Editorial

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The 13th Trans-Tasman Community Psychology College Conference in Melbourne was one of the biggest ever, with more than 80 delegates attending across 3 days in April 2017. Now the latest edition of The Australian Community Psychologist features a selection of peer-reviewed papers from the conference, including Chris Sonn’s welcoming keynote address.

The Melbourne Conference came together in less than six months, and forged its own place in the folklore of Trans-Tasman conferences - Pakatoa, Maralinga, Rotorua, Yarrabah, Toodyay, Hamilton, Melbourne, Hillary’s Harbour (Perth), Tauranga, Sydney, Fremantle, Tapu Te Ranga Marae, Island Bay (Wellington), and back to Melbourne. This is not the place to revisit the conference itself, but I do want to acknowledge the work of all the contributors to the Conference Committee, which I chaired: Harriet Radermacher, Emma Sampson, Jenny Sharples, Ben Moberley, Rebecca Hogea, Helen Killmier, and Renzo Vittorino, plus Neil Drew, Katie Thomas and Dawn Darlaston-Jones from WA and a bevy of indispensable student helpers from Victoria University. We also very much appreciated the support of the Community College National and Victorian Section Committees, Victoria University and the APS National Office staff, and our international sister groups, APA Division 27 (SCRA) and the Institute of Community Psychology Aotearoa.

Parallel to the conference planning, the prospect of the proceedings constituting the next issue of the Australian Community Psychologist emerged. All conference presentation proposals had been subjected to a review process, and each of the papers submitted for the Proceedings special issue was further considered by at least two reviewers. The review panel included Heather Gridley, Ben Moberley, Lynne Cohen, Harriet Radermacher, Chris Sonn, Lyn O’Grady, Craig Wallace, Katie Thomas, Julie Dean, Meg Smith, Niki Harre, Susie Burke, Libby Gawith, Emma Sampson, Robbie Busch, Neil Drew, Joanne O’Connor, Rachael Fox and Dallas Amby. Thank you all for the serious consideration and constructive feedback you offered. And special thanks to Rachael Fox as incoming ACP editor for editorial back-up and moral support, and to Anne Sibbel who waited patiently as production editor for the drip feed of completed articles.

The specific focus of the conference was to revisit the foundations of community psychology to promote critical reflexivity and identify opportunities for change. While not representative of the entire range of keynote addresses, symposia, nuts and bolts sessions, posters, and creative activities that took place at the conference, the nine papers featured in this special issue continue the theme of Critical
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Conversations, covering a diverse array of content from Australia, Bhutan, South Africa, and Aotearoa New Zealand. Topics include vicarious trauma in sensitive research and community projects, promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children, applying community psychology principles to the study of suicide, the status of diverse sexualities and genders in community psychology research and practice, and the transformative potential of nature strip gardens. We are delighted with their freshness more than twelve months on from the conference, and congratulate all the authors for the way they have managed to balance accessibility with intellectual and critical challenge.

When it came to determining an order of publication for the nine papers that make up this issue, or identifying any thematic groupings, I drew a complete blank. Nature strip gardens and school counselling in Bhutan? Suicidality and opioid substitution treatment? Decolonising approaches and vicarious trauma? Something for everyone in our first issue for 2018, but were there any links between these diverse offerings?

It made sense for Chris Sonn’s paper to open this special issue, not only because it opened the conference itself, but more importantly because his work invariably invites readers (and students) to stretch themselves, to think beyond taken-for-granted standpoints and world views by engaging in critical discussions and joint learning. His paper explores critical epistemologies and creative methodologies that he and his colleagues at Victoria University in Melbourne’s west are deploying locally to document and respond to racism and racialised exclusion, and to support individuals and groups within and beyond the university confines and constraints.

There is no logical order to the remaining eight papers, beyond a loose thread from one to the next, and a recurring emphasis on what are understood to be core community psychology values, principles and approaches irrespective of content area. The paper by Simône Plüg and Anthony Collins picks up the issue of undertaking research and community projects in the context of structural and racial violence and trauma, this time in South Africa, and invites critical reflection on the impacts on researchers themselves. And in applying community psychology principles to contextualise historical and theoretical understandings of suicide, Lyn O’Grady argues that the phenomenon cannot be separated from questions of social (in)justice and (dis)empowerment. Both of these papers disrupt intradisciplinary boundaries that are typically erected (from both ‘sides’) between community and clinical/counselling psychology.

