do and how they will together live” (Pitkin, 1981, p. 343). In the same sense, for Roberto Unger, politics refers to “the

struggle for resources and agreements that fix the basic terms of our practical and passionate relations” (Unger, 1987, p. 145).

As we see, politics is directly related to who is able to decide the collective way of life that we want, including the production of knowledge, resources and institutional arrangements. Social life is essentially political, whatever the participation of the social subjects that comprise it. For Iris Young “politics covers all aspects of institutional organization, public action, practices, social habits and practices, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decision-making” (Young, 2000, p. 23).

Therefore, politics is a matter of participation and power to decide the collective affairs of a society. The meaning and value of politics are based on the fact that it is the field where it is decided who engages and acts, for whom, for what purpose and with what resources. This means that politics necessarily affects our lives as social subjects, without differentiating between private and public spaces, between intimate life and public life. As the feminist movement in the 1970’s emphasized: “*the personal is political*”.

In other words, we cannot do without politics, because it is constitutive of social life. If someone is going to decide on our lives and our future, then it is evident that we need to participate in these decisions. Therefore, the more politicized a society is, the more political power its members will have, including much more capacity of resistance and political consciousness. The same occurs with social work. We are not outside of social life and thus of politics. Therefore, to reinvent social work around the world explicitly entails recognizing the meaning and value of politics for social work.

## **REINVENTING SOCIAL WORK AROUND THE WORLD**

Reinventing social work worldwide also means not reproducing dichotomous thinking; that is stopping separating professional practice from the production of knowledge and professional training.

I would like to stop listening to false debates in social work, which insist on separating these areas. These false debates consider, on the one hand, academia and the production of knowledge and, on the other hand, professional practice, as if they were separate and even competing areas. With this dichotomy, we are only functional to those who dominate and control us. We are teachers, intellectuals and social workers, but fundamentally we are salaried workers and employees, and therefore as vulnerable as the social subjects with whom we daily interact. We are not superior because we may have one or more titles, but we have greater responsibilities. We must put all our knowledge and professional experience at the service of the people.

The reinvention of social work worldwide also implies having the maturity to criticize our own governments, when these governments only respond to the interests of large transnational corporations. These corporations have neither homeland nor nation and take political decisions that harm millions of people, condemning them to lives of extreme poverty, war and conflict, forcing them to flee from their own lands, to take refuge in some strange country, or to drown in the Mediterranean Sea.

Do these people have no dignity, value, or rights? Yes, of course they do. As social workers, we should watch over and defend these rights and not find ourselves defending,, the governments, protected by false nationalisms, that generate these situations with their decisions. Peoples’ rights are not negotiated, they are demanded, they are respected, and they are exercised. As social workers we have to put ourselves on the opposite side of those who oppress, violate, and deny these rights.

This stark reality requires us to think as a group, to build a collective agenda, regardless of the differences that we have between us, beyond our singularities. It requires us to build a critical and emancipatory social work. I am convinced that just as the World Social Forum<sup>1</sup> adopted the motto “another world is possible”, at our global level also “other social work is possible”. This depends only on us, on our own political will and the degree of historical consciousness that we have. So, we can continue co-validating the existing social order, or we can question it in order to transform it.

The colonial matrix of power built processes of differentiation as synonyms of inferiority: “*poor*”, “*black*”, “*women*”, “*Indian*”, “*homosexual*”, among other political and social categories and classifications that are built from this logic of power. As María Lugones argues, it is necessary to retrace the plot and intersectionality between race, class, gender and sexuality and the violence inscribed in this plot (Lugones, 2008).

I do not pretend that we all think in the same way. On the contrary, I maintain and claim the differences in our respective positions, but not understood as synonyms of inferiority, because this implies inequality, and inequality always involves domination. On the contrary, as I said, I support and claim differences, not as inferiority but as diversity, as wealth and potentiality of our professional collective.

We can never accept the construction of the *other* from a place or position of superiority. On the contrary, we must be deeply respectful of others, of the autonomy of people, of popular knowledge, of diverse social and religious practices. To maintain the opposite transforms us into instruments of social domination and oppression. However, differences cannot be obstacles to the construction of collective projects because, beyond all the differences, we must be able to build agreements and consensus, where collective interests prevail over individual interests. Reinventing social work therefore implies building a policy of recognition of diversity, because without this it is not possible to think about social justice and without social justice there is no possibility of promoting the dignity and value of people.

## **CONCLUSION**

In 2014, the International Federation of Social Workers, in the framework of the World Assembly that took place in Melbourne, Australia, voted and approved a new global Definition of Social Work that states that:

*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.*

As we can see, my reflections relate directly not only to the themes of the Global Agenda 2010-2020, but also to the guiding principles included in the global definition of social work itself. What I have tried to do is to deepen or perhaps explain in more detail what the topic of the global agenda and the new global *Definition of Social Work* imply. I deeply believe that the principles that we define for social work worldwide cannot be left as empty or abstract statements, or as rhetoric, because they would be transformed into simple concepts that have no meaning.

My major interest in accepting the invitation for this Conference was to contribute effectively toward the construction of a critical and emancipatory social work. This will motivate us for action and is a great collective project in which we all feel included and for which we all fight and are willing to give the best of ourselves.

Of course, I am aware that this proposal that I share with you, far from giving us peace and security, disturbs, mobilizes, and provokes us. It is a proposal that invites us to detach ourselves from our unique and monocultural thinking. It proposes disobedient and undisciplined practices, but offers us a horizon of hope, dignity and plurality of voices that have been silenced and forgotten. As Walter Benjamin (2009) maintained, *the dead demand us*. Many social workers, throughout the world, have fought and given their lives for social emancipation, with the sole objective of contributing to a more just, democratic and humane world.

A clear current example of this commitment by social workers around the world is the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are saving the lives of others by risking their own lives at this time of global crisis generated by the pandemic. So, I invite you to reflect deeply on the themes and issues that I have outlined in this chapter. I call you to continue and deepen our collective struggle for this more humane, just and democratic world to which we all aspire.

This fight, as I mentioned earlier, is not only about social workers. We have the legacy of great social and political fighters who have set a course and laid out a path that we must follow without any surrender, without lowering our flags and without abandoning our compatriots. We follow in the wake of inspiring leaders, such as Karl Marx (Germany), Mahatma Gandhi (India), Martin Luther King (United States), José Martí (Cuba), Simón Bolívar (Venezuela), Ernesto “Che” Guevara (Argentina), Mary Wollstonecraft (England), Olimpia De Gouges (France), Emiliano Zapata (Mexico), Nelson Mandela (South Africa), Malala Yousafzai (Pakistan), Rigoberta Menchú Tum (Guatemala), Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (Argentina) and Paulo Freire (Brazil), among many others.

As Mary Wollstonecraft said, what the world needs is not charity but justice – and justice will be impossible while the structures of oppression and domination continue and the devices of power that generate and reproduce inequality, exploitation and misery remain intact. We have a great challenge ahead. Of course it is not easy, but I am convinced that this cause is worthwhile and that it is worth continuing to fight because, as Ernesto “Che” Guevara maintained, “The only struggle that is lost is that which is abandoned”.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Decolonial Perspective:** Latin American epistemological, theoretical, and methodological option.

**Recovered Factories:** Experience developed in Argentina in 2001 of self-management of workers.

**Reinvention:** Capacity for reconfiguration, recreation, innovation, permanent renewal.

**Social Agenda:** Political document prepared by the International Federation of Social Workers.

**Social Inequalities:** Social conditions in which some social groups have advantages or privileges in relation to other social groups.

**Social Movements:** Ability of human beings to organize collectively for action in defense of their rights.

**Social Order:** Historical, political, social conflicting construction where power and domination are constitutive of it.

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The World Social Forum (WSF) is an annual meeting held by members of the movement for a different globalization, to organize global campaigns, share and polish meeting strategies, and for the different members to inform each other of the new existing movements.

# Chapter 13

## Social Work in the Anthropocene

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The reality of the Anthropocene hangs over our heads as we enter the 2020s. Humanity is facing multiple crises, and it has become clear that political and government structures are incapable of dealing with them adequately and equitably. We are seeing the erosion of the liberal democratic state and its institutions, the appeal of populism, mistrust both of politicians and of political institutions, and powerful interests responding by increasing surveillance, secrecy, and control. The Anthropocene also challenges the anthropocentrism that has been taken for granted in the world view of Western modernity, but is proving to be unsustainable and indeed harmful to human and non-human flourishing. This presents a new set of challenges for social work, if it is to remain relevant to the needs of the society, and also to remain true to its value base. This chapter argues that social work needs to explore and adopt theory/practice that is community-based, political, anarchistic, decolonised, matriarchal, and grounded in an ecological epistemology that is both Indigenous and post-human.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Social work as a profession emerged from Western Modernity, and carries with it many of the epistemological and ontological assumptions of that heritage (Tascón, 2018). Throughout the early years of professional social work, right through to at least the 1970s, social work theories and models, and research-based knowledge, from the UK and the USA dominated social work, and were imposed on the rest of the world, often uncritically, as the “right” way to practice (Gatwiri, 2020; Tusasiirwe 2020). The heritage of Western Enlightenment Modernity remains strong in social work, despite more recent post-colonial and Indigenous critiques. This heritage, while it enabled social work to establish credibility in a world of neo-liberal globalization, colonialism and Western cultural hegemony, will not serve social work well as the world of Enlightenment Modernity unravels.

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Facing the reality of the Anthropocene is the challenge for all societies and cultures in the twenty-first century (Angus, 2016; Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016). The Western Enlightenment project, with its associated neo-liberal economic agenda, has been responsible for the current unsustainability of the global economic, social and political system, and so the way forward (if there is one) from our impending global crises will not be found within that paradigm. If social work is to remain relevant, its values of “social justice” and “human rights”, and its accepted knowledge and theory base, will need to be significantly reformulated.

