**Charles Darwin University**

**At cross roads**

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Monani, Devaki

# At Cross roads: White Social Work in Australia and the discourse on Australian multiculturalism

**Devaki Monani**

Charles Darwin University, Australia

**Corresponding author:** Devaki Monani, Discipline of Social Work, School of Health and Human Sciences, Charles Darwin University, Casuarina Campus, Brinkin, Darwin, NT 0909, Australia. **devaki.monani@cdu.edu.au**

## Abstract

The profession of social work intervenes in the lives of the vulnerable and marginalised. In the majority, social work policy and practice in Australia has been founded on a western practice paradigm. Recent and rapid developments in the migratory trends of migrants and refugees places additional demands on social workers to practice with and for diverse communities. This article argues that the profession of social work is reluctant to embrace the multicultural face of Australia and lacks the intellectual apparatus to respond to diversity. The article underpins Professor Andrew Jakubowicz's analysis to multiculturalism as a powerful platform for social work academics and students to critically engage with by challenge existing racism and discriminatory trends towards multicultural communities that may possibly arise in social work practice.

## Keywords

## Introduction

Andrew Jakubowicz is a Professor of Sociology and Media studies in Australia. His commentary, activism and in-depth radical analysis on multiculturalism, government policy and race relations in Australia are comparable to Noam Chomsky's ideals on US foreign policy. Jakbuowicz is one of the most powerful intellectual figures in Australian academia, forcing public policy to engage with the less popular and controversial topics of the intersections of multiculturalism, racism and violations of human rights in Australia with meaning, rigour and empathy.

As an early career academic in Social Work, I draw inspiration from Jakubowicz's ideologies to explore the possibility of resolving emerging tensions in social work education and practice. These continue to exclude minority and Indigenous radical voices from its curriculum and practice. Aspiring social work professionals and students work with a view to intervene in the lives of some of the most vulnerable and distraught members in the community (Maidment and Egan, 2009). Social Work academics find solace in offering traditional social work theoretical models of systems theory or anti-oppressive practice (Ife, 2016) with a particular focus on social justice in the classroom. Despite the fact that these discourses offer constructive methods to practice, they fail to offer constructive critique of the dominant western white social work discourse. Social work is fearful of embracing the new emergent multicultural Australia. Jakubowicz's analyses intersect public policy, disability studies and exclusion based on race both past and present. These can present significant value for social worker scholarship and practice in Australia.

## Acknowledging Social work as a white profession in Australia

In Australia, social workers were historically trained on the British model that embodied the social causes of poverty, shifting away from the clinical American model. Based on the underpinnings of the British model, Australian social workers played a key role in reforming the welfare sector from the historic charitable distinction between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving poor'. Social work is also problematised because of its concentration in large bureaucracies (Mendes, 2005, p.125). Mendelsohn (1979, p.126) in a review of '*The Condition of the People: Social Welfare in Australia 1900-1975*', as cited in Mendes offers an accurate description of social workers in Australia as being 'jargonistic white witchdoctors, involved in social control and personal career aggrandisement'(Mendes, 2005, p.125).

Scholar and social work advocate John Tomlinson who worked for several years at ACT Council of Social Services who advocated for universal basic income is worthy of mention here. Tomlinson (2004) published a review of Philip Mendes's book on *Australia's Welfare Wars*, *The Players, The Politics and The Ideologies* (Mendes, 2002). I recommend the book to my students when teaching social policy courses. John Tomlinson's (2004) expert book review in the *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, points to the insufficient regard given to 'Indigenous Social Justice' and 'Refugee Asylum Seeker issues' in the text by Mendes (2002). Tomlinson (2004) however provides an additional critique of the Mendes (2002)

book by suggesting that it was written in a manner 'that will not distress the "Lady Bountifuls" enrolling in Social Work courses'. It is a book he describes which is meant for 'the study not the barricades' (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 476). This is an interesting observation, the Oxford dictionary meaning of 'Lady Bountiful' is a 'woman' who engages in ostentatious acts of charity to impress others. When we reflect on the term 'ostentatious acts of charity' it is important to note that we are talking about an immense difference in the power relations dynamics. Although, a feminist analysis (Weeks & Monani, 2002) of Tomlinson's remark can reveal its sexist nature, what is implicit is the great divide that can possibly exist between a social worker and client through the act of charity. My primary concern as a social work academic who is also a migrant is around this existential power dynamic that Tomlinson (2004) is referring to when he mentions 'Lady Bountiful' involved in making life changing decisions about families, and in most cases, mostly children. However, like elsewhere in the Australian professional context they can be predominantly white, middle class and Anglo-Celtic.

