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Reinventing Liberatory Practice: How Do We Work with Groups of Which We Are Not a Part?[1]

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Abstract

The research that informed this paper asked: how can we work as allies of groups of which we are not a part? This question is particularly focussed on work with people who have experienced colonisation by those who are aligned (by race, class, gender, culture or position) with the colonisers or oppressors. The research brings together literature in the fields of community work, adult education, and feminist and postcolonial theory, with Indigenous viewpoints and experience. An analysis of Indigenous viewpoints identified a range of key ideas about achieving social change. These ideas are developed into several frameworks, two of which are discussed. The first framework offers a way of conceptualising work against oppression and proposes that it must involve a focus on fostering emancipatory agency. Emancipatory agency involves the capacity to know and to act towards social justice ends via meaning-making which follows ethical criteria. An ethics of meaning-making is proposed which includes a focus on: multiplicity and difference; the partial nature of all knowings; the context/situation of meaning; and the critical/reflective attitude in meaning-making. This type of agency is dependent on the process of transformative dialogue which is inherently communal and is based on four micro processes: affirming the O/other; encountering, exploring and experiencing of multiple and partial views; moving between positions of self and others; and enacting meaning into the world. A second framework operationalises these ideas in the field of community development. Community development is understood as involving a 'trialectic' of three interdependent principles: relationship, organisation and justice. A seven-step method of practice to enact these principles is proposed.

Keywords

Agency, dialogue, community development, emancipatory, practice

Introduction: The research base

This paper draws on research that set out to answer the question: how might we work as allies with groups of which we are not a part? This question focuses on contexts where the worker[2] is positioned as aligned with the dominant system (including by professional role or cultural background) and is working with groups who have experienced or continued to experience oppression at the hands of this system or culture. In my case, this question grew out of my work as a non Indigenous person working with Australian Indigenous people in a range of fields but particularly community development, adult education and research. This

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[1] This paper is an adaptation of material presented in the doctoral thesis 'Community in Diversity: reinventing liberatory practice', presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Western Australia, School of Social Work and Social Policy, 2005.
[2] Throughout this paper I use the term 'worker' to refer to the many 'workers' in social change activities including paid and unpaid roles as well formal and informal ones. However, I do not wish to align the notion of 'worker' or 'practitioner' to that of 'professional' (in any discipline) as such a notion is associated with discourses that exclude a range of practitioners.

question recognises a complex set of relationships and histories. It recognises that, despite the best of intentions and the most sensitive and respectful actions, the relationship between, for example, community workers and community members, teachers and learners, or researchers and informants, is one that is related to the historically and culturally derived identities of each. Recognising this deeper context leads to recognition of the need to confront the oppressions experienced by people we work with and the ways our work, in any practice domain, contributes to continued oppression. In my case, this kind of recognition led to a kind of professional and personal impotence or "fatalistic passivity" (Leonard 1993, pp. 161), which was accompanied by the need to critique my every action and understanding. How could I work when I was inevitably implicated in the structures I wanted to change (Ellsworth 1989)? How could I act without undermining the agency of those whose agency I wanted to support? How could I act without reinscribing oppression and colonisation? How could I avoid "hegemonic evangelism" (Bishop 1996, p. 59); becoming the well intentioned outsider imposing a 'liberatory' agenda and approach? Did I, as a member of the colonising culture (even if also oppressed as a woman by this patriarchal culture), have any role in working with people who were the target of oppression and assimilation from this culture? However, other writers and my Aboriginal mentors also suggested that there were equal risks in doing nothing or in simply uncritically affirming difference and entering the space of "benevolent inertia" (Christine Walton cited in Greville 2000, p. 36). Hence the research question recognises the need to own rather than deny my position vis-a-vis the dominant culture, and to seek ways to continue to work against oppression in the face of this recognition.

The research set out to investigate methods and understandings of practice that aimed to be anti-oppressive and foster emancipatory agency (to be explained below) in such contexts. To do this, it drew on a range of 'data' including: personal experience of practice in both Indigenous community development and adult education; a wide range of literature in the fields of emancipatory and post colonial theory; a study of a tertiary curriculum for and largely written by Australian Indigenous people which had an explicitly emancipatory agenda;[3] and interviews with Indigenous students in this course about their experience of increased agency. As a result, the research was strongly informed by Indigenous viewpoints and contexts, and by contexts where Indigenous people and non Indigenous people worked together (and sometimes against each other) towards social change. This paper will not seek to detail the varied and interesting findings of these different data sets, which are dealt with elsewhere (Wilson 2005). However, the following ideas can be summarised as the core concepts emanating from the research. They have become key foundations to the two frameworks for action in the field of liberatory practice that are discussed in the remainder of this paper.

The research identified a number of core ideas that are developed in these frameworks. These include: the critical importance of the recognition of marginalised people's right to produce their own knowledges and the importance of the meaning-making context or 'location' in doing so; the power of thinking processes that were based on multiple viewpoints, contexts and ways of making meaning; a recognition of the tension between these different knowledges as productive rather than needing synthesis and as central to the work of social change; and the idea of the agency of individuals to reinvent knowledge from dominant systems to be consistent with the contexts (and the values) of its use. Finally, particularly from the Indigenous data,

came the belief in the importance of community as a powerful form of social organisation with the potential to frame and fuel liberatory movement.

