

## BOOK REVIEWS

## Decolonizing Social Work

Mel Gray, John Coates, Michael Yellow Bird and Tiana Hetherington (Editors)  
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This volume follows Gray, Coates, and Yellow Bird's *Indigenous Social Work Around the World* (2008). Organised into four parts that individually focus on theory, practice, education and research, it reflects the editors' aim of paving the way for 'contemplative review and paradigmatic shifts in social work' (p. 7) practice with Indigenous Peoples and others who have been impacted by colonisation. The contributors include social work educators, practitioners and researchers, who for the most part write from first-hand knowledge and experience of colonisation. This prioritising of their experience as colonised individuals and simultaneously as practitioners in a colonised field, inscribes the 16 chapters of the book with authenticity: contributors detail work in locations as varied as Cuba, India, Jordan and New Zealand, and draw on an even wider base of cultural knowledge and experience. This in itself challenges the hegemony of views from the Global North, the location of much social work theorising. Just as important to the purpose of the book is that it reveals inherent tensions in the idea of working cross-culturally. A consistent theme emerges across this breadth of material: a truly decolonised form of social work is yet to appear, but more than mere accommodation of the perspectives of colonised peoples or assimilation of their experience into existing social work paradigms is necessary if positive change is to occur.

The scope of the volume and its associated agenda of philosophical, intellectual and political change are important; the challenge for a reviewer is to do this justice. The sheer volume of ideas and detailing of evidence has forced a selective approach to discussion of its contents. In Part One, 'Theory: Thinking about Indigenous Social Work', the editors' Introduction frames the discussion and clarifies concepts and terms, in particular what they mean when referring to 'Indigenous Peoples', 'indigenisation' and 'decolonisation'. They are careful to point out the double standards and essentialism that come with any attempts to label and define peoples (including Western peoples), and the inherent right of Indigenous Peoples to define who they are for themselves. Not all Indigenous people are at ease with the term because of its tendency to homogenise the diversity it seeks to describe; conversely,

the editors note, there are other recognised meanings to the term. For one of the editors (Yellow Bird), it refers to the 'personal and collective process of decolonizing Indigenous life and restoring true self-determination based on traditional Indigenous values' (p. 4). In social work, indigenisation is commonly used to refer to 'the adaptation of Western social work theory and methods to local contexts' (p. 4). Describing debates about the authenticity of Indigenous identity as a distraction and as contributing to static conceptualisations of Indigenous culture, the editors focus instead on promoting 'locally and culturally relevant forms of scholarship, research, education and practice' that work against universalising forces, and seek to 'remove the often subtle vestiges of colonization from theory and practice' (p. 7).

One of the ways the broader field of social work has sought to do this is through the development of methods that address cross-cultural practice. A number of the contributors tackle this and the related issues of cultural competency and culturally relevant social work practice. The chapter authored by Ann Joselynn Baltra-Ulloa, a Chilean Mapuche woman and social work practitioner and educator in Australia, points out the predicaments involved in the idea of cultural competence as a core skill in social work practice. Not the least of these is that it draws on a static notion of culture and 'an underlying assumption, rooted in racism, that the social worker is superior and thus eminently capable of overcoming all obstacles to reach the cultural "other"' (p. 94). One of the intellectual tools Baltra-Ulloa has sought to use in her work as an educator is Whiteness theory, which seeks to reveal the power and privilege held by the bearers of white skin (Hage, 1998). This produced discomfort for both herself and her students, who were seemingly unable to come to terms with its challenge to the core value of multiculturalism in Australian society, which they associated with racial tolerance. For them, recognising the privilege associated with their own Whiteness would have involved recognition and criticism of the system that endowed this same privilege upon themselves. As Moreton-Robinson (2004) and others have pointed out, Whiteness constitutes an 'invisible norm' against which peoples of all other

