

Disrupting Human Rights: A Social Work Response to the Lockdown of Social Housing Residents

Kim Robinson ^{1,*}, Linda Briskman² and Ring Mayar³

¹*Geelong Waterfront Campus, School of Health & Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Geelong, VIC 3220, Australia*

²*School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia*

³*South Sudanese Community Association in Victoria (SSCAV) Inc, Sunshine, VIC 3021, Australia*

*Correspondence to Dr Kim Robinson, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Deputy HDR Co-Ordinator, School of Health & Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Geelong Waterfront Campus, Locked Bag 20001, Geelong, VIC 3220, Australia. E-mail: kim.robinson@deakin.edu.au www.deakin.edu.au

Abstract

The article probes the disproportionate impact on marginalised populations to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (COVID-19 is an acronym that stands for coronavirus disease of 2019).. It explores this problematic through research with refugees residing in social housing in Melbourne, Australia. The focus is on the specific pressures facing this cohort with the 2020 deployment, without notice, of armed police to enforce lockdown in the central Melbourne housing high rise tower estates. Our research methodology comprises narrating experiences of a community leader who had direct contact with residents and is a co-author of this article; accounts arising from an African community forum and a review of media sources that are attentive to voice. From a thematic analysis, we found consistency of narrative for a cohort whose voices had previously been excluded from the public domain. The themes were in three key areas: representation and employment of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse social workers and community workers; restoration of human rights to those experiencing state-sanctioned violence; and the application of critical multicultural social work practice. We apply theorising derived from Helen Taylor and Jacques Derrida, and argue that responses to crises should be led by the wisdom of affected communities, in keeping with critical social work theories and practices.

Keywords: critical social work, community development, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, human rights, social housing

Accepted: May 2021

Introduction

In July 2020, panic and fear erupted in Melbourne as COVID-19 infection rates began to rise after a period when the first lockdown had subsided. On 4 July, approximately 3,000 social housing tenants living in high-rise towers, known as ‘the flats’, were ordered without notice into home detention. The government directive was enforced by 500 armed police towards those who lived in the central Melbourne suburbs of Flemington, Kensington and North Melbourne. Portrayed by public health and government authorities as a health crisis, already vulnerable and marginalised residents experienced a crisis of trust, well-being and basic freedoms, eroding faith in what was purported in dominant discourses to be an inclusive, progressive and democratic city. This top-down approach to responding was for us, antithetical to the core values and principles of social work, of community development, and community-driven approaches.

Many of the residents are humanitarian migrants who have fled persecution and come from backgrounds of displacement and trauma. They meet the United Nations (UN) definition of refugee and have permanent residency in Australia. However, there are people who are seeking protection and asylum, and are on other visas (Jenkinson *et al.*, 2016). Residents who value the importance of home as a safe space were cut-off from support systems, particularly older people who relied on carers and daily medication. To compound their difficulties, some did not speak fluent English and the limited official communication produced fear. Many large extended families living in small flats did not have sufficient food for the ensuing days.

There was an absence of social workers and community workers deployed to the area. The emphasis was on virus detection and compliance by police and officials from the Department of Health (changed in 2021 to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing [DFFH]). The measures introduced in the interests of public health failed to acknowledge the diverse needs of residents, and there was lack of interpreters and appropriate modes of communication. As critical social workers, our specific line of inquiry examines the failure to adopt community-driven responses consistent with human rights and community development approaches to social work, including collaborative responses and participatory democracy.

The resourcefulness of the residents and the communities to which they belong went unrecognised until those communities seized some control and developed communication strategies, delivered culturally

appropriate food and provided other support mechanisms, compensating where the government failed. Trust was clearly absent in the way residents were treated as deficits rather than partners in solving a perceived problem. The impact was so severe that the treatment of residents is under investigation by the Victorian State Ombudsman following complaints about an overwhelming police presence and lack of communication with residents and community leaders. The investigation will examine the issue of human rights protections and future strategies in responding to pandemics (Hall, 2020).

