# Cultural collisions in social work –
# The case of Aboriginal clients in Australia

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# Abstract

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Problems in social work with aboriginal clients in Australia are analysed in this thesis. The cultural collision between Western social workers and aboriginal clients is interpreted as the result of poor insight into the culturally determined worldview, the value system, norms and conceptions held by many aboriginal clients. More specifically, the collision is expressed in communication problems concerning support design and the importance of kinship. This problem is also manifested when social workers with an Aboriginal background encounter peer clients as well as Westerners. Symbolic interactionism and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis concerning how the linguistic framework determines the worldview provide theoretical insights into the communication problems together with anthropological knowledge of cultural and ethnic identity. The thesis gives a literature review of current studies of social work among Aboriginals. The outcome of this analysis is reported in the thesis. Finally, the critical issue of social work training is brought up. How should the education in social work be improved to meet the demands of successful and meaningful encounters between social worker and Aboriginal clients? Obviously, more insights and knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture is necessary together with practical communication training.


*Swedish version*
I uppsatsen analyseras problem som uppstår i mötet mellan socialarbetare med västerländsk bakgrund och klienter med aboriginisk bakgrund i Australien. Den kulturkollision som ofta uppstår kan förstås som bristfällig insikt i den kulturellt baserade livssyn, verklighetsuppfattning, normsystem och värdesystem som gäller för många klienter med aboriginisk bakgrund. Mer specifikt kommer kollisionen till uttryck som bristfällig kommunikation i fråga om stödinsatsers utformning och släktbandens betydelse. Symbolisk interaktionism och Sapir-Whorf-hypotesen om hur en individs lingvistiska referensram bestämmer verklighetsuppfattningen ger teoretisk förståelse av kommunikationsproblemen tillsammans med antropologiska kunskaper om kulturell och etnisk identitet. I uppsatsen ges en översikt av aktuell vetenskaplig litteratur om socialt arbete bland aboriginer. Utfallet av kategoriseringen redovisas i uppsatsen.
Uppsatsen tar också upp hur utbildningen av socialarbetare kan förbättras så att mötet med aboriginiska klienter blir mer framgångsrikt och meningsfullt.

**Key words:** Aboriginal, indigenous, Australian social work, literature review.
**Nyckelord:** aboriginer, urbefolkning, Australiskt socialt arbete, litteraturstudie .

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## Dictionary

**Aboriginal people**- the descendants of the earliest inhabitants of a place. They are the "original inhabitants" of the land. They have existed in a territory from time immemorial (the beginning) and before the arrival of European/American colonizers.

**Indigenous people**- diverse populations located throughout the world, residing on ancestral lands, sharing an ancestry with the original inhabitants of these lands, having distinct cultures and languages and regarding themselves as different from those who colonized and now control their lands.

**Torres Strait Islanders**- Indigenous Australians, but also the indigenous people of Torres Strait Islands, a part of Queensland, Northeast Australia. Regarded as being distinct Aboriginal Australians and are sometimes referred to separately. Approximately 45 000 people of the indigenous Australians are Torres Strait Islanders

(Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird, 2008)

## Statistics

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) there are around 520 000 Aboriginals in Australia, 2,6% of the population. The Northern Territories have the highest amount of Aboriginal Australians (33%) and the percentage is evenly spread in the rest of the states (around 2-4%).

The unemployment rate for indigenous Australians is approximately 16%, which is three times more than non-indigenous Australians.

Median age for an indigenous Australian is 21 years, compared with non-indigenous Australian with median age of 37.

Thirty-two percent of indigenous Australians live in cities and 25% of the indigenous population live in remote areas.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

# Introduction

Social work implies meetings between human beings. A successful meeting requires mutual understanding, in fact a deep understanding involving empathy, the capacity to take the other's role, to understand her/his feelings, intentions and thoughts. This understanding is basic and necessary in order to evaluate the client's needs and to develop an appropriate strategy for providing assistance. However, a major obstacle for this understanding can be wide differences between the social worker and the client in terms of culture, age, gender, class, worldview, and life experiences. Such differences always exist, but can in many cases be overcome. A well-trained and experienced social worker has often developed sufficient capacity and empathy to encounter people of various backgrounds with reasonable success. However, in cases of too wide differences between social workers and clients the situation can be very problematic.

In this thesis, I will bring up a striking example of a cultural gap between social workers and clients, i.e., the collision between Western social practices and Aboriginal[1] clients in Australia. This example has certainly many unique features but also some general characteristics with relevance for many cultural minorities in the world today. I will first analyse the situation for the Aboriginals in Australia, including a brief account of the historic background and the current situation. Then I will present some basic issues in the relationship between the social worker and Aboriginal client. I will in this context also discuss the situation when the social worker has an Aboriginal background. In addition, I want to highlight the need for an improved education of social workers. The bases for my analysis will be text material primarily from scientific journals and academic textbooks. And I will approach this material by applying a coding system to simplify and categorize the various themes involved in the problematic meeting of a social worker and an Aboriginal client.

However, I want to emphasize the fact that Aboriginals do not constitute a homogeneous group. An essentialistic approach can be misleading. Thus, I try to recognize individual differences when I discuss the witness reports in the cited literature.

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[1] When I speak of Australian Aboriginal as the Indigenous people of Australia, Torres Strait Islanders are included.

## The background of indigenous Australian social work

In order to understand the development of Australian social work and the indigenous Australian struggle over the last centuries, I will in this section briefly introduce the history and background of Australian social work.

Gray et al. (2008b) states that when the colonization of Australia began, including the removal of indigenous children and the attempt of westernise Aboriginal communities, the indigenous Australian understood what kind of impact this process would have on their culture. They could later see the destructive influence of the social work profession that did nothing to emphasize the Aboriginal way of helping or healing, even though the Aboriginal worldview had very little in common with the Western worldviews. This is, according to Gray et al. (2008b), seen in many indigenous cultures around the world but Australia has been noticeably slow in their acceptance of non-Western worldviews, especially when it comes to social work. As a result social work education and social work practicians in Australia have had difficulties to deliver services in an effective and appropriate way to encourage Aboriginal culture. Western social work is thus often inadequate in the meeting with indigenous people. Also we have to remember that social work as a profession is a contemporary Western invention, apparently its original idea is not always transferable on indigenous needs or match indigenous values (ibid.).

Briskman (2008) indicates that it is important that Australian social workers understand the history of Australian social work, and by learning from the mistakes made in the past they can understand their role as an Australian social worker today.

Briskman (2008) also points out that indigenous people have remained the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder as a result of the legacy of policies of oppression and they have not gained benefits of health, education and economic status. The poor health, high rates of substance abuse, inadequate housing/infrastructure, unemployment and the fact that they live twenty years less than other Australians is surprising when comparing Australia's indigenous people to other fourth world settler nations (ibid.).

According to Lindqvist (2005) it is notable that the New Zealand's indigenous people (Maori) have not experienced similar colonization effects due to a treaty that was

signed with the Maori people to legitimise the British invasion and gave them right to some of their land and the right to continue living in a traditional way.

