Reflections of an activist social worker: challenging human rights violations

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Activism in social work can arise from practitioner wisdom that prompts action to respond to human rights violations. This paper offers reflections on the Eileen Younghusband keynote address in South Africa in 2008. I lament the lack of human rights advancement in subsequent years where infringements on the rights of many of the world's most vulnerable people receive negative responses from governments and scant attention from professions. The paper calls for ascendancy of the active moral practitioner, born from outrage and a desire to combat racism, the marginalisation and demonisation of those 'othered' in dominant discourse. Social work values and principles provide leads.

In 2008 the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) held its international conference in Durban, South Africa. The conference theme of transcending global and local divides was timely as, despite the catchcry of globalisation, many nation states were increasingly bunkering and drawing themselves into what anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2003, p. xii) refers to as a 'pervasive paranoid nationalistic culture of neo-liberal capitalism'. Alongside this a human rights discourse was rapidly sinking into a security discourse. Reflecting on this conference and updating the keynote address I gave on this occasion brings little joy, for the human rights trajectory has increasingly spiralled downwards. This chapter offers some reflections on social work responses to human rights violations and reflects on my own activist journey as a way of advancing critical engagement of social workers in issues of global concern. It builds on Eileen Younghusband's keynote address delivered in 2008 at the IASSW conference.

I have personally traversed a long and bumpy personal and political journey to where I position myself today as an academic activist in the Australian context. The further I travel on this journey, I become increasingly convinced, maybe even doctrinaire, about the moral and ethical duty of social workers to move beyond the realm of everyday practice to explore critical issues that impact on the wellbeing of our nations and the world at large, however small the contribution. Although social work has a courageous reputation in dealing with questions of injustice, this is by no means universal; settings where social work's political activism is ingrained in its mission are not the majority. Political action can be a contentious and risky business. I believe, however, that in order to create a just and
peaceful world the concerted actions of people, ordinary and extraordinary, are needed to work towards the principle of 'never again.' In this, social work has much to contribute in both international and local contexts.

My two main areas of social work political endeavour are in the areas of Indigenous rights and asylum seeker rights. In this I am spurred on by the words of Australian Aboriginal activist Lowitja O'Donoghue, who poses the question: ‘How is it that this nation's First Peoples, and its last peoples, should suffer similar indignity?’ (O'Donoghue 2003). These are questions that permeate in too many countries.

The question is partly answered by understanding the pervasiveness of Western dominance and how ‘the other’ is represented in societies where power and privilege accorded to ‘the West’ creates a climate of ongoing colonialism where the non-conforming are represented as ignorant, deviant, dark and dangerous. In this, as a global community, we are still so far from recognising Indigenous wisdom or accepting the gifts that those ‘othered’ in mainstream discourses can bring to our societies in order that we can all flourish in inclusiveness.

The focus of my chapter is on the social work response to the here and now, within the supposedly ‘democratic’ west, where the rhetoric of the rule of law is often misleading as it masks pernicious practices that take place under its aegis. In many countries monocultural doctrines are increasingly taking hold and this results in tragic consequences for many groups, damage to the reputation of nations and denigration of the professions which implement the policies arising from such canons. In this way the professions, including social work, are both victim and perpetrator within prevailing paradigms and frameworks. The example of social work resistance and political activism that I will later be drawing upon illustrates a human rights challenge by social work educators – the People's Inquiry into (immigration) Detention in Australia.

But first I widen the context to refer to some of the human rights issues that ought to be of concern to social workers. In doing so I propose four interconnected junctures for social work in carving out its role in the political realm: recognising human rights abuses; responding through political activism; identifying guiding principles; and responsibility of educators.

**Recognising human rights abuses**

In many countries we are observing the imposition of malevolent acts, and see governments of the West level accusations of human rights abuses on ‘the tyrannical.’ Without discarding the need to be informed commentators on the international stage, regrettably this emphasis may render us blind to brutalities in our own countries, such is the strength of government propaganda machinery and media collusion. The examples below relate to ‘the war on terror,’ the Indigenous sphere and racism.

