2013

From absolutes to a relational approach when working in international development

Lester J. Thompson  
*Southern Cross University*

Elizabeth Reimer  
*Southern Cross University*

Publication details

Thompson, LJ & Reimer, E 2013, 'From absolutes to a relational approach when working in international development', *New Community*, vol. 11, no. 2, iss. 42, pp. 9-17.  
*Article available on Open Access*
The International Development issue
Dear subscribers and readers of the New Community,

This is our second issue for the year 2013 and whilst it may not look like we ARE catching up with the ‘backlog’ and all associated results of a rather difficult 2012... this issue is coming to you at the same time as vol. 11(1) so there is no real need to say much more in addition to what you - careful reader you are (!) - will already know from perusing that editorial...

The next issue – to be hopefully with you in December (!) – has already all the content it needs to make it a really interesting contribution to the discussions and practices related to Community Development and Indigenous Peoples in Australia and – to a small extent – in other countries. And some of those contributions don’t just talk about CD in the more ‘narrow’ sense of that word, but they very much also address a range of crucial dimensions of Indigenous knowledge and philosophy, making it doubtlessly a ‘must-have’ publication for all involved in CD where-ever...

The last issue of the year (likely to arrive with you early 2014) will have a major ‘essay-review’ piece on (at least) six book publications about or around CD to have appeared in Australia in the last 18 months... leading to an interesting question... why is it that the books keep coming and CD education and practice seems to become more and more marginal...?? Or is it just me seeing it that way...? So the last issue of the year will contrast the really excellent content of these six-or-so books with what is ’happening’ in the field in as far as I can judge that from ‘where I sit’ and get involved in practice.

Is said in the previous editorial, cuts to programs and services in many areas and across all states have led to a number of cancellations of subscriptions and that seems to be an indication of sorts that educational and practical ‘interest’ in the promoting of our approach is diminishing....

So please, again, dear readers and subscribers and friends, do recommend New Community
From Absolutes to a Relational approach when working in International Development

Lester J. Thompson    Elizabeth Reimer

Community development workers are increasingly expected to intervene internationally to progress a seemingly international human rights agenda. There is an evident need to engage with ethno-sensitive practice frameworks and to understand the traps of paternal or top-down practice tendencies. The theoretical underpinnings of good community based and bottom-up work are quite simple. What is less simple is the application of these principles when employed by an aid agency to further a specific rights agenda. This discussion considers some of the value-based traps associated with international community development work, referring particularly to child and gender-based violence work. It advocates a relational position on intervention so that the dangers of absolutist judgments are minimized.

Introduction

Many community development activities, and especially those about intervention into the private realm of families, are felt so emotionally by the public that absolute (good/bad) judgements can be seen as normal and morally appropriate. For example, the community have little tolerance for child abuse and expect prompt and decisive action when it occurs, regardless of here or overseas. Though experienced Community Development Workers might consider that the only absolute judgement in child protection is that there are no absolutes, our recent conference presentation, suggesting a relational approach to family intervention, was met with outrage. One conference delegate argued that 'when it comes to child protection there have to be absolutes!'

This article will prolong the outrage, by exploring the need for those community development workers who are delivering aid in 'developing' countries, to reject absolutes when intervening with families, and rather to adopt a relational approach to decision-making. Such 'relationalism' nears the position taken by Bruno Latour (1999, 2010) and John Law (2007) if we need to understand group formation and function and for sensitive consideration of how to deal with cultural differences between groups. In some ways, this approach also agrees with Cooper (2007:100), who sees a danger in assuming a 'disciplinary expert' role suggests that expertise is about 'qualities' that assist workers to engage with and see the significance of others' worldviews and their particular approaches to family issues.

Cross-national helping activity seems to have intensified in recent years as a result of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) international child protection activities. Both are driven by the ascendency of rights paradigms across cultural borders but predicated on 'consultation'. We believe there is, arguably, a need for intensified, ethical caution about the quality of consultative processes and the impacts upon families of absolute perspectives on rights. The following discussion commences with a specific deliberation on the parameters and problems of an absolutist 'child rights' mentality. It contends that 'absolutist' pressures on community development workers encourage them to adopt dogmatic ethical frameworks from Western 'developed World' perspectives at the expense of ethics, traditions, customs and community-based family approaches that fit with 'developing World' cultures. This both sets workers up to fail, and acts to homogenise culture(s).

