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Kickett-Tucker, Cheryl, Bessarab, Dawn, Coffin, Juli and Wright, Michael (Eds.) - *Mia Mia Aboriginal community development: fostering cultural security*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, (pp. 235). ISBN 978-1-107-41447-1 (pbk)

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Mia Mia: Aboriginal Community Development, Fostering Cultural Security makes an important contribution to the field of development; opening a new discursive space and Aboriginal-driven agendas and frameworks of community development. Almost 50 years since self-determination gained momentum in Australia, and nearly 40 years since community-based development approaches began to be promoted internationally as the preferred paradigm, this collective of critical Aboriginal scholars and Elders sets the landscape for change and the emergence of different social theories of development anchored in Australia's First Nations' epistemological and ontological perspectives.

Albeit designed as an educative resource, this edited volume is not a guideline to Aboriginal community development. It is instead a tool to critically deconstruct the multilayered assumptions that have framed countless development projects – whether they concern externally imposed definitions of Aboriginality, of socio-economic 'improvement', wellbeing and empowerment, or concept of 'underdevelopment', all of which have informed the elaboration of policies and programs (Bodkin-Andrews et al., Chapter 2). Reminding us of the strong links connecting development and a number of explicit or subtler paternalistic assimilationist policies sponsored by generations of Australian governments or realised through a number of NGOs and philanthropic visions, the project embraced by many of the authors of *Mia Mia* is, first and foremost, a decolonising one. Accordingly, the book questions and re-appropriates the premises and practices of development and the social changes it proposes. In doing so, it reiterates the imperative for Australian First Nations to formulate their own visions to drive the development of their diverse communities and foster a genuine 'grassroots, yet flexible approach [...] governed and controlled by the community itself...' (Chapter 14, p. 226).

Mia Mia draws on the knowledge and values of Elders and Aboriginal academics from various disciplines spanning from social work, psychology, nursing and education, while expanding into the field of cultural studies and others. Many of the contributions compiled in this volume show that, all too often, development projects, including many professed bottom-up community development initiatives, are moulded by bureaucratic western perspectives narrowly informed by a deficit approach to Aboriginal development and its relation to the market economy. The market economy, in this context, is itself usually posed as unproblematic or often left unaddressed by policies and program like the deep impacts of colonisation (Kelly et al., Chapter 6), racism (Paradies, Chapter 11) and related intergenerational trauma (Kickett-Tucker and Hansen, Chapter 13). Such perspectives have repeatedly limited the actualisation of development alternatives guided and driven by Australia's First Nations' standpoints, knowledge systems, sociality, values, and visions (see Coffin & Green, Chapter 5, p. 75). Conflicting definitions and understanding of 'participation' and 'consultation', key principles of the 'community development' paradigm, have also impeded on Aboriginal peoples' and communities' involvement and rights to design and decide on the directions of such development. Coffin and Green (Chapter 5) allude to problems associated with the mode of communication generally embraced by development practitioners (meetings, focus groups, interviews) rather than opting for Aboriginal communication style such as yarning and storytelling. As Mooney et al. emphasise, '[v]ery often the government representatives had good intentions and believed that they were consulting with the Aboriginal community' yet, 'much of what is termed consultation leaves people victim to a very ethnocentric interpretation of what is said, what is reported and what is translated into action' (p. 59). Arguing for a truly participatory approach to Aboriginal community development, where communities are

'setting the agenda, initiating actions and determining priorities, and provide clarity about decision-making processes' (p.138), Bennett and Green emphasise that the main objective of bringing Australian First Nations on an equal socioeconomic footing as non-Indigenous Australians, has kept the focus away from the power inequalities characterising the relations between practitioners and communities (p. 134).

Exemplifying some of the issues discussed above, Smallwood (Chapter 3, see also Bennett and Green, Chapter 8) examined the *Closing the Gap* framework, a core *Council of Australian Governments (COAG)* strategy implemented in 2009 to overcome some aspects of Indigenous disadvantage and which have informed countless local government programs and initiatives. Intended for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders across the country, the goals sponsored by this strategy (e.g. closing the statistical gap existing between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians in regards notably to school attainment and attendance, employment, and life expectancy), while arguably important, are widely criticised by academics and community leaders alike, for lacking to engaged community in its elaboration phase and failing to align with the main concerns of grassroots communities (see for example Markham et al. 2018). Instead, as part of an ongoing colonisation process, such framework has consistently superimposed a particular neoliberal trajectory onto Australian First Nations and individuals through which the state continues to '[determine] the parameters of Aboriginal community development, organisational operations and service delivery' (Howard-Wagner 2012, p. 6). The deficit approach, as opposed to assets- or strength-based perspectives, underpinning several (un)solicited development projects is still justified and serves to justify the perception that outside expertise is key 'to improve your community' (Kelly et al., Chapter 6). Importantly, Mooney et al. remind us of the significant role that research has played, and is still playing, in sustaining frames of analysis justifying external interventions (Chapter 4).

Bennett and Green (Chapter 8) bring our attention to the funding structures and associate accountability measures that underpin Aboriginal community development and how these have been instrumental in maintaining the domination of western paradigms over Aboriginal aspirations, describing these fiscal mechanisms as a form of indirect rule. The authors also stress the need to break away from the equity and problem fixing paradigm mentioned above, to move towards community development approaches based on Aboriginal rights and justice which focus on redressing past and current injustices and on the rights and capacity of diverse Aboriginal communities to define their own development.

In a storytelling style, *Mia Mia* emphasises the need to listen to diverse Aboriginal voices rather than instruct and define. It is a tale about respect, introspection and openness. It tells stories that may be hard to hear but so desperately need to be told and re-told. It contextualises, complexifies and defamiliarises the notion of development which is reconfigured through Aboriginal experiences, comprehensions and visions of community development (Coffin and Green, Chapter 14). It destabilises and challenges assumptions about the forms that development could or should take in various Aboriginal communities; making visible the power relations underpinning the definitions of concepts of community, development, and community development. *Mia Mia* examines the injustices that are historically and currently associated with the practice of development and anchors the reflection in a critique of past and ongoing colonial processes in which 'development' is deeply entrenched. Essentially, *Mia Mia* is an accessible decolonising tool that researchers, governments, NGOs, students and community members should pay attention to. Finally, it argues for fundamental changes in the way development is thought and implemented and the role that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers and practitioners play in this space. As Wright and Kickett-Tucker write, it is a 'profound journey of change for non-Aboriginal people. The journey is not simply about developing an understanding of the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people, but also for you to explore your own doubts, concerns and aspirations in your professional and personal life' (p.154).

References

Howard-Wagner, D. (2012). *Beyond Closing the Gap and Neoliberal Models of Success and Well-being. Annual Conference of the Australian Sociological Association.* (TASA) Australia, p. 10.

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About the reviewer

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