CHAPTER 20

Hearing Indigenous and local voices in mainstream social work

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Social work, like ‘sailing, gardening, politics and poetry, law and ethnography are crafts of place: they work by the light of local knowledge’ (Geertz, 1983, p. 67).

In this concluding chapter we attempt to counter misconceptions about the silencing of local and Indigenous voices in mainstream social work. Within the mainstream literature notions of difference or diversity have been dealt with in a variety of ways. As we showed in the Introduction, this has spawned several bodies of knowledge or parallel discourses (see Table 1) relating to inter alia crosscultural and anti-oppressive social work practice. Culturally and racially sensitive practice models, then, form part of social work’s attempt to deal with ‘difference’. Critical theorists have been quick to point out the way in which

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minority and Indigenous voices have been silenced within this dominant social work discourse.

We argued in Chapter 1 that globalizing and universalizing forces continue the profession’s colonizing tradition by which western social work models have supplanted local, Indigenous approaches and practices and argue that these trends are re-igniting resistance. At the same time, in those contexts where social workers and local or Indigenous communities have been interacting and working in close proximity with one another, their voices are finding some expression in the mainstream literature, notably in the areas of spirituality and environmental social work. In these contexts, this discourse has progressed beyond multiculturalism, cultural sensitivity, and anti-oppressive practices to embrace Indigenous and non-western thinking and practices. The examples herein presented—from Australia, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Tonga, China, Malaysia, Israel, India, and Africa—provide evidence of this. They highlight the importance of culture and local knowledge in the development of genuine and authentic social work practices in these diverse contexts.

Like Nimmagadda and Martell (see Chapter 11) we want to promote the fact that western social workers have as much to learn from Indigenous social workers and social workers from nonwestern cultures, as they have to learn from other western social workers. Thus, for example, the lessons learned in Indigenous contexts have application in western contexts as well, especially in situations in which social workers are dealing with diversity. We want to address the imbalance in the literature on crossculturalism that is largely directed towards western social workers practising within culturally diverse client communities in western contexts where it embraces many of the ideas of antiracist and anti-
oppressive practice. In fact, this literature tends to conflate discussions of race and culture and all forms of discrimination and to subsume it under critically constructed anti-oppressive practice theory. This is not surprising given that most Indigenous groups are minority populations (with few exceptions, for example, black majority South Africans under apartheid) who have historically experienced oppression from colonizing nations that have undermined their efforts at self-government and, therefore self-determination.

While there is much of value in the crosscultural literature, there is also much to be gained from the Indigenous and international social work literature. If there were to be a single perspective emanating from this book, it would be an appeal for culturally relevant social work and for social workers around the world to be knowledgeable of experiences from ‘other’ international contexts. Social workers have much to learn from one another’s work and each has implications for the other (Gray & Fook, 2004; Gray, 2005). In this vein, when reading and reflecting on the Indigenous and international social work literature, the central question becomes what might we learn about the cultures of Indigenous and nonwestern peoples that might inform mainstream culturally relevant social work practice? Being mindful of our international audience, we believe that the issues raised herein should be of concern to all social workers everywhere, practitioners, researchers, and educators alike.

Against this broader political reality, the literature on spirituality and environmental social work—aka ‘green’ or ‘ecosocial work’—articulates and privileges local and Indigenous cultures, to use anti-oppressive terminology, but more importantly it is a countermovement to the universalizing movement in social work and beyond and questions the theory of globalization. Spirituality, a path that seeks greater connection to larger
purposes and meaning, celebrates diversity and promotes inclusion. Ecosocial work draws on a deep ecological awareness of our relationship with nature and makes us acutely aware of the importance of protecting and sustaining the natural environment in everyone’s interests. It needs to be distinguished from ecological social work, which tends to take an anthropocentric stance focusing on the social environment from the point of view of human or individual interests (Besthorn, 1997; Coates, 2003).