The paper argues for a more culturally sensitive relational approach to overseas aid work and concludes with a justification for a more 'relational' approach to development ethics in overseas aid work and social welfare education. In order to do this, it examines both absolutist and relational arguments against the challenges of different ethical approaches to child protection and family work in 'developing world' contexts.

Absolutism in child and family welfare: Parameters and problems

Absolute judgements regarding child protection and family intervention are commonly seen to be based upon a desire to protect vulnerable children and women from harmful aggressive and sexual behaviour. These types of judgements seem natural to mainstream Australians, as they have for many years been laid down in legislation and they strongly accord with mainstream values. Such values align with the post-Second World War UN principles intending to protect individuals from the types of abuses that were perpetrated by Nazism, and that were later laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. In 1989, world leaders decided that children needed a
special convention just for them because people under 18 years old often need special care and protection that adults do not. ... The Convention ... spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.).

The active protection of such rights has considerable value and the importance of UNICEF's work in social protection of stolen and exploited children cannot be denied. The right to 'participate fully' in 'cultural life' implies, however, some degree of conflict between the child protective intentions of the 'developed' world regarding 'harmful practices' and cultural inclusion practices affecting children. Interestingly, the above-mentioned conference delegate provided a useful example of conflict between 'developed' world ideas of rights and the illegal and unacceptable inflicting of physical damage to children, especially through practices that result in children having 'broken bones' or 'mutilated genitals'.

Though such instances seem obvious examples of the need for absolute rights judgements, 'genital mutilation' and 'bone fractures' represent value-laden generalisations lumping a whole range of practices together, characterising them from a 'developed' world cultural view as if they were two obvious extremes of 'bad' or abusive treatment of children. Without considering the specific meaning of the terms or the context in which they are used, the examples serve to highlight that in many ways such arguments represent truisms which argue that 'bad actions' should be stopped because they are 'bad'. We will argue that there are ethical problems associated with such circular and absolutist logic; we will show that, if development workers are to achieve outcomes that are as appropriate and effective as possible in dealing with complex protective cases, they should try to apply local knowledge to culturally understand what is going on and why it happens.

In this discussion we consider international intervention into child protective arrangements in small 'developing' nations; we argue that two major 'top-down' failings exist in family intervention processes in such contexts. Firstly, emotionally-based protective feelings, especially towards vulnerable children, encourage intervention workers to make rapid judgements and, without thoughtful consideration, decisions based upon 'absolute' positions of right and wrong fitting with ethnocentric and inappropriate ('developed' world) cultural understandings. The 'developed' world rights framework argues that:

The four core principles of the [CRC] are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. ... The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in health care; education; and legal, civil and social services (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.).

Thus, judgements about the 'best interest of the child' can be open to parentally and culturally insensitive interpretations by (external) caring experts wishing to set up protective services; they may not understand the cultural complexities at work in regards the interests of children or what services or standards flow through the cultural context to protect their interests.

The second failing is that we tend to judge existing family protection processes in 'developing' countries, especially those different from the ones espoused/practiced in our 'developed' nation-of-origin, as deficient, less theoretically-robust and sometimes even 'primitive'. Together, the two tendencies are significantly problematic if they form the basis for 'development' work that entrenches new processes and policies into the socio-cultural framework affecting vulnerable children.

1 Protective Sentiment-Based Ethnocentric Development

Concern about the plight of vulnerable children is likely to be a motivator of family-intervention 'aid' work in 'developing' nations and it is likely to be focused on the desire to promptly protect those who are perceived to be harmed or at risk. Concerned politicians, lawyers, police, religious helpers, philanthropists, rights-focused welfare workers and others who have been influenced by dominant cultural ideas will likely want decisive action to save victims and punish perpetrators. They will likely advance two significant arguments to justify absolutism in child protection: 1) as
children cannot protect themselves, there is a moral need for 'rights experts' to judge whether they are being 'harmed' to set up enforceable (legislative) interventions into the harmful family situations; and 2) some overarching standard of legal protection of children from injurious activities (including some initiation and sexual practices) which cause physical or mental harm needs to be established.