Briskman (2008) concludes that ever since social work as a profession began in Australia there has been a dominance of the Western discourse, which has caused great harm to the indigenous people. The indigenous knowledge of helping their peers has been ignored in the past and is not often recognized as a professional social work method. The Western discourse has dominated indigenous knowledge, and it is the significant difference between the two knowledge structures that has caused the root of the problem of social work with indigenous people in Australia. Briskman (2008) means that it is no doubt, professional Australian social work has failed to include indigenous culture, worldviews and healing procedures, on obvious case of cultural arrogance.

## Statement of the problem

Social workers in Australia will frequently meet indigenous Australians in their work, and it is of importance that staff members have the appropriate skills and insights to work with this client group (Pederson et al. 2006). The number of indigenous social workers in Australia is very small and they are often working in Aboriginal communities close to their own kinship. They feel that the education of social workers does not explicate the practice of working with indigenous people, and that the need of working in a different way towards indigenous clients is disregarded (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003).

The non-indigenous social worker many times thinks that indigenous social workers do not apply the standard and the Western procedure in their work. On the other hand, the indigenous social workers feel that they do not get the acceptance of the work they are doing in the way they mean is appropriate and needed when working with Aboriginal clients. There is thus a need for recognition of the indigenous social work practice and that the Western discourse is not always suitable for indigenous social work (ibid).

According to Baldry, Green and Thorpe (2006) the Aboriginal clients many times feel neglected and discriminated by a non-indigenous social worker when seeking

assistance within the social service and that they have problems understanding the jargon that is used by non-indigenous social workers. Therefore the indigenous clients often prefer assistance from an indigenous social worker.

The lack of knowledge of Australian Aboriginal history, and most important, the culture is a factor that leads to the non-indigenous inability to provide adequate assistance to Aboriginal clients (ibid).

*Personal interest*

My interest in this subject began when I was as an intern at a non-governmental organization (NGO) in central Sydney, Australia, providing assistance to clients with immediate needs, such as social service, mental health care, housing, rehabilitation or other contacts with governmental or non-governmental organizations. Some of our clients were indigenous Australians, and I felt they used a different approach to me as a white social worker student. They were harder to reach out to and sometimes intimidated when seeking the help we provided. During my time at the NGO, I could not quite understand why this was the case as I aimed to treat everyone equally. But after reading about social work in Australia I realised there are many factors behind the Aborigines' approach to me as a social worker. I therefore think there is a need for a substantially increased knowledge and improved education for non-indigenous and indigenous social workers to be better prepared in their meeting with indigenous clients. The different attitudes between non-indigenous and indigenous social workers should also be noticed and what we can learn from each other in the future.

## Aims

The aim of this study is to analyse the difficulties indigenous Australian and non-indigenous Australian social workers face in their meeting with indigenous Australian clients. Is there a need for more specific education regarding indigenous clients? Does this possible lack of education contribute to the problems that indigenous workers and indigenous clients experience with the Western discoursed based social work? The study is based on a review of relevant literature. More specifically, the following problems will be elucidated:

## Problems

- What aspects, according to the literature, are important to consider when working with indigenous clients?
- Are there important differences to take into account, between indigenous and non-indigenous social workers that may affect this work?
- What is needed in the social worker education to support the indigenous social worker student?
- How can the Australian social worker education be improved to provide understanding of indigenous needs?

## Main concepts

*Culture*

Culture as a concept can have many different meanings in various areas of discipline. When I speak of culture in this study, it is understood as the Australian Aboriginal cultures such as their religion, meaning of land and most important their worldviews.

I will quote Devore and Schlesingers' *Ethnic-Sensitive Social Work Practice* (1999) regarding the cultural concept as an exemplification of the meaning in this context:

> "*Culture is a commonly used concept that is difficult to define. It revolves around the fact that human groups differ in the way they structure their behaviour, in their worldview, in their perspective on the rhythms and patterns of life, and in their concept of the essential nature of the human condition*"
>
> (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999, page 26)

The above paragraph clarifies the concept of culture but also the relevance of what culture stands for in this particular study. I will primarily use the cross-cultural perspective that relates to the interaction and synthesis concerning two different cultures.

The ethnical identity is also an important part of the meaning of culture in this framework. Different cultures means different worldviews and self-awareness. Belonging to a group, sharing similar cultural heritage creates advantages in the sense of serving and helping. People tend to not have the feeling of responsibility towards others if they are from another cultural group (Allwood, 2000). The cross-cultural perspective is here defined in the context of being the helper to someone with a different cultural and ethnical background than oneself. In this study the concepts of culture and ethnicity are symbiotical or closely interwoven.

## Text material used in this study

There is an extensive literature on Aboriginal Australians and Australian social work in general but very little on indigenous social work; there are just a handful of texts proposing a structural development regarding the indigenous matter, even though this is a highly controversial topic (Green & Baldry, 2008).

I will mainly use articles from Australian social work journals, where most of the research is found. Unfortunately most of the articles are written by the same author/authors, implying that there might be too much of the same point of view. The journals that have the most research on the topic are Australian Social Work, issued by Australian Association of Social Work, AASW - the professional representative body of Australian social work.

A primary book has been *Indigenous Social Work around the World- Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice* (Gray & Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008). It is an anthology for contemporary social work studies with many important chapters such as: *Indigenous Social Work Education* by Erika Faith, *Hearing Indigenous and Local Voices in Mainstream Social Work* by Gray, Coates and Hetherington, *Missing the 'Flight from Responsibility'* by Gair, to only mention a few.

Sue Green, Associate Professor, Nura Gili (indigenous studies and resource centre) at University of New South Wales, UNSW, in Sydney and Eileen Baldry, Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work, UNSW are frequently mentioned in various Australian journals regarding their work and research about indigenous social work. For my study I have chosen the two most relevant: *Building Indigenous Social Work* (2008) and *Urban Australian Aboriginal peoples' experience of human service* (together with Katrina Thorpe, 2006).

Another article from Australian Social Work is, *Hearing the stories of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers: challenging and educating the system* by counsellor Bindi Bennett and lecturer Joanna Zubrzycki (2003). The authors are discussing what challenges indigenous social workers are facing when

practicing a Western discourse based social work. Further discussed are also indigenous social work students' opinions on the social worker education in Australia.

Anne Pedersen, Pat Dudgeon, Susan Watt and Brian Griffiths' (2006) article: *Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians- The issue of "special treatment"*, emphasises the negative approach many non-indigenous Australians have concerning indigenous Australians when the last named group receive special benefits such as housing and legal privileges. This article was published in The Australian Psychologist and is valuable in this study to confirm that racism is not uncommon among non-indigenous Australians.

I will also use two articles discussing Canadian Aboriginals, *The Experience of Urban Aboriginals with Health Care Service in Canada* by Associate Professors Ron Levin and Margot Herbert (2004) and *Painting the Prisons "Red": Constructing and Experiencing Aboriginal Identities in Prison* by Professors Joane Martel and Renée Brassard (2006). I find these relevant as the focus lay on the indigenous social work as a profession and that the Western social work discourse does not acknowledge the Aboriginal way of helping. The two studies focus on Canadian Aboriginal social work but they both explicate the similarities of Canadian and Australian indigenous people.

The Swedish anthology *Tvärkulturella möten- Grundbok för psykologer och socialarbetare* (Cross-cultural encounters, my own translation) edited by Carl Martin Allwood and Elsie Franzén (2000) has been useful in the parts concerning cultural descriptions as a significant resource in the analysis regarding the non-indigenous social workers encounters with indigenous clients.

