



WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

JUDY TAYLOR

OXFORD

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WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

For
Yunus Rached and Leo John Cheers
The next chapter is yours

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PREFACE

Introduction

This book is based on my practice and that of my friends working in communities in all parts of Australia and in Nepal. The experience I have had in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander friends in Western Australia, Queensland, and South Australia has been illuminating and the more I learnt the more I knew I didn't know. The same goes for my experience as an Australian Volunteer for International Development in the Ministry of Health and Population in Nepal in 2013 and 2014. As I write this I am listening to the devastating impact of the earthquake in Nepal. This is a resilient country and humble in the face of adversity and I am hoping that resilience will overcome.

Long and vigorous debates with Queensland government colleagues in community services development in the 1990s helped develop some of the concepts on which this book is built. We asked questions about why some programs worked in some communities and not in others and why some communities took action and others didn't. I think we are still looking for answers, but some of the ideas about community structure and functioning are helpful. As an academic, I have had the luxury of trying to refine concepts about community work, such as community participation, community sustainability, and community partnerships, through research with communities and that too has been enlightening.

This book explores the space between practising community work and conceptualising it—what we do and the theory and concepts that we use in doing it. This space is a little bit tricky because some of the concepts we use are ephemeral and our practice is sometimes tenuous and cautious. So uncovering the space is important as it releases our energy and passion. For example, discovering what 'purposive developmental relationships' (Owen & Westoby, 2012, p. 309) might mean in practice takes us to central Australia. We explore Andrew Stojanovski's purposive developmental relationships with Warlpiri elders to establish the Mt Theo Petrol Sniffing Prevention Program in the remote desert Aboriginal community of Yuendumu. Learning about why some communities take action leads us to suburban Adelaide and we examine the community work residents undertook fighting to protect their neighbourhood. They didn't win the fight, but as it turned out, other things were important—like relationships.

In writing this book I have used 'we' instead of 'I' and in doing this I am hoping that the reader will be coming along with me. We will be exploring, questioning, and enjoying reading about working with communities.

The plan of the book

The book is divided into three parts, dealing respectively with:

- theoretical foundations of community work
- conceptual approaches and practice frameworks for working with communities
- practical applications and processes in working with communities.

Part 1: Theoretical foundations of community work

Chapter 1 presents different approaches to community work, as a method of practice, as a set of strategies to build community capacity, and as endogenous development. The choice to use the term community work and working with communities is a pragmatic one because the book is focused on learning how to practice—to work with communities. This doesn't mean though that the vast body of knowledge about community development is not relevant—it is and the term community development is retained when it is referred to as that in the original material. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, recognising the place of the first Australians in this country, is the term preferred over Indigenous. Sometimes Indigenous is used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when it is used in the original material.

Some of the contextual factors influencing community work practice are presented in Chapter 2 and theory and concepts helpful in understanding different types of communities as a prelude to working with them are introduced in Chapter 3. Community interaction theory developed by Wilkinson (1991) and Sharp (2001) from social field theory (Kaufman, 1959; Wilkinson, 1970) is used to underpin understanding of community and community functioning. In Chapter 4, we explore some Australian Aboriginal understandings of community, which are different from Western understandings. We do this through dialogues with Rachael Cummins, Ian Gentle, and Charmaine Hull. The concept of whiteness is introduced in this section so we are alerted to white privilege and some of the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience it. Whiteness is largely the reason the ways of working that Rachel, Ian, and Charmaine tell us are essential don't happen. Chapter 5 explains, using community interaction theory and concepts from Tilley (1973), why communities act.

Part 2: Conceptual approaches and practice frameworks to working with communities

In this part of the book a typology of contemporary conceptual approaches to working with communities emerges as the 'contributions', the 'instrumental', the 'community empowerment', and the 'developmental' approaches. 'Purposive developmental relationships' (Owen & Westoby, 2012) are introduced as they are related to the developmental approach but also should underpin the other approaches to working with communities.

Chapter 7 presents four different types of practice frameworks useful in community work. The important role of government in working with communities is described in Chapter 8 and the non-government sector in Chapter 9.

Part 3 focuses on the practical applications and processes involved in working with communities:

- Chapter 10, community decision-making
- Chapter 11, building and maintaining community partnerships
- Chapter 12, community participation
- Chapter 13, community planning
- Chapter 14, understanding and assessing community capacity
- Chapter 15, community leadership
- Chapter 16, building knowledge about working with communities.

Using the case studies, practice exercises, and practitioner perspectives

The relationship between theory and practice is demonstrated through case studies, practice exercises, and practitioner perspectives. Each case study illustrates the points made in the chapter and brings together the key ideas. Some case studies are constructed specially to demonstrate the points and some are actual examples and if they are the latter then the references are given. The case studies are followed by questions that invite critical reflection. It is important to be able to visualise the further application of the ideas in the case study and the body of theory they relate to.

