



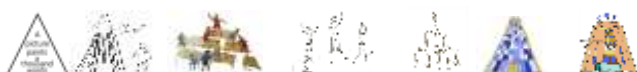
Chapter 8

Creative washing up (65 Spencer St)

Our House in Spencer St, Gatton was a nice old Queenslander. There were a few steps at the front to a veranda and a full set of stairs at the back. It had lovely ‘crows ash’ floors, a yellow timber often used in dance halls as it was very hard. It was a big change from Ropeley. We now had electricity. We quickly established a vegie garden and with ‘endless’ town water were able to grow a lot more in our backyard than we could at Ropeley. Some friends of friends moved in to the buildings at Ropeley, and we would go out on the weekend to keep looking after the place and the animals. It was nice to have neighbours close by and we soon got to know people in town via different community activities.



The Gatton township is on a slight rise above the black soil flats of the valley. The influence of the European settlers was very evident. There was a particularly strong German influence in the town and in the wider district as evidenced by a big Lutheran Church and primary school. There was also a Catholic school across the street from our place and a State primary and high school in the town. Gatton was very self-sufficient and just about anything you needed could be purchased in town from new cars to groceries. There was also three very big agricultural supplies businesses in the town selling tractors and anything that could be required on the farm. The shire had about 12,000 people. There were four hotels in town and two others at Tenthill and Grantham. The economy revolved around farming and was further supported by an agricultural college, very nearby, that had students from all over Queensland attending as well as interstate and overseas students, who would rent the cheaper houses in and around Gatton.





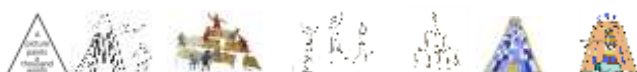
Living in Gatton was very different from Ropeley. A trip to the shops could take several hours, as people we knew were keen to stop and chat, particularly with Matt in the backpack. He was a friendly and engaging child and Gatton people loved engaging with new babies and young children. Michelle enjoyed the town experience as did I but most of my time was now spent back in Brisbane. The train station was only a short walk away and I would leave early to catch the railmotor to St Lucia Campus, returning each evening. The 4 hours a day on the rail motor was a very productive reading time for me. There were very few interruptions and I could really concentrate and immerse myself in my reading and thinking. I did this Monday to Thursday and then worked at home Fridays.



University

Uni was a mixed experience. I enjoyed working on my thesis. I had two supervisors Alan Halladay and Mal McCouat, who I respected very highly. I would see them informally around the corridors for a quick chat, but formally perhaps once a month. So for the most part, I was working independently. I felt my topic was very important and so this energized the whole experience. While a very poor reader I liked ideas and I would get a thrill as I developed my own ideas from immersing myself in the reading and an even bigger buzz when the ideas started to come together and a theoretical logic started to emerge. It was very satisfying as the overall structure and argument of my thesis became clearer. It was also exciting as specific issues that needed to be sorted out to make the bigger argument work were resolved.

I also enjoyed (for the most part) my tutoring work at Uni in part as this was my main social contact. I tutored a 4th year subject where students were trying to clarify their own approach to social work practice. Social work students by and large, are a very appreciative and engaged group, keen to discuss ideas. I enjoyed helping them think about issues and helping them to develop their own ideas. I also taught in an interview skills program for second year students. This was not really my forte, but it was good for me, and I think my own skills certainly improved having to teach in this area. I began to feel more confident in this area





as time went by and to expand the focus of the content from interpersonal helping skills to skills for community engagement.

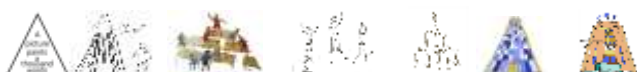
Often, very experienced workers from the welfare sector would want to gain formal social work qualifications. Teaching interpersonal helping skills to these experienced practitioners was very daunting but for the most part they were very kind, and supportive of the whole group learning process, without making me feel too inadequate, given my comparative youth and limited social work practice experience.

I also did the odd lecture in other subjects, mainly around my network theory. This was always a fairly nerve-racking experience in front of a hundred or so students. I would spend a lot of time unnecessarily rehearsing exactly what I was going to say, so the task was very demanding. Part of me enjoyed the affirmation that came with being asked to do such lectures, and it helped to instil more confidence in my material and my lecturing abilities. I think in hindsight I also enjoyed the status that came from lecturing and from being able to spruik my own ideas and theories to a group. It was a position of power and influence, which I think part of me enjoyed despite my espoused egalitarian orientation. I also believed some students would be influenced by my ideas and this would lead to a change in their behaviours to encourage more mutual relationships in their social work practice and more generally.



