Activism and Social Change: enacting social justice: challenging, disrupting and building resistance

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Acknowledgement of Country

I wish to acknowledge the Noongar people, the Traditional Owners and custodians of this unceded land we are meeting on today. I recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and community. I pay my respects to them and their cultures; and to Elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge that the Aboriginal First Nation Sovereign peoples of Australia were the first people to fight for social justice.

Introduction

I am honoured to be invited to give this keynote address, especially because the theme of the conference is on activism and social change, something that I am passionate about. There is so much injustice and inequality that we can challenge through various forms of social or political activism including, but not limited to, climate change, refugees, violence, human rights and equality for particular groups and communities, urban development, homelessness, poverty, racism, homophobia and on we can go.

I am assuming most of you are social work or community welfare educators and/or researchers, field educators, practitioners and students. So my main focus today is on the challenges we confront in building knowledge, skills and commitment to prepare our future practitioners to have the confidence to work towards social change and a more just society and how we as educators and citizens contribute to social justice and social change through our teaching, research and lives. I have lived and worked in NSW all my life and apologise in advance for my Australian, NSW and Sydney

centrism.

As educators and practitioners in the community, health and human services, if we are to move beyond the rhetoric of social justice and do social justice, social and political activism is one of the many ways we can do this and as such it has to be high in our educational and practice agenda and our lives. But is it?

I believe that in the context of neo-liberalist influences that have impinged on higher educational institutions (or should they now be called businesses or corporations), professional organisations who monitor and accredit social work and welfare programs, and employers who are driven by managerialist imperatives that social work and welfare education and research has, or is at risk of becoming more conservative. How can we as educators, researchers, practitioners and students move beyond this to work towards a just society? Activism is one way to do this - it is the theme of this conference and social justice activism is the focus of my address today.

I will begin by spending a few minutes talking about the meaning I give to social and political activism and then share some examples of social change propelled and supported by activism. As this is a social work and community welfare education conference I will then explore the priorities and hurdles in our learning and teaching about social justice, social change and activism and the challenges we face in keeping it high on our agenda. As part of this I am going to share how I came to embrace the importance of social change which began when I was doing my social work degree. Finally, I will talk about how we contribute to a just society and activism through the research we undertake.

Activism

I see activism as an intentional action to promote, impede, direct, or intervene to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change which will contribute to social justice, equality and freedom. To me those last few words ‘contribute to social justice, equality and freedom’ are important but often not stated or referred to.

Activism takes many forms and is used by different groups seeking change. Campaigns, protests and demonstrations, civil disobedience are not just the domain of those who are working for equality, social justice and human rights. Activism can also be used to challenge diversity and difference, to reinforce colonialist values and beliefs, to sustain injustice and promote inequality. If you look at what is happening

in Australia conservative groups are using these methods to try to thwart change. My point is that we need to be clear about the purpose of our activism. What sort of social change are we seeking? Is it aimed at promoting a just society? This is the activism I am talking about today – social change towards a just society.

I like to think I am a social justice activist although my activism now is quite different to my activism in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. To me activism was, and still is, about challenging, speaking and acting up about the unfairness and disadvantage of the society we live in. Activism can involve campaigns, protests, marches, civil disobedience, but other things too like planning, negotiating, writing letters, aligning with other like-minded people and groups, signing petitions and many more activities.

In Australia over the last several decades, social justice activism has aimed at creating a more just and equal society in many ways. This can be a slow process and can take considerable time, persistence and commitment. Over the last few decades there have been stories where activism has been instrumental in social change for a more just society. These are some of those stories.

