A Social Justice Lens to Examine Refugee Populations Affected by Disasters

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ABSTRACT

The pedagogical implications of encouraging social work students to consider the intersections of social justice with communities affected by disasters are considerable. This focus is key as disasters can impact upon vulnerable groups in disproportionate ways. The Canterbury earthquakes, which have been characterised by four major events and thousands of subsequent aftershocks, provide a setting to examine a number of sensitising questions that can help orient social work students to a social justice frame. This paper presents reflections on conducting research with resettled refugee groups living in Christchurch to demonstrate how a social justice model can be pedagogically applied in disaster contexts. Using Finn and Jacobson's "just practice" model, it breaks down the complexities of social justice into five workable components that students could use to critically envisage and constructively respond to a disaster event involving culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Keywords: *Disasters; Social justice; Refugees; Social work education*

Disasters are events that cause significant damage and disruption that overwhelm the affected population's capacities to respond effectively. Whether these events are human-induced – (as in the case of wars, and industrial catastrophes) or natural hazards (earthquakes, floods and famines) – there is a human element that makes a major negative event into a disaster. Within a particular locality the lived experience of a disaster, however, varies. This paper presents reflections from the process of conducting a two-year research project with refugee-background communities living in Christchurch to look at the pedagogical implications of incorporating a disaster-informed curriculum. Through using Finn and Jacobson's (2003) "just practice" model, which breaks social justice into five distinct, but interrelated, components, this paper considers how a social justice lens as defined by this model can help students to consider the sensitising questions (Blumer, 1969) that relate to disaster and diversity. This paper first presents key considerations concerning the experience of forced migration and resettlement to then examine how disasters can have variable impacts on particular groups. The social justice concepts from the Finn and Jacobsen (2003) model are briefly summarised and then specifically applied to the experience of conducting fieldwork with refugee-background communities to examine the pedagogical possibilities of using a social justice lens to inform social work practice.

REFUGEE JOURNEYS AND DISASTERS

The relevant literature shows that people with access to both internal and external resources are more likely to show resilience and an ability to respond effectively to a disaster scenario than people who are less resourced (Aldrich, 2010, 2012; Elliott, Haney, & Sams-Abiodun, 2010; Klinenberg, 2002). Disadvantages may interface with considerations of culture, gender, ethnicity, class and age (Enarson & Meyreles, 2004; Mercer et al., 2012; Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Rees, 2007; Tierney, 2006). In addition to this resource-based analysis, Valtonen (2008) has maintained that refugees who have already experienced significant trauma, economic deprivation and conflict may have additional vulnerabilities that are not necessarily captured within the most commonly used signifiers of diversity. It is in this understanding that refugee groups can potentially be at a greater risk of harm from a major event than other groups (Marlowe, 2013; Christchurch Migrant Inter-Agency Group [CMI-AG], 2011).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2014) estimates that there are currently more than 11.7 million refugees and 51.2 million people "of concern" worldwide. The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees formally defines a refugee as:

A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. (UNHCR, 2014)

Within this definition, refugees represent a heterogeneous set of nationalities, ethnicities, ages and other markers of diversity, and the UNHCR annual reports clearly show how the source countries of refugees have changed, and are currently changing, over time.

As refugees often come from very different social contexts, there is a challenge to develop effective disaster response plans that consider how culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups may interpret, comprehend and respond to a particular hazard (Eiser et al., 2012).

The resettlement experience of coming to live in a new host country as a refugee provides critical protection to people who have lived in protracted conflict and dangerous situations, and yet, settlement challenges themselves can also be significant and profound. Resettled refugees often fly into a new country with relatively little preparation, and are confronted by a raft of new social constructions that inform how people interpret and live their daily lives. These differences may relate to different ways of parenting children (Deng & Marlowe, 2013), learning a new language, trying to succeed in new educational contexts (Harris, Marlowe, & Nyuon, 2014), and often living with experiences of discrimination (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Fozdar & Torezani, 2008). Culturally sanctioned positions on gender roles may be questioned and challenged (Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010; Marlowe, 2012) and there may also be different acculturation experiences across different generations and families in migration contexts (Valtonen, 2008). The list of adaptations also includes how people create meaning around concepts of community, time, money and happiness (Castles, 2009). Thus, whilst resettlement opportunities often provide safety, stability and the recognition of key human rights (relative to the forced-migration journey), the associated adjustments can have profound implications for one's identity, acculturation experience and interaction with the host society. These considerations may have direct relevance in a disaster context as a refugee group's meaning-making processes and relationships with the wider society can influence the ways in which people may be either resilient or vulnerable to a natural hazard.