The thing I enjoyed the least during my first 2 years as a PhD student was the staff room. Here I felt very inadequate. It often seemed a bit of a battle ground with people trying to impress others with their intellect or quick wit. There was a bit of competition to see who could be the smartest person in the room. I felt a bit like the dumb hippy. Over time I would form friendships with other staff. Tea room get-togethers became a bit more relaxed, as I became more aware of the divisions, promotion rivalries and battles being waged between different staff factions. With this understanding I could better understand the intellectual displays of the various academic peacocks.

I really did enjoy theorizing. Reading was hard work but I liked thinking. I was developing a very tight set of connected ideas with a clear consistent argument.



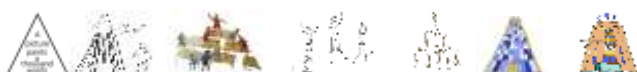


Typically any new ideas developed in one area could be further developed and expanded by examining it in all the other areas. My thesis was about how we know and I explored traditional approaches to knowledge creation, critiquing them by turning their own arguments reflexively back on to their own fundamental elements.

At its core my thinking lead me to challenge the traditional causal view of the world where everything is determined and where one thing causes the next. This can be contrasted to a view where everything is seen as chaotic with no rhyme or reason. Where I was heading was to try to understand all reality, not just the social world, but also the physical world, as being in a creative process. A process where everything is not given, causal or chaotic, but where creativity is a fundamental process of everything. This is harder to explain or imagine at a physical level where things often appear very set, but it can be better understood when we look at things over very long time periods. The mountains around us seem stable and unchanging but over millions of years they are constantly changing from erosion and movement in the earth's crust. Even a hydrogen atom does not live forever. It will ultimately be changed and transformed as the universe also begins to unwind. In the social world flux and fluidity is more obvious but unfortunately a lot of social science and a lot of professions base their practice on very deterministic ways of thinking. This determinism leads to and encourages and reinforces controlling relationships. A creative view of the world however leads professionals to more collaborative mutual relationship where we are all in it together. Not surprisingly my PhD turned out to produce ideas very consistent with my honours thesis on social networks.

It is perhaps not surprising, that my developing philosophy and world view was a long way from accepted mainstream positions across all disciplines. I was aware of only a handful of other academics internationally that shared a similar orientation. Fortunately academia often embraces or at least tolerates variety. My thinking was leading me to the margins of academia rather than the dominant paradigm. I was seeking to challenge these dominant paradigms and to create some room for my own position on the edge of the academic community.

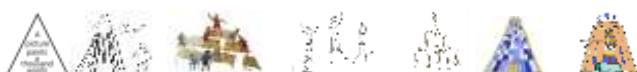
There is a hierarchy of world views and ways of understanding and doing research. The dominant approach favours a very deterministic causal view of the world where through experimentation and direct experience people can gain





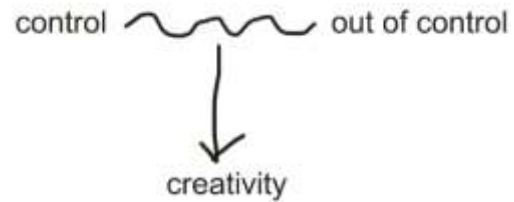
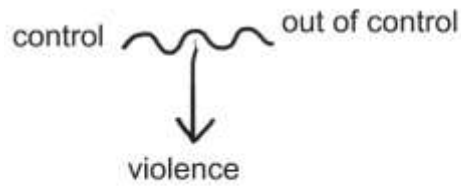
knowledge that offers a capacity for control and prediction. I saw this form of ‘knowing’ and research as another way in which people, typically elites and experts have exercised control over others. Just as I wanted to challenge controlling relationships in society generally, I also wanted to challenge them in academia and science. While I tried to build friendly supportive relationships with my peers, they knew what I was advocating was actually a challenge to their own world views. They would show some academic curiosity in my ideas but several staff knew my approach was a direct challenge to their positions and views. Consequently there was often an uneasy relationship with these colleagues, particularly the ones teaching the dominant ‘positivist’ way of doing research.