An over-arching concern is the erosion of civil liberties in the wake of the attacks in New York on 11 September 2001 when a number of Western governments introduced draconian anti-terrorist laws (Burnside 2007, 145) that were enabled by producing a politics of fear that bordered on mass hysteria. By what logic, we should ask, has the so-called war on terror upturned the protections that were once considered sacrosanct? The results of this upheaval have been dire and engendered by fear imposed on an unsuspecting and uncritical citizenry.
In a number of countries we have observed acceptance of rendition and the outsourcing of torture. In Australia we saw one of our nationals, David Hicks, spend five years in captivity in Guantanamo Bay. Another Australian, Mamdouh Habib, was tortured by Egyptian and American authorities with Australia’s knowledge. Later an Indian national and medical practitioner, Mohammed Haneef, was held without trial and removed from Australia on now discredited and flimsy grounds that were constructed around the linking of his mobile phone SIM card to botched terror attacks in Britain in 2007. This man’s life and career were destroyed by an over-zealous government and Australia’s reputation was further scarred. Australian social worker Aloysia Brooks (2013) is one of the few social workers who has ventured into exploring the social work response to torture.

On a global scale there is ongoing suffering and maligning of Indigenous peoples. It took far too many years for the declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples to find its way through the United Nations. Australia, Canada, the United States and New Zealand were condemned by the international human rights community for initially voting against it. Social workers are acutely aware of the harms done to Indigenous family life through the removal of children from their families and communities in a number of countries. But in 2007 in Australia many stood helplessly by when the conservative government invoked an Emergency Intervention. Ostensibly to deal with problems of child sexual abuse in remote Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, the federal government cast aside provisions of the Racial Discrimination Act and deployed, into localities where memories of abuse at the hands of authorities were very much alive, the army, police and medical practitioners. Taken away were the minimal but hard fought for rights of those communities and the government introduced legislation which did not even mention children. The election of a Labor government led to an apology for past wrongs by Prime Minister Rudd that went some way toward healing past wounds, but has not resolved the socio-economic status of Indigenous peoples who still lag in having their human rights realised in such fields as health, housing, education, employment and income (Briskman 2014). Social work increasingly strives for engagement with Indigenous communities including through centring Indigenous Australians in its most recent Code of Ethics (AASW 2010).

Social workers are familiar with tenets of anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice but this is more likely to be directed inward to social work practice at a micro level. Racism is not always named yet the lack of care of society toward those ‘not like us’ is directed at the marginalised, the excluded, the despised – those struggling for belonging and identity. This very year of 2014 has seen the ‘race debate’ ignite in Australia following an announcement by the federal government that it would replace a section of the Racial Discrimination Act that makes it unlawful to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate on the grounds of race, colour or ethnicity. Commentator David Marr (2014, 7) dispels the notion that the move is about free speech, stating that Prime Minister Tony Abbott is instead persuading a slice of the electorate that ‘he is running a government after their own hearts – one that understands, even respects what they feel about Aborigines, immigrants, Muslims and boat people’, the latter term referring to asylum seekers who make their journeys to Australia by boat.

Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge increasingly dominate and are imposed as universal truths (Seidman 1994, 257). In Australia this represents an insidious revival of the White Australia Policy which we believed had been cast aside, the rise of unfettered nationalism based on imperial principles of British heritage that we thought had vanished and the demise of multiculturalism which we thought was here to stay. Globally we are
observing what Kundnani (2007), in the British context, refers to as the end of tolerance and what Barthes (1997, 88) describes as inoculation; practices that immunise society against difference. There is an insidious rise in Islamophobia, with organisations worldwide preaching hate and propagating myths directed at Muslims implying that Muslim immigration is something to fear. In a climate of fear, now an entrenched universal phenomenon, the protection of human rights becomes extraordinarily difficult (Burnside 2007, 159). The limits of international law present an imperative for both local action and international pressure. Proactively, the Australian Association of Social Workers (2010) calls upon social workers to recognise and challenge racism and other forms of oppression.

Responding to human rights abuses through political activism

Rather than being on centre stage, social work is a profession that is often misunderstood, ignored, practised within contradictory paradigms and sometimes lacking in self-confidence within the hierarchy of professions. The question is how to position social workers as actors in the political realm.

