4

Girramaa marramarra waluwin

Decolonizing social work

Sue Green

This chapter examines the importance of decolonization for the practice of social work. In order for the social work profession to meet its core principles of social justice and human rights, it needs to work towards decolonization. Firstly, the profession of social work needs to decolonize its own values and practices and then work to decolonize the world we live in. In recent times, decolonization has replaced terms such as empowerment and self-determination and is at risk of becoming just another catchphrase unless there is a commitment to undertaking the necessary processes and actions of decolonizing. The issue to date is that there is a lack of understanding of both colonization as an ongoing process and societal structure and decolonization as active processes. This chapter will discuss how social work can become an agent of decolonization whilst decolonizing the profession itself.

As it is an important protocol for most First Nations peoples, and definitely for Wiradyuri people, I must introduce myself and position myself within what I am writing.

> Yuwindhu Dyudyan Garbargarbar, Galari Wiradyuri yinaa, Biira-gu-bu Yilaaydya-gu-bu Yuluwidya-gu-bu garingun, Bala-dhu ngama Yandru-gu-bu Danyal-gu-bu Yalidya-gu-bu. Bala-dhu gunhinarrum-bu badhiin-bu galingabangbur-guliyagu. Baladhu Girramaa Marramaldhaany. Ngadhu yalmambili Wiradyuri-dyi gari-dyi.
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> My name is Susan Green, Galari (Lachlan river clan), Wiradyuri (nation) woman, granddaughter to Vera, Eliza, and Louisa and mother to Andrew, Daniel, and Alicia, and grandmother to their children. I am a social worker. I teach Wiradyuri truth.

In addition, I am also currently the elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board Director on the Australian Association of Social Work as well as the Professor of Indigenous Australian Studies and Course Director of the Graduate Certificate Wiradjuri Language, Culture and Heritage at Charles Sturt University.

Throughout this chapter, I will use Wiradyuri language as a sovereign Galari Wiradyuri woman and as part of the process of decolonizing the societal structures in which I currently exist. The title of this paper starts in Wiradyuri language – Girramaa marramarra waluwin – which I am using for Decolonizing social work. However, as with many languages, there are frequently words that cannot be directly translated from one language into another. It is almost

DOI: 10.4324/9781003176619-5

impossible to do a literal translation from Wiradyuri into English and vice versa, so what we do is look at the concepts and translate them that way. Girramaa means to be elevated, lifted (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 376) and marramarra means to make, do, create (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 406). These two words are being combined to make the term social work, as social workers are people who, in accordance with their professional codes, should be working to change social structures to elevate the lives of individuals and groups. Waluwin means good, well, healthy, in order, right, tidy (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 458), which is being used to mean decolonization, because the process and outcome of decolonization should be that things are being put in order and being put right and the result should be good, well and healthy peoples, communities and environments. My language is important as it gives me my identity and defines who I am in relation to all else, whilst giving me my focus, which in turn determines my actions and forms the wayanha (transformation) of my actions (Grant & Rudder, 2014). That wayanha (transformation) is decolonization.

Within their Code of Ethics, the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW, 2020) sets out that the social work profession in Australia complies with the definition set by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.
>
> *(p. 5)*

Note that burrowed within the list of theories that underpin social work is "indigenous knowledge" (AASW, 2020, p. 5), sandwiched between humanities and well-being. This is our first clue on how much the profession of social work globally needs to decolonize. To state Indigenous knowledge as singular and not plural indicates a fundamental misunderstanding and misconception of the term. Globally, there are many different First Nations peoples with different cultures which are based on their knowledge systems. Within Australia, there are hundreds of different First Nations, who each have their own languages and cultures and hence knowledge systems. In addition, no one culture or person has a singular knowledge – everyone has multiple knowledges; thus, it should be 'Indigenous knowledges'. Our second clue is the spelling of 'indigenous' in lowercase. You would not find any other name for a people or a nation starting without a capital letter. Whilst not capitalizing 'indigenous' or other words to describe First Nations peoples, such as 'aboriginal', might be grammatically correct within the English language; it also shows how entrenched colonialism is within our current societal structures. Ideologies and belief systems are played out in language, and language reinforces those ideologies (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Hence, not capitalizing 'indigenous' places First Nations people in a different or even an inferior position to other groups of people. This is how colonialism continues even within systems and groups that are trying to achieve social justice. It also highlights the difficulties in decolonizing because we are often unconscious of the ways in which colonialism has invaded every structure of our lives. Hence the first step of decolonization is to become aware of how colonialism is present in our everyday lives, thoughts, and actions, as individuals and as a society. This first step highlights the importance of 'knowing one's self' – or to put it in social work terminology – self-reflective practice.