Initially, our assertions may seem relatively uncontroversial, yet they can prove to be challenging at a quite basic level because, as there is well-documented evidence that external intervention - even into violent family situations - can itself be harmful (Fernandez, 2009; Higgins, 2008). In addition, there is debate about the possible consequential harm resulting from 'removal' and difficulties integrating 'removed' children into their own (or alternate) families. Children may be emotionally harmed by intervention as they commonly perceive to be personally at fault or 'bad' children if they are removed from their family or 'imprisoned' in protective custody (Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panazzo, & Richardson, 2005). In addition, they may be excluded from their traditional cultural practices and lose their identification with them (Bromfield et al., 2005; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Furthermore, as shown in Indigenous communities in Australia, if the perpetrators are removed and charged with offences, harmful economic consequences for the families can result, including residual guilt, recriminations and exclusion for remaining family members (Wild & Anderson, 2007).

The above considerations relate to perceptions of what constitutes 'harm', what action would minimise harm and the definition of unacceptable levels of harm. For example, when organisations such as UNICEF work to protect children from commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC) and forced involvement in war-situations, harm seems clearly definable; however, in the case of specific cultural practices for social functions, it is more difficult to interpret and distinguish what is harmful and what is functionally useful. For example, the often-used 'absolute' example of the harmful cultural practice of genital mutilation of children is difficult to deal with, as genital modification is particularly abhorrent to certain cultural critics, easily superseding the rather extensively occurring modifications of ears, faces, lips, teeth, necks, thoracic skin and (historically) feet. It could, however, be argued that the 'harmful' modification of body parts is to be considered across a number of continua including age of the person involved, his/her degree of choice, the dis/satisfaction with the outcome, the pain caused, the resulting physical dysfunctions, the extent of the practice and the perceived aesthetic impacts. It can also be argued that each of these continua requires culturally defined subjective judgements rather than an absolute one on the harm of the practice. Furthermore, it is important to consider the implications of a child missing out on such culturally normal practices and the subsequently harmful social exclusion they might face; for example, where 'uncut' children of either sex are deemed inappropriate marital partners in later life, these practices hold significant cultural importance.

Interestingly, consideration of several of the continua might justify an examination of both male and female child genital modification rather than only the latter, as males are globally more likely to be incised. Though a considerable range of discomforts and sexual insensitivities may be caused by male and female circumcision, sub-incision and other practices, female 'circumcision' is more commonly judged as 'absolutely' harmful and unacceptable. While the volume of 'harm' to male children is larger, less social concern seems to exist about it; as well, arguments about the severity of harm should also consider other practices, including male sub-incision, which may be as dramatic as the widely criticized female genital modification practices.

Despite simplistic arguments about 'broken bones' and 'genital mutilation', using a more complex analysis, it can be argued that the concept of 'harm' is far from a universal absolute; rather, major cultural differences in community values exist about what behaviour is acceptably or unacceptably harmful and what is appropriate in specific circumstances. Continuing with the genital mutilation example, the perceived 'absolute' harm caused by certain genital modification procedures is, in reality, part of a continuum of culturally determined and sometimes even self-chosen body modification processes. Despite this, certain practices seem extreme to cultural critics and justify their call for legal prohibition rather than critically examining them so as to offer a more sensitive response.

There is, however, reason to ponder if the ill-considered imposition of insensitive mainstream 'developed' world values is likely to have a more harmful impact on culturally different and complex communities than the putative positive impact of associated interventions. For example, Thompson and Hil (2010) argue that the desired enactment of child rights legislation in the Solomon Islands was seen by the supposed 'beneficiaries' to be inspired by the 'devil'. Furthermore, in the case of female genital mutilation (FGM), the imposition of law and punishment tends to push practices 'underground' rather than achieving intended changes. In a quite sensitive article in the AASW National Bulletin, Costello (2013) referred to Australia's absolute position in criminalising FGM. The intent of this absolute stance is to assist women in rejecting female child cutting and thus in helping them to stamp out the practice. Yet, Counsellor Sameem Ali (in Carter, 2012) argues that the 2005/6 criminalising of FGM in the UK had not resulted in any court action, because complainants feared implicating family members. Rather, Ali (ibid) agrees with the UNICEF (2010:8) report that such legislation can push the processes underground. Criminalisation
may even discourage ‘cut’ women from attending medical help, fearing that they may incriminate family members. This shows that unanticipated consequences occur when interventionists misunderstand the strength of values and the importance of cultural practices. As well, when external helpers intervene through development processes, there is considerable danger in assuming that no cultural and community damage will be caused by ethno-centrically motivated righteous fervour about stamping out practices that offend against ‘developed’ world beliefs about rights and their enforcement.