To explore this point, I discuss the social work response to asylum seeker policy in Australia for it is in the realm of asylum seeking where nation states have bunkered themselves most successfully against people fleeing their homelands in search of safe haven. Invasion anxiety and border security become privileged over human security. By way of countering this stance, social work academics in Australia initiated a major undertaking spurred by shame and disgust at the brutal treatment of asylum seekers in our country, where we reached a new moral threshold that meant it was possible to push away unarmed people seeking refuge in our waters (Perera 2002). It should be noted that this activity has recently accelerated in the form of a policy named Operation Sovereign Borders, with its centrepiece of intercepting asylum seekers at sea and retuning them to their staging post of Indonesia in specially designed orange life rafts. The extent of this operation is covert as it is intentionally hidden from the public, with the Immigration authorities refusing to speak about what it calls ‘on-water’ matters. The quest for transparency in government is a failed project.

Australia’s policy of mandatory detention was secured for the long-term in 1992, which means that all ‘unauthorised arrivals’ arriving without travel documents are removed from the human circle and placed in immigration detention centres for indeterminate periods, until granted a protection visa (now only temporary visas) or removed from Australia. These detention prisons have been primarily located in remote desert or island sites or offshore in Nauru or Papua New Guinea (Manus Island), the latter of which has been the scene of extreme violence that resulted in the vicious killing of an Iranian asylum seeker in 2014.

Around this shame of the nation an advocacy movement formed, which was faced with the monumental task of countering highly effective government propaganda that had duped the public into becoming accomplices to the prevailing view that we were in danger of being invaded by fleeing asylum seekers whom, we were told, could even be a terrorist threat. Although increasingly harsh measures exist on a global scale, Australia has stood out in its application of mandatory detention to all unauthorised arrivals and became a testing laboratory (Pickering 2005) for other countries wanting to eradicate what they see as the asylum seeker scourge.
The People’s Inquiry into Detention, auspiced by the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work, sought to change asylum seeker policies in Australia and to have the stories of this reprehensible era of social policy on the public record for the future of the nation. It was particularly the policy of indefinite mandatory detention that spurred us on and harsh prisons where people were enveloped by a punishing power (Browning 2006) and reduced to what Agamben (1998) refers to as ‘bare life’.

The Australian heads of social work, representing more than 20 social work schools in Australia, undertook the inquiry as government would not. The policies and practices of the government were seen by us as a catastrophic response to a global humanitarian issue that had only minimally reached Australian shores. We were incensed by the resistance of government to investigate its own policies and practices even though it had called an inquiry into the wrongful detention of a mentally ill Australian resident, Cornelia Rau, who had been locked away in a detention centre by convincing the authorities that she was a German called Anna. She had been meted out the very same treatment as the asylum seekers whose plight did not create the media and public eruption that followed Cornelia’s detention. We were further impelled by the increasing despair of those who had been detained for many years and for whom the courts effectively deemed could remain there for the rest of their lives. The People’s Inquiry was born from outrage. As a group of academic social workers, we considered it beholden on our knowledge, expertise and passion to conduct a national investigation.

After announcing the inquiry we were overwhelmed by the response to what soon became a collective, organic and transparent process. Immediate support emerged from all around Australia and from people from all walks of life (Briskman and Goddard 2007). Before long, a team of advisors, organisers, counsellors, panel members, researchers and others rallied to join in the quest to expose the evils of the detention regime. Students joined for social work placements or internships from other disciplines. We commenced with no money but gradually attracted some funds from philanthropic trusts and organisations which believed in our quest. The inquiry process demonstrates how social work, despite its diversity of practice models and organisational constraints, can garner the support of others to challenge human rights abuses (Alston, in Briskman et al. 2008).

Ten public hearings were held across Australia and heard the gruelling testimonies of almost 200 people, one-third of whom had been in detention and the rest who were advocates, professionals or people who had worked within the detention system. We received a similar number of written submissions. Our research assistant trawled through masses of public documentation, media reports and information that came to us informally from ‘the back of a truck’. The strength of the work is the documentation of the stories, told by those affected, while they were still current. At the end of our deliberations we could only conclude that asylum seekers had been portrayed as less than human, that the media colluded with the portrayals and that the public (most of whom supported mandatory detention) were deceived.

