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INVITED COMMENTARY



Wayanha: A Decolonised Social Work*

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Mambwarra-ndhugir ngay ngaanha wiray-ndhugir¹
Wudhagarbinya-ndhugir ngay winhangarra wiray-ndhugir
Yalbilinya-ndhugir ngay gulbarra wiray-ndhugir
You look but do not see
You listen but do not hear
You learn but do not understand

My name is Sue Green and I am a Wiradyuri woman. I graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work from Sydney University in 1998 and with a PhD Social Sciences in 2014 from the University of New South Wales. My thesis was entitled the *History of Aboriginal Welfare in the Colony of New South Wales 1788–1856*. My current areas of interest are decolonising and Indigenising social work, welfare history, colonisation and welfarisisation, First Nations governance and Wiradyuri sovereignty.

My name is Bindi Bennett and I am a Gamilaraay woman. I graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work from ACU Canberra in 1997 and with a PhD Philosophy in 2015 from ACU Strathfield. My thesis was entitled *Developing identity as a light skinned Aboriginal person with little or no community and/or kinship ties*. I also have over 20 years in the field of mental health specialising in trauma. I am interested in trauma and equine therapy.

After much careful consideration of what we would like to say to social workers and the social work profession, we wanted to start with the acknowledgement that social work, for the most part, has owned its own actions of the past and is taking steps to make amends for past actions and to learn and grow from past mistakes. However, there is still something missing. As a profession, whether that is in the field, within education and training, or as the professional body, we do not seem to be able to quite get there. So, what is it that we are missing?

The problem and the solution are complex but at the same time quite simple. You see, in social work we focus on problems and seek out how to address those problems. We acknowledge that the individual is not the problem, rather societal structures are responsible for many of the issues that are facing individuals and groups within our society. We know that categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, among others are areas that

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[†]Sue and Bindi acknowledge Uncle Stan Grant senior, custodian of Wiradyuri language, and thank him for all that he has taught them.

*Wayanha means transformation.

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advantage some and disadvantage others. However, in seeking the solutions to the issues and problems that arise from disadvantage we focus on what are the issues for the disadvantaged individuals, groups, and communities, and work on ways for them to overcome that disadvantage. It is simple; we are working on the wrong end of the problem, rather like treating the symptoms rather than the cause. So what does this mean for overcoming the issues that Aboriginal peoples and communities are experiencing?

Well, the starting point is that Aboriginal people are neither the problem nor the cause of the problem. It is not Aboriginal people or culture or communities that need to be fixed. The problem is colonialism, a condition that permeates every part of Australian society and that includes our profession and the manner in which we exist and operate. Historically and currently Australian social work has moved between and been a mix of English and American social work. It must be noted at this point that America was also a British colony and is still rooted in colonialism. What we call Australian social work today has its foundations in colonisation and is still embedded in colonialism. This colonialism is evident today in the way in which social work is practised, its relationship with Aboriginal people and communities, the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges, and the positioning of Aboriginal social workers. Furthermore, this colonialism is evident in the reaction to Aboriginal social workers when they speak out about the problems within our profession and the resulting white fragility that sadly happens more than it doesn't. So how do we move forward?

The answer is simple—decolonise. Decolonisation is not a simple act, it is a journey that requires more than simple words and cannot be achieved in a short time frame. Rather like reconciliation was not achieved in the 10 year period set by the Federal Government in 1991 (Gardiner-Garden, 1999) or why Closing the Gap set to be achieved by 2020 (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018) is so far off track from reaching its goals that it is not realistic to think this is even remotely possible. There are two major reasons why the Government and Australian society could not achieve either Reconciliation or Closing the Gap in the time frames that the Government nominated; firstly, the size of the problem and how long it has taken to create the current situation, and secondly that the so call solutions that are put in place are not focusing attention on the actual cause of the problem. The problem was created by the actions of colonisers in the act of colonising and those actions of colonisation are still present today through the societal structures that we live within, which in turn continues the act of colonisation. Further to this, the solutions are focused on getting Aboriginal people to change and to assimilate into the capitalistic society that Australia is today, rather than the recognition that the problem was created by colonisation and continues to be created through the maintenance of a capitalistic colonising society. In short it is Australia's societal structures that are the problem and requiring fixing, not Aboriginal people. Ok, well we have named the problem and we are social workers talking to social workers, so there shouldn't be a problem in at least getting social workers to actually move towards decolonising. After all, social work values and principals are about social change and equity. The Australian Association of Social Workers has undertaken great steps in acknowledging its own past practices against Aboriginal people and apologised for the profession's role in removing Aboriginal children (AASW, 2004). Furthermore, the professional body has also provided very clear directions to its practitioners about how they should work with Aboriginal people (AASW, 2010) and have directed the training of future social workers to ensure that they have the

