

New Voices: A 'student's vision for practice'

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The real problem that confronts Indigenous peoples is one which exists in the white community. Racism is a problem that can only be overcome by people who are part of the community in which it festers...Therefore my ultimate message is that rather than seeking to come into our communities and 'help' us, you have a much more important role in your own community... We can solve our own internal community problems. It is up to you to change your society, not ours. (Foley 2000,p.87)

WOW - here I am with only a few months left of my social work studies and I will be 'out there' in the big world, striving to articulate and demonstrate professionally, ethically and effectively all of the theoretical knowledge I have learned over the last 7 years. Exciting and frightening at the same time! Although I am thrilled and very relieved about getting to the end of my degree, within my Self there is a whirlpool of frustration, confusion, trepidation, loneliness, and uncertainty that twists and convulses uncontrollably within the confines of my soul. It encompasses a massive vortex of dominant concepts/perspectives and ideologies waiting to be utilised- all that is needed is its application. There is an expectation that for me to be a graduate social worker, successful completion of each subject is required – and fair enough too, I don't have a problem with that. However, what I do have a problem with is that throughout my theoretical learning stages, Aboriginal holistic viewpoints have been almost absent in social work curricula. Briskman (2007, p.13) identified the entrenched elitism of social work practice can be perceived as "obfuscating Indigenous knowledge". Equally, Trevithick (2005, p.23) stated that Indigenous knowledge has been "seriously overlooked" in social work and Aboriginal wisdom is ignored or considered less relevant than the knowledge of "experts". As a WakkaWakkaWarumungu Aboriginal woman I am disappointed that the perspectives of my people's "... collective ways of being, spiritual connections with land and the significance of extended family" (Briskman 2007,p.3), have not been a constant in methods of effective and appropriate engagement with Aboriginal people. I can only conclude that still "...social workers [are] participants in the process of dispossession and oppression, albeit sometimes only by default" (Gilbert 2001, cited in Briskman, p.15); and are members of a "...profession of oppressors" (Atkinson, Weeks, Hoatson, and Briskman, cited in Briskman 2007, p.14/15), intent on maintaining an apolitical therapeutic approach and resistant to activism (Briskman 2007). Hence my dilemma in terms of methodologies of practice - sometimes I just don't know what to do and how to do it. I become stuck, because I am Aboriginal and I have such a different way of looking at the world. Oftentimes I find myself in a position of 'no man's land'. So where do I go from here; how do I transform these 'theoretical perspectives' into a paradigm of practical experience conducive to an Aboriginal viewpoint; an Aboriginal way of doing and being that is in complete contrast to "traditional social work... [that is] largely shaped by modernity that reifies universal constructs and scientific truths at the expense of plurality and difference" (Briskman 2007, p.8). Furthermore, such theory is derived from a white society that does not generally believe that it has anything to learn from Aboriginal knowledge and culture (Briskman 2007). Yet Indigenous Australians make up a significant proportion of social work clients. I have to say I feel so alone at times and I find myself becoming quietly despondent, disappointed and frustrated at the lack of understanding and consideration of the "...cultural differences...and...communication styles"(Lynn, Thorpe, Miles, Cutts, Butcher & Ford 1998, p.2) of my people.

So what is my VISION and how am I going to practice as a social worker? How am I going to incorporate my Self into my practice so that I stay true to the essence of Nangala (my skin-name), a proud WakkaWakkaWarumungu woman with the ethics of a professional social worker? In terms of ethical practice, am I to abide by the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) Code of Ethics 2010, endorsed by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)? It stipulates in 1.1 Definition of Social Work "The social work profession promotes social

change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work”. (AASW 2010, p.7).

What about the ethics of my culture, tradition and lore, that connects with “... Aboriginal values of kindness, patience, listening, sharing, and emphasis on relationship building ... connection, spirituality, ongoing learning” (Baskin 2005, p.103). What about understanding and knowing the differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, being genuine, yarning and storytelling, talking plain, and utilising family connections and resources. Then there is having a laugh, sharing smokes, having a cup of tea, respecting Elders, knowing your place, talking language, non-shaming, being straight up and direct, especially with young people, and doing what you say, and being with them all the way. Some would say that I could utilise them alongside current theoretical applications. However, this is my point – we have a legitimate theory that utilises historical knowledge, cultural practices, knowledges, mores and perspectives. The question I ask is how can I not incorporate these attributes when they are equal to the breath I take and essential to my Spirit? Why is it that we continue “...to be silenced and the norm reproduced” (Spry 1996 cited in Lynn, Thorpe, Miles, Cutts, Butcher, Ford 1998, p.82). Moreover, if non-Aboriginal people who are working with Indigenous peoples, don't know or understand these concepts, how are they able to “intervene at the point where people interact with their environments” (AASW Code of Ethics 2010)?