In Wiradyuri, the word winhangadurinya means to meditate, know, reflect, and the word winhangadilinya means to know one's self (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 469). There are several words that start with 'winhanga', which are all linked. For example, winhanganha means to know, think, remember; winhangarra means to hear, think, listen; and winhangabilang means intelligent, clever (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 469). What this tells us is the importance of self-reflection, in that not only does it allow us to know ourselves, but that knowing ourselves is linked to intelligence and being clever. It also tells us what you must do to be self-reflective, and that we must think, hear, and listen, which also lets us think, know, and remember. A further word that links to this group of words is winhangagigilanha, meaning to care for each other (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 496). Thus, a consequence of self-reflection is that we become knowledgeable, that we know through remembering and that through that knowing, that knowledge, we end up caring for each other. The Wiradyuri cosmology informs that we can only be known through our relationships with others; that we are in relationships with all else and that those relationships have always existed whether we are conscious of them or not (Grant & Rudder, 2014, p. 5). Those relationships give us our identities and thus when we are self-reflecting, when we are beginning to know ourselves, we can only know and understand ourselves via those relationships. We do not exist as individuals but rather as a collective of beings who exist within relationships – whereas in Western cultures, it is the individual that is the core of being.

Colonialism is embedded in the ideology of individualism and individual rights (Flynn, 2005). Ife (2016) points out that human rights have become seen as belonging to individuals rather than being based on the relationships between individuals and groups. Furthermore, focusing upon and centring the individual within the framework of human rights diminishes the rights of the collective and ignores that individuals exist and are known within and by their relationships with others and all else. Grant and Rudder (2014) explain that "the identity of all things (and people) is defined by their relationships with/to all other 'identities' in the social, the spiritual and the physical environment" (p. 4). You cannot take an individual out of their relationships and anything that is done or given to an individual directly impacts others. Please note, when speaking about others, this is not restricted to just people but as Grant and Rudder (2014) explain above, it includes all else. The AASW (2020) states that social workers "operate at the interface between people and their social, cultural and physical environments" (p. 6). The focus is on 'people' (singular) and the interface between individuals and their environments. Furthermore, 'interface' implies a space where people and their environment interact, which also implies that they exist separately. However, for Wiraadyuri it is the collective – including the spiritual and the environment – that co-exists and cannot exist outside of their relationships (Grant & Rudder, 2014). It is more than just the existence of relationships but rather that everything is interrelated. Wongamar (2006), a Wiradyuri Elder and now Ancestor, illustrated this when providing instructions on how Wiradyuri should live: "Look after the lands and rivers and the lands and rivers will look after you." (p. 31). This statement points to the truth of the interconnected relationship between people and what is termed 'the physical or natural environment'. If the lands and the rivers are not looked after, if they are unhealthy, their ill health impacts directly upon human health. Humans are totally dependent upon the natural environment for every aspect of their being, including their well-being.

Social Work has increasingly developed an understanding of this, as demonstrated by the works of people such as Boetto (2017, 2019), Matthies et al. (2020), Rambaree et al. (2019), Bowles et al. (2018), Norton (2012), and Molyneux (2010). A few years ago, Bowles et al. (2018) pointed out that social workers are dealing with the impact of climate change within their practices and that the profession's response to climate change was starting to pick up.