Pulling together these ideas in answer to the question: how might we work as allies with groups of which we are not a part? or, how can we work against oppression, with those oppressed, when we are part of the oppressive majority?, this paper will offer two frameworks for practice. The first framework offers a way of thinking about oppression and agency. This analysis underpins the way I suggest we understand social change work (in any field). It suggests that all work needs to focus, at some level, on the way we make meaning and (re)create knowledge, if we are to achieve a liberatory and inclusive society. In particular, the framework provides a guide for collaborative meaning-making work through a model of transformative dialogue. Whilst the framework operates at a conceptual level, I also offer a more concrete guide to the elements of dialogue required for transformative change to occur. I propose that this somewhat advances our understanding of that well-used term 'dialogue'.

The second framework operationalises these broader conceptual ideas in the field of community development. It provides a way of refocussing understandings of community development as well as a specific method of practice that aims to generate liberatory and inclusive community.

Community in diversity: A conceptual framework for work against oppression
"what the elites of today want…[is] for the people not to think" (Freire 1972, p. 102).

This conceptual framework attempts to capture what I see as the corner stone of oppression, exclusion and agency: control over meaning-making. This is not to say that other types of action against oppression are less important. Indeed, actions to address inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities are vital, as are actions to skill community members to achieve greater agency within the dominant system. Likewise, actions of direct opposition are foundational to change. This framework does not aim to supplant other analyses or mechanisms of change. It suggests, instead, that behind or alongside these should lie a framework that focuses on expanding the ways we make meaning, which in turn effects individual and social change.

My premise is that epistemic oppression is central to processes of oppression and continues in our development work throughout the world. As Leonard argues:
"The knowledge claims of modernity, based on a dogmatic belief in one universal Truth, have been instrumental in silencing, erasing or marginalising the diverse voices, needs and practices of the Other" (Leonard 1999, p. vi).

Epistemic oppression involves the systematic de-legitimation or denial of the knowledges of those groups who are being colonised or dominated; the (attempted) assimilation of these groups and cultures into a dominant framework; as well as the promulgation of a set of epistemological values. These values reinforce "the imposition of artificial uniformity" (Ife 1999, p. 217); promote a synthesising of difference (where recognised at all) into an overly homogenous whole; emphasise singularity over diversity; and celebrate

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[3] This curriculum was that of the Aboriginal Community Management and Development Program of the

binary logic resulting in unnecessarily oppositional stances. This epistemic culture engenders the "words and images we carry around in our heads … that shape social realities in ways that judge and confine, that squander hope and energy, and that refuse to celebrate the human spirit" (Kelly and Sewell 1988, p. 167). Epistemic oppression functions at both social or systemic and individual levels, which are mutually reinforcing. In short, a limited set of knowledges are validated, which exclude those of minority groups; alternate ways of knowing and acting are belittled and denied value; and members of alternate cultures and knowledge groups are forced to adopt the dominant knowledge system which dictates what is known and how it to be known.

In practice this means that social 'problems' and 'solutions' are defined within set parameters and social, economic and political theories (endorsed by the dominant system), with usually little or no reference to the interpretations or knowledges of those experiencing the problems. It is most often those deemed as expert in the dominant epistemologies, external to the immediate context of experience, who are charged with classifying and solving social issues. The interpretations or meanings of those experiencing the problems are marginalised or de-legitimated. Within this context the legitimated social welfare discourses of the dominant system focus on ideas of *participation in* but not *control over* knowledge production around social issues. On the ground this translates as consultation around social issues, with the classification of both 'problem' and 'solution' the preserve of legitimated knowledge producers within the system who remain outside the relevant community context.[4] As Dorothy Smith suggests, "issues are formulated because they are administratively relevant, not because they are significant first in the experience of those who live them" (Smith 1990b, p. 15). Much effort is put into increased participation mechanisms by some social activists without similar efforts aimed at exposing and transforming the epistemological framework these sit inside of. In describing such mechanisms of epistemological oppression, Freire (1972) suggests that oppressed/colonised societies cannot develop because "their political, economic and cultural decision-making power is located outside themselves in the invader society" (p. 130).

Agency

The dismantling of these mechanisms of oppression demands a recognition of knowledge production or meaning-making as a core act of agency. Agency, in this context, and as described by both Freire (1972) and feminist theorists, is the ability/ power to produce knowledge or make meaning and act on this basis. As discussed above, both of these elements of knowing and acting are the usurped domain of the dominant system.

In postcolonial contexts, agency has been related to 'conscientisation' as:

> "the process in which people, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a
> deepening awareness both of the sociohistoric reality which shapes their lives and of their
> capacity to transform that reality" (Freire 1970, p. 27).

This kind of agency focuses on activating new ways knowledge is produced. As Patricia Hill Collins states:

Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University, Western Australia.
[4] Weick (1993) talks about the process whereby an individual relinquishes or is expected to relinquish their own interpretations and analyses in favour of the legitimated 'expert' or 'professional' as a " 'giving over' process" (p. 16).

"Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering. But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications" (Collins 1991, p. 221).

