

Building resilience through relationships: community development practice in inter-cultural settings*

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Good morning! It's really great to be back in Aotearoa and to the Devnet conference this year here in Dunedin.

What I'm going to talk about and reflect on this morning is some initial findings from a larger research project that explore strengths-based approaches adopted by organisations working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout Central and Northern Australia. The research is being undertaken by an inter-disciplinary team from the University of Newcastle including myself, Jenny Cameron, Amanda Howard and Graeme Stuart.

We are interested in how organisations are embedding strengths-based approaches into, for example, the design of particular programs or more informally in the day-to-day practices of working with these communities.

This larger project emerged out of a collaboration with the Centre for Appropriate Technology, an Indigenous-led organisation based in Alice Springs and working to secure sustainable livelihoods for Indigenous communities through appropriate technology.

Part of this research is also about documenting and thinking through the challenges of doing community development work in these, and any community contexts, and the myriad ways in which practitioners work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and negotiate multiple pressures and priorities.

What I want to share today is some of the very specific relational practices that underpin much community development work, especially in what we refer to, following Hoggett et al. (2009), as the 'dilemmatic space' that characterise the sector and discuss how practitioners (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) negotiate these spaces as they build relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

So what might this have to do with resilience?

I'll conclude my talk by commenting briefly on the implications of emphasising relational practices for broader questions of resilience thinking drawing on several recent critiques.

In a keynote address on the future of community development, renowned writer on the sector Jim Ife (2012) described community development as being ruled by 'the tyranny of the project' (p. 11). Ife was concerned that when community development revolves around projects 'that get proposed, funded, implemented and evaluated' (p. 11), the practices and processes that are fundamental to community development practice may be lost. In an era of managerialism, it is easy to see why a focus on 'the project' has become so established: '[p]rojects are clear, defined, discrete and time-limited. They have a beginning and an end,

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they are “managed” by project managers, and they can be readily evaluated in terms of outcomes’ (p. 11).

Many are concerned that the increasing managerialism is undermining community development’s foundational focus on practices and process. Using the notion of ‘dilemmatic space’ we identify some of the dilemmas that community development practitioners regularly encounter in the contexts within which they work and here I’ll briefly introduce two practices used to navigate these spaces: the practice of patience and the practice of ‘letting go’. We call these practices ‘unsung’ as they can be easily silenced in the cacophony of project and program formulation, funding announcements and evaluation regimes.

As our research bears out, community development practice is frequently quiet, slow and embedded in relationships yet also flexible and creative. We argue that it is by attending to these relational practices that effective community development is nurtured and made possible.

From the twenty-six interviews so far conducted in 2013 and 2014 with a range of organizations in Central and Northern Australia we found that practitioners continually negotiate the tyranny of time-limited projects; connect with and respond to community rhythms and priorities; incorporate local knowledge and values in their practice, while finding a place from which to support community decision-making and leadership.

The Practice of Patience

Practitioners universally understood that working with communities required a long-term commitment to building relationships and gaining trust, reflecting the nature of community development work in general, as well as the specific challenge of working with people whose lives have been indelibly impacted by colonization.

In order to work to community time frames, practitioners repeatedly spoke of the importance of the practice of patience. Patience involved setting aside, for a period of time, the expectations, imperatives and outcomes required by programs, projects or services. Frequently practitioners referred to simply ‘hanging out’ to describe activities that do not register with immediate program or project priorities but nevertheless are about the deeper and more essential relational work that ultimately results in community ‘development’. Here is the various ways that one practitioner described this practice:

Often there were days when the community didn’t want to talk. We just hung around in the community, and helped them out with other things ... So it was good to walk around with the community and just spend time there. Like I said, some days I didn’t do anything. Just hung around and talked to people (Interview 7, pp. 3-4).

I just sat back and listened and talked and chatted ... It’s about what’s happening. There’s a football carnival on or there’s ceremony happening somewhere or people are getting together. Generally, it’s those sorts of yarns that bring out that sort of relationship over time (Interview 7, p. 8).