The crises facing humanity in the coming decades are serious and potentially catastrophic. Even though the term “existential crisis” is often over-used, it is a truly appropriate term for the current condition of humanity. Global warming is a serious issue, and the responses from governments to date have been inadequate (Eisenstein, 2018; McKibben, 2019). This is hardly surprising; to address global warming adequately would require a social, economic and political revolution, away from growth-oriented economics, from extractive industries, from consumerism, from individualism, and indeed from the very foundations of capitalism itself. But global warming is not the only challenge of the Anthropocene (Kingsnorth, 2017; McKibben, 2019). The over-fishing of the oceans and the erosion of topsoil, if allowed to continue at their present rate, will result in serious global food shortages by mid-century. Toxic pollution is poisoning the environment, with potentially disastrous consequences. The loss of bio-diversity threatens the flourishing, and indeed the very survival, of living systems. Population density combined with rapid mobility amounts to a pandemic waiting to happen. Political instability, the inevitable consequence of crisis, threatens new wars over climate, water and land, with the ever-present threat of the deployment of nuclear weapons. There is no point in hiding from these dire predictions, pretending that somehow everything will be alright (Eisenstein, 2018; Bendall, 2018, Read & Alexander 2019).

To this can be added the inability of governments to appreciate, let alone respond to, the totality of the crises facing humanity. Indeed, at the very time when one would wish for strong progressive political leadership, we are seeing the erosion of liberal democracy (Kenny, Ife & Westoby, 2020). Public confidence, both in politicians and in the very structures of democratic government, appears to be decreasing. Corruption in the body politic, which we can argue has always been present to some extent, is now blatant, both in the Global South and in the Global North. Elections are manipulated, through the drawing of electoral boundaries, through voter suppression, and through increasingly sophisticated manipulation of the electorate both through conventional media and through social media (Zuboff, 2019). The separation of powers—between the legislature, the judiciary and the executive—which is seen as a bedrock of liberal democracy, is challenged with the politicization of the public service and through the political criticism, and often manipulation, of the judiciary. The separation of Church and State—another central component of Western democratic systems—is under increasing challenge with the influence of organized religion, particularly conservative forms of Christianity, on the body politic. The power of business interests to control and manipulate the political agenda, through corporate media ownership and manipulation of social media, amounts to a further serious erosion of autonomous government. And the militarization of the police, evident across many countries, is cause for serious concern.

Of course the problems of democracy are not new. They have been evident in political systems for centuries, and the ideal of liberal democracy is more vision than reality. But in recent years this has become both more pronounced and more blatant (Kenny, Ife & Westoby 2020). It was once possible for many people to believe in the ideals of democracy, denying that there were systemic problems, but this has become more difficult, as the corruption of the system becomes more obvious, and the result is a decline in public acceptance of liberal democracy and an increased cynicism about politicians and

governments. This of course has been reinforced by right-wing ideologies suggesting that government intervention in the economy (or in anything else except defense and support for business) is problematic, a drag on resources, and an assault on individual “freedom”. We have learned to mistrust our governments and our politicians, rather than to look to them for leadership. This is not very helpful at times of crisis.

Into this crisis in liberal democracy has stepped right-wing populism (Kenny, Ife & Westoby, 2021). This must be seen not just in local terms, but as a global trend. To concentrate simply on Donald Trump, for example, is to ignore the reality that there are others playing similar roles in many different countries. At the time of writing, Johnson, Morrison, Duterte, Orbán, and Bolsonaro all reflect a similar appeal to simplistic right-wing slogans, often with little connection to the reality of people’s lives, the reality of planetary crises, or to research-based policy (whether social research or research in the physical sciences). And the world’s two most populous countries—China and India—have leaders who enact a frightening authoritarianism and who display contempt for minorities.

There are several themes at the heart of this state of affairs. Neo-liberal capitalism is the dominant economic narrative, has driven globalization, and has increasingly allowed no apparently credible alternative to emerge in mainstream public discourse (Žižek, 2018). Capitalism exacerbates already existing inequalities of wealth, power and life chances. It requires continuous growth—economic growth, population growth, growth in consumption, growth in resource exploitation, and so on (Harvey, 2005). Especially in its neo-liberal form, capitalism exacerbates inequality to obscene levels. The problem is that the growth imperative now comes up against the constraints of a finite planet, with resulting pollution, environmental degradation, global warming, loss of bio-diversity, and so on. Powerful forces are required to maintain the status quo of “business as usual”, even at the expense of democratic institutions and to the detriment of social justice.

Another central theme is the problem of anthropocentrism and human privilege (Jensen, 2016). The tradition of “man having dominion over” the rest of the natural world is a core component of the Western world view, with the implicit support of the main Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) through their shared creation story in the Book of Genesis. Human exceptionalism is such a dominant aspect of Western Modernity that it is usually taken for granted; as one example, viewing the world in terms of “resources” is commonplace, yet the very word betrays a world view that accepts that the natural world is there for humans to use as we wish.

Another strand in this thinking is patriarchy, which has valued relationships of domination and has valued aggression and competition at the expense of peace and cooperation (Federici, 2019). Patriarchal values have been disastrous not only for women, but also for the natural world, for eco-systems, and for human communities. The powerful, conquering, authoritative male has been an icon of Western “civilization”, representing the desirability of domination and exploitation, extended beyond the exploitation of women to the exploitation of other species and of the earth. If there is to be an alternative future, it must incorporate feminist, and specifically eco-feminist, values and understandings.

A further strand is colonialism, and the imposition of a white Western worldview (Fanon, 2002; Tharoor, 2016). The Enlightenment tradition provided an intellectual justification for colonization, and the imposition of Western values, practices and institutions on other races and cultures; if “we” were “enlightened” it was surely our duty to enlighten others, and show them the superiority of the Western tradition. Alongside this colonialism was racism, an assumed superiority of the “white man”, and hence the devaluing and exploitation of those of other races. Colonization and colonialism, of course, pre-date the Western Enlightenment, and have always been about the seizure of wealth and land in the interests of

the colonizing power, but the Enlightenment enabled these colonial practices to be justified and claimed as beneficial and humanitarian, and could soothe the consciences of the colonizers.

There is no space here to elaborate further on these multiple crises—ecological, ideological and epistemological—facing contemporary humanity, and the reader wishing to explore this more is referred to the now substantial literature on the subject. It is important to note, however, that awareness of this sense of crisis has moved beyond the world of academic researchers and environmental activists, and is now becoming more established in mainstream public discourse. Ideas that we are approaching the end times, that the end of the world (at least as we know it) is upon us, that we desperately need a new paradigm, and that we cannot guarantee a future for coming generations, are now commonly expressed in newspapers, on television, in film and documentary, and on social media.

This is a worrying and bewildering time. The belief in linear progress—that things are generally getting better and better—has been taken for granted in Western societies since the Enlightenment, and has been imposed on the rest of the world in the name of “development”, but it is no longer a self-evident truth. Many people (though probably not yet a majority) in the Global North worry that their children and grandchildren will not have as good a life, and will face a period of crisis and potential disaster rather than order and “progress”. Climate change has become increasingly part of people’s experience, for example with the unprecedented bushfires in Australia in the summer of 2019-20, and other extreme weather events that are “normally” only expected once every hundred years but which now occur far more frequently. And there are increasing numbers of writers suggesting, on the basis of hard evidence, that it is really too late to avoid major ecological change and crisis, and that we are right to be scared about the future (Bendall, 2018; Kingsnorth, 2017).

There have of course been many prophecies of doom or apocalypse throughout history, most of which have proved to be false, and this makes it easy for people to dismiss those concerned about these issues as alarmist and as doomsayers. What makes the present predications of crises different, however, is that they are based not on visions, religious prophecy, sacred texts, tea leaves, dreams, comets or astrological readings, but rather are based on extensive and rigorous scientific research across a variety of disciplines, by thousands of researchers world-wide. We ignore their warnings at our peril.

This is the world in which social workers will practice in the coming decades, and it is the world which will dramatically impact on the lives of individuals, families and communities. Yet much of the world is currently in denial. There are many people with a level of environmental awareness, but who see the “solutions” in terms of transition to renewables, improved technology, and so on, while not recognizing that these will ultimately prove ineffective if the imperatives of growth, accumulation and capitalist exploitation remain unchallenged, in a finite world. What is needed is not just a technological initiative, but a different world view of the place of humans on the earth, our relationship to other species, and to the earth itself (Eisenstein, 2018). This would be a world view more consistent with what First Nations people have been trying to tell the “civilized” West for a very long time, about how to live as part of nature respecting the natural world, its limits, and our responsibilities to it (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006; Yunkaporta, 2019). But such a view has only minority support in the modern West, where the narratives of “jobs”, “growth”, “progress”, “resources”, consumerism and material wealth are far stronger. To expect that such a change of worldview could be achieved, globally, within a decade, and that governments worldwide would facilitate such a change, is clearly naïve, yet according to climate scientists we only have a decade left for effective action.

Read and Alexander suggest that there are three possible futures for global humanity.

## ***Social Work in the Anthropocene***

1. This civilization could collapse utterly and terminally...
2. This civilization (we) will manage to seed a future successor-civilization(s) as this one collapses, or
3. This civilization will somehow manage to transform itself, deliberately, radically and rapidly, in an unprecedented manner, in time to avert collapse. (2019 p. 4)

Of these, the third, though the most desirable, is the least likely. Indeed, many will now conclude, along with Read and Alexander, that it is now effectively impossible, given the delay in effective government action, the power of vested interests, the magnitude of the paradigm shift required, the very limited time still available for change, the rise of right-wing authoritarian governments, the likelihood of serious wars (including nuclear wars) and the appeal of right-wing populism. The first option, of terminal collapse, though the least desirable, remains the most likely, and some commentators such as Jem Bendall (2108) now regard collapse as inevitable. The second option, however, holds out some level of hope, not that we can “recover” the old certainties of Western Modernity, but rather that some form of new society, based on a different paradigm, might emerge, Phoenix-like, from the ashes. It is this possibility, however unlikely, that exercises the imagination of many, and that forms the basis for the remainder of this chapter.

## **SOCIAL WORK: GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

What is the place, if any, for social work in this threatening and frightening future? If social work is to have any role, it will need to break out of its heritage in European Enlightenment Modernity. But if it can do so, social work is an activity (let’s not bother with “profession”) that has much of importance to contribute. Indeed, this uncertain future is one in which social work, of a certain kind, becomes of vital importance. For the remainder of this chapter I will outline a number of areas where social work offers important contributions to shaping the future. A new social work for the future does not involve many new ways of working, but rather a refocusing of the knowledge, values and skills that social work already claims.