While very abstract philosophical ideas, I like to think my thesis was also moving to some very concrete examples of how the creative approach could work and be used in practice. It also led to some new theoretical ideas and I developed a theory about child abuse while working in the Department of Family Services. In this theory, violence is seen as a product of deterministic thinking that leads people to see themselves as being in control (or out of control) and where being ‘in control’ is highly valued. Trying to control children almost certainly leads to failure and feelings for parents of being ‘out of control’. This desire for control but failing to achieve it, creates an unwanted feeling of being ‘out of control’. The tension or confusion between being ‘in’ and “out of” control can be very unsettling. Violence is one way to resolve the tension. In the act of violence, parents are neither ‘in control’, or ‘out of control’. The violence provides a synthesis of both feelings. Taking ‘control’ in an ‘out of control’ manner. The resolution of the tension is short lived as the effort to re-establish a perception of being ‘in control’ again is doomed to failure and so encourages the possibility of more violence. In this way I am in part blaming child abuse on the dominant deterministic way of thinking we have in western society





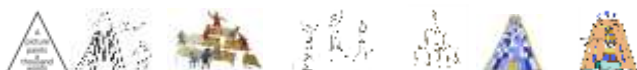
Creativity is the other way to resolve the control/out of control tension. In an act of creativity with a child, the parent is no longer trying to control but is more in a mutual relationship of play where either child or adult can take the interaction in different positive ways. This creative encounter between child and parent then creates a positive experience and so encourages more creative moments where the child is not seen as a thing to be controlled but rather a person where a mutual relationship can be created. Obviously it is not as simple as this and apologies for such a brief inadequate description¹ I mention it here to emphasise that these broader philosophical/epistemological considerations can lead to new insights in to everyday practical problems



Family Services

As part of my PhD research I wanted to immerse myself in a traditional social work position to test out and further develop my ideas. After 2 years of full time study, I applied for a job in Family Services, a State Government Department that works with child abuse, juvenile offending and caring for children in the care of the State. I was initially knocked back as a police check done by the department said that I was “an antiauthoritarian protester”. The head of the Social Work School, Professor Edna Chamberlain went to bat for me directly with the director general of the Family Services department who she had known for many years. It took a while, but eventually Edna was able to convince him I was a good person and would be professional. Edna had always shown an interest in my theorizing ability as an undergraduate and was a marker for my honours thesis. I felt supported and affirmed by Edna and somewhat honoured she would stick up for me as she was a very prominent person in the University and within the whole Australian Social Work profession.

¹ See my phd thesis chapter ?





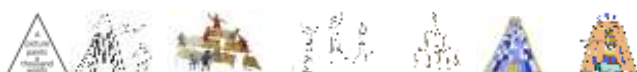
I ended up working for the department as a child care officer in the Toowoomba office. I expected to not like working in a hierarchical remedial welfare organization, but planned to learn from the experience. I was only going to work there for a year but I surprised myself and enjoyed my time there and decided to stay another year.

It was a busy 2 years for me, with a young family, a full time job and part time Phd study. The work was very stressful. Dealing with young offenders who did not initially want to speak with you was hard work. Investigating whether parents had abused their children and whether the children were at risk of further abuse, was very stressful work. I would often go to bed hoping the right assessments and decisions were being made and that no one would come to any harm, including myself.

While difficult work, it was great to be part of a team again. While there was an explicit hierarchy like the Uni and a clear chain of command, it actually felt a bit more like how things were in the co-op. At Uni there was considerable staff rivalry, here we were all on the front line together. My boss was very supportive and consultative. It felt like we were all in the trenches together doing very difficult demanding work in a hostile context and everyone (generally) was keen to help each other. The hostility would come from outside the team from the clients, parents, the police, and senior management. So there was a need for unity and a lot of comradery.

Given this difficult, often hostile context, I felt good that I was generally able to develop supportive relationships with young people and families and that they could use the relationship to try to improve their situation. I was relieved to never bring a child in to the care of the State. I was very aware of the possible, even likely abuse of children in the State system by foster parents or foster siblings, and the damage removal could do to the whole extended family. Consequently I worked hard to support and try to strengthen problematic families despite the risks, whereas some of my colleagues would weigh up the choice between two bad options in perhaps a more conservative way.

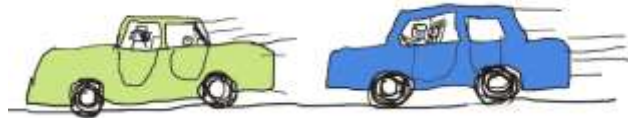
The work was very illuminating for my thinking. I had in the past really only worked in areas I thought were worthwhile where the focus was on change or prevention rather than picking up the pieces. I was now desperately trying to pick up the pieces of shattered families and trying to piece them back together via



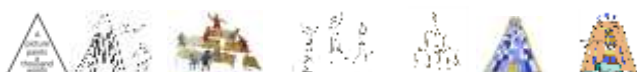


building on the positives in their relationships and assisting in their own solutions. I reminded myself a lot during my time in family services, how spoiled I had been previously. I would often say to myself that everyone should help out metaphorically with the 'washing up'. While doing fun exciting things like the worker co-ops is good, we all need to play a part in the basic things that need doing. There was a lot of serious child and family problems in our community and we all need to play a role in trying to improve things. Over time I began to see that preventing things from being really bad instead of just bad is a positive thing. Every now and then it was still possible to do creative things in a very constrained context. Washing up the dishes can still be creative.