However, they also found that there was still much work to be done and that there was a need for stronger leadership from the International Federation of Social Workers. Fast forward to 2022, and the urgency of dealing with climate change has never been so heightened. Hensel et al. (2022) argue that despite there being clear evidence that there is an urgent need to take action against climate change, there is not enough societal action. The IFSW (2022) highlights how the last five years have been the hottest on record and that this is a threat to humans and the planet. They also highlight the connection between the damage to the environment and the COVID-19 pandemic. Further to this, the IFSW (2022) acknowledges that "humans are part of the ecosystem, and that human and environmental well-being are interrelated". However, despite talking about the importance of partnerships, nowhere in the document and its call to action does it mention Indigenous peoples or knowledges. Given the IFSW's definition of social work included that it was underpinned by theories including Indigenous knowledges (see AASW, 2020), it should be expected that somewhere in the document, regarding the role of social workers in addressing climate change, Indigenous knowledges are both centred and play a pivotal role. Firstly, because worldwide, Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by climate change, and secondly because they have knowledges about the environment and have to adapt and cope with environmental changes (UNESCO, 2021).

The current climate change situation we find out ourselves in is because of colonization. Harvey (2021) argues that human societies have created the crisis of climate change and that this commenced within the period of industrialization and colonization. Nursey-Bray and Palmer (2017) found that Country and connecting to Country are essential to dealing with climate change. Highlighting that the solution to climate change must be within the processes of decolonization. In order to uphold the values and principles of social work as set out by the IFSW, social workers must – as a matter of urgency – actively address climate change within the global society. However, to do that they must connect with Indigenous peoples to learn how to connect with Country and about their own inter-relationship with Country. Green and Bennett (2018a) contend that colonization has shaped the relationship of people with the environment and that – in order to decolonize – that relationship needs to change. Country is more than just 'land' or a 'geographical location'. The Wiradyuri word for Country is Ngurambang (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 99). Ngu as a prefix (beginning of a word) indicates belonging (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 448), which demonstrates that one belongs to Country. When a word begins with Nguram it is about home, camp, country (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 451). Bang, as a suffix, is an intensifier (something is large or larger) (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 297). Thus, for Wiradyuri, Country is that large area, camp, home, where you belong. Country is home and you belong to Country. Your relationship with Country gives you not only your identity (as in the Western world where your national identity is the nation-state where you either were born or are a citizen or you live), but it also gives you focus, your worldview, and understanding of the world. For Wiradyuri, Country is the essence of who we are, how we understand the world, and how we act or should be acting. When we disconnect from Country and from understanding who we are and our place on Country and in the world, we start to think we are different to Country and do not have the respect we need and do not care for Country. The industrial revolution, capitalism, and colonialism have resulted in this disconnect from Country and the crisis of climate change that we are now experiencing.

To reconnect with Country, we have to consider what our actions are. To consider our actions, we must have an understanding of the Wiradyuri cosmology as it provides our worldview, to understand what we must do. The Wiradyuri cosmology can be explained as five areas that are not separate and cannot be separated. They are in no order and each is formed by the