### **Systemic Thinking and Acting**

Western Cartesian ways of thinking and researching, concentrating on isolated units rather than inter-relationships, has been one of the problems of the dominant world view of Western Modernity. Many critics have argued that more systemic, integrated analysis is needed if the interrelated challenges and crises of the coming decades are to be adequately understood and addressed; indeed, this has been a major theme of much of the literature in this area, seeking alternatives to the Cartesian paradigm (Eisenstein, 2018). Holistic and systemic thinking is a strength of social work, which has long drawn on systems perspectives to make connections. This applies both at the level of practice—connecting people, communities, institutions, families, across multiple interacting systems—but also at the level of theory and knowledge, where social workers have been able to connect different theoretical perspectives, paradigms and knowledge traditions. This enables social workers, if they choose, to contribute significantly to development of alternatives along the lines proposed by Read and Alexander in their idea of seeding future successor civilizations.

## Relationships

Social workers work with relationships; such a statement is really a tautology if we accept the true meaning of “*social work*”. This also makes social work well suited to the development of new paradigms, based on inter-connectedness. After being devalued in favor of individual achievement and competition through the period of capitalist expansion, the importance of relationships as the basis for reality is now achieving due recognition. Writers such as Spetnak (2011) and Gergen (2000) have pointed out the significance of relational reality: that reality emerges not from the essence of isolation, but from relationship. An atom is only an atom because of the relationships between its fundamental particles, not because of the nature of the particles themselves in isolation. A molecule is only a molecule because of the relationships between its atoms. And this applies at all levels: a human being, a family, a society, a nation, the earth, the solar system and the galaxy. All are defined by relationships, and so it is through relationship that we construct reality. This resonates with work in the new biology (Weber, 2016), and the importance of symbiosis in evolution (Margulis, 1998), as well as the new understandings of how much animals and plants communicate and interact with each other. If relationships are to become central in developing a new world view, then social workers, as expert practitioners in relationships, will have important contributions to make, if they have the vision and imagination to see the significance of their often taken-for-granted wisdom.

## Community

A common theme running through nearly all the writers envisioning a sustainable future is the importance of strong and sustainable communities. The community is seen as the essential building block of a sustainable society, and the breakdown of traditional community structures has been seen as a serious weakness in modern Western societies, as they embraced neo-liberal individualism and consumerism. This suggests that the most important aspect of social work in the coming decades will be community work. The individualized casework or therapeutic approach to social work is simply unsustainable as a way of helping those in need, and promoting social justice. It can only even be available for a small percentage of the population, and while there may still be a place for such services in some instances, it will not be the main form of social service delivery in future decades, as I have been arguing now for 25 years (Ife, 1995; 2016). Genuine community-based services, where the resources of a community are used as a primary basis for providing help, have in past centuries been important in the West, and remain so today in many non-Western cultures. Such an approach to human services can be regarded as the norm for human flourishing, and will need to become so again if a more sustainable future is to be achieved. Social work has a strong tradition of working at community level, whether labeled “community development”, “community organization”, “community work” or “community social work”. In some Western countries this has been recently devalued in favor of more individual therapeutic social work practices, and this trend will need to be reversed if social work is to remain relevant in the future. But if that reversal can be achieved, social workers with a community development perspective will find themselves at the forefront of necessary social change.

## **The Post-Human**

The need to see humanity as embedded in, and interconnected with, the natural world is a common theme among those exploring alternative paradigms. The boundary between the human and the non-human is not the rigid, impermeable boundary that was assumed in Western humanism (Oliver, 2020), and there is increasing realization that Indigenous understandings of humanity as part of, not separate from, “nature” will be essential for the future (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006; Yunkaporta, 2019). This connects with the idea of post-humanism, where our taken-for-granted assumptions of what counts as “human” and “humanity” need to be reformulated (Braidotti, 2013; Grusin, 2015; Morton, 2017). Our inter-dependence with the rest of the “natural world”, however, is only one aspect of post-humanism. The other dimension is the connection with technology. Technology has become increasingly part of our lives, to the point where it has become part of our humanity. Many people need technology such as glasses, hearing aids, dentures, and artificial body parts in order to live full lives. Smart phones, computers and tablets have become ubiquitous, to the point where people will say they cannot live without them; they have become necessary for achieving our “humanity”. Our productions, our memories, our experiences are stored in the “cloud”. Our communities are constructed through social media. Artificial intelligence is adding another layer to this dependence on technology. Where does the human end and technology begin? The border is now so permeable, that to use the metaphor created by Donna Haraway (2004), we become cyborgs.

These two aspects of post-humanism have important implications for social workers in the coming decades. Social work will need to move beyond its traditional understanding and mistrust of “technology” to recognize that technology is now part of our humanity. We have relationships with technology that can legitimately be labeled as part of the social. And our relationships with what is termed the “natural world” must now be regarded also as important relationships with which social workers need to work. The “social” can no longer be thought of as an exclusively human realm, the “human” is not an isolated phenomenon with impermeable boundaries, and “community” is not for humans only.

## **Social Justice**

The above discussion of the multiple crises facing humanity barely mentioned social justice. Yet this will be the first question that social workers will raise about these issues. Social work values would require an analysis of who will be most at risk from these crises, recognizing the intersecting and reinforcing dimensions of disadvantage in terms of class, race, gender, culture, ability, access to resources, sexual identity, and so on. Without such an analysis, it is likely that those already disadvantaged will suffer the most, while those already privileged will have those privileges protected. This has been repeatedly pointed out in relation to climate change, as those most affected are likely to be those in the Global South, who have been least responsible for creating the problem in the first place, yet are the most vulnerable (Shue, 2016). Those with power, privilege and resources will be more able to protect their positions and ensure their safety. Social workers, and others with a social justice perspective, will need to be strong in challenging this protected privilege and arguing in support of the most vulnerable. This will require a commitment to socialism rather than capitalism (though some may question the necessity of the binary), which requires courage and commitment in an environment where neo-liberalism remains a dominant ideology and where governments respond to threat and instability by resorting to individualized policy and increasingly authoritarian measures. But it is clear that capitalism will be unable to deliver a more

sustainable society, and that capitalism is incompatible with social justice principles (Harvey 2005). Social work cannot claim ideological neutrality.

Of course social justice requires more than a critique of capitalism. Feminist analysis is critical, given the continuing oppression and marginalization of women, and the social and environmental destructiveness of patriarchy (Federici, 2019). And anti-racist and postcolonial analyses are also of central importance for social work, given the persistence of white privilege and the marginalization of people, of knowledges, of practices and of cultures from other traditions (Tascón & Ife, 2020). Similarly, understanding the structures, discourses and processes that continue to marginalize and devalue the LGBTIQ community, and also people with disabilities, must remain prominent in social work theory and practice.

## **Internationalism**

This in turn will require an international perspective. The impacts of climate change, of economic crisis, of political crisis, of food and water shortages, of climate refugees, and so on will be felt across national borders. These are global problems, and while local initiatives are essential (as discussed above in relation to community) they will need to be addressed also at global level. Sovereign national governments, only loosely coordinated by the UN, have proven inadequate to deal with global issues such as global warming, resettlement of refugees, nuclear disarmament, poverty, over-fishing of the oceans, global pollution, tax evasion, organized crime, and so on. Social workers can join with others in advocating stronger global and multilateral institutions and processes to develop global cooperation that extends beyond the economic and business ties of “globalization”.

## **SOCIAL WORK: SPECIFIC RESPONSES**

### **Mental Health**

The genuinely existential crises facing humanity clearly have implications for mental health. The very fact that we can no longer look forward to a better future, whether for ourselves, our children or our grandchildren, and the uncertainties and threats that people feel from climate change, food insecurity, authoritarian governments, pandemics, pollution and the threat of war, pose a serious challenge for the “mental health” of all of us. This is an area where social workers claim expertise, especially in their capacity to understand mental health in a holistic, interconnected and systemic way, rather than through the limited “medical model” of diagnosis and treatment. It will be important in future not to pathologize “mental health” issues relating to the Anthropocene and ecological crises. Faced with a precarious and uncertain future, it is surely normal, indeed “healthy”, to feel depressed, angry, betrayed, alienated, and in some cases suicidal. To see the future as bleak, and to question whether there is any point in continuing to live, is rational in the current context. To believe that there are stronger powers manipulating our “reality” is not delusional paranoia, but is fully justified by the existence of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and the manipulation/ownership of the mainstream media by powerful vested interests. What we may define as “mental health problems” are also ways that people come to terms with the state of the world, and the science supports such reactions as both rational and realistic. Indeed it is those who continue to deny the reality and the magnitude of the crises facing humanity, and who still believe that somehow everything will turn out all right, who are “out of touch with reality” and who perhaps

warrant a psychiatric label. Anxieties that are based on reality should not be dismissed as “mental health problems” thereby denying the real systemic causes of distress. This does not make those anxieties any less important, and they should warrant the attention of social workers and others; rather it is to question the psychiatric paradigm for addressing them.

## **Pandemics**

The highly mobile, densely-populated, globalized world is a pandemic waiting to happen, and the risk of pandemics is serious and on-going. Social workers will have vital contributions to make in the response to pandemics, as governments understandably give priority to health concerns while not taking account of the intersecting social and cultural factors that are important in dealing with both the spread and the management of a pandemic. Medical social workers have significant experience in the social aspects of health, and will have important roles to play at both policy and clinical levels. As with other social issues, addressing the issue at community level becomes a priority, and community development programs can help to build management of pandemics at community level, rather than just through top-down government intervention.

## **Financial Security**

As economic and financial crises inevitably develop, because of the unsustainability of growth-oriented capitalism in a finite world, financial security becomes more precarious for more people. This is already of serious concern, in the “developed” Global North as well as in the Global South, with the gig economy, the withdrawal of the safety net of the welfare state, and the growth of the “precariat” (Standing 2014). Again, social work needs to broaden its response beyond advocacy within the fraying remains of the welfare state and support for private charities (important though these will be) but in addition should seek alternative forms of community-based economy that are more sustainable in times of crisis. Community-economic-development workers have been working for decades with local currency schemes such as LETS, cooperatives (both consumer and producer), skill-sharing, and so on (Ife, 2016). These will be important initiatives for social workers in the coming decades.