a) Australia was invaded and colonised by Britain. Eurocentric and colonialist values resulted in destructive intervention in the lives of Indigenous Australians, the owners of Australia. Brutal treatment, displacement and dispossession of land, discounting of Indigenous knowledge and an unwillingness to learn from them has had devastating consequences for Australia's First Nations people and their communities. They have a long history of activism, fighting for land rights and self-determination. In 1967, after decades of activism Indigenous people were recognised as citizens. Prior to that, in 1965 a group of students led by Charlie Perkins, travelled in a bus through regional NSW to towns where there were large Aboriginal communities. The purpose was to increase awareness of the poor living conditions and the state of Aboriginal health and education and challenge discrimination towards Aboriginal people. In 1972, the tent embassy was set up in Canberra in response to the Liberal Prime Minister's rejection of land rights. During the period of the Whitlam government, Wave Hill Cattle Station was returned to its Aboriginal owners and Aboriginal Legal and Health Services were established and ATSIC was set up. Overturning the doctrine of Terra Nullius in 1992 and the Native Title Act in 1993 was a great leap forward for Aboriginal Land Rights. Moving to May 2017 - a constitutional convention

was held at Uluru with 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. The Uluru Statement from the Heart calls for 'constitutional reforms to empower Australia's First Nations people and take a rightful place in their own country'. It calls for a constitutionally guaranteed advisory body to provide advice to Parliament. Five months after this meeting the recommendations in the Uluru Statement from the Heart were rejected by the federal government.

In 2019 the theme for NAIDOC week was **Voice Treaty Truth:**

- **Voice** - Have voices heard after being excluded when the Australian Constitution came into being.
- **Treaty** - Have an enhanced role in decision-making in Australia's democracy.
- **Truth -** Have fellow Australians recognise that sovereignty has never been ceded, and their land was taken without agreement.

While change and activism is continuing, a high percentage of Indigenous people and communities still experience high levels of poverty and disadvantage. Fighting and activism for justice by Indigenous communities and their supporters is ongoing and although change is happening it is far, far too slow.

b) I think back to what it was like in 1970s and 1980s when working in the area of male violence against women and children. Police did not see it as their role to intervene in what they called 'domestics' or private matters; there were not many services providing support to women. But there has been change over the last three or four decades. The activism of feminists led to the establishment of refuges in the 1970s and services to support women and children who were living with or fleeing violence. Feminists fought for, and achieved, changes in the law that could provide protection to women and their children and make men accountable for their actions. Over these few decades we have witnessed an increasing acknowledgement and awareness of the extent and seriousness of male violence against women and children. Community education has aimed to challenge the culture and community perceptions of male violence. While there may have been changes in law, practice and community awareness, violence against women and children remains a huge, ongoing challenge – on average

one woman each week is murdered by her current or former partner. There are organisations such as the Family Court of Australia which struggle to understand and address the insidious pervasiveness and seriousness of male violence. In 2019, International Women's Day marches throughout Australia emphasised that this remains a priority. Sexual violence is an issue that is also at the forefront of activism – the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse set up in 2013 did not just happen. It came from the voices of people who spoke out about stories of child sex abuse in the Catholic Church and other religious organisations and non-religious institutions. Change is happening but there is a long way to go!

c) Changes that have happened in LGBTIQ+ communities are another example of ongoing and persistent activism. In the 1970s gay men and lesbians were sacked from their jobs, condemned by the church, marginalised and discriminated against. In Sydney, in June 1978 hundreds of people marched in what is now referred to as the first NSW Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. They had a permit and marched through the Sydney CBD and along Oxford Street as part of the international solidarity celebrations. Towards the end of the march the police descended and beat the activists with fists and batons. Fifty-three people were arrested, many of whom were later beaten up in the police cells. This violent involvement of the police prompted protests and demonstrations over the next several months and arrests continued until the laws around demonstrations were changed in April 1979. In February 2016 the New South Wales Police apologised to the gay and lesbian marchers who were arrested and bashed by officers during that first Mardi Gras. The first Mardi Gras was a catalyst for change and in the 1980s and 1990s many gay and lesbian organisations were founded throughout Australia. One of these was the Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research at the University of Sydney which was opened in 1993 by the Governor General, the Honourable Bill Hayden.