Social Justice and the Canterbury Earthquakes

In light of the above comments about marginalised communities, it is critical to recognise that refugees are not inherently vulnerable. Recent research has found that refugee groups have effective ways of responding to disaster scenarios which may be informed through intra-ethnic community responses (Marlowe & Lou, 2013), spirituality (Osman, Hornblow, Macleod, & Coope, 2012) and wider organisational capacity-building initiatives (Zakour & Harrell, 2003). It is in this sense that considering the balance between capacities and vulnerabilities (with respect to how we might go about trying to understand social justice in a disaster context) provide some critical considerations for social work education and the profession at large.

Teaching the concept of social justice can often be difficult to deliver pedagogically – particularly when the end goals (often the realisation of social justice) are at times shrouded by unclear pathways to envisage such concepts (Hölscher & Grace Bozalek, 2012; Lundy & van Wormer, 2007; Swenson, 1998). To assist students to develop an understanding of how a social-justice-oriented approach could be applied to a disaster, Finn and Jacobson's (2003) framework provides a social-justice-oriented approach into five main concepts described below. These concepts provide manageable and identifiable considerations towards achieving the broader notion of social justice in social work practice. By particularising social justice into these identifiable components, students can apply the specific characteristics and considerations related to the disaster context and population of interest.

This paper employs this model to illustrate its pedagogical use in considering a social work approach within a social justice purview by using the Canterbury earthquakes as a case study.

The 2010–2011 Canterbury earthquakes resulted in New Zealand's largest natural disaster in recent memory. On September 4, 2010 there was an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.1 on the Richter scale that caused serious damage and this was followed by the February 22, 2011 earthquake (magnitude 6.3) that resulted in 185 fatalities making it the second-most deadly natural disaster in New Zealand history. Prior to these earthquakes, Christchurch was one of New Zealand's primary resettlement localities for people from refugee backgrounds and provides the location for a relevant case study to examine the interface of social justice and "vulnerable" groups in disaster contexts. This paper is informed by the experience of conducting qualitative fieldwork with refugee background communities (predominantly Afghan, Bhutanese, Somali and Ethiopian) that was conducted in Christchurch from January 2012 to March 2013 (see Marlowe & Lou, 2013 and Marlowe, Lou, Osman, & Alam, 2014 for more information about the study). Using a social justice lens, I outline the ways in which the "just practice" framework can be used to develop a number of critical questions that are helpful in contextualising a disaster scenario with refugee background groups.

CANTERBURY EARTHQUAKES AND THE "JUST PRACTICE" FRAMEWORK

To consider curriculum-based content about working with refugees in disaster contexts, Finn and Jacobsen's (2003) just practice model is presented to illustrate the five components of a social justice approach comprising meaning, context, power, history and possibility. Each of these terms is first defined briefly, and then I present vignettes related to the Canterbury earthquakes which relate to each term. Before discussing these concepts individually and alongside the conclusions of Finn and Jacobson, I acknowledge that these five concepts do not exist as discrete particulars and are often used to inform one another. It is within this dynamic understanding that these terms interact although they are presented separately to assist with conceptual clarity.

Meaning

An understanding of meaning and of people's interpretations of particular experiences is central. An important element of social work practice has been the practice of reflexivity where we are aware of our own histories and experiences and how this might impact on our work with others. As Finn and Jacobsen (2003, p. 70) note,

The process of engaging with others develops, recreates, challenges, negotiates, and affirms meaning... It calls for questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about reality and for the consideration of multiple and contested interpretations.

