



Book Review of “Indigenous Social Work around the World. Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice”, 2008, edited by Mel Gray, John Coates and Michael Yellow Bird¹

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One could be seduced into a critique of this volume that focuses on its potential to overstate the momentum for a shift in Western social work ideology when faced with the conundrum of cultural difference. One could posit that the discussion is too broad, the topics covered too numerous, the opportunity for detail missed, the urgency of the messages unnecessarily exaggerated, the “proof” not beyond anecdote and so forth. I reject this temptation to conform to the dominant professional dynamic most emphatically and offer that what Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird have presented to the social work field in this volume is the first tangible step towards an alternative paradigm for an occupation afflicted with unsustainable hypocrisy and thus at the brink of irrelevancy.

Meemeduma (1993) warned us that the social work field is incarcerated by its continuous attempts at examining and adjusting the “how’s” of practice without any meaningful examination of the “why’s”. Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird offer an opportunity to pursue such vocational reflection.

¹ Gray, M., Coates, J. and Yellow Bird, M. (eds.) 2008: *Indigenous Social Work around the World. Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice*. Ashgate, Burlington, VT, USA. 339 pages. Hardcover, AUS \$188.95.

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She utilises action research methodologies in all her research activities to not only learn and facilitate community development but to also evaluate social work practices. Funded by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship and sponsored by the University of Tasmania she co-leads *Tasmanians Talking*, which is piloting action research methods of facilitating community and organisational Dialogue on issues of cultural diversity. Her dream is to one day learn the language of her ancestors, to speak it and to teach it to her children under the condor’s sky.

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Indigenous Social Work around the World. Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice articulates a social work epistemological revolution. The pages in this volume invite the reader to rethink what is required for social work to be transformed. We are called to “authenticisation”, “to go back to one’s roots to seek direction” to co-create theory and practice from “the ground up” in an effort to learn from the wisdoms of those who have been there, those who know the context, the experiences of the community, the locals we often call the “victims”.

These messages may not be new messages but as the authors rightly point out in their introduction these messages seldom reach Western social workers. I’m left wondering if what we need, as a social work field, is a common discourse that acknowledges that transforming Western social work practices will require an ethical comfort with constant discomfort? Are we shackled by a culture that makes us so fearful of “not knowing”? Does the key to these messages of transformation reaching everyone rest in an acceptance that elements of Western culture have become outdated? It is a “big call” to question Western cultural superiority: after all, are we not in the midst of desperately trying to rescue the West?

It is precisely these questions that give this book its contemporary relevance. As the world is beginning to see and feel the traditional rules of engagement changing, as people see and feel that capitalism is not invincible, that a Western individualistic lifestyle will not protect you, that a Western style of democracy does not guarantee a voice for all: people are realising the painful process of transcending cultures. For generations of Indigenous peoples, “rising above” culture was a must for survival. Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird not only acknowledge the difficult metamorphosis now faced by Western social work, they invite social workers to resist the binaries of surpassing a culture; they highlight the possibilities that lie in the spaces ‘in between’ - the “relational spaces” (Kumsa 2008), the spaces of dialogue, of mutual learning, of examination and contestation, of sharing and respecting.

From its beginning pages each contribution further develops and explores the rationale for re-conceptualising the “outmoded” concept of “Indigenization”. In part one, the focus is on rejecting the current drive to internationalise social work; questioning the reasons associated with this drive; and, finding a “universal core”, highlighting the real driving force behind professionalization and positioning this debate within an historical framework. What becomes clear to the reader is that colonialism is well and truly alive, deeply rooted in social work’s Western birthplace; in how it continues to be taught, learned and practised; and, how it is packaged and exported to the rest of the world.

The literature reviewed is not only diverse and refreshingly non-mainstream (from an Australian perspective) but also unapologetically direct in discouraging any attempt at trivialising the imperialistic nature of Western social work. The book begins by giving the culture of Western social work the centre stage. There is no attempt to hide the fundamental underpinnings of social work behind its “noble quest for social justice” or its brave attempts at “empowering”. The message is clear: Western social work does not know how to see itself as a cultural product and consequently to consider the destructive elements of Western value systems that are driving our practices.