Agency in postcolonial contexts therefore demands the validation of local knowledges; the conscientisation (Freire 1970) or decolonisation of minds (Hooks 1990) to encompass new ways of thinking and knowing; and the acting on these new systems of meaning-making to affect social reality. The linking of knowing and acting is critical in this understanding of agency. Knowing alone will not achieve social change, though the actual process of knowledge production is critical to the nature of social change as will be discussed below. Acting involves the bearing of the meaning made into the world and the enacting of it (Buber 1958), which necessarily involves both the action of self-change as well as social change. However, in order to challenge systems of epistemic oppression, agency needs to be more than just increased participation in the construction of knowledge and more than increased capacity to act. In short, knowledge produced needs to be less oppressive and more generative of social justice (Ife 1999, 2002) than that produced via dominant epistemologies. This kind of agency could then be understood as *emancipatory agency.*

The process of emancipatory meaning-making
The conceptual framework presented here suggests that we need to work to increase the agency of oppressed members of our society in making meaning of their experience/world and acting on this basis. This agency needs be affirmed and legitimated as productive of valid and important knowledges that must inform social institutions, policies, programs, roles and behaviours. To be anti oppressive, meaning-making within this understanding of agency is dependant on the process and ingredients of its production. The ingredients of anti oppressive or emancipatory meaning-making are discussed below and understood as 'ethics' of meaning-making.[5] The process of production is discussed subsequently, and identified as a process of transformative dialogue.

The ethics of meaning-making
If the problem is an epistemology of totalising singularity and false homogeneity then the meaning-making which is aspired to within (and to bring about) a new epistemology must be based on a commitment to four principles or ethics:

- *Exploring multiple and different meanings*: This principle focuses on the recognition of multiple identities, experiences and perspectives within and across individuals (which are informed or constructed by multiple discourses and epistemologies). Difference is understood as the divergence among the multiple which, while not benign, is not an inherently oppositional distinction. The logic operating within the ethic of multiplicity and difference is a "both/and conceptual stance" (Collins 1991, p. xiv) where difference and multiplicity are actively sought out and understood as creative sources.
- *Acknowledging the partial nature of all knowings*: Knowledges, identities (formed of multiple subjectivities and discourses), and the narratives they produce are necessarily partial. This is a partialness: of incompletion and constant formation (Orner 1992); of exclusion and partisanship where meaning is constructed so as to defy, ignore or background other meanings or alternate positions (Ellsworth 1989);

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[5] These are discussed at length in Wilson (2005).

and of the ever-present alternate subjectivities and meanings that may be hinted at but not pursued in a given position. With this in mind no meaning-making or knowledge production is understood as complete or dominant but is constantly subject to revision, expansion and juxtaposition with other knowledges.

- *Validating the locatedness of meaning-making*: Meaning-making always occurs in and is dependent on context. Context can be understood as: the multiple (and partial) contexts of the meaning maker's 'self'; the immediate context of interaction in which meaning-making takes place; and the broader discursive, historical, social, cultural and political context of the meaning-making activity. The key focus of this ethic is about how to best understand the meaning of others. This is dependent on recognising and entering their meaning-making contexts and learning the language of these. Not to do so maintains hegemonic control with the interpreter who uses her/his own interpretative context to determine the meaning made by others and how it is represented (Bishop 1996; Freire 1994).

- *Utilising a critical and reflexive attitude that evaluates the oppressive potential of meanings generated*: The critical/reflexive ethic of meaning-making focuses on identifying and exploring multiple (and partial) positions of meaning-making, and critiques the influences contributing to their construction. It is the deliberate search for alternatives, contradictions, and possibilities through moving between positions of difference and into 'both/and' perspectives. This ethic draws on criteria of social justice, (as defined by Ife (2002), and as reinvented within the local context), to guide analysis of the oppressive potential of meanings generated.

The application of these ethics of meaning-making to an epistemological framework aims to bring about the "rejection of knowledges that promise answers that lead to closure" (Luke and Gore 1992, p. 7). In this framework, meaning-making is enabled and affirmed from multiple positions and locations, all of them partial, and these meanings are understood as continually open for critique and reinvention. The ultimate use of meanings is guided by a commitment to social change which seeks meanings that lead not to closure but to opportunities for self, community and social transformation towards a more just world.

Dialogue

Whilst the ethics of meaning-making represent the core ingredients for emancipatory meaning-making, the process of meaning-making is equally important. Emancipatory meaning-making is dependent on the process of transformative dialogue which is described below (and in detail in Wilson 2005).

In this framework dialogue is, at its simplest, the process through which we make meaning (using the ethics above) either as individuals or as groups. Dialogue has a lengthy discursive history alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, used to describe conversation, social discourses, and a process of communication. In emancipatory literature, dialogue has been understood as "democractic communication" (Shor and Freire 1987, p. 14) towards a rational, universal truth (Habermas 1987). In terms of this framework, such ideas of dialogue are largely unhelpful. Here, dialogue is both about people and ideas, and is ultimately a process of community as well as one of meaning-making. It is not necessarily democratic, though it is anti-hierarchical, and it is not about achieving a definitive position, but rather is characterised by movement and tension.

Transformative dialogue is a communicative and creative event where subjects "meet in cooperation" (Freire 1972, p. 135) to name their worlds. In this framework, such dialogue needs to be simultaneously

understood as: a meeting place, an encounter, an interaction, a process of exposure and expansion, an attitude or stance of openness and movement, an attentiveness, a "dynamic facing of … others" (Buber 1947, p. 51). Transformative dialogue is the process of recognising, exploring, moving between and holding in tension multiple meanings, understandings and/or positions. To achieve a transformative understanding of difference (as offered via multiple, partial and located perspectives), the process of dialogue involves an encountering of the actuality of these differences in an intersubjective way. Dialogue is a movement between positions of self and other: of looking inwards, looking at/against, looking from alongside other, looking together. It is the moving between and among these positions constantly bringing new meanings to each. Through intersubjective encounters, meaning-making has an experiential element as well as a creative one.

The framework posits four layers of dialogue:
- affirming/recognising/turning towards
- encountering/exploring/experiencing
- moving between
- enacting.

Key notions appending these four layers are those of intersubjectivity and tension.