Such practices are familiar in community development work and in some ways the relationships that are being fostered by ‘hanging out’ are the mainstay of community development. But what practitioners did highlight was a very careful micro-practice of

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patience in which even relationship building was at a pace that is perhaps unfamiliar to many. One practitioner gave the following example of this micro-practice of patience:

So you approach a house and there's a fence. You wait first until you get invited and then you can come in and then you come in (Interview16, p.5).

What is striking is the attention the practitioner gives to each step in the process: you approach a house; you wait, you can come in, then you come in. That the practitioner distinguishes between the last two steps—between receiving the invitation to come in and actually coming in—suggests that this is a very carefully considered process. This may seem a trivial example, but to us this is reflective of the deliberative way that patience is practiced, and the attention and thought that is given to the community development work of relationship building in this context.

Practitioners also spoke of the way that they are taught, even disciplined, by communities to be patient in this work of relationship building, as one practitioner described:

The relationship is a much longer process and it takes a long time to build. It's like [Aboriginal] people are watching people [workers]. They're observing the person's [worker's] mannerisms, they see people come and go every day, carrying messages or services...[s]o it takes much longer (Interview 6, p. 13).

Here the community is setting the time frame. They are watching and deciding whether or not to participate. In this setting, workers have to practice patience as communities carefully scrutinize them and determine whether or not to participate. The scrutinizing of practitioners continues even when, for example, a decision is made to invite practitioners in or to participate in meetings. This relationship between practicing patience and being watched is evident in the following interaction:

People watch you, how you sit down...where you're going to sit. There will be a chair or there will be a tin drum or the floor and so depending, the person might sit on the ground. So you can choose to sit on the chair, on the tin drum or on the floor and so that will tell them already how you're going to position yourself (Interview16, p.5).

This practitioner highlights the embodied practice of waiting and sitting, and the messages about respect that are conveyed in these micro-practices. For the practitioners interviewed this care for seemingly simple interactions is a critical antidote for heavy-handed approaches, such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response or for superficial 'community consultation'.

Overall, by practicing patience practitioners are responding to the different cultural frameworks that are implicitly and explicitly part of community development work, and thereby respecting and responding to community nuances, voices and actions.

The practice of 'letting go'

A second dilemmatic space that practitioners encountered was that of having to negotiate between different and sometimes conflicting knowledge and value systems. Practitioners frequently found themselves in the dilemmatic space of having to implement and deliver programs, projects and services whose objectives were at odds with the prevailing

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knowledge and value systems of the communities they were working with. As well, sometimes those interviewed described how they encountered ways of being in the world and with others that exceeded their capacity to fully comprehend or explain it. For practitioners who are employed because of their skills and training these experiences of incomprehension were often uncomfortable and destabilizing.

In order to work in this dilemmatic space, those interviewed spoke of the importance of 'letting go' of their sense of expertise and learning to feel at ease in a space of 'not knowing'. One practitioner described it in the following terms:

Not knowing ... is a good thing; it can be a strength thing too...Like we don't have to know everything or be an expert in our work space ... I can easily get stuck on my own world view, and miss all the other social and cultural parts. So in a way I am also learning (Interview 6, p. 1).

Here the practitioner refers to 'letting go' of the idea that they have to be expert in their work area, but also a deeper practice of letting go that involves recognizing how one's own culture shapes what one is able to see, hear and understand, and trying to forgo some of our culturally-embedded knowledge in order to be open to other understandings. Later this practitioner described this practice as "shedding your skin really, like a snake, putting a fresh one on" (Interview 6, p. 16).

Practitioners spoke too of how communities acted to 'fast-track' the process in which assumptions about expertise and knowledge were overturned, as one practitioner recounted:

I was lucky enough to walk into a scenario where a group of Elders sat me down in the dust to define the rules or look at the way they wanted learning to happen for them and their community ... [So] from very early on I was taught to shut up and listen. I was coming in as the educator but I needed to be educated in order to be able to make a difference in that setting (Interview 2, pp. 1-2).

