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1

Introduction

Margot Rawsthorne

As editors we wish to start this book with an acknowledgement of the ongoing history of dispossession and deliberate attacks on the cultures and spirituality of Australia's First Peoples. This history gives us great pain and enormous regret at the devaluing of knowledge acquired by the First Peoples during 70,000 years of continuous life on this land. The inability of non-Indigenous Australians to learn from First Peoples is to our collective detriment, whether through inclusive social norms or communal forms of child-rearing, the demise of soil, or threats of extinction of unique fauna.

Social work practice is implicated not only in the discounting of Aboriginal knowledge and an unwillingness to learn from it but also in the destructive intervention in the lives of generations of Indigenous Australians (Bennett, 2015; Briskman, 2016). Working across difference with Australia's First Peoples requires urgent attention. Accordingly, the book includes several chapters written by or with Indigenous Australians. These chapters are not presented as 'the' Aboriginal perspective but offer insight into the experience of multiple 'differences' in settings as diverse as academia, health, community and violence against women services. For non-Indigenous (white) readers these chapters provide an opportunity to listen and learn from Indigenous Australians, from a position of cultural humility.

This book arose from our shared struggles in practice, theory, research and teaching to 'work across difference'. The term 'differences' denotes a set of highly politicised, socially constructed, social relations that reinforce inequity, dominance and oppression. Difference benefits racially stratified, patriarchal capitalism but are simultaneously a site of struggle, something to work with and across, something that we inhabit and may inadvertently reproduce through daily practice and something that can be challenged and dealt with more equitably with a goal of social justice and fairness.

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Writing from her social positioning within the intersections of race, gender, class and homophobia, the late Audre Lorde (2012) argued that

> Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation. (p. 17)

Social work and policy studies in Australia are increasingly called on to work across differences in ways that promote social justice and challenge growing inequity. However, as Lorde (Lorde and Rich, 1981) noted, we have no patterns for relating across human differences as equals and, as she argues further, 'Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people' (Lorde, 2012, p.115).

This quote highlights the way in which larger social systems benefit from both the denial of difference and our lack of strategies for identifying and working across real and imagined differences. These 'differences' justify inequity, harm and divide us and thrive off the existence of disposable people and regions of the world that can be exploited, destroyed and left to decline (Giroux, 2015). Lorde argues further that

> it is not the differences that separate us, it is our denial of their existence and our inability to critically examine and challenge their impact on social and individual actions and ideas. Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. (Lorde, 2012, p.115; reprint from a 1977 speech delivered to the Modern Language Association)

This book is aimed at ending isolations of all kinds and building interconnections that recognise and celebrate differences, redistribute resources and ensure voice and representation in the building of equity-directed social justice practices and policies.

In this collection, the term differences is also used in Lorde's (2012) sense that much of the work of changing social relations lies with those who are more powerfully positioned within intersecting oppressions:

> Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a

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> constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future. (p. 92)

Unearned privilege underlies these dynamics. This privilege is not distributed equally but accumulates along axes of power such as maleness, whiteness, gender, immigrant status, able-bodiedness and so forth (Mehrotra, 2010). These socially constructed relations form intersecting nodes of power and privilege that operate without the conscious instigation of those accorded this power in our society. For example, light-skinned immigrants do not wake up in the morning and decide to make use of white-skin privilege; it is part of everyday interactions without the need for conscious activation. Part of working across difference includes recognising and 'un-doing' this invisible but omnipresent privilege (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017; Pease, 2010).

The contributors to this book highlight the need for intersectionality in our analysis, as critical race theorists have identified, as a tool for resistance (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality recognises that oppressions never operate singly; rather they overlap, reinforce, undermine and contest in complex and ever-changing webs (Mehrotra, 2010). Dismantling the many, intersecting threads of these webs requires a crisp, critical analysis and openness to new ways of challenging inequity and building social justice.

