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Table of contents

Editorial

Diversity is complex! *Marg Lynn* 1

Refereed article

Social work and welfare education without discrimination.
Are we there yet? *Norah Hosken* 3

Reflections on practice

Nigerian women in the diaspora in pursuit of self-actualisation:
A case study of three women in Britain, USA and Australia *Vicky Omifolaji* 17

Reflections on practice

Rural community planning: Love in a dry climate *Mark Remnant* 31

Book review

The value of nothing: How to reshape market society and
redefine democracy *Olga Bursian* 43

For your attention

New Community Quarterly *Jacques Boulet* 77

Editorial: *Diversity is complex!*

For all the criticisms heaped on our governments by those of us committed to social justice, there are some things that Australia does reasonably well. One of them, albeit contested, flawed and frequently threatened, is multiculturalism. Relative to our population, a higher proportion of migrants and refugees are granted permanent residence or citizenship than in most other countries. Despite flagrant human rights issues concerning the treatment of asylum seekers, the 'big picture' of migration has been one of welcoming newcomers to the 'land of opportunity', of cultural diversity changing the social landscape, and of first and later generations of migrants contributing above their 'weight' to the intellectual life of the nation. It is up to us all as to whether Australia continues to benefit from such diversity.

Given this context, we have been asked by two of this issue's authors to reflect on some of the consequences of our multiculturalism, our requirement to understand the lives of people who become our fellow Australians, and our responsibilities in changing attitudes and structures that inhibit their human rights: particularly to culturally aware education and to professionally appropriate employment. In so doing, we recognise our own position in maintaining such structures, and our unexamined assumptions about the rightness of current practices.

The two papers, by Norah Hosken and Vicky Omifolaji, come from very different speaking positions. Norah voices her concerns about the startlingly alien teaching methods, concepts and constructs in social work and welfare education, in her work with South Sudanese Australian students. Their educational experiences, largely in villages or refugee camps, have been premised on assumptions at significant variance to the hegemonic Western, rational, impersonal and objective, linear, bureaucratic, institutional thinking that shapes social work and welfare theory and practice, often in ways that escape our antennae for tuning in to the 'usual', but nonetheless intractable, structural barriers of class, race, gender, and so on, significant as these are in this context. The collective struggles of students and teacher to make meaning in personal, cultural and structural terms has a lot to teach all academics and practitioners about our own challenges to discover our critical voice and own our own discriminations. The paper also challenges us to recognise that we as students, practitioners and academics are also the 'other', likely to experience oppression and/or clienthood. It is important that critical writing guards against the assumption that we need to learn about oppression as experienced by the 'other', being free of it ourselves, thus enabling many students to only find a client and not a worker identity to relate to in the literature.

Vicky's paper presents an African experience which may be equally unfamiliar to many of us, despite some of its themes being consistent with Anglo middle class educational and professional career mobility and aspirations. Vicky comes from a self-acknowledged privileged background with a western-influenced Nigerian university education. Her enquiry draws together the experiences of several Nigerian women living in the diaspora, who share the challenges of reaching their own achievement goals and self actualisation in a foreign

country, along with discrimination in the job market. They have all left their own country and extended family, but not the responsibilities that go with contributing significantly to the ongoing wellbeing of family, from whom they have moved away. While grounding her argument in a western framing of needs, that of Maslow, Vicky explores some of the national and cultural factors that motivate women who strive to reach their full potential and be independent, found in the traditional practice of polygamy and the absence of a welfare and public services system that constrains both families' and the country's development.

Mark Remnant writes from the position of community development and planning in rural Victoria, a far more diverse perspective than is frequently recognised, especially in the cities. He draws out a number of lessons from community building, for the communities themselves and for practitioners, and notes that it is always a 'work in progress', as communities are overlapping, evolving, learning entities that can be assisted to identify and negotiate their own needs, interests and preferences, and take ownership of the means to meet them.

Olga Bursian reviews a fascinating and challenging book *The Value of Nothing: How to reshape market society and redefine democracy*. Globalisation's tendency to homogenize experience, products, political systems and processes, is at odds with the localisation agenda which can deliver participatory and deliberative democracy, genuine diversity, and systems that people want and own. The book provides examples from around the world where people have reclaimed political spaces.

This issue deals with diversity in regard to race, place and institutional formation, only a few of many manifestations. Negotiating the significance of diversity for ourselves is complex, confusing, sometimes difficult and uncomfortable, and challenging. But perhaps embracing diversity is the only way of being truly human.

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Social work and welfare education without discriminationⁱ. Are we there yet?

NORAH HOSKEN

Abstract

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has identified education as one of five crucial issues relating to the settlement of African Australians into the Australian community from a human rights perspective (AHRC 2009:5). In this paper I advocate that social work and welfare work in Australia are placed in important and multi-dimensioned positions in relation to our complicities, responsibilities and potentialities with this educational human rights issue. As a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) welfare and University social work educator, I offer an outline of the 'mutual respect inquiry approach' that developed between myself and Southern Sudanese Australian students as a basis for discussion, reflection and change. I seek to stimulate thinking and action, particularly among those welfare work and social work educators, practitioners and students who identify as critical and anti-oppressive, to consider how these approaches can be realised and reshaped in practice to enhance not only Southern Sudanese Australians' right to education that is 'without discrimination', but indeed all students in our diversity.

Key words: *Human rights, Southern Sudanese Australian students; Mutual respect inquiry approach; Critical social work.*

Introduction

There are three multi-dimensioned positions occupied by social work and welfare work in Australia in relation to our complicities, responsibilities and potentialities with the issue of the human right to education. I use the experiences that Southern Sudanese Australian students and I have shared as a critical and important illustrative example in its own right, but believe this analysis has greater reach in the context of education and diversity.

The first position is recognising the fact that as educational courses, welfare and social work have attracted a significant number of African, particularly Southern Sudanese Australian students. I suggest this presents a wonderful opportunity, and responsibility, for social work and welfare educators to publicly align themselves with the values of diversity. This could involve using aspects of critical pedagogyⁱⁱ in our educational practice that demonstrates and models our commitment to critical and anti-oppressive welfare and social work practice (AOP) in the institutional education context. I provide an example of how this can be enacted in a brief outline of the 'mutual respect inquiry

approach' developed between myself and Southern Sudanese Australian students. It would also involve re-evaluating course curriculum, knowledge base, educational assessment content and processes, teaching loads and pedagogy in light of Sudanese Australians' specific educational human rights issues. There is broader relevance here, as welfare and social work courses consider the implications of the Federal Government's push for TAFEs and Universities to increase their numbers of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and the overall increase in diversity in the student population.

The second position is that, as professions that now have African Australian members, it is opportune to reflect with all colleagues on the professions' codes of ethics and course accreditation requirements to assess their ongoing relevance. The codes and accreditation requirements of social work and welfare work courses have been critiqued from a number of viewpoints, and need the embedded processes that support, expect and encourage ongoing challenge and change.

Thirdly, as professions that provide services to/with African Australian clients, groups and communities, it is essential that social work and welfare educators and practitioners create the opportunities and networks to work with African Australian colleagues, clients and communities to mutually review our experiences, practice and theory. I offer the modest example of the network I have been a part of with Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates as an example.

Human rights, social work and welfare work

The right to education, contained in Articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), is one of the human rights standards set out in international treaties and declarations through the United Nations that Australia has agreed to uphold. This includes the right to equally accessible higher education and the availability of all forms of education *without discrimination* (AHRC 2009:24).

The place of human rights generally in the social work and welfare work professions, although established, is also contested and critiqued (Skegg 2005; Nipperess and Briskman 2009). The International Federation of Social Work holds the principle of human rights as intrinsic to social work by its very definition (Hare 2004). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW 2010: 7) states that:

The social work profession ... subscribes to the principles and aspirations of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration ...

In addition, the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) requires social workers to:

promote human rights (p.9); respect the human rights of individuals and groups (p.12); ... oppose and work to eliminate all violations of human rights and affirm that civil and political rights must be accompanied by economic, social and cultural rights (p.13); ... respect others ... within a

framework of social justice and human rights (p.17); ... promote policies, practices and social conditions that uphold human rights and that seek to ensure access, equity, participation and legal protection for all (p.19); ... (and), ... recognise and acknowledge the religious, spiritual and secular world views of colleagues, within a framework of social justice and human rights (p.32).

The Code of Ethics that applies to welfare and community workers is the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers' (AIWCW). Although the AIWCW does not yet specifically include the term human rights in its code of ethics, the code is consistent with human rights practice. Many of the welfare courses delivered through TAFE in Australia make direct reference to a course philosophy that incorporates a human rights framework.

Although recognised, the value and relevance of a human rights perspective for social work is questioned. Skegg (2005: 671), among others, suggests that social work needs to guard against the potential misuses of a human rights framework.

Problematically, navigating the grey area between retaining cultural diversity and upholding human rights is not easy. If utilized wrongly, human rights discourse can be yet another form of western domination and another step towards a global monoculture.

I believe that a human rights framework does have much to offer social work, welfare work and education, particularly in the change from the welfare state to an advanced capitalist workfare state context (later explained). However, the right to education without discrimination needs to be understood in the context of the various human rights (civil, political, economic, social, cultural and collective) as an 'indivisible' (Ife 2001) package, each when present, mutually reinforcing, and each in absence, cumulatively oppressive and degrading. This warns educators, students and social work and welfare workers, that the right to an education that is non-discriminatory is not likely to be realised unless other human rights (to adequate income, housing, health care, a practice culture) are also realised.

Experiences and learnings with Southern Sudanese Australian students

My experiences and learnings from working with Southern Sudanese Australian social work and welfare students and graduates led to doubt and questioning, and sparked this work. The summarised, stylised (and inevitably author emphasised and particularised) accounts that follow, reflect my own partialised understandings of these cumulative events and discussions. The accounts do not intend to represent how Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates, and educators may have intended or understood the interchanges:

A meeting was conducted with a student to clarify the reasons why their (first ever) essay written for an introductory welfare unit did not quite meet all the

requirements. The student explained that the great value placed on education, and importance of getting the essay right, was the reason a family meeting comprising the children and other relatives was called, so that all could consider, discuss and contribute to, the submitted essay. I was impressed with the seriousness the student accorded the task, and thought what a wonderful process the inter-generational family meeting and sharing, learning and contributing seemed. I then wondered how this family collective approach to the writing of essays would fit, or not fit, in the Euro-western education environment. I started to think of explaining the notions of plagiarism, collusion and an individual being responsible for the writing and development of their own work – but stopped. I could not, at that point, actually say it.