This article is based on primary research and theoretically locates the events and aftermath of the sudden lockdown from a critical social work perspective and human rights framework. It raises questions of the artificial dichotomy between vulnerability and agency as well as questions of community leadership when responding to crises. Our primary focus is on humanitarian migrants, whilst recognising that other residents also experienced trauma during the lockdown. We draw on theoretical constructs of Taylor (2013) on home and displacement as well as Derrida and Dufourmantelle's (2000) notion of hospitality to illustrate the unconditional and conditional forms of welcome and connection/disconnection to belonging, a framing that has been adopted by other social workers (see Westoby, 2019, 2021). The perspectives of residents are derived from three sources, described in the Methods section, in what we believe is a first for social work in scrutinising the lockdown and its aftermath. We begin with a critical literature review, followed by the methodology and methods adopted, and then present our findings. We conclude the article by applying a critical social work lens to recommend an alternative to top-down authoritarian approaches to public health issues for the future that recognises the expertise and agency of social housing residents.

Critical literature review

We completed our paper in February 2021 when to the best of our knowledge there have been no published academic papers on the topic of the lockdown. Relevant to our inquiry, however, is the extensive literature on both housing and humanitarian migrants that adopts or adapts a perspective directly from social work or is consistent with critical social work tenets. We note that the area of humanitarian migrants and forced migration is contested ground globally with our article contextually illustrating how this unfurls in policy and practice. For example, the work of Power *et al.* (2020) speaks about problems in the social housing sphere, whilst others (Briskman, 2021) refer to the precarity of the lives of people from refugee backgrounds. Jenkinson *et al.* (2016) describe challenges in relation to finding housing and obtaining secure housing

tenure. In this article, we align with anti-racist, strength-based social work approaches that highlight strategies to facilitate sustainable community cohesion and build social capital (Briskman, 2019; Robinson and Haintz, 2021).

There is a current social work literature regarding the range of issues facing those living in social housing, including marginalisation and stigma, poor levels of infrastructure management and a neo-liberal discourse of blame (see Hicks and Lewis, 2019; Pawar, 2019). Intertwined is literature about strategies of resistance of people from refugee backgrounds pushing back against disabling discourses of trauma, and high levels of preparedness and skill in dealing with disaster in social housing to support communities (Marlowe, 2010; MacDonald, 2017; Howard, *et al.*, 2018). Social work has a key role in activism and engagement with refugee settlement promoting participation (Marlowe, 2018; Robinson, 2020). We subscribe to the deliberations of those who posit that social work is inherently political such as Parkinson (2020) who proclaims there is a clear link between party politics, political ideology, social and economic factors and social work practice (p. 223). She argues it is important to understand that social work is shaped by the politics of the day and that social workers be cognisant of the impact of government policy on the lives of people with whom they work. Relevant too is the literature on how power differentials perpetuate disadvantage by excluding people through binary thinking and the politics of difference (Goodwin, 2019). Ottmann (2020) discusses the rise of authoritarian welfare in Australia, documenting the shift from rights-based welfare to a punitive behavioural change model enshrined by compliance. He suggests that surveillance and outsourcing of social services have weakened safeguards, ensuring that clients are protected from arbitrary sanctions.

A significant body of literature discusses housing as a human right that is enshrined in universal norms. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948), which underpins all international and national human rights instruments, states that human rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person. Specifically, Article 25(1) notes:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [sic] and of his [sic] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [sic] control.

Bell (2013) notes that this is a declaration of the human right to adequate housing in the context of a broader right to an adequate standard of living and economic security. He also emphasises the importance of

housing to the well-being of individuals, families and communities, which is particularly relevant to this study.

More recent literature and theorising sees the right to housing as not merely framed around housing and the rights that flow, but rather explores exclusionary paradigms where human rights are negated for the most vulnerable, precariously positioned and subjected to insecurity. Global literature on public housing that accounts for class and ethnicity disparities increasingly features in academic research and writing, supplemented by the work of community organisations and interest in the voices of the tenanted (see [Power and Rogers, 2020](#)). Much of social work's concern with housing is derived from academic and practice work on homelessness ([Manthorpe et al., 2015](#); [Zufferey, 2017](#)). Our literature review contributes to understandings of what it means to be a humanitarian migrant tenanted in social housing.

Writing on transformative practice, [Williams and Graham \(2016\)](#) call for a reframing of what they call the 'problem' of diversity. They suggest we need to acknowledge the contexts in which debates about practice occur as contested territories that reflect localised political contexts. Building upon this, they argue for a theory of change built *in situ* as significant in making a difference. For us, this challenges the notion of universal human rights through theory building and practice directions coming from the grass roots location in specific sites, in this instance the Melbourne social housing towers. Alongside, we need to be acutely aware in this specific context of what [Williams and Graham \(2016\)](#) discuss in relation to the nature of ethnic and racial inequalities. As they note, whilst aiming for transformative and contextualised practice, social work activities and values are curtailed by neo-liberal models of welfare.