An even more puzzling development of the area of culturally influenced genital modification, trends towards elective surgery by adults in the ‘developed’ World to achieve aesthetic improvements are spreading; both adult men and women are not just elective to alter the form of their ears, faces and breasts, they also choose genital modifications such as sub-incision or labial trimming. Whilst such individuals diversify the group of those subjected to the much-criticised ‘cultural practices’ (Bmezin, 2012), the absolutist argument remains that beyond a certain level of incision, the practices are harmful to sexual gratification and health. Ironically, an Italian hospital offering minimal genital incision operations to meet some women’s cultural requirements (and thus avoiding more extreme forms) was prevented from doing so because of the absolute judgement that the hospital was condoning harmful practices against women (Galeotti, 2007; Ruderman, 2013). In fact, it was reducing the extent of genital modification/harm and reducing the pain experienced in what was a lesser procedure than most elective surgery. FGM in Italy, the criminalisation of which is strongly supported by some advocates, may be better addressed through more sensitive and consultative processes if it is not to go underground and done again under painful, unhygienic conditions.

The lesson for development practice is that unrecognised reasons for and very strong cultural commitments to certain practices may exist and that unanticipated consequences may result from absolute judgements. As welfare professionals are expected to behave in a culturally sensitive way, this sensitivity should apply regarding practices that are approved as well as disapproved of. It can be argued, therefore, that effective community development work requires a more thoughtful consideration of existing cultural traditions, rather than pronouncing absolute judgements and the need for punitive prevention of the associated practices. This discussion therefore offers an important instance of the need to consider cross-cultural interventions so characteristic of ‘capacity development’ oriented ‘aid’ work; ‘development’ in any cultural context radically divergent from that of the ‘developed’ world will likely highlight perceived failings while strengths are ignored given the ethno-centric value-based expectations of the helpers. Helpers (and social researchers!) will thus tend to identify certain practices in culturally divergent contexts as child protection ‘problems’ and ‘needs’ which will emphasise the need for intervention and de-emphasise the need for more in-depth understanding and support.

The desire to assist children who (presumably) cannot protect themselves and which is based on a moral urge by ‘protection experts’ to assess ‘harm’ and use their expertise to legally intervene in the (assumed) harmful family situations creates the problem that mainstream ‘expertise’ does not guarantee adequate understanding of why assumed harmful processes developed, what socio-cultural function they carry out and what consequence(s) will result from the ensuing intervention. The desire to enact legal protection of children against activities that are perceived to cause physical or mental harm, including initiation practices, ignores the profound philosophical difficulties involved in determining what constitutes unacceptable harm. Indeed, from some perspective, the sight of adolescents in bathing costumes is evidence of harmful sexualisation and requires intervention of some sort, whereas from another perspective, the wearing of burkas represents a harmful suppression of female individuality and each of these can be perceived from the opposite end of the moral continuum.

Experts who are cultural-outsiders will have little understanding of the felt harm of the considered events and situations; it seems that many cultural practices pertaining to initiation involve some level of pain as a marker of children’s capacity to pass into adulthood. Clearly, similar practices carried out in different socio-
cultural contexts and situations are associated with different levels of pain. Even if the experience of pain is demonstrative of inflicted harm, it is hard to judge the level of tolerable pain that is culturally normal and acceptable (think ear- or nose rings...). A more logical - and respectful - approach might involve defining a limit for the pain caused to children rather than making judgements about the type of practice that might cause the pain. This would involve consultation as undoubtedly different levels of tolerance exist within and across cultures. After all, the harm associated with external agents judging and proscribing any or all (putatively) painful processes for children might outweigh the benefits of intervention if it subsequently excludes adolescents from their expected passage into adult ceremonial responsibilities, thereby causing other harm, including damage to their self-esteem. Looked at from a cultural self-critical perspective, many childhood sports would have to be banned as they (potentially) inflict pain on children and cannot be considered to be in their ‘best interest’ - think about young swimmers or, for that matter, ‘gifted’ child performers in the arts or entertainment industries.