Mendes (2005) argues that despite the Australian Association of Social Workers apologising for past practices related to the removal of Aboriginal children, little has been recorded or mapped about the actual details of the actions of social workers. Similarly, Weeks (2000), as cited in Mendes, highlights the historical emphasis in social work practice with an undue emphasis on psychoanalysis and casework at the expense of alternative theories and methods such as Sociology and community development (Mendes, 2005, pp.127-128). For social workers, the study of sociology is especially important, in particular for those who are exposed to vulnerable and marginalised clients from multicultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The emphasis in training on cultural competency has often caused white social workers defensible distress. As revealed in Dominelli (2018, p. 11) social workers are struggling to transform social work practice with multicultural clients using an 'anti-racist' praxis as they struggle to rise beyond 'individual interventions' to formulate collective strategies. This is evident in Harrison and Turner's (2011) research on cultural competency.

Harrison and Turner (2011), in their research on cultural competency in social work practice and education, shed light on the extent to which it remains a 'murky' concept for practitioners. Their qualitative study focused on interviews with practitioners based on few questions: What does the term cultural competence mean to you? Can you give examples from your own practice? And How does the organisational context of your work impact on this type of practice? In reviewing the findings for the purpose of this paper, it is revealed that the majority of social work professional participants in the Harrison and Turner (2011) study recognised their clients as the 'other'. To be more precise, below are some of the common views that were shared.

> *For me, when I think about it in a work context, it means cultures other than*
> *white Anglo-Saxon.* (Social worker practising in the Corrective services,
> Harrison & Turner, 2011, p. 341).

*People tend to think of culture as country specific or race specific or ethnic specific…I think that (social work cultural competency training) creates a barrier in someone's head.* (Speaker 1, Harrison & Turner, 2011, p.343).

*Certainly within the system that I work in, there are time frames … you have to have a diagnosis by this time, or you have to have a report written up by this time. So there's a lot of external pressure on us to perform that isn't necessarily congruent to the way we need to work with people from different backgrounds.* (Social worker practising in hospital services, Harrison & Turner, 2011, p.343).

Harrison and Turner (2011) acknowledge in their analysis of public policy and social work organisations that merely enhancing workers' cultural awareness is not enough to address significant 'disparities' in health status and service delivery, especially since  the disadvantaged position of some minority groups is determined by structural factors rather than cultural difference (Harrison & Turner, 2011, p. 348). This brings me to the original purpose of the commentary in this paper. Social work discourses do not engage with the history of multiculturalism. The discourse on multiculturalism does not particularly form part of a white social workers world view (Dominelli, 2018). Here, I would like to bring in Jakubowicz's socio-historical analysis of white Australia's tensions with multicultural communities as critical to the understanding of this 'white backdrop' of social work practice.

Jakubowicz's critical reflection and historical review on the 'White Noise: Australia's struggle with Multiculturalism', points to Australia's inability to either engage or deny its colonial-settler history. Moreover, 'white' plays a central part in the historic mythology of Australia. The great Australian dream when entering into the twentieth century was one of a 'white, democratic, egalitarian society, without hierarchies of entrenched inherited privilege and one mostly without an underclass of helots or coolies'. Jakubowicz points to the fact that in its own imagination '[Australia] was intensely fair and decent for all those allowed to share the wealth, however stubbornly intolerant of those deemed Other and unacceptable. Since the lifting of the white Australia policy, this dream of course has not been realised, it however remained etched in popular memory (Jakubowicz, 2002, p.108). The remnants of this legacy are evident in the staffing and the curriculum of the social work schools in the oldest universities in Australia. The majority of social work academics, heads of social work departments in Australian hospitals, Australian charities and managers of human services are predominantly white Anglo-Saxon or of British descent. This positioning of 'white privilege' in social work practice is described by Dominelli (2018, p.79) through the classic example of how privilege manifests in grassroots practice: 'white social workers are unable to accept black foster carers as bonafide carers', so far the exchanges involving children has been one way: black children only ever go to white families, white children are never placed with black families (Dominelli, 2018, p.79).

The historical evidence presented by Jakbuowicz is compelling, in recognising that from early to mid-80s alongside the complex debates over immigrant settlement of Indo-Chinese communities, this period also coincided with Aboriginal claims for land rights and

the spiritual importance of ancestral lands in Aboriginal lives. Jakubowicz argues that it is important to recognise this period in contemporary Australian history that normalised the emergence of a racist discourse for both these marginalised communities (Jakubowicz, 1985, p.3).