In defining these core layers of dialogue, which could perhaps also be thought of as dialogic 'acts', my intention is to highlight the ingredients of transformative dialogue. Whilst the layers, or acts, are easily understood as sequential, they also need to be understood as cyclic, iterative and even simultaneous. Movement is the core element of dialogue and participants in it continually move between these layers, returning to and expanding each. However, on another level, there is some merit in understanding these layers as discrete: for example, it is possible to enact layer one (affirming/recognising) and for the dialogue to cease at this point. Nevertheless, even this experience, though limited, can have transformative potential. In this way, it is useful at each point to hold into the analysis a consideration of what transformation, epistemologically and ontologically, may be achieved with each layer. This kind of analysis is useful for the social change worker as it helps identify what has occurred and what could be facilitated to yet occur. It provides an analysis that maximises the potential for agency at all points rather than seeking to link agency to a fully realised process. Dialogue can never be fully realised — it is a continuous act with which we alternately engage and disengage. But unless our ongoing actions, our agency of meaning-making and enacting, is continually grounded in a process of dialogue we will replicate epistemological closure and oppression against which we set out to fight.

Layer 1: Affirming, recognising, turning towards the other
> "The basic movement in the life of dialogue is the turning towards the other (Buber 1947, p. 40).

The first action is that of recognition and affirmation of otherness rather than denial or attack. Buber characterises it as a "turning towards" the other person or position and, by doing so, affirming their existence in all its difference and even opposition. The affirmation of difference is fundamental to overcoming oppression. Affirming difference, rather than modifying, attacking or denying it, can be transforming for both

parties, even though the understanding of this difference and the possibilities this brings for meaning-making around social change will be limited without the further layers of dialogue.

Layer 2: Encountering, exploring, experiencing

This layer directly confronts the problem of location, that is, how to understand the multiple meanings confronted within the context in which they were created. This requires a process of repositioning meaning makers from a disconnected stance to one of connectedness and engagement within the "cultural world view" of the other (Bishop 1996, p. 26). It is not just an observation but an entry into the world and perspective of another. Bishop refers to this as the establishment of a "cultural consciousness", which is a "way of knowing that is born of time, connectedness, participation and commitment" (Bishop 1996, p. 238). Such descriptions imply an experiential, even participative, element. Buber speaks of this dialogic action as "experiencing the other side" where one (or each) person "lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other" (Buber 1947, p. 124). This experience or encounter is one of intersubjectivity and is central to transformative dialogue. This intersubjectivity, or in Bishop's words "participatory consciousness" (Bishop 1996, p. 116), is a continued movement between subjectivities of self and other. It is neither assimilation of the other into the self, nor is it a denial of one's own subjectivity and selfhood (Buber 1947).

These dialogic acts of intersubjectivity are fundamental to transformative meaning-making as they provide dimensions of understanding. They alter self: the other is both out there and in here and the understandings gained transform one's own meaning-making structures in subtle ways. Without these, we can only ever interpret the meanings of others from within our own locations, rather than understanding these from within theirs.

Layer 3: Moving between

The action of encountering (discussed above) demands the engagement with various and multiple positions including the multiple positions of self and the multiple positions of other via intersubjective encounters. This encounter involves a moving back and forth between and among positions of self and other. Whilst the encounter may initially be with a particularly foregrounded subject position (of self and/or other), the engagement with this opens up a dialogic relationship with other elements of its location (Bakhtin 1998), which can lead to encounters with other subject positions and locational contexts. In this sense, the third layer of dialogue focuses on moving beyond the initial location of encounter across multiple terrains and simultaneously recognises that these terrains are ever changing.

This movement of dialogue is an enriching or additive process (Bakhtin 1998) as positions are revisited, bringing elements of other positions into a re-reading of all. A key idea appending this layer is that of tension which is seen as generative rather than requiring reconciliation. The process is not one of assimilation, but a layering of meanings and perspectives which is multidirectional, continuous, and affirming of both connections and differences simultaneously.

Layer 4: enacting

The final layer of transformative dialogue is that of enacting. For Buber this is a forward movement flowing out of the relational or intersubjective event, an enacting of the impact of this experience, which has a number of levels. On one level is the need to confirm the relational experience by living it. As Buber states, it

is not enough to just "think" the other person, to give that person life in thought, but we must also "live towards the other man [sic], who is not framed by thought but bodily present before us; we should live towards his concrete life" (Buber 1947, p. 47). This is an active acknowledgement of the life of the other, as we determine the actions of our own life. But more than a lived acknowledgement of the being of another, the meaning made from this dialogue needs to be enacted, to be borne into the world. This is the clear link between agency as meaning-making and agency as action. For Freire (1972), knowing and action can never be separate acts but must maintain a continuously iterative relationship through which the world is transformed.

In enacting meaning, Buber states that, we must also continuously "re-decide" and "act anew" via a continued transformative dialogue with self and other (Buber 1947, p. 91). In this way, there is no final position but an ongoing process which includes affirming, encountering, moving and enacting in an iterative, continuous cycle, which constantly re-finds and reconstitutes the way we hold together the tension-filled multiple meanings.

Relationship, organisation and justice: A framework for community development work

The conceptual framework discussed above offers a way of responding to oppression focussing on agency. It suggests that a core aspect of social change is the fostering of emancipatory agency, which involves a new way of making meaning that validates different ways of knowing and being. This broad social change task can be understood as relevant to multiple fields of action and practice. The task of this next section is to apply this approach to a specific field of practice, community development, which is a methodology widely used in 'inclusive development' work. This section attempts to answer the specifics of how do we work for social change within the sphere of community development in our day-to-day practices.