The growing acceptance and recognition of spirituality and ecology with their emphasis on alternative worldviews have brought forth a welcoming and inclusive context enabling the celebration of diversity, and the sharing of knowledge. The expanded understanding of person in environment to include an awareness of our interdependence and relatedness to the Earth, the importance of place, and the openness to more traditional and Indigenous forms of healing and helping offers a refreshing openness as they start from a set of values and beliefs which are similar to many traditional and Indigenous helping approaches. It creates opportunities for social work to make culture an implicit part of professional education and practice and encourages multiple diverse interventions rather than a simplified, modern, universal, or homogenized technology. We are mindful that to local and Indigenous Peoples around the world, globalization—McDonaldization or the trend to promote social work as a homogenized global product—is just a new form of colonialism.

How culturally relevant practice fits with cultural competence

As already outlined, generally the literature on crosscultural practice in social work flows from the idea that there is a particular body of cultural knowledge, values and skills, and
‘layers of understanding’ (Devore & Schlesinger, 1995, p. 904-905) which the social worker can and must uncover or master (Clark, 2000; Lum, 1999; Weaver, 1998, 1999, 2000) so as to implement ‘culturally appropriate interventions’ (Boyle & Springer, 2001, p. 56). Within this literature, the development of ‘cultural competence’, and of ‘practice guidelines’, is said to aid the process of working across diverse cultures as well as ‘transactional learning’ (Miller, 1998) where the focus is on understanding other perspectives and cultures. Lum (1999) refers to the bringing together of culturally specific knowledge, values, and skills as ‘bicultural integration’ (p. 3)—presumably those of the social worker and client from another culture.

While they are, for the most part, complementary, there are a number of important differences among international, Indigenous, and crosscultural social work literatures. First, the crosscultural literature is aimed mainly at western social workers in western contexts working with people of a different culture. The social worker’s ‘western’ culture is seldom the object of analysis or learning and social work itself is not questioned as a ‘cultural construction’. However, the Indigenous social work literature, and much international literature, regards western social work practice more critically as its main concern is not professional intervention but culturally appropriate helping embedded in local cultures within particular local practice contexts. As such, culturally appropriate practice is a grounded approach where the point of reference is the local context and cultural practices. The main issue for these diverse contexts is the relevance of western social work models that have been or are being imposed on local contexts by outsiders who, in the process, overlook local cultures (Gray, 2005). As we have seen, a constant theme in the Indigenous social work literature and nonwestern contexts—as shown throughout this book—is
overcoming western hegemony and searching for authentic, culturally relevant social work practices. Western social work may or may not fit, so its utility must be questioned and what does not fit or prove useful discarded.

At the same time, it is important when reflecting on Indigenous and local cultures and practices not to romanticize the ‘traditional’ but to question these in relation to the acceptable universals in social work, of which there are few, such as the pursuit of human rights and social justice (Gray & Fook, 2004; Gray, 2005). As Wiredu (1980) points out, when writing about African culture, modernization and development bring with them a scientific and systematic approach to culture, which is not only about the transfer of technology. In applying scientific thinking to Indigenous cultures, or any other culture, the resultant philosophy of practice must be justified on rational grounds for the continuance of particular cultural practices, both in western and Indigenous contexts. For example, too often belief in the supernatural is attributed to prescientific traditional cultures when, if one were to explore such practices further, one would find more witches in Europe than in Africa, though the myth is perpetuated that traditional Indigenous and local cultures are the main purveyors of supernatural practices.

Second, in all contexts questions arise about outmoded customs or cultural practices. The difference in western contexts is that Indigenous and nonwestern cultures are expected to fit in with mainstream culture in the implicit belief that western beliefs and practices are superior to traditional ones. Crucial here is the definition of ‘culture’ being used. Culture is a flexible concept and the process of distinguishing between those aspects of culture worthy of being preserved from those which need to be abandoned is continual in response to historical, social, economic, and political changes in the broader society (Dean,
2001). Critical evaluation of traditional philosophies is needed as much as critical evaluation of western thinking, such as the consequences of science and progress and the devastation of the environment. In truth, there is no such thing as pure culture in Indigenous or western contexts and this is the main weakness of the crosscultural literature which implies that culture is a static entity such that one can learn about another’s culture and practice in a culturally appropriate manner—the culturally appropriate manner being adopting or, at least, accepting the culture of the other uncritically (see Sin, Chapter 13).