After class, a student asked me how to read the information that was on the powerpoint and handout that was placed in columns. It was explained to me that columns had not been used in their primary school education in Sudan. The student described the process used to understand my class. He heard my English spoken words, looked at and read the English powerpoint and handouts, converted that in his mind to his oral Southern Sudanese tribal language, took notes in Arabic, and converted everything to English at home. He also clarified for me that Arabic is written from right to left (opposite to English) and this created visual learning challenges for him in understanding diagrams and columns, in particular. I reflected on how much of my taken for granted teaching practice was shaped by, and immersed in, Western thinking and presentation.

A teacher discussed with me the situation of a student who had not met some essential requirements in a counselling video assessment for a practice unit. The problems included: use of an expert directive, rather than the instructed client-centred, approach; referral of the client to a neighbour for help when that was not mentioned or appropriate in the interview context; and emphasis on the harmony needs of the client's family and community relations over that of the client.

A number of students explained that they needed information about how work is conducted in an office-based environment, as they had never had that experience. Their previous paid work experiences in Australia included: abattoirs, security, meat works and timber mills. Some had experience in Sudan and other parts of Africa in refugee camp related work; village related work including: care of cows; securing food, wood and water; crafting and building tools, household items, housing structures and weapons; family and village security; and the growing and harvesting of crops.

An agency supervisor expressed concern and possible fail potential regarding a student on placement who had not: taken initiative in asking workers for opportunities to observe or be involved in the case, group, family and community work of the agency; actively involved themselves in a variety of relevant discussions that occurred in proximity to the student in the office and the field; appeared comfortable with some of the Western clients.

Some Western client individuals and families had indicated they did not want to have Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates as their workers. This

personal, political/structural and cultural/institutional levels of understanding, experience and action that I think are necessary ingredients for change. Each of the three domains are inter-related and 'co-constructive', and therefore potentially 'de-constructive'. Due to space limitations in this paper, I concentrate on the personal and cultural/institutional domains, whilst briefly acknowledging aspects of the importance of the political domain.

Personal

I am a working class-shaped and -committed feminist, critically inspired, Anglo-western, grassroots social work practitioner, and now educator. I have taught human rights and anti-oppressive practice approaches in welfare work and social work units at TAFEs and University. Over the last seven years, the opportunity I have had to teach and learn with a new cohort of students, Southern Sudanese Australians, in TAFEs and University has challenged the relevance of my social work professional theory and practice orientation, and my social work and welfare work education theories and teaching practices. I have been motivated to challenge and critically evaluate my own teaching practice for its ability to deliver on the human right to education, using the anti-discriminatory analytical framework (Thompson 2006) of the personal, institutional/cultural and structural/political domains of inter-related and mutually creating contexts.

Specifically, I wondered if the courses I taught in, and my own teaching practices, were without discrimination. What would the non-discriminatory knowledge, theory, pedagogy and 'day to day life' of social work and welfare teaching and learning look like? How does my desire to model anti-oppressive social work practice translate into education and teaching practice? Is critical and anti-oppressive theory and practice enough? What are the personal, institutional and structural barriers to constructing and delivering a unit, or course, of study that is without discrimination?

The knowledge and feedback from students and graduates seems particularly relevant to assisting the development of social work and welfare education. This process of privileging the knowledge and 'voice' of students, clients, user groups, the discriminated against, the 'oppressed', those who have personal experience, consumers, and locals has been promoted in social work, some examples being, in feminist social work (Dominelli 2002; Weeks 2003); social work education (Manning 2006; Gupta & Blewett 2008); community development (Kenny 2006); social work relevant social action and participatory research (Guerin & Guerin 2007; Westoby 2008), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research processes and ethics (AIATSIS 2000). There is a problem, however, with critical pedagogy and seeking to create the space for students' diverse 'voices' to be heard in classes, to be heard in the construction of units and courses, and to be heard in the institution. The problem is just who is listening, and are they those that need to listen?

In using a critical theory analysis, with aspects of critical pedagogy and a 'culturally friendly' (Engelbrecht 2006: 257) approach, respectful learning relationships developed between myself, a Western raised educator, and Southern Sudanese Australian students

and graduates. This led to experiences of teaching, learning and 'being' in education in which we became more aware of and responsive to, similarities and differences.

The refugee background students whom I have taught and learned with, have initiated and/or responded strongly to the value of a social work and welfare work human rights analysis (Ife 2008) and agenda, to help understand and explain their own experiences, and to develop a framework for practice with, and teaching of, others. The values of understanding and positioning all human beings as having intrinsic value and worth that should attract fundamental human right provisions and considerations resonates (and often contrasts) in a real way with many refugee background Australian student life experiences.

Anti-oppressive practice considers all discriminations and oppressions in need of understanding, challenge and change. Allan (2009: 74) provides an outline of 'doing critical social work' using an anti-oppressive approach that includes an explanation of empowerment having three dimensions: personal; interpersonal/ social/cultural; and structural/political, and states 'a critical perspective recognises the importance of all three'. My experience was that in the courses I taught in, alone or with others, that have at their core a commitment to social justice and change, we constantly struggled to empower ourselves, to model critical practice in pedagogy, and to challenge our own personal and cultural/institutional contexts.

Social work and educational theorists in critical theory (Allan 2009: 74) and critical pedagogy (Saleebey and Scanlon 2006: 4) do stress the need to understand how discrimination and oppression are created, experienced and changed at the personal, cultural and structural levels of society. In this framework the understanding and efforts towards educational change can be understood as necessarily linked to, and shaped by, a broader social justice mission that aims for transformation of the economic and social order that would lead to a more equitable society. This involves educators challenging themselves, and each other, to transform their own practices, courses and institutions to address issues of Western, patriarchal, elite, classist, hegemonic social work education; and power, race, language, gender and class in the context of the construction and experience of education and human rights. I suggest a process is needed that challenges educators, personally and institutionally, that is grounded in, and informed by relationships with those who have knowledge, experiences and vision, beyond, or different to, the educational hegemonic norm of the stereotyped (white) Western, heterosexual, rational, business-minded, middle and upper class male. To this end, there is mutual benefit in creating the opportunity for informal and formal networks with students, graduates and practitioners.

Further, actually creating space for diverse voices to be heard and understood at the classroom level (students and teachers), and at the unit and even course development and review level (student, teachers, coordinators, chairs, middle managers), is a good step. However, unless a strategy, commitment, funding, plan, and/or 'champion' with influence, has already been found that can resource and embed the changes at the institutional level, there is generally not sufficient resource and infrastructure sustainability for the changes to be realised.

Political/Structural

A significant impediment to the goal of working towards the provision of the human right to education that is ‘without discrimination’ at the personal teaching and unit construction level is the political allocation and prioritisation of time and resources, via federal and state policy and funding formulas, and the consequent managerial control by universities and TAFEs. The ability to create the environment to be open to having the discussions with students in which the mutual exchange of knowledge and skill can take place is not funded or supported in the educational institutional context. My experience is that teaching loads are often predicated on a funding formula that appears, at best, to allow for three to eight minutes of individual discussion with each student per unit of study. Although there are many words in documents in the education sector that state that students, partnerships and working with the community and industry are essential, there has been little resourcing to enable their enactment.

Institutional /Cultural level

Reshaping critical and anti-oppressive social work theory

In the search for ways to understand and construct social work and welfare work education that resonates more with what Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates articulate, one possible source of ideas is from critical and anti-oppressive (including anti-racist) social work theory that has sought to analyse and change the way power relationships construct oppression in society, and in social work organisations and social work practices (Thompson 2006; Dominelli 2008). Although critical social work is diverse in terms of practice approaches (Marxist social work; radical social work; structural social work; feminist social work; anti-racist social work; and anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory social work), these approaches ‘share an intellectual debt to the critical social science paradigm’ (Healy 2000:18 cited in Healy 2005:173). The ideas behind critical practice can be seen as stemming from several interrelated theoretical traditions, historically to the work of the Frankfurt School. Critical practice also resonates with social constructionism in sociology that views the social context in which people live not as an objective reality, but rather as having been created in the process of people interacting and (re)naming their human experiences (Glaister 2008).

Healy (2001: online no page number) defines critical social work as referring to a broad range of practices that share:

a recognition that large scale social processes, particularly those associated with class, race and gender, contribute fundamentally to the personal and social issues social workers encounter in their practice; the adoption of a self-reflexive and critical stance to the often contradictory effects of social work practice and social policies; a commitment to co-participatory rather than authoritarian practice relations; and working with and for oppressed populations to achieve social transformation.

Graham (2000:424) suggests that social work academics' and educators' interest in critical and anti-oppressive theory has not, however, really focused on, and challenged, the domination of existing social work knowledge and its symbiotic relationship to the social, political and economic mainstream thinking within welfare (and educational) institutions in the broader society. Graham argues for:

anti-racist and African-centred social work educators to critically examine cultural oppression within social work knowledge so that students can share spaces outside the dominant hegemony to critically explore alternative world views and their social theories for social work practice (Graham 2000: 424).

The call by Graham (2000) for social work to examine its Western colonial knowledge heritage and reconstruct itself to be able to acknowledge, and learn from, African-centred world views, aligns with similar calls from a range of people and groups that critique the patriarchal, classist, elite, Western-centred worldview that underpins mainstream social work. Graham's work is also understood in the context of a broader literature on an Afro-centric framework (Bakari 1997; Monteiro-Ferreira 2008) that challenges the taken for granted, or not even recognised, assumptions and 'superiority' of Western formulated social work (Pease 2010).

Key aspects of critical social work theory (Adams, Dominelli and Payne 2002) and postmodern critical social work (Pease and Fook 1999) including advocacy, human rights, anti-oppressive practice, emancipation, self determination and respect, offer promise for the development of an Australian social work and welfare work that can learn with, and from, the myriad of African, and more specifically, Sudanese-generated understandings and knowledges.

Although valuable, critical social work theory is still often shaped by, and/or translated by, class based patriarchal Western-thinking, and often creates undesired stereotyped 'others'. 'Writing the life out of things' (Lea 2008: 223) captures for me some of the difficulties with aspects of critical social work theory and anti-oppressive practice – the need to name the oppressions and the oppressed recreates the simplistic reified othering it seeks to undo. Although Lea is writing about the development of policy in a bureaucracy, the inherently flawed policy creation process she describes seems applicable to the creation of social work theories and models for education and practice.

While it is not possible to make plans without simplifying, this very failure to capture the complexity that stands beyond the plan renders impossible the desired correlation between pronouncements and effects. The vicissitudes of everyday life among the people being improved – a life that interveners may barely even know – inevitably snag the smoothness of their interventionary imaginings (Lea 2008: 227).

Lea's description fits with how some students describe many of the critical and anti-oppressive text books and articles as not seeming relevant to them. Many of these writings only seem logical when you identify they are premised on the unstated assumptions that: social workers, and by implication social work students, are middle class and white; it is only the 'clients' not the workers or students that are from discriminated against groups; or who have past or current experience of discrimination and marginalisation; and that there is a distinct identity or category of 'client'. An example of some writing from a critical social work text that has an unstated assumption that the social worker would be without oppression, therefore probably white and middle class is:

an understanding of the various forms of oppression allows structural social workers to make more sense of the situation of oppression of those they serve ... an understanding of personal or individual oppression and the various types of internalized oppression will enable the structural social worker to better understand how oppressed persons may be experiencing and coping with their situation of oppression. Through dialogue, this knowledge will assist the worker in sorting out with members of subordinate groups helpful and counterproductive responses to their oppression (Mullaly 2007: 284-5).

I suggest that a significant number of social work and welfare students, workers, educators, and various members of the community, who are not a designated 'subordinate group' member (read 'client'), may experience oppression and/or be 'clients' of social work or other 'helping' professions and services at some stage(s) of their life. It is often the case that people who are a bit more privileged by virtue of income or employment are able to choose to keep their 'client' status secret.

In light of this, it is not surprising that in academic units built on such texts relating to critical and anti-oppressive practice, some Southern Sudanese students have said the only place they could 'see' themselves in the unit readings, powerpoints and discussion was as 'subordinate group' members, as 'refugees', as the oppressed, as 'clients', as the 'other'. The skills, knowledge, strengths and resources of Southern Sudanese Australians were not made evident. The texts did not provide the platform or place for these students to imagine themselves as welfare and social workers.

The new institutional context

The brief critical review of the existing literature undertaken for this paper has focused on aspects of the constraints and potentialities of the critical and anti-oppressive theoretical underpinnings of social work and welfare work. In addition, the issue of the changed nature of the institutional context in which social work and welfare work is constructed and performed has been noted for its importance in shaping, and being the reality of, the environment in which these theories need to be enacted. The limitations of translating critical theory into pedagogical practice, and into social work and welfare practice are often related to the changed nature of the political, economic, ideological and institutional landscape in which it does not fit. As Mc Donald (2006:185).indicates:

... if we think about critical practice broadly defined as an expression of morality and politics, it will, in all likelihood, continue to occupy a larger position in the collective professional imagination than the realities of contemporary practice actually dictate.

I argue that there is a similarity in the needs for both welfare and social work practitioners, and welfare and social work educators, in understanding, challenging and negotiating their new institutional contexts. The higher education and welfare service institutional contexts are no longer shaped by a welfare state, but rather what McDonald (2006) calls the 'institutional rationality of the neoliberal workfare regime' of 'advanced capitalism', with its methods of 'new public management' involving establishing 'consumers, fees, user-pays, markets, choice, risk management, obligations, competition and profit' in welfare and education. It is not a context that readily facilitates the ideas discussed in this paper.

Conclusion

The combination of the considerable barriers to critical social work theory being practised, and the institutional change to educational and welfare organisations under advanced workfare capitalism, significantly contribute to the difficulties for social work and welfare work education in achieving the status of being 'without discrimination' for Sudanese Australian, and many other, students. It seems that much of current critical social work theory was constructed for the welfare state context. We need to creatively and honestly take up the task of changing this theory base (working with and learning from practitioners and community members) to assist workers to resist and challenge the contemporary workfare institutional contexts of welfare and social work education and practice. Otherwise, educators will continue to be wanting to create non-discriminatory education, but lamenting its unattainability.

It would be appropriate for social work and welfare work educators to 'practise what we preach', a human rights based education framework that embraces the challenge to interrogate itself, to find ways to resist and create institutional change in the new landscape of advanced capitalism and the workfare state. I think this is more possible when educators, students, practitioners and clients create opportunities for recognising our similarities and differences, and potentials in friendship, mentoring, alliances and exchanges of knowledge.

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Notes

ⁱ *The term education 'without discrimination' is as it appears in the legislation.*

ⁱⁱ *Critical pedagogy is a philosophical approach to education that examines the role of power in who gets to say what is valid knowledge, and identifies the purpose of education as the freeing of oppressed groups, involving the goal of power equalisation between teachers and students, communities and universities, and researchers and subjects (Saleebey & Scanlon 2006).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *I obtained permission from the Southern Sudanese Australian students and graduates, and educators to write about my understanding of their and sometimes our experiences. They have favorably reviewed this work. I have not included their names in this particular paper due to the deliberate effort to combine and nuance the events and situations into more collective generated learnings.*

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Nigerian women in the diaspora in pursuit of self-actualization: A case study of three women in Britain, USA and Australia

VICKY OMIFOLAJI

Introduction

This article explores the experiences and the self actualisation of Nigerian women in the diaspora using experiences of three Nigerian women based in Australia, the UK and USA as case studies. I will trace the progress of these women from their pre-diaspora era to their adaptation to the diasporan way of life and their self-actualization. The paper outlines reasons behind their struggle to succeed and aspirations to improve their social status. The paper will describe the challenges these women face and their fortitude in turning these challenges to their advantage.

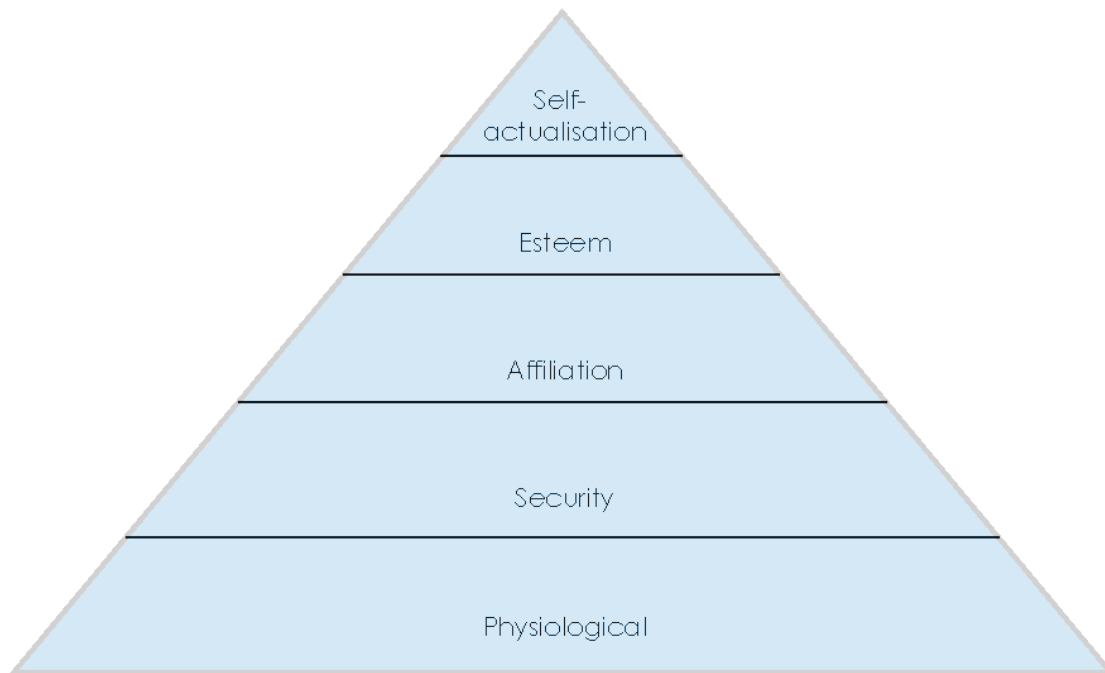
What is self actualization?

Self-actualization refers to developing or achieving one's full potential. According to Ciarrochi, Forgas and Mayer (2001), self-actualization is the process of striving to actualize one's potential capacity, abilities and talents. It requires the ability and drive to set and achieve goals. It is characterized by being involved in and feeling committed to various interests and pursuits. Self-actualization is a process and to be able to promote it, it requires hard work, patience and commitment. The following steps of the self-actualization process need to be observed, as suggested by Maslow (1971):

- Be willing to change
- Take responsibility
- Examine your motives
- Experience honestly and directly
- Make use of positive experiences
- Be prepared to be different
- Get involved and
- Assess your progress
-

Self-actualization is a life-long effort leading to the enrichment of life (Ciarrochi, Forgas and Mayer 2001). Self actualization is the highest need for human beings. Physiological needs are the needs we all strive to satisfy before the next set of needs which are generally known as security needs, affiliation needs and esteem needs (Hellriegel and Slocum 2007). If all these needs are satisfied, we may still feel restless and discontent unless we are doing what we are suited to. The needs of self-actualization do not become apparent until the needs of physiology, safety, love and esteem are satisfied.

Looking at the Needs Hierarchy Model (Maslow in Aucoin 2007) a person has five steps of needs: physiological, security, affiliation, esteem and then self actualization.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Aucoin, M. 2007: 62)

Hanley and Abell (2009) note that the interpersonal model of self-actualization emphasizes the importance of relatedness as the substance of individual growth at all levels of psychological development.

As a Nigerian woman who has been living in Victoria, Australia for the past nine years, I had assumed that I was the only Nigerian woman faced with the urge to define myself not just as a wife of a medical practitioner, or a mother of three children, but with my academic achievements and success in my profession. I re-connected with my childhood friends after over 20 years of no contact and apart from my childhood and old school mates, I also linked up with over 65 Nigerian women that now call Australia home. I was able to identify with most of their stories and realise that there are distinctive similarities in all the stories of all these Nigerian women.

The awareness of the way most Nigerian women pursue their goal of self actualization came to me when I was at an interview for a social work position in a local hospital and I was asked about my greatest achievements. I initially thought about it and despite the fact that my interview panel had my resume with them, I informed them with pride of my studying for Masters in Counselling, travelling 160km each way from Melbourne in order to attend classes, and how I completed the program just after I gave birth to my daughter. I also mentioned completing my second masters program while working full time, caring for my three children under eight years of age and being married to a busy local general practitioner and business

man. I remembered during my first Masters program, I would study all night while my children were in bed and would struggle to stay awake for them during the day to care for them. I also remembered all the challenges I faced during my second masters degree program. My being able to successfully complete both programs despite all the challenges, gave me a sense of fulfilment and joy. My reply to a simple question by one of the interview panel reminded me of the responses from my friends, old school mates and new acquaintances, when I asked them what they have been doing since leaving school.

With my personal experience in pursuing my own self actualization and my discussions with some Nigerian women, I decided to explore different experiences of some women in the diaspora, so as to get answers to some of the questions that have been worrying me since the interview. The questions include why are Nigerian women so driven? What impact does Nigerian women's urge and drive to succeed have on the women and their family unit?

I planned to use some questions to guide me while conversing with the three women across three countries – Australia, the USA and the UK. I will touch on some of the reasons that led these women to leave Nigeria, the challenges they were faced with where they live and the challenges they are facing in pursuing their self realisation. I will briefly talk about Nigerian women generally, the life of educated and uneducated women, and how Nigerian women are perceived pre and post colonial era. I hope to give a glimpse and educate readers about how energetically Nigerian women pursue self actualisation, and about the hardships endured by some migrant women as they strive for the attainment of their goals.

Case Studies

(pseudonyms are used throughout)

Victoria Okajiafor – was born in Benin City in 1972. She studied business administration at University of Benin. At the same University, she studied Masters in Business Administration. She met David who was working at the university teaching hospital. They got married and settled in Lagos. They both decided to travel overseas, convinced that they could do better in the western world. David sat for the South African Medical Council examination and passed. He applied to a rural hospital and was offered the Hospital Medical Officer position in South Africa. Victoria and their 2year old son joined David after he settled in Piet Retief, Mpumalanga province in South Africa. Victoria reported that while in South Africa, she couldn't get employment despite responding to over 1000 job advertisements. Victoria and David moved to Australia after her husband secured a position in a hospital in New South Wales. Victoria stated lack of job security for foreigners as their main reason for deciding to move to Australia.

While in New South Wales, Victoria applied to work in the bank through employment agencies but was unsuccessful. She was offered a casual position at McDonald's fast food restaurant but reported that she was rarely called to work; once in two months.

She spoke to other Nigerian women in Australia and she was advised to work towards getting into the medical line. They all shared their experiences of moving into Australia with high dreams and hopes of working with their academic certificates because some were lawyers, teachers, and accountants before moving to Australia. Most of them related similar experiences of their inability to get jobs. They informed her that the only people that were able to get employment with ease were those in medical lines – nurses, radiographers and doctors. She was advised to apply to TAFE College for Cert 111 in Aged Care, a 6 month course. She applied for the course and was admitted.

Victoria reported about how hectic her life became when she started studying, coupled with her carrying a three months pregnancy. She said:

How I did it I do not know as it was hectic. My husband, being the only income earner in the household, was spending hundreds of dollars every month on child care for our son, not to talk about other expenses. We were not eligible for any government assistance at that time because my husband came into Australia as a skilled worker. Coming home from TAFE College, I had to perform all my wifely duties including cooking, cleaning the house and settling the kids. My husband sometimes helped, especially with caring for our son. Most nights, I found myself struggling to stay awake to study and work on my assignments. Throughout this period, we were receiving phone calls from our families in Nigeria requesting financial assistance for feeding, housing and medical bills. All our attempts to explain our situation fell on deaf ears. Their feelings were that we did not want to help as they did not know what we were facing then. Despite our tight situation, my husband still managed to send money to our families especially our elderly parents.

I eventually finished the course, and was blessed with a bouncing baby boy only three weeks after I completed my course. I got a job as personal carer in a nursing home. I started working when my son was only two months old. I had my children in a day-care centre.

After my son started prep class, I enrolled at a TAFE College to study Certificate IV in Nursing (Assistant Nursing course) which I did part time. The course took me two years to complete. I got a job as an assistant nurse in the local hospital.

Working three years in the hospital, I enrolled at a local University for Bachelor of Nursing (part time) which I completed with flying colours. I am in the process of completing my Masters degree in nursing. It has been very hectic and difficult for my children, my husband and me but success crowned my labours.

It was not easy for me to change from what I so much loved to a profession I am doing now, in order to be able to help in providing for my immediate and extended family in Nigeria. The drive to achieve came from the years I wasted looking for employment and the fact that I wanted to be seen as Victoria, the nurse and not just Victoria, Dr Okajiafo's wife. Though painfully difficult, I realised that the saying 'no pain, no gain' is totally true in my life.

Olanike Akinyemi – was born in Lagos in 1978 to an international business tycoon. She is the younger of two children. Olanike graduated from University of Lagos where she read medicine.

After graduating, she opened her own private hospital with financial assistance from her father. She reported that even though she had no financial problems, she was finding it increasingly difficult to live in Nigeria because of the general situation of things. She talked about the lack of regular electricity which led to almost every household having a power generator, which is one of the causes of pollution. She reported that the lack of basic amenities including a piped water supply (for clean running water), and most patients not being able to pay for their medical bills, eventually made her sell her practice and move overseas.

Olanike recounted:

It was frustrating running a private hospital in Nigeria where there is no government funded health care system. I found it hard to turn my back if someone could not afford to pay their medical bills. I had the hospital for three years and I made no profit but at the same time, I thought, how many people would I continue to do this for? Is it sustainable? The frustration in me was from all angles. The government refusing to provide for the people, at least basic needs to make life easier for everybody, the rich and the poor. I was also frustrated with the Nigerian public that are acculturated to the way they are being treated by the ruling power.

I got married to my childhood friend; we were in medical school at the same time. We both decided to leave Nigeria because we were tired of the general situation, air pollution, driving hours to work because of bad roads which caused hold-ups or 'go slows' and lack of other basic amenities. Even though we are both from rich families and successful in our own right, we shared in the hardship like any other Nigerians. We used the same terrible roads; we turned on the generator just like others with the air and noise pollution all around. It was indeed a hectic situation.

We moved to North America where we both went back to the University for further studies in order for our certificates to be updated and recognised. We wrote qualifying examinations for some years before we were able to practice as doctors. Though it was stressful and hectic, I was not deterred. I believed we were luckier than most people because our parents provided us with financial assistance through-out. I gave birth to our first child in our third year of being in North America, so I took a year off studying. We employed a live-in nanny so as to continue with my studies. I felt guilty for leaving my son at one year in order to pursue my goal and I still feel the guilt today for not being with him 100%. The guilt was the terrible emotion that nearly consumed me and almost derailed me. I am now a dermatologist in my own private practice in Texas.

My husband and I are members of a charity organisation founded in Nigeria to help struggling Nigerians. We provide financial assistance to the organisation and we travel to Nigeria where we offer free health checks, health care and medications to people living in rural communities.

Roseline Ogunwemimo – was born in Ondo town, Ondo state of Nigeria in 1964. She studied nursing at Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospital Nursing School. Being the first born of her parents, she was responsible for looking after her disabled mother and her five siblings. Her father passed on to eternity when she was about to finish nursing school. He was involved in a motor vehicle accident and died instantly while her mother was rushed to the hospital but her leg was badly crushed and had to be amputated. Despite the tragedy, Roseline managed to complete her studies and graduate top of the class.

She got a job as a nurse in a local hospital. She became the bread winner for her family. At 23 years of age, from her earnings, she was paying school fees for her siblings, buying groceries as well as paying for all their health care needs. She graduated; she married Ade, a University lecturer in Physics. She was contacted by her best friend Bunmi who now resided in United Kingdom. Bunmi informed Roseline of shortage of nurses in UK where she could make far more than what she was currently earning. Bunmi explained the process and gave her contact details for an agency that could help.

Roseline contacted the agency in Britain. She and her husband borrowed money from friends to pay for her application processing. She travelled to Britain where she paid thousands of pounds for a three month bridging nursing program. Her husband sold his car and borrowed cash from the bank for Roseline to be able to pay for the course. She got her nursing position at Birmingham Maternity Hospital. She later processed visas for her husband and her daughter. She completed a Masters in Midwifery and she is now an associate unit manager for the maternity ward.

Roseline still cares for her disabled mother, sends money to her siblings and even her extended families. During my discussions with her stated:

It was becoming so hard being the only one providing for everybody. It got to the stage that my salary was unable to pay for everyone's needs so I had to borrow from the bank to make ends meet. I was living from hand to mouth. I thought it was going to be easier after I got married to Ade but it wasn't. Ade's family, his elderly parents, relied heavily on him for all their financial needs. Whenever the family wanted financial assistance and we could not afford it, his family blamed me and insinuated that I had used 'juju' on him not to take care of them. His family became hostile to me and our relationship was somehow strained.

When the opportunity arrived for me to work overseas, we jumped at it and grabbed it as if our lives depended on it. Actually, our lives did depend on it. We borrowed

money to achieve our hearts desire. We thank God that our aspiration to look for greener pasture was fruitful.

My living in Britain was not all a 'beds of roses'. After paying for my bridging course, I had limited funds to pay for accommodation, food and other needs. There were days that I could afford only one meal a day. I arrived during winter; I could only buy one jacket in a second hand shop. When I started working, I was sending over 80% of my wages after tax in order to pay the bank in Nigeria and still provide for my immediate and extended family members. I was working extra shifts in order to have enough. My health suffered for over using myself. I was having irregular heart beats, insomnia from thinking and stressing about not having enough.

After I finished paying the banks, I was able to apply for visas for my husband and daughter and I also enrolled at a University for a master's degree program. I did not see my daughter or my husband for two years, and I was working and studying for hours a day. The guilt that I felt was indescribable but no matter what I felt, I had to do what I had to do, not just for me alone but for my family. I realised that at work, being one of the few African nurses, I was being constantly challenged by unwarranted comments from colleagues, patients, and their families, even other staff members. I had the urge to continuously develop myself so as to prove that being an African, a Nigerian, does not mean that I am stupid but that I have what it takes to be successful in my profession.

Discussion

In Nigerian culture, especially during pre-colonisation, families tended to focus more on male children, sending them to school while female children were set aside till they were old enough to get married. Nigerian women are principally seen as combining child rearing with working with her husband on the farm, apart from general up-keep of the house. Nigerian women tend to engage in various kinds of trades to supplement the household income.

The post independence era finds more Nigerian women receiving western education but this has not helped to liberate women from struggle. Polygamy, which is well practised in Nigeria, seems to be one of the factors pushing Nigerian women at home and abroad. In Nigeria, traditionally there is no limit to the number of wives permitted for a man. According to Entwisle and Coles (1990) polygamy is a social practice that continues to affect Nigerian women. Because women realize that their husbands may take additional wives without their knowledge or permission, they seek to maintain financial independence. They cannot rely on their husband's earnings for the upkeep of their family as the funds may be shared with others. Polygamy accounts for the reasons why Nigerian women in the past work so hard to provide for their children without waiting for their husbands to supply the funds needed (Rives and Yousefi 1997). It is rare for Nigerian women to pool their income with their husbands because of polygamy and inheritance law (Fapohunda 1987) which discriminates against Nigerian women. With the inheritance law, Nigerian women generally do not inherit

from their husbands; though they may inherit from their own families (Freeman, 1994).

As noted by Rives and Yousefi (1997), it is considered a disgrace for Yoruba women not to work due to their income being essential to the household, since traditionally men are not expected to support their wives and children. In watching our mothers, grandmothers and aunts struggling to provide for their children, it has now become part of us to be industrious, hardworking and a pillar of strength for our husbands and children.

There are different reasons why Nigerian women emigrate. Some of the reasons can be deduced from the three case studies in this article. According to Akhtar (1995) immigration from one country to another is a complex psycho-social process with lasting effects on an individual's identity. Reynolds (2006) states that some African professional women make decisions to emigrate based on gaining the ability to fulfill cultural expectations in the financial maintenance of the household. Many women within African states, including the upper echelon of women from highly educated, wealthy, and influential families, find that cultural expectations for financial management of their households are difficult to fulfill under changing economic systems in states like Nigeria (Reynolds, 2006).

Some Nigerian women emigrate because of the social and economic situation in Nigeria. Poverty and its socio-economic constraints are major causes of population movements (Komolafe, 2002). Previous research has shown that debt has a detrimental effect on government educational and health programs for women and children. The body of research also concludes that the Structural Adjustment Program, a program that government implemented to redress the government debt, produces negative effects, especially on women by adding more pressure on them to provide for the household. Ekong (2006) asserts that women are the real engine driving the Nigerian economy, and are the keys to development, and therefore crucial to the goal of sustainable development. Agbola (1990) confirmed that women are the operators of the economy and constitute a major arm of the labour force, and that Nigerian women are dynamic, industrious and resourceful.

The lack of a government funded social welfare system accounts for one of the reasons why some women decide to emigrate in order to provide for their families, both extended and immediate. With lack of government funded social welfare services, working families are mandated to provide for their immediate and extended family members. In pre-colonial Nigerian societies, it was normal for an individual to receive economic assistance from members of his or her extended family--including paternal and maternal uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins. The practice of expecting assistance from family members (Okafor 2004), grew out of the understanding that the basis of family wealth derived from land and labour, both inherited from common ancestors. Even as an individual sought help from extended family members, he was in turn required to fulfil certain responsibilities, such as contributing labour and financial provision when needed, or participating in activities

associated with rites of passage of family members. Today, the same system of welfare assistance is still practised in Nigeria.

The search for greener pastures and a better standard of living is another reason why some women decide to emigrate. Okpewho et al (1999), states that economic survival through labour is a predominant reason for families migrating.

Nigeria has been home to the largest number of the world's extremely poor: 55.5 million people according to Komolafe (2002). Nigerians living on over \$2 per day represent just 30% of the population; the wealthiest 2% possessed incomes equivalent to the total income of the poorest 17% in 1970 and the poorest 55% in 2000 (Komolafe 2002). Duze, Mohammed, and Kiyawa (2008) warn that Africa in 2030 will be home to a larger proportion of the world's poorest people than it is today.

Integration and its challenges

Getting employment becomes important to Nigerian women in the diaspora in order to be able to integrate into the system where they find themselves. In finding employment, the assurance of being able to earn enough to cater for immediate and extended families is there. Reynolds (2006) notes that the burden to support a household according to local cultural expectations is illogical for many professional women which has led to many women deciding to migrate to Western countries. In Western countries, women can find legal and structural guarantees of the right to financial privacy, control of their own earnings, and the ability to use earnings to support children (Reynolds, 2006). They have a sense of fulfillment in their ability to contribute to the new communities they find themselves in and at the same time, are able to contribute to the Nigerian economy.

Women and migrants generally are crucial to another development strategy (Sassen, 2003). The remittances migrant workers send home are a major source of hard-currency reserves for the migrant's home country. With regards to the uses of remittances, Nwajiuba (2005) reports that remittances are put to household and community uses which impact on livelihoods.

Assimilating into the new community is never as easy as expected. The three women that I interviewed spoke of the challenges they faced. All three women, just like most educated African women, emigrated with qualifications and work experiences which were not recognized in their new environment. Many female immigrants find themselves excluded from integration programs in the destination country both as a result of their dependant status and in some case their families (Omelaniuk, 2005). Moussa (1993) notes that though employment is a key factor in the social integration of newcomers in most societies, most African immigrants especially women, face severe systemic discrimination in the labor force due to their race and gender.

In order to be able to feel part of the community, some immigrant women made choices to go back to college to start all over again, or updating their certificates so as

to obtain sustainable employment. Okpewho et al (1999), while writing about immigrants in Canada, state that many immigrants who are qualified as physicians, nurses or teachers in their home countries may not be granted a license to practice their professions abroad. Okpewho et al (1999) further notes that many immigrants with extensive qualifications and experiences are underemployed in jobs that use their expertise but underpay their market worth. There were financial concerns, psychological challenges and family disruptions that these women faced in order to achieve their goals of self-actualization.

The benefits and drawbacks in pursuing self actualization

There is a sense of fulfillment in the women achieving success in their chosen careers, and education can be identified as one of the benefits. Nigerian women are also contributing to the Nigerian economy, especially through their remittances to families in Nigeria. In being able to integrate, Nigerian women in the diaspora gain additional qualifications and knowledge and exposure to a 'better' way of life which aids their striving for self-actualization.

The drawbacks in achieving self-actualization include discrimination, which accounts predominantly for their drive to prove themselves and their struggle to achieve. According to Misztal (1991) Non English Speaking Background migrant women tend to be employed in much lower level, lower status and lower paying occupations than Australian born women. Okpewho, Davies and Mazrui (1999), in writing about immigrant women in Canada, conclude that immigrant women, in spite of their high educational backgrounds, are forced to engage in low-paying jobs under difficult working conditions. Okpewho et al (1999) report that immigrant women, specifically blacks, were stigmatized as unassimilable and undesirable for permanent settlement in Canada, and that they faced discrimination in employment, education, housing and immigration.

The individual's striving for self-actualization can cause relationship breakdown between partners. As commented by Buijs (1996), 'remaking of self was often a traumatic experience with serious repercussions on the migrant women's relationship with their men folk'. There is also the risk of relationship breakdown between children and their mothers, especially with some of the women not being available most of the time. Asis (2001) state that women are referred to as the 'servants of globalization' because many go abroad to serve families of a higher social status while they pass their own family caring role to other family. The women talked about the guilt they felt associated with working for long hours and not being there for their children, and the guilt of watching their husbands work so hard to provide for the family and their inability to help initially. Some had health concerns due to the stress of studying or working for long hours.

In conclusion, the Nigerian women in the diaspora have to continuously struggle for economic and social status. Their emigrating from Nigeria to other countries in order to run away from the social, political and economic problems in Nigeria has been

identified. A lack of a government funded social welfare system accounts for why most women emigrate, and it is still an ongoing battle for most Nigerians. Some of the women followed their husbands while some left first in search of greener pastures, but on getting to their destinations, were faced with new challenges in order to fulfill their dreams. Some of them had to change their careers in order to fit into new occupational structures. Strong determination to succeed proves to be a driving force behind some Nigerian women's constant battle of the will. Looking at the needs of self actualization, some Nigerian women refuse to settle for anything less than achieving their full potential.

Appendix

Questionnaire that guided my interviews with Victoria, Rosaline and Olanike

- 1) What led you to emigrate from Nigeria?
- 2) What was your educational level before you left Nigeria?
- 3) Did your level of education fit into your new environment?
- 4) What are the challenges faced in achieving what you have managed to achieve so far?
- 5) Did your leaving Nigeria make any difference with the roles that you play with your families?

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Rural community planning: Love in a dry climate

MARK REMNANT

Abstract

This article looks at the experience of rural community engagement and planning in the light of some current academic observation. The work explores the challenges confronting local government in working with rural communities as partners in addressing local priorities at a time of significant challenges for rural Victoria. Made up of ten communities located across 8500 square kilometres, the Buloke Shire crosses the boundaries of the Wimmera and Mallee regions of Victoria. Buloke Shire Council used the Community Building Initiative (CBI), a Victorian Government program funded by the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD), to provide a platform for community engagement, planning and development. This paper reflects on why this participatory approach is so important in rural Victorian shires. What are some of the challenges in moving to a participatory approach? The paper discusses the reality that participatory planning, in Buloke as in most settings, is very much a 'work in progress.'

Why We Need 'All Hands To The Pump'

Margaret Alston and Jenny Kent observe that social capital is the human glue that holds a community together: the participation, trust, generation of networks, etcetera. In practical terms, lower social capital means fewer sporting clubs and other community groups and organisations. In times of drought, social capital can become fragile at the very time it is most needed. The chronic nature of drought, combined with the resulting prolonged economic stress erodes engagement in activities outside of the bare essentials. The revitalisation of social capital may therefore be a key factor in helping communities to manage the impact of drought (Alston and Kent 2004: 98).

An appreciation that planning at all levels represents an opportunity for social interaction for various parties has driven this process. The healthy exchange of ideas drives participatory planning. 'This often calls for a conscious, concerted and active process of reaching or tapping into stakeholder groups, organisations and associations for participation in social planning' (Long, Tice and Morrison, 2006:158,150). Participatory planning has real potential to exist as one of the key elements in the development and maintenance of valuable social capital.

This participatory approach becomes increasingly critical in view of the constantly changing social landscape of rural Victoria. Researcher Dr Neil Barr (Barr 2005: 65) observed in his paper *Changing Social Landscape of Rural Victoria* that we are seeing the ageing of our population as well as the increasing cost of Melbourne property. In

light of this, many country towns in Victoria will face increasing migration from Melbourne, bringing new cultures, skills and networks. These will be crucial to the survival of many small towns. At their best, towns may be transformed into vibrant small places. The example of Maldon in central Victoria, based on a transformation from a mining and small landholder agricultural economy and culture, to one based on history, music and tourism was noted.

In considering this development Barr concluded that many small towns once had very well-developed social networks. Where these networks are tightly linked and have few outside connections, the outcome can be a parochial culture that may exclude alternative views and new ideas. Researchers now consider that effective social capital must be built not only of close strong ties that bind, but also of ties that act as a bridge between networks (Barr 2005: 66). While strong ties provide the greatest level of social support, our broader though weaker ties provide the basis of social experimentation and innovation. Weak ties allow for ideas from different sources. Innovation is more likely to come from persons with access to a variety of ideas from a variety of networks (Barr 2005: 66).

In taking on board the changing social landscape in rural Victoria, balancing the various ties and developing effective lines of communication and participation is an important challenge facing local government. The process of encouraging a complementary rather than competitive approach to community and regional issues is one which continues to challenge all levels of government. The scarcity of resources in rural areas means that many communities are now unable to tackle important issues in isolation. The importance of ties that link networks that may hold differing perspectives is that, as Barr (2005) observed, they may provide the basis of social experimentation and innovation.

Planning On The Ground

Recognising the importance of all community ties was critical to the work in the Shire of Buloke in regards to the development of a more participatory community planning model. It began with Council taking advantage of the Victorian Government's Community Building Initiative (CBI) program as the backbone of a whole of Local Government Area (LGA) engagement and planning project.

Following an application from one of our ten community forums in conjunction with council, funding was received to implement a CBI project across five communities. Using drought-related funding from the Department of Human Services it was decided to extend the program across the entire LGA. As has often been observed in attempts at community development, little community consultation preceded the application. When the application proved successful, significant confusion and delay was experienced. As a result the project began some 11 months late. While the project had been launched with some fanfare and a committee formed with representatives from all ten communities, the delay resulted in the facilitator commencing later than expected. The project was now at significant disadvantage in terms of community

support. The recently appointed Shire CEO, however, recognised it as a useful tool to develop a genuine participatory community planning model for a sparsely populated shire. Senior management involvement in the project has ultimately been invaluable.

The re-engagement of the steering committee required diplomacy and taking on board some acerbic criticism. Nelson, Babon, Berry and Keath (2008) discuss the need for ongoing engagement to develop meaningful communication and trust, and the various challenges this presents. The first few months of the project highlighted the need to take seriously the issues of communication and trust. While we are by no means there yet, significant progress is being made.

Why The ‘Buy In’ Factor Is Important

This initial experience has reinforced for us the challenge presented by the existing power structures in the wider Australian community. Often decisions affecting whole communities are made, without broader consultation, by those who hold a degree of power. The challenge presented is that opportunities for positive experiences are missed due to a lack of community commitment. We have observed that communities will acquiesce to decisions made *for* them, but will take no active ownership of the program or project imposed *on* them. In these cases the ‘silent majority’ feels justified in criticising any perceived failings in the project.

It was notable that Buloke communities felt little sense of ownership of the CBI program. This was due to the fact that the decision to implement the program was made by a select few. While well intentioned, this action almost proved disastrous. Not only was there little community buy in evident, there appeared to be very little buy in from council’s operational team. As Council would inevitably become a key partner in any significant projects resulting from the community planning process, the lack of support from Council departments would make progress difficult. Council officers had been used to responding to the ‘squeaky wheels’ within communities, developing funding applications on the basis of these requests. This historical context helped to explain why communities demonstrated little enthusiasm for a planning process that they saw as needlessly slowing things down.

Here we come to the issue of real community engagement. A discussion by Twyford, Waters, Hardy and Dengate (2006: 19) of community engagement in its various forms, (used in the IAP2 ‘Public Participation Spectrum’), ranges from informing the community, through to empowering them by genuine inclusion, which ‘enables us to walk away with a clear understanding of the what and why of decisions.’ This understanding encourages buy in regarding the decision making process, leading to real community ownership and participation, which they define as ‘placing final decision making in the hands of the public’ (Twyford et al 2006: 133).

The localised bonds holding the original applicants together were not complemented by effective broader connections, or weaker ties, with the other nine communities in the LGA. We have, over the past two and a half years, worked to recover some sense

of understanding of the value of participatory planning and to build ownership of the program by both council staff and communities. We learned the importance of listening to and acknowledging the concerns of confused committee members. While, as mentioned, Council department managers and officers initially felt little affinity or involvement, this situation improved as the practical elements of the planning process increased constructive communication within the organisation. Ensuring that all relevant officers were included in project meetings at the earliest possible stage of planning was critical to this process. It took some time for us to learn this process and to embed the practice in project planning within Council. Valuing legitimate risk assessment rather than labelling it as blocking has also built stronger, cross departmental, project teams.

In view of this the challenge remains to engender community ownership and real participation in the planning process. Some communities are coming to recognise, through ongoing project support and addressing community priorities, that council is, in fact, a partner and enabler in the process. Our challenge is being prepared to wait for communities to move on getting projects up and running or endeavouring to rein in potential 'loose cannons' who unintentionally derail projects through precipitate action and a lack of planning. The key is being patient and being prepared to persevere.

There is no easy way to address the 'just do it' argument. Community planning, like community engagement is often seen as 'just another hoop the government (or Council) makes us jump through. Things would be so much easier if we could concentrate on our core business of making things happen' (Twyford et al 2006: 56). We have begun to scratch below the surface of this deeply entrenched community doctrine. Three years' work has gone into encouraging communities to see the importance of having and working with a documented community plan. The stakes are currently being raised in Victoria with the launch of regional plans.

It's So Important To Know What You've Got

In Buloke the concept of 'Asset Based Community Development' (ABCD) was largely unknown. Communities had been dealing continuously with drought for almost ten years. The LGA average age of residents is 45, so we are an 'old' Shire. The population has been shrinking significantly for some years. Asset based community development was not the basis on which community leadership groups were operating.

As ABCD advocate Peter Kenyon, observed '

traditionally communities have tended to focus on their needs, deficiencies and weaknesses. Today the focus is increasingly on the use of techniques like asset mapping and appreciative inquiry which encourage commitment to identify internal assets and advantages' (Kenyon 2002).

This shift to asset based community planning and development, while initially challenging, has encouraged communities to refocus on the positives in each community. Recognising and building on community assets as opposed to concentrating on deficits existing in communities, allows for a much more positive approach to participation.

One to one discussions with community members in which we asked people to identify what they saw as key assets was a key tool in this process. These conversations provided people with the opportunity to reflect on, and to articulate the value that they place on these. It was notable that people and community relationships figured most prominently in people's thinking.

A photographic record of physical and infrastructure related assets was also greatly valued by residents, who had been living with them and were so familiar with them that many had ceased to 'see' them. The photographs generated more positive conversation when displayed at the Community Opportunity Workshops.

Ongoing conversations with community members, individuals and groups, to record the energy and enthusiasm being channelled into a range of projects, contributes to a refreshed view within communities who are coping with significant challenges requiring resilience and enhanced local capacity.

Just Get Out There and Communicate

The Community Building Initiative model described, has drawn heavily on the ABCD framework. The emphasis on asset mapping and connecting community organisations has been an interesting exercise, providing an introduction to the long term value of the program; that of developing a long term approach to the partnership between Council and the communities across the LGA. While individual projects often provide a short term boost, the capacity for communities and local government to work collaboratively together is critical to the work of maintaining the liveability of communities. Council's support for community projects is often an important factor in their viability. Community ownership and passion continue to be the critical driver that makes real collaboration possible. When community sees projects and activity as purely Council inspired and driven, the loss of 'buy in' mentioned earlier comes into play.

The Buloke community development project has been running since the latter half of 2007, when the first five 'COWs' or Community Opportunity Workshops were facilitated under the DPCD Community Building Initiative. Our first community was a small one of 100 residents. Our decision was to engage the community by visiting each household and personally inviting them to attend the workshop. People were very welcoming and really valued the opportunity to talk about why they lived in the community and how they would like to see it in five years time. This process was continued across the LGA and resulted in positive participation in the community planning process through the Workshops. The 'door knock' method also allowed us to

test the priorities agreed on at the workshops, and greatly increased the interest and participation in the planning process.

Common themes such as the loss of young people and families, the future of local businesses and secure water supplies, soon became obvious. This was of real value to the seven incumbent Shire councillors who joined in the program which crossed over ward boundaries and townships. A Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) staff member also came knocking on doors with us. He commented

‘I’ve been a Community Engagement Officer for five years now, this is the first time I’ve been out to engage first hand like this with the community.’

This phase of the work required the allocation of significant resources in terms of time and face to face communication. The ongoing challenge is getting the message across effectively to a range of people, all listening through their individual ‘static.’ Council is often seen as something to work around rather than with, when developing community projects. Community planning is often seen as ‘something council expects us to do.’ We found that, even communities that moved positively on community planning still saw themselves as ‘doing a job for council.’

Following our experience with this type of community engagement, businesses in the LGA also now receive regular visits from the Community Development team, when we have relevant information to share with them. Invitations to business focused events and activities such as the Buloke Business Excellence Awards, a Business Networking night and a Buy Local campaign were all personally delivered.

Nelson et al’s (2008: 46) concern that

community consultations still tend to centre on invitations to provide information, ideas or responses, especially on narrow or specific development ... rather than opening out broad and inclusive debate through dedicated structures and continuous processes of demographic engagement ...

is relevant to most participatory planning exercises. This challenge has led to consideration of how to engage residents in a way that maximises the potential to empower by genuine inclusion.

Good Things Come In Small Packages

In view of the above challenge, a recent development has been a program of small community engagement events as part of our response to drought and climate change. This has resulted in Buloke Shire Council working with rural residents in a new way.

In conjunction with a range of drought-related service providers, including Centrelink, the Rural Financial Counselling Service, Department of Primary Industry (DPI),

Salvation Army, Wimmera Uniting Care, as well as the Country Fire Authority (CFA) we have been getting together with local rural fire districts and utilising the fire sheds as a gathering point. These sessions have provided farming families with an opportunity to get together socially and to receive relevant information from service providers. The sessions have been conducted informally, with opportunity for one to one conversations and a chance to put 'faces to names.' Courtesy of the Rosebud Rotary Club, we have put on a barbeque, and some much needed social interaction between neighbours has contributed to some memorable evenings.

Council is using this program to build on community engagement across the shire. This is an opportunity to facilitate the 'ongoing conversations and engagement' that Nelson et al (2008: p.46) recognise as so important. There is a need for people to see a positive move from council to engage their participation in the ongoing planning for growth and response to the issues confronting both communities and individuals. This has led to the development of a culture of getting face to face with residents on 'home territory' which has met with a positive response. Councillors, council management and officers regularly attend these gatherings to consult with, and provide information to, residents. No speeches are given and there is not a whiteboard or piece of butcher's paper in sight!! However, as one new councillor observed

'I learned so much tonight. People were relaxed and wanted to talk. I didn't have to push things, the conversations flowed easily.'

The desire to explore this particular setting for community building was informed, in part, by the work of Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004). Their research into *Adult Learning through Fire and Emergency Service Organisations in Small and Remote Australian Towns* reflected much of what we were experiencing in relation to, both the dissemination of knowledge, and the building of a support network to apply this knowledge to local issues and settings.

The research highlighted the importance of fire and emergency service organisations in small and remote towns as local adult learning organisations, providing a critical focus for community building activities. These continue to be some of the few organisations in which older adults, and particularly older males, are able to sustain a culture of voluntary learning in a local community setting. Through this training a significant proportion of volunteers receive training in team, leadership and communication skills as well. Many of these skills are valuable and transferable to paid work, self-employment, commercial enterprise and other community settings (Hayes et al 2004: 23).

The Importance of Critical Reflection

The sharing of knowledge with families empowers them to actively plan not only for their community but, more importantly, for their future actions as a family. A number of young farming families are accessing information that provides them with the opportunity to look at how their theories of action, or 'why I do what I do' (Argyris

and Schön 1974) drive their thinking, and then use this process to look at the accepted norms that have shaped these theories. For Argyris and Schön (1978:2) learning involves recognising and correcting error. In this context, the assessment of the current situation considers how families would like that situation to look and what needs to change in order to achieve this.

Where something goes wrong, it is suggested, an initial port of call for many people is to look for another strategy that will address the need within the existing governing variables. In other words, 'given' goals, values, and rules are almost unthinkingly actioned rather than questioned. According to Argyris and Schön (1978:2-3), this is *single-loop learning*. An alternative response is to question the governing variables themselves, to subject them to critical scrutiny, discovering and asking what Vogt, Brown & Isaacs (2003) call the 'big questions'. For some younger farming families this has meant not simply asking 'how do I farm?' but 'should I be farming?' This may mean thinking and acting outside generational norms and asking 'am I working to live or living to work?' For some this means considering whether they are working for their family or their forbears.

It is worth re-stating this important element in participatory planning. It remains critical for community leaders, whatever their formal designation, to provide relevant information for their constituents, clients or congregations to enable planning to encompass potential solutions that allow for the governing variables to be tested as to their relevance to the environment in which the plan is to be actioned. The opportunity to participate in planning at this basic but important level and to access information from a range of relevant sources in a supportive environment can build real capacity within communities to remain resilient in the face of significant challenges. The opportunity to engage in conversation with a range of residents in this way is, however, one that requires substantial resourcing.

The commitment of individual service providers to this project has been one of the real highlights. Centrelink Rural Officers have been notable for their ongoing participation as have Rural Financial Counsellors, CFA Peer Support and Community Engagement Officers and DPI officers. Local Resource Centres, Churches, both local and regional, have all made their time available outside of normal working hours to farming families in this setting.

It is important to note that this project is moving us beyond the 'Workshop, Survey, Questionnaire, Public Meeting.' This is an opportunity for Council and the service providers to simply ask 'how are you going?' to have an informal conversation, to make the time to get out of our office into the 'office' of our farming families. The information sharing has been a real two way experience. Councillors, managers and officers have been able to hear first hand the needs of farming residents. Services, including Council, have been able to provide real assistance to families through having spent time in the heart of the community, speaking and listening informally to families.

These get togethers have provided valuable follow up to a visitation program commonly designated 'Farm Gate' which, in the case of Buloke Shire, followed on from the community engagement phase of the Community Opportunity Workshop program. Farming families have received up to three visits from Council Community Development and Drought officers in the past 18 months. The lessons learned through the experience with community consultation through facilitating ten 'Community Opportunity Workshops' (COWs) across the LGA have been critical in shaping our approach to participatory community planning and development.

Speaking Clearly

Getting people involved in planning takes this challenge to a whole new level. The existence of a 'just do it' culture across the communities adds to the reluctance to get involved in 'mucking about in meetings and getting bogged down with paperwork.' While this can make life exciting, the risk issues are significant.

A recent example of this showed up in a small community when the local bowls club wanted to pipe water to the bowling green. A tank was set up at the green and council was approached for permission to set up the pipeline some 1.4 kilometres in length. 'We need to cross under two street culverts and under the rail line, but there's also a culvert there with a water authority pipe through it.' Council agreed, the process was set in train for the necessary permit. The Planning Department agreed to issue the permit on the receipt of written permission to go under the rail culvert. The community members were informed of this by email and the process was begun with the relevant rail authority.

A follow up call to the community members for further information was met with 'what would you say if the job was already done?' When asked why, the response was 'Joe had an email from someone at the council saying it was right to go.' While three weeks had past since the initial meeting, the rail authority response was both cooperative and timely. No unnecessary delay was experienced. However, this process was too long for the community and they had 'got on with it.'

Council officers learned some interesting lessons in communication. It is important to consider the capacity of individuals to interpret communication. More significantly, the message coming across related to the capacity of community members to buy into the planning process and to accept the fact that this requires allowing time for due process. While this has relevance to immediate, tangible actions, the more significant application of this comes into play when looking at bigger picture 'visioning' exercises required in community planning.

The challenge of encouraging communities to question the existing governing variables, such as, 'we always meet at 8pm on Monday' or 'our local economy has always been based on grain growing', and to subject them to critical scrutiny, is now complicated by the increasingly complex environment in which local government and its community partners operate. Situations such as that described above relating to the

water supply are often interpreted by communities as their challenging the governing variables. As local government officers are often called on to challenge assumptions of freedom to act, this is interpreted by community members as putting stumbling blocks in the way of community driven initiatives.

With scrutiny of governance increasingly an element of the climate in which organisations operate, the importance of educating communities is increasingly critical. The requirement of community planning to bring order to development and to build the capacity of communities to work within the constraints placed upon them by an increasingly complex world add an extra dimension to the planning matrix. It is noteworthy that examples such as the one above continue to redefine the parameters of the information needing to be provided to communities in this regard. The need to communicate with community groups with terms such as ‘I have no discretion in this matter’ is becoming increasingly common.

This situation is often seen as flying in the face of the stated desire to partner with communities to enhance their liveability. Without careful planning, the capacity for communities to contribute to local projects through ‘in kind’ support may be severely limited. Keeping lines of communication open between council and community groups must include education in relation to effective project planning and the realities of the regulatory frameworks that we work in.

What have we learned through the process?

Coming through this exercise, for us, has been the continuing need to monitor and improve the way we communicate. The potential for people to effectively participate in community development and planning is directly proportionate to the messages and information that they are receiving which inform their understanding of their options as well as the process involved in participation.

This work of communicating the importance and relevance of the planning process is also critical to the maintenance of community plans as living documents. The increasingly complex world in which we operate will place ever greater pressure on our communication skills and our willingness to communicate with inclusiveness as the goal.

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Book Review

The Value of Nothing: How to reshape market society and redefine democracy

RAJ PATEL (2009) Melbourne: Black Inc., 256 pp, \$24.95 rrp, ISBN 9781863954563

This book addresses issues that professionals and the thinking public ponder on a daily basis. In a masterful and rollicking good read, Patel ranges across global history, economics, the daily struggle for making a living, agriculture, human rights, transnational corporations and their behaviour, ecology, food security, social movements and the future of what Patel calls the planet's living systems, including democratic forms of government. He uses abundant statistics to substantiate his arguments and his vignettes from unexpected parts of the globe make his writing style not only accessible but also fascinating.

This is not a classic welfare text but its unique contribution is that it enables non-economists or lay people to understand seemingly arcane knowledge and to join the dots between contemporary seemingly disparate issues, such as the swine flu, Somali piracy and why Australians work too much or not enough. This book was set as one of the texts in the Masters of Regional and Community Development at Monash University Gippsland, and the mature age students, often professional practitioners, confirmed my own enormous 'aha' experience. Apart from Patel's demystification of economics, global finance and politics, he provides human services workers and community activists with a convincing theoretical framework about human rights and social justice, and the possibilities for local economies which serve people's needs. He also discusses participatory forms of democracy which are designed to grant citizens power to make decisions during a government's term of office, significantly increasing the public's capacity for influence beyond the ballot box. The title of this book refers to Oscar Wilde's famous statement that: 'today we know the price of everything and the value of nothing'. Patel's beginning thesis is that the way price is allocated is artificial, historically imposed by a minority in order to extract maximum profits. The first part of the book is dedicated to a thorough and consistent analysis, replete with historical evidence and data, about the global implementation of a system of ascribing commercial values designed to benefit the world's richest corporations. Such price tagging is distorting and anti-social and operates at the expense of the majority of the world's population, of their livelihoods and finally, of the viability of the environment.

Chapter 1 begins with the 'Global Financial Crisis' and Alan Greenspan's admission that it was due to the flawed assumptions underpinning free market economics, or the neo-liberal theory which we are all familiar with. The importance of this topic is that: 'market society doesn't simply turn things into commodities – it makes its own culture and ideas about human nature and social order' (Patel 2009: 24).

Chapter 2 'Becoming Homo Economicus' continues his historical deconstruction of commercial valuing in turning people into consumers, who equate material wealth with a sense of self worth and with happiness and who unquestionably allocate priority to economic growth and higher GDP. Patel introduces Nobel Prize Laureate Gary S. Becker whose thesis that everyone and everything is driven by self maximisation has been applied to all areas of social sciences and government. The readers of *Practice Reflexions* know well how limited this view of human nature is, and this potentially rather dour chapter is enlivened by amusing anecdotes, such as Becker's wanting to study sociology but finding it too difficult. Becker's powerful ideas are counterposed with a story about experiments with chimpanzees who demonstrated gratitude, cooperation and an innate sense of fairness. The monkeys became most aggravated at unfairness, at which point they simply stopped playing. The subtext is that perhaps we ought to also question whether the game of global free markets is fair.

Patel does not oppose markets per se which are necessary and have always existed, but rather his focus is on the behaviour of transnational corporations dominating governments and world regions. Chapter 3 'The Corporation' refers to a documentary which reveals that the behaviours of big business fit fully into the definitions of psychopathic personalities, according to the American manual of mental disorders (DSM-IV). Patel provides international evidence that big profits are at the expense of social and environmental costs falling on people, governments or the environment itself. He traces the hidden contributions by government subsidies and by taxpayers to the affordability of a \$4 Big Mac. A similar analysis is applied to the 2008 failed wheat crops in China. These negative externalities are not counted nor paid by shareholders, whom therefore Patel calls thieves, another example of his lively writing style.

Chapter 4 continues with a historical exegesis of Adam Smith, Karl Marx and Keynes. Chapter 5 deals with the relationship between government and the corporate world, which could provide insights into some of the puzzling decisions Australian governments make. Chapter 6, 'We are all Commoners', is arguably the most revealing. Comparatively late in the history of human civilisations, beginning in 1200 in England, there has been an acceleration of the appropriation and enclosure of natural resources which had never been owned by anyone. The Commons refers to the water, waterways, forests, nature, and land that were seen as belonging to everybody. As social systems were communal, interconnectedness ensured the maintenance of fair and ethical uses of these common resources. My view is that the history of land enclosures, the ending of subsistence farming and the invention of individual property rights is so important that it ought to be part of everyone's knowledge. The process continues and accounts for famines in regions that were previously bread baskets. The depletion of the world's fishing stocks is due not to unsustainable global population but to the industrial fishing practice of trawling nets kilometres long, destroying everything from the ocean floor, while throwing out 90% of the catch as having no resale value.

Patel's thesis is that the operations of transnational corporations are destroying livelihoods and ecological living systems. At this point, Patel's arguments leads into a consideration of human rights as collective rights. We do not usually hear of community rights. Rather, the

existing scholarship is about human rights as pertaining to the sanctity of the individual. The legal apparatuses in Australia are geared to protecting individuals. Patel leads us to consider that life is necessarily interdependent and human rights are the rights of collectives, of groups, in inter-connectedness. So legal or economic systems, operating on the construction of humanity as single individuals, constitute a denial of basic humanity. The ecological crisis compels a rejection of the construction of people as Homo Economicus, and a return to a paradigm where all living systems are connected and interdependent.

The second half of Patel's book deals with 'the right to have rights'. His examples across the majority world and less so in wealthy countries, show communities reassuming control over local resources, factories, economies, food and agriculture (*Via Campesina*), resistance to slum clearance, appropriations of scarce common water by Nestles in India, and establishment of meaningful democracy in Mexico (*Zapatista Junta*).

Patel distils the crucial challenges for the planet as residing in food sovereignty, which in his view, encapsulates the ethical and inalienable right to existence. The current global subservience to free markets demonstrates a disregard which impacts most on women, and goes in tandem with other forms of violence against people and nature. Patel shows, by interviewing groups around the world, that social arrangements that are respectful and life sustaining are already implemented.

Lastly, Patel addresses how societies could be governed, and having shown the limitations of representative democracy, he discusses participatory democracy, such as Latin American local governments devolving to communities the power to decide allocation of budgets, and the Zapatista Junta's deliberative democracy, where all decisions are made by local people through protracted and very slow dialogue.

This overview places the social justice struggles of social and welfare professionals and academics in a much broader context, and provides data with potential uses in policy advocacy. The final strength of this evidence lies with the inspiration that can be derived by human services and community development workers in identifying that our efforts are part of global movements of ordinary people choosing to create new forms of democracy that are not only participative, but also deeply deliberative. Patel gives readers a breadth and depth of vision to conceive that another world is not only possible but is already being actualised. I was not able to put Patel down, which is rather unusual for a book on global financial systems.

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Book review

Brian M McCoy (2008) *Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal Men* RRP \$34.95 ISBN: 978 0 85575 658 1 Publisher: Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS

CHRIS LAMING

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www.eurekastreet.com.au

In *Holding Men*, McCoy explores issues central to the Indigenous men of the Western Desert region. Issues of masculinity, of grief, of illness, and how these relate to Kalyirninpa (holding, nurturing, teaching, growing-up, respect). Though specifically about that region, *Holding Men* has crucial implications for the whole of Australia.

For nearly forty years Brian McCoy has lived and worked with Indigenous communities, mostly in the Western Desert, and from this depth of experience and from his PhD research about the health and well-being of Aboriginal men, comes this extraordinary book.

It is a book about an ancient culture and its people, trying in their own way, to survive in 21st century Australia. Rigorously researched yet simply written, it challenges us with human stories of heart-breaking enormity whilst reflecting a quiet hope in resilience and healing of *kalyirninpa*.

There are many profound insights in this book, which come from years of respectful relationships and deep reflection. *Kalyirninpa* points a way forward, a way out of the nightmarish day to day tragedies of disease and ill-health among Indigenous Australians, because it involves 'a proper looking after'.

Three chapters in particular situate serious current issues for Indigenous communities, particularly men, within the embrace of *Kalyirninpa*: 'Petrol sniffing: More than a risk'; Football: More than a game; Prison: more than a holiday'. As McCoy puts it: 'From the perspective of *kanyirninpa* these socially significant spaces (petrol sniffing, Australian Rules and prison) can offer men both healthy outcomes and unhealthy risks'. My own meaning making around those 'spaces' was deeply challenged and enriched with constructive alternatives.

The key *Puntu* (Aboriginal) values, of *ngarra* (land), *walytja* (family) and *tjukurrpa* (ancestral dreaming) are represented as 'continually dynamic and inter-relating' and *kanyirninpa* provides the balance for creative tension between relatedness and autonomy, on

the one hand and nurturance and authority, on the other. McCoy manages to maintain a similar balance in his book.

Juxtaposed to his deeply sensitive, respectful, inculturated research - in the tradition of de Nobili or Matteo Ricci - is his empathy and compassion for those affected by the personal tragedies associated with petrol sniffing, alcohol abuse, a prison sentence or premature death.

McCoy's insights are profound and he is able to articulate them in a very clear way. His rolling narrative at times has the feel of a foreign correspondent in a battle zone. This is a silent 'battle zone', and arguably the most important moral battle ground in Australia today.

Holding Men is also a challenging resource for policy makers in the area of Indigenous health and well-being, precisely because it is the antithesis of armchair philosophising and moralising. It is deeply respectful and mindful (and heartfelt), of traditional values and customs (eg 'Sorry Business') and offers a key to understanding the links between life and death, mourning and celebration, health and disease, for Western Desert Indigenous people.

McCoy manages to move through this difficult terrain with the sure-footedness of an ancient Aboriginal tracker and a confidence founded on years of sitting, listening, observing and quietly healing. Reading the book is at times like sitting in on a conversation under a Boab tree. Brian McCoy is a healer who carries his wisdom quietly. The ethical dilemmas and questions are addressed with integrity, humanity, respect and truthfulness, with no attempt at glib answers.

This is an important book, written in a lucid thoughtful way that leads us step by step through what is, for most of us, foreign land on Australian soil. In particular *Holding Men* lets us feel the impact on Indigenous boys and young men, no longer being held by the land, by their elders, more and more autonomous and physical and psychological peril, adrift from their traditions, lands and culture.

Holding Men is about being wounded but it is also about being resilient and the possibility or hope of building that resilience in others, both individually and in community, through *kalyirninpa* .

The Indigenous artwork is riveting, confronting and evocative, with many paintings graphically illustrating the stories of young Aboriginal men and the spaces they find themselves in.

The Spirit of Christmas is fully alive and well in *Holding Men* .

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