

# THE AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE *of* SOCIAL WORK

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## What is Advanced Practice for Social Workers?

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As an Aboriginal social worker, when considering the question, "What is Advanced Practice for Social Workers?" my mind immediately turns to the question, "What is Advanced Practice for Social Work as it intersects with the First Australians?" This paper focuses on the latter question and in doing so introduces four support pillars that can inform this practice. These four pillars are firstly, the Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples (2008) offered by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and supported by the House of Representatives. Secondly, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), which was supported by the Australian Government in 2009. Thirdly, the impending Constitutional change through Referendum, planned to occur within the next three years. The final support emerges from the Australian Association of Social Work through the development of a national Reconciliation Action Plan.

Having introduced the four pillars that I propose will support advanced social work practice with the First Australians, this paper provides some insights about each pillar and how they can be harnessed to advance practice. However, this paper should be viewed as a pre-cursor to more in-depth papers to be presented in the future.

### **The Apology**

There is a perception by the wider Australian community that the Apology was made to benefit only the First Australians. However, this view is narrow and uninformed. As Paulo Freire (2003), a South American educationalist pointed out, when one nation invades and dehumanizes another, it is not just the colonized who are dehumanized as the actions of the invading groups can also result in the loss of their own humanity. This loss of humanity by the colonisers of this land can be clearly found embedded within Australian history (King, 2011). Therefore, I argue that the Apology was just as important to the healing and regaining of humanity by the broader Australian population as it was to the First Australians. To understand the importance of healing, not just for the First Australians, but for Australians as a whole, there must be an understanding of both sides of the story of this land - this means 'Ourstory'<sup>1</sup> as well as history. Professor Michael McDaniel, aligned public policy to domestic violence when he said in a speech at the launch of the Allens Arthur Robinson Reconciliation Action Plan that we, as a nation, needed to not just reflect upon and discuss the past, but that Aboriginal peoples:

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<sup>1</sup> Ourstory is a term I use to describe the Aboriginal version of history (King, 2011).



*...need to tell you the story of what it's been like to be the by-product of your success. We need, as partners within what might be described as a domestic violence situation, the right to sit down and tell you how it felt, because we can't go to the next stage. We can't have a box of chocolates, a bunch of flowers, go off to a dance and not talk about it. Right? Silence is a form of abuse, and if you impose silence upon us as a first step you continue the abuse, so we need to have a chat (McDaniel, 2009).*

I believe that as social workers embrace the Apology and incorporate the insights it provides for practice, we will be more open to sit and have the discussions that Professor McDaniel states are so necessary.

### **The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

There are two main types of international legal instruments developed and used by the United Nations and its member nations. These instruments are Treaties and Declarations.

*Treaties (also known as Conventions, Covenants or Protocols) are binding agreements made by governments. They create legal obligations under international law. Treaties can and have been made in the past between governments and Indigenous Peoples. The treaty of Waitangi is a well-known example of a treaty between New Zealand and the Maori (Human Rights Commission, 2010, p. 8).*

Declarations on the other hand are "Statements made by the world's governments. They do not create legally binding obligations but they do carry political weight" (Human Rights Commission, 2010, p. 8).

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (hereafter referred to as the Declaration) is important from an Australian perspective because Australia is a country that does not have a treaty with the original inhabitants. Therefore, the Declaration can act in place of a treaty as a litmus test to guide and inform advance social work practice in Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Mick Gooda stated that:

*The Declaration is the most comprehensive tool we have available to advance the rights of Indigenous peoples. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, I intend to use it as my guide during my tenure in this position. It will become the foundation upon which to build my agenda (2010, p. 4).*

### **Constitutional Reform**

The Australian Constitution was written in 1900 and does not mention the First Australians at all because we as a people were expected to die out and our culture, ways of knowing, being and doing were not recognised or valued. This is despite the Constitution being, "the most powerful set of laws in the nation" (Reconciliation Australia, 2010). Many social workers may be unaware that the Australian Constitution is the only one in the world that allows for discrimination against its First Peoples based on race.



Constitutional change will allow for this to be redressed and for social justice and equity to be made available to the First Australians where it is not currently available. This fits with the social work ethic of social justice and I propose that the non-Indigenous social workers of Australia ensure that they are well informed about the differences between a preamble and changing the body of the Constitution, so that the rights of the First Australians are brought into line with the rights that the wider Australian population enjoy, and that would see the racial discrimination contained within the body of the constitution removed. It is interesting to note that Australians have in the past voted in forty four Constitutional referendums, but have only voted in the affirmative on eight occasions. Therefore as the profession that prizes itself as being the only one to work for social justice, it is important that social workers are well informed and prepared for the Referendum and to consider Constitutional change.

### **A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)**

A Reconciliation Action Plan is a tool that can be used to assist the AASW, to build positive relationships between social workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as well as between Indigenous and non-indigenous social workers. It does this by providing a format for exploring how reconciliation can advance social work practice. It is the public contribution of the AASW towards the national effort to close the unacceptable life expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the broader Australian population.

The RAP will formalise the AASW contribution by encouraging the identification of clear actions and realistic targets, as well as lessons learnt. The RAP is foundational for advanced social work practice as it will frame and inform the way in which the social workers engages with the First Australians over the next two years (the lifetime of the initial RAP currently in development).

### **Conclusion**

This paper focused on the question, “What is Advanced Practice for Social Work as it intersects with the First Australians?” and in doing so introduced four support pillars that can inform advanced practice. These pillars were identified as being the Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples (2008), *the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), Constitutional change through Referendum and the development of a national Reconciliation Action Plan by the AASW.

It is recognised that some social workers will already be aware of if not all, then some of the pillars introduced and will have incorporated them into their practice, while for others, various pillars will be new and bring about a reflection on how they can be harnessed to advance practice. However, as clearly stated at the beginning this paper should be viewed as a pre-cursor to more in-depth papers in the future.

**References**

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