An example of meaning was the different community perspectives and access to reliable information regarding the major earthquakes. These differences created a different focus on whether they would stay in Christchurch or possibly leave. The Afghan community focus groups were often resolute about staying and noted that fate played an important role in what would happen to them. The Bhutanese communities on the other hand were not as resolute in such deliberations and were considering their options. These differences

were reflected by a number of factors that included time resettled, age, gender, spirituality, perspectives on fate and connections to place (see Marlowe, 2013).

Context

It is important to recognise that meaning-making does not happen in isolation or even exclusively between social workers and the clients/communities that they work alongside. An analysis of context requires considering the multiple players that are involved in disaster situations which often include local and central government sectors, non-government organisations, multi-disciplinary teams, funders and the multitudes of people that comprise any particular community. As Finn and Jacobsen (2003, p. 70) note, "Context pushes us beyond generic discourses of 'structure' to the specific examination of the micro practices, schema, relations, resources, and discourses through which structures translate to practice." Thus, the ways in which different players have a direct impact on the lived experiences of refugee groups provides contextual insight into existing capacities and vulnerabilities.

Context in the Christchurch situation therefore relates to not only understandings of the refugee communities but also those of organisations (both specialist and generalist) that support them, government ministries, the media and scientists who are communicating key messages about the disaster. In this sense, context provides an array of players where disaster communications can be limited, misinterpreted and potentially misrepresented. One example that received tremendous media attention within Christchurch was the exodus of several refugee communities when a person known as the "moon man" made predictions of the next major earthquake based on lunar cycles and thus influenced the mass evacuation of more than 1000 people from refugee backgrounds (CMI-AG, 2011). This earthquake did not eventuate although many participants still spoke about these predictions more than a year later. The fact that many refugees do not speak English as their first language can mean that when disaster-related information is being disseminated (often in English) that the associated meanings between refugee community members and the wider society can be limited or even misinterpreted.

A critical step within examining context relates to Mills' (1971) sociological imagination that explores the intersections between personal biography and structure to understand how a person's "private pains" can be linked to indications of public troubles. Such a lens provides a helpful perspective from which to ask questions about why it might be that refugee groups often have higher rates of unemployment and underemployment that goes beyond a simple examination of individual people's decisions and actions to an analysis of structure. This analysis also takes us directly to an exploration of power.

Power

Power is derived from multiple sources and provides an important reminder that people do not share influence and access to resources evenly. As Finn and Jacobsen (2003, p. 71) note, "Social justice work calls on us to ask how power is created, produced, legitimized, and used and to understand how relations of power influence the nature of social work practice." In disaster contexts, the sources of power may be varied and emanate from places that are not part of people's everyday experiences. This power may be present at unconscious and barely

perceptible levels in situations where particular government authorities or even community leaders may wield enormous influence on disaster-response and mitigation strategies.

The politics of resource allocation also occurs in local and central government responses where key funding and support may be targeted. For instance, the government decided to stop resettling refugee groups in Christchurch due to the associated housing shortages; particular authorities had power to decide whether buildings should remain or be destroyed and agencies working to support refugee groups have found funding challenges, cuts and restructures. Other documents illustrate the challenges of locally based NGOs trying to secure resources and funding and having community-informed responses blocked by protracted and inefficient bureaucratic processes and confusing/limited pathways to accessing key decision makers that delayed essential services and support (Wylie, 2012).

Power dynamics were also present amongst community leaders who were able to grant access to particular members of their community or not. These leaders may also be the ones who convey key information to those within their community – particularly those who do not speak English. These hierarchical relationships demonstrate that the questions of dominance and use of power therefore need to be asked cautiously and critically alongside an understanding of meaning and context.

History

History provides us with important reminders of how the intersections of meaning, context and power have influenced people's lived experiences of social justice. Case studies focussing on Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and tsunami, and many others, demonstrate that groups who have historically been labelled as "vulnerable" are more likely to be negatively impacted by a disaster scenario than others. As Aldrich (2012) notes, however, such vulnerable groups historically have also shown remarkable ways of responding to what he terms "mega catastrophes" with reference to the Haiti earthquake (and others). Clearly, a social justice frame must consider how history coincides with the lives of refugee groups generally, and specifically within disaster contexts, that takes vulnerability and capacity into account.