By world standards there are very few unauthorised arrivals in Australia due to tyranny of distance. And we, from a vast and wealthy nation with an ethos of a ‘fair go’, have seen an increasing range of policies introduced that make us among the world’s worst. The policies are so evil that Julian Burnside (2007, 129) has accused a former prime minister John Howard (1996–2007) of being guilty of crimes against humanity when judged by his own laws.
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Although the detention of all people has been shocking, the detention of children, often for many years, has shaken to the core social workers and others in the Australian community. Even when notifications under state government child protection provisions were made by social workers and other advocates, they were ignored as the children were bounced between the question of federal and state jurisdictions (immigration being a federal responsibility and child protection in the domain of the states). Child and family welfare is something that should be the centre of social work concern and, like the Stolen Generations of Indigenous children removed from their families before it, the detention of child asylum seekers is sure to stir future generations into harsh condemnation of this era of Australian history.

Children were detained in immigration detention facilities until 2005 when the policy changed following agitation from within the ranks of the government. It later re-emerged and now there are more than a thousand children in closed detention facilities in Australia or on Nauru. The caging of children is perhaps the greatest human rights violation in Australia since World War 2 (Ozdowski 2008, 1). It has been described by two of the authors of the book that arose from the People’s Inquiry (Goddard & Briskman 2004, 17) as organised and ritualised abuse of children. More recently we have described the transfer of unaccompanied children to Nauru as human trafficking (Briskman & Goddard 2014). The Australian Human Rights Commission is conducting an inquiry into the detention of children, the second on this topic in a decade.

The People’s Inquiry began as a somewhat subversive endeavour with no formal authority to conduct the inquiry except for the authority of ‘the people’. In 2008 it entered the mainstream with the three social work authors (Briskman et al. 2008) winning the Australian Human Rights Commission Award for Literature.

Guiding principles

Arguably, social work has an obligation to engage in the type of political activism that underpinned the inquiry. Tiamelo Mmatli (2008, 306) tells us it is dereliction of our professional duty not to comply with what Mullaly (1997) calls the promotion of political will to develop a humanised society. There is also urgency to overturn secretive activities of governments, and to invoke our expertise and value base for transparency and public interest. In this there are a number of core social work underpinnings.

First, there are the directives and principles enshrined in social work ethics, national and international, that call on social workers to affirm human rights and to challenge unjust principles. The international Statement of Principles on ethics in social work proclaims that the principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IFSW & IASSW 2004). The Australian Code declares that the social work profession opposes and works to eliminate all violations of human rights (AASW 2010).

Then there is the knowledge base of social workers, much of it derived from practice wisdom as critical ethnographers – participant observers in our work where we are witness to the impact of subjugation, oppression, racism and structural disadvantage. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW 2012) states, ‘As part of civil societies’ ground force, social workers have inside access to the people most affected by poverty and human rights injustices.’
And there are the critical theoretical leads – including postcolonialism, and anti-oppressive and anti-racist paradigms – that assist us in working towards emancipation and liberation (Mullaly 1997, 143). Through our connections and observations there is the prospect to challenge taken-for-granted ways of doing things that for practitioners may equate with complacent and unquestioning compliance.

This leads on to the question of complicity. If social workers fail to act on what they know, are they collaborators? I have conducted research that examines the ‘dual loyalty’ question – loyalty to the client or loyalty to the employing body. Much of the exploration on this question arose in South Africa through Physicians for Human Rights, bringing to the forefront complicity of health professionals during the apartheid era. In Australia, together with Deborah, Zion, Bebe Loff, I explored the involvement of professional workers – mainly psychologists, psychiatrists, general practitioners and nurses – with the immigration detention regime in Australia. All are professions with codes of ethics. There were contrasting responses: collusion, advocacy and silence. Some health professionals are disturbingly associated with actions that fall under the Convention against Torture’s definition of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment (Briskman et al. 2010).

For social workers facing dual loyalty conflicts, there is a need to reconsider roles and principles. Social work is largely organisational practice and there is a wealth of literature that discusses how organisations can be sites of tension for social workers as their practice ideals are subsumed by the organisational mission (e.g. Lymbery & Butler 2004; Hough & Briskman 2003). Social workers have been among those employed on Nauru by a non-government organisation and were among those who spoke out publicly about the brutality they witnessed. A human services practitioner with the organisation said, ‘We were expected to show allegiance to the Australian government and the organisations that worked on Nauru, ergo helping the men was a form of treason’ (Isaacs 2014, 59).