Policy discourses surrounding Indigenous communities and Immigrant communities have continued to evolve since this early period. A decade ago on 13th of February 2008, the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered a national apology to Australia's Indigenous People. This step was in the direction of reconciliation and acknowledgement of past mistreatment based on race and culture and the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The apology remains deficient when we closely look at social work intervention and public policy in the area of removal of Indigenous children. For instance a most recent study from Western Australia has revealed that Indigenous children were 'eight times' more likely to enter out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children (O'Donnell et al., 2016). In addition, Australia has highlighted Indigenous over-representation in the National Child Protection Framework, 2009-2020 with a view to reduce child protection intervention. We are nearing the end of the National Child Protection Framework, 2009-2020 with little or no effect in the reduction rate of intervention in Indigenous families. It becomes problematic when professions such as social work downplay the effects of racism and historic systemic discrimination toward certain communities. The impact of racism is significantly overlooked by creating theoretical frameworks that examine cultural competency and offer discourses on effective parenting as the ideal underpinnings of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This lack of understanding or reluctance to understand the conceptual frameworks underpinning racism is the crux of the inadequacy that emerges in white social work practice (Dominelli, 2018, p.95).

It is highly likely that newly settled African communities of refugee backgrounds in Australia such as those from Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, alongside the skilled migrants belonging to the Indian Muslim Bohra community, are likely to face harsh interventions similar to the Indigenous communities. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) will become the single biggest cause of child removal or child protection intervention in these communities (Costello 2015, p.231). Despite interventions by groups in several communities and by women's health groups, social workers are still lagging behind in understanding this conversation (Costello 2015, p.232). Bohra Muslim parents had received a seven year gaol sentence in 2016 for engaging in FGM practice toward their daughters in NSW. These communities will remain on the radar of Child Protection services, more so than others.

Social workers in Australia and abroad have been complicit in harsh implementation of the child protection policy, for example in Norway social workers removed Indian children from their parents. These parents were middle class Information Technology workers hired by a Norwegian company, they were qualified and worked on temporary work permit holders in Norway. Social Workers perceived that the family was force feeding the children using hands rather than cutlery and that the parents chose to co-sleep rather than provide for children to sleep in a separate nursery. Here we need to reflect that eating with hands is part of Indian cultural habit, many parents view feeding their children with their hands as a form

of bonding with the child, the same applies to co-sleeping (Monani, 2015, p.44). Dominelli (2018, p.93) reminds white social work practitioners to become culturally aware by not using 'value judgements' that presuppose white superiority. Dominelli calls for social workers to explore the privilege of white power in relationships with people of diverse backgrounds (Dominelli, 2018, p.93).

Here, I reflect on Professor Andrew Jakubowicz's landmark paper developed for the Australian Human Rights Commission on *Australia's migration policies: African dimensions* (2010) that focuses on African Australians and their experience of human rights and social inclusion in Australia. This paper is critical in understanding the struggles of African-born Australian residents attempting to reorient their lives in Australia. In particular, Jakubowicz highlights the intense reactions of some Australians that are marked by anger and suspicion toward cultural and physical difference. This is compounded often with violence and remains a significant barrier to full racial equality. Jakubowicz offers significant historical detail and foresight in dealing with issues and challenges experienced by some African families. Of utmost importance to the field of social work is dealing with Horn of African families where FGM has occurred. The paper is of tremendous value to students and practitioners of cross cultural social work in Australia intervening in the lives of African communities. As such no in-depth studies have been focused on the experience of social workers intervening in African communities, this is a significant gap in social work research in Australia.

Now, I would like to draw on further tensions in the profession. McDonald, Harris and Wintersteen (2003) highlight that social work, despite its popularity as an occupational group, plays no role in building the intellectual apparatus of the Australian welfare regime. They shed light on the marginal 'status' of social work arguing that despite repeated attempts 'social work' has been primarily 'unsuccessful' in gaining state recognition through formal registration. Here they argue that the problem continues to remain with social workers identity as a clinical role within mental health, counselling, juvenile justice, disability that exclude social workers from engaging in the larger conversation around social justice, human rights and cultural diversity. Instead, social work continues to remain a key player in diversifying the human services labour market (McDonald, Harris and Wintersteen, 2003, pp. 201-203). These findings remain consistent with recent studies on registration and the profession of social work in Australia (Fotheringham, 2018, p.8). Fotheringham (2018) reveals that social work is a 'self-regulating profession'. Social Work is not governed by the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS), which came into effect in 2010 and is delivered by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). Social Workers were not included in the NRAS despite being the largest group of Allied Health Professionals in Australia (Healy, 2018, p.206). Fotheringham (2018. p.14) calls for further research into the role and impact of registration in the social work profession in Australia. Healy (2018, p.213) argues that the capacity of the Australian Association of Social workers (AASW) to effectively regulate the profession has mostly been weakened by the relatively low uptake of 'professional membership' by social work practitioners and students.