Understandings of community development are varied and broadly focus around a number of key themes. In the literature, we find a variety of definitions that foreground different characteristics of community development including: community mobilisation and social action; self development; self determination; community building and social/structural change. The understanding I propose here draws on all of these and is framed well by Ife, as follows:

> "The purpose of community development is to re-establish the community as the location of significant human experience and the meeting of human need, rather than to rely on the larger, more inhuman and less accessible structures of the welfare state, the global economy, bureaucracy, professional elites, and so on" (Ife 1996, p. 131).

In defining 'community development', I affirm an understanding of community as defined by various locations including those of identity, culture, relationship, belonging and geography. The definition of community development I propose also relies on Ife's (2002) understanding of 'development'. Ife (2002) argues that 'development', in community development contexts, needs to encompass an understanding of betterment in many dimensions including the personal/spiritual, cultural, social, economic, political and environmental. Rather than associated with 'growth' in the capitalist sense, development needs to be understood as consistent with the values of sustainability, organic development and social justice (Ife 2002). This understanding enables a wide range of development activities on all 'levels' of development (micro, meso, macro) as long as they are consistent with the values identified here.

Whilst any definition of community development relies on the inherent understandings of 'community' and 'development', it is also the relationship between the two that defines the concept. Central to the definition of community development proposed here is the primacy of the authority of the community (i.e. the affected community of people) in the development. In this understanding, community development is not defined by work *with* or *for* the community, or work *focussed on* community need. Fundamentally, community development is about the pre-eminence or primacy of community/local authority to make meaning, to produce knowledge, to decide, and to act for betterment (development). Primacy of local authority means that identification of the direction and methods of development are located within the community. Even where external analyses or agendas are imposed, the community is able to decide to adopt these and adapt or reinvent them to fit their own understandings and experience, as well as exercise determining power over how they are operationalised locally.

Community development is essentially about building (or re-building) community. As Ife (1996) argues, this involves "new ways of relating, organising social life and meeting human need" (p. 2). I understand these 'new' ways to be premised on three fundamental elements: relationship, organisation and justice (ACMDP 1998). These elements encompass many of the definitional thrusts documented in the literature and, in particular, Ife's twenty six principles of community development (Ife 2002) in a relatively simple framework. These elements work together to define community development work across a wide diversity of contexts. They function in a dynamic and interdependent relationship in such a way that all must be present in a continuously connected trialectic if the activity is to be defined as a community development one.
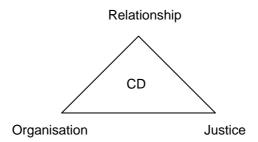

Relationship

CD

Organisation   Justice

Figure 1. The community development (CD) trialectic

This definition offers an orientation to, or methodology for, the work of community development within which a method of practice sits. The discussion below (and in detail in Wilson 2005) focuses on identifying the nature of each of the elements of this methodology (relationship, organisation and justice) and their underlying values, principles and understandings.

Relationship
The element of relationship within community development work focuses on relationship as a core building block of community. Within this framework, understandings of relationship as a tool of community development focus on: fostering, maintaining and extending relational or intersubjective encounters (as discussed in the conceptual framework); a recognition of the role of relationship as a means of expanding social capital; and the use of the concept of relationship as both a core analytical category and a strategy in social change.

Relationships in community development are understood as connective and relational events. They need to be fostered and extended in three major domains: within the self (i.e. one's own conception of self and her/his relationship to a broader context); between people (in the micro relations between and among worker and community members as well as at a macro level between people and those representing the political, economic and social structures of the society); and between people and place (or environment). This involves fostering dialogic encounters between people to enable intersubjective engagements with the ways others experience and make meaning of their world.

In discourse on social capital, relationships can be understood as resources in a wide range of ways (Bourdieu 1986). Relationships bring access to information, skills, and support as well as other material, cultural and economic resources. In community development terms, the mandate is to increase the 'richness' and robustness of people and community through increasing the number, depth, diversity (i.e. across heterogenous groups and social positions) and breadth of relationships (Productivity Commission 2003).

The concept of relationship is a powerful analytical category for the work of community development. Understanding the world as comprised of webs of both overlapping and clearly demarcated relationships opens up possibilities for analysing social, political, cultural and economic life. Using this tool, social change agents can identify or map relationships in any given domain or context. In doing so they identify those included, those excluded, the interconnections among relationship 'webs', the type of relationships, their goals, and the potential to make them more relational and liberatory. Focussing on relationships provides a way of re-personifying institutional structures and reified issues. It offers direction for strategic work based on enhancing relationships and building new ones in key areas.

Organisation

The notion of organisation is perhaps one of the most discussed in community work and social action literature. Within this paper, the element of organisation focuses on bringing people together into a participative, collaborative and counter-oppressive association with each other. These 'associations' are the core collectives for action in community development, whether this action be critique, lobbying, social action, community management, service delivery, research, education, advocacy or other.

Organisation is understood as carrying several complementary purposes. Firstly, organisation focuses on mobilising people to act, both in terms of mobilising to meet their own needs and as a form of bargaining power to influence the actions of others. Secondly, organisation is a mechanism through which to increase access to social capital. Thirdly, organisation functions to model alternative forms of social, political and economic organisation and social relations to address community needs. Fourthly, associated with this, is the operation of organisation as a location for discourse (and counter discourse) development and dissemination. The last two purposes are little discussed in community development literature but are critical to social change.