Within the Christchurch context, several reports emerged relating to work with CALD groups noting the importance of developing and maintaining existing relationships with communities; making use of community gathering places such as marae; diversifying communication channels; and maintaining databases of particular community leader contact details (CMI-AG, 2011; Wylie, 2012). The marae, for instance, was highlighted as a critical recovery centre and could have great potential as a future site to bring people together if another event were to occur. It also demonstrates the importance of working proactively and relationally with groups *before* a disaster occurs (in this instance, with tangata whenua) so that such possibilities are already in place. Osman et al. (2012) found in their work with refugee background communities living in Canterbury that previous exposure to earthquakes in their home countries was helpful as they were relatively (historically) accustomed to responding to such events. In this way, history provides important signposts to the opportunities and possible barriers to achieving social justice in disaster contexts.

Possibility

Finn and Jacobsen (2003, p. 72) provide an important reminder that "as we expand our possibilities for thinking, we may change the way a problem is perceived and therefore envision new possibilities for action." Disaster scenarios by definition overwhelm local capacities to respond to the immediacy of the situation. *Possibility* reminds us, however, that responses and capacities can come from diverse and creative sources.

After the February 22, 2011 Christchurch earthquake, Somali women for instance began cooking for the responders and helped the police. The Ethiopian community worked with the local council to relocate their destroyed church so that the community could work together. A number of refugee communities volunteered their time to help shovel the liquefaction. The Hazara ethnic group from Afghanistan collectively purchased a local community centre to provide a place to meet – this local capacity-building meant that people knew where to gather and created a collective site to pool resources and respond to community members who needed assistance. These examples illustrate that there may be a number of avenues through which people can respond to adversity in creative and collaborative ways.

A Critically Informed Social Work Curriculum: Refugees, Disasters and Social Justice

A particular challenge within social work education is in coming to grips with what social justice means and what the steps towards its realisation might represent in a disaster context. Whilst this paper does not adequately engage with the larger discourses around social justice, the Finn and Jacobsen (2003) model provides some of Blumer's (1969) sensitising concepts that can help students think through some potentially relevant considerations towards achieving it. The following subheadings use Finn and Jacobsen's social justice concepts to stimulate key questions that can help inform curriculum development within a disaster context.

Meaning – A reflexive and collaborative exercise

Recognising that refugees often come from different social realities, meaning is a central consideration in disaster response. To engage with such multiple and contested interpretations, encouraging students to use a social constructionist lens can be helpful. Burr (2003) argues that social constructionism can be best understood through taking account of the following: a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge; historical and cultural specificity; and how knowledge is sustained through social processes. Thus, perspectives on gender roles, parenting practices, family dynamics and the role of community are perspectives that can shift across cultures, context and time. Burr (2003) provides an example of the Japanese word "amae" which, translated, means the sweet feeling of having dependence on a person. Within a Western construct, dependency is often seen as weakness and illustrates that a disaster context and the "knowledge" and policy that informs the response and recovery efforts are socially mitigated. When a disaster unfolds, the meanings that responders might have can be very different from those they are trying to assist. This can create significant tensions across diverse cultural groups. Alongside considerations of meaning and understandings of social constructionism, it is critical that we ask students to consider the following questions:

What are the religious, ethnic, cultural, spiritual and other relevant forms of identity that might inform a person's associated belief system and how might this translate to their perspective and response to a disaster event?

How does the community view the disaster (is this caused by humans, a natural event, a supernatural occurrence)?

- What are the most relevant concerns in the community (these may or may not relate to the disaster event)?

- What are the potential risks of enquiring into people's meanings, often around adverse circumstances, and re-traumatisation?

- How does our own history influence our professional practice and views about refugee communities?

- What are the appropriate ways and protocols of engaging particular communities? Who are the important people that we might need to consult? And how might our own forms of identity and social constructions influence cross-cultural interactions?

These questions essentially ask social work to iteratively examine the meanings behind the "how, why, when and for whom" of social justice.