## Theoretical frame of reference

Aspers (2008) state the importance of using the point of view of different discipline when pursuing a study or research. Theories and theoretical frames of references can apply to other areas outside the one you are connected to. Therefore, I have turned to the anthropological discipline as highly relevant in the study of Aboriginal culture.

In order to be able to explicate my choice of theoretical framework I have been using McGee and Warms' *Anthropological Theory* (2008) and Lambek's *Anthropology of Religion* which both are highlighting Marcel Mauss' theory on Totemism and the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis. Georg Herbert Mead (1934) has also been a valuable source for inputs in the theoretical framework.

## Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis/The linguistic relativity is the theory and idea that our language shapes the way we think and behave (McGee & Warms, 2008). In this context the theory is useful in the understanding why non-indigenous social workers have difficulties of understanding indigenous clients, and the fact that the Aboriginal Australians have a different worldview than other Australians. In many interviews with Aboriginal clients the language barrier between social worker and client seems to be a major issue. It is reported in the literature used in the study that it is not the fact that they speak different languages (most Aboriginal Australians speak English as their first language, only a few speak an Aboriginal language)- the issue is the difference in the understanding of what is important and the maintenance of the Aboriginal worldview (ibid.).

The language is also important to culture and it is difficult to preserve a culture without uphold the language, since the language contains beliefs, worldviews and concepts. This is particularly important to indigenous cultures, when the language is a part of the foundations of their culture. Even though many Aboriginal Australians do not speak any of the Aboriginal languages, they feel cut off from their ancestors when not being able to translate words or meanings that have no equivalence in the English language when their indigenous language is lost (Gray et al. 2008a).

The meaning or semantics of words and concepts is not the only linguistic obstacle for mutual understanding. Also para-linguistic factors such as prosody, intonation, word stress, voice volume, facial expression, gestures etc. play a significant role in the communication process. Georg Herbert Mead's classic work on symbolic interactionism is particularly relevant here (Mead, 1934). This framework is certainly useful in empirical studies where the actual interaction between social workers and clients are observed. Symbolic interactionism also provides an important theoretical framework for the interpretation of the communication failures in the relation between a Western social worker and an Aboriginal client.

## Reciprocity-Totemism-Kinship

According to Stanner (2002) in the anthology *A reader in the Anthropology of Religion* Australian Aboriginal culture has played a significant role in the development of anthropological thoughts. The Aboriginal Australians have been considered to be the simplest society on earth, but anthropologist who studied various Aboriginal communities found that they have a complex and deep religious thought and social structure. Stanner (2002) mentions Claude Lévi Strauss theory about totemism, related to the kinship theory and also religiously orientated. Totemism is an important part of Australian Aboriginals religion and the totems purpose is to make the physical world more comprehensive. Stanner (2002) means that totemism creates a way to cope with life, when contemporary society is interfering with the Aboriginals physical environment.

Kinship is important to Aboriginal Australians since they refer to their entire surrounding network as *family*, not just the immediate family and biological relationships, but also their community. The kinship plays an important role in the Aboriginal community as it creates reciprocity obligations between the members of the kinship network (ibid.).

Reciprocity is connected to the kinship theory due to the importance of exchanging goods or services within the kinship group. This is especially noticeable for social workers working in Aboriginal communities and in their own kinship network.

## Methods and data selection

My method has been a literature review guided by the questions specified in the introduction. The theoretical analysis has, in other words, led me to my questions.

The method I have used in this study is a literature review where the statements given by various expert observers are taken as witness statements. A reasonable alternative method would have been to interview indigenous and non-indigenous social workers in Australia or making direct observation of interactional patterns. Unfortunately, I had no possibilities to do this study overseas and I am aware of the potential shortcomings with my approach. Therefore I have to rely on other studies on the same or similar topics instead of empirical data collected by myself. I have considered the textual data and the authors' point of view as witness reports, and I am aware of how secondary sources can affect the outcome of the analysis. It is not the actual respondents statements I am analysing, rather the authors or witnesses interpretation of their particular study/research. When using secondary sources it is important to remain critical and reflective over my choice of data.

Even though I could have made interviews over e-mail or video conversations, I felt that this procedure would have taken too long and with a risk of inconsistency in the data. However, the chosen literature according to the applied selection criteria gives some guarantee for valid answers to my questions. In this sense, this is rather a pilot study for a more direct empirical investigation of the problems involved in indigenous social work. Such empirical studies should include direct observations of the communication patterns in the interaction between social workers and Aboriginal clients, interviews of the persons involved, questionnaires as basis for more quantitative information. The impact of adequate training should also be evaluated. Practical limitations in terms of time and economy, however, have restricted me to use secondary sources as the basis for my ambition to understand the basic issues in this thesis.

According to Aspers (2008), you should choose a method that can provide the best answers to your problem and as I mentioned above, the risk of getting a fall out of important data increases (such as the interviewee not giving complete answers or no possibilities to clarify certain answers) when using Internet as an interview method.

## Analyses of available texts

I have followed Watt Boolsen (2007) and started by reading over twenty major articles and books concentrating on Australian social work with indigenous clients. After this first step I had to narrow down the available texts to be able to focus on the problem chosen for my study. Step two was to write down and categorize main themes found in the literature. When analysing the textual data, I have used a version of coding. Instead of coding a particular word, sentence or point of view, I classified or graded articles or chapters in terms of the main content. This method gave me an overview of what textual data I already had and what I might further need to be able to answer my questions. To begin coding, there has to be predetermined what to look for but I can still have a few unfixed code principles. However, when using a literature review as a methodology, the problem or question must lead the code categories (ibid). After coding the empirical data, I have been able to classify the literature into categories matching my original questions or state of problem and through these classifications compose an analysis.

Main categories have been:

- Indigenous or non-indigenous worldviews
- Indigenous or non-indigenous attitudes
- Indigenous or non-indigenous social workers' point of view
- Australian Aboriginal history
- Social work education in Australia
- Different types of indigenous clients

Through these main categories I have created subcategories to be able to find exactly what I am looking for in a particular theme. By using these categories I have also formed the different sections in the analysis. The sections in the analysis are:

- Australian Aboriginal and indigenous social work
- Different worldviews, different understanding
- Indigenous clients
- Social work education in Australia

## Limitation and advantages

I have based my study on peer reviewed articles from internationally recognized journals, mainly Australian, issued by AASW. The journals are primarily from areas concerning social work, psychology and health care. The books I have been using regarding indigenous and intercultural social work are mainly published by social work professors in several nations around the world. This base has its obvious limitations. I only get knowledge of an indirect kind and have to rely on the validity of the observations done and interpreted by other investigators. This is a fundamental problem. A more practical problem is that the selection of texts is not complete due to limitations in library resources. The selection criteria (peer reviewed journals and highly regarded textbooks by established researchers) give some guarantee that the reports include valid and reliable observations.

Since I am not a student at an Australian university I have no access to their Internet library. When I requested this I was referred to Nura Gili, the University of New South Wales, UNSW's, indigenous research department. Nura Gili is mainly a department for indigenous university students but also for them who seek knowledge in indigenous studies. Through Nura Gili I could find relevant articles and books, but I had still no access to the research centre. Therefore, I tried to find the same articles and books from Lund University database. Sometimes this was successful, especially with the articles. The books, on the other hand, were more difficult since most of them were not available in Sweden.