ethnic and cultural groups can be measured — ultimately, as Baltra-Ulloa notes, to be problematised as minorities and inferior. On the other hand, Baltra-Ulloa's discomfort was associated with challenging this invisible norm. For her, social work needs to recognise that cross-culturalism is not decolonised social work. This requires making visible both the contexts of the social worker as well as the 'others' they work with. In practice, she suggests, this would involve more collaborative approaches — social worker and 'client' working together to design, develop, and test 'what might work for them, in their context' (p. 97). Central to this would be an ethic of care that recognises Whiteness as inhibiting the capacity of social workers to care for all people, including caring about their own motivations and actions in doing social work. This goes to the heart of the espoused principles of the profession: human rights and social justice, and working towards a just society; but, Baltra-Ulloa maintains, this will only be possible if social work turns its gaze back on what it is as a profession and how it conceptualises its practice. In this view, context rather than cultural competency becomes a core component of a decolonised social work practice.

The second part of the book, 'Practice: From the Bottom Up', discusses social work in a variety of international locations (Cuba, Mexican Americans in the United States, Native Hawaiians, New Zealand Maori, Jordan). The first chapter is de Urrutia Barroso and Strug's paper on social work in Cuba, tracing its development and continuing professionalisation independently from forms of social work found in capitalist economies. The first Cuban school of social work appeared in 1943 but closed along with the rest of the University of Havana in the lead-up to the Cuban Revolution. After the Revolution in the late 1950s, the post-revolutionary government did not see a need for professional social workers because of the scope and intent of its economic and social programs. These were designed to provide universal access to education, healthcare, housing and employment, but by the 1970s the need for trained professionals to assist in bolstering the public healthcare system resulted in the establishment of a training program for 'social work technicians' (p. 109). Social workers in healthcare and untrained 'empirical social workers' (quasi-volunteer community members affiliated with mass community organisations) were employed to function as 'agents of transformation' (p. 109). Economic crisis in the 1990s and increased social differentiation forced the government to abandon its policy of universal access in favour of targeted welfare programs. Known in Cuba as 'The Special Period in Time of Peace', it forced a change from top-down decision-making processes to greater focus on community involvement. In 1998, a professional degree program was established at the University of Havana (The Social Work Concentration in Sociology), and in 2000, a para-professional social work program was created, offering training in community-based practice, which has graduated more than 40,000

para-professionals. These 'emergentes' were required to work in their own communities, with some working on projects of national significance. De Urrutia Barroso and Strug are careful to note that the development of social work in Cuba reflects the particular local conditions there. They do not propose it provides a model for capitalist countries with more individualistic values systems. They suggest instead that the community-based, socially oriented approach of Cuban social work can make a useful contribution to international dialogues on education, research strategies and theoretical advances. Given Cuba's status as a post-revolutionary nation and that decolonising social work is concerned with the impacts of Western colonisation, de Urrutia Barroso and Strug ultimately conclude that social work in Cuba is 'a work in progress' (p. 123) with some of the features of a decolonised profession — notably, in its attention to community. However, the legacy of the revolution evidenced in top-down and centralised decision-making and program implementation limits its role, as does a lack of professional degree training.

In Part Three, Kreitzer's chapter, 'Education: Facilitating Local Relevance', provides a thorough analysis of the progress of social work in Africa in the period from 1971 to 1990, no small feat given the breath of cultural and national diversity to be covered. Kreitzer gives real insight into the impacts of colonialism in Africa, including on higher education and the development of professions such as social work. The complexities involved in developing an African social work identity and body of knowledge, described by Kreitzer, include the history of cultural approaches to education, a missionary past and the Eurocentric legacy of colonialism in higher education programs. The failure of social work to decolonise and adapt to country-specific needs has contributed to a lack of respect and understanding of its role, and a tension between Western clinically-based models and community-based social development models of social work has contributed to this. Kreitzer suggests the idealisation of Western social work knowledge, ethnic and nation-based political differences and tensions, the brain drain away from African countries and 'lack of critical debate on the appropriateness of the profession in Africa at all' (p. 201) are contributing factors as well. She sees questions of the relevance of social work in Africa as dependent on whether there is a will to adopt a new and revolutionary path. After decades of experience of a colonial social welfare model, Kreitzer suggests, simply dismantling the present system without a planned alternative would be disastrous, but decolonising the profession is urgently needed.

