

Special Section Editorial Psychology and Poverty Reduction

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United Nations member countries committed in 2000, as one of their Millennium Development Goals, to poverty reduction by 2015 yet in 2013, according to the World Health Organisation (2013), “approximately 1.2 billion people in the world live in extreme poverty (less than one dollar per day)” (para. 1) and according to the World Bank (2013), “2.4 billion live on less than US \$2 a day, the average poverty line in developing countries” and “in some developing countries, we continue to see a wide gap – or in some cases – widening gap between rich and poor, and between those who can and cannot access opportunities” (para. 6).

In the relatively rich over-developed world, scholars like Richard Wilkinson have argued consistently since 1976 not only that the more poverty stricken you are, the shorter, less healthy and more problem ridden the life you are likely to live but also that the healthiest and least problem-ridden societies are those with the most equitable distribution of income (i.e., *the least relative poverty*) and the unhealthiest and most problem-ridden societies are those with the most inequitable distribution of income (i.e., *the most relative poverty*).

Focusing on Australia, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS, 2012) write:

In 2010, after taking account of housing costs, an estimated 2,265,000 people or 12.8% of all people, including 575,000 children (17.3% of all children) lived in households below the most austere poverty line widely used in

international research. This is set at 50% of the median (middle) disposable income for all Australian households. . . A less austere but still low poverty line, that is used to define poverty in Britain, Ireland and the European Union, is 60% of median income. . . . When this higher poverty line is used, 3,705,000 people, including 869,000 children were found to be living in poverty. This represented 20.9% of all people and 26.1% of children. (p. 7).

As one response to the Millennium commitment to poverty reduction, the Poverty Research Group at Massey University Aotearoa/New Zealand), led by Stu Carr, proposed and worked towards a ‘*Global Special Issue*’ devoted to *Psychology and Poverty Reduction*, which would be:

. . . a whole series of peer-reviewed journals to the theme . . . The journals represent psychology from low-income, transition and OECD economies. . . . Each journal will publish either a special section of papers, or an entire issue of the journal, on the poverty reduction theme. These are the peer-reviewed journals who participated in the initiative: *Psychology and Developing Societies*; *The Journal of Psychology in Africa*; *The Interamerican Journal of Psychology*; *Journal of Pacific rim Psychology*; *International Journal of Psychology Special Section*; *Applied Psychology: An International Review*; *American Psychologist*; *Journal of Managerial*

Psychology; Journal of Health Psychology; New Zealand Journal of Psychology; The Australian Psychologist; and Australian Community Psychologist Special Section." (http://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/learning/departments/school-of-psychology/research/poverty/other-projects.cfm#global_issue accessed 4 June 2013, para. 2-3).

What you are reading is the long-promised *Australian Community Psychologist Special Section* devoted to *Psychology and Poverty Reduction*.

The call for papers for this Issue envisaged "a special issue devoted to community critical psychology approaches to poverty reduction. Contributions by: people with first-hand experience of poverty; poverty activists; members of organisations committed to poverty reduction; as well as papers by academics and researchers, are invited. Contributions which contribute, from a community critical standpoint, towards the development and implementation of practically effective, politically engaged, ideologically progressive reduction or prevention of poverty or which critique the role of acritical psychology and the psy industry in poverty construction and maintenance are especially welcome. Authors from anywhere in the world are invited to contribute but especially those writing from communities impoverished and immiserated by colonisation and globalisation. Innovative modes of communication using a variety of forms of text are welcome."

It has not been easy or quick to assemble a set of papers from a critical standpoint delivering the vision of the call for papers, perhaps providing some support for Carl Walker's suggestion (this Special Section) that often "the contributions of psychologists to an understanding of the processes that underlie indebtedness, poverty and subjective suffering" (which do not depoliticise, medicalise, individualise or psychologise what is economic and

structural) "have been at best negligible and at worst toxic."

Certainly this *Australian Community Psychologist Special Section* delivers on the promise to reflect the perspectives of "people with first-hand experience of poverty" and "poverty activists" in that it is the result of the collaboration, over a quarter of a century, between community activist, Cathy McCormack, and community psychologist, David Fryer. As a community activist, Cathy has facilitated tenants' group activism, promoted popular education, deployed the theatre of the oppressed, collaborated in award-winning documentary cinema, accepted international speaking engagements and written powerful accessible prose exposing and contesting socio-structural violence. As a community psychologist, David has engaged in teaching, research and praxis informed by his reading of critical theory, community psychology and emancipatory pedagogy and attempted to uncover and contest the everyday socio-structural violence which is unemployment and its roles in socially constituting misery, injustice and the destruction of individuals, families and communities. Together we, Cathy and David, have collaborated in teaching and running workshops with undergraduates, clinical psychology trainees, community groups and academics; co-presented at conferences and book festivals; co-authored papers; and attempted to raise critical awareness by bridging community activism and critical community health psychology by using newer communication means like podcasts and community radio. This is the first time we have co-edited a journal special issue together.