A few articles and books I use in my study are treating the Aboriginals in different parts of the world except from Australia, such as the Canadian Aboriginals and Maori New Zealanders who have experienced similar colonisations issues but are not, according to Green and Baldry (2008), as discriminated as Australian Aboriginals in contemporary social work.

Due to my decision of using a literature review I will be able to evaluate both qualitative and quantitative methods the authors have used in their reports. As a result I will receive a broader perspective on my study since I am unable to interview key persons myself.

## Reliability and validity

I consider the empirical data reliable and valid in view of the fact that that I am only using peer reviewed and internationally recognized journals where the authors are acknowledged in the area. Numerous of the documents I use in my study are also used by UNSW's research programs for indigenous studies, Nura Gili. The authors are well known in their area of research and often professors and lecturers of social work or health care studies.

On the other hand, the reliability and validity issue should concern not the texts I am using but rather my method of classification. If another person used the same text material and reached very similar classifications the procedure could be regarded as reliable and valid.

## Ethical considerations

On the basis of an ethical consideration I will illuminate the risk of regarding the Australian Aboriginals as victims. Some people will argue that the term *victim* in this matter is not politically correct, although I believe that the Australian Aboriginals have been and still are refugees in their own country and for that reason it is possible to refer to the Australian Aboriginals as victims. I consider the fact that if someone else caused a person or a group harm the offended are by definition victims. However, I will not use the term *victim* in my analysis.

In today's contemporary society of Australia many of the Australian Aboriginals' problems originate from the colonisation when the Australian Aboriginal were considered as non-equal and discriminated from the new society. Of course this condition is still seen all over Australia and the rest of the world among other indigenous groups.

I have to remind myself that many Australian Aboriginals do not want to be integrated and keep on practicing their religion and culture the same way they have done for thousands of years. They do not want to interact with the "new" country and want to remain undisturbed.

There is also a group of Australian Aboriginals who want to move in to the cities and interrelate with the white society. However, with limited education and work experience that often leads to unemployment and alienation. This is where the social issues begin for the indigenous community.

As mentioned above, these are factors I have to consider when analysing my empirical data; not every Australian Aboriginal want to be integrated and far from everyone is a case for the social service. The problem usually starts with Australian Aboriginal moving to larger towns and cities as an end-point of the colonisation process (Green & Baldry, 2008).

The articles I use for my study that relate to the indigenous or non-indigenous social work and interviews with indigenous clients are ethics approved, so when I discuss the Australian Aboriginal attitudes of social work the stories have been confirmed by interviewed persons. Thus I consider that expressed attitudes and opinions are reasonably valid.

May (2001) pointed out that impartialness in the research process is associated with science, truth and interest and that these are working in symbiosis. I have to be careful with how my own values and opinions reflect upon my collection of information (ibid).

## Analysis

To be able to answer the questions of this study I will in this part analyse the textual data I obtained. The following four themes will be analysed:

1) The indigenous social workers' description on Australian social work and how it is affected by the Western social work.

2) The Australian Aboriginal worldview.

3) The indigenous clients experience with contemporary Australian social work whether the help is coming from an indigenous social worker or a non-indigenous social worker.

4) An analysis concerning the social work education in Australia.

## Australian Aboriginal and indigenous social work

According to Gray et al. (2008 a) Western social work has a lot to learn from indigenous social work and social work from non-Western cultures. What is learned in indigenous frameworks has relevance in Western frameworks as well, especially when dealing with cultural diversity.

Gray et al. (2008a) also point out that the acceptance of indigenous social work seems to grow as a consequence of increasing numbers of immigrants from non-Western countries. Western societies tend to acknowledge and appreciate the value of alternative worldviews, and spirituality (ibid.). Social movements such as peace, disarmament, holistic medicine, voluntary work and feminism are much more common now than they were centuries ago, and has also helped indigenous social work on its way to recognition due to acceptance and reinforcement from the scientific/academic Western society. This can open opportunities for indigenous social work and local approaches of healing and helping. Thus, culture seems to play an important part of social work, and social work as a profession is a product of culture (ibid.).

*Kinship*

According to Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) the cultural identity of the Australian Aboriginal social workers influences their practice and their professional position. Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) interviewed several indigenous social workers to see how the Western social work practices influences the indigenous way of helping and

healing, and they suggested that the indigenous social work is culturally and professionally challenged. This also seemed to include working with their own kinship network, which is common in smaller indigenous communities throughout Australia, where the non-indigenous social worker is not as frequent. They also suggested that the indigenous social worker often struggles with personal and professional boundaries due to the importance of kinship as a part of the Aboriginal culture. We are taught during our social work education that a professional boundary is important in the helping process, to be personal but not private. But in indigenous communities this is probably a harder task. Once again the kinship culture must be difficult to avoid. According to Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) an indigenous client often feels the necessity of developing a friendship with the indigenous social worker when coming from the same area or Aboriginal land. It is not rare that when being helped by an indigenous social worker the client exceeds this professional boundary and expects that the social worker's service also applies to close family and friends. These kinship ties are not uncommon in Aboriginal communities when many Aboriginal people relate to each other in one way or another. The standard procedure of re-referring a client to a new social worker with no immediate connection to one other is not always applicable in this case when small communities do not have this option (ibid.). This ethical problem may also occur in smaller communities in other countries.

A common method in small Aboriginal communities is to first establish a relationship with the client, such as, identifying birthplace, share personal stories and life experiences. Self-disclosure during the introduction process may be efficient when working with indigenous clients and originates from indigenous worldviews where connection, relationship and harmony are described as being an important part of the helping process (Bennet & Zubrzycki, 2003; Gray et al. 2008a).

The interviewed social workers in Bennet and Zubrzycki's (2003) study mention that the maintenance of boundaries is expressed during the social worker education but with no connection to social work with indigenous clients and especially not while being an indigenous social worker themselves. One interviewed social worker mentioned an event when a client called in the middle of the night asking for help when being locked up in jail. The professional status says no, but the fact that the

client would call even if you were not a social worker makes it even more difficult. The kinship ties are thus deeply rooted in their culture and obviously hard to avoid (ibid.). According to Stanner's (2002) explanations on the reciprocity theory, the reciprocity obligations are here clearly manifested. Exchanging services within the kinship network are described as being crucial. In this case the clients' requested of being helped, even though it stands outside the social workers professional status. However, in Aboriginal communities the kinship ties might not always be seen as an issue, since the Aboriginal social worker might actually want to help and support clients' from the same kinship network as oneself. The kinship obligation does not just disappear with the social worker's profession.

Another common issue when working with many indigenous Australians is to get permission from the family when working with an individual. The focus lies on the individual but the family or community members are connected to the clients' helping process. According to Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) the use of the family has in some communities become a part of the helping process; in some cases can this be an asset when the family can have a more suitable intervention strategy, but in many cases the kinship tie can preclude the social worker from engaging with the client. This is often experienced when dealing with domestic violence, and the client feels that the social worker comes too close to a family problem and fear of the confidentially arrangement being exceeded (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; Gray et al. 2008a).