My boss John Dalglish lived in Forest Hill and my place in Gatton was on the way for him to Toowoomba so he would pick me up and drive me home most days. Driving with John was terrifying. He is the worst tailgater I have ever encountered. It was not from aggression, it was just how he drove. He would very cheerfully chat with me on the way, at 100 klms/hr, looking at me as he told stories (while I stared at the back of the drivers head in the car 2 metres in front of us). He would then pull out and pass the car and zoom up to the next car still chatting. Getting to and from work became a lot more scary then anything happening at work. At the same time he was a very good boss. He was initially a bit wary of me, due to how I had arrived in the department, but as we got to know each other we became good friends. We trusted each other (except for driving) and he supported me in trying to think about the potential to do things differently. Later when I went back to Uni and John had started working in Brisbane, we would share a bottle of port on the way home on the railmotor every Thursday. I would hear all the Family Service gossip and we would both be pretty wobbly when we departed the railmotor.

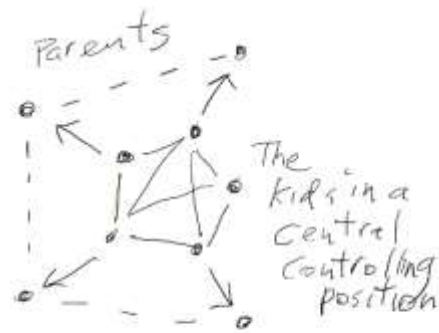


John allowed us to try different approaches including some more community based approaches with offenders and child abuse. One example was a project I did with a fellow child care Officer, Allan Duckett. He and I started a support group for the parents of offending kids. This had some interesting immediate effects. The kids who were offending in Toowoomba would generally all know one another but they would often tell lies to their own parents about the other kid's parents, so that their parents would be put off any contact with other parents.

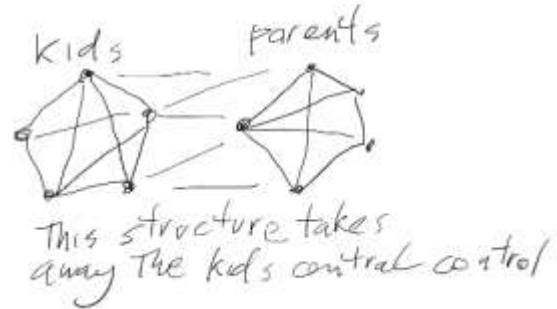




This left the kids in a powerful central network position. When we got the parents together and they could see these lies were not true. As they got to know each other this took some power away from the kids. It consequently also gave parents more power and confidence in their relationship with their own kids.

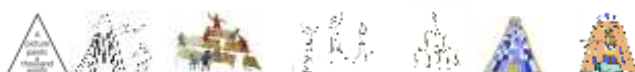


Allan went out of his way to welcome me in the office and to help me learn what was involved in surviving in the department. He would remain a good friend even after I left the department, until his tragic death in a light plane crash, while on a work trip from Toowoomba.



A second example began with the development of a pin map of child abuse notifications over the last few years and it showed an extremely high concentration in housing commission areas. It is important to note this does not mean that abuse was occurring more there, but it was certainly being notified more. Sometimes hostile neighbourhood relationships resulted in people using the department against each other. It was also clear that placing families who are all under stress and who have few resources together was actually putting the whole neighbourhood under stress. For vulnerable families with less extended family and social support, neighbours become particularly important especially if transport options are limited. These families need strong resourceful families around them, not other similar vulnerable families.

This clearly highlighted how much better planning by the housing department could assist child abuse prevention but it also meant at the local level that we could do some preventative work trying to build stronger ties and supportive relationships in the neighbourhoods. Instead of becoming unwitting pawns in neighbourhood disputes we could help build more supportive relationships between people. While we trialed a small neighbourhood building response that was positive, an effective response would have required a well-resourced community work response and structural/policy changes in the housing





commission. My boss tried to facilitate some policy discussions with the housing department as we had a state government minister who looked after both departments, but our discussions stopped when the ministerial responsibilities changed.