The difference in many local and Indigenous contexts is that many of these societies are in transition from the traditional to the modern and the “process of modernisation entails changes not only in the physical environment but also in the mental outlook of … people(s), manifested both in their explicit beliefs and in their customs and their ordinary daily habits and pursuits” (Wiredu, 1980, p. x). Such changes are slow and people do not easily discard their beliefs merely because they have migrated to new places. Thus these issues are important for social workers everywhere, whether they are working with immigrants and refugees in post-industrial societies or with First Nations people in Gabarone, Botswana, Osh Kosh, Wisconsin or Nome, Alaska, as examples.

Third, while cultural identities might be taken for granted in western cultures, often local and Indigenous people are seeking to reclaim and preserve the best parts of their culture, which is why it is important to find ways to foster development and technological progress so that the best of local culture is preserved (Wiredu, 1980). We have much to learn from Indigenous cultures and one area where this is occurring is in the literature on spirituality and ecosocial work (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006).
Fourth, the crosscultural literature is often silent on the question of language. Language is central to culture as it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to preserve one’s culture without retaining one’s language. Languages contain concepts, beliefs, and ways of understanding that convey particular Indigenous worldviews; the loss of language is the loss of a foundation for a culture, and this is particularly applicable to Indigenous Peoples (see Chapter 4 and the Postscript). This is one of the reasons why language is highlighted in the postmodernist discourse, and why postmodernists react to the homogenizing effects of universalization. For example, with the dominance of English in global cultural products, local languages—the principal tools of cultural expression—acquire the image of inferiority. More importantly, however, languages are being lost: “an indigenous language disappears every two weeks. It is estimated that by the end of the 21st century, 5,500 of the current 6,000 languages now spoken will simply be as dead as Ancient Greek and Latin” (Sardar & Wyn Davies, 2002, p. 126). There are words, terms, and phrases not available in English that are being lost forever and real voices in real languages are being threatened. Thus even when we hear Indigenous people speaking, it is almost always in a voice, in a language, that is not their own. The loss of language is one of the most pervasively damaging effects of globalization and imperialism. Those whose ancestors spoke in different and dying languages and who had concepts and spiritual impulses not amenable to translation, feel cut off from ‘their own kind’ when their Indigenous language is lost.

Against this backdrop, we can look critically at social work’s enchantment with universal definitions and global standards. We can examine the merits of universalizing trends such as these in light of social work’s colonial past and criticisms of its cultural
imperialism (Gray & Fook, 2004; Midgley, 1981; Chapter 2). We can be sensitive to Indigenous concerns with the perpetuation of colonialism through economic globalization given the fact that in much of the less developed ‘Third World’ economic indebtedness has supplanted political subordination. In developed ‘First World’ contexts the move to global standards makes perfect sense in that it is consistent with social work’s universalizing and globalizing aims to make its skills transferable across diverse countries and cultural contexts. Nevertheless it shows lack of sensitivity to more pressing concerns in local and Indigenous contexts, such as the preservation of language and the reclamation of the best in their culture against the onslaught of the culturally homogenizing effects of globalization. So while the establishment of national professional standards—competencies—in many countries like Canada, South Africa, and Australia (see Journal of Social Work Education, 23(5)) might be appropriate as social work and most other forms of knowledge become commodities, there are life and death issues to be dealt with as a consequence of globalization in Indigenous contexts. A profession so avowedly committed to human rights and social justice cannot overlook these issues.