One interpretation is that the collective group plays a more significant role than the individual. Gray and Coates (2008) propose that sharing and reciprocity is essential in the Aboriginal community and this strengthens the groups, especially in rural communities. Social relationships distinguish individuals, and identity comes from sharing food, water, land, knowledge, spirits and social activities. According to Mead (1934) the identity formation is a social process, and once a strong identity is established it will have a profound influence on the communication process far beyond the sequence of words uttered. So we can reach a deeper understanding of the problematic meeting with indigenous clients.

The indigenous culture can also make it difficult for a social worker to work with clients of a different gender or age due to culturally boundaries. It is not always

appropriate for an elderly man to receive help from a younger female social worker as it highlights the gaps in power, status and knowledge (Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003).

*Working with non-indigenous social workers*

According to Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) numerous indigenous social workers have a non-indigenous social worker as a supervisor, and many indigenous social workers find it complicated to work with a non-indigenous supervisor due to their lack of cultural knowledge. Their interpretation is that the Western discourse of helping is not always applicable on indigenous needs, and supervising sessions might just be an opportunity for the indigenous social worker to justify why they are working in this way, instead of getting the appropriate help they are requiring.

The indigenous practice and the "common" practice are described as colliding in terms of the different ways of helping, but they can coexist according to Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003). A consequence of (mainly by social service agencies) not recognizing the indigenous practice is that indigenous social workers do not get employed, and it leaves the indigenous community alienated. On the other hand, many organizations want to employ indigenous workers just for the fact they are indigenous but they do not accept their indigenous way of helping, which makes it more difficult for the indigenous social worker to acknowledge their professional status (ibid.).

In the Australian Association of Social Work, AASW, Code of Ethics (2009), social work with indigenous people or Aboriginal Australians are only mentioned a few times. But it is stated as a principle that social workers must recognize Aboriginal Australians as the indigenous people of Australia, and acknowledge the historical disadvantages and apply this in the social work with Aboriginal clients. Also social workers must recognize and respect cultural diversity of Australian society within indigenous and other cultures (AASW, 2009).

*Improvements of indigenous social work*

The following proposed changes for indigenous social work are found in most of the literature used in this study and I find them representative (consider them distinguishing for) of the literature focusing on indigenous social work:

Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird (2008b) explain the political nature of indigenous social work and indicate that there is a need for culturally relevant responses from non-indigenous social workers. Indigenous people are described as being suspicious of professional social workers and are concerned of the non-indigenous way of helping. Therefore Gray et al. (2008b) suggest a few solutions in order to change indigenous social work: 1) Social workers should engage with the indigenous clients, meaning that they have to understand their desire to own, manage and control their lands. 2) Smooth the progress of social service resources as indigenous people are portrayed as being among the most disadvantaged and deprived in the world. 3) Encourage social workers to support indigenous movements (indigenous people are fighting back and are engaging in activism around the world).

4) Develop social service models and theoretical frameworks relevant to local cultures and contexts. 5) Work with the governments to ensure they take responsibility for their violations of indigenous people and live up to their agreements and give adequate compensation for the harm of indigenous people (ibid.).

## Different worldviews, different understanding

According to Hart (2008) the definition of worldview is the way a person in a particular society perceives his/her relationship to the world or the idea of the universe. The worldview differs from culture, ethos, way of thought, and national character. A person's worldview indicates the way people in a particular culture understand the world or construct meaning in the world, but also comprise a person's attitudes, values, opinions and concepts, and affect individuals thinking, how to define events and making decisions. Belief systems and social values are described as being the central frameworks in worldviews, and it is very difficult for people to let go of their worldview since we are unconscious of them, unless we deliberately reflect on what they stand for. Most societies today conciliate diverse cultures, but according to Hart (2008) there is a dominant worldview in every society, which reflects how we interpret minority cultures and worldviews. Social work with indigenous people often requires acting against the dominant worldview, and the fundamental differences makes the authoritarian norms conflicting.

Relevant to the concept of worldview is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The linguistic frame of reference has a profound influence on how a person perceives his/her environment. However, as stated earlier in this thesis, it is not only a question of words. Language has a far richer set of dimensions impacting the worldview.

According to Hart (2008) key values in the Australian Aboriginal worldview are:

- Spirituality - the non-physical world in Aboriginal life. Respected in all interactions, including Aboriginal helping approach. Guide to good conduct.
- Sharing - knowledge, life experience and materials goods.
- Respect - showing of honour, esteem, admiration and courtesy to all. Not commanding Aboriginal views on others.

These key values according to Hart (2008) are also found in other texts about Aboriginal ways of helping. These values are believed to shape the Aboriginal helping approach in which people are seen as naturally good. Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that non-indigenous social workers must emphasise these values in the helping process of an Aboriginal client.

Western social work usually does not see spirituality (which is central to an Aboriginal helping approach) as important as the psychological, behavioural, cognitive, social and emotional approaches, generally used in non-indigenous social work. As spirituality is normally viewed as a non-academic perspective, it is important for the Western social work to recognize spirituality as a method in social work with Australian Aboriginal clients (ibid.).

According to Allwood (2000) it is surprising that the psychological knowledge developed in Western countries, traditionally assume that the results are also transferable on to other countries and cultures in non-Western societies. Much more needs to be developed in the education of those who meet people from a different cultural background. Many countries are developing education programs focusing on the countries cultural heritage. Thus, there is a need for national methods and theories focusing on the specific country's issues.

Green and Baldry (2008) emphasize the significance of indigenous Australians families and kinship in indigenous social work. The family is for Aboriginal Australians synonymous with their country, and family is much more important than material possessions, something that, according to Lindqvist (2005), the British invaders disregarded when removing children, women and men from their roots and land. The land is described as a central place in the indigenous worldview and the indigenous people have a spiritual relationship to their country. It is according to Green and Baldry (2008) impossible to address social work with indigenous Australians without understanding the importance of the country for Aboriginal clients. Stanner (2002) embody the Aboriginal land as a totem and thus an important part of their religion. Disregarding someone's religion will clearly have a negative impact on the identity.

Levin and Herbert (2004) point out in their study the problem of having too many non-indigenous health care and social service experts when handling Aboriginal issues when it seems to be a need of a different knowledge than the one originated from the Western social work. On the other hand, it is believed that the need of well-educated professionals, indigenous or not, is necessary and helpful but the expertise must be used with sensitivity when dealing with Aboriginal clients.

*Cultural and ethnical identity*
One interesting witness on the problems involved in the meeting of people with different cultural backgrounds is Allwood (2000). He has articulated the tensions between different worldviews and the development of self awareness. Coming from a different culture means, according to Allwood, having a different worldview and different understanding of the world. This is particularly relevant in the social workers meeting with clients of a different culture than themselves; there is a different understanding of the world and what is important in life. An important part of a persons' cultural understanding is how he/she conceives the cultural group with which oneself is identified. This is also known as ethnical identity (ibid.). There are different criteria, which must be fulfilled in order to belong to a certain ethnic group, such as, -the person himself and other ethnical groups must recognize the belonging of that particular group, -a common origin, -characteristics that differ from other ethnical groups and -sometimes common language and history (ibid.). One criterion is not

enough to be considered the same ethnical group. There must be a combination between more than a few of the criteria mentioned above.