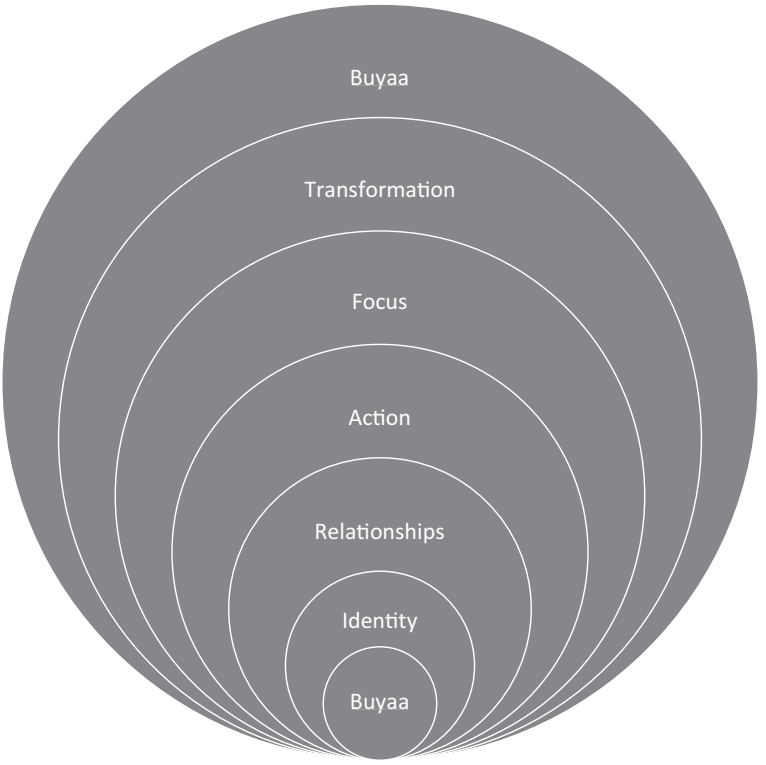

Figure 4.1 Wiradyuri cosmology.

others. Those five areas are identity, relationships, focus, actions, and transformation and have at their centre Buyaa (Figure 4.1).

Buyaa is another word that is not translatable into English. The easiest way to think of Buyaa is law or lore. However, neither of these English words accurately describes Buyaa. Buyaa is the centre of our being, the centre of our universe and the centre of all things Wiradyuri. Buyaa is also the outward covering, the protection of all things Wiradyuri. Bala is our identity; Bala or ba means to 'be' (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 293); when used as a prefix it can also mean 'am' (p. 64).

Our relationships are Yambuwan which means 'everything' (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 479) and words starting with 'yam' are connected with relationships. As well, we have relationships with Bangal, which, when used as a word stem, means place but it also means time (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 297). However, this type of time is related to place and is not measured in hours and minutes. Wiradyuri focus is based in Yindyamarra. Yindyamarra is a very important word and concept for Wiradyuri. The basic interpretation of Yindyamarra is respect, be gentle, polite, honour, do slowly (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 485). As with all Wiradyuri words they have a much deeper meaning than can be relayed in English translations. However, we can see some of the layers when we break down the word Yindyamarra. Yindyang means slowly (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 485) and marra, when used as a suffix, is an action that makes or causes something to happen (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 405). When putting the word Yindyamarra together the ng is dropped from Yindyang and marra is added. The word Yindyamarra provides

the definition of respect by clarifying *how* respect is shown, i.e., by going slowly and gently, and by clarifying that it is *an action* that either creates or causes something to happen. Yindyamarra is central to reconnecting to Country. We have to act slowly and gently, with the intention to have minimal impact on the environment.

Our focus should also include Walu-win, which means good, well, healthy, in order, right, tidy (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 458), and we must walumarra – protect, be guardians (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 458) of Country; marunbunmirra – love, to be kind (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 407); and garigarra – be true (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 366). In addition, two other important concepts that should inform our focus are Marrungbang – justice – and marrumbang – mercy (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 407). Basically, our duty is to be the guardian, to protect Country, and our focus should be grounded in respect, doing the right thing, love and kindness, truth, justice, and mercy.

This focus informs our actions. Our actions comprise Winhanganha (outlined earlier in this chapter); we need to think about our actions and what the consequences of our actions will be. Are our actions gentle, having as little impact as possible, and where we do impact, is it tidy, is it right? We also need to ensure that we Wirimbirra – take care of, preserve, keep (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 470) Country. As well we have to Dugunybirra – be generous, give always, give freely (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 333) and also be Dugumbirra – generous, not be greedy (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 332). Birra is a suffix that indicates that something is being made or caused to happen (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 308), which like Marra means that it is something that we have to actively cause to happen.