## **Food Security**

Closely related to financial security is food security. Given the disruption to agriculture caused by global warming and economic instability, food security will become an increasingly important issue in the Global North as well as the Global South. For this reason, lessons from the Global South, which has been dealing with food insecurity for decades, if not centuries, become important for social workers in the Global North as well. There are two important ways to increase food security in these difficult times. One is by supporting more sustainable agriculture, moving away from the large-scale agricultural practices that support monoculture and the continued degradation of the land. There are alternative agricultural practices that can be introduced (Massy, 2017), and some social workers may be in positions where they can advocate for these at community level. The other important initiative is to localize food production, and to use the resources of local communities. The community gardens movement is particularly significant in this regard, and has become an important aspect of many communities (Nettle 2014). Using small areas of otherwise unused land in urban and suburban spaces, for the production



of vegetables, cereals and fruit, has great potential to help relieve food insecurity. Vertical gardens are another option in urban areas. Social workers, working at community level, are in a good position to help communities explore such alternatives.

## **Housing**

Housing is a major social issue in both the Global North and the Global South. Homelessness has become significant and obvious, even in the wealthiest of nations, and this is compounded by issues of housing affordability, as high rents and high real estate prices drive many people into poverty. Housing will undoubtedly continue to be a major issue, as long as property ownership and speculation remain key aspects of wealth “creation” (for many, “theft” would be a preferred term). Social workers will be required to deal with housing issues, which will be exacerbated if there is to be economic downturn and high levels of unemployment or underemployment. As governments become increasingly unwilling and unable to address housing, social workers will need to look at community-based alternatives. Forms of social housing, housing cooperatives, sharing of resources and appliances, the “tiny house” movement, and other such initiatives will be important for social workers in this space.

## **Disaster Recovery**

Climate change has already led to an increase in the scale of “natural” disasters such as drought, fires, floods and cyclones/hurricanes/typhoons. As this increase is the result of human activity, it is now incorrect to label such disasters as “natural” or as “acts of God”. The frequency and scale of disasters seems likely to increase in the coming decades. Disaster recovery is an area where social workers have developed significant expertise, which will be called on in the future, and social work also has important contributions to make at policy level as well as at local level. A community-level approach to disaster recovery is particularly important; strong communities respond better to disasters, and the capacity of communities to “pull together” at times of crisis is a particular strength that community-based social workers can utilize. Social workers have worked with crisis intervention for decades, but this expertise needs to be applied not only to individuals and families, but to communities, and indeed to the larger society.

## **Indigenization and Decolonization**

Many commentators have argued that if we are to find our way out of the crises we face, we need to respect and learn from Indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions. This applies to agriculture, food, education, stewardship of the natural world, community, family and spirituality. First Nations People, whatever their geographical location, understand sustainability and have a worldview that is about living as part of, and interdependent with, “nature”, rather than separate from “nature” in a relationship of exploitation (Sveiby & Skuthorpe, 2006; Yunkaporta, 2019). Social workers have long expressed their support for First Nations People, and for indigenization and decolonization, this has been from a perspective of social justice and human rights, recognizing the violence and oppression suffered by First Nations People, including the assault on their cultures, languages and knowledge systems. To this must now be added a further argument, namely one of survival. It is not simply support for First Nations People as a matter of social justice (critically important though this is), but also because First Nations knowledges, worldviews and ways of living are critical for the very survival of the human species on

the Earth. This poses an important challenge for social workers. Not only do they need to understand the oppression and continuing disadvantage of First Nations People, but they also need to decolonize their predominantly white, western social work knowledge, and allow Indigenous knowledges to inform their practice (Tascón & Ife, 2020). The decolonization of the social work curriculum, of accreditation standards, of social work texts, of social work journals and of social work conferences thus becomes a major focus for change. Social work, if it is able to make this paradigm shift effectively, will be in a position to contribute to changes in other fields and professions to facilitate a more appropriate adaptive response to the turbulent context of the coming decades.

## **Art, Poetry and Stories**

In times of crisis, people will often turn to the poets, artists and writers for inspiration and for alternative stories, as the “reality” of the “rational”, “practical” world fails them. It is as if poets, writers and artists can provide a different level of knowledge, understanding and hope. In 1802 William Wordsworth, in despair at the state of England at the time, called on a poet from an earlier era:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:  
England hath need of thee: she is a fen  
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,  
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,  
Have forfeited their ancient English dower  
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;  
O raise us up, return to us again,  
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power!  
(Wordsworth, *London 1802*)

This sentiment will surely resonate with many in Brexit England of the present day. On the election of President Trump in 2016, US blogger and filmmaker Macky Alston wrote:

*It is the time for poets and prophets and speaking our love for one another publicly, personally, politically, regularly, gratuitously, dangerously—to our neighbors, our workers, our estranged friends, our family members, the ones who voted with us and the ones who voted against us, who perhaps are just as terrified as we are and that's how we've arrived at this moment. (Alston, Macky 2016 All I Have is a Voice)<sup>1</sup>*

British environmental activist Paul Kingsnorth, on concluding that conventional environmental activism was too little too late, and that a new dystopian future awaits us all, established *Dark Mountain* (<https://dark-mountain.net/>), a collective of artists and writers, to tell their stories at these times of change. What he thought would be a small group turned into a worldwide movement, as many people turned to alternative poetry, art and stories of humanity.

In non-Western cultures, and especially in societies experiencing conflict and turbulence, poets are prominent and their work valued, more than is the case in the West. Chileans turned to the poetry of Pablo Neruda in their time of crisis, and Arabic poetry, with its wonderful blend of the natural, the sensual and the political, remains central in Arabic culture.

Social work can look to poetry, art, music, novels, theatre, films and stories as alternative forms of both knowledge and practice. They represent knowledge, as they are all ways of telling stories about the world that appeal to the imagination and to the emotions, rather than just Western rationality. And they represent practice, as people can be encouraged to participate in art, music, drama, story-telling and other forms of creative expression as part of their seeking to live well in these difficult times. This again is best instituted at community level, through programs of community arts and community cultural development, so that it becomes a collective experience rather than an individual one, and community solidarity can be both enhanced and also drawn on for support.

## **Community**

The over-riding theme of the above discussion has been the central importance of community. If there is to be a future for social work, it is most likely to lie in its capacity to work with communities to achieve the social work values of human rights and social justice, at a time when genuine sustainability must also be added to social work's value base. This is in line with most commentators on the multiple global crises facing humanity, given the inability of most governments to respond appropriately and effectively. The future survival of human "civilization" will be dependent on strong, sustainable communities, concerned not just with solving social problems (as so much community work tries to achieve today) but also integrating this with the need for environmental sustainability, interdependence with the "natural world", strong local economies, food security, adequate housing, and the incorporation of First Nations knowledges and world views. Social work knowledge, theory and practice will need to reflect this if it is to remain relevant in a future world.

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## **ENDNOTE**

<sup>1</sup> . <https://mackyalston.com/category/huffingtonpost/>

# Chapter 14

## Looking Back to Keep Moving . . . And It May Not Be “Forward”

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### ABSTRACT

*In this concluding chapter, the author looks back over the content of the 13 preceding chapters of the volume and reflects on the process of assembling them. Rather than offer an interpretative summary that would dilute their contextual specificity, the various “recontextualization stories” should be read on their own. Instead, five global “predicaments” with which all social work practice accounts in the volume directly, indirectly, and intersectionally are addressed: the pandemic, the crises in global capitalism, racism and other “embodied” social antagonisms, war and conflict, and the ecology. A second section briefly speculates about the consequences of the convergence of the several predicaments whilst the final section offers thoughts about the need to evolve a “relational” approach to professional social work, proposing that the real meaning of the “social” that refers to the authors’ “work” entails their professional attempts across all their intervention modes to restore people’s relational capabilities.*

### INTRODUCTION

The process of assembling, writing, reviewing and editing this collection of international accounts of “re-contextualizing social work” has itself been affected by global contextual events and occurrences. There is the massive global health crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic—deeply affecting countries across the “developing-developed” spectrum. There are the resonances of events expressing and illustrating the racial and gender inequalities and violence(s) and leading to globally rippling responses and resistances. There are the lingering and worsening crises associated with the contradictions generated by the political-economy of capitalism. There are the much publicized and not-so-well-known instances of war and conflict. And—especially—there’s the steadily deteriorating global ecology and its locally specific instances caused by humans’ exponentially destructive ways-of-living now referred to as the “Anthropocene”.

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A rather disheartening list, but as Donna Haraway (2016) admonishes us, we need to “stay with the trouble(s)”. We, to a large degree, have been responsible for creating and cannot stop making it worse, or so it seems. Most of the contributions to this volume address at least one, but often several, of the list of overlapping predicaments mentioned. And the projects and initiatives they refer to, are all trying “to do” something about these “troubles” in their attempts at creating a better world, from the individual and local, to the collective (including nature) and the global.

It would be quite impossible—and not very useful—to *summarize* the findings and lessons to be drawn from the accounts offered by our colleagues in the preceding chapters. As the contextual detail and practical specificity of their experiences would get lost without adequate further elaboration and that would probably require a few further volumes. Also, the introductory chapter offered some pertinent references to several converging points of view in the global discourses affecting social work, its understandings and transformations, as well as referring to epistemological and social scientific connections, examples and instances. The authors of the chapters have equally emphasized the more specific discourses relevant and central to their praxis and to the stories revealed in their respective chapters.

Hence, rather than summarizing, this final chapter shares the insights we, as editors, have gained from reading and reflecting about the diversity of their and our own recontextualized insights. We conclude this volume offering three reflective steps. Firstly, a suggestive, but very brief elaboration of the five contextual and global “predicaments” suggested earlier. Secondly, some general thoughts about what they together may mean for the praxis of social work as a profession. And thirdly, ending with some thoughts about paradigmatic changes to social work(ers’) values, our relational modalities (often referred to as “interventions”) and a call for a commitment to accountability and personal/professional responsibility that moves beyond the “cases” “assigned” to us by our respective “operating systems”.

## **THE CONTEXTUAL AREAS OR “PREDICAMENTS”**

### **The Pandemic**

Where better to go to than the World Health Organization’s (WHO) (2020) *Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response* and their Second Progress Report (2021) about the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for people.