2 Prejudging ‘under-developed’ Institutions in Country

Before engaging in a more in-depth discussion of ‘relationalism’, we want to consider ‘absolutism’ in child and family protection matters and processes more specifically in ‘development’ contexts; indeed, the ethic of efficient and effective protective processes engenders the problematic perception that ‘standard’ approaches to child protective work can exist and should be implemented in certain ‘developing’ nations. Thompson and Hill (2010) have referred to an instance in the Solomon Islands during which a new ‘Pacific’ approach to child protection was implemented, thought to be based on local cultural paradigms. This ‘model’ was conceptually developed based on a ‘European’ selective interpretation of Pacific Islander cultural processes. It was thus ‘externally’ conceptualised but presented as a ‘Pacific’ approach to child and family work. Unfortunately, existing government-based child protective administrative processes were in place, involving a special police unit and welfare workers. The existing processes, though functioning, were seen as incompatible with the new ‘culturally appropriate’ model and in need of reform to implement the latter. The intellectual pressure for change originated outside the nation and yet, the desired imposed change was perceived as appropriate because it was assumed to be a ‘cultural model’.

It was a clear example of paternalistic, ‘top-down’ action even though explicitly conceptualised by its implementers as a ‘culturally sensitive’ and, therefore, ‘bottom-up’ process. It also poses questions regarding the level of cultural respect that is due to existing administrative institutions of democratically elected governments in ‘developing’ countries. The importance of this case relates to the extraordinary situation where NGOs and Aid agencies seem to exert considerable power over elected governments in ‘developing’ and have the capacity to impose policies that are insensitive to community members or even to important government stakeholders. The situation raises issues regarding the ‘rights’ of well-resourced and committed Aid agents and the appropriateness of their (absolute) judgements about imposing changes on administrators and processes. If, for example, an Aid agent considers that an administrative unit is placed in the wrong Ministry, or if the agent considers that a particular administrator is not assisting the desired agenda, what would justify their enforcing changes? Our earlier arguments about cultural sensitivity throw doubt on the validity of external judgements about the need for urgent changes in institutional processes that are there to ‘protect’ the vulnerable.

We selected the above examples as they served as arguments in the previously mentioned severe criticism of relationalism as proposed in the conference; there, absolutism in the ethical judgements regarding cross-cultural welfare practice with children was defended and it was evident that quite extreme moral(istic) pressure was exerted to conform with them. However, any understanding of community and social work ethics cannot posit that certain decisions are universally accepted, are morally essential or are determined by a higher spiritual authority. Consequently, no grand narrative should be seen to inform community or social work ethics in all situations, for all cultures or across groups. Thus, the ethics of new and emerging child protective practices requires that workers strive to understand the central worldviews within the relevant cultures in a ‘developing’ nation. Community workers need to recognise social relationships, divergent realities and the fact that ethical judgements are dynamic and emerge from every-day practices in situated cultural contexts. It is important that beliefs about moral rightness are considered and discussed before they result in interventions against the wishes and values of local stakeholders.

Arguing for ‘Relationalism’

The relational model of ethics suggested in this paper treats ethical positions and practices as related to other culturally determined practices and judgements, which constitute the “...continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located” (Law, 2007:1). This assumes that the reality and concrete perceptions of community members are defined by community relations rather than individual agency. Mol (2002:6) argues that the way reality is understood “is not given in the order of things, but instead [is] brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day..."
day, socio-material practices.” Noddings (2010:390) argues that relationships with others are definitive of human perceptions of conditions such as good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant and so forth. She states that “Human beings are born from and into relation; it is our original condition” and as “relation is ontologically basic”, our normal understanding of others, their needs and their ethical care is described by inter-relations (culture) (Noddings, 2010:390).