This collection does not provide a prescription for working across difference; instead it problematises intersecting differences and privileges in numerous contexts, and offers insights into more equitable ways of undertaking social work and making social policy. Working across difference is more than simply having promotional material in other languages, scattering around a few rainbow flags or employing the occasional non-white person. The task of 'working across difference' requires profound, ongoing, consistent efforts to make any meaningful progress towards our shared commitment to social change and equity. Oppression and privilege are deeply embedded through the hegemony of binary genders, settler colonialism, racism, ageism and ableism (Allan et al., 2009; Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017).

Despite social work's genuine concern with the experience of those subjected to oppression and 'othered', it remains too often uncritical of its own privilege and power, and its participation, often unintended, in sustaining oppressive relations (Bennett, 2015; Briskman, 2016). In this book we take a critical stance to the social work profession's current and historical 'social justice project'. We question the extent to which the actions of social workers and social policy makers have challenged structural oppressions. We ask, what would decolonised practice look like? How

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do we respond to mental distress without resorting to power/privilege/violence? In what ways do our practices disable? How do we disrupt the 'marking' of some identities as less than? This critical questioning of our role as social workers, policy makers and community activists needs to inform our ongoing 'social justice project', which may provide a pathway for rethinking social work beyond merely 'doing good'.

In rethinking social work beyond unintentionally doing harm while intending to be 'doing good' we are also reclaiming the centrality of the profession's ethical pursuit of human rights and social justice (IASSW, 2004). The danger of human rights and social justice becoming optional in social work practice (Ife, 2012) is even greater in the current context of austerity and late neoliberalism (Baines, 2017; Mullaly, 2010). Neoliberalism is understood in this collection as simultaneously a project, an ideology and a process (Dean, 2010; Harvey, 2007). The ideology of neoliberalism has introduced 'a new model of citizenship in which societal rights and responsibilities transform social problems into the failures of the individuals rather than that of society' (Birch and Mykhnenko, 2009, p. 7).

Taking this further, Roy (2014) argues that neoliberalism reconceptualises poverty as an 'identity problem', negating the systemic causes of inequality: 'Poverty … is often framed as an identity problem, as though the poor have not been created by injustice but are a lost tribe who just happen to exist' (p. 37). Neoliberal ideology is so pervasive that it becomes almost impossible to challenge (as it is presented as the only option), saturating mass cultural and political realms, and creating new social norms and monoculture (Gray and Webb, 2013; Harvey, 2007). Under neoliberalism, power relations are reconfigured such that individuals internalise the state's 'marketisation' objectives through self-regulation and self-governance (Foucault, 1984). As such power is decentred, as opposed to being exclusively and overtly hierarchical and authoritarian, as it has become embedded in the beliefs, fears, desires and aspirations of the population (Brown, 2006). This has made neoliberalism almost invisible and the assimilation of social workers into the neoliberal political project less contested than it should be (Gray and Web, 2013; Mullaly, 2010).

Social service organisations and practitioners have been deeply challenged by the doctrine of small government, marketisation, individual responsibilisation, growing inequality and attacks on collective responses and resistance (Fawcett et al., 2010). Social work responses to neoliberal discourses' marking of certain groups as 'different' (read inadequate and unworthy) are often constrained by bureaucratic standardised practices which purport to be neutral (Allan et al., 2009; Gray and Web, 2013; Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017). These standardised practices often target those who social workers seek to work alongside in our social justice work, through imposing income support sanctions, rationing access to support, and/or criminalising and removing children. It is sobering to consider

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that more Indigenous children are currently in state 'care' than during the period known as the 'Stolen Generation' (Long and Sephton, 2011). In their putative neutrality these practices depoliticise social work practice, remaking it as a technical profession rather than a social justice-engaged vocation (Baines, 2017; Mullaly, 2010).