To be able to understand the prerequisites in the meeting between people of different cultural background, it is relevant to emphasize the meaning of belonging to an ethnical group. Allwood (2000) argues that the fact of belonging to a group also influences the way others and yourself understand your self-awareness. The self-awareness and identification is dependent on the ethnical group you belong to.

A common effect of ethnical belonging is that people from a certain group see themselves as a superior group and the other group is alienated. Allwood (2000) means that it is not rare that advantages are given to people from the same ethnical group and the feeling of being responsible over other individuals is therefore present. Stereotyping is based on a lack of knowledge and contact with the other group; prejudice and discrimination is a result of the stereotyping.

Allwood (2000) points out the quality of being able to understand a different culture in the meeting between a social worker and a client from different cultures. A main feature is that the social worker is able to identify with the client without thinking of something as divergent.  When a person, or in this case, a social worker participates in a cultures' knowledge and meaning, the understanding of the culture also changes the way the social worker interprets the clients beliefs and needs.

The meeting with people of a different culture is a challenge involving both positive and negative effects. Allwood (2000) describes misunderstandings and misconceptions as being natural, but on the other hand, possibilities of inspiring conversations and a progress of cultural understanding are a possible positive outcome.

Allwood (2000) concludes that when a social worker is working with a client from a different culture it should be his/her moral obligation to obtain relevant knowledge of the different culture and provide the help according to the client's culture and worldview.

*Aboriginals in prison*

Martel and Brassard (2008) studied imprisoned Canadian Aboriginal women and concludes that a majority were not allowed to practice their culture. The staff members ignored Aboriginals desires such as speaking to an Elder, performing rituals or other cultural ceremonies. Not to be able to practice fundamental religious philosophies contributed to low self-esteem and lack of self-identification. In some prisons the Aboriginal inmates were allowed to cook traditional food in traditional ways and they were to an increasing extent endorsed to practice religious or cultural traditions. The self-esteem and self-identification levels showed great differences from prisons where this is not allowed. Martel and Brassard (2008) discuss the need for cultural recognitions in prisons for Aboriginal or other, by society, discriminated groups. The need of cultural acceptance in prisons in other countries such as Australia and the U.S.A is also argued in the article.

Lindqvist (2005) mentions that many Australian prisons now allow inmates to practice their cultural traditions, mainly by preparing and cooking traditional food. This is described as being highly appreciated by the Aboriginal inmates and important for their self-identification.

> *"As clients´ self-identification with their culture conflicts with the structure and organization of social service within an oppressive environment such as the prison, the need to practice social work from the perspective of the client comes strikingly to the fore. "*
>
> (Martel & Brassard, 2008, page 357)

Above quoted paragraph explains the importance of adopting the indigenous worldview in the process of helping clients on an institutional level. Authorities dominating view of Aboriginals and Aboriginality are thus causing a wider cultural gap between the client and the authority. Martel and Brassard (2008) highlight the importance for social workers to acknowledging this when working in prisons or similar institutions.

*Improvement of mainstream social work by indigenous cultures*

Gray et al. (2008a) discuss what aspects indigenous cultures can improve and enrich in mainstream and Western social work. Indigenous context can therefore enlighten

culturally relevant social work practices. It is also stated by Gray et al. (2008a) that this is applicable in other cultures with indigenous people.

- Indigenous approaches may enhance the mainstream social work by humanitarian goals and the value of connecting with the clients, as these qualities are described as being central in indigenous approaches.
- Indigenous worldviews can enrich and strengthen the social work profession. There are alternative ways of helping and different knowledges.
- If mainstream social work can accept other values and approaches from non-Western cultures, the so-called "universal" social work methods will be more effective in non-Western countries.
- Western and non-Western social work are not opposites, they share common qualities. It is important to value both discourses. Accept indigenous ways of helping rather than romanticize indigenous worldviews as something exotic and innovative.
- Social network, kinship and family are an important part of the healing and helping process.

As mentioned above, it is important to remember that Western and non-Western social work are not contradictories. One does not exclude the other. It is also important to realize that all Western countries do not share the same Western social work practice. It must be differences within different Western cultures and societies. There are great risks by homogenizing Western or universal social work, and by that disregarding other practices as something unordinary and invalid.

## Indigenous clients

There is, according to the literature, a difference between urban and rural clients and I will in this part discuss the urban clients' interaction with the social service. According to Baldry et al. (2006) very little is written about rural or remote Aboriginal clients, but from their research on the subject, rural clients often get assigned an indigenous social worker since indigenous social workers are much more common in rural Aboriginal communities, while urban clients more regularly encounter non-indigenous agencies in the cities.

Faith (2008) indicates that the social work profession has a bad reputation among the Aboriginal Australians and the Aboriginal clients in contact with the profession. For them it has always been another form of oppression and an unwelcome government intervention into Aboriginal communities. Faith (2008) also reports that many Aboriginals experience the social work profession as disrespectful of the Aboriginal culture and have thus developed anger, mistrust and a lack of confidence towards the social work profession and therefore also the Australian government.

> "*The best mainstream social workers can do is to accept our lack of competence in cross-cultural matters and realize that working across cultures is not so much about 'knowledge' as about 'understanding'*"
>
> (Gray et al. 2008a, page 262)

Gray et al. (2008a) means that the client is the expert of his/hers problem and the social worker should try to understand what life is like for the client. The professional competence is described as not always being relevant in these meetings; rather a gain of understanding is the fact that will evolve, help and change the client.

*Urban clients*

Baldry et al. (2006) discuss urban Australian Aboriginal clients' experiences with human services and conclude that the indigenous client might feel more confident talking to an indigenous social worker for the reason that they have more understanding of the cultural meaning and speaking the 'same language' as themselves. Many indigenous clients request an indigenous social worker, and due to this fact it is now common to be given, if possible, an indigenous social worker immediately. Social work agencies tend to refer most indigenous matters to the few indigenous social workers there are, but the interviewed indigenous social workers mentioned that just because it is an indigenous matter does not mean it will be easier for an indigenous social worker to deal with.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is relevant in this case due to the clients' report on the importance of similar linguistic use. It might be the reason why the clients' feel more confident with an indigenous social worker. But it is also a question regarding professional expertise, if an indigenous social worker is handling a client with a

specific problem outside the social workers proficiency; the problem might be just as difficult with a non-indigenous social worker.

Baldry et al. (2006) discuss a major issue; the poor attitude occasionally found among non-indigenous workers and governmental policy making authorities. This result in many indigenous clients prefer going without services rather than getting helped. Interviewed Aboriginal clients sometimes experienced a change in attitude when the social worker finds out about the Aboriginal heritage, and sometimes shame when being illiterate and not telling the social worker about this, then resulting in walking away without the help needed or with documents impossible for them to fill out. In some cases, Baldry et al. (2006) report that the non-indigenous social worker takes for granted that they want an indigenous social worker and re-refer the client without asking what they actually prefer.

It is stated in the article (Baldry et al. 2006) that some clients asked for clarifications in some matters such as documents and forms but the response could be that it is not their (the social worker) fault they (the Aboriginal client) do not understand. It is hard to believe that a social worker would say such thing to any client, but maybe this is how the indigenous client interprets the social worker.