The Indigenous and international social work literature also enables us to take a more critical look at notions of cultural competence and the idea that one can become competent in the culture of another. Cultural competence is a modernist idea that is “consistent with the belief that knowledge brings control and effectiveness, and, that this is an ideal to be achieved above all else” (Dean, 2001, p. 624). Thus it treats “cultural categories or groups as … static and monolithic with defining characteristics that endure over time and in different contexts (and) … involves learning about the history and shared characteristics of different groups … using this knowledge to create bridges and increase
understanding with individual clients and families” (Dean, 2001, p. 625). More contemporary postmodern views see understanding of culture as individually and socially constructed, as “always contextual, emergent, improvisational, transformational, and political” (Laird, in Dean 2001, p. 625; see also Dean, 2001; Fook, 2002); as a dynamic, living thing, constantly being moulded and shaped by diverse influences at play at any one time, which moulds and shapes us as we attempt to understand it (Gray & Allegritti, 2003). Hence postmodernists question the notion that social workers can become competent at something as complex as another’s culture. The Indigenous social work literature shows how much a person’s identity is linked to their culture and how difficult it is to understand culture from the outside. Culture is not something social workers can put on and take off like a cloak. We are embedded in our culture and its rituals, practices, and ways of doing things. Hence Laird’s (1998) observation that we in the global north ought to shift the focus of our discussions on cultural differences to ourselves and find ways to better understand our own culture so as to make us more sensitive to others’ cultures. The best mainstream social workers can do is to accept our lack of competence in crosscultural matters and realize that working across cultures is not so much about ‘knowledge’ as about ‘understanding’ (Dean, 2001, p. 624).

With “lack of competence” as the focus, a different view of practicing across cultures emerges. The client is the “expert” and the clinician is in a position of seeking knowledge and trying to understand what life is like for the client. There is no thought of competence—instead one thinks of gaining understanding (always partial) of a phenomenon that is evolving and changing (Dean, 2001, p. 624).

Thus the Indigenous and international social work literature teaches us that it is wise to maintain a healthy scepticism to modernist ideas like cultural competence since it is questionable to assume that “one can become competent at the culture of another” (Dean,
2001, p. 623) since it is not easy to “comprehend the perspective of … others differently located” (Young, 1999, p. 127). The postmodern focus on ‘the lack of competence’ rather than the possibility of cultural competence is a sociologically realistic and fruitful position because it shows that one way of gaining an understanding of the other’s culture comes about through the process of communication since “understanding comes, if it comes at all, only by engaging in a volley of practical dialogue” (Tully, 1995, p. 133). The process of cultural understanding is ongoing and never complete. It proceeds in stages. As we gain an understanding of the other’s culture it changes our previous ideas and interpretation, and we redefine our knowledge accordingly. As our understanding changes through crosscultural or intercultural interaction, communication or dialogue, we then strive to gain further knowledge about the other’s culture. It is this emphasis on dialogue, discussion, and communication that directs our attention to the fact that our interactions are intercultural, transcultural, or crosscultural, whichever term one prefers. There is an ongoing international debate about intercultural or crosscultural communication which examines what happens in the process of talking to the cultural other (Benhabib, 2002; Habermas, 1994; Taylor, 1994; Tully, 1995; Young, 1999).

Another lesson from this literature is that culture is not homogeneous, neither is it internally consistent. In fact, ‘a culture’ is always made up of a number of cultures because historically cultures have not existed alone or in isolation. In many Indigenous communities, western culture has been historically imposed through colonization and imperialism. Since the beginning of history people from different cultures have interacted in a voluntary capacity. They have inter alia exchanged goods, intermarried, fled from religious or political persecution or poverty, and emigrated. In the process, there has been a
greater blending of cultures than national histories have made out. This is the strength of the postmodernist position. It has discredited the Enlightenment notion of culture and the view that individuals are located “in independent, closed and homo-geneous” (Tully, 1995, p. 14) cultures and societies. It has introduced the idea that individuals are members of cultures that are ‘densely interdependent’ and which overlap, interact and are negotiated (Tully, 1995, p. 10-11).