Justice

Community development, as it is understood in this framework, is founded on the principle of social justice.

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Using a critical analysis, it is essentially about creating better, fairer, more accessible communities and social structures, identifying and addressing oppressions, injustices and inequities.

The justice element of community development draws on multiple analyses of oppression and disadvantage. In particular it focuses on work to overcome unjust and oppressive *structures* (in social, political, economic, cultural and local domains), *discourses* (including beliefs and knowledges), *relations* (social relations, interpersonal and structural relationships), and *practices* (within the group/community, outside it, and to do with place/environment). It also addresses inequities in material conditions and opportunities resulting from the oppressive domains listed above. In this work, the ethics of meaning-making are central with the critical ethic constantly driving analysis to inform action. The critical ethic utilises a social justice and anti-oppressive criteria which critiques social/political/economic inclusions and exclusions; the interests these serve; locations of decision-making; and the consequences of actions.

The interdependence of the principles in defining community development

Clearly there is much useful work that utilises one or two of these elements of relationship, organisation and justice. However, this trialectic of community development requires that all three elements must be enacted together if it is to be considered a community development activity. This is an important definitional aspect which helps distinguish community development from a range of other practices utilised within community work and other professional disciplines (e.g. management, planning, education). Community development is not simply a method of participation or consultation nor is it only teamwork, capacity building or relationship development. It is a political activity but its success is not simply measured by the level of change of political and social structures. Community development must be based on relations between people (in the Buberian sense), on organised collective action and consciousness in the public domain, within the context of striving to achieve greater social justice through the work of people as community.

A method for practice

Having articulated a methodology for community development work, based on the three elements of relationship, organisation and justice, it is now time to turn to ways to enact these understandings. The next section on 'method' aims to operationalise both the community development framework offered here, and the larger conceptual framework 'Community in diversity' in which it sits.
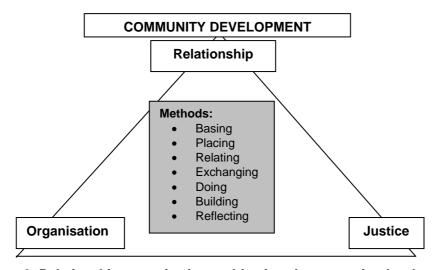

Figure 2. Relationship, organisation and justice: A community development framework and method of practice

The method offered here identifies my own personal rhythm in undertaking community development work. Rather than a set of tasks, the method identifies the core elements of the work and draws through the understandings and aspirations of the conceptual framework into the practice of community development. Even more broadly, this method is also applicable to other social change work, such as teaching or research. Despite the differences of the field of work, differing contexts and differing analyses of appropriate action, the way of working in many social change activities which have community at their heart invariably involves the steps or cycles which comprise the method described below. Each of these steps variously foregrounds aspects of relationship, organisation and justice.

The steps or cycles of the method discussed below represent the core rhythms of the work. Though they are presented in a linear format, in practice they do not frequently appear so. The cycles are perhaps best understood as simultaneously overlapping and as continuing without end whilst the work of community continues between people.

Cycle 1: Basing

Community development is founded on located understandings and relationships. Basing is the first step of these. It is primarily the task of immersing oneself within the local context and experiencing what it is like to see the world from this perspective. It is the process of coming "to know with them [i.e. the people] the reality which challenges them" (Freire 1972, p. 82). Basing is a critical shift in orientation and priority for the worker and is a central enactment of the element of justice and of the ethic of 'locatedness'. Rather than uncritically assuming that the worker's world and reading of it is the "compass" by which others fix their bearings (Freire 1994, p. 22), this step acknowledges the commitment to a fundamentally different orientation and location.

Basing has a number of elements: recognising and affirming the differences of context and perspective; building locatedness of understanding, which is a mutual process between worker and community members; and creating an interactive space that is based on cultural, contextual and communicative competence. Basing is a core element of relationship building.

A core requirement of Basing is the need for the worker to embed her/himself in the local meaning-making context to affirm and understand the meanings acquired by language in this unique environment. Simply put, the worker "learns the uses of the language of the setting, and learns how to mean properly in those settings" (Smith 1990a, p. 92). Gaining this perspective requires talking with local people, with those at the heart of the issue. Bishop (1996) suggests that central to this is allowing community members to tell their stories both to the worker and to each other. Clark et al. (1996) emphasise the importance of the inclusion of the ordinary, that is, time devoted to spontaneous exchanges on virtually any subject, in the development of located understandings and relationships. Through these activities, the worker learns about local experience and simultaneously becomes attuned to local meanings as well as the significant cultural models or "storylines", "images" or "theories" that underpin them (Gee 1999, p. 81).

This kind of interaction is participative and reciprocal. Via this type of reciprocal relationship (of varying depths) each participant learns from and partially identifies with the other (Archibald and Crnkovich 1995).

This kind of exchange is productive of two central pre-conditions for community development work: an intersubjective perspective which incorporates a "double consciousness in which we begin to see both ourselves and each other as we exist in the material world" (Archibald and Crnkovich 1995, p. 114); and the establishment of a shared cultural and meaning-making competence which is fundamental to the interactive space to be occupied together in community development work.

In focussing on meaning-making competence, the cycle of Basing is not solely about the worker gaining located understandings, but is also about enabling those with whom the worker will work to make an assessment of the cultural and contextual competence of the worker. It is through Basing that community members come to make a judgement about whether or not the worker is able to understand what they are saying and hear it from within their context. This judgement fundamentally affects the community development work in the future (if indeed any is sanctioned to proceed).