Baldry et al. (2006) concludes from their interviews that the spoken language used by social service officers is a significant issue among indigenous clients and the feeling of being excluded is then even bigger. Many indigenous clients have not long lived in the cities and the formal language is thus even harder to understand than for an indigenous person who has lived in the city their whole life.

*Social work in health service*
Levin and Herbert report in their study (2004) the major gaps in knowledge and skills of the Canadian health care when providing service to Aboriginal clients. The study is focusing on the Canadian Aboriginals but they imply that there are many close similarities to the Australian health care services. The Australian Aboriginals are believed of suffering from similar chronic and stress-related illnesses studied in other Western countries with indigenous people. Researchers from Australia have now requested more culturally competent social workers when dealing with Aboriginals in

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the health and human services. In the U.S., the federal division of Indian Health Service employs specially trained social and health representatives in the Native American communities and it is now a call for the same routine in Australia (ibid.).

The respondents in Levin and Herbert's (2004) study, who were all professionals in the Canadian health care service and working closely with Aboriginal clients declared difficulties in providing treatment or service to Aboriginals. Due to indigenous clients' need of maintaining culture and belief system, the respondents found it difficult to help with physiological issues when these issues have a strong spiritual connection. The respondents felt they lacked in Aboriginal cultural knowledge and spiritual matters.

*Attitudes towards indigenous clients*

Pedersen et al. (2006) report on the negative attitudes towards the indigenous clients in Australia. Their study consisted of interviews from different locations in Australia with randomly picked names from a year 2004 phone book (2400 residents in total). The study concludes that many non-indigenous Australians believe that being Aboriginal entitles you to more social security benefits or privileges on the fact of just being Aboriginal. These "special treatment" issues concerned benefits such as housing, legal system, education and government handouts (brochures for Aboriginals). Many non-indigenous Australians referred to Aboriginals' wish of having equal rights but on the other hand accepting "special treatment". For example, certain governmental websites have a section for indigenous people and what they might be entitled to. Regarding the "special treatment" in housing matters the respondents believe that Aboriginal Australians are given houses by the government and the rent is sometimes payed for. This belief is according to Pederson et al. (2006) incorrect and anyone who is eligible governmental funds for housing will receive the same financial help. It is reasonable to assume that non-indigenous Australians ignore the fact that many Aboriginal Australians are over-represented in various governmental benefit systems.

Pederson et al. (2006) also discuss the "special treatment" issue in the education system, that Aboriginals are getting paid to go to school (higher education) or getting tuition, uniforms, books etc. paid by the government. It is also mentioned that there

are more services or assistance for Aboriginals on campus, centres where indigenous students can turn when facing problems or in need of extra tuition. But, these beliefs that indigenous students receiving special treatment is a common false belief and when Pederson et al. (2006) looked into this matter of special treatment they found that there are many disadvantaged groups (limited financial means, people in rural locations, disabled or people with English as a second language) getting the same kind of aid depending on their needs.

Pederson et al. (2006) mean that in the legal category including court decisions and prisons sentences, many non-indigenous Australians mentioned that Aboriginals getting shorter sentences or treated differently in court. Statistics do show that indigenous prisoners serve shorter sentences, but this can be a reflection on the crime committed and not an indication on special race treatment. On the other hand, in a report published by a Law Reform Commission in 2000 (ibid.) it is stated when sentencing an Aboriginal offender, the cultural background should be taken into account. The reason for this is discussed by Pederson et al. (2006) and one explanation is that many Aboriginal offenders come from a dysfunctional background, and this can be viewed by the court as a mitigating aspect.

Pederson et al. (2006) concludes that it is undeniable that prejudice against indigenous Australians is widely spread. More than one third of their respondents apparently reported a negative view of indigenous Australians and this number is of great concern.

## Social Work education in Australia

It is well known that social worker students learn how to keep a professional role towards their clients, but Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) indicate that in an Aboriginal community the kinship ties can be difficult to maintain and it is important to teach indigenous students to insist on a professional and ethical service. It seems that the balance between professional and cultural demand is not always addressed during social work education and according to Bennet and Zubrzycki (2003) very little research has been made concerning this topic.

Baldry et al. (2006) suggest that there should be improvements of the social worker education to prepare Australian student in their meeting with Aboriginal clients. According to Gair (2008) there is also a need of adequate academic support for indigenous students who find themselves in a foreign environment. Gair (2008) indicates that the Western prospectus are excluding and discriminating against indigenous students, and it should be a call for urgent changes of teaching and learning in Australia due to dropping numbers in indigenous Australian higher degrees. The issue of the authority and legitimacy of non-indigenous academics to teach and write about indigenous history and contemporary social problems is also highly debated by Gair (2008).

Bennet and Zubrzycki (2003) discuss the issue for indigenous people when deciding to start studying social work. The profession still seems to be considered (by indigenous Australians) as a part of the oppression of indigenous people. The interviewed social workers in their study stated the negative approach by other indigenous people from their communities and their fear of loosing them to a "white" profession. This belief might come from the removal of thousands of Aboriginal children during the British colonization, but it can also approach from the fact that many children still are removed from their Aboriginal parents if they are living in a harmful environment (ibid.).

According to Gair (2008) and Faith (2008) social work as a profession is described of being fairly unattractive to indigenous students in Australia due to the colonization and history of child welfare policies. The numbers of indigenous students in the School of social work and its profession remain well under proportionate number of indigenous people in the Australian community. It is though noticeable that the Aboriginal Australians are only a small number of all Australians and that the under-representation might still be proportionate.

Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) report that Aboriginal social work students often feel that they are expected to already know indigenous history, culture and how to deal with indigenous clients, even though they have not received appropriate knowledge on the subject. The indigenous students sometimes experience that the teachers think they understand everything in an Aboriginal way, due to the different worldviews and background, which they feel is discriminating. Gair (2008) states that during

internships in conjunction with their ongoing social work education, Aboriginal students are sometimes asked to advise non-indigenous supervisor on cultural matters and Aboriginal issues in which they have no knowledge or authority to distribute.

According to Bennett and Zubrzycki (2003) indigenous students at the school of social work disclose the issues of being indigenous in a traditionally white education. They sometimes feel ignored by teachers and co-students in termes of values and perspectives. When having lectures on indigenous culture or issues many indigenous students could not recognize the information on "how to be Aboriginal". The students felt that the non-indigenous teachers or experts are defining and stereotyping all Aboriginals. Many of the interviewed indigenous students stated the importance of indigenous resource centres and support from other indigenous students. According to Gair (2008) students in many other areas of disciplines somehow must perform without adequate academic support to help them achieve satisfactory results (Gair, 2008).

Levin and Herbert (2004) conclude in their article with recommended changes at the school of social work curriculum, such as: Increasing the number of indigenous professionals or non-indigenous professional with a specific knowledge in Aboriginal culture during university education, and emphasize the importance of recognition of Aboriginal medicine and treatment in health care and social services.

In order to increase indigenous students at academic levels Gair (2008) suggests improvements of the support systems for indigenous students, such as indigenous teachers and staff members. It is also important to encourage non-indigenous students to work with indigenous students in group-based projects, and promote meetings between indigenous and non-indigenous students to share experiences in social work matters. According to Gair (2008) meetings and group-based projects of this kind have been proven successful in cross-cultural training and respectful academic relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous students at the School of Social Work at James Cook University, Queensland. Aboriginal literature or literature written by Aboriginal authors is significant in order to decrease the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students.