appropriate knowledge and skills to work with Aboriginal people (AASW, 2012). So why despite all this work are we not there yet?

Well, despite the rush to incorporate decolonisation and Indigenous knowledges into universities where we train social workers and into many areas where social workers practice today, there are major issues that ensure that the colonial structures remain. To start with, decolonisation and Indigenous knowledges are not simply concepts (or packages) that people can pick up and incorporate into their practice. Decolonisation requires the individual and in turn the profession to undergo a journey of self-discovery and a personal process of decolonising themselves. The individual needs to recognise who they are and their own positioning in regard to Aboriginal people. What advances and privileges do they have that are either not afforded to Aboriginal people or are at the expense of Aboriginal people? Once they acknowledge their own positioning in regard to Aboriginal people, what are they prepared to do about it? You see it requires not only acknowledgement but also action and therefore it becomes tricky. It is easy to talk the talk and to claim the values but when it requires one to give up their privilege, it becomes quite difficult. Many will say but I am also disadvantaged within Australian society, I am a “woman”, “not white”, “non-English speaking background”, “not heterosexual”, “poor”, “disabled” and the list could go on. However, regardless of their own disadvantages they have still made advances at the expense of Aboriginal people. The problem is that we keep looking at those ahead of us and lamenting what we do not have and forget about those who have even less than ourselves. Any individual or group who lives in Australia is living here on the land that was stolen from Aboriginal people, thus what they have is at the expense of Aboriginal people. Sadly, it is not just land but also space; professionally, academically, and personally, where people have carved out a space for themselves and at the same time locked out Aboriginal people. In the race to embrace Indigenous knowledges and to Indigenise social work theory and practice there has been a creation of many “non-Aboriginal” experts and the appropriation of the knowledge of Aboriginal people. Frequently those “experts” will befriend Aboriginal people and provide us with a helping hand to succeed professionally. However, the power imbalance never shifts and we always remain in the subservient position to their “white” benevolence. There are some who may seek to bring us up to an equal level, there are others that are concerned with locking us into a relationship of dependency and denigration.

Do we believe that all non-Aboriginal people who work alongside Aboriginal people are doing this? No. There are quite a few examples where non-Aboriginal people are working alongside Aboriginal people and allowing Aboriginal people to become empowered and to succeed. However, these are not the people who you will see claiming to be experts regarding Aboriginal people. These are the people who you will see walking alongside younger or more junior Aboriginal professionals and academics for a period and then you will see them step to the side. These people are the ones who have truly started and move ahead in their own journey of decolonising, even if they don't have the words of decolonisation. These are the people who are willing to give up power and privilege to ensure that Aboriginal people are able to claim space within their own right. You will not hear these people say that they are the leaders, they have done all the work, that they have helped Aboriginal people and are now not being recognised for what they have given us. These are the people who will say, well, that was their (Aboriginal) knowledge and therefore they (Aboriginals) were the leaders in the work we did. These are the people who will

say that they have had the honour to walk with Aboriginal people and that they learnt so much from Aboriginal people. So, we are now asking you where do you stand on this journey? Have you started it, or are you at the beginning, or are you somewhere along the path? We say to social work and social workers lets ngurambung yanhanha ngurra.² Let's wayanha Social Work to ngurambang nginhagu.³

Notes

1. The language used in this paper is Wiradyuri. The Wiradyuri people are from Western NSW.
2. Walk country together (side by side).
3. Belonging to country.

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