Through this book and in collaboration with our contributors we sought to explore how social work may repeat, reject, resist or rupture exclusionary practices based on difference. In doing so we deliberately privilege the perspectives of those positioned as 'different', through race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and ability. In privileging these perspectives we are not suggesting that 'difference' is only a concern of those in dominant cultural positions. Our goal is to open up dialogue and debate concerning notions of difference with a view to the co-creation of new forms of social work practices. We acknowledge the risk of totalising the identities of 'others' through this and have tried to highlight the intersection of multiple (and at times contradictory) positionalities among ourselves and the people we work alongside (Mehrotra, 2010). Through adopting an intersectional stance we aim to resist collapsing difference under universal categories (Tong, 1989) and acknowledge as Lorde does that 'her shackles may look very different to my own' (Lorde, 2012, p. 124). This signals a rejection of the neoliberal discourse of a benign, uncontested 'diversity' which serves to obscure the very real, day-to-day structural inequality and oppression experienced by non-white, distressed, older, disabled and other marginalised people. Though we draw on concepts and strategies from the postmodern and poststructural critique, we consciously seek to avoid the paralysing effect of postmodern perspectives that do not provide the basis for collective political actions (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Our contributors seek to avoid identity politics that fail to acknowledge the material subjugation of those 'othered' (Zuffery, 2015) or the benefits that accrue to privileged groups through this. Rupturing exclusionary practices requires more than linguistic shifts or clever deconstructing. It requires structural as well as cultural and political solutions, including a concrete, material redistribution of resources, practices, policies, representation and access to affirming identities and cultural practices (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017).

Though each situation and context requires its own unique strategies rather than a standardised response, the following points are helpful in thinking about and working across difference:

1. Recognising that multiple, intersecting differences exist in every interaction and context (Mehrotra, 2010).

2. Developing a critical lens for analysing these differences and understanding why they exist in any given context, who they benefit/harm and how to use this analysis to build consensus for action.

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3. Working as an ally with those socially positioned as less powerful and less privileged (Bishop, 2012; Mullaly, 2010). Building conscious ties of support.
4. Accepting the leadership of oppressed groups and providing active, not passive, support for their social justice initiatives and critiques of power and privilege.
5. Using one's privileged position and the power that is socially accorded to this positioning in alliance with oppressed groups (Baines, 2017).

Working across differences, using these five points, can be accomplished through: direct practice with groups, individuals, families and communities; social policy; community and social policy projects; social activism; critical pedagogy; and theory.

We hope this book will be of interest and use to students, practitioners, policy makers and educators. It is likely that readers will focus on specific chapters reflecting their own priorities. To more fully comprehend the goal of this book, however, we would encourage readers to explore a range of chapters. In this way it will be clearer how 'difference' is structured, highlighting the commonalities in the struggles of young people of diverse sexualities, Aboriginal academics or Muslim women, for example. Each contributor has been asked to problematise normative and instrumental approaches which reproduce top-down toolbox approaches to working across difference. In doing so the contributors have drawn heterogeneously on anti-oppressive theories, including Indigenous knowledges, queer theory, intersectional feminism, critical mental health and critical race theory. Of course, one chapter can only be a taster – for those wishing to explore further issues raised by the contributors a list of resources is included.

For educators, we suggest chapters are paired, with student learning supported by guiding questions. Again we would encourage the pairing of diverse chapters in order to enable more sophisticated critical engagement. Guiding questions (for students but also others) might include:

- How are oppression and/or privileges structured and/or experienced by various groups of people?
- How is difference marked by neoliberal discourses or practices?
- How can the insights of each chapter be used to challenge inequity in social work practice and policy?

The book is divided into six parts. Reflecting our commitment to foregrounding the experience of difference and engaging with Indigenous

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knowledges, Part I focuses on Aboriginal Perspectives. It comprises three chapters incorporating the knowledge of practitioners, educators and academics. Sigrid Herring and Jo Spangaro (Chapter 2) bring into focus the experiences of Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations. The chapter highlights the contradictory experience (which appears common) of those both marked as requiring intensive state scrutiny and simultaneously unworthy of acknowledgement. Mareese Terare (Chapter 3) inspires educators to embrace difference within learning environments as a resource for transformational learning. The chapter argues that developing cultural safety is not merely about creating space for marginal voices but also about creating space for those with privilege. In this way these learning and teaching moments can reject, resist or rupture exclusionary practices based on difference. The final chapter in Part I by Bindi Bennett (Chapter 4) explores the tensions and risks of 'incorporating' Indigenous knowledges into white academia. The chapter challenges us to consider how non-Indigenous practice, sometimes unintentionally (sometimes not), leads to cultural appropriation. All three chapters in Part I engage with the impact of white privilege on Aboriginal Australians, highlighting the constant vigilance required not to replicate oppression and providing strategies for 'doing better'.