*The direct health impact, seen in the number of people infected and deaths caused, has been magnified by substantial indirect impacts on essential health and other services and on people’s livelihoods and well-being. Across the planet, people have died, families have been left bereft, and societies and economies reshaped.*

*Stark inequalities have been laid bare within and between countries. Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals has been halted and even reversed. The worst of the pandemic and its impact are yet to come as we write at the beginning of January 2021. Despite the myriad shining examples on every continent of human ingenuity in response to the virus, we have failed in our collective capacity to come together in solidarity to create a protective web of human security. (WHO, 2021, p. 4)*

## ***Looking Back to Keep Moving . . . And It May Not Be “Forward”***

A darker and more explicit, but also very honest, assessment would be hard to imagine. We have seen and experienced our health systems being overwhelmed. We have seen politics, of various kinds, interfering with good preventative and curative practice. We have seen populism and “anti-vax” movements getting in the way of creating collective and whole-of-population prevention, or even reduction of the harms of the infection. Interestingly, the national responses to the now more than yearlong pandemic, have also shown strengths and weaknesses in societies along the above intimated “developing-developed” continuum; but also, quite interesting and unexpected results.

Indeed, as the report points out, inequalities both within and between nations have worsened. The global pandemic alert system is not fit for purpose. There has been a failure to take seriously the already known existential risks posed by pandemic threat and the WHO has been underpowered to do the job expected of it.

As there was already evidence of COVID-19 cases in a number of countries at the end of January 2020, containment measures should have been implemented immediately in any country with a likely case: and they were not. Safeguarding the health of people, societies and environments and their ability to cope transcends the health sector, requiring whole-of-government and whole-of-society responses. Where high-level coordination and community engagement have occurred and been supported, they became key determinants of success in responding and containing the spread of the virus.

It has become abundantly clear that localized and community-engaged and engaging preventative health systems are vital at every step of pandemic preparedness and response. From early detection and alarm to dissemination of reliable information throughout a community, including effective ways to prevent, care for and treat infection. The undermining, defunding and outright destruction of health promotion programs and community development in many developed societies—including Australia—in the slipstream of the imposition of neo-liberalism (privatization, focus on curative medical model, outsourcing and individualization, to name a few) has created havoc and lacunae in community preparedness. As the WHO panel concludes: “In most societies, disadvantage has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with deepening inequalities in health access and infections disproportionately affecting those in more precarious or informal employment” (2021, p. 25).

Given social and community workers’ traditional roles in preventative health work, dealing with pandemics clearly should remain (or become) part of our sets of capabilities and play a more prominent role on our curricula.

## **The Political-Economy of Late-Capitalism**

We finally seemed to have reached a point in time when one can criticize capitalism without being pigeonholed as a “communist” and that “that hasn’t worked” and that “capitalism is not perfect, but the best there is” . . . and then not be listened to anymore. Indeed, the systemic failures, the effect on our ecology of the engrained belief in the need and possibility of eternal “growth”, the blatant injustices, inequalities and systemic contradictions, and the costs thereof on increasing numbers and groups of people, are becoming ever more blatantly obvious. Those who continue to rake in enormous fortunes that have grown exponentially during the last 30 to 40 years continue to exercise their immense power over our political and economic systems from the local to the global, from the personal to the collective. Lately, they are increasingly supported by governments and technology (social media, especially) who have combined to become more populist, often with the willing support of police and army (Zuboff, 2019; Boulet, 2021).



To better understand the historical and contemporary background to, and possible ways out of, this predicament, Piketty’s enormously important *Capital and Ideology* (2020) documents, over more than 1000 pages, how “every human society [needs to] justify its inequalities” lest their entire political and social edifice would collapse. He illustrates the contradictory ideologies political systems need to develop and sustain (including present-day neo-liberal capitalism) to legitimize existing inequalities and consolidate these with economic, social, political and ideological rules and normative constructions, in order to make sense of them for the populace. The dominant narratives emerging from these ideological systems are to maintain and strengthen the existing inequality regimes. And as we know, welfare, social and community services and their associated professions play an ancillary role in this. Developed nations, that initially evolved the capitalist version of inequality, were eager to export their systems and their rationales globally, folding them into their colonial invasions and regimes and (since the 1950s) into a globalized “development and progress” paradigm.

The late anthropologist David Graeber’s *Debt: the first 5000 years* (2011) retraces another historical moment of this ideological and practical subjection. The language of ancient and present-day works of law and religion (using words like *guilt*, *sin* and *redemption*) derives from ancient debates about debt and indebtedness. They still shape our most basic ideas of right and wrong, of “justice” in relationships, from the reciprocities between individuals to the “mutual obligation” maxim we subject welfare recipients to. Indeed, his work assists in understanding the moral reasoning often sustained in our social legislations and programs as well as in our interventions in people’s daily lives.

Daniel Schmachtenberger (2017) hopes that the untenability of capitalism into the future paves the way to consider fundamentally new types of system design, never before possible because they require technology that is just now emerging. He poses several important questions that should be asked and responded to when judging the “fitness” of our system and pre-figuring the next one:

Is it possible to have a world

1. With lasting global peace and a for-profit military industrial complex together?
2. That optimizes human health and well-being, and has a for-profit health care industry that makes money managing illness?
3. That restores and protects a thriving natural world and biosphere and maintains having no balance sheet for the commons, so externalizing costs and maximizing extraction are incentivized?
4. That is fair, just and free, and maintains private ownership with inheritance, where capital increases access to more capital (inexorably widening the wealth gap) and access to education, healthcare and financial services?
5. That protects and increases the evolutionary complexity of ecology, biology and psychology, and measures value in radically simplified, abstracted economic metrics?
6. That avoids extinction and continues to incentivize developing exponentially increasing technological power to affect the world without developing commensurately better choice making processes for how to use that power?

Beginning answers to several of those questions are being tentatively experimented with. The one offered by Kate Raworth (2017) is directly relevant for an enlarged understanding of the role and place social and welfare work should/could play. Raworth dubbed it the *Doughnut Economy* (<https://doughnuteconomics.org/>), a visual representation for sustainable planetary and human evolution—shaped like a doughnut or lifebelt—and combining nine *ecological* planetary boundaries that must not be

## **Looking Back to Keep Moving . . . And It May Not Be “Forward”**

“overshot” with the twelve *social* boundaries or limits below which humanity and societies should not allow themselves (and especially their vulnerable groups) to fall. The doughnut shape, left in-between its outside and inside circles, is the “sweet spot” where everyone on the planet has a good and adequate social foundation, and the Earth’s resources are not being overexploited. And that “sweet spot” is there to keep the balance within the two boundaries.

Parenthetically, striking this balance as the world begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and strives to find new ways to sustain its livability, should become a permanent focus of social and community work and the professions and systems they are part of. Indeed, the “Doughnut” could be considered the optimal “space” for an ecologically enlarged and informed progressive social praxis, aware of its socio-ecological contextual boundaries and hence, its professional purpose.

## **War and Conflict**

In early January 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General observed that geopolitical tensions were at their highest level this century (<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-01-06/secretary-generals-statement-the-press>). And whilst international weapons sales and transfers overall have been slightly levelling off during the last five years, they remain close to the highest level since the (so-called) end of the (so-called) cold war. To their lasting shame, the flagging economies of several of the main western “democracies” led them to shift back to the weapons trade; as Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) comments:

*Substantial increases in transfers by three of the top five arms exporters—the USA, France and Germany—were largely offset by declining Russian and Chinese arms exports. Middle Eastern arms imports grew by 25% in the period, driven chiefly by Saudi Arabia (+61%), Egypt (+136%) and Qatar (+361%)... The USA supplied major arms to 96 states in 2016–20, far more than any other supplier... France increased its exports of major arms by 44% and accounted for 8.2% of global arms exports... Germany increased its exports of major arms by 21% and accounted for 5.5% of the global total... Russia and China both saw their arms exports falling... China, the world’s fifth largest arms exporter decreased by 7.8% (<https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/international-arms-transfers-level-after-years-sharp-growth-middle-eastern-arms-imports-grow-most>).*

Given that the bellicose language from western powers against China—including by Australia—has gradually reached a crescendo and is therefore responded to in kind by China, the fears about the arrival of a new war (cold or warm) gradually intensify. Indeed, it would not be the first time that “democratic” nations, and especially their governments, invoke international “tensions and dangers” to deflect attention from the problems occurring in their own societies and to generate power (and income!) for those who benefit from arms production and transfers. It also shows an enormous lack of historical awareness on the part of Western countries about their centuries’ long imperial and colonial oppression and exploitation of much of the rest of the world, including China. And then interpreting and labelling China’s efforts at widening its influence globally as “aggressive” and needing to be “contained” seems to be rather hypocritical and willfully ignorant.

Altogether, for many of us peace activists fighting against historical cold and other wars, it feels very much like *déjà vu* and reminiscent of decades past (Boulet, 1992), and hence reminding colleagues and other welfare workers that war is not healthy and certainly not beneficial for the majority of humans, let alone the Earth.

## **Racism and White Entitlement; And the Many Other “Exclusions” Our Societies Suffer From**

The nine minutes a white police officer in Minneapolis held his knee on a black man’s neck on the 27th of June, “ignited a wave of national and then global protest, a wave that is leading to changes in symbols of racism – from flags to statues – in stances of corporations, in hopes of real police reform, and of overdue reparations to Black Americans” (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/10/from-the-george-floyd-moment-to-a-black-lives-matter-movement-in-tweets/>) and then rippling into many countries globally, with reverberations in Australia as well (<https://adi.deakin.edu.au/news/the-black-lives-matter-movement-in-the-australian-context>). The “Black Lives Matter” protest outpourings then generated diverse expressions, specifications and resistances, from the many varieties of non-white colors and body and facial shapes to the denialist “All Lives Matter” and “white supremacy” resistances. As an earlier incident in the US exemplified

*The graphic convergence of anti-Black and anti-indigenous violence in the name of self-defense emerges with unmistakable clarity in the recent “stand your ground” meme featuring sixteen year-old Nick Sandmann wearing his “Make America Great Again” baseball hat. The red, white, and blue meme appeared on white nationalist and rightwing social media in the wake of the viral online video of the mostly white Covington Catholic School students from Kentucky wearing MAGA hats and taunting Nathan Phillips, an elder of the Omaha Tribe, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC on January 18, 2019. The students had traveled to DC as part of their school’s delegation to a rally against women’s reproductive rights. Phillips and those drumming with him were participating in the Indigenous Peoples’ March. In the video, surrounded by his laughing schoolmates, Sandmann stands face-to-face with Phillips, blocking his path. Another video highlighted by Diné/Ihanktonwan journalist Jacqueline Keeler shows a Catholic high school student just prior to the Sandmann-Phillips clash, who declares: “Land gets stolen, that’s how it works”. (<http://www.publicseminar.org/2019/04/stolen-land-standing-ground-and-the-viral-spectacle-of-white-entitlement/>).*

These two emblematic events illustrate the confusing landscape of identity politics, entitlements and claims, “woke” and “cancelling” (<https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-awokeness-history-origin-evolution-controversy>) movements and discourses, libel and defamations suits by those who have been “outed” as racists/sexists/ableists/ageists/ “heteros” or accused of harmful acts (usually prefaced by the word “alleged”) against the victims of these acts. And all of these movements and the “situated contexts” in which they occur are busily intersecting and adding to the confusion and not always contributing to real inclusion, equality and participation across all the areas of discrimination, violence and harm.