The crosscultural literature tends to look for congruencies, commonalities, and similarities rather than to recognize that intercultural interaction, even in professional settings, requires that we leave behind our cultural comfort zones, listen to the different ways, philosophies, and practices of the cultural other and change and expand our established views on their cultures and, most importantly, keep an open mind (as Gair shows in Chapter 17). One of the starting points in discussing culture from a contemporary, postmodernist position is to recognize that culture is a contested concept or, as Benhabib (2002) points out, “cultures are constituted through contested practices” (p. viii).

**Indigenous social work, ecology, and spirituality**

The growing acceptance of Indigenous social work has arisen, in part at least, as a consequence of providing services to increasing numbers of immigrants from nonwestern countries, the recognition of the value of alternative worldviews, the development of Indigenous social work literature, the resurgence of interest in spirituality, and growing awareness about environmental degradation. This has been a complex, rather than a linear, process. Recent decades have witnessed the systemic challenge to the social order. This period has seen the intensification of economic globalization, the end of the ‘cold war’,
liberation struggles in many countries, the threat to human wellbeing due to human initiated environmental problems, a quest for economic domination by the world’s most militaristic country, terrorism, and the search for security that accompanies such massive changes. In this period of rapid change, which to some appears as chaos, old paradigms, most notably modernism, have been challenged as the guidelines they provide are no longer effective (see Berry, 1999). As a consequence, we are witnessing large numbers of people, on all parts of the planet, facing great uncertainty and returning to reactionary beliefs—for example, fundamentalist Islam in the Middle-East and evangelical Christianity in the West. This divide is appearing within professions and academic disciplines, as well as in faith traditions.

However, we have been witness also to the groundswell of social movements that, taken together, argue for significant changes to the current structure of society, for example, movements such as holistic medicine; antinuclear, peace, and disarmament; sustainability; process theology; voluntary simplicity; ecofeminism; and goddess worship (Capra, 1982; Elgin, 1993; Sahtouris, 1989; Swimme, 1998; Swimme & Berry, 1992; Trainer, n.d.). These alternative perspectives have been reinforced by scientific discoveries, like quantum mechanics and evolution, which have shifted our understanding of nature and humanity’s relation to it. For example, the concept of nature is shifting from an unchanging mechanistic—dead—universe, to an unfolding, organismic, creative cosmos in which the human can play a significant role. While postmodernism helps to understand this surge to a ‘multiverse’ of perspectives in which alternative points of view are debated, it will not solve the problems of fragmentation and domination inherent in modernism (see Coates, 2003). Postmodernism served to expose the ‘soft under belly’ of modernism by challenging
universalisms, focusing on the social construction of knowledge, and drawing attention to
the inherent allocation of power that flows from privilege. The challenge to universalism
made it possible for the voices of the marginalized to be heard.

The discomfort that the postmodern deconstruction created has contributed to the
questioning of foundational assumptions, and the renewal of interest in the search for
meaning. The resurgence of interest in spirituality and ecology over the past two decades
has arisen, in part at least, to meet this need. It is a consequence of the breakdown of
security that has resulted from postmodernism and other challenges, such as
postmodernism’s critique of metanarratives, the recognition of marginalized voices, the
critique of colonialism, the ascent of anti-oppressive practices, environmental degradation,
and the rise of terrorism. This quest for meaning has led to a search for alternatives to
modernism’s values and beliefs. It is this quest that has resulted in many scholars—such as
Adams (1993), Berry (1999) and Naess (1989)—recognizing the important contribution of
traditional and Indigenous beliefs and values.