Practitioners and educators alike will be interested in Wehbi's critical examination of international student placements, another of the chapters in Part 3. Wehbi, who is of Lebanese origin and draws on her experience as a Canadian social work educator, is particularly

concerned to examine students' motivations for seeking overseas placements — she argues this is crucial if social work is to avoid 'reproducing inequitable North-South relations' (p. 223). Wehbi points out that international placements are seen as a vehicle for enhancing cross-cultural knowledge and communication, and like Baltra-Ulloa, she too points to the static conceptualisation of 'culture' in the literature on cultural competence, which deflects attention from the political dimensions of race. The result is little critical analysis of power imbalances within and between cultures, and little attention to issues of racism and white privilege. Given that it is typically white students who go on international placements, Wehbi sees a critical interrogation of social work's colonising history and of students' motivations as crucial preparation to carry out before they depart. Student interest in international placements may include fascination with another country, culture or individuals; a disempowering charity or rescue perspective; and a naïve desire to 'give back' to their country of origin on the part of students with connections to the placement host country. Wehbi suggests that a structured, critical reflection on their positioning in relation to the host country, including knowledge of its specific historical and contemporary conditions and social relations is needed to achieve a critical, decolonised and socially just curriculum with regard to international student placements.

The five chapters in Part Four, 'Research: Decolonizing Methodologies', canvass some of the debates, theoretical approaches and discourses of relevance to what the editors describe as 'an emerging field within the discipline' (p. 14). Ekatone and Walker's analysis of Kaupapa Maori approaches demonstrate its efficacy as both a 'native theory', and in terms of both research and practice, a form of social action that has opened a space for decolonising service provision. Matsuoka, Morelli, and McCubbin discuss culturally relevant research with Indigenous and immigrant communities, with some focus on the experience of Native Hawaiians. They point to the need to resist ethnic stereotyping resulting from colonisation and assimilation into host populations, which limits both understanding and the provision of effective service provision, and call on social work to develop research methodologies and strategies that respect Indigenous community concern to 'manage, define and promulgate their own histories and cultural realities' (p. 284). Decolonising the research process, they state, requires researchers to work in partnership

and to use methods that resonate with and respect participants in the research. Yellow Bird discusses the emerging field of neurodecolonisation, a technique that combines mindfulness meditation with other secular and sacred contemplative practices to replace negative thoughts, emotions and behaviour; in particular, those arising from the experience of colonisation. In this fascinating chapter, Yellow Bird draws on a neurodecolonisation project he conducted with Native American school students experiencing academic and social difficulties. Responses from the students involved in the project demonstrate its complementarity with tribal practices and effectiveness in assisting the students to overcome a colonised mindset. Wilson's chapter points to the need to develop Indigenist research methods if the goals of decolonised social work are to be achieved. This includes recognition of the importance of relationship building — as Wilson suggests, this means full participation in the life of the community. It also means recognition that creation of a healthy society requires that Indigenous people and communities determine for themselves what they want in terms of social work systems — as Wilson states, this means working in ways that are accountable and relational.

In their concluding remarks, editors Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, and Hetherington note that colonisation exists still, in guises of globalisation and capitalist expansion. Vigilance is required if social work is to move forward and participate in the decolonising project. To achieve this, they suggest, open dialogue and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is vital, as is awareness of the colonialism embedded in language and other formal and informal practices. The call to action from this volume will provoke, challenge and unsettle, but for a profession concerned with equity and justice and the cross-cultural contexts of practice, the weight of the evidence it provides in support of the argument for decolonising its processes is difficult to deny.

## References

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