Participation is a means and an end to support wellbeing in democratic societies
- Janet McIntyre

As I complete this prologue the troops are moving into the remote Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory, to respond to alcohol related violence, a problem that has been highlighted for decades. According to the Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse:

*The combined effects of poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, gambling, pornography, poor education and housing, and a general loss of identity and control have contributed to violence and to sexual abuse in many forms.*

These are vicious problems in that they are both causes and effects (Beer 1974, McIntyre–Mills 2003a, Atkinson 2002).

Whilst no one can dispute the urgency to keep little children safe, the challenge will be to ensure that top down interventions do not tip the balance that erodes decades of work to achieve rights.

In 1962, Aboriginal Australians were recognized as citizens, but only had the right to vote recognized in the constitution in 1967. Some would argue they are citizens with limited rights (Chesterman and Galligan 1997) because they do not

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2 See Diagram 1.5, p.14 called “Breaking the cycle through participatory governance and developing citizenship rights and responsibilities.”
participate sufficiently in setting policy agendas and designing services.

The elders in South Australia explained, in a conversation over a lunch to discuss our research on wellbeing, that by flying the Aboriginal flag bullying at school could be reduced and the next generation would have a sense of their rights and responsibilities as Australian citizens. The elders, service users and many Aboriginal service providers stressed the importance of ‘yarning’ and using this interactive process to make sense of public and private issues to raise awareness and to prevent silencing.

It is my sincere hope that this conference and the related research helps to redress this imbalance, because:

> There has never been a serious attempt to focus on the institutional interface between Indigenous people and governments in Australia. To construct an interface that creates greater parity and mutual accountability (and true shared responsibility) would require governments to agree to limitations on their existing powers and prerogatives and to make accountability a two-way street rather than the existing one-way street. ...  

“The process is the message”, to adapt McLuhan and Powers’ (1989) phrase! Thus testing out ideas with people is both a means to an end, namely better decisions and a sense of being citizens with rights and responsibilities to ‘have a say’ and ‘have a fair go’.

Contemporary debates centre on the role of communication in governance and democracy and the implications for the way in which processes can promote two-way communication (see McIntyre-Mills 2006b) or to promote

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one-way communication. Borradori (2003) explored this theme in conversation with Habermas and Derrida in the book, Philosophy in a time of terror. They raised concerns about the need for respectful versus hospitable dialogue to create shared identities. More recently Al Gore in his new book, The assault on reason (2007), argues that one-way communication raises many problems for democracy. Importantly, Gore writes about the way in which two-way communication is vital for building relationships and creating attachments between people at the individual level and also at the societal level. Participation is inextricably bound to wellbeing and democracy.

New approaches to communication within and across organizations to support good governance require working with many variables and considering not merely linear ‘cause and effect’ but instead considering the boomerang effect of feedback loops (see McIntyre-Mills 2006a,b).

Systemic communication is the basis for democracy and governance, not to mention wellbeing across self-other and sustainable governance. Categories need to be re-considered in terms of the:

- **‘Boomerang affect’**: Beck (1992, 1998) argues that if poverty and pollution cannot be shifted they will impact across boundaries. Boundaries are constructs and not fixed in Euclidean space. They are relative. If space is understood in Einstein’s terms then it needs to be seen in relation to others and as shifting and moving (Downes 2006). Us/them, in/out are boundary judgments that can be reconceptualised as being part of one system with ongoing feedback.

- **Spirituality** and the boomerang concept of Aboriginal Australians.

- **Dialectic** of thesis, antithesis and synthesis from Greek philosophy. Dialogue is the basis of Aristotelian notions of wisdom (which he called phronesis in Nichomachean ethics) and which Marxist and critical theorists have re-worked (Michels, 1915) to avoid top down tendencies in all democracies.
Recursive notions (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992, 1998) of what we think shapes the world and how the world shapes our own thinking. The recursive communication process is the basis for the field of sociocybernetics and it provides rich support for the value of language as a reservoir of diverse meanings.

Wellbeing is based on involvement in decision making that spans social, cultural, political, economic and environmental factors.

Aboriginality is a matter of family connections and a history of marginalisation and disadvantage. But it is also about survival against the odds, a celebration of spirituality, diversity, creativity and life.

References


Borradori, G., (2003), Philosophy in a time of terror: dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, interviewed

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4 The way we see the world is shaped by how we are socialized to see the world, but because it is a construction we can remake the way we see the world. This is central to a critical systemic approach and it has important implications for social transformation and healing. For example: Downes (2006) argues that whether you concentrate on figure or ground/environment depends on how you are encouraged to see the world. For an American, the figure of a fish in a pond is described first. For a Japanese informant, the environment of the pond is described first.
by Borradori Giovanna, University of Chicago Press: Chicago.


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