The environmental movement, with its search for sustainable practices, has
gradually gained strength with increasing attention to the scientific evidence indicative of
the desecration that human activities, as well as industrial and technological progress and
social development, have wrought upon the Earth (see Gore, 2006). The search for the
causes of environmental destruction has led to a critique of the fundamental assumptions of
modern society (Adams, 1993; Berry, 1999; Coates, 2003; Spretnak, 1997). These critiques
point to the need for a new foundation of beliefs and values, a new paradigm to guide
human activity and bring it into harmony with the life processes of the Earth. Thus
connectedness and interdependence, harmony with nature, creative unfolding came forth to
replace the dualism, domination, and determinism of modernism (Coates, 2003). These values are consistent with traditional and Indigenous beliefs and values (see for example, Four Worlds Development Project, 1982; Hart, 2002) that place spirituality at the centre of life. While some schools of thought have come to similar conclusions from different paths, for example ecofeminism and deep ecology, some writers have gone so far as to argue that Indigenous beliefs can guide humanity (Berry, 1997). As a result, Indigenous beliefs and values, in particular, have gained recognition and credibility among the worldviews that provide a reconceptualization of the universe and humanity’s relationship to it.

In social work this has opened avenues of acceptance toward Indigenous and local approaches to helping along with increasing recognition of the need for alternatives to economic and cultural globalization, like local currencies, community supported agriculture, ‘right sized’ organizations, and ecoregionalism. This is consistent with the centrality of diversity inherent in alternative cosmologies. For social work this can lead to the valuing of diversity and the need to ensure that services are culturally relevant. Such changes can push social work beyond technology transfer and cultural sensitivity, toward the integration of social work principles with Indigenous beliefs, values and rituals, and the corresponding adaptation of its technologies. In Canada, for example, this is reflected in the development of social work programs that are not only dedicated to First Nations students and services, but also focused on the delivery of services within First Nation communities (see Chapters 18 and 19). There, and elsewhere, as the chapters in this book show, education no longer attempts only to present dominant social work theories and interventions and then discuss how these may be relevant. The focus has shifted to an identification of needs and the application of traditional or Indigenous methods of healing
(see Chapters 10, 17 and 18). Greater attention is being given to such traditional practices as healing circles, smudging, sweat lodges, and spirit quests, for example. Provincial laws must still be adhered to, and interventions more traditional to social work are adapted when appropriate, but the focus of education for Indigenous social work has shifted. Themes of harmony, balance, connectedness, and sufficiency in Indigenous social work literature, as well as the literature on spirituality and ecosocial work, have come to replace exploitation and progress, economism, individualism, and consumerism. The case studies in this book show how these Indigenous themes are entering mainstream social work discourse.