The Centre initiated numerous conferences, raising the visibility of LGBTIQ+ communities. It undertook research on discrimination in the workplace (Irwin, 1997) and homelessness of young LGBTIQ+ people (Irwin et al., 1997). This research was widely used to seek change. The Centre and numerous other gay and lesbian organisations lobbied for equality. Change did happen but it happened slowly. In 2008 legislation was passed that removed a swathe of discriminatory Commonwealth laws around family law, immigration, taxation, income support, health insurance, superannuation and anti-discrimination – in fact everything except marriage (Irwin,

2009). On December 7th, 2017, after a long-protracted campaign and an unnecessary postal vote, marriage equality legislation was passed in the federal parliament with the Australian community overwhelming supporting marriage equality (Rugg, 2019).

What contributed towards the huge attitude change from 1970s? In my view it was the visibility and voices of the LGBTIQ+ communities challenging the homophobic myths that influenced beliefs, attitudes and practices. Strong social and political networks and alliances had formed and grown within the LGBTIQ+ communities and their supporters and unjust, exclusionary and marginalising practices were responded to with activism in its many forms.

Similar to male violence against women and children this is a work in progress, but the commitment of the LGBTIQ+ communities and their supporters, the knowledge, skills and resistance that has been accumulated over the years of fighting for change means that activism is continuing.

d) Climate change and climate justice is an issue that is getting more and more attention throughout the world. The recent marches in Australia and across the globe are evidence that this is a major issue with many people from diverse social, economic, political and geographical backgrounds fighting for climate justice. In Australia this message does not seem to get through to the government who seem to superficially acknowledge climate change, but actively support the growth of fossil fuel and other industries that use precious resources, often jeopardising the environment and contributing to global warming. Rising sea levels are putting at risk the very survival of our South Pacific island neighbours.

These are stories of activism and change towards a more just society. They are stories of resistance that have been built by the commitment, persistence and strength of those fighting for change.

Learning and Teaching

As educators and practitioners our role is to work with students in their preparation to become practitioners. You may be familiar with Stephen Brookfield's writings on becoming a critically reflective teacher (Brookfield, 1995; Brookfield, 2009). Much of his work is directed to teaching in schools, but it applies more broadly to those who are educators. He argues that challenging our values, beliefs and hidden assumptions about power relationships, social contexts, the world and how we see it, can pave the

way to enact social justice. He contends that educators who challenge their own, taken for granted assumptions are invaluable role models for students.

Our individual roads to activism or working towards social justice are often different and can be unintended, but exploring the process can be transformative.

I am going to briefly share how my conservative values and beliefs were challenged and how I began to engage with social justice activism. I became a social work educator as a result of activism! Not activism that I was involved in but activism by social work students and some academic staff at the University of Sydney in 1977. In the radicalised environment of the 1970s, students and some academic staff were demanding the right to participate in decision making that affected their education, arguing that this was fundamental to participatory democracy.

There had been student discontent with the social work program for some years. In April 1977 negotiations and discussions between social work students and staff about the conservative and traditional focus of the course broke down and social work students led a prolonged strike, supported by some academic staff who also went on strike. The students did not attend class but designed courses for themselves with backing from a small group of supportive academic staff. It was the 1970s and many of the students had been involved in various forms of activism outside the university. Towards the end of 1977 an agreement was reached to review the course, appoint several new tenured academic staff (including a professor) and set up staff/student consultative processes. The contract staff who went on strike lost their jobs. I was appointed in one of those vacant contract positions. I had no experience of activism or teaching.

I was brought up in the 1950s in a small rural town in NSW in a white, unpretentious, conservative family. I never questioned the conservative beliefs and values instilled by my parents and extended family – they were normalised beliefs and values that I took for granted – my white and colonialist privileged position was not evident to me at this stage of my life. From an early age however I was very aware of the uneasiness I had about the limits of being a girl – for me life was gendered - boys played cricket, football and marbles and when I tried to join in, I was excluded 'It's not a girl's game!' Fortunately, my parents saw the value of education for everyone, girls and boys and, unlike many of my friends, I was encouraged to pursue my educational goals.

