

# Aboriginal Fields of Practice

## Book Review

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Bindi Bennett (Ed.)

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*Aboriginal Fields of Practice* is another cutting-edge collection of chapters brought together by Bindi Bennett showcasing the knowledge of experienced Aboriginal social work practitioners throughout Australia. Specific to this recent volume is the practical guides from Aboriginal workers across different social work fields providing much-needed guidelines for social work students, researchers, academics and practitioners. The work provides new insights and critiques of white feminisms as well as colonialism and patriarchy alongside clear explanations of concepts such as *cultural safety* and *cultural humility*. Divided into three main sections: working with particular interest areas; different practice settings; and niche and emerging trends. The book is easy to navigate and includes useful case studies which are carefully analysed and instructive. These are alongside reflective discussion questions concluding each chapter. These questions support readers to reinforce their learning.

One of the most useful aspects is that each chapter explores a field of practice in depth – providing insight and understanding for readers. In the “Working with particular interest” section, the concepts of gender and LGBTIQ are extensively explored from three different Aboriginal perspectives, adding to the currently sparse scholarship on the topic. These chapters are followed by “A culturally supportive ethics of care: Working with Aboriginal children and young people” by Jessica Russ-Smith and Amelia Wheeler, and a chapter by Maddison Williams, “Working with Aboriginal older persons” exploring aged care for First Nations Australians including social and emotional wellbeing, cultural responsiveness, culturally safe care and working respectfully.

In the second section, entitled “Social work practice settings” is a wealth of fields of practice advice covering working within mental health settings, criminal justice settings, and working with Aboriginal men. A chapter about “Child Protection” by Kaylene Malthouse and Fiona Oates provides an illuminating case study where the impact of the dominance of EuroWestern knowledge systems on both practitioners and service users is clearly shown.

Ideas for how non-Aboriginal workers can respectfully and safely work within this space is included. Following this is a chapter about criminal justice, where the authors make the important point that “much can be done at the level of the individual practitioner” (Morgan et al., 2021, p. 184), emphasising the importance for non-Indigenous workers learn to work in culturally responsive ways. This and other chapters demonstrate practical steps for how to go about this, pointing out some common errors that social workers make.

In the final section, entitled “Niche fields and emerging trends”, Stuart McMinn, Clayton Cruse, Rachael Howard, Nathan Murgha and Phil Pallas offer their lived experience of living and working in rural and remote contexts. Here they provide some practice principles and point out some common blind spots in order to assist non-Aboriginal social workers to move beyond complicit and harmful practices in rural social work. Amongst the many pieces of advice in this chapter, is the need to “wrestle with nuance,” and avoid positioning the self in a parent-type role, or as the hero of the narrative when, in reality, social work has been complicit in harmful practices.

Michael Woodley and Dyann Ross’ chapter “First Nation leaders’ lessons on sustainability and the environment for social work”, is the next chapter in this final section, and calls for social work to stand with First Nations People and invites readers to consider how they can contribute to standing in solidarity. Then, in a chapter entitled “Resilience based therapeutic interventions to address intergenerational trauma”, Amy Kennedy shows how non-Aboriginal social workers can play a role in developing the strengths and knowledges, resilience, perpetual healing and culturally therapeutic interventions Aboriginal communities already possess. The caveat here is that they need to acknowledge wrongdoings alongside this. There are steps proposed for a social worker to become an ally of Indigenous feminist perspectives.

An ethics framework from an Indigenous worldview complete with detailed explanations of principles and implications and opportunities for social work practice is then presented in the chapter by Maggie Walter and Joselyn Baltra-Ulloa. This leads well to a chapter by Jennie Briese and Jodie Satour which analyses the historical effects of policy agendas and actions in Australia on First Australian peoples. Drawing attention to how discursive practices reproduce colonial practices that control First Nations people, Briese and Satour contend that social workers need to be aware of the “neo paternalistic and assimilative nature” (p. 275) in contemporary policies such as Closing the Gap, and others. Lack of financial transparency was also identified, amongst other things, as a block to accountability and progress. The chapter supports readers to think critically about policies their organisations might subscribe to, to be more powerful advocates in the policy space. This is a great segue for “Aboriginal activism and embodying activism in social work” by Jessica Russ-Smith and Amelia Wheeler – a chapter designed to learn from diverse ways to engage with activism and “what these actions of strength and power can teach social work practice” (p. 290).

The final chapter brings together key themes and is entitled “Mistakes and misunderstandings: Why are social workers still not getting it right?” Written by Bindi Bennett, Stuart McMinn,

Nigel Millgate and Claire Morse, this chapter continues the useful process of demonstrating concepts using case studies and examples and includes reflective questions to prompt further thinking. Overall, this book weaves the skilful observations of Aboriginal practitioners regarding blocks and hindrances to achieving cultural responsiveness together with practical advice for how to work respectfully across all fields of practice. It is a “must-read” for all social workers, whether they be based in government, NGO or in academia, since first and foremost, social workers should do no harm.

## References

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