Making social work practice authentic to local culture: Some case examples

There is widespread acknowledgement in the social work literature—from both the western and nonwestern worlds—that social work as a profession is a product of culture and that culture plays a critical part in its construction. The discovery—or rediscovery—of the diversity and uniqueness of local cultures has led some academics and practitioners to question the relevance of applying western models of social work practice to nonwestern contexts. Many of the examples presented herein follow from the prior work of our contributors, for example Nimmagadda and Cowger’s (1999) qualitative research with Indian social work practitioners in an alcohol treatment centre in India revealed that these social workers had “distinctive ideas about advice giving, family intervention, confrontation and reassurance that were at variance with western models of practice and practice behaviours” (Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999, p. 274). Many nonwestern cultures struggle with the western notions of advice giving and self-determination. Nimmagadda and Cowger found that advice giving was an effective social work strategy used in this
context because first and foremost clients expected it. In addition, being more directive also worked in practice due to its alignment with local cultural norms which emphasized self-control and maintaining harmony. Likewise Ling (2003) in Sarawak, Malaysia found that advice giving was a common strategy used in local helping practices, which minimizes problems, avoids conflicts, and emphasizes the local cultural values of harmony and stability. Similarly, Cheung and Liu (2004) found that a more directive approach was used by Chinese social workers as clients saw them as having both authority and knowledge and came to them for advice and direction with their problems (p. 121). This approach was applicable due to cultural norms regarding the way in which Chinese people were taught to respect authority and the fact that individuals were not encouraged to make decisions by themselves. It should be noted that in these three contexts authority is not associated with the western concept of powerlessness, but rather authority is enacted through status, rights, and responsibilities as deemed by dharma or the social order. In the examples from India, Malaysia, and China, social work practice can be viewed as part of dharma, working with and through social norms relating to cultural stability and harmony. The involvement of family and community members, or naturally occurring support networks, encourages interdependency and harmony. Thus even though the individual may be the focus of help, the family or community are seen to be intrinsically connected to clients and involved in the helping process either directly or indirectly. This is in line with a culturally relevant Indian worldview that emphasizes communal responsibilities and the interconnectedness of people. A similar worldview is found among Indigenous Australians (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; Collard, Crowe, Harries & Taylor, 1994; Thorpe, 1997).
Among First Nation groups in Canada, Hart (2002) has articulated an Aboriginal approach to helping which incorporates many elements of an Aboriginal worldview and its assumptions about the nature of helping and ‘holistic wellness’—wellness in all aspects of life: Physical, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive—based on connection, cooperation, collective responsibility, relationship, balance, and harmony (see Chapter 10). Mafile’o (2004) writes of similar values—fakefekau’aki (connecting) and fakatokilalo (humility)—in Tongan social work practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand (see Chapter 9). Tongan society is hierarchical and relationships are not individualized but are governed by one’s social position and roles in a network of connections. Similarities to the use of connecting and humility can be found in social work practices in Indigenous Australia, India, Māori/New Zealand, Hawaii, Malaysia, and Samoa. Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) conducted qualitative research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers in Australia and found that the helping relationship and the workers’ credibility were enhanced when social workers used self-disclosure during the introduction process, identifying birthplace and kinship ties, shared personal stories and life experiences. The personal nature of the helping relationship was also a theme in Nimmagadda and Cowger’s (1999) work in India.

The same is true of Hawaiian culture where an individual is defined in the context of relationships with family, community, the land, and the spiritual realm. Iaulima (cooperation) and kokua (helpfulness) were seen as far more important to harmony and lokahi (unity) than self-satisfaction or meeting one’s own needs (Ewalt & Makuau, 1995). Similarly, writing from earlier research in Malaysia, Hawa Ali (1991) describes the family unit as the foundational social caring system where gotong-royong (mutual help) and kerjasama (cooperation) keep the community unified. In Samoan culture sharing and
reciprocity are pivotal. In short, many Indigenous cultures emphasize the value of the collective over the individual and the strengthening of group cohesiveness and stability as an integral part of life. Individuals are characterized by social relationships and a shared identity that comes from “sharing food, water, land, spirits, knowledge, work and social activities” (Linnekin & Poyer, 1990, p. 8).

So what might mainstream social work learn from local and Indigenous cultures?

In these case examples, and others presented throughout this book, it can be seen that interventions into nonwestern cultures based on concepts like individualism, objectivity, and professional distance inherent in western conceptualizations of social work practice would not be as effective and may even be alienating. While these case examples provide us with demonstrations of genuine, authentic social work practice in that the cultural themes underlying these approaches are compatible with the profession’s core values of respect and social justice, they are simultaneously grounded in the beliefs of local people. There is thus a mutuality of worldviews and the possibility of some aspects of a universal social work emerging, however, to address our question posed at the outset, we end with an enunciation of some important aspects of these local cultures that can enrich mainstream culturally relevant social work practice and thus contribute to its universality:

- Indigenous approaches remind us of our humanistic goals and the importance, first and foremost, of connecting with the client. While mainstream social work is replete with models for engaging with clients, for enhancing communication processes, and for developing a healthy helping relationship, the most important aspects of connecting
with others is grounded in the everyday lives of our clients. If we can reach clients where they eat, live, and play, if we can encounter them in the systems that are meaningful to them and understand the relevance of their cultural beliefs and practices, then our practice be relevant to their needs.