Context – Recognising the multiple players in a disaster context

The meanings discussed above come together in a particular context that involve various actors perhaps including the refugee community, refugee-based organisations, media, government agencies and the wider society. It is within these unique contexts that students need to ask a number of critical questions about who the players are in any disaster scenario and what specific meanings might they be bringing when engaging with others. It is in this context that social work finds itself working in multi-disciplinary environments where the foundational knowledge bases of different expertise and values come together. Some helpful reflective statements for students to consider include:

- Who are the key players and sectors in a disaster scenario and how do they potentially interact?

- In what multi-disciplinary capacities will social work find itself (alongside planners, medical professionals, policy makers, natural scientists, etc)?

- How can we remain attentive, not only to the belief-system of the client but also to that of our own and other professions?

- What are the professional assumptions about neutrality (in the sense that social workers should not allow their personal beliefs to influence professional practice)?

- Do we as social workers place an emphasis on social justice, upon what we see is 'just' (i.e., what is our place when the meanings we have are at odds with the individuals, families or even communities we are working alongside)?

- Thus, informed social work responses that look to effectively work with, and empower, refugee communities necessitate that this must be accomplished alongside other professionals and highlights the need for inter-disciplinary education for disaster education and awareness.

Power – the politics of access and domains of oppression

The exercise of power operates on many levels. A social justice approach that considers power must take into account the relational contexts of securing buy-in and trust from respected community leaders. It highlights again, the need to know the meanings and contexts so that social workers can make the necessary relationships to meaningful engagement with particular communities.

- Who are the key power brokers within the community?

- Is the community divided in particular ways or does it appear to be largely united?

Considerations of power, however, are not only about negotiating the politics of access within particular community groups; these are also about oppression. Thompson (2012) notes that there are commonalities about oppression that relate to thoughts (stereotypes and prejudice) and, more specifically, actions that relate to lived experiences of inequality, denial of rights and discrimination. Oppression can operate at unconscious levels so it is important to ensure that students critically consider their own assumptions, beliefs and actions. Thus, as social workers, we are encouraged to ask ourselves how our professional identity gives us a sense of power and privilege, which provides both opportunities for empowerment but also possibilities for oppression. Sensitising questions in relation to potential oppression include the following:

- Do particular policies relating to disaster response advantage or disadvantage certain groups (welfare, housing, health, etc)?

- Who has a say in developing such policies and in the distribution of particular resources (particularly when these are scarce)?

- In what ways can I check that my agency and my own practice are not potentially oppressive – how might power relations be exercised in ways that are explicit and implicit?

- When there are concerns about oppressive practices, how can we address these in ways that best protect the safety and interests of the people we are working alongside and also our own?

Thompson (2012, p. 16) maintains that oppression is the outcome of discriminatory practices and often involves the dominance of one group over another and a negative

and demeaning exercise of power. He further argues that one of the most powerful tools of oppression can be the claims of "common sense". Common sense often takes the form of dominant ideologies that may be informed through oppressive practices of heterosexism, racism, ageism, disablism and so forth. Thus, when students think about refugees and/or disasters, it is central that they consider what their assumptions are about them and how these might be tested. It is also necessary to recognise that people do not experience oppression(s) in isolation, so it is important for students to consider what it might mean to live life with multiple oppressions that may be informed across class, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. In this sense, central is the inter-sectionality of multiple forms of identity and how these are received within community, society and the structures in place that influence people's lived experiences.

History – using past and multiple histories to inform the present

The influence of power is often so great that the opportunities for incorporating a social justice lens are difficult to find. History can be particularly important to help interpret and address this tension as there are many lessons that can be learned from previous disasters. For instance, Aldrich (2012) and Nakagawa and Shaw's (2004) work demonstrates the value of social capital as critical resources to respond to, and mitigate, the impact of major disasters through local and wider-based community relationships (bonding and bridging capital). They also caution, however, that there are dangers of social capital where strongly bonded ethnic groups with limited ties to the wider society can also create situations of vulnerability for minority groups. Thus, there are a number of questions that are helpful for students to consider:

- What capacities and resources do the associated community possess (social, economic, cultural, etc)?
- How did these communities respond to adversity before their forced migration journey?
- What are relevant local, regional, national and international examples of social-justice-oriented social work practice (both contemporary and historical; and disaster/non-disaster-related)?