I think I was in the department in a good time. It was in the last years of the Bjelke-Petersen reign and the Family Service work was of little concern to the conservative government, and so the department while not highly resourced, did have a lot of freedom. When Labor got in, more resources flowed, but they also tried to control everything, to implement a particular approach. This narrowed what was possible, it increased the bureaucratic load to achieve more scrutiny and accountability of decision making, unfortunately this also removed some options for creativity. The tension between being ‘in control’ and ‘out of control’ can also occur at a policy level. The Labor party was very keen to look ‘in control’ and my theory of violence and creativity could also be applied to organizations as well as parents.

Back to University

After leaving Family Services, it took another 2 years full time to finish my thesis. I was back teaching in the same subjects. It was all familiar and enjoyable. I also felt more confident and congruent in the teaching role with my family Services experience under my belt.

I was now really settling in to an academic life. I did not have any plans once I finished my PhD to return to practice, worker co-ops or farm labouring. It seemed like I would continue with this intellectual life, playing with and making up ideas to share with each new cohort of students coming through. This drift towards academia seemed supported by my family and friends but a couple of things did nag at me. I of course was a poor and slow reader and so ill-suited to the mountain of information that came my way. I also felt a strong sense of sadness at the end of the year as the students from my 4th year tutorial would all be going off to do





something new, while I was still there repeating the process with a new lot of students. There was a quality of the movie “Ground Hog Day”.²

I had started very hesitantly (as I felt very unconfident about my writing ability) to send articles based on my thesis of for publication. The philosophical nature of my work meant many local journals were not suitable and I would need to try the more prestigious international journals. One of the most exciting parts of my academic career was receiving in the letterbox at Spencer St an acceptance letter from the Social Services Review, one of the most respected international Social Work Journals. It was affirmation from overseas that suddenly made others in my department pay more attention to my work. I was maybe not quite as dumb a hippy, as they thought.

Research Paradigms in Social Work: From Stalemate to Creative Synthesis

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For the last 15 years, Australian journals have been the venue for a vigorous debate concerning the appropriate research methods for social work. The issue underlying the debate is not well beyond methodology but rather a search for appropriate values, theories, epistemologies and methodologies. This debate is mainly concerned with the three elements of the paradigm. While the debate remains unresolved in large part, some consensus around consensus within a paradigm. These consensus are fairly shared. They are the social, not political, and research paradigms.

There is considerable agreement among social work writers that there is a significant trend toward an empirical, positivist, scientific approach to social work research. The question whether the trend benefits social work has been the focus of a heated debate between the supporters of the empirical and construction paradigms. The purpose of this article is not to rekindle the conflict but rather to try to understand the issues that lie behind the debate, in order to encourage a more cooperative resolution of the conflict.

The discussion of the debate is based on the contributions that have appeared in four journals: *Social Research*, *Social Work*, *Social Work Journal* and *Social Work Review* (1998).

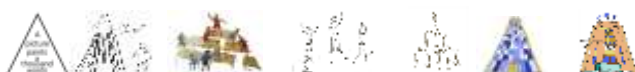
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Ella

The most important development in Spencer St years was the birth of Ella. Like Matt, Ella also arrived in a far from relaxed way. Complications developed while trying to deliver naturally. Michelle had a caesarean with Matt and after many hours of labour the internal scar started to tear causing distress for Ella and putting Michelle also in a very dangerous position. The medical staff quickly delivered Ella by caesarean. If not for their quick response Michelle and Ella would both have been in a lot of trouble. Given what transpired we were also very lucky that we overcame some issues in getting to the hospital.

About a month before Ella was born we had to buy a new car after ours was stolen. My mum and dad had been at us to get a new car as they had questioned whether our old yellow Cortina would make it up the Toowoomba range to the Maternity Hospital. One night we awoke to hear our car driving away from the front of our house. When we realized what had happened we joked that my parents would stop at nothing to make us get a new car. We could see from

² The central character wakes up to find he has gone back 24hrs and has to relive the same day with all the same incidents over and over again.





spillage on the road that it looked like they probably were just trying to steal our petrol initially. I had left the keys in the ignition (which was our habit, at Ropeley). Once they saw the keys they must have decided to forget about the petrol and take the whole car. Having both worked in family services, Michelle and I were not very worried at all and expected to find our car the next day after they had finished their joy ride. However our mood changed when the police told us that the car had been torched. The Gandhian approach of leaving things unlocked so people have to do less violence to steal something was thrown in to question. Our slackness with the keys encouraged them to jump from just stealing petrol, to arson. Maybe locking things can help reduce violence.