In this example, the practitioner, a trained educator, had to let go of his ideas about how training and education were to be delivered and respond to what the community wanted. Here was a situation in which the community wanted something and needed to teach the educator what they wanted, signalled by the deliberative act of making him sit in the dust. This contrasts with the experiences referred to in the previous example where communities were more warily watching practitioners to see where they sat as part of the process of determining whether or not to engage or participate.

In the interview this practitioner goes on to discuss how this initial experience has reframed his understanding of community development as a two-way process:

Don't go in with all the knowledge. Go in to learn. So go in as a person who is learning and willing to learn. The knowledge that you carry is what you share, it's not what you impose or not what you impart. People will get from you what they need ... In a community if you're there and you are prepared to listen or just be then people will engage because you're not imposing (Interview 2, p. 5).

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In this context, not only is there a letting go of who has expertise and a recognition of multiple forms of co-existing knowledge, there is also a letting go of being able to anticipate what might result: 'people will get from you what they need'. This suggests a purposeful practice of dwelling in uncertainty about even the influence we might be able to exert in the world and to simply 'listen or just be'.

This practice is patently at odds with the measurable targets and outcomes so valued by most funders. In the current context in which external expertise is prized and valued, 'letting go', 'not knowing' and 'just being' are difficult practices to justify in an era of heightened managerialism. Nevertheless, for those interviewed these practices are essential if any differences are to be made.

This is not to say that there is no room for the knowledge of practitioners. As the practitioners above indicate the knowledge transfer can be a two-way process. What is critical is knowing when to 'shut up and listen' (to use the practitioner's words) and when to contribute.

So how might these examples and emphasis on relational and micro-practices speak to debates on the efficacy of resilience thinking?

The quick uptake of Resilience by policy makers, international organisations and development practitioners present both possibilities and problems. Several recent reviews of resilience as concept, outcome and capacity, notably Obrist (2010), Bene et al (2014) and Welsh (2014), raise questions about its uncritical application.

Obrist (2010, p 281), for instance, suggests a need to pay attention to questions of power relations and 'whose resilience' is to be built. Bene et al (2014) point to the potential dangers of the increasing use of resilience as a normative concept. Much as 'participation' became the paradigm of all 'good' development projects of the 2000s, resilience has emerged, for these authors, as a normative and evident 'good'.

Welsh (2014) goes a little further arguing that resilience discourses produce responsibilised subjects in the context of a retreating state. Concerned about the 'governance of uncertainty' inherent in resilience thinking, Welsh (2014, p. 21) draws attention to the fetishising of complex adaptive systems shorn of political context and a tendency to construct abstract concepts to the detriment of real world lived experience and with it relinquishing urgent questions of power and inequality.

Reflecting on our work, and like the criticisms of resilience thinking, there is always a risk of fetishism when privileging a particular approach or set of approaches as we have done with our emphasis on strengths-based approaches in community development.

Focusing on capacities, possibilities, visions, hopes and strengths of individuals, organisations and communities can lead to an under-emphasis on the inevitable challenges and culturally-embedded assumptions that often characterise these contexts.

Yet, to attend to 'unsung' and micro-practices and processes; to pay close attention to various dilemmas and how practitioners are negotiating them in meaningful and respectful

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ways; and to relate quietly and slowly and listen, is to begin to attend to questions of politics, power, and inequality.

It is in the actual doing of 'the project', any project; whether it be a strengths-based community development initiative in central Australia; a minority world *National Resilience Plan* or a World Bank approach to *Climate-Resilient Cities*, it will be the relationships built (or not) in the interactions and negotiations themselves with project 'partners', communities, actual people, that matter most.

So it is in the actual practice of 'the doing', I would argue, of the implementing, of the evaluating, that will more than likely determine a projects deeper engagement and success. In other words, politics is to be found in this 'doing'; in this relational practice.

As Bene et al (2014, p. 599) argue, resilience thinking in itself is neither 'good' nor 'bad'. If this is the case, and I think it is, attending to relational practices; like practices of patience and 'letting go', might be the very things required to take more seriously issues of politics, power and inequality in the rush to embrace 'the project' or in this case, the rush to adhere to resilience as the next big thing.

Thank you

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