Theoretical underpinnings

There is expansive literature on refugee rights but here we focus on the less explored concepts of home and hospitality for forcibly displaced people. The following theoretical approaches arise from the narratives throughout our research and the themes that arise. First, although her work derives from a different international context to ours, [Helen Taylor's \(2013\)](#) theorising on home and displacement provides some leads for analysing the lockdown of the social housing flats and the impact on refugee communities. People displaced from their countries of origin, to refugee camps and then to the receiving state, may find themselves displaced and marginalised in the country which granted refuge. Home for them signals a sense of belonging, building of community and rights-entitlement from which meaning-making arises. Applying this to our work, the flats constitute a site from which to build and re-build social, community and religious networks and establish education and

employment and life markers such as births, marriages and deaths. Segregating tenants from refugee backgrounds from the wider community constitutes a form of everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) where health and checkpoints defy notions of belonging. What this means in the context of the lockdown was akin to destruction of the physicality and emotionality connected with home and disrupts the wall of security that is both an aspiration and a reality. The loss and injustice from flight to temporary shelter to a sense of permanency interlink and shatter beliefs in what futures might hold.

Secondly, Derrida's writing (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000, 2005) on hospitality explores the notion of how migrants are received, and the degree to which it is unconditional or conditional. 'Unconditional' hospitality refers to the ethical dimension of a total welcome, and 'conditional' speaks more to the constraints implicit in migration legalese. Hospitality is helpful to unpack as it illuminates the tensions in governmental minimum standards in service provision (the conditional) with the community based and more grassroots outreach afforded to newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers (the unconditional), often represented in movements such as Welcoming Cities (2020). Catherine Brun (2010) draws on Derrida in the context of forced migration, and notes that hospitality can be demonstrated in the manner we relate to ourselves and others, particularly how humanitarian practice is developed 'in the interplay with local perspectives of dealing with displacement' (p. 351).

Peter Westoby (2019) writes of Derrida's radical politics and that he was always reaching for a politic that has two key dimensions: the 'summons to justice' and second, being attuned to 'vigilance for the other'. These themes link with our over-arching focus on critical social work in this context of social housing and the strategies to ameliorate the injustice towards community members. He frames community development as key to this process and argues justice is the main driver for meaningful engagement, and notes: 'Here is an invitation in community development praxis to integrate theory (ideas), practice (the doing with an idea of our intention) with passion, or emotion' (p. 10).

Methodology and methods

As researchers we emerge from a social constructionist position, with an interest in collective stories that have emerged 'up from below' (Burr, 2015). Ife (1997) in his work with human rights workers suggests that social work is based on a humanist form of knowledge that 'emphasises a practice based on the centrality of human values and the need to understand another's subjective reality' (p. 47). Our research privileges the voices of the group about which we are writing, and these narratives

articulate more wide-ranging concerns and issues, and experiences of oppression (Plummer, 2001, p. 90). The interest in narratives is linked to the postmodern sensibility, one that challenges grand narratives and places more emphasis on diversity and difference. Creswell and Poth (2018) note 'As a method it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals' (p. 67). It also incorporates a critical positioning of the researcher as part of the process, and the text as a document that is interpreted is based on values, subject position and context. We as researchers identify as settler feminist social work academics, with a long-standing interest and commitment to human rights in the context of forced migration.

Our initial plan was to interview social and community workers connected with the Flemington, Kensington and North Melbourne flats, but due to lockdown which included limits on distance travelled (confined to five kilometres), we were unable to do so. Despite this limitation, we sought alternative ways of privileging voice to academically recognise the perspectives of residents and their communities. Ethics approval was obtained by Deakin University. Arising from our methodological positioning, our research adopted the following approaches.

1. The written narrative of Ring Mayar in response to critical questioning posed by the academic authors, which focused on experiences, challenges and ideas. Ring is a prominent community leader and drew on his substantial experience at the social housing flats during the state government lockdown, as well as his ongoing advocacy and relationships with government, academia and non-government organisations.
2. Our observations and documentation of spoken experiences arising at the Africause forum held online via Zoom, with approximately twenty attendees based in Melbourne.
3. Review of media reporting that arose in the immediate days following lockdown. We reviewed approximately forty pieces of press media during the months of July and August 2020. We incorporate eleven of those which cited direct voices of residents and well-informed commentators.