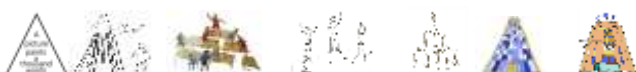
With the new car, stupidly, what I thought was the container to fill up the radiator water, turned out to be just for the wind screen wipers and on the way to hospital the new car overheated and we had to stop in Grantham. We rang my Uncle Robin from a phone booth. It was 5 miles to his farm but he seemed to get to us incredibly quickly. He drove us back to his place so Matt could stay with his wife Kay. Robin panicked over every cattle grid trying to go quickly but safely for Michelle. Again if not for Robin's quick caring response, things could have possibly not turned out so good. We borrowed their car and drove the rest of the way to Toowoomba, where, as mentioned the birth had some very scary moments, before all ending up fine. These incidents encouraged me to be even more cautious and protective of both Matt and Ella³.

The Gatton community

After a short while living in town we began to feel a part of the Gatton community. Through relatives and Len and Nola we got to know others in the town quite quickly. It did not take long before we were both involved in the development of two new community projects.

Trish a friend of Nola's was interested in starting a women's support group. A diverse group of women started to meet regularly to support each other and to

³ Over protective according to them both. Ella has still never forgiven me for tying a rope around her waist and back to me when we climbed the very steep rock face of Pyramid Mountain at Girraween National Park. Ella would have been about 6 years old and liked to do the opposite of what we asked. The rope was a way to keep her safe and reduce my anxiety





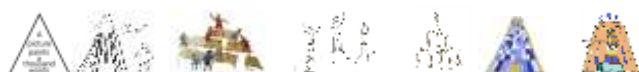
lookout for women new to town. This group eventually grew in to the Lockyer Information and Neighbourhood Centre (LINC). It later gained funding to employ a community development worker. While Michelle was a key member of this group, I was able to play a role to assist LINC, by supervising the new worker and also by organizing and supervising some social work students as part of their 3rd year placement. LINC is still an active organization in Gatton, 30 years later.

Through LINC we got to know some very poor families. High rents and security was a big issue for them. Given our familiarity with housing co-ops we began to discuss this as an option with these families and together we formed a housing co-op. Fortunately we were able (in fairly quick time) to get funding to purchase 2 homes. These families became founding members of the co-op and became their own landlords and in control of their own housing. I am not sure exactly what has happened to the Gatton Self Help Housing Group. At one stage the State government fairly aggressively took over the houses of Housing co-ops across the state, to add to their own housing stock. I can only assume this is what happened.

Stress and anxiety

Everything seemed good at Uni. I was lucky and very privileged to be on a commonwealth scholarship. Overall, staff and students seemed to like and value me. I wanted to do well and make a contribution to my department, my profession and academic theory. But despite all these positives I would often feel very uncomfortable and anxious. I would get nervous before some public performance particularly lectures, but sometimes I would feel anxious for no particular reason. It reminded me of the period of anxiety I had in my 4th year of uni. My life was incredible good, I should not be feeling like this.

Reading by chance, that one of the side effects of too much coffee was persistent anxiety provided one explanation. I was at this time drinking about 10 cups of instant coffee a day at Uni to break up my work day. The term persistent anxiety really fitted with my experience and I immediately stopped drinking coffee. Things did improve a bit, but I realized I had started to eat a lot of chocolate without consciously realizing, to keep the caffeine addiction going. Once I gave



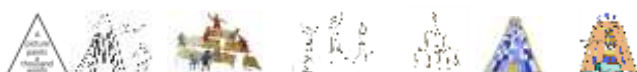


up chocolate things seemed much better. It was good to have something specific to blame. Just as in 4th year I blamed my anxiety on the side effects of the flu, I was very relieved when I could blame my anxiety on something external.

While I still don't drink coffee and I avoid chocolate if I am feeling a bit anxious, I now recognize there was a lot more going on than caffeine. Now I can see my anxiety was a product of stress. I was working very hard and having to do things that did not come naturally to me, like public speaking and being around ambitious, competitive people in the Social work department. It was also a feature of my emotional makeup.

In Family Services I would get anxious as a result of specific concerns or worries about a particular family. I was more consciously aware that this was stressful situation. The other workers were also stressed and it was more openly talked about. I could see I needed to be able to handle stress better, but I also wanted to be seen as on top of things. While probably benefiting from their more open discussion of their stress and I think I did not share much and tried to look more like I was 'in control' (a failure to take my own child abuse theory seriously at a personal level). At Uni, my female friends would often talk about their stress and their emotions, but again I think I resisted joining in, wanting to appear more laid back, strong and stable. This could have been a typical masculine response but for me I think it was more than this. In part I thought talking about it may make things worse, but more importantly I believed to expose your fears creates an opening for the bullies to take the advantage. I think it was self-protective. I did not like to be looked down upon. Within the University hierarchy I did not want to look weak to my superiors, so I kept things more secret even with friends.