There were three powerful experiences in my twenties that influenced my values,

beliefs and practice and began to get that fire burning in my belly. The first one was in my final year of my social work degree. I attended University from the mid-1960s. This was when social protest movements began to emerge but somehow at this time, I missed these! I was not aware of the activism that was happening all around me. The social work students in my year were not activist or political, unlike the year ahead of us. It wasn't until the last year of my degree in 1969 that I became aware of my conservatism. I was enrolled in a course that was taught by Alex Carey, a leftie psychology lecturer. The content of his course was a little different to the more conventional teaching I had previously experienced and his passion was palpable. For the first time in my years at university I was really engaged by the different way he framed politics and everything else. His teaching challenged the way I thought, the way I saw the world, my values and my privilege – I began to question some of my taken for granted beliefs and values. This was the first crack in 'conservative' me. It was enough to get me to 'silently' vote for the Labor candidate in my electorate in my first voting experience in a federal election!

The second experience was my introduction to feminism a couple years later in 1971 when I had friends who were actively involved in Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) and I began to engage with feminism. There was great excitement amongst my friends when in 1972 the Labor Party and Gough Whitlam romped into power. This was an exciting time for many reasons, especially with the introduction of the Australian Assistance Plan which led to numerous grass roots, community development opportunities. I was working in the area of immigration and the introduction of 'multiculturalism' in Australia was exciting and came with substantial resources. After the demise of the Labor government I began to struggle and be at 'dis-ease' with my job. In 1977 I had my first child and took some maternity leave and decided to look for a new job – a job that would be challenging but not too stressful. Teaching or social work education had not been an option I had considered, but a friend told me there were tutor positions at the University of Sydney. I had never taught before; I hadn't read social work literature since I had graduated. I remember in the job interview Yvonne Taylor Cullen asked me 'Do you believe in the politics of social work?' I didn't really understand the question but being an insightful social worker, I answered yes, however it was only after I had been there for some months that I really began to understand what was meant by that question. Thus began my third life-changing experience. Yvonne introduced me to the work of writers such as Jeffrey

Galper (1975; 1980) and Saul Alinsky (1972). Ros Thorpe, who was one of the new tenured staff, introduced me to many of the early British writers on radical social work, including Bailey and Brake (1979), Peter Leonard (1979), Corrigan & Leonard (1978), Lena Dominelli (1984), Marjorie Mayo (1975), Mike Simpkin (1975) and others. It was exposure to this literature that helped me to understand, form and act on my own politics. I began to get an understanding of the position of the 'oppressed' in the context of the social, political and economic structure. The focus for me was initially on gender and class inequality, but this extended to other forms of structural inequalities based on race, sexuality, ability, age and other 'differences' that resulted in exclusion and marginalisation of particular people and groups. The development of critical and structural and later anti-oppressive theories and practice provided me with more nuanced knowledges and explanations of inequality.

These learning experiences could be labelled by Freire (1993) as 'conscientisation'. I had moved from a relatively naive worldview to a more questioning and nuanced understanding of society, enabling me to critically evaluate the world as I saw and experienced it. I began to understand the nature of power and grasp how it worked to privilege some groups and disadvantage others.

I now recognise these as three experiences of transformative learning which prepared and exposed me to many other deep and powerful learning experiences about inequality, exclusion, disadvantage, invisibility, racism, sexism, ageism and many forms of social, economic and political injustice and made me aware of my privilege as a white, educated, middle class woman. It was these powerful experiences, together with reading and discussing the philosophical and theoretical concepts, that led me to an increased awareness of structural inequalities, how they are reinforced and how easy it is to be complicit in supporting a system that is unjust. Marty Brannigan and Bob Boughton (2003) write extensively about non-violent activism. In an article they wrote about learning to be an activist, they suggest, while academic learning can be valuable, there are other forms of learning that can be equally valuable. One of these is critical or emancipatory learning, which is premised on critical pedagogy and involves questioning the psychological and cultural assumptions that underlie our perceptions of the world.

Uncovering and discovering how injustice is embedded into our society, and how this plays out in people's lives is, to me, sewing the seed for social justice, social change

and activism. Creating spaces and opportunities for students to learn and unpack how inequality and injustice works is crucial.