The contributions to this special section begin with a paper by Emma Sampson, Heather Gridley and Colleen Turner reflecting on their submission in 2010 on behalf of the Australian Psychological Society to the *Australian Social Inclusion Board's* public consultation on *Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* and their subsequent reflections on this attempt to influence both the

Australian Government's policy and practice agenda as well as how psychologists think and work in relation to poverty.

The document Emma, Heather and Colleen submitted explicitly contested individualism, psychologism and victim blaming, endorsed local strengths-based programmes and repeatedly emphasised the need to address structural inequalities. This deployment of the intellectual resources of community psychology was important in itself and there were some grounds for confidence in it having been successful in some respects. For example, the emphasis on 'location' and 'disadvantage' was reflected in the *Australian Social Inclusion Board's* eventual recommendation that "the structural advantage caused by the locations in which people live" should be addressed. However, Emma, Heather and Colleen are the first to admit that the *Australian Social Inclusion Board's* final report still emphasised individual and service focus, positioned "participation in work . . . as key to social inclusion" and that other Government policies adopted at the same time will increase poverty, especially for single parents, refugees, asylum seeker and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

All in all, the submission – and the authors' reflection upon it – raises fascinating and important questions about whether, and if so how, the authority of a mainstream (avowedly apolitical) institution like the Australian Psychological Society can be deployed to achieve radical/progressive political effect. As Carl Walker, in a brief commentary on the paper suggests, the paper by Emma, Heather and Colleen points to an urgent need for a "critically informed and reflective account of exactly how community psychologists might act as advocates when engaging with . . . exercises that facilitate the transfer of knowledge to political authorities from those anointed as experts" and for the development of strategies and tactics regarding how governments can be "held to

account" for the consequences of their policies by "collectives of academics."

The next paper in the Special Section, by Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain, Yardena Tanel and Shiloh Groot, also emphasises the importance of "efforts to advocate for the rights of beneficiaries" though their conception of advocacy is more radical and includes "supporting direct action events, fostering service developments, presenting public lectures for wealthier community groups, conversing with government bodies . . . conducting workshops with key stakeholder groups, writing policy submissions and engaging with journalists to extend public deliberations about poverty within the mediapolis." Darrin, Kerry, Yardena and Shiloh strongly recommend community psychologists move from being "academic researchers to activist scholars working in collaboration with research partners . . . to achieve societal change."

To exemplify the activist scholar approach they take, Darrin, Kerry, Yardena and Shiloh describe a project in which they provided food parcels for one year to 100 households in return for members of those households engaging for nine months in researcher-structured fortnightly conversations with social workers. The assumptions of Darrin, Kerry, Yardena and Shiloh were that "people experiencing hardship have intimate understandings of their situations that other people lack" and that "the experiences and life worlds of families living in poverty" can be "a basis for conceptualising and theorising issues and developing responses," that is "practically oriented knowledge" ("phronesis").

Darrin, Kerry, Yardena and Shiloh continue on to illustrate the value of the development and deployment of such practically oriented knowledge by first demonstrating "how a myriad of structurally-patterned practices and relationships are interconnected and embedded in the everyday lives of families in need, and in the emplaced practices of agencies responsible for helping

them” and then using this to facilitate a workshop for judges which took place during an annual professional development event for the judiciary. Darrin, Kerry, Yardena and Shiloh developed three case studies “each illustrating different perspectives on the relation between impoverished people and the justice system,” generated fictitious ‘supporting documents’ of the sort usually available to judges when sentencing, and facilitated 90 minute workshops, each comprising an introduction, reading and discussing of case study material including additional documents, discussion, report back and more general discussion. Whilst there were several ambitions, one involved intervening to provide opportunities for conscientisation, in a Freirean sense, of judges who engage with the consequences of poverty on a daily basis to make available new discursive resources relevant to how “the courts . . . can actually work to improve a person’s situation.” Key to the advocacy work of Darrin, Kerry, Yardena and Shiloh are “reciprocal relationships between researchers, participants, partner agencies, and broader stakeholder groups in society, who have the power to make a difference to the lives of families in need.”

The third paper in the Special Section is by Carl Walker who focuses attention on the shocking scale of, and inexorable increases in, ‘personal debt’ in the UK, the even more shocking consequences of personal debt (“the experience of poverty and severe financial strain is utterly immiserating and is characterised by subjectivities that are both inevitably and powerfully traumatising”) and the still more shocking “prevailing construction of personal debt “ as the “personal problem of a small group of feckless and/or financially illiterate people.” Carl argues that “personal debt can best be understood as a symptom of the activities of problematic politico-economic regimes” and that the manufacturing of consumer debt is “deliberate and systematic . . . as a strategic

economic and political strategy.” Carl’s challenging analysis leads him – and so us all – to “interrogate whether there is any place for psychologists, community or otherwise, in an area of profound concern that has been artificially and unhelpfully segregated into the personal, the political, the economic, the social and the educational” other than to “illustrate and expose the social, economic and political processes that so impact on the subjective experiences of suffering, distress and deprivation.” Carl concludes that “if psychologists are serious about mental health and suffering then they have to critically engage with the institutions contingent on the continuation of poverty and debt.”