Social work has the perfect opportunity to incorporate the true history of Aboriginal culture, tradition and lore, that is inclusive of justice, family, respect, hope, genuineness, openness, knowledge, commitment, growth, courtesy, honesty, acceptance, dependability, friendship, achievement and many more values, all a big part of my make-up and what I hold dear. We need to speak “...in a good way...” (Baskin 2005,p.103) about Aboriginal life and our history and what the impacts continue to be as a result of colonisation rather than become caught up in the darkness of it. Colonialism has been a catalyst for Aboriginal over-representation in health and welfare statistics. It cannot be viewed in terms of past tense, rather “it totally surrounds and is absorbed into our whole existence and how we think about ourselves individually and collectively” (Baskin 2005,p.98). It is imperative that everyone, whether they are in academia, practicing social workers, or students, is educated in terms of “...the real thing about colonisation and [about] assimilation practices” (Baskin 2005,p103). Colonisation “...is the fundamental denial of our freedom to be Indigenous in a meaningful way, and the unjust occupation of the physical, social and political spaces we need in order to survive as Indigenous peoples” (Alfred cited in Baskin 2005, p.98).

Aboriginal social work practitioner and educator Cindy Baskin states that an “...anti-colonial discursive framework sees Indigenous knowledges as an important standpoint... [and] highlights key issues such as colonialism, Indigeneity, spirituality and resistance/agency...” (2005). This framework identifies and articulates an Aboriginal standpoint perfectly, and one that I include in my ethos for practice and change. For example, I don't want to feel like an outsider in my chosen profession or made to feel like a whinging black when I express or question the motives of a certain theory or framework of a fellow

practitioner, when they are working with Aboriginal people. “Respect for persons...social justice...professional integrity” (AASW Code of Ethics 2010,p.12) are three core values of social work. However, I have personally felt the repercussions of disciplinary action after I asked a non-Indigenous colleague what methodology she was utilising when working with an Aboriginal woman. I was accused of being a bully and offending this colleague and I was chastised. This accusation sits alongside the racist behaviours and discrimination that I experienced at this feminist non-government organisation. This was a challenge I thought I would not meet in an environment where the safety and support of all women was paramount to this organisation’s vision statement and organisational ethos. I was completely undermined in what I was trying to achieve there, not only as a woman, but an Aboriginal woman whose role was to develop, implement and manage programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Standard 3.8 of the Practice Standards for Social Workers states: “The social worker is able to initiate and/or contribute to the review of organisational systems and processes in the organisation in which they work...” (2003). This openness was not afforded to me in the above example. I felt completely left out in the cold and experienced “...such feelings as self-hatred, inferiority and powerlessness...” (Briskman 2007,p.55), because my supervisor at the time was a practicing social worker. If I didn’t believe it before then it certainly became evident that I was working in an environment that supported “colonialist practice... [that was] so implicitly rooted in social work practice that it [became] invisible... and [was]...unchallenged” (Briskman 2007,p.29). According to Dominelli (cited in Briskman 2007,p.17), “Therapeutic helping approaches, maintenance approaches and emancipatory approaches” are all essential engagement strategies that social workers need in their artillery when working for social justice and human rights. These approaches are “...a necessary precursor to effective engagement of social work with Indigenous peoples” (Briskman 2007,p.17). Although I was not afforded such strategies, it is vitally important for me as an upcoming practitioner to “to identify, analyse and take action to counter discrimination, racism, disadvantage, inequality and injustice” (O’Hagan 1996, p.74), upholding “a culturally safe and respectful workplace... freedom from unjust repercussions or victimisation... freedom from discrimination in the workplace... support from the profession when acting in an ethically obligatory or permissible way...[and]...safety in professional practice” (Section five, AASW Code of Ethics, 2010).