At the same time, the disaster literature shows that inequality and markers of disadvantage place some groups of people at higher risk of negative outcomes (Aldrich & Crook, 2008; Davis & Bali, 2008; Klinenberg, 2002). As social work educators we have a responsibility to know what some of these historical examples are so that students not only have the theoretical concepts to engage with what social justice might represent but also have real case studies to further ground this learning.

Possibility – what might be possible to know, envision, and achieve

Social work values remind us that practice should endeavour to explore what is possible to know, aspire and achieve in our profession. Possibility provides fertile ground to imagine and can deliver social work practice into areas that may bring about meaningful and lasting forms of healing, meaningful engagement in civil society and justice. As such, accepting the status quo is often not a tenable position when there are considerations of oppression and

inequality that stem from, or are exacerbated by, a particular disaster. Some key questions for students to consider:

- How can we consult with affected groups in ways that encourage them to discuss not only their immediate needs but also longer-term visions?

- How can we have these discussions in ways that do not create the dangers of empty promises but still promote an active engagement with what might be possible?

- How can we work collaboratively in multi-disciplinary and multi-sectorial ways that better ensure partnership and outcomes?

- Should social work practice focus on the individual responses or on broader systemic change and the role of advocacy and social action in the therapeutic process – should such roles go hand–in-hand or remain separate?

- What are the different ways that oppressive situations can be addressed? What meanings, contexts and power are at play? What can history teach us here?

In this sense, possibility brings together the four previously discussed elements to make an informed and emancipatory form of practice increasingly possible in a disaster context.

Bringing these elements together

A commitment to social justice is an imperative when thinking about disaster response with potentially vulnerable groups. It is important to ask questions within the social, cultural, political and economic milieu that provide the unique barometers to work with particular communities under exceptional circumstances. I conclude with some final considerations when thinking about a social justice lens in relation to refugee groups and disasters:

- The complexities of social justice cannot be taught over one lecture or course and requires an ongoing engagement with students throughout their studies so that they are better equipped to consider the multiple forms of diversity and how these may lead to experiences of injustice, particularly in the aftermath of a disaster event.

- As educators, it is useful to provide the small steps and local examples of social justice work so that achieving what is often an unclear end goal is separated into more workable processes.

- Social justice education is powerfully done through experiential means. Access to practicum-based supervision that encourages wider structural critique and an anti-oppressive lens can help students navigate and incorporate this knowledge in relation to their experiences.

- There needs to be further development of the concepts of meaning, context, power, history and possibility so that students are critically applying this model to each unique situation rather than taking a prescriptive approach.

Whilst the term "refugee" is a key focal point, it must be acknowledged that other markers of diversity (age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, linguistic capabilities and time resettled) provide an important reminder of the importance of not becoming blinkered, focused on one specific demographic or experience (see Zetter, 2007). While the Finn and Jacobsen (2003) model is the one presented in this paper, it is important to recognise the limitations of any one model recognising the diverse contexts of social work practice and the unique communities that each professional context works alongside. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that this model provides helpful concepts that can be *applied* rather than *prescribed* to a social justice analysis, which requires consideration of the local, regional and wider contexts within which any disaster occurs.

CONCLUSION – SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE, DISASTERS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Freire (1990) argued that social workers should adopt a "critical curiosity" where they embrace praxis that is honouring of people's experience and beliefs which may be very different from their own. When and where natural hazards do occur, the need to consider the diversity represented across values, cultural beliefs and interpersonal dynamics and how people's histories coincide becomes increasingly relevant in disaster contexts. Built into this understanding is an awareness of our own epistemological, ontological and theoretical foundations that guide our assumptions, professional knowledge bases and personal histories. Alongside this awareness is the need, as the conceptual framework acknowledges, for critical engagement with definitions of vulnerability (across space and human/social interactions) that consider the interplay of multiple actors and domains of power. Embracing the concept of possibility reminds our students of the need to move beyond the status quo to consider what might be possible when responding to a disaster in ways that are collaborative, empowering and informed by a social justice lens.

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