So what can be done differently for those already working in the social service or health care systems? According to Levin and Herbert (2004) there are specific involvements for social workers in health care to consider: First of all there should be an increased knowledge in the Aboriginal clients' worldview, and to achieve this the social workers who meet indigenous clients should receive appropriate training by specialists on the area. Cultural sensitivity and cultural norms should also be included in the training. Second, the directors of social service departments should encourage hiring indigenous social workers or liaison workers.

For those who teach social work students, the importance of skilled cross-cultural teaching should be emphasised. More research is therefore needed to understand this complicated problem (ibid.). Gair (2008) propose that the development of relevant curriculum in social work education including indigenous worldviews, history and knowledges is also important for non-indigenous as well as for indigenous students.

Gray et al. (2008a) perceive that cultural expertise can aid the process of working with indigenous cultures, but also in any cross-cultural practices. Hence it should be more focus on understanding other perspectives and cultures in social work and other nearby professions. When working with clients from another culture than oneself, it is, according to Gray et al. (2008a) important with culturally specific knowledge and skills, and to accept different values than the ones most Western-based social workers possess.

However, Gray and Coates (2008) see the importance of not romanticize all traditional and cultural relevant ways of helping and healing in the social work discourse. Sometimes they must be questioned in order to fit the universal values of social work such as human rights and social justice. Critical evaluations are essential in both Western thinking in the social work practice as well as in traditional philosophies and indigenous social work. According to Gray and Coates (2008) many indigenous societies seems to be the process of moving from traditional to a more modern way of thinking, and it is changing not only indigenous communities but also indigenous psychological points of view.

But peoples beliefs does not change just because they moved to new places or getting urbanized, the changes are slow and it is difficult for anyone, indigenous or not, to abandon deeply-rooted beliefs.

Gray and Coates (2008) also see the difficulties of developing cultural appropriate social work educations when universities and the social work profession are initialling internationally recognized education programmes and methods. They mean that it should also be a local approach and relevance to the social work education in the country where it is practiced.

# Summary

The aim of this study was to evaluate the difficulties indigenous and non-indigenous Australian social workers face in their meeting with indigenous clients, and what is needed in the social work education to improve the profession when dealing with indigenous clients. Characteristic for all the texts and witness assertions I have analysed, is the view that the Western concept of the social work has failed to include the indigenous traditional knowledges and practices on helping and healing. The text material and the witness reports used in the study gave me the following answers on my original questions:

*What aspects, according to the literature, are important to consider when working with indigenous clients?*

The main differences between indigenous and non-indigenous social workers in their meeting with indigenous clients are described as having different perspectives on healing and helping. The indigenous social worker often struggles with personal boundaries, since kinship is an important part of Aboriginal culture. The kinship obligations can be explained by Stanner's (2002) descriptions on reciprocity and kinship theories. Within the kinship network everyone is expected to help each other.

*Are there important differences to take into account, between indigenous and non-indigenous social workers that may affect this work?*

It is stated that one of the most important reasons is that non-indigenous social workers do not speak the same 'language' as the client. Even though the language is still English, they differ in cultural perception and hold different worldviews. The client also feels that the spoken language used in the social work profession is too bureaucratic and difficult to understand. An indigenous social worker is believed to have more cultural sensitivity of the helping process. This can be understood with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis when the linguistic shapes the way we think and behave.

*What is needed in the social worker education to support the indigenous social worker student?*

The witness assertions insists on that more indigenous educators and lecturers, as well as improved support systems (research centres) for indigenous students, are needed in

the social work education programme. It is also, according to the authors, important to keep an open dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous students, professionals and educators.

*How can the Australian social worker education be improved to provide understanding of indigenous needs?*

Acceptance of indigenous approaches of helping and healing from the mainstream/Western social work profession is needed. According to the witness reports, the social work profession also needs to develop methods and theoretical frameworks to better support indigenous social workers and clients.

## Conclusion and personal reflections

According to Gray et al. (2008a) the Western social work method and theoretical frameworks are not created to recognize, respect and enhance the indigenous worldview. They are primarily created to support Western and non-indigenous social work practice. However, Western-based social work should not be viewed as a superior practice. The Western social work is not a homogenous practice, not all Western countries share the same methods and social work structure. My analysis is only based of what the textual data has contained and how the authors interpreted the issues of indigenous social work. I am aware of the risks of not having primary empirical data. My analysis is a product of secondary sources, and thus the outcome might be too essentialistic and that the Aboriginal Australians are described as being a homogenous group.

But what can we learn about indigenous and non-Western cultures that may inform mainstream culturally relevant social work practice? According to Gray and Coates (2008) cultural identities and diversity are nowadays often taken for granted in Western cultures; people tend to an ever-increasing extent accepting cultural variety in the society. Many indigenous people rather want to reclaim and preserve the best part of their cultures. It should therefore be important to promote new insights from present research into indigenous social work, so indigenous cultures can be maintained.

There is though a danger with identity politics- the issue of looking to a persons' ethnical belonging rather to the individual himself, irrespective of his ethnical identity. An ethnical group is not homogenous. The identity politics is categorizing people and problems of giving a certain group priority or advantages occurs, and there is a risk of giving certain groups priority by associating them with groups rather than acknowledging the individual.

Many researchers in my study are talking about universal social work such that all social work practiced around the world should be equally cultural sensitive and able to apply to most of the social issues. Even though it is not mentioned in the literature used in this study, my personal view is that it is inevitable to always be fully multicultural. Sometimes it is necessary to adjust to the mainstream societies' laws and norms. If not, then it will always be a problem with cross-cultural encounters and coexisting societies. But I do believe that social work should hold culturally appropriate interventions, and that cultural knowledge is invaluable. Cultural knowledge and acceptance is a fundamental part of the social work profession, and it creates openness towards other cultures, values and beliefs. One can not always be understanding and open-minded towards other cultural groups and it is not always reasonable to accepts all cultural manifestation, for example: many societies does not accept Muslim cultures views on women and culture code related violence.

According to Gray et al. (2008a) indigenous helping approaches are not always compatible with the Western ways of helping, instead, any method is relevant if it can solve local social problems in an effective and culturally appropriate way.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Australian Aboriginals are described as being alienated and refugees in there own country, and they are sometimes referred to as getting special treatment by the government and social services. However, if forced to leave their lands, they are consequently forced to lose their identity since their land is one of the most important part of indigenous Australians culture. I do not think of Aboriginal Australians as being advantageous, they deserve redressment and the Australian government has taken too long to apologize to the indigenous people of Australia. However, the discussion of taking an earlier generations' wrongdoing, and continue being punished for old mistakes is another story.

Finally, I want to emphasise that the theme of this thesis has relevance far beyond Australian Aboriginals. It concerns a very basic human condition – the power relation between unequal parts aggravated by cultural and ethnic diversities. We see this problem increasingly in all parts of the world. There is no simple solution of the dilemma, but theoretical insights, deep knowledge, sensitivity and empathy are necessary components in our struggle for better living conditions for suffering people.

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