

Simon Robb, Patrick O’Leary, Alison Mackinnon and Peter Bishop, *Hope: The Everyday and Imaginary Life of Young People on the Margins* (Wakefield Press, 2010)

This book is one of the outcomes of a cultural studies research project, ‘Doing Social Sustainability: the utopian imagination of youth on the margins’ (2006-08), funded by the Australian Research Council and conducted by University of South Australia researchers Simon Robb, Patrick O’Leary, Alison Mackinnon and Peter Bishop. The aim of this research project was to investigate what ‘hope’ and ‘the future’ mean to marginalised youth, and the participants (aged between 13-18) were drawn from two alternative education schools in South Australia. It is not clear from the preface how many students and teachers were involved in the project, or whether there was a selection process for material included in the book.

What *is* evident is that many of the young participants were living in difficult circumstances and dealing with major emotional or behavioural problems. Some were involved in criminal activities, or affected by substance abuse, and living with the impact of these decisions on their lives. It is important to clarify, both for the purpose of this review and for the aims of the research project, that these students were not being approached as a problem to be solved and are not judged by, or blamed for, their individual circumstances. The approach of the researchers was to enlist the students as collaborators in the project.

Another outcome of the project was an exhibition held at the Migration Museum in Adelaide, in 2008, which required there to be a visual component to the research. With this in mind, the students were given disposable cameras with which to photograph events and objects from their daily lives that depicted ‘hope’ and a sense of ‘future’. The participants were also interviewed and some drew pictures. The theory of narrative therapy underpins the interview technique used and the interview material is presented as brief first-person narratives.

In order to protect the young participants, no names are used in the book and this seems to have a distancing effect on reader engagement with the stories and empathy for the speakers. A better connection might have been made if pseudonyms had been used, as it was also not immediately obvious whether individual stories were told by a young male or female. Some form of naming would have provided a contextual frame for the stories.

All of the photographs in the book, over 40 including the cover image, were taken by the students. Where there are people in the photographs, their eyes have been blacked out to shield their identities. There are photographs of family and friends, hooded youths, cars, houses, pets, girls in poses, trees and places. Many of the images seem to portray desolation and disorder, rather than ‘hope’ but the main point of this project is to investigate what ‘hope’ means to marginalised youth and this must be remembered when viewing the images. Many of the photographs are everyday scenes, such as food on a table or family members sitting together, which for the photographer might represent security and therefore be considered hopeful. However, this highlights an inherent problem with the book’s appeal to an audience. Who, in fact, *is* the intended audience?

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If we consider the elements of the book we can see the problem more clearly. Firstly, as already mentioned, there are no names to frame the individual stories and help the reader to visualise the speaker. There are photographs and experiences in the book that will seem the antithesis of 'hope' or 'future' to many readers. For example, one participant says 'in 20 years time I'd like to be dead' (24); another says 'When I think about hope I think about dope plants' (34). There are eighteen narratives in three sections of the book titled 'People', 'Places' and 'Future'. These are followed by a section titled 'Teachers', which records the interviews with seven teachers at the two schools. Then there are four essays written by the research team in a more academic writing style, with reference to utopias and sustainability, social intervention, narrative therapy and risk. The interviews with teachers might be of interest to other teachers but the book is not likely to appeal to a large number of its participants – the students. It might appeal to academics in cultural studies, social work and sociology, but it isn't likely to attract general readers.

It was quite depressing to read most of the narratives the first time around because some of the darker, more hopeless, aspects tended to be more obvious. However, a second reading brought the more positive, hopeful reflections to the surface. Common themes are more apparent on revisiting the stories, such as the desire for good relationships, jobs, children, cars and nice homes – security, comfort, and connection. One student associates hopefulness with his girlfriend and Mum: 'They bring tranquility and calmness. They make me calmer ...' (2); another remembers 'moments of feeling hopeful' when s/he was able to repair her/his relationship with Mum (11).

The book doesn't indicate whether more substantial research papers were produced in the course of the project, so it is difficult to judge the sufficiency of the references provided, as the included papers may only represent a fraction of the research output. However, I am surprised that the hope theory of C.R. Snyder (incorrectly referenced as Synder) was not examined in more detail. There is a fleeting reference to one article written by Snyder in 2002, from an extensive publication history spanning many years. A close examination of Snyder's work on goal-directed thought and pathways and agency thinking might have led to a consideration of the difference between passively hoping for change, or dreaming of a better future, and actively taking steps to effect change. It would have been interesting to explore the perceptions of these young people with regard to their sense of agency or powerlessness to create a better future for themselves and apply the findings to identifying and helping to overcome obstacles to self-empowerment.

I am also surprised that there were no references to the work of Donald Winnicott, specifically his argument that hope can be expressed in the 'antisocial tendency'. For example, Winnicott argues that

the antisocial tendency implies hope. Lack of hope is the basic feature of the deprived child who, of course, is not all the time being antisocial. In the period of hope the child manifests an antisocial tendency. This may be awkward for society, and for you if it is your bicycle that is stolen, but those who are not personally involved can see the hope that underlies the compulsion to steal.¹

¹ D.W. Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 309.

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Nevertheless, Alison Mackinnon acknowledges this, to some degree, when she refers in her essay