Addressing the lasting effects of the many forms of “coloniality” and the often-implicit paradigms associated with “whiteness” and “normality”, and their impositions, will require social and community workers’ profound, engaged and ongoing attention. This is not an easy task given the control exercised by institutions and other processes of governance in our societies, and given how much expressions of coloniality have entered into our language and our ways of daily relating. Still, potent voices have meanwhile emerged to assist with this, and several contributions to this volume have included such references (Mignolo, 2011; Kimmerer, 2013; Santos, 2014).

## Ecology

I have already referred several times to the destructive threats to our very livelihoods and indeed, to the livelihoods of numerous other species affected by the ways “modern” humans have come to live their “normal” lives. This destruction leads to the name given to the epoch we inhabit, the “Anthropocene”, quasi-indicting “us” as perpetrators of the damage.

Just briefly, and linking “ecology” with other predicaments discussed in this final chapter (especially the pandemic), recently, the United Nations Environment Program and the International Livestock Research Institute have identified seven human-mediated factors driving the emergence of zoonotic diseases (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/mar/20/our-biggest-challenge-lack-of-imagination-the-scientists-turning-the-desert-green>). They include: increasing human demand for animal protein; unsustainable agricultural intensification; increased use and exploitation of wildlife and its illegal trafficking; unsustainable utilization of natural resources accelerated by urbanization, land use change and extractive industries; increased travel and transportation; changes in food supply; and climate change. Addressing these risk factors requires “one health” approaches, which combine human, animal and environmental health considerations.

Again, several chapters in this volume have extensively documented and referred to this context. My own contributions to its relevance for an amplified understanding of social and community work have been published elsewhere (Boulet, 2021). I refer in that text to the great convergence of work bridging the bio/natural-, neuro- and social sciences, quantum philosophy and eons-old Indigenous knowing (especially the North-American Indigenous voice of Kimmerer (2013) and a growing number of Indigenous voices in Australia), that offers an emerging foundation for the restoration our human capabilities to relate with, and within our communities, including the multispecies communities we are part of. And re-generate what we thoughtlessly have destroyed during the centuries of “modernity” and indeed, up to this day.

## **WHAT MAY THE CONFLUENCE OF THE FIVE GLOBAL PREDICAMENTS ENTAIL FOR “RECONTEXTUALIZING” SOCIAL WORK?**

I will have to be brief. Indeed, authors of all chapters in this volume have included their responses to the more specific predicaments they faced, and dealt with, and their suggestions cannot possibly be summarized, as mentioned at the start of this final chapter. Time-boundedness and local reality require a praxis that is appropriate to the place and the moment, in which our interactions with those entrusted to us live and often suffer. That is especially so, if we attempt to become more cognizant of the global predicaments and their overlapping and interpenetrating effects on the people we (mostly paid to) care for and try to assist in their struggles for a dignified livelihood beyond mere survival. Indeed, as social and community workers, we need to act, in the full awareness that every *turning point* we try to engage in is both a *moment* and a *site*, a *place*. A *turning point* is a good *moment* to stay still for a while and think, but it is a tragic *site* or *place* to just stand and wait till things happen. So we must act and engage in change work because of our relational responsibility, even if devoid of hope and certainty.

The importance of *context-specificity*, and of acting in that specificity, calls for a synthesis between micro, meso and macro-approaches because every transitional instance is unique in terms of context and participants, requiring a specific contextual and participatory approach. The reference to “best practice” is patently illusory if not dangerous and is certainly part and parcel of corporate and other institutional

processes of control and homogenization. Standard recipes cannot possibly be adequate for transition processes. Local practice and commensurate knowledge are *always* contextual and cannot be easily implemented in large—let alone global—schemes as they resist standardization and are more adequately based on local knowledge of local communities. The constitutive roles of service users and grassroots initiatives should be re-acknowledged and re-appreciated after about 40 years of being undermined and eroded by the policies, politics and institutional processes imposed by neo-liberalism.

As editors of this volume, we argue for the importance of community, of the everyday life-activities of service users and communities in sustainability and other social transitions as evoked by our contributors. Sometimes, the *multiplicity of little pictures* and of *local stories* about social practices (eating, traveling, dressing, bathing, working, relaxing and so on) arise in everyday life out of habitual and semi-habitual activities. From an ecologically and critical theory-enlarged social and community work perspective, since many such social practices represent common but unsustainable everyday life routines, “turning point” interventions should focus on changing parts of those practices and their *entanglements* in the overall “reproduction” of our lives on Earth, as Barad (2007) and many working in the emerging “post-human” approach suggest (see chapter 1).

Hence, the above list and my brief discussion of our global predicaments and the social structures and processes mostly operating “behind and beyond our backs” should not be understood as “merely external forces.” The fact that they seem so remote, inaccessible and overpowering does *not* make it superfluous to change the minutiae and detail of our personal, relational and collective daily lives. We believe that contextualized but localized interpersonal, relational and community “interventions”, will have greater and more lasting positive effects than the call for, and reliance on, the socio-political systems and powers and those who benefit from them, to create needed change.

Of course, some support and less undermining on the part of the latter would help.

## **TOWARDS A RELATIONAL PARADIGM IN SOCIAL WORK**

In “Towards a relational paradigm in sustainability research, practice, and education”, Walsh et al. (2021) contend that

*...various authors have recently argued that a lack of relationality is at the core of many of our current crises and describe what may be considered an emerging paradigm informed by relational thinking using different terms and concepts, such as the ecological paradigm, systems approach, integral theory, meta-modernism and constructive postmodernism. As relationality has become a buzz word with many meanings, however, it is unclear whether different relational thinkers share linked assumptions that constitute an emerging paradigm and to what degree they relate to sustainability.*

I (Boulet, 2018b, p. 135) “rang out” one of my own attempts at more profoundly understanding the nature of the social research relationship (and by implication of all social practices) as a practice of “relationality” with the following call:

*... when circumscribing the ontological-epistemological foundation and purpose of ecologically-informed and relationally saturated social research praxis, could we agree on the following: ‘how can we come*

## Looking Back to Keep Moving . . . And It May Not Be “Forward”

*to better understand how the ‘world’ (Gaia) expects us, humans, to live with ‘it’ (‘her’) and how can we – as humans – intra- and inter- relationally adapt reciprocally with that expectation...?’*

A bit convoluted, but together with the preceding quotation, it succinctly states the onto-epistemological and ethical point of this final chapter and of the entire edited volume. In terms of our professional accountability, when asked for “evidence” of anything we would have changed for the better in our work, we often must remain silent with humility, but heartened by Detges’ (2017) suggestion that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”. Humbly, we probably have made positive differences in the daily lives and feelings of those who have found solace and purpose in the relationship we tried to cultivate with them, and in the reflective learning processes we attempted to engage in in our varied and locally situated and contextualized practices. Having lived and worked and compromised through 40 years of neo-liberal abominations of what the “good life” is meant to mean, we also know that good work rarely starts with “going for funding” and pursuing “Key Performance Indicators,” but rather with the relational energy generated in the in-between places between humans and between humans and the non-human.

Based on the stories shared in this book, all of us have had the privilege of moving into a deeper/ broader understanding of our human entanglement through a much larger story than the one we grew up with. A story, which has re-emplaced us with the responsibility of helping to maintain *larger-than-human commons* and for which, our ability-to-respond is feeble and still hesitating. Many of our stories illustrate that we slowly are learning to move away from the ancient Greeks’ *gnothi seauton* (*know thyself*) most of us appropriated variously as the Western ideal of humanness and that we learned to shift toward Donna Haraway’s (2016, p. 125) *sympoesis* mode of relating, which she so forcefully describes.

*Finally, and not a moment too soon, sympoesis enlarges and displaces autopoiesis and all other self-forming and self-sustaining system fantasies. Sympoesis is a carrier bag for ongoingness, a yoke for becoming-with, for staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements of colonial and postcolonial naturalcultural histories in telling the tale of still possible recuperations.*

We would claim this to be programmatic for “work” that refers to itself as “social” and, by extension, as ecologically responsive and responsible social and community work, indeed, as *relationally engaged* work at all times, irrespective of the “intervention modality” (i.e. case, group, community or policy work) we employ. It also requires us to become more aware of the pitfalls of an uncritical use of the ‘person-centered’ ideal of too much social work (Gergen, 2009; Verhaeghe, 2014).

I have detailed four axiological characteristics of the relational gifts we can offer to those we encounter in our work across all “situated contexts” in which we employ our relational capabilities (Boulet, 2018b).

- **Time/duration** – social/ecological informed relating needs time, needs to last and endure.
- **Shared place/space** – social/ecological informed relating needs to occur in shared places. Indigenous peoples still are at pains to let their invaders and colonizers understand this.
- **Reciprocity** – to care and being taken care of... the gift relationship at the core of our existence where gift-giving is impossible without the gift of the receiver ... belonging is being missed when not there... social workers thanking ‘clients’ for accepting the gifts of care they offer.
- **Sacrifice** – relating as contributing to the social body so that our individual-selves can also ‘be’ in all their necessary diversity: the recovery of our ‘social selves. (p. ?)