Despite being involved in a helping profession I clearly had little insight in to my own emotions and ways of helping myself and for whatever reason a resistance to reaching out to others for professional help. I also did not talk to my family and friends outside Uni. Michelle had no ideas about how anxious I was during this period. I was very good at appearing otherwise. My failure to more openly work on my emotional state, and instead, burying these feelings, all pointed to a bigger problem ahead. I was just 'kicking the (anxiety) can down the road'.





Insights from this period

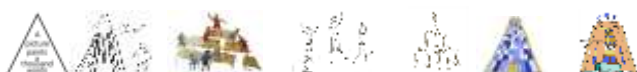
These years confirmed for me that change can take place anywhere in the system, but there are obviously different constraints and possibilities. At this time I was more a professional than an activist, experiencing what can be done through traditional means and existing societal structures. Yet, while getting more capable of making a difference in the lives of others I was blind to my own problems and to getting help.

We have come a long way in talking about mental illness. It is fantastic that today sports celebrities will openly talk about their anxiety or depression issues. This did not happen when I was a young person. I learnt from sport to never show fear or injury. This culture of repressing vulnerability, and looking strong, was still unfortunately part of my make-up when at Uni and even still persists in me now. At heart, I am still the shy scared 4 year old but I have always tried to look more adult, confident and competent.

This culture of putting on a brave front, was surprisingly, also supported by the 60's hippy ideas that if you really believed in something it would happen. This also reflected the idea of the power of positive thinking which was also taken up by 'get rich quick' entrepreneurs. While consciously opposing such ideas I nevertheless seemed to in practice be adopting the same approach. I hoped if I looked strong and did the things required of me, eventually my emotions would adapt and all would be OK. As others often advised, you will get used to it, you will get over it. Just like when soldiers returned from World War II, the command was to toughen up and get on with life and forget about the past. I assumed that eventually I would get stronger and the anxiety would fade away. I hoped by wishing it to be the case it would happen.

It is good that a new more enlightened open approach to mental health is emerging, but it will all come to nought if we don't look at the genesis of anxiety and stress. For me the origin is clear, hierarchy and controlling relationships. I see my anxiety as a material consequence of hierarchy

People don't show vulnerability because it leaves them open to attack. If you are trying to survive in a hierarchy or to compete to get a promotion, you want to



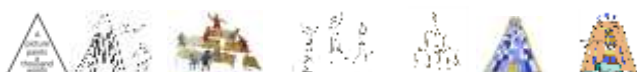


look good. This might involve being more helpful with others mental health problems but it is not about revealing your own. The business world and government departments want staff who like what they are doing and who are keen, hard workers. If you don't like what you are doing, but you want to stay employed and maybe get more money through promotion, you need to behave in ways that look like you enjoy your work. Hierarchy requires people to fulfil the goals of the organization and this generally means many will have to bury their feelings and fears. If everyone is doing this, it is not hard to see how a very toxic situation can develop where no one is actually honest and everyone is pretending to be happy. Uni had many of these elements. Scared shy people like myself are particularly vulnerable in these contexts. We tend to work harder to counter any possible perceived weakness.

Despite living in a very affluent society where you would expect most people to be happy and content, the opposite is occurring with increasing rates of depression and anxiety. Controlling relationships put the dependent person in an anxious vulnerable position, dependent on the controlling person to be a good boss, but always knowing that this can change. Our society has become increasingly more controlled by government and powerful multinational corporations. The hierarchy of controlling relationships has strengthened.

It seems good that people are supported these days to better deal with anxiety without as much stigma, but this adaption just further supports the success of the hierarchy. If people can all cope better, the structures can start to expect more from people and so apply more pressure, a vicious cycle of better coping and more pressure. We need to be better able to cope and deal with anxiety in these situations but at the same time we need to try to reduce the power and control of the systems producing the anxiety or we are just making things worse. It is not easy as an anxious person inside a hierarchy to challenge it. Challenges are of course resisted and the challengers marginalized or excluded and so leads to more stress and anxiety.

Part of my goal of this book is to try to find some new way forward to make this process easier. This idealism carries its own burden however. Implicit in this is an acceptance that I can effect change and if change is not happening then it is another thing for me to personally take as a failure. Feminist and Marxist consciousness raising processes have been very important in helping people





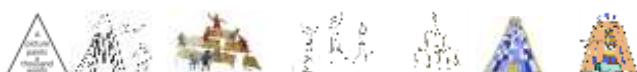
realize it is the system not the individual that is to blame, but again it reinforced the idea that if we could adopt a new consciousness, then things would change. If things don't change who is to blame then? The system, me or the ideas? Clearly courageous people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King are going to be more effective at challenging controlling structures. Hopefully there is still a role for the 'scaredy cats' like myself.