Regarding Method 2 above, we were invited to a community leadership event in October 2020—*COVID-19 Impact Post Flemington and North Melbourne Hard-Lockdown*—initiated by a community organisation—Africause—to explore the responses of community members and services to the lockdown. It was after this event that Ring approached us and expressed interest in becoming involved in the research study. Ring became central to our approach including co-presenting in November 2020 at the Australia New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWER) symposium and co-authoring this article.

Ring expressed frustration with attempts at tokenistic consultation by authorities as well as the work of previous academics who did not share their findings. There is a substantial literature that has examined the ethical issues of researchers working with refugees and vulnerable groups, and the ‘research fatigue’ that many experience when repeatedly asked for their story by academics (Pittaway *et al.*, 2009; Pittaway *et al.*, 2010; Marlowe, 2018). Humanitarian migrants have long reported their frustration and anger at being seen as the ‘other’, and that no change is made to their material conditions or to their status as a result of their contributions (Robinson and Haintz, 2021). As experienced researchers and social workers, we sought to avoid this tension, and keep our focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the residents in the social housing community and include the community leader as a co-researcher and author. This co-production sits alongside data acquired from other sources and positions Ring’s narrative as a key component.

We identified three themes arising from each data-set that are central to social work policy and practice futures. They are as follows:

- representation and employment of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) social workers and community workers;
- restoration of human rights to those experiencing state-sanctioned violence; and
- the application of critical multicultural social work practice.

In the following section, we present the key findings from each data-set: Ring’s narrative, the Africause symposium and media reports, followed by discussion of the three themes above.

Findings

Ring Mayar—African community perspectives

As a prominent community leader and advocate, Ring’s experience during the social housing lockdown ensured his importance as an informed respondent and co-author. He recounted:

In early July 2020, in my capacity as a community leader, I assisted CALD communities such as Vietnamese, Somalis, Middle Eastern communities and South Sudanese during the residential lockdown in North Melbourne and Flemington Estates. I coordinated culturally appropriate food delivery, including medicines, and provided Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) translated materials in various languages to assure and educate the residents about COVID-19 testing and safe social distancing practice. I was able to calm down resident’s fear, anxiety and depression related to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Ring described the impact of Government bureaucratic control over the community and that this led to time constraints and delays ‘before action is taken to assist the community’. When we encouraged Ring to reflect on what worked well during the time of the pandemic, he highlighted that it was the mobilising and coordinating of assistance to residents in the flats. Once the lines of communication were open and liaison with the Chief Medical Officer COVID-19 was in place, there were opportunities for educating the community, liaising with all government agencies and not-for-profit organisations to provide culturally appropriate food and water relief, and distribute school packs, ipads and computers. When pressed on what did not work, Ring was critical of the heavy presence of police as this led to an increase in fear, anxiety and mistrust. He also highlighted that there was a different set of rules for Victorians depending where they live and that conflicting messages diminished the confidence of residents in those providing advice and guidance.

Ring presented two main problems in relation to how the lockdown was managed: the lack of communication and trust. As an exemplar, Ring discussed one particular experience that highlighted communication barriers:

I took a senior Department member not been to the flats during the lockdown. He was terrified, didn't want to touch anyone or anything. We visited flats where food was being brought into the corridors and left for people. Hygiene was unbearable, smell was really horrible; conditions were poor, and there was confusion. This lack of communication simply translates into missed opportunity to have uniform approach.

Lack of trust pervaded the lockdown as Ring explained:

Community leaders were locked in. They are trusted people, but they could not communicate with the residents. This also included other community leaders, including Vietnamese, Bhutanese and Burmese. There were some conspiracy theories going around about testing, food distribution, etc. People were suspicious of government, given some experiences of racism and lack of communication.

The government, Ring recounted, needs visibility of a diverse workforce on the frontline to build trust and confidence with people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. It also needs staff who bring empathy and their trusted networks of CALD people as this would provide an awareness of needs at short notice—without doing further consultations. This would facilitate a pool of workers, and people who volunteered, who can advise on communication processes in any future events. A limitation, he says, is that the government may need to recruit people who might not meet the criteria for jobs, or do not have all the right skill sets and are not quite job ready. However, the benefits they bring will outweigh those shortcomings, and the government as an employer needs

to install mentoring programmes for six months to ease them into the jobs.

