

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

**SOCIAL WORK AND RACISM:
A CASE STUDY IN ACT HEALTH**

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ABSTRACT:

A Feminist Action Research methodology was used as a collaborative process with five ACT Health social workers based at the Community Health Centres and four at the Woden Valley Hospital. The primary purpose of the study was to investigate, both through critical reflection and action in their work setting, the participants' relevance or otherwise to Aboriginal people in the ACT and region. Behind this is the question of how encapsulated social work is by racism. The impetus for the study arose from my unresolved concerns regarding these issues, having been a social worker in ACT Health for 6 years, to 1990.

Decisions on how to proceed involved a process of ongoing consultation between the participant social workers and myself. Exploratory meetings were held in March and April, with an ongoing program being held 2-3 weekly from June to September, followed by a review in December. Most gatherings were specific to the Woden Valley Hospital or Community Health settings. However two half-day workshops were held for all the participants. All the sessions from June were taped. Aboriginal leaders were consulted, as were several managers in ACT Health.

The phenomena of institutional, cultural and personal racism were addressed by the social workers through discussion, exercises, and anti-racist initiatives in their work setting. They found that significant time restraints presented an example of institutional racism working against their good intentions. Another dimension arose from implicitly racist education in social work courses when most of the participants undertook their undergraduate courses in the 1960s and 1970s. Aspects related to professionalism such as its language and separation of a personal and professional self were indicative of cultural racism. Stories of personal racism were shared, in the context of raised awareness leading to changing those attitudes and behaviours.

The fact that the study took place in 1993 - a watershed year for Aboriginal/white relations in Australia - seemed to lead to greater momentum for the project. The social workers found that participation in this study increased their knowledge of, and their confidence - both actual and potential - in interaction with Aboriginal people. However, they also understood these to be just small steps towards greater justice for the indigenous people.

An outcome of the project has been involving some colleagues in similar anti-racist actions to those the social workers participated in during the time of the study. The action research project has continued on in different ways, beyond 1993, despite my withdrawal as 'the researcher' who took the initiative.

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ABBREVIATIONS:

AAACE	Australian Association for Adult and Community Education
AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
ACTGS	Australian Capital Territory Government Services
ADCCP	Acting Director of Corporate and Client Programs
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AHS	Aboriginal Health Strategy
AIDAB	Australian International Development Assistance Bureau
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AIHWJ	Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal
AIWCW	Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers
ALO	Aboriginal Liaison Officer
AMA	Australian Medical Association
ANU	Australian National University
ARS	Anti-Racist Strategies
ASW	Australian Social Work Journal
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission
BASW	British Association of Social Workers
CAE	Centre for Advanced Education
CAR	Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation
CAT	Cultural Awareness Training
CDIH	Community Development in Health; Community Development Initiatives in Health; Centre for Development and Innovation in Health

CHASP	Community Health Accreditation and Standards Program
CHSW	Community Health Social Worker
CT	The Canberra Times newspaper
CMP	Community Medical Practitioner
CMW	Collective Memory Work
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs
DLITT	Doctor of Letters
FAR	Feminist Action Research
HIV/AIDS	Human Immune Deficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
IYWIP	International Year of the World's Indigenous People
JIS	Journal of Intercultural Studies
NAHP	National Aboriginal Health Policy
NAHS	National Aboriginal Health Strategy
NCEPH	National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health
NESB	Non-English Speaking Background
NESP	Non-English Speaking Person
NIC	Network for Intercultural Communication
NTTF	Northern Territory Tripartite Forum
PAR	Participatory Action Research
POs	Professional Officers
POA	Professional Officers' Association
PSU	Public Sector Union
PSW	Psychiatric Social Worker
SACAE	South Australian College of Advanced Education
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service

SPOA,B,C	Senior Professional Officer A,B,C
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TSI	Torres Strait Islander
TPF	Tripartite Forum
UC	University of Canberra
VMO	Visiting Medical Officer
WHS	Women's Health Service (ACT Health)
WVH	Woden Valley Hospital