- **Indigenous worldviews strengthen and enrich social work knowledge and practice.** They remind us that there are many ways of knowing, that science too has limitations, and that culture need not be accepted uncritically. These alternative voices draw our attention to our common humanity, to the importance of family and community, to the importance of celebration and ritual, and to the values of humility and compassion. These cultural practices provide some measure of certainty in an otherwise uncertain world.

- **Indigenous and local thinkers question the universality of social work knowledge** but leave open the possibility for shared values and discourses provided that mainstream social work can open itself up to the lessons local cultures have to offer. They remind us not to accept uncritically the idea that western social work has universally relevant methodologies, that universal standards are desirable, and that an international professional identity for social work will necessarily be valued in nonwestern countries and contexts. When people think that ideas are being imposed on them without regard for their culture, they will resist, challenging such cultural imperialism. We learn too that there is a need to break free of western conceptions so that people can recover their own cultural identity (Wiredu, 1980). Where else can they find it than in the rediscovery of ‘old’ Indigenous ways of knowing and helping grounded in the worldviews and cultures of local contexts? Sifting through this and working out what
fits the transition from traditional to modern is a process from which a new culture emerges, one which is distinctly African or Chinese or Indian or Hawaiian or Malaysian …

- **Nonwestern cultures challenge the dualistic notions of western thinking.** Kissman and Maurer (2002) remind us that:

  Eastern and Western healing practices are not opposites but share common attributes … Wellness is enhanced by the emphasis on humility, gratitude, connectedness with self and others, present-moment awareness, sharing and listening to stories … the quieting of the mind to cope with stress and worries, speaking to and listening to a higher power and bridging the gap between mind and body (p. 35-36).

  Much of this thinking is holistic, rooted in place, in harmony with nature, and in preserving the wellbeing of all life forms. Indigenous approaches remind us of the importance of context.

- **Local approaches demonstrate the importance of valuing both western and nonwestern knowledge** yet of accepting neither uncritically. Concrete practice examples, like those herein presented, release local and Indigenous ways of knowing from preconceptions that they are ‘exotic’ or romantic. They remind us that we are all grappling with the same questions about the meaning of suffering and hardship. Generally nonwestern peoples, particularly from India and certain parts of Asia, may be more accepting of hardship since they take the view that many life events are subject to external control of a transcendental nature. For example, while clients in India may complain about fate (*karma*), they can also ascribe their problems to it, externalizing the causes of their problems as we do in narrative therapy in western social work. Similarly the belief in fate also has positive outcomes as it helps clients to accept their problems with equanimity.
- Indigenous cultures remind us that self-fulfilment can only be realized in group fulfilment. They help us counter the worst consequences of individualism and draw attention back to the importance of family, of kin and social networks, and of community.

In the case examples presented throughout this book, social work practice can be seen to be taking on a distinctive character wherein Indigenous ways are providing mainstream western social work with new and innovative approaches. In short, there is much for western social work to learn from Indigenous helping principles and methods.

In conclusion, there are differences and similarities in the ways in which notions of culture are used in the crosscultural, international, and Indigenous literature pointing to the main issues each seeks to address. These include sensitivities in the Indigenous social work literature towards universalizing and globalizing forces which continue the colonization process, and claims in the crosscultural and anti-oppressive practice literature that mainstream social work silences ‘other’ voices. We contend that ‘alternate’ voices are finding expression through the literature on spirituality and environmental or ecosocial work noting that in some contexts where social workers and Indigenous communities have been interacting their discourse has progressed beyond multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity to embrace Indigenous thinking in mainstream practice (Coates et al, 2006). In other words, they have proceeded beyond an awareness of culture to making culture explicit in their education and practice. Through case examples, we can draw attention to ways in which Indigenous social work enriches mainstream understanding of culture and how lessons from Indigenous contexts can inform culturally relevant practice. Our aim is to open up these issues, not to prescribe practice or develop models. They offer insights that
can shift our thinking on some very important issues in social work about which all social workers should be aware.