This is the place where recontextualized social and community work needs to be; with Donella Meadows (1994), we can envision what we really want, and learn how to bring that vision “lovingly into being” in a world of systems that requires “our full humanity—our rationality, our ability to sort out truth from falsehood, our intuition, our compassion, our vision, and our morality”. And with Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 217-21), we should strive to enlarge our generic definition of care to include:

*... “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’” – our bodies, ourselves, and our environment – “so that we can live in it as well as possible in a complex, life sustaining web.” I have tried to gently decenter the “we” and the “our” that put human agency as the starting point of care, prolonging relational ontologies’ ongoing problematization of any claims to a center. ... There must be other ways to get involved in fostering the ethopoietical liveliness of the more-than-human agencies that support, currently mostly coercively, that we get the care we need.*

I have left to the last my usual attempt to share an understanding of where the concepts and words we use “come from” etymologically, if only to marvel at how their original meanings have changed and often have almost transformed into the opposite of what they originally were meant to convey. And so it is with “context” and its derivative of ‘recontextualizing’.

Etymonline (<https://www.etymonline.com/>) suggests: **contextus** “a joining together”, originally the past participle of the verb **contexere** “to weave together”; the assimilated form of **com** “with, together” (see con-) + **texere** “to weave, to make”, to “fabricate”; “textile” another obvious derivative of that verb.

*So, there you have it dear reader: ‘recontextualizing social work’ thus becomes **reweaving social work**. And can you imagine what would happen in our educational institutions... our students engaged in project studies and being offered the possibility and opportunity of **reweaving social work**, so that we all may learn again to relate with, and care for, a precious world? (Boulet, 2018a; <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/lsn/educator/edtech/learningtheorieswebsite/vygotsky.htm>).*

Hence, looping back to the title of this concluding chapter: “*Looking Back to Keep Moving... and it may not be “forward”*” but side- and even backwards... and by creating “situated contexts” where relational care and all forms of lovingly “sustaining” can actually happen, and be experimented with.

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## About the Contributors

**Jacques Boulet** has studied, worked, and lived in five continents. Originally from Flemish Belgium, studies social work, graduating in 1965; after 3 years volunteering in Community Development in Congo, lectured in social work and community development in Germany throughout the 70s, especially active in social work curriculum development. Obtained PhDs (Sociology and Social Work) from the University of Michigan (80-85) and lectured from 1985 to 1996 at Melbourne and RMIT Universities in Australia. Started the Borderlands Cooperative in 1997 and is involved in consulting work in a broad range of research projects in social and community issues and continues to be a casual lecturer/researcher at several local and overseas universities and Adjunct Professor at Deakin University. Editor of the only Community Development journal in Australia (New Community) appearing with interruptions since 1983, he has published widely and across the entire spectrum of social work content, some of his works translated in several other languages.

**Linette Hawkins'** experience as a practitioner, planner, project worker and educator has spanned social work, welfare studies and community and international development. Her employers have included state and commonwealth governments, universities and non-government organisations. The participatory action research approach has guided her research with others in areas such as, the labour market and education for professional expertise in community and human services and innovative field education models. Organisations in which she is involved include Action Research Issues Association (ARIA), Australian Association of Social Work (AASW), Borderlands Cooperative, International Association of Community Development (IACD) and New Community Quarterly Management Committee.

\* \* \*

**Linda Arkert** returned to study Social Work at a later stage of life and obtained her BSW degree from Unisa 2013. She became interested in environmental social work whilst she and her husband were involved in the anti-fracking and anti-uranium mining movements in the Karoo in South Africa. They decided to relocate to the Karoo, where she worked together with the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), who were opposing fracking and mining there. She registered for her Masters' degree, focusing on Environmental social work within the context of South Africa, and now consults to an NGO called The Green Connection. They are currently involved in a project named "Who stole our oceans?", which is opposing the mining of offshore oil and gas near Mossel Bay in the Western Cape of South Africa.

**Helen Goodman** has had a long career in Human Services, in both direct practice social work roles, and in research and evaluation projects across government, non-government and community sectors. Helen's PhD thesis explored reasons for a poor outcome of an evaluation effort within the public sector, examining the distorted account provided of the project under review, the diminution and hence harm to work relationships, and negative impacts on work tasks. Following her PhD, she worked at the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) as a researcher based at RMIT in the evaluation of community safety programs in Victoria and South Australia. She took up a direct service role after the 2009 Victorian fires, and has remained linked to this field of disaster preparedness and response. In more recent years, she has focused more strongly on how institutions struggle to work mindfully with communities in general, and how this is amplified in a disaster scenario.

**Olga Gountras** commenced her social work career in 1987 and has a BA, BSW, and MSW from the University of Melbourne, Australia. Olga worked in acute and rehabilitation hospital settings in Melbourne for 21 years. As National Manager of Social Work Services at Slater and Gordon Lawyers, Olga established the first, and currently only, social work service in an Australian law firm in 2009. Her clinical work focusses on addressing the long term emotional and social impact of serious injury and illness in the compensation context. In conjunction with leading the Social Work team, Olga coordinates the highly regarded Slater and Gordon Legal Education Program for Social Workers in Victoria and Western Australia and oversees the team's national publication 'Social Work and the Law'. As a small and unique service, it was important to Olga to maintain connections with her profession and she has done this through active membership in a number of forums. These currently include: the Australian Association of Social Workers; Oncology Social Work Australia New Zealand; the Traumatic Injuries Social Work Special Interest Group; and the Specialist Support Professionals in Legal Settings Special Interest Group.

**Grant Holland** is fortunate to be the grandson of the late Sir George and Lady May Holland. Sir George was an ANZAC WW1 first lander and the Victorian RSL State President from 1929 to 1950, and National President from 1950 to 1960. This philanthropic and leadership legacy led Grant to become the founder of the Holland Foundation charity ([www.hf.org.au](http://www.hf.org.au)) which honors his grandparent's memory through the Foundation's innovative programs and services to the disadvantaged. The Holland Foundation's core program is their highly successful "real world" employment-training program, which has helped over 600 disadvantaged people gain employment in the last 8 years. Grant is a proud social worker and clinical family therapist, who has a Master of Social Science (Research), and qualifications and accreditations in youth work and childcare, mediation, workplace assessment and training, negotiation and global diplomacy.

**Issie Jacobs** obtained a BSocSc (Social Work) degree in 1985 at the University of the Free State in South Africa and in 2003 an MSD in Play Therapy at the University of Pretoria. In 2019 she obtained a PhD in Social Work from the North-West University where she is employed as a senior lecturer and mainly responsible for postgraduate research of social work students. Her research focus area is the wellbeing of family relationships (especially the reciprocal responsibility for the wellbeing of the parent-adolescent relationship) and recently also ecological social work and sustainable development. She has presented papers at different conferences and published articles in several academic journals.

## **About the Contributors**

**Anne Jennings** is a PhD Candidate through the Nulungu Research Institute and the School of Arts & Sciences, at The University of Notre Dame, Australia. Her PhD research explores, “Community Development for Ecological Conversion”, which seeks to move current theory and practice from a just the human perspective to embrace the non-human in social and ecological change. Anne holds a Bachelor of Social Sciences in Human Services and a Master of Arts degree in Ecologically Sustainable Development. She has 30 years’ experience in Community Development as a Practitioner, Lecturer and Researcher, based in regional and remote areas of Western Australia. This includes working in Local, State and Commonwealth Government, in the Not-for-Profit Community Services Sector and as an independent Consultant. In addition, Anne is a Country Correspondent for the International Association for Community Development, based in Scotland, and is on the National Board of the Australian Association for Community Work.

**Silvana Martínez** was born in Buenos Aires in 1974. She has a PhD in Social Sciences from the National University of Entre Rios, Argentina. She also holds a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in Social Work. She is a Research Professor at the National University of Mar del Plata, Argentina, where she also is Director of the Doctorate in Social Work. She was President of the Argentine Federation of Social Service Professional Associations for two consecutive terms and President of the Latin American and Caribbean Region of the International Federation of Social Workers. She is currently the Global President of the International Federation of Social Workers. She received an Honorary Doctorate from the Universidad Dr. Andrés Bello in El Salvador. Her research interests focus on issues of gender, feminism, decolonial thought, social theory, politics, power and social violence.

**Liz Orr** is a member of the Australian Association of Social Workers National Research Committee and is a committed Indigenous ally. Liz has worked alongside diverse community-based projects to improve prevention strategies and service responses for women and children affected by all forms of violence, inequality and exclusion (e.g., racism, poverty). She is a recipient of a Lowitja Institute PhD scholarship for her thesis *Stories of Good Practice from Aboriginal Hospital Liaison Officers and Social Workers in Hospitals in Victoria*, which was awarded the Nancy Millis medal at La Trobe University in 2018.

**Kate Saxton** was born on Wadawarrung (also Wathaurong, Wathaurung) Country to a Dutch mother and American father of Irish and Navaho ancestry. She has previously lived in Fiji and Tonga where she both taught and worked as a social work practitioner before returning to Australia to be closer to her family. Kate has a strong interest in decolonizing approaches to research and education and has worked extensively in community development and cross-cultural settings. Her PhD explored the role of Western educational and professional agendas usurping traditional models of social care within Fiji and she maintains a strong commitment to culturally responsive and decolonizing movements within social work. Kate is now based in Brisbane and works with local high schools and Pacific Island Communities to promote cultural safe learning and wellbeing opportunities for young people.

**Lesley Shuttleworth’s** primary interest is building healthy communities which embrace diversity. She draws on her learning and inspiration from growing up with amaZulu people and the small South African farming community in which she was raised. Her focus is on the development of processes which enable people to work towards the creation of communities which work towards building sustaining and



just ecologies. Lesley holds a Masters in Sustainability and Social Change and is interested in how we can develop a more integrated and holistic approach to all aspects of life.

**Janet Spink**, who assisted in editing this volume, originally qualified as a social worker in 1973 and a teacher in 1976. She worked for 34 years as a social worker in hospitals, child and adolescent mental health, community health, education, public health and in non-government organizations. Janet has training in family therapy, consumer participation, Cochrane training in systematic reviews and professional writing and editing (RMIT). She gained a Masters (1984) and PhD (2000) in social work at the University of Melbourne and focused on qualitative research through Health Issues Centre, and taught at the Royal Children's Hospital, Monash and Melbourne university. Janet now practices as a freelance editor and textile artist, enjoying the freedom of both word and image. When editing this book, she was familiar with many of the countries, practices and philosophies of the authors. She has been inspired by the progress social work has made in recontextualizing itself. She was a longtime member of AASW and is currently a member of the Institute of Professional Editors (IPED).