African voices: Africause forum

Amongst the most vocal communities to reflect upon the events are those representing African communities, which comprise a substantial refugee population in the flats. On 8 October 2020, all authors attended an online community leaders forum held by Africause, an organisation that represents a range of African communities in Melbourne. Ring Mayar was an active participant and the other authors were observers. Fifteen people attended as participants and several more as observers. Those present were asked to respond to such questions as to what occurred in their communities, the impact on young people and education, the effect on work, identifying what services were useful and how to move forward as a community.

Although it was acknowledged that people needed to be safe in the light of COVID-19, what became clear was the impact on people across the age spectrum. Young people could not access schooling or social activities, and those in their 20s were unable to attend their workplaces. For older people, there was difficulty in accessing the range of services that they required. Overall, social networks were disrupted and planned activities such as weddings could not take place. At the most basic level, food and medicine provision were severely disrupted. Panic dominated when people tried to seek advice from the local police, who were known to many residents, but no answers were provided and the police seemed as uninformed about the events as the residents.

Social workers were amongst the health professionals needed, but not made available. Rather than public authorities, volunteers in the community worked with residents on how to access services to meet their needs. However, limited employment of representative groups in local community centres hampered efforts. To respond to community concerns, the Department subsequently organised meetings with communities, although ministers of state were not considered helpful.

Even with the government wanting to act, they did not have an entry point. One participant said that there was not one African person employed in the relevant state department. The public servants did not display sympathy and it was believed if community members were employed, then the result would have been better, adding: 'I don't believe the issue was the lockdown, it was the lack of connection with community'. This is despite the fact that African communities are long-standing residents in the flats, raising deeper questions of what it means to be African in Australia. Some of the specific problems included an account from one woman with five children who was unable to go to a

park and confined to her small crowded flat; others not being able to eat for up to eight hours (including lack of supply of Halal food); the differential experiences across generations; overcrowding, and limited internet access diminishing online learning.

One community leader spoke of trying hard to support people, particularly women, and having to deal with people who wanted to leave the flats, which were small and overcrowded, but were not permitted to do so. There was confusion in families where one member tested positive and another did not, resulting in uncertainty about how to respond. There was impact on morale, with one participant referring to a university pharmacy student who felt that her dream had now gone. Communities that were regularly targeted differentially experienced the results of the sudden lockdown, such as the South Sudanese community, which Ring noted feel singled out as villains. A question raised by forum participants was why the lockdown was immediate and why a 24-hr warning could not have been in place, alongside appropriate measures taken in consultation with residents and their communities to avoid the significant disruption and mental health problems that arose from the way it was managed.

Media reports

In the aftermath of the lockdown, media attention was drawn to the social housing flats, and we draw on a selection of accounts here. For a group of people often ignored by the mainstream, this was a high-profile event that led to significant criticism of systemic problems facing the residents. In keeping with our method of privileging voices of residents or expert commentators, we excluded media accounts that did not do so.

In an article in *The Conversation*, Carrasco et al. (2020) emphasised how the lockdown highlighted inequalities as nearly 350 residents had been infected. As they note, COVID-19 might not discriminate, but its impacts do, and they go beyond the health sector alone. As one interview respondent told them: ‘the enforced lockdown is a direct reflection of the systemic inequalities in public housing’. Another talked about how a health response rather than a police response was required.

The lockdown in Melbourne revealed how unprepared the Victorian health bureaucracy was to deal with migrant communities. Mohammed Mohideen from the Islamic Council of Victoria told public media that ‘from the government point of view, they went in like they were dealing with a bushfire crisis. But this was different. These people were not in a refuge, they were in their own homes’ and ‘there was a lot of fear. They were locked in, they were from refugee backgrounds’ (cited in Knight and Rinaldi, 2020).

An infectious disease doctor seconded from a public hospital to Victoria's health department during the lockdown of the public housing towers says he was 'furious' about the way tenants were treated, arguing that the police presence was 'deeply dehumanising' and that the expertise of tenants was not harnessed. He spoke to *The Guardian*, drawing on his observations and experiences, as well as conversations with community members. He said that those 'facing the biggest barriers to equitable participation and inclusion in society bore the brunt of the disease', adding:

You had this huge response with police everywhere, apparently to protect 'vulnerable people' who are in fact actually very capable people living in a vulnerable environment, that they themselves had been asking to be fixed for a long time before the pandemic (cited in [Lemoh, 2020](#)).