The registration conundrum brings us back to the historical relationship between government departments and social services. Historically, these were located in the realm of strengthening

the services delivered by Centrelink as first recommended in 1941. Lyra Taylor an experienced social worker was appointed in November 1944 as chief research officer. According to research by Fitzgibbon (1999) on social work in a corporatised environment draws on the earlier Department of Social Security definition of social work.

> *The primary objective of the social work service is to promote the wellbeing of Departmental clients by working towards the social objective of preventing and relieving hardship and suffering to promote and facilitate the access of clients to Departmental income support programs and community resources with particular attention to the needs of disadvantaged people; to provide supportive social work services to Departmental clients in situations of crisis and distress; to promote and facilitate the sensitive delivery of the Department's service to clients; and to promote and facilitate the development of income support and community services to meet the needs of Departmental clients* (The Department of Social Security Social Work Handbook, p.1 as cited in Fitzgibbon, 1999, p. 179).

Thus, Social work in Australia for a number of years maintained its visibility not through advocacy but through its partnership with several governmental departments, more so, with those such as Centrelink that are primarily interested in the 'assessment of social and personal circumstances for payment and service eligibility' (Fitzgibbon, 1999, p.183). This history is somehow overlooked when social work continues to be linked to child protection, rather than the management of human services such as Centrelink. More recently, Morley and Ablett (2017, p.11) in their study on radical social work are equally concerned with the neoliberal contexts emerging from Centrelink practices, within which social work services become more conservative, and are often privatised, resulting in many areas of practice emerging as industries to be mined for profit (Morley and Ablett, 2017, pp.1-13).

I have personally struggled with this identity of social work as a profession. As a migrant social work academic educated in Australia, the trajectory of social work enmeshed in the realm of bureaucracy and 'policing' of vulnerable communities, often celebrated by social workers as special status, can become a cause of heightened anxieties for members of migrant communities. Here, the earlier intellectual piece offered by Professor Andrew Jakubowicz in 1989 on *The State and the Welfare of Immigrants in Australia* offers a historical repertoire of capitalist and assimilationist welfare policies in Australia targeting immigrants. The argument in the article almost 30 years old remains true today, particularly, as Australia embraces the arrival of a newer set of migrants and refugees. Jakubowicz (1989, p.31) maintains in his analysis the extent to which provision of welfare becomes a platform for white hegemony to thrive. Divisive tactics are implemented through categorisations of 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor and the subsequent impacts of these decisions on newly arrived immigrant communities. Social Workers are at the heart of this debate and are complicit in the disintegration of the welfare state, through their non-committal attitude towards advocacy and over reliance on the clinicalisation and bureaucratisation of social work practice (McDonald, Harris and Wintersteen, 2003).

**Viewing immigrant stories through the lens of Professor Andrew Jakubowicz**

Social work academia and curriculum is largely underpinned by the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards; the Practice standards for Social workers alongside the Code of Ethics. These are published, evaluated and accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers.

Walter, Taylor and Habibis (2011, p.14) were alarmed in their literature review to find only three articles on white social work practice in a Scopus search, for the terms 'whiteness', 'social work', and 'Australia between the period of 2000-2010. A further gap was that none of these articles was published in the core social work or social policy journals. The research of Walter, Taylor and Habibis (2011) is mainly concerned with Indigenous communities, social work and whiteness. This leaves us with a significant knowledge gap on white social work practice and multicultural communities.

With the lack of academic research focusing on the critique of white social work and its relationship with Australian multiculturalism, current and future students of social work are at considerable risk of losing out on contemporary debates in Australia on race, multiculturalism and the social work response to the changing face of Australian society. Here, I want to shed light on Professor Andrew Jakubowicz's contribution to enhancing the visibility of immigrant and multicultural stories. These are excellent resources for social work students and staff in engaging with visual material drawing on case studies of specific communities.

Professor Jakubowicz has been a series advisor on the SBS series, 'Immigration Nation' (2011), and series advisor on 'Once Upon a Time in...', a three season project for Northern Pictures and SBS, of which 'Cabramatta' (2012) and 'Punchbowl' (2014) have been released. He developed the concept for 'The Great Australian Race Riot', a three episode series for SBS made by Essential Media and broadcast in 2015.