If only to add to the book’s conceptual clarity and logic of analysis I would offer that part two could have been integrated across other sections of the book. The following are my personal suggestions:

Firstly, chapter three “*Towards an Understanding of Indigenous Social Work*” by Gray, Yellow Bird and Coates and chapter four “*Indigenous People and the Language of Social Work*” by Yellow Bird and Gray could have been added to part one to follow on from the discussions on professional imperialism that are offered by Midgley in Chapter two. This is only so momentum can be maintained in the lead up to what is a considerable new debate on how Indigenous social work deconstructs and decolonises social work discourse.

Secondly, chapter five “*Indigenous Social Work in the United States: Reflections on Indian Tacos, Trojan Horses and Canoes Filled with Indigenous Revolutionaries*” by Weaver could have formed part of a stand alone section in the book dedicated to Indigenous Social Workers’ reflections. I heard Weaver’s message, as an Indigenous worker not in my land and a junior academic using strange words to convey familiar messages. I am forever caught in the binaries contained in “the belly of the Trojan horse”, in the “canoe” of my ancestors. Indigenous workers are part of two worlds; maybe we are bridges or connectors? As Hart suggests in chapter 10 “*Critical reflections on an Aboriginal Approach to Helping*” it is not easy knowing how much our people want us to share and how much the West is prepared to hear. Perhaps what is needed as Ling suggests in Chapter 7 “*The Development of Culturally Appropriate Social Work Practice in Sarawak, Malaysia*” is “intercultural spaces” for everyone to Dialogue. Food for thought, perhaps for a next edition!

Thirdly, chapter six “*Decolonizing Social Work in Australia: prospects or Illusion*” by Briskman, with it’s strong political message to Australian social workers, calls for a conscious examination of the human rights platform that has evolved around the treatment of Indigenous Australians and whether this can actually be found in the “social justice rhetoric” commonly enjoined by professional social workers and bureaucrats. From an educational perspective, Briskman’s message could well be placed in part four of this book in order to offer a pointed first message to anyone looking to develop alternative social work pedagogy. Considered from a regional Australian aspect, Briskman’s message reinforces the work that began with the all too belated apology to the stolen generations of Indigenous Australians.

Part three of the volume offers the reader an array of case studies from around the world from which to gain wisdom. The themes of earlier discussion are placed into multiple cultural contexts such as the exportation of Western social work into non-Western contexts; the cultural anomalies between the notion of professional social work and traditional helping practices; the limitations of Western knowledge production methods; and, the importance of history and culture in understanding a people’s context.

No one experience mirrors the other, although two issues stand as links throughout the discussion. Firstly, indigenous world views are fundamentally focussed on the collective; and, secondly for indigenous/authentic social work practice to occur social work knowledge has to be co-created with the local culture. The importance of culture for indigenous/authentic social work practice is explained so clearly by each contributor that one can not imagine how it is that, in the West, we still cling to competency sets to measure our “effectiveness” in cross-cultural settings.

Of particular interest is the New Zealand Indigenous experience explored by Walsh-Tapiata. The knowing of a people’s history; the centrality of being in community connected to collective experiences before *helping* is possible; and, the rebirth of Indigenous stories as authentic social work tools were issues that reinforced the patronising nature of “empowering social work practices”. The need to end the use of that word “empowerment” was potent after

reading this section of the book – how dare we send our social work students out into the world believing they are agents of “empowerment”? How little opportunity we offer ourselves and our clients to just get to know one another? How little room there is in social work education to learn to just be *in community*? How marked are the boundaries we promote in professional social work? The contributions in this part of the book eschew empty cynicism, which so often clouds the possibilities, to offer the social work field simple common sense human experiences from which to start, from which to learn.

I feel compelled to share with Hart and the reader my critical reflections on his contributions to the volume. Indeed, every couple of sentences I nodded and every page I wiped the tears from my face as I read on in the grip of his narrative. There is such spiritual re-birth in witnessing the courage of a voice that speaks what one has often hidden because of fear and isolation. Turner’s (2005) words shared by Hart ring as an invitation to people like me to cry “I am indigenous, yet I am *not* an indigenous philosopher”. Hart seems to have found a way to *be* indigenous in his work and, although he shares the challenge that was presented to him in adopting cautious approaches in the past, the reader, this reader, yearned for more – for those of us forcibly removed from our communities away from our philosopher elders I understand the journey involves returning/reconnecting, must we journey back in silent? Do we hold off becoming “word warriors” till the journey back is complete?