Practice exercises are more directly related to practice and they are designed to identify the possible activities that might be involved in practice with communities. Practitioner perspectives introduce practitioners and their experiences. The practitioner's background is shared and the reader can make sense of how their experiences highlight the concepts discussed in the chapter.

Many of the examples in this book are from rural or remote Australia because I am familiar with these contexts, having lived in rural, remote, or regional areas for most of my life. In addition, in these areas, there are starkly apparent patterns of interaction. The use of the Nepali examples is important because they highlight the influence of Western values and practices in community work across cultures.

Working with communities

Energetic and committed community work practitioners are tackling the hard questions; the uncertainty and ethical challenges and we would all agree that the political, economic, spiritual, environmental, and social contexts we live in are challenging our lives in so many ways. In spite of this, those writing about their practice and those who wrote case studies in this book demonstrate that people are still passionately exploring the notion of what could be for communities. The subterranean and subversive nature of community work—sometimes in partnership with government, universities, and politicians—is evident. Even when community action doesn't succeed, communities

still win to some extent, because people have felt the joy, the heartache, the challenge, the uncertainty, the anger, warmth, and fun of belonging and working together.

Opportunities for community work are found in working with individuals, talking with people to understand community issues, and getting to know the social structures and networks operating in the community. This puts the practitioner in a sound position to promote the community work options when they occur, even though they are rarely up front. If you are thinking ‘community’ and understand the way the community concerned functions, there will always be opportunities for community work.

The other thing is that communities take action themselves—all the time. Generally though, community members don’t write of their experiences. The conceptual analysis comes externally from the community, often from developers who have the ‘head space’ and the motivation to do this. Really, working with communities is about realising the energy the community has to set its own course (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000).

GUIDED TOUR

Linking theory and practice to help you engage with the real world

Throughout the text, **case studies** demonstrate the relationship between theory and practice by illustrating key ideas introduced in each chapter, and **critical reflection** questions invite you to stretch your understanding and independent thinking.

Case study

6.3

THE STATE COMMUNITY INCLUSION FORUM

The state government established a community forum to enable statewide networks of community service agencies—a community of interest—to have input into social inclusion policy. Most of the networks were composed of agencies that received government funding and this was an explicit criteria for participation. The government personnel talked about the industry rather than a community. There was considerable unrest about the criteria as this meant that advocacy organisations that did not receive government funding, who were not part of the government's definition of the industry, were excluded. The relevant state government department provided a secretariat and a part-time project worker. The worker's role included identifying who could be included and organising the agenda items requested by different state government agencies. Increasingly, the business of the forum became focused on government agencies providing information about their new programs. The intention being that the member networks would publicise these initiatives. There was insufficient time at meetings to properly discuss the issues brought forward by the community service networks. It became difficult to maintain a community-initiated agenda. Members felt they were 'owned' by government, and it was the goals of government agencies that were in focus, with little space to meet the needs of the networks. There was discussion among many of the network representatives of oppositional strategies to enable networks to have a voice.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

- 1 What are the key features of the instrumental approach in this case study?
- 2 If an instrumental approach is used what are more appropriate ways of working with the community to achieve government objectives?
- 3 How might the community work value of commitment to social inclusion sit with the government approach to formulating the policy?
- 4 What challenges might arise if the agenda is increasingly focused to government needs?

PRACTICE EXERCISE 9.2

National Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO): 'Investing in NACCHO makes economic sense'

The NACCHO Healthy Futures Summit was held in 2014. One of the functions of the summit was for the ACCHS to demonstrate their economic value in addition to the provision of health services. One of the key points made by NACCHO was that 'our NACCHO member Aboriginal community-controlled health services (ACCHS) are not fully recognised by governments. The economic benefits of ACCHSs have not been recognised at all. The ACCHSs need more financial support from government, to provide not only quality health and wellbeing services to communities, but broader community economic benefits.'

Questions for practice

- 1 What do you think are these broader economic benefits that the ACCHS provide to their communities and how do they come about?
- 2 What are the broader benefits provided to government and how do they come about?
- 3 Should government continue to invest in ACCHS?

Practice exercises identify activities that might be involved in practice with communities, and invite you to reflect on your own attitudes and practice skills.

Practitioner perspectives profile practitioners from diverse backgrounds, providing you with insight into community work within a range of settings.