Cycle 2: Placing

Knowledge of each other does not necessarily mean an agreement to work together, to continue to build a relationship. Withdrawal of either party is possible after the first stage, with both coming away with a somewhat expanded understanding.

The second cycle is about negotiating a place in the community or gaining permission for an ongoing relationship. This negotiation is not only about affirming permission to 'step in' or to work together, but how far to 'step in'. The worker's role may be peripheral to the community development activity or at its core, and the worker must stand where she/he is put. In addition, the 'place' of the worker is being continually renegotiated as the activity changes and relationships evolve. The important thing here is to be sensitive to the subtle suggestions about the worker's role which arise in meetings and conversations, and to avoid an assumption of centrality to the action.

It is important to emphasise that Placing entails an agreement to work within the directions and processes of the community or group. Membership entails rights and responsibilities for all group members, including the worker, over which the group has control. This placing of the worker inside the group's parameters and processes is fundamental to just and anti hegemonic practice; without this, the worker operates outside the community and maintains hegemonic control (Bishop 1996).

Cycle 3: Relating

This cycle is critical to both building and reinventing community. There are three core aspects of this cycle: enabling relational encounters; developing a sense of community through organisation; and defining direction — the activity of joint analysis, vision-building and action planning.

A key element to building a liberatory community is the fostering of relational encounters between its members. As described in the conceptual framework, these relational encounters are intersubjective and affirm difference and multiplicity. Achieving relationships of this kind between community members, and between community members and the worker, is the core task of this cycle. Relational encounters are likely to be momentary, often fostered through narratives, personal exchanges, collaborative activity, and creative events (stories, song, drama, art). The challenge is in the working beyond what Lorraine Code describes as

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the "first recognition of commonality and the exhilaration at the fact that we have so much in common" (Code et al. 1992, p. 137) to a willingness to encounter and engage with the differences and tensions within and between members.

This process of community (via encounter and dialogue) begins to build and cement a sense of collective identity. This process centres on building the story or stories of experience. It is a "learning with each other how to speak together" from the standpoint/s of experience (Smith 1990a, p. 5). Gee (1999) discusses how this involves drawing out the separately held parts of a cultural model or storyline, and exploring the larger more complex linking of cultural models. This is the mapping and analysis of the issue which starts first with the near to hand experiences, key themes, images and stories (hence, often that sense of commonness of what we share as a group via our shared cultural and discursive models). Next, the analysis extends to the less near and larger explanations and diverse and different cultural and discursive contexts. It is here that the element of justice and the critical ethic of meaning-making most inform the community development activity. It is the role of the group here to critically explore and negotiate the multiple knowledges and meanings experienced via their relational encounters, and to further develop local analyses and theories linked to wider analyses (Mohanty 1991). A critical part of this process is the development, or 'staking out', of a language to capture the experiences and known world in a way that overthrows the limitations of the inherited views and language of the oppressors which have dictated the way things are known and spoken about (Smith 1990a). This shared and deeply rich 'speaking from experience' leads to "discoveries of a language, political, cultural, artistic, philosophic" (Smith 1990a, p. 2), which is part of a growing community's sense of self as well as the development of a counter discourse.

The third key element of the cycle is that of direction setting which is both a continuing of the process of analysis and an activity of vision building. This process is able to "unleash energy, stimulate creativity, instil pride, build commitment, prompt the taking of responsibility, and evoke a sense of investment and ownership" (Guba and Lincoln cited in Stringer 1996, p. 22). Alongside of analysis, multiple aspirations need to be mapped and together create a vision for community action. It is, as Freire (1972) describes, a "climate of creativity" (p. 148) that is fuelled by dialogue.

This cycle embodies the key moments when people begin to realise the possibilities of thinking and acting together. Meanings emerge from their relational encounters and the group begins to assume responsibility for enacting them into the world. It is from these meanings and vision that mobilisation springs.

Cycle 4: Exchanging

"In this form of practice, the knowledge and wisdom of the worker are not privileged over the knowledge and wisdom of the 'client', and the relationship between the two is one of mutual education. Each learns from the other's experience, and as a result they can together engage in some form of action which may have been impossible for each in isolation" (Ife 1996, p. 221).

While relational encounters are by nature a kind of exchange, the activity of community development also requires more explicit exchanges (or giftings) of skill, information and knowledges. To achieve the vision, change or action identified in cycle three, it is often clear that both group members and the worker need to

increase their information, analyses and skills. This cycle aims to exchange these (particularly between parties to the action) so as to enable all stakeholders to participate in bringing about the desired result. Ife (2002) refers to this as "skill sharing" (p. 215).

Often it is the worker who has the privileged access to many of these resources and who will play a key role in 'skilling' community members or organising others to take on this role. However, community members will have both specialist knowledge and skills in various areas, as well as skills and understandings about how the community works, local protocols and relationships. Without these, the worker will be ineffective in her/his role.

Exchanging is a long-term venture, often with short term bursts of activity. This cycle requires the group to identify what skills it has, what it needs, and how best to learn these in ways that are appropriate and relevant. The focus is both on building new skills, as well as working to maximise existing skill bases so that all people can contribute effectively and their contribution is valued. From a justice perspective, it is essential to value all types of skills and expertise; as Kuyek points out, allowing the formally educated to assume their traditional roles of dominance will "squeeze out" others along with their skills, knowledge and expertise (Kuyek 1990, p. 156). Exchange mechanisms can be formal or informal through: skills workshops; information sessions; meetings with resource people; peer mentoring and 'apprenticeships'; or informal conversations and observation.