The volume’s closing collection perhaps stimulates our consciousness most. It commences with Sin’s “*Reconfiguring ‘Chineseness’ in the International Discourse on Social Work in China*” in which a clear message is delivered in quoting Midgley (1990): the International community has ignored the need to include and disseminate the experiences of the “Third World”. How often do we attend conferences that claim to be of International relevance only to find that almost all of the delegates and all of the papers for presentation (knowledge for dissemination) are of Western background? How often in the West do research supervisors encourage their students to access non-Western literature? How openly do we, in social work departments and faculties, debate and examine the strengths and weaknesses of student overseas placements from all affected perspectives?

In this section Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird successfully give voice to the myriad manifestations of the dynamic in social work practice and research that conveys wisdom “from the West to the rest”. Although the focal point is social work education, there are parallel messages such as those offered by Yuen-Tsang and Ku in “*A Journey of a Thousand Miles begins with One Step: The development of Culturally Relevant Social Work Education and Fieldwork Practice in China*” who make us aware of the complexities and diversity of cultures within cultures and the implications of power and politics when one seeks to indigenize social work practice.

The case of curriculum development is well documented by the Botswana experience in Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo’s “*Developing Culturally Relevant Social Work Education in Africa: The case of Botswana*”. In this contribution good intentions and even opportunities to contextualise social work and develop local pedagogy are described to show the reader that what persists are the underlying dynamics of oppression expressed in the perpetual perception that “West is best”.

Then we reach Gair’s “*Missing the ‘Flight from Responsibility’: Tales from a Non-Indigenous Educator Pursuing Spaces for Social Work Education Relevant to Indigenous Australians*”. Her honest recounting of her efforts to support and encourage Indigenous

Australians journeys through social work studies remind the reader of the kind of Dialogue that is encouraged through out the volume. The kind of Dialogue that involves a negotiated, respectful and ongoing conversation based on mutual learning and action that must be undertaken without concern for time, with commitment and personal sacrifice.

If one were to comment on this book's originality and thus its implications to the social work field and potential as a social work intervention that activates change (which I believe it is) one must highlight the contribution made by Bruyere in "*Picking up What was Left by the Trail: The Emerging Spirit of Aboriginal Education in Canada*". Sheer transformative practice is shared through this piece where the description of the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) in Canada may well serve as a blueprint for what social work would look like if the indigenisation of social work education were achieved. I sincerely hope that people of non-indigenous background reading Bruyere's contribution are not seduced by tokenism and tolerance as they seek to replicate some of the possibilities offered here. As Faith describes in the last chapter of this wonderful collection "...it is important that the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems be done with great respect, and attention to voice, power and privilege".

As a piece of indigenous pedagogy I think "*Indigenous Social Work around the World. Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice*" is brilliant. Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird have mobilised the voices from the margins, the echoes from long before our time that so genuinely warned us in spirit and that we have, for too long, so foolishly ignored.

In conclusion, there are an incredible number of ideas, experiences, wisdoms and reflections offered in this book and yes, many could have been developed in more detail, structured differently and maybe analysed more 'rationally'. However, are we not witnessing a coming of age in this field of social work? Is this not a time of renaissance? Is it not a time to examine where we've come from so we can understand where we stand and visualise alternative futures. Hasn't the 'expert' let us down in our quest for social justice? Isn't social work about mobilising change? I invite the authors to consider translating this book into as many languages as possible, to pursue a soft cover reprint so that students across the globe can own this book, reflect on it, use it and add to its wisdoms. I invite every academic reading this book to hold it up to scrutiny *in* the classroom. I invite Latin American social work academics to join the Dialogue that the authors have facilitated in their book: let us hear from you too. If Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo in Chapter 16 are right and Latin America was the first to "become disillusioned with Western theories and practices", let us hear of your efforts to make social work authentic – indigenous.

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