Part II explores the experiences of those marked as 'culturally different', through language, cultural practices and religion. Two of the three chapters in this section foreground the assumed difference of non-Christian Australians. Lobna Yassine (Chapter 5) and Nafiseh Ghafournia (Chapter 6) write from the position of Muslim women at a time of cultural hostility, challenging social workers to critically reflect and engage with the political task of confronting racist stereotyping. The chapter by Yassine and co-author Linda Briskman (Chapter 5) documents the collusion of leading social work organisations with efforts to vilify and marginalise Muslim people and suggests that we all have a role to play in resisting oppression in its professional and personal manifestations. Jioji Ravulo (Chapter 7) provides inspiration to educators seeking to engage with this political task in the classroom and through their teaching.

Part III shifts our focus to gender as a site of political struggle and contest. Alankaar Sharma (Chapter 8) questions the co-option of feminist positioning by men in challenges to men's violence and discrimination against women. He advocates for a position of allyship whereby men hold themselves and each other accountable for gendered violence. Tina Kostecki and Selma Macfarlane (Chapter 9) provide a tool for practitioners and researchers alike in uncovering older women's life stories. Readers are invited to experiment with the 'Intersectionality Tool' in their practice to avoid creating a static, monochrome picture. Rebecca Howe, Amy Harper and Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett (Chapter 10) draw on Foucault's

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notion of 'Games of Truth' in a powerful collaboration with transgender and non-binary young people. The chapter demands we interrogate our role in creating 'truth' for 'others'.

Part IV asks us to consider how the concept of 'normality' shapes the experiences of those outside that 'norm'. Emma Tseris (Chapter 11) adopts a critical stance in exploring social work practice with those people marked by psychiatry as 'mentally ill'. She confronts social work's co-option by psychiatric discourses that can lead to socially unjust practice. Barbara Soares e Madureira (Chapter 12) examines the social inclusion potential of supported employment for people with intellectual disabilities, highlighting first-person lived experiences.

In Part V our contributors turn their attention to policy responses to 'difference' across a wide terrain. Susan Heward-Belle (Chapter 13) questions policy assumptions that all homelessness is the same. Her research with refuge workers reveals that the specific experiences of women survivors of domestic violence cannot and should not be 'generalised' as simply homelessness. Amanda Howard (Chapter 14) takes a critical stance on the marrying of market forces and human rights within the National Disability Support Scheme (NDIS). She highlights how this marrying has rendered silent significant concerns about neoliberal marketisation. The lived experience of policy is Frank Wang and Sheng-Pei Tsai's focus in the final chapter (Chapter 15) of Part V. Highlighting Indigenous aged care practices in Taiwan, they reveal the possibility of conflict between the 'social justice' policy and self-determination.

In the final part of the book, Part VI, we provide some reflections and explore resistances. Susan Goodwin analyses select poststructural and postcolonial terms in Chapter 16. Though not all authors in the book used poststructural theory, the concepts she highlights are very useful in the analysis of socially constructed difference. The chapter can be used as a glossary or as a thought piece to spark further critical engagement with some of the concepts and ideas used in the book. Donna Baines and Fran Waugh provide an Afterword in Chapter 17, in which they confront the very real risk of ultra-right challenges to our social justice project and the pervasiveness of white fragility in the face of resistance and challenge from those marginalised within existing systems. Drawing on two extended vignettes the chapter seeks to undercover resistances in everyday social work practice. It asks, what tools can social workers use in the context of late neoliberalism to find spaces for critical reflection and generate alternative, social justice-engaged, diversity-embracing practices and policies? The Afterword concludes that resistance is still possible and avidly pursued by many in the social justice social work endeavour.

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