Critical pedagogies focus on adult learning, drawing links between *experiential* and *transformative* learning. I like O'Sullivan's definition of transformative learning:

> Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters the way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our locations: our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body of awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (O'Sullivan, 2003, 326).

The focus is on a potential for change in a philosophical and value framework that promotes human well-being, relationships and social justice, power and politics, care for the environment, and emotional well-being. Transformative learning involves reflecting on our knowledge, beliefs and values and becoming aware of where they come from and how they play out in our lives, our behaviour and our practices.

Transformative learning experiences can lead to a critical consciousness or increased awareness that oppression silences, reinforces and sustains inequality. Critical pedagogy underpins social justice, social change and activism. It leads to critical analysis of society and an awareness of unjust systems where society's benefits and privileges are not distributed equitably. Critical theories of learning include an activist self that constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs. Critical social work encourages emancipatory personal and social change.

Looking over the conference program I have noticed there are several papers that cover different aspects of both transformative learning and critical pedagogies and critical social work where perhaps some of the issues I have referred to may be dealt with in greater detail.

Going back to the links between experiential and transformative learning - in the neoliberal space of higher education where resources are limited and large classes prevail, creating spaces to facilitate this can raise numerous challenges.

In the 1990s critical adult education led to innovative approaches to social work and community welfare education in some higher education institutions where the focus was on project based or issue-based learning. This was student centred and involved students working, often in small groups, on real-world challenges and problems. They acquired skills and a deeper knowledge which could then be applied in different contexts to other issues. These innovative efforts were short lived and undermined by the priorities of neoliberalism and the transformation of higher education into a product that could be bought and sold like anything else in a globalised market. As government spending for education decreased, higher education institutions were encouraged to become more entrepreneurial and seek alternate revenue streams and create businesses that were subject to market forces. The neoliberal restructuring of Australian higher education has resulted in course cuts, larger student-staff ratios and an increasingly overworked and casualised workforce. The proportion of casual academic staff has soared with recent data suggesting that casual academic staff now exceed fifty percent of the academic workforce teaching in undergraduate programs (Long, 2018). This has a major impact on the size of classes and workloads in other areas, meaning there are fewer opportunities for one-to-one contact with individual students, and less time to be involved in scholarship and research.

Even in this context of cutbacks, as educators in social work and community welfare we have been innovative in creating opportunities where students can learn through knowing and doing. In my role in the accreditation process of social work programs in Australia I have seen numerous innovative processes that are used to encourage students to be curious, ask questions and challenge injustice. Conferences such as this create opportunities to share our creative endeavours, as does publishing. Advances in technology have made a massive difference to the resources available to educators and students that facilitate and encourage students to explore real situations – podcasts, popular literature autobiographies by people about their lived experience. These resources provide us with first-hand experiences of the impacts of injustice and opportunities to explore how these injustices can be challenged.

Social justice is at the core of our social work and community welfare education programs and moving beyond the theory and knowledge to ‘the doing’ can be quite challenging – that old adage, the integration of theory and practice, often raises its head as we work to make the connections between personal and social issues. This can be exacerbated by a ‘methods’ approach to social work and community welfare

education which siloes different aspects of practice and often masks the links between the structural and personal dimensions of everyday life. Field education and exposure to practice and its contexts offer opportunities for students to make that link between the personal and the political. I know field education is currently a fraught issue with the exponential growth in the numbers of social work masters qualifying students in some states in Australia, putting pressure on obtaining suitable placements. This poses a challenge as the field is often the place where transformative learning can occur, with students becoming more politicised as they are exposed to the inequalities and impacts these have in people's lives.