*Once upon a time in Cabramatta : Resource for the social work classroom*

For the first time an Australian television documentary focused on the history and tensions in the early days of the end of the White Australia Policy. More importantly, it depicted historic images of the arrivals of the Vietnamese refugees in 1978. In particular, from the social work point of view, the narrative is a reminder of the trauma of loss of family, displacement, poverty, social exclusion due to racism and lack of English language, and unemployment. The film is mostly powerful for social workers' viewing as it depicts counter-transference of trauma from parents to second generation, in this case it is the Vietnamese community of Cabramatta and the impact on their families, challenges that emerge from these traumatic situations such as drug addiction and youth crime. Thus, the documentary has all the intersectional elements that social work students need to become aware of. Jakubowicz (2016, p.145) aptly describes the documentary to include social movements and contemporary politics that have shaped the conversation of the refugee story and the 're-election' of Pauline Hanson and other One Nation Party senators. Social work academics engaged in social policy analysis need to become engaged with these past and present

Australian realities that shape social policy and polity in Australia. In addition, the film also depicts in-depth interviews with a Vietnamese social worker and his impressions of the challenges faced by Vietnamese refugee youth in the Cabramatta community in the early 90s. These narratives are great learnings for both social work academics and social work practitioners. 'Once Upon a time in Cabramatta' needs to form part of the curriculum when teaching cross cultural social work.

A recent study from Canada on settlement of Syrian refugees in Canada published in the prestigious International Social Work Journal by Drolet et al. (2017, p.5) urges social workers and social work academics to engage in practice with immigrants and refugees by bringing greater awareness in practice of structural racism, and building knowledge of political practices that oppress, whilst recognising the impact of historical and ongoing colonial processes. The study emphasises that social work has a distinct contribution to make to the important area of immigrant resettlement, particularly the refugee settlement process. Here, the evidence presented in 'Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta' can provide reflexive narrative and case studies for social workers to rely on in building the case for good practice approaches in refugee settlement and the importance of advocating good practice frameworks with multicultural communities.

## Conclusion: Uncomfortable realities for social work practice in the multicultural space

Professor Andrew Jakubowicz's impression on multiculturalism and refugees provides social work with an impetus to ground policy and practice frameworks that are inclusive, reflexive and competent. These are grounded in critical understanding of Australian political history at the centre of which is the discourse on the importance of 'welfare' for multicultural communities. Jakubowicz's (2016, p.160) stark reminder of the double standards of refugee policy in Australia is worth reflecting on here, he argues that more often 'it is the cultural background of the refugees that is the problem, not merely their method of seeking refuge' (Jakubowicz, 2016, p.160). Social work is grappling with the concept of 'culture' and dealing with cultural difference. This is evidenced in the writing of a number of scholars aspiring to good practice approaches with multicultural communities.

Chomsky (2017, p. 77) when talking about the role of intellectuals emphasises that 'it is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies, in the Western world'. Chomsky describes academic power as coming from political liberty, access to information and freedom of expression'. In synergy with Chomsky's ideals, Jakubowicz throughout his academic career has sought and revealed the challenging aspects of Australian multiculturalism. This has been a difficult conversation for Australian public policy and the wider audience. Jakubowicz has fulfilled his responsibility as an academic and public intellectual. His works can be deemed of great value to Social Work policy and practice in Australia and all those countries grappling with the changing face of their respective social orders.

This brings me back to the original intent of the article which is to raise the question to what extent can white social work practice engage with the multiculturalism debate with genuine interest and empathy rather than through the lens of 'distrust' and 'policing'. White

Anglo frameworks of social work policy and practice will need to find ways of developing 'inclusive practice' rather than demonstrating mere cultural competence. Inclusive practice will only thrive if practitioners and policy makers stop resisting change (and there is evidence about the extent to which white social workers do resist change). Global migratory trends such as temporary workers, migrant workers and the refugee influx will continue to place demands for inclusive practice. To what extent white social work policy and practice frameworks will embrace this challenge will depend on their ability to engage with information external to their realm of comfort.

## Afterword: Personal Notes:

For the last two years, I have taught human rights and social justice (undergraduate level); law and policy for social workers (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and cross-cultural practice (postgraduate level). From anecdotal evidence and personal teaching evaluations it has become clearer that undergraduate students are excited, enthusiastic and were more willing to embrace the narratives presented in Once Upon a Time in Cabrammatta. They could engage with the various case studies and conceptualise social issues that could arise as a result of poor public policy, social exclusion, language barriers and lack of support services for multicultural clients.

There is interest in studying social work in Australia by international students. In particular, students from Nepal, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Brazil are enrolling in social work degrees. Social Workers in Australia would benefit from gaining cultural understanding from these students. There is potential for these students to continue to reside in Australia and contribute to practice within a trans-national social work context.

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