Federal member of the parliament Peter Khalil grew up in public housing. He echoes sentiments about the decline in funding for public housing, noting that the lockdown 'suddenly rendered the invisible visible' with voices being heard not just about needs but presenting ideas about what communication and health policies might be put in place for other public housing estates to prevent extreme lockdowns. [Khalil \(2020\)](#) adds:

They are not victims and they are not helpless – so many work hard to put food on the table, get a good education and build a better life. They have agency as individuals and as members of their community and they have a voice that should be heard.

Three days into lockdown, resident Najat [Mussa \(2020\)](#) wrote in *The Age* newspaper:

Our family of four has received one small box containing food and apart from the packet of Weetbix and jar of jam, every other item had passed its expiry date. We have not had a visit from medical professionals and are still awaiting to be tested... So far the only direct communication we have received from the government has been via police officers.

Mussa said that for a community that lived through an extensive history of discriminatory policing, the presence of such a large number of armed police led to stress and anxiety.

Seventeen-year-old Yaqub Hashi told *The Australian* (cited in [Varga, 2020](#)) about what it was like to be locked in the three-bedroom home he shares with his parents and six siblings. He is the child of Somali refugees and has lived all his life in the public housing tower in North Melbourne. He said he could hear his neighbours cry out during the night. He heard cries of 'let me out', 'let us out' and expressed concern about his elderly neighbour and could not even check on him.

Detention order notices were distributed to tenants. 'I just feel like we're being treated like criminals', said Shan Berih (cited in [Briggs, 2020](#)). He told The Australian Broadcasting Corporation that it was

intimidating to come home and see police everywhere, stating that it was intense, and people were panicking. Another resident expressed the view that: ‘We do not need 500 officers guarding the nine towers. We need nurses, we need counsellors, we need interpreters’ (cited in Briggs, 2020).

One of the key concerns were the absence of a social work presence, and the limited communication with community leaders. In a commentary piece in *The Guardian*, resident Hiba Shanino (2020) stated:

You would think that we would have social workers, or medical practitioners, or youth workers, or counsellors, or even volunteers... but it is actually authority... a lot of these people, they come from war torn countries and authorities in these countries are seen as a threat, so this is triggering for a lot of people in our community.

This lack of engagement with social workers and other supports was elucidated by others, including journalists Wahlquist and Simons (2020), who stated:

... no social workers or other support services were observed outside the tower blocks in Flemington on Saturday night – only armed police officers wearing gloves and face masks.

An upside of the lockdown was that it prompted people from public housing flats to join local council elections, with one declaring ‘I have a dream to be prime minister one day’ (cited in Button and Szego, 2020). Another, Hamid Ali, joined a political party, telling journalist Julie Szego (2020) that he wanted to be ‘inside the tent’.

Findings and themes

From the three approaches adopted in our article, we inductively extrapolated three key themes in our analysis, which pointed to ways that social work can critically engage with: the need for representation and employment of CALD social workers and community workers in government; restoring human rights to those experiencing state sanctioned violence and the application of critical multicultural social work practice.

Representation and employment of CALD social workers and community workers

A key issue emerging from this research is the urgency of employing community members—to give them a voice in services and work in the community. Key agencies like the DFFH are obligated to employ CALD workers at all levels of service delivery and policy making. The future workforce relies on the inclusion of migrant students in social

work and community courses. As Ring noted, ‘we need more students in higher education and more voices from CALD students’. Instead of being approached as a strong community that featured proactive advocacy, residents were treated with prejudice and distrust ([Women’s Health West, 2020](#)). From Ring’s narrative, we can see that residents had their trust in authorities shattered due to the absence of culturally appropriate communication strategies.

Exercise was only permitted in a fenced off enclosure causing great hardship to families, and for people in insecure work who could no longer access their income, anxiety levels were high. For children and young people in educational facilities, the disruption was dire, with many families not having access to adequate computer and internet facilities or spaces for remote learning. The lived experiences of those affected are cumulative and community legal centres have spoken publicly about previous targeting of young people by police, and these actions have further impacted police/community relationships. There was evidence of increased racism with One Nation politician, Pauline Hanson, labelling those in the flats as drug addicts and alcoholics who do not speak English, despite many not drinking alcohol at all due to their faith ([Knaus, 2020](#)). The multi-faceted impact of the pandemic on the social housing residents resulting in diminishment of trust between residents and authorities may have been alleviated by partnerships with social and community workers and employment opportunities.