Cycle 5: Doing

"alternative knowledges … form the basis for alternative ways of doing things" (Smith 1999, p. 34).

Community development is essentially about betterment, be it responsive to negatives or positives in the community. Having built relationships, shared visions and skills, the key movement is into action. This is the action of working towards identified goals, building further relationships, and organising new social and community structures. There are two key components of the cycle of Doing: that of *en*acting and that of mutuality or doing together.

Given that community development relies on the element of organisation, it is important to stress an understanding of action or enacting as a group one. According to Clifford Geertz, it is "by sharing the same experience in time and place…[that] people overcome their mutual strangeness" and build community (Geertz cited in Czarniawska-Joerges 1997, p. 61). The act of Doing is not just a necessary activity to achieve change but is in itself, if the doing is shared, a relational event and an act of community building. Buber (1947) suggests that sharing in an activity is practising a "community of work" with others (Buber 1947, p. 113). For Buber, this mutuality of action is important as it moves beyond a one directional man doing something to the world (Buber 1947) into an acting together which holds the multiple and alternative meanings and options into a focussed but collaborative strategy.

Cycle 6: Building
Cycle 6 is about building change outward from the initiating group. It is ultimately the expansion of liberatory community via ongoing dialogic activity.

Bishop (1996) discusses the notion of an ever widening spiral of inclusion. New understandings, and the actions they generate, are carried forward into the world beyond the initiating group via fostering located relationships with successive layers of the spiral including with family, friends, neighbours, politicians, and bureaucrats. Building outwards to family and friends can increase understanding and bring in new skills and views. Building outwards to politicians and bureaucrats can enable revised thinking, policies and decisions based on a new understanding of the needs and views of the community. In this way, building outwards extends the opportunities for others to develop new understandings via relational encounters, as well as increases social capital through diversifying the base of the community.

In the discussion of the element of organisation, I identify how it is concerned with developing new forms of social organisation, social structures, and social relations which aim to overcome the oppressive forms of these. The cycle of Building pays particular attention to the building of these new structures and relations and to discussing these developments with an ever-widening web of people. A key mechanism of change and of building outwards is that of discourse development and dissemination. New discourses built through community processes need to be extended into the wider public realm where they can engage with, counter and seek to change existing oppressive discourses. In this process, groups seek to articulate their (new) knowings and bring other people to the dialogue, which continually recreates these. Community groups have traditionally employed a range of strategies to do this including public forums, the use of media, community arts, street theatre, public speaking, and participation in other organisations.

Cycle 7: Reflecting

If we understand that emancipatory agency entails the production and enactment of meaning which is counter oppressive, then reflection is a key responsibility of this agency. It is a collaborative and dialogic activity that explicitly links analysis and practice.

It is essential to understand reflection (or meaning-making) and acting as mutually dependant and iterative. Reflection is never the last thing to be done, but is always the partner of action. For Freire there is "a dynamic and dialectical movement between 'doing' and 'reflecting on doing'" (Freire 1998, p. 43). In this way, the cycle of Reflecting attends each of the other cycles at all times.

The process of reflection draws on the ethics of meaning-making and the processes of dialogue, discussed in the conceptual framework, as well as the understandings encompassed in the justice element. Via these it searches for multiple and different interpretations, recognises the partialness of all, and critiques the consequences of each. As with the process of enacting within transformative dialogue, reflection requires that we continuously "re-decide" and "act anew" based on this transformative dialogue with self and others (Buber 1947). Reflection involves critical self analysis as well as a focus on the immediate action; the broader goal of transformed self and society; and the process implemented to achieve these.

Conclusion

In this paper I position myself as someone seeking social change in a context where I am implicated in the oppressions of others, implicated via my membership of the dominant cultural group and via the various legitimating privileges (such as qualifications and professional positions) I have accrued through this

membership. I enter social relations with oppressed peoples with this legacy standing before me. Though I want to work against oppression I am fearful of further oppressing and reinscribing the relations, mechanisms and structures of exclusion, delegitimation, denial of agency, and dependence.

In this context, to undertake liberatory social change, I/we need to know:

- how to work to overcome oppression without reinscribing it
- how to work from my/our own social positionings without becoming either immobilised or dominated by them
- how to work as allies across our differences towards fostering a liberatory community in which we can all share.

This paper offers two ways of practice to do this. Firstly, I suggest that it is imperative to adopt and foster new ways of meaning-making that inform our actions in the world. This emancipcatory meaning-making has a unique process: through four dialogic steps it intersubjectively engages with different and multiple understandings and experiences; acknowledges and critiques their partialness and the context from which they have developed (and the interests they serve); and moves between these rich ideas to build new knowledges to be enacted into the world. The dialogue with others and positions of difference is a key technique in this. Drawing these ideas through into a second arena of practice, I suggest that community development has the potential to build rich and inclusive communities through this approach. This method commences with localised meaning-making and affirms the role of community members in evaluating the meaning-making competence of the worker. This community is also responsible for articulating the 'place' of the worker vis-a-vis its members and the desired action. Through fostering relational encounters among community members, the worker facilitates the development of a communal language, commitment and vision which is translated into collaborative action. The process involves skill sharing and exchange, and aims to expand the operative and discursive community through building relationships with others outside the group. The group retains agency to reflect on, rework, refine and reinvent ideas as they engage in each activity.

These modes of practice have the potential to influence and direct practice in a wide range of (professional) domains. The challenge is to reinvent and operationalise this practice in arenas that dominate our lives and particularly the lives of the oppressed. It is through such practice that we can achieve community in diversity.

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