Responsibility of educators

How do social work educators inspire future social workers to take a lead and become what I heard a participant at the 2008 Durban social work conference refer to as morally active practitioners? One important strategy is to demonstrate to students the passion for human rights work as role models. The People’s Inquiry involved students in every aspect of the process and invariably the students stayed with us when their placements ended as they believed that what they were doing was important. We did not fear accusations of partisanship when human rights were on our side. We set aside concerns about whether or not we were adequately preparing students for the realities of practice for they will face those soon enough, but student-time may be the only opportunity for supported engagement in political reflection and political practice. Furthermore, academics are less constrained than others and universities may be the last bastion of freedom for the exercise of our core values and principles. The role of universities is essential, for, as Hamilton and Maddison tell us (2007, 13), they:

are essential for producing educated, informed and questioning citizens with some capacity to scrutinise government decisions. The academics who staff these institutions require a high level of academic freedom to pursue research that may, at times, challenge a government’s values and agenda.
Speaking out can occur in non-conventional ways. One of my heroes is former British social work academic Roy Bailey, who together with Mike Brake wrote an early radical social work text. Roy Bailey is now a folk singer of renown, spreading the word on a range of oppressions.

**Moral courage**

Jim Ife, in the Eileen Younghusband address in Montreal in 2000, made a comment that resonates. He spoke then of how many social workers have an interest in international issues by supporting Amnesty International, for example, but in their role as a private citizen. What are the ways to move social work to more direct action? I return to the example of refugees to pave the way forward.

For human services workers casting their gaze on refugees, there can be passive or active ways of acting and we must be alert to the fact that decisions that impact on the social work agenda are not usually made by social workers or even by people who share our value base. Refugees can be seen as a practice issue in dealing with torture and trauma, mental health and settlement. Another mode of working is through minimising harmful policies in order to provide better service outcomes. A third mode of intervention sees asylum seeking as a political issue requiring direct political action. There is an inherent difficulty of working across all practice boundaries requiring an exploration that draw upon on a mix of ethics, theory, values, methods, ideology and dual loyalty concerns. Ultimately social workers need to decide whether to work in settings where the values are in contradiction to personal values and professional ethics and whether speaking out and protest is the best choice in particular settings. This has been the stance of some social workers employed in Nauru detention who resigned from their positions.

**Conclusions**

The recommendations from the People's Inquiry called upon the Labor government of that time to remove racism, restore human rights and reinstate accountability. These three tenets transcend the local, but these universal themes are often understated in the lexicon of social work. These three basic principles represent a gateway for the emancipation of ourselves from the tyranny of organisational practice and for the liberation of those suffering at the hands of cruel regimes.

Academic Brian Martin (2006) calls upon scholars to speak out. He warns against fear of imagined risk saying:

You think that if you offend someone powerful, this may jeopardise your tenure or promotion application. Your grants might be blocked. You might be sued for defamation... You could even be hauled in by ASIO and interrogated.

To counter such fears, we can take inspiration from the words of lawyer and head of Reprieve, Clive Stafford Smith. In his book titled *Bad men: Guantanamo Bay and the secret prisons*, he states, ‘I am under no illusion that I have the skill to do justice to the stories of these prisoners, but the greatest sin would be not to try’ (Stafford Smith 2007, x).
Confidence can be gained by noting that our disidence received massive support, our academic careers have not suffered and security officials have not entered our doorways. As Martin (2006) states, the biggest risk to free speech is not reprisals but self-censorship. The best antidote is for more people to speak out.

And finally, I refer to a small but significant book by Stephane Hessel titled *Time for outrage*. He wrote this call to action in 2010 when he was 93 years old, ‘on the last leg of my journey’ as he put it. He used the time before he died to reflect on events that laid the foundation for his lifelong commitment to politics, which was the resistance movement challenging inequality, discrimination and oppressive acts against those without social, political or economic power. Hessel spoke of the unbearable things around us and implores us to open our eyes so we will see. The worst attitude, he says, is indifference. He invoked the duty of all to ensure that our society remains one of which we are proud, not a society that is among other things wary of immigrants and intent on their expulsion. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to use our precious freedom wisely and before we too lose this right.

References

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