Whilst agreeing with Noddings that relation is a fundamental aspect of being human, the ethical practice of community work must acknowledge that the ‘developed’ world culture is more suffused with individualistic thought and practice than most ‘developing’ cultures. Not only should individual rights-based ideas be considered ethnocentric; they can be at odds with sophisticated care theory. The best ethical practices may require a clear recognition of and engagement with the inter-relational reality of communities and an evaluation of the strengths of and reasons for those relations.

This relational model offers the basis for a powerful analysis as it assists workers to recognise that the community in which they are ‘intervening’ possess a real and functional worldview that gives meaning to its (inter)actions and that functionally – if not perfectly – meets the needs of participants. It also acknowledges that the influence of power and changes in the environment result in functional changes in behaviour and in moral/ethical standards. Furthermore, it emphasises that these changes happen from within the network or system as well as from complex impacts emanating from external pressures. Behaviours that community workers may perceive to conflict with rights-based judgements may have developed from essential environmental adaptations or power-relations within communities from times gone-by and which became entrenched as unchallengeable moral imperatives, like those regarding ‘female purity’ or ‘strong masculinity’.

Community Development work must be recognised as political activity, in that it juxtaposes different cultural values and ethical practices; in cross-cultural work, ‘developed’ world notions of child rights may, for example, conflict with ‘developing’ world notions of female purity or male authority. This operates at a more or less implicit level in all development contexts. In effect, community workers are involved in choosing winners and losers when they prioritise one area of intervening into power relations over another. Community leaders’ perception that child rights were inspired by the devil testifies to the empowerment of children and perceived disempowerment of the former; their power was as ‘morally right’ as are perceptions of female purity or even as ‘child rights’ are to UNICEF advocates.

Latour (2010) argues that knowledge - and thus ethics - develop from a relational process that takes functional ideas, covers them over with tradition as they gain some stability and acceptance and then submerges them into moral infallibility. Consequently, community (relational) power politics is obscured from public view and ethical arrangements that result are presented as inherently ‘cultural’ or ‘contextual’. Most importantly, they are assumed to be natural for the cultural or social group and Latour suggests that these power-based decisions be opened up to view. He suggests that practices, morals and even ethics can be considered to be the outcomes of functional inter-relations that have become closed-off from view as are ‘black-boxes’. ‘Black-boxes’ are accepted as unchallengeable, almost mystical, objects rather than opened, examined and functionally evaluated. One way to consider the application of ethical frameworks is by considering each ‘ethic’ (right or practice) as a relational ‘black box’ (Latour, 1999:5) resulting from a historical development process in a specific context (e.g. Melanesian, African females, Post-War). This then involves considering the application of ethical frameworks as an outcome that each professional can collaboratively ‘open’ to scrutiny regarding its current relevance and functionality.

Ethical frameworks conceptualised as ‘black boxes’ may appear to be permanent to cultural insiders, but this is only because they are routinely and uncritically applied in everyday judgements. According to Latour (1999:5), the application of each ‘black-box’ has often been done without sufficient consideration of the power-relations or consequences involved. Yet, the application of his analytical ideas makes it possible for professional work with communities to routinely open dialogue about the ‘black boxes’ that contain child rights judgements and that define traditional cultural practices that conflict with rights. A lack of critical scrutiny of ‘boxed’ ethics, morality and practices has established them as ‘essential’ and afforded them characteristics such as “good”, “virtuous”, “caring”, “socially just” and “conscientious”, making them extremely difficult to unpack and examine, except through the lens of history or through dialogue that treats both sets of ethics as examinable. For example, consider how the removal of Indigenous children in Australia was accepted as a (black-boxed) necessity until opened for re-examination for its injustices. Yet, by contrast, external critics of the contemporary Australian 'Emergency Intervention' policy in Indigenous communities have been unable to open the 'child protective ethical' box and were represented as immoral apologists for child abuse (Thompson & Hill, 2010), even though the policy conflicted with national Human Rights legislation.