Practitioner perspective

ANDREW STOJANOVSKI PROGRAM COORDINATOR—MT THEO PETROL SNIFFING PREVENTION PROGRAM¹

I worked in partnership with the Warlpiri elders of Yuendumu, an Aboriginal Community 300km West of Alice Springs, to create the Mt Theo Program (www.mtheo.org), a community campaign to stop petrol sniffing. Initially we were all volunteers. I had a full time job at the school, while most of my Warlpiri team mates were on very low incomes.

A community work example

Mt Theo Program grew out of a series of community meetings as Warlpiri people and non-Aboriginal people were trying everything to stop petrol sniffing in Yuendumu. The idea of sending petrol sniffers to the remote outstation of Mt Theo, 140km north of Yuendumu, came from Aboriginal people themselves

Directing your learning by helping to bring all the pieces together

Each chapter opens with clearly outlined **chapter objectives** to help direct your learning around the main focus points. **Key terms** are listed to identify important concepts addressed throughout the chapter.

Strengths-based approach to community development: An approach to community development that focuses on community strengths and draws forth those strengths through self-defined activities

LINKAGE ►► The understanding of community work as endogenous development, that is, activities emerging spontaneously from communities, is discussed in Chapter 1.

The assets-based approach to community development (ABCD) is a strengths-based approach. The framework is capacity rather than deficit-based, and it is often called 'inside-out' development because of the focus on looking inwards at the community's strengths (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). The **strengths-based approach to community development** (Tedmanson & Guerin, 2011) is another approach that also uses the concept of strengths rather than deficits. The ethos of 'inside-out' development fosters community members' control over the direction of development and the use of local resources or assets (Healy 2006, p. 254). This approach acknowledges the importance of citizen-led community initiatives that are 'endogenous' that is they evolve without an external agent (Burkett, 2011a).

The definition of assets is broad and includes relationships, financial resources, information, community members' expertise, and organisations and networks. The breadth and depth of community wisdom to understand problems and assets and the community's own problem-solving capacities are most important (Mathie & Cunningham, 2005, p. 177).

At the end of each chapter, **summary points** draw together important ideas and link back to chapter opening objectives to reinforce what you have learnt. **Further reading lists**, sorted under clear, descriptive headings, gather main references and other sources that may be of interest to you.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT IS COMMUNITY? ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING

The purpose of this chapter is for readers to take a critical stance in understanding the development of the concept of community and be aware of the conceptual differences between a community of place, a common interest group, a social system, and an on-line community. Community interaction theory is the theoretical foundation for understanding community and the key elements of the structure and functioning of communities are analysed using this theory. In Chapter 4, Aboriginal Australians Rachel Cummins, Ian Gentle and Charmaine Hull explore how the concept of community might better be understood in the context of Aboriginal social life. The learning objectives of this chapter are for readers to understand:

- how the sociological development of the concept of community has evolved and is evolving
- what defines a community of place, a community of interest, a community as a social system, and on-line communities
- how community interaction theory underpins an analysis of community elements; local society, community field, types of community structures, and types of community power structures
- the relevance of Granovetter's (1973) concept of strong and weak ties in community work practice
- why it is important to understand community heritage narratives.

KEY TERMS

community field
community heritage narratives
community interaction theory
community of place

community of interest
community power structures
on-line community
strong and weak interpersonal ties

Key terms are defined in the **glossary margin notes** throughout the text to assist your understanding as you read. **Linkages** noted in the margins direct you to related content in other sections of the text to help connect ideas.

The role of government in working with communities is examined in this chapter. Although government's role is somewhat distanced from practice their influence is significant in setting the policy agenda, providing funding, and building partnerships for some initiatives. It is in government's interests for communities to become sustainable in the context of change such as industry downturn or movements of population. What sustainability really means is contested and government's perception is often limited. Place development is one way that the economic, social, and environmental aspects can be considered and an integrated approach to development achieved although there are inevitably conflicting priorities. Another important role of government is to collaborate in aspects of service delivery and delegate some responsibilities. We examined the collaboration between government and NGOs that occurred in Queensland.

The practice of community engagement by government is designed to create greater involvement by citizens, stakeholders and communities in the development and implementation of government policies and programs. What is critical to effective engagement is the degree to which the community can control the process and ensure that the right people are involved—those who are central to the initiative. Purposive developmental relationships are essential with those people and often are the key to whether the strategy will be effective or not. Another issue is the time commitment required for successful engagement. For most endeavours, a longer-term approach is required rather than just a 'one off' consultation.

Government often works very closely with the non-government sector and in Chapter 9 the role of the non-government sector and some of the types of organisations are explained.

SUMMARY POINTS

FURTHER READING

Community sustainability

Farmer, J., Prior, M., & Taylor, J. (2012) A theory of how rural health services contribute to community sustainability. *Social Science and Medicine*, 75(10), 1903–1911. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.06.035>