**Sharlotte Tusasiirwe** is a Ugandan-born, internationally educated social worker. After completing a bachelor's degree in Social Work in Uganda and a master's degree in Social Work and Human rights from University of Gothenburg, Sweden, Sharlotte pursued her PhD at Western Sydney University from 2016-2020. Sharlotte is very interested in researching Social Work Education and her PhD has been focused on how to decolonize social work education and practice to create a culturally appropriate and contextually relevant profession. She has researched how African knowledges and Ubuntu/Ubuntu philosophies can inform social work. She is interested in theorizing about how diverse epistemologies from our diverse cultures can be at the center of social work education and practice. She loves teaching and researching indigenous knowledges, ageing and age-old wisdom, community-led initiatives, community development and advocacy.

**Tim Walsh** lives near the Port of Adelaide on lands of the Kaurna People (where sovereignty was never ceded). He has raised two children there with his partner Zarinah. Tim was himself born and raised in Brisbane, on lands of Turrbal & Yaggera Peoples. He is one of five children of Anglo-Celtic heritage, with ancestors arriving in Queensland from 1850s. Tim has worked in areas of inner-city homelessness, in programs for First Nations Peoples, in community aged care and disability sectors, and in public hospital and correctional settings. Tim has been involved in environmental advocacy and education, particularly in areas of school and community gardens. He has sought to combine his environmental community work and social work roles; and helped to develop a Green Social Work Practice Group in South Australia. Tim remains involved in student education, as tutor and field educator with the University of South Australia.

# Index

## A

accident 111, 114-115, 120, 122-123, 234  
 action research 1-2, 16, 18-19, 29, 89, 100-102, 106, 109, 227  
 activism, 22  
 advocacy 18, 53, 71, 78, 94-95, 97-98, 100, 105, 111, 117, 121, 123, 157, 249  
 alienation 38-39, 41-42, 45-48, 53, 58, 63  
 Anthropocene 3, 7, 58, 60, 64, 241-242, 248, 252, 255, 261  
 Anthropocene, 241  
 anthropocentrism 31, 153, 241, 243

## B

Burungi Bw'ansi 183, 185, 187

## C

CAPITALIST POLITICAL ECONOMY 46, 255  
 Centres Against Sexual Assault 89  
 Civilisation Collapse 241  
 climate crisis 151, 161, 167  
 coercion 65, 67  
 collective power 1  
 colonization 41, 44-45, 163, 175-177, 188-189, 193-194, 210, 218-219, 222, 243  
 community 1-3, 5, 7-11, 16-20, 22, 25-34, 38-39, 46, 49-52, 57, 59-87, 89-105, 107-110, 112, 116-118, 121-122, 124-127, 130-131, 133, 136, 138, 140, 142-144, 148, 153-155, 157-160, 162, 165, 170-171, 178-190, 193, 196-200, 202, 206, 208-227, 229, 241, 246-250, 252-253, 257-265  
 community development 1-3, 9, 16-19, 22, 25-27, 29-30, 32-34, 51, 68, 71-72, 83-84, 91, 94, 131, 140, 142-144, 178-179, 182, 187, 189-190, 196, 209-217, 219-227, 246, 249, 253, 257, 265  
 community garden 50, 52

community work 10, 17-18, 33, 51-52, 71, 76, 89-92, 97, 99, 110, 180, 186-187, 208, 213, 221, 226, 246, 252, 259, 261-264  
 connectedness 8, 38, 58-59, 100, 105, 143  
 CONTEXTUAL PREDICAMENTS 255  
 cooperatives 24-26, 213, 234-235, 249-250  
 crisis 38, 48, 54, 58, 60, 62, 67, 83, 85-86, 93, 95-96, 98-99, 103, 114, 116-118, 122, 126, 134, 147, 149, 151-152, 160-163, 167-168, 201, 231-232, 234-235, 239-244, 248-252, 255

## D

Decolonial Perspective 229, 240  
 Decolonization 175, 192, 222, 250-251  
 Deep ecology 47, 62, 168, 211

## E

eco-feminism 162-164  
 ecological social work 53, 60, 64, 151-152, 154, 156, 161, 166-167, 169  
 ecology 13, 17, 25, 29, 33, 45, 47, 53-58, 62-63, 83-84, 86, 104, 159-160, 162, 168, 173, 211, 215, 224, 255, 257-258, 261  
 eco-social work 38-39, 51-52, 60, 161, 170-171, 213  
 education 1-3, 6, 10-12, 14-19, 26-27, 29-30, 32, 34-35, 60, 62, 68-69, 83-84, 91-96, 98-100, 103, 108, 110, 118, 123, 125-126, 130, 134, 138-139, 141, 144, 147, 165-166, 168-173, 176-177, 179, 183-185, 189-198, 202-208, 210-211, 213-214, 217, 222-223, 226-227, 235, 250, 258, 262, 264-265  
 employment 1, 3, 5, 9-10, 12, 29, 72, 95, 111, 126, 131-134, 136-137, 139-141, 143-144, 147, 193-194, 257  
 environment 1, 3, 5, 7-8, 10, 18, 38, 41, 45-46, 51-53, 56-59, 61, 63, 65, 68, 70, 73, 78-80, 84, 91, 94, 99, 103, 112, 126, 130, 132, 136, 139-141, 145, 151-153, 156-157, 159, 161-164, 166-169, 173-

176, 182-184, 186, 192-193, 202, 206, 211-215,  
223, 226, 231, 242, 247, 261, 264  
Environmental Degradation Hot Spot 151

## F

facilitate 1, 27, 96, 100, 125, 165, 189, 199, 216, 218,  
244, 251

## G

Global Agenda 8, 12, 104, 153, 161, 170-171, 224-225,  
229-230, 233, 238  
globalization 24, 60, 103, 147, 153, 192-193, 195, 199,  
201, 203-204, 206, 225, 232, 240-241, 243, 248  
Green Social Work, 38

## I

Indigenous 1, 7-9, 12, 21, 34, 38, 42-43, 49, 64, 70, 79,  
84, 89, 101-102, 104-107, 109-110, 154, 159-160,  
162, 164, 167, 173, 175-180, 183, 185-194, 196,  
198-201, 205-215, 218-224, 226-227, 238, 241,  
247, 250-251, 254, 260-261, 263, 265  
Indigenous knowledges 9, 104-105, 191, 207, 209,  
211, 220, 222, 251  
indigenous models 175, 178, 180  
Indigenous science 38, 42  
inequality 14, 16, 40, 58, 64, 78, 89, 105, 134-135,  
146, 154-155, 232-233, 236, 238-239, 243, 258  
injury 10, 74, 111, 113-125, 129  
innovation 53, 131, 137, 167, 240  
insurers 111, 120-121, 123, 125  
intersectionality 14, 33, 98, 100, 104, 107, 238  
intervention 1, 7, 14, 32, 55, 59, 70, 81, 100, 111,  
117-118, 122, 128, 171, 243, 249-250, 255, 263

## L

law 10, 42-43, 60-61, 63, 92, 94, 96, 101, 107, 111-116,  
120-121, 124-126, 128-130, 159, 166, 177-178,  
209, 211-213, 218-221, 226, 235, 258  
Legal Profession 111-112, 130

## M

Mainstream Paradoxes 65  
modernity 175-177, 188, 241, 243, 245, 261, 265

## N

Neoliberalism 14, 25, 33, 35, 146, 149, 192, 235, 253  
non-human 30, 33, 40, 58, 60-61, 165, 170, 209-211,  
220-222, 241, 247, 253, 263, 265

## O

Ubuntu 175-176, 179, 183-188  
Ubuntu-led social work 175-177

## P

Pacific Social Work 191-192, 194, 201-202, 206-207  
pandemic 9, 19, 58, 68, 105, 133-134, 139, 160, 202,  
239, 242, 249, 255-257, 259, 261, 265-266  
paradigm shift 151-152, 159, 161, 166, 245, 251  
Participatory Action Research 1-2, 16, 18-19, 29, 227  
person-in-environment 38, 57, 104, 152, 166, 171, 202  
place-based 65, 68, 71, 79, 86  
POLITICAL-ECONOMIC CONTEXT 13  
post-humanism 241, 247  
primary prevention 89, 99, 101-102, 104  
privilege 113, 120, 163, 192-193, 198, 201-202, 243,  
247-248, 263

## R

racism 47, 53, 102, 222, 231, 236, 243, 255, 260  
Recovered Factories 234, 240  
Reinvention 7, 237, 240  
relational social work 6, 83, 175, 188

## S

shared responsibility 65-66, 75, 80-81  
Slater and Gordon 111, 113-116, 118, 122, 124, 126, 129  
Social Agenda 240  
social inequalities 229, 233, 235-236, 240  
social justice 3, 5, 7, 25, 38-39, 51, 54, 58, 69, 78, 103,  
111-112, 121, 128, 130, 138, 144, 147, 153-154,  
164-165, 168, 204, 209, 211, 215, 221-222, 236,  
238, 242-243, 246-248, 250, 252  
Social Movements 91, 229, 240  
social order 7, 78-79, 98, 229-230, 233, 235, 238, 240  
social transformation 8, 209, 233  
social work 1-20, 22, 24-25, 27, 29-35, 38-39, 46-48,  
50-54, 56-57, 59-66, 68-71, 77-80, 82-87, 89, 91-  
93, 95-100, 103-123, 125-132, 137-138, 141-145,  
147, 149, 151-154, 156-158, 161-178, 182-183,  
186-215, 220, 222-227, 229-230, 233, 235-239,

## **Index**

241-242, 245-256, 261-265

South Africa 8, 151, 154-158, 160-162, 164, 166-167, 169, 171-173, 239

spirituality 16, 24, 161, 199-200, 209, 211, 214, 220, 222, 250

sustainable environment 151

## **T**

the personal is political 13, 92, 98, 108, 237

training 2, 6, 9-10, 12, 19, 26, 33, 90-91, 102, 105, 108, 113, 120, 123, 127-128, 131-132, 136-145, 148-149, 156, 158-159, 178, 194, 196-197, 208, 236-237

Transport Accident Commission 114

## **V**

Victorian 2009 bushfires 72

Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority 86

## **W**

well-being 8, 58, 61, 121, 146, 200-201, 218, 256, 258, 264

women 9-10, 26, 29, 34-35, 41, 47, 50, 60, 74, 89-110, 112, 126, 134, 136, 139-140, 148-149, 155, 163-164, 171, 179, 181-182, 185-186, 191, 202, 231, 235, 238, 243, 248, 254, 260