Demonstrating how each area of cosmology is not separate from the other areas – with transformation, the consequences of our focus and actions should result in Waluwin and Walumarra. As well, we should have ensured Bagaraybang – restored, comforted, healthy, comfortable (Grant & Rudder, 2010, p. 2928). Notice that Bagaraybang finishes with 'bang' which, as discussed earlier, is an intensifier meaning that you cannot have a little part that is healthy. To be healthy means that the whole must be healthy. So, things cannot be right until we have decolonized. We cannot address the issues that create illness, inequality, disadvantage, crisis or disaster until we address the structures that create these things. Where we currently are, climate change and pandemics are all a result of the way we have been living. We have been living in a manner that is not sustainable and certainly has not been Wirimbirra Ngurambang-gu – Caring for Country.

It is important to note that Country is not just about land, it includes all aspects of the environment, it includes sky, water, plants, and animals. It also includes people and all people. People are not separate from any other part of the environment. We exist within and are part of the environment and our being and actions impact the environment in the same way that any other part of the environment impacts all else in the environment. However, people have impacted the environment to an extent that no other part of the environment has. In addition, people as well as other areas of the environment are being impacted and peoples' lives and livelihoods are under threat. People have the responsibility to address what we have done, to correct, to put right the damage of our actions and to ensure it never happens again and we need to do this before it is too late.

Social workers as agents of social change and social justice have a responsibility to address not just the effects but also the causes of climate change. While we are not scientists, social workers should be lobbying, advocating and developing policies and programmes that address climate change and also the impacts on individuals, families, communities, and groups, particularly those who are most vulnerable and will disproportionally be impacted in these situations. Social workers have the responsibility to ensure that policies and resource distribution are not used to oppress and harm or are unfair and they must work in solidarity to ensure changes

that result in a responsible and inclusive society (IFSW, 2018). The issue of climate change has to have priority for social work practice to ensure that policies and resource distribution are fair and that those policies and practices do not continue to harm others and in particular the most vulnerable. Further, the AASW (2020) directs Australian social workers to "recognize the impact of the environment on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people and its fundamental importance to the future of human society". There is a very clear directive about the responsibilities of social workers in working to address the issues of climate change both at the policy and government levels and with communities and peoples.

We cannot even start to think about how to address the issues of climate change and its impact on the well-being of people and Country without addressing what has brought us to this point. Climate change is a direct result of the exploitation of natural resources (Green, 2020). Colonization was and continues to be about the exploitation of resources and human labour. First Nations peoples have also had their land taken and were forced into labour, often for little to no wages. Colonization has sought to alienate people from the environment and First Nations peoples from their belonging to Country. Thus, we have to work to dismantle the structures of colonization that continue today. That means that we must actively decolonize our societies as this is the only way for social justice to be achieved.

To decolonize, we must address the actions of the past and also make invisible the structures and actions of the present that continue to perpetrate harm. We need to change our view of the environment and natural resources. We need to recognize the rights of Country and the right to justice (both social and criminal) for Country. Actions led by Indigenous peoples and communities in New Zealand (Aljazeera, 2017), Bangladesh (Westerman, 2019) and Canada (Kestler-D'Amours, 2021) applying for the 'personhood' of rivers or recognizing them as a 'legal person' should be replicated throughout the world and not just for waters. There is a growing conversation about how 'personhood' and legal rights of the environment can address the ongoing harm to the environment (Gordon, 2018; Mortiaux, 2021; Pain & Pepper, 2021; Reeves & Peters, 2021). For Wiradyuri people, the concept of the environment having personhood and rights is nothing new. The environment (Country) has always been recognized as Mother – the nourisher, the one who looks after you and provides life. As per the Wiradyuri cosmology, everything is in relationship with all else and thus all have rights. Buyaa provides Country (the environment) with those legal rights and recognition as being equal to people. Decolonization cannot occur without the recognition of the rights of the environment.