The next two papers shift the focus onto the psychosocial wellbeing of children in two very different cultural contexts: the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan and urban and remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. In both cases, communities dealing with the systemic, social and emotional impacts of colonisation are grappling with issues of how far to resist or/and accommodate ‘Western’ notions of education, mental health, help-seeking and counselling. Kuenga Dem and Robbie Busch examine this question from the standpoint of a first generation Bhutanese school counsellor trying to balance traditional expectations of young people and conceptualisations of schooling with the emergence of ‘new’ social problems such as substance use and youth suicide. In the Australian context, the national Kidsmatter child mental health initiative identified a need for specific resources in relation to Aboriginal children’s social and emotional wellbeing, and here Smith, O’Grady, Curnow and Pearce outline the intercultural collaborative processes that were set in motion to ensure the resources developed would be culturally-appropriate and meaningful for Aboriginal families. Although one of these papers is a research report and the other is practice-oriented, both employed critical narrative approaches in their principles and processes, and both are place-based and highly sensitive to their respective community settings.

Conference delegates were treated to an exhibition of images from Motherhood Unmasked, a community arts project which is one of four initiatives highlighted in a paper critically reflecting on the role of mothers in society and how mothering is valued more generally. Sampson, Dane, McSolvin,
Northfield, Radermacher, and Short have set out to interrogate constructions and experiences of mothering; they argue that mothering remains marginalised in Western, developed (neoliberal) contexts, and explore particular tensions associated with ‘mothering from the margins’, whether of sexuality, family formations, mental health or sheer isolation, disempowerment and gendered oppression. Their analysis is grounded in community psychology principles of social change, social justice, valuing diversity and subverting power relations.

In somewhat similar vein, Bróna Nic Giolla Easpaig, Rachael Fox, and Sarah Bowman present three pieces of community research and practice that shared the aims of promoting the wellbeing of LGBT communities and groups within the Trans-Tasman region. Each of these projects offers learnings for researchers and practitioners alike and highlights the connections between community psychology frameworks and LGBT knowledge and practice. Both of these papers foreground some of the tensions and opportunities that emerge for community psychologists in our region who work with individuals, groups and communities marginalised by patriarchal and heteronormative social arrangements.

The final two papers share the distinction of inviting consideration of very specific community-based issues that I am confident have never previously appeared in the community psychology literature anywhere in the world. Denise Blake examines particular challenges to provision of and access to opioid substitution treatment following a disaster like the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch. She draws on a social determinants of health framework that should be familiar to community psychologists, to consider the way in which disaster preparedness planning might minimise harm and maximise psychological, social and physical health and wellbeing for people, their families and communities.

In contrast, Margaret Schubert and Julie Van den Eynde take a much more mundane and benign activity, the planting of a nature strip garden (is this term unique to Australia?? Try verge, curb lawn, berm, sidewalk plot, parkway….). They speculate about the transformative potential of this highly place-based and communal activity. Community psychology has relatively recently applied its emphasis on transformative change to the increasingly urgent imperative for society to reduce and adapt to the effects of climate change. Could the processes and experiences of joining with neighbours or fellow activists to plant a publicly visible and accessible edible garden help to promote ecological consciousness, share learnings about the operation of power, and eventually facilitate policy change?

Taken together, all nine papers identify principles for ensuring that our work is all-inclusive, recognises diverse and multiple identities, cultures and family and social structures, and is an empowering rather than an oppressive experience for the communities we serve (and of which we are all a part). Perhaps the take-home message from these disparate papers is that community psychology is not defined by its content but by its values and processes – echoing yet again James Kelly’s oft-cited trope ‘Tain't What You Do (It's the Way That You Do It)' (2006, p.113).

We were proud of both the quality of presentations and the processes that supported them in making the Thirteenth Trans-Tasman Conference in Community Psychology so memorable for visitors and locals, veteran and neophyte community psychologists alike. We are equally proud of this special “Proceedings” edition of ACP, which brings together research and practice in community psychology, and encapsulates some of the most pressing theoretical and political issues confronting the field.

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Reference