It is critical to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to directly confront and challenge the current system of injustice and equip them for activism. As well as information about inequality, our colonialist history and its impact, learning skills associated with social justice can include a range of actions, from the organisation of large campaigns, attending and supporting protests, initiating petitions, signing petitions, contributing to funds that challenge injustice, naming injustice in our workplaces and communities, small acts of resistance, some growing into larger forms of resistance challenging injustice - for example, Greta Thunberg and climate change. Another example of a small act of resistance involves a young woman who sits outside the radio station in Sydney where a well-known shock jock continually makes degrading comments about women and diminishes women's and children's experiences of violence. This young woman sits peacefully in the grounds of the radio station before she goes to work and spreads out socks with the names of women who have been murdered by their partners in the last year. Her own lived experience of violence as a child contributed to her awareness of the impact these disparaging tirades can have on women and children who live or have lived with violence. It is important to value lived experience and how it could inform social work and community welfare education making it more relevant to the communities and the people with whom we work.

We need to keep at the forefront of our minds the messages about acting for social change that came from radical and structural theories including, working collectively, building cooperation and consciousness, understanding the social consequences of the market system, working with people and communities to deal collectively with social problems, making alliances with organisations to work for change and challenging agency policies that perpetuate oppression.

Research

As researchers we can make a substantial contribution through our research which can inform social justice, social change and activism. Research that is geared towards uncovering injustice, exclusion, disenfranchisement and inequality is important in providing knowledge and influencing the 'doing' of social justice. In research it is not only what we do but also how we do it.

Systemic oppression flourishes with collusion that often goes unrecognised or is denied. Qualitative research and transformative methodologies can create opportunities to uncover hidden agendas and explore the impacts these have had in the lives of people, communities and groups. Transformative research approaches have the potential for people to become self-empowered and speak up about social issues from their position of lived experience. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argued many years ago that narratives of women's lived experience politicises them as 'agents of knowledge'.

Narratives can explore complex issues in people's lives, uncovering how structural factors such as racism, ageism, homophobia, sexism and violence impact on everyday experiences. A social work researcher, Liza Lorenzetti (2013), in an article 'Research as a Social Justice Tool', wrote about how her entrée into social activism was through stories. She argues that the power of narratives can challenge values, change minds, incite collective action and in some cases alter the direction of history. This is seen in research undertaken by Ally De Pree Raghaven, Margot Rawsthorne and Kayleigh Ellis (2017) who found that the members of a group in inner city Sydney, Concerned Older Women (COW) discovered that sharing their stories was empowering and politicising and enabled them to challenge ageism in their local community by agitating for services and facilities.

The development of transformative research tools and ways of researching can be critical in this. Tina Kostecki and Selma Macfarlane in a chapter in a recently published book 'Working Across Difference', write about a research approach they developed to gather stories from older women about their lives (Kostecki and McFarlane, 2019). They wanted to explore the intersections of privilege and oppression across women's lives and how structural factors such as race, class, and gender accumulate for women in older age. They developed an intersectionality wheel that can be used by practitioners and researchers to uncover older women's life stories.

The wheel guides women and facilitates the exploration of their lived experience, providing an opportunity for them to understand how contextual and structural factors have impinged on their lives. The wheel is aimed to assist women's responses and produce knowledge to redress the growing inequality for older women. These stories of lived experience will contribute to a more nuanced knowledge and understanding of older age and the structural factors that frame ageing across a life span.

From 2008 to 2015 I was involved with colleagues in a research project, *Working From the Ground Up* in two social housing areas in Sydney (Irwin et al., 2017). The aim was to tackle the entrenched social exclusion and disadvantage in these two neighbourhoods by working with the local people to identify issues they considered needed to change. We were hoping to encourage residents to participate in the project and shift power back to the local communities by building community from the 'inside out'.

We used action research, complemented by a community development approach. We chose action research because it has the potential to enhance social justice by maximising the participation of residents and groups and can be used to bring about changes in specific contexts, especially when the change is practical and can be implemented in real situations. We like to think we were quite creative in using a variety of methods and developed tools for unique situations.

We began by 'reaching out' to residents, inviting them to share their experiences of living in the area and their ideas and priorities for change. We walked the streets, door knocked, letterboxed, did surveys, interviewed residents, held and participated in local events. Initially residents viewed us with suspicion and struggled with the idea that we were interested in what they had to say. Building trust was critical to the success of the program.