The relational alternative to absolute judgements about rights or about the integrity of culture is to accept the dynamism of cultural change and accept that practitioners can be a part of that dynamism. This
engagement can be done ethically or unethically and relationism holds that absolute rights judgments, or even consultative impositions, can be unethical if they do not openly allow for the critique of the material in both 'developed' and 'developing' boxes. This is another area of community practice that must be developed dynamically and reflectively. The dynamics are constantly "...running the risk ... of disappearing" (Latour, 2010:603) and so are any ethical absolutes that are applied to them. Thus, ethical frameworks are highly emergent, situated and political, meaning that there are no absolute ethical rules that can be applied to cross-cultural development work. Instead, the ethics of community development is an ethics of good processes and just intentions, rather than of expert rules and ethical practice is developed by each worker as a self-development process.

Conceptualising for Teaching Community Development Ethics

Community Development decision-making can be looked at as a set of changing power relationships between interventionists, contextual influences and a range of 'clients'. Thus, ethical decision-making is part of those dynamics of interaction that require the professional 'use of self' (here emphasising communication and trust-building skills). This must, therefore, be developed alongside the capacity for evolving and maintaining relationships based upon mutually acceptable actions, which first involves relations rather than absolute judgements or rules.

Whereas Community Development (CD) curricula might treat context-specific ethical practices as sealed 'black boxes' or self-contained objects 'applied' when making ethical judgements, it may be more important to allow practitioners to open these 'boxes' when working with clients or stakeholders. Training CD workers in self-motivation and communication skills towards opening these "black boxes" and in collaboratively examining the ideas and relationships contained within them, they will be able to adopt more caring and satisfying change processes. This will also facilitate the contestation of undue power in relationships and offer considerations for ethical decision-making. Any curriculum and pedagogy which is based on such methodology focuses on questions workers need to ask and tools they need to have in order to:

- interpret the relations, functions, or (now) non-functional influences that these 'black-boxed' ethics, morals or practices play in the complexities of contemporary 'developing' world life.

We want to argue that in order to educate CD workers capable of engaging with a wider view of ethics than that operating within the wider 'absolutist rights' agenda, the philosophical and methodological concepts of ethics need to shift towards concepts based on relationism. An important consequence of this move is that it requires a shift from current models of CD education based on 'perceived' knowledge of human rights and where and how they must be applied, to a model based on how to proceed in making explicit and understandable the functions, values and political consequences of development intervention steps. More precisely, students must understand how they can ensure that their practices are ethical rather than just know that they are applying the ethical rules they have learned.

Furthermore, if CD ethics focuses on preparing workers that can "fit into" the ethical practices of a given context, CD students are short-changed in their learning about how ethical arrangements come to be and are maintained. Indeed, in such case they are encouraged to accept the 'cultural', 'contextual' or 'natural' and merely fit their personal practice to the given situation. As such, they would focus on finding solutions to problems within established ethical frameworks, rather than ask 'why is this a problem, how did it come to be this way, and what would constitute an ethical response?' The achievement of absolutist (legislative) criminalisation of FGM, for example, may make a worker feel that they have made an ethical achievement without actually assisting those impacted by the practice.

Moving from ethical absolutes (god, state, altruism, duty, virtue) to embracing and aligning with a relational ethical
approach to rights-based frameworks, CD students will be asked to examine conceptual and pragmatic knowledge and skills, which might help them to engage with others and better understand their 'relating' with those they are intending to assist. Explicitly and implicitly opening up CD education rests on four essential areas of ethical theory and practice vital for informed ethical CD professionals:

first, the need for historical consideration of why ethical systems (such as rights) are generally and in specific contexts, good and valuable;

second, the need for examination of the political nature of ethics and why value positions and 'ethical' courses of action differentially empower and disempower persons and groups;

third, the need to understand the diversity of ethical approaches across and within groups in reaction to environmental pressures as well as globalism;

fourth, the importance of emergence and change in ethical frameworks in response to the globalization of information, culture and the market place.