The social work profession and thus individual social workers must work together as a collective and alongside First Nations peoples and other allies to decolonize. However, it does mean that the profession must decolonize itself at the same time as it is seeking to decolonize society on a global level. To decolonize we must first acknowledge that the problems are created by colonization and its structures that continue to govern society and our lives. One of the things that colonization does is to ensure that it remains invisible and to refocus attention from itself onto those who are experiencing the greatest impact of colonization. People have become separate from the environment, thinking that they have the right to exploit it for their own benefit. At the same time, people and their labour have also become a commodity to be exploited. First Nations people have been denigrated for their continuing connection to Country and this has been used to justify their exploitation and also their disadvantaged positions within society. However, if all people and all of the environment are recognized as having personhood and legal rights then it would mean that anyone who does damage to either people or the environment would be legally held to account, which would address much of the ongoing damage that is occurring.

This can all appear to be quite overwhelming and too hard to even know where to start. Green and Bennett (2018) point out that whilst both the problem and solution are quite complex, it is also quite simple. They argue that the problem is that we keep focusing on those who are experiencing disadvantage as being the problem and seeing the solution as helping them to overcome their problems rather than focusing upon the structures that create the problem in the first place. Colonization and colonialism are the problem and decolonization is the process to solve the problem. Decolonization must become the focus, the primary objective of social work globally. Without decolonization, there is no chance of social justice being achieved, as it will also just become another metaphor in a box of metaphors of what we talk about being. Decolonization must inform our practices and our actions as social workers. As Tuck and Yang (2012) caution us: if we allow the word decolonization to become another metaphor that we pull out at convenient times, we will prevent any possibility of decolonization from becoming a reality. We can no longer afford to ignore the urgency of the problems facing us globally. Whilst it is hard to change from the lifestyles we are accustomed to, we cannot keep ignoring the price that is being paid for those lifestyles. Also, we can no longer ignore the disproportionate price that continues to be paid by the environment and by First Nations peoples, along with other disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. In addition, First Nations peoples hold the knowledges that are required to address the issues we now face, during this global crisis of climate change and pandemics.

Social Work has a responsibility to work in solidarity and to advocate for the rights of First Nations peoples and the environment. It is the right of First Nations peoples to be able to care for Wirimbirra Ngurambang-gu, to live and practice their duty to Country, and to acknowledge and live their relationship to Country. It is not enough nor any longer acceptable for social workers to 'help' First Nations people to live in a society that continues to destroy Country. It is also no longer acceptable to ignore or deny the rights of Country (of the environment). Country must be accepted as a living entity that determines not just the quality of our lives but also our very existence. We cannot become decolonized without Indigenous knowledges, First Nations peoples and most importantly without Country.

This means that as part of the process of decolonization, social work, globally, needs to revise its codes of ethics, standards and principles and redevelop them to include the centrality of Country to all things; education and training programmes need to be rewritten to ensure that all social workers graduate with an in-depth understanding of Indigenous knowledges and Country along with a commitment to fight for decolonization; and our current social workers must retrain to upskill them for the important work ahead. It is no longer enough to just throw around words such as social justice, empowerment, self-determination and decolonization without any understanding of what these concepts truly mean. However, it is not possible to begin the journey of decolonization without first making visible colonization – as both an action and a structure – and how it affects society and the lives of all.

We live in a time when the world is facing interrelated crises of climate change, and pandemics. All of these are direct consequences of human behaviour and the belief that it is the right of humans to exploit natural resources. People have disconnected from the environment and no longer recognize Country as an integral part of their identity nor that people are a part of the environment, just as much as animals, plants, air, water, and land. To address the issues of these crises and the crises themselves, we must decolonize. Social work, as a profession that is committed to social justice and human rights, has the mandate to advocate and work in solidarity with First Nations peoples to ensure that decolonization is achieved. An essential part of decolonizing is to recognize the rights of Country (the environment) and this requires the recognition of the legal rights and personhood of Country. However, to

do this, social work has to work to decolonize its own identity and practices and, at the same time, work to decolonize the world.

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