Restoring human rights to those experiencing state-sanctioned violence

The deployment of police as first responders to the flats in the lockdown alarmed many working in the social work and community sector. Our inquiry reveals that the security of residents turned to insecurity and oppression with the deployment of police authorities placing residents under compulsory house arrest. The support needs of those living in the flats are well known to local services and community groups, and social workers. Whilst we recognise that COVID-19 resulted in some urgency for public policy responses, excessively harsh responses by government and the police endanger existing relationships that may continue after the pandemic is over, an aspect that requires ongoing research.

In respect to communication issues, [Women’s Health West \(2020\)](#) documented resident’s narratives that ‘no one has knocked on the door to explain why this is happening...or why there’s no social workers, nothing’. Resources were channelled into security but not support mechanisms or basic supplies. [Women’s Health West \(2020\)](#) maintains that a public health crisis is best addressed with health, welfare and

community-based responses. Consistent with Ring's assertions, their report says that trust, goodwill and two-way communication are vitally important. As one resident says, 'there were police everywhere. There were no interpreters, no social workers, no medical workers, just lots of police' (Shanino, 2020).

Human rights and community development-oriented approaches to social work critique top-down impositions and affirm collaboration and participatory democracy. Critical social work has engaged with these issues and identified transformative practice across the following four domains of service provision: critical reflexive interrogation; responsiveness; rights-based advocacy; and co-production (Williams and Graham, 2016). It is this unconditional hospitality that must be embedded.

Critical multicultural social work practice

Critical multicultural practice in social work requires challenging dominant discourses and incorporating contemporary key learnings from international practice. One of the lessons critical race theory has taught us is that this requires engagement with communities, and that it is not the refugees and migrants that are the problem but the systems and structures that exclude them. Our study aimed to examine the provision of services from the perspective of those communities and community leaders affected. The project investigated and highlighted who was responding to this crisis, and the role critical social work can play in ameliorating top-down policy that can threaten community cohesion and trust.

As commented earlier in the article, there is a balance between vulnerability and agency. Although we use the term vulnerability to denote precarity, we are conscious that calling people vulnerable can be patronising. As the narratives reveal, social housing is full of resourceful people who can give us solutions to complex problems. 'They' are not the problem to be solved, and social housing estates are filled with strong people across age and ethnicity spectrums. Critical social workers and community workers know that top-down approaches that exclude those affected are incapable of working. Drawing on people strengths and not seeing them as deficits is a principle that should prevail. According to Taylor (2013), home for tenants in social housing gives this diverse community a sense of belonging and rights entitlement, and a strong voice to be heard.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we return to Derrida, and specifically Westoby's (2021) deliberations that see social work as an activist project, which melds

with our premise that social work is inherently political. For Westoby (2021), a Derridean take on the ethic of learning implies disrupting the institutions of social work, including universities, and partnering with those who are oppressed and marginalised. As critical social work educators, community workers and social workers on the frontline, we have much to contribute to this space as we continue to work in partnership with diverse newly arrived and long-established communities.

A key learning from the research findings is to seek achievable ways of implementing measures that align with critical social work perspectives. These include adhering to human rights, validating grass roots advocacy and influencing policy and practice through the voices of diverse and resourceful communities. At a practical level, attention to the labour market is immediately achievable, for as Ring Mayar told us, and echoed by other residents, government needs a bridge with CALD communities, and employment is that bridge. Employing people from African and other emerging communities would give the government quick access to culturally appropriate and community-driven crisis responses, well into the future. We reiterate our central argument that responses to crises should be led by the wisdom of affected communities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the organisation Africause for inviting us to their online community leadership event. We also wish to thank the residents of social housing in central Melbourne for sharing their stories and finally we thank our social work colleagues at the Australian and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWER) for their feedback on our presentation at the 2020 Symposium. Ethics approval was obtained by Deakin University—HEAG-H 170-2020

Funding

None received.

Conflict of interest statement. The authors have no conflicts of interest to report with respect to the publication of this article.

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