The impact of multi-dimensionality, emergence and unpredictability are the everyday work of CD workers, yet current education models tend towards absolute ethical approaches without providing students with tools they can use to 'lift the lid' on processes of ethics formation. For example, in the case of Child Protection, students must be able to distinguish first order questions about empirical evidence of child abuse from second order questions about the methods that were used for investigating and documenting the abuse. Once the relative perceptions of such abuse are considered, collaborative judgements about its perceived 'harmfulness' and of the validity of measures of its significance can be developed. Third order questions about cultural assumptions and underpinning ethical values can be used to collaboratively consider the validity of intervention strategies. CD students who learn to pose such questions develop the process (or virtue ethics) approach that assists them to go beyond absolute rule-based ethics and make sound ethical judgements in the dynamic context of cross-cultural work.

Finally, the 'relational' approach is deliberately post-structural as it promotes understanding of ethical-political relationships between the CD practitioner and the community context; visibility of the power relationships and of the impact of power on moral/ethical perceptions supports open examination and transformative reflection on the part of the practitioner. CD workers can still choose to align closely with the ethical framework of the context they work in (such as promoting Rights, addressing abuse, FGM, etc.), yet now they do so after engaging in an explicit and philosophically consistent process of reflection and interpretation in context. They also have acquired the philosophical and theoretical toolkit to cope with the emergence of new ethical positions in communities and the moral outrages about existing practices and change processes. The ethical-political decisions about the "good" and about "virtue" can be made based upon consideration of a much wider range of relational entities than by merely "fitting in" with existing in-situ ethical practices and frameworks.

Conclusion

Whilst child abuse and family intervention activities are so emotionally felt that they encourage absolute judgements and ill-considered 'morally right' actions, there are arguments that justify considered and cultural sensitive action. CD workers have been faced with morally-righteous community pressure to act punitively and to apply Rights-based principles about protective intervention, while professional imperatives for culturally-relative acceptance of challenging practices have equally emerged and we agree with the overall suggestions in Ife's (2010) Human Rights from Below publication. We have explored the need to reject absolutes when intervening in communities while acknowledging the possibility of changes based upon opening-up and considering both community values and Rights imperatives. We argue for the adoption of a relational middle-way approach to ethical decision-making that satisfies all. Used examples from child-protection and FGM to explore Latour's and Law's ideas about group function, sensitive consideration of cultural differences and the inevitability of power and change, we have criticised the absolutist, rule-based 'disciplinary expert' role. It also recommends a 'process' or 'virtue ethics' approach that assists workers to engage with, understand and respect other worldviews, including ethical/unethical practices affecting children. We have sought a more ethical way of engaging with communities regarding changes to practices (such as FGM) that are now incompatible with 'developed' world ethics or health intentions.

As cross-national helping activity intensifies and of UN/UNICEF activities continue to drive Rights-based interventions across cultural borders, the need for ethically relevant training is increasingly important. We have highlighted how the relational approach can be applied in CD learning to equip workers with the personal capacities (or virtues) to understand the dynamics of cultural formation and change and to engage with the change process in an ethical manner. The emphasis is first on collaboration rather than on expertise and on engagement in discourse rather than on the imposition of absolutist ethical intervention.

REFERENCES

People, Power, Participation: living community development

A memoir and reflections on community development

People, Power and Participation contributes to a history of community development in Australia and to debates about its future as a strategy for social change. The author’s lived experience, told through stories of activism, practice and teaching from the 1960s on, is a means for identifying changes in community development theories/practices and factors influencing those changes. Highlighted are positive outcomes for disadvantaged people as well as tensions and contradictions, notably those arising from government patronage.

The author calls for re-affirmation of community development as a significant means for tackling social problems. Increased sponsorship by non-government organisations committed to social justice and ecological sustainability is prioritised, as is deconstruction of an understanding of community development as a paid occupation only. Rather, it is seen as a way of doing things that emphasises connection, participatory democracy and common good, a way which can inform all aspects of human activity.

Available at:
Online (Paypal):
Institute of Community Development
www.cd.borderlands.org.au
ph 03 9819 3239

ABBOTTVILLE

John Tomlinson

We will:
stop the news about the boats.
Praise the rich.
Blame poor folks.

We will:
act with haste to stop the waste.
Work with fools to close the schools.
Dredge the reef export the coal.
Slash foreign aid and sell our soul.
Sanitise the message.
Pacify the outrage.
Glorify our verbiage.