From this process the residents identified four key areas in which they thought change was needed. These were: ***Our Place,*** with the focus on older residents who were concerned about isolation, health and general wellbeing; ***Get Connected,*** with the focus on mental health as there were increasing numbers of people with mental health issues in the neighbourhoods but limited awareness of the impact of living with mental health issues; ***Our Mobs Yarning Up,*** with the focus on Aboriginal participation and listening to Aboriginal communities; ***Connecting with Each Other,*** with *the focus on* families, children and young people and the lack of services and supports for young

families and very limited activities for pre-teens and teens (Toivonen et al., 2015).

Our approach was to begin with people's lived experience and their everyday lives with a broad focus on well-being and social inclusion. Projects were developed around what was important to residents. Residents were employed as advocates and peer workers and we worked with groups who were often invisible in the community. Underpinning and incorporated into the project was a commitment to social justice, human rights, and social inclusion. We recognised that participatory approaches would not radically change major structural disadvantage, but could begin to tackle aspects of disadvantage, influencing and contributing to change. Projects were developed around local people's lived experiences in their everyday lives. This is a snapshot of the outcomes

Our Mob Yarning Up: We employed a local Aboriginal woman on the project who worked with elders and the Aboriginal community and they determined the direction of the project. Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing conflicted with the way government agencies practiced tenancy participation and the group felt agencies were disrespectful by not acknowledging their ways of 'doing' participation. Approaches to Aboriginal tenant participation based around everyday issues were developed. The *Our Mob Yarning Up* project was able to shift the debate about living in social housing to acknowledging their experiences.

Getting Connected*:* Mental health consumer advocates were employed and worked with local people who lived with mental illness to determine the direction of the project. They collected stories from local people of living with mental illness and with support from a local film maker who made a film of their stories. This was launched in Mental Health week at a large, packed cinema in the local neighbourhood. The group felt the showing of the film increased awareness of the challenges that confront people who live with mental health issues.

Our Place*:* This group was involved in a range of social and educational activities throughout the project. A couple of years into the project they formed the *Over-55s Research Group* which contributed to the construction of a second household survey and undertook their own analysis of the findings relating to the over 55s. They held a forum to feed this analysis back to a broader group of older residents. The community forum identified priorities for action, including improving the information exchange between government agencies and social housing residents. They then began to

negotiate for safer housing design, better transport services and changes to bus routes. The older residents positioned themselves as residents, researchers and policy participants.

Connecting with Each Other: Young people were identified in the first survey as problematic by residents. A group of young people approached the researchers, questioning why they had been seen this way in the first survey. They questioned why they weren't asked to participate in the process and express their views. We had included adults in the first household survey, and they had spoken on young people's behalf. By excluding children and young people we had rendered young residents as objects in the research, not participants. We worked with children and young people to develop ways they could be included and with them, developed four research approaches to capture their views. The information gained from these approaches led to a homework club in the local primary school; a youth services roundtable a yearly careers event for high school students; and an annual Family Fun Day with a focus on activities for children and young people.

Concluding

I commented earlier that my activism is different now to what it was in the 1980s and 1990s. I am on the street, but not as much as I used to be, I am certainly not jumping on the bonnets of cars that try to drive through peaceful rallies (yes I did that once). I am not actively involved in research anymore but with a few friends have formed a small group which we have called the Blue Stocking Think Tank. Our aim is to uncover gendered inequality in both policy and practice in the NSW government. We do this by seeking government information on issues through FOI or GIPPA as it is now called in NSW. We pass the information we get onto relevant organisations or journalists who use it to fight for social justice. Advocacy groups have used some of the information to lobby for changes for women who flee domestic violence and are disadvantaged by changes in refuge funding that occurred in NSW in 2015.

Social justice, social change and activism are integral to social work and community welfare education, practice and research. Working towards a just society demands that we take risks, speak out, stand up, act out and be outrageous. All it takes to become an activist are passion, knowledge and a desire to help bring about change. Anyone can do it! I invite you to do this in your own way.

I wish you a stimulating and productive conference. I challenge you to end the conference with a political statement and press release on a social justice issue that arises over the next two days!

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