The fourth paper in the Special Section is by Cathy McCormack who, like Emma, Heather and Colleen reports on an attempt at advocacy and lobbying, in Cathy’s case as a Commissioner to the Church of Scotland Assembly Special Commission on the Purposes of Economic Activity in 2012. Cathy reports that after “two years sitting round a table bearing witness to the vast amount of evidence presented” the 14 Commissioners “were in agreement that the model of the economy that has dominated the UK for most of the last three decades has failed all but the few” but could not agree upon whether “the current devastating effects on our communities” were an “unfortunate side-effect of governmental social and economic policies” or “an inherent part of the economic model that continues to be deployed.” Cathy’s view – developed and confirmed during decades of community, housing and political activism – is that the devastating effects are consequences of “a ‘war against the poor’ – only this war was a ‘war without bullets’, a social, economic, psychological and propaganda war, a war fought with briefcases instead of guns against our fellow citizens” and particularly the “weapon of mass destruction,” unemployment.

The fifth contribution to this Special Section is by Katie Thomas, who reviews her own book, *Human Life Matters: the Ecology of*

Sustainable Human Living vs. the Rule of the Barbarians, a book which Cathy thought so important she reviewed it for the Church of Scotland Assembly Special Commission on the Purposes of Economic Activity. Katie's book uncovers and critiques the "deification of barbarism that has swept the globe alongside phenomena of market reification, globalism and neoliberalism." Barbarism, according to Katie, is manifested in "the domination of the financially and physically strong over the majority; the insemination of raw, competitive greed into cultural life; and the imposition of dominance and aggression onto most human interactions." Barbarism is disproportionately directed at "those who have little systemic power – the poor, the marginalised, children, elderly, differently abled."

The fifth contribution to this Special Section is by Darrin Hodgetts who reviews Nandita Dogra's *Representations of Global Poverty*, which explores "the representation politics surrounding poverty and appeals for charitable aid," for example, through deployment of discourses and implicated images which "do not implicate potential UK-based donors in the causes and extent of poverty in the 'majority World,'" through which "a human oneness is constructed and histories of colonialism, imperialism and slavery are displaced from contemporary discussions of poverty," poverty is infantilised and feminised and poverty is repositioned as "a problem inherent to the society itself rather than the result of Anglo-American exploitation." Although focusing on charity appeals to UK donors, Darrin uses his review to lead the reader to extrapolate to "the dominant Anglo-American variant of psychology" and the ways it "offers a technology of the self that is itself central to colonialism, neoliberalism, globalisation and new forms of imperialism."

Taken collectively the contributions to this *Australian Community Psychologist Special Section* are a powerful argument that

we need to go beyond community psychology rhetoric. As Emma, Heather and Colleen demonstrate, deploying that rhetoric of in Government consultation exercises is important but evidence for its effectiveness is slim. In any case, as Carl points out, once apparently radical notions such as empowerment, inclusion, giving voice etc. have long since been co-opted by the Establishment. They may also turn out, retrospectively, to be part of the problem in the sense of being manifestations of a psy complex complicit with the dominant 21st century neoliberal politico-economic regime.

The Special Section collectively emphasises poverty as a form of social violence. Emma, Heather and Colleen urged the Australian Social Inclusion Board to "address the structural inequalities known to be the primary causes of disadvantage." Darrin, Kerry, Yardena and Shiloh emphasise that "systemic violence is central" to welfare 'reforms' in New Zealand (but we might reflect that it is characteristic of neoliberal austerity program around the world) and that such "systemic violence involves methodical processes that harm certain vulnerable groups of people 'as a matter of course' . . . enacted through technocratic and bureaucracy procedures for 'managing' the poor." Carl emphasises "the deliberate and systematic manufacture of consumer debt as a strategic economic and political strategy and an act of political and social violence." Katie emphasises the "unnecessary violence, suffering and deprivations foisted on those who could not or would not compete in the global market." Cathy most explicitly names poverty as a form of social violence through her notion of the "'war against the poor' . . . a war without bullets, a social, economic, psychological and propaganda war a war fought with briefcases instead of guns."

Having read this Special section we hope it will be hard to resist the conclusion that it is an urgent priority for us to better understand the socio-structural violence which is poverty and to better deploy that understanding

progressively in the interests of, and in collaboration with, those subjected every day to the war without bullets in our communities.

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