Before leaving this discussion on anxiety I also want to highlight that anxiety actually serves as an early warning device for society. The rising levels of anxiety in the system should be seen as an alarm. Something is wrong and needs to be fixed. Anxiety is also an early warning sign for individuals. Rather than operating with the societal expectation of overcoming anxiety and struggling on, perhaps a better response is to see what is causing the anxiety for the individual and to take action on these causes rather than ignoring the alarm.

Returning to a theme from the previous chapter, my time at Uni was clearly idealistic. I believed and acted as if ideas (my ideas) could change the world. I hoped my ideas would lead to a change in my colleagues and student's thinking and so their behaviour, hopefully encouraging a more mutual, less hierarchical society. The limitation of this idealism was clearly evident in my own anxiety. Despite wishing it away, despite trying to change my thinking around my fears, my body resisted and kept telling me all was not good. The materiality of my body would not subscribe to my ideas. Materialism is commonly understood to refer to the physical structures of society, but it could also refer to the biological base of society. A good idea does not transform our genetics. Instead of letting ideas dominate, I needed to listen to my own body, to the material aspects of my experience.

To properly understand our world and our place in it we need both idealism and materialism. We need to understand their interaction and how they transform each other and hopefully beyond this to seek a way of knowing that synthesizes both the ideal and the material. In relation to my anxiety, I needed to not just change my ideas, but to also change the material conditions I was in and/or to change my physical location within this material structure.

More generally for more than 60,000 years people in Australia were materialists. Their ideas and language grew out of the ground, out of the Country. Their culture and beliefs grew out of their connection to the biological material space





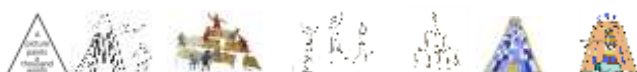
in which they lived. Idealism arrived 250 years ago with people who thought they were above nature, who believed their ideas could transform nature, and further who thought their ideas were superior to those of the First Nations people. This assumed superiority gave the colonizers a justification to take over and transform the country and to attempt to subjugate the original people. They tried to impose their western ways of thinking on the land and the people.

The failure to listen to the Country has been a terrible mistake for all. From the outset, damage to the land began with many species becoming extinct and soils becoming depleted. It has placed us in the shadow of a potential environmental catastrophe. However our leaders still rely on idealistic thinking in response, hoping for technological breakthroughs to avoid run-away damage to our climate. The limits of this idealism (I hope idealistically) is becoming more widely understood. In any case the material changes happening to our biological world and our climate will force change on people and our society. Unfortunately, it could well be the human species that does not survive.

Our future depends on learning from our First Nations people, to listen to and respect the biological/ material basis of our existence. This will require a synthesis of both idealistic and materialistic ways of thinking, to rebuild a new culture for all, that respects and grows out of our connection to the country around us. A new self-conscious materialism that avoids controlling, domatory behaviour (and ideas), and seeks a mutual connection to everything and everyone around us.

Conclusion

I went from being an urban hippy, to a country farm worker, to a social worker in a government Department and a budding academic. I moved from seeing myself as being outside the dominant hierarchy to operating at the base of two very big hierarchies. Part of me felt I had been spoilt in the worker co-ops having lots of freedom. I thought I needed to do my share of the “washing up”, to do my time inside the system like everyone else. While following this sense of duty, I began to see how I could affect some small changes from within the system to “wash up creatively”. I also began to experience how uncomfortable it was for me to be involved in these big competitive demanding structures. I enjoyd





developing my ideas through these experiences but I was also aware of my own increasing anxiety within these structures.

Maybe this was hardly surprising as in both Family Services and the university I found myself wanting to challenge the dominant traditional way things were done. Both structures were based on a deterministic view of the world which validates controlling relationships and practices. I wanted more mutual relationships and creative practice. It seems wherever I am, I keep putting myself at the margins, seeking to undermine the ideas and practices of those around me. While I worked fairly hard at building friendly supportive relationships it is hardly surprising that there was unease. At a personal level I wanted to be liked and welcomed, but in terms of ideas I positioned myself in opposition to most of those around me. I might not have been yelling loudly at others in an extroverted way, but this attitude, despite my quiet shy approach, is not a recipe for a calm, stable and relaxed working relationships. Maybe to survive in this structure I should have better anticipated (perhaps even celebrated) the expected anxiety, either theirs, mine or both.



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