Through critical reflection, that experience has made me even more determined to pursue an anti-colonial position in my practice. Furthermore, alongside my anti-oppressive and anti-racist standpoint, I want to pursue the legitimisation of an Aboriginal framework for practice, and to continue challenging systemic oppression, injustice and inequality of my people. My reflections align with Section 6.3 and 6.4 of the Practice Standards for Social Workers, where “the social worker uses ongoing reflection on practice in order to enhance the development of their skills, knowledge and understanding...[and]...the social worker views their own development as an ethical practitioner as essential” (2003).

Utilising an anti-colonial framework in practice will enable me to educate people about the importance of learning my people’s ways of being and doing and to articulate why it is important to understand our differences to celebrate and embrace these wonderful treasures

of knowledge, and be able to feel a "...freedom to exist as... [an]...Indigenous...[person]... in almost every single sphere of...[my]...existence". (Alfred cited in Baskin 2005, p.98). I want to practice as an Aboriginal woman who has a social work degree and not a social worker who is Aboriginal. I want to express myself through the lens of Aboriginality in all its splendour, beauty, differences, customs, traditions and knowledge. More importantly, I want to see the Aboriginal worldview acknowledged, accepted and included in academia as a legitimate discourse and methodology of practice. After all, "...to practice without a theory is to sail an uncharted sea; theory without practice is not to set sail at all..." (Susser 1968,v). This quote by Susser is conducive to Aboriginal perspectives and viewpoints in terms of a legitimisation of theoretical process that "recognises the importance of locally produced knowledge emanating from cultural history and daily human experiences and social interactions..." (Dei &Asgharzadeh 2000, cited in Baskin 2005,p.98). For me an Aboriginal perspective is akin to and shares many attributes to that of an anti-colonial perspective which enables us as Aboriginal peoples to take back our power and "...to question, to challenge, and to subsequently subvert the oppressive structures of power and privilege...promote our own powerful discourses such as storytelling...use our own... concepts and cultural frames of reference...[and]... shift away from a sole preoccupation with victimisation" (Dei &Asgharzadeh 2000, cited in Baskin 2005, p.99).

When I am conversing with fellow students, colleagues, lecturers and academics regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, I am asked what framework I work from. I answer, an Aboriginal perspective; and to be honest, at times I feel that my answer will not hold water, that there is not any form of tangible weight associated with it and that I need to further articulate and expand on it so it corresponds to a theoretical framework they can relate to. Once that framework has been established they are happy that they have been able to identify and relate to a framework that suits their level of understanding and I feel I am safely included and accepted within their circle of professionalism. WOW what a contradiction in terms here!

On one side I cringe at having to explain myself all of the time because, "Oppression is systemic and is produced and reproduced in everyday social practices and processes in ways that serve the dominant group" (Briskman 2007,p.22) hence the continuity of explanation to the dominant group; yet on the other side, I feel I need to share it so I can feel that I belong!!! My natural Aboriginal framework is concrete, it is real and living and it has substantial structure and system within its makeup. It BREATHES AND IS ESSENTIAL, TANGIBLE! Yet, I continually have to explain myself from my perspective as an Aboriginal woman, and in terms of the relevance of social workers being culturally competent - how important it is for others to understand the concepts of colonialism and the impacts it has on my mob. As Foley wrote in the opening quote, non-Indigenous workers have their role to play in addressing this ignorance and racism.

It is imperative that we all understand we are ONE human race, albeit with differences, and these differences in all aspects of life and creation are what constitutes humanness. The beauty of difference should enable us to each learn about and indulge ourselves in its splendour, to make room for the exquisite diversity of human life, our cultures, traditions and knowledges. I believe in the Dreamtime my Ancestors had it right when they created

Mother Earth. They utilised all of her gifts perfectly in creating rivers, mountains, seas and lands, animals, trees, the stars and my totems of the wedge tail eagle and the sand goanna. They created them to show how perfect diversity is and how vitally important and connected they all are to each other and that our culture's traditions and lores embrace them to protect them and to keep our story alive, breathing and real. My Dreaming alongside that of my brothers and sisters, my Spirit, and my family is worth all that I am- to see it survive and given its due respect and acknowledgement. Someday, you the reader will read my papers, books, and research, and listen to lectures that I will orate so I can continue my responsibility of teaching about my people and our ways; so I come to respect and appreciate yours, as you will of mine. This is the essence of my social work practice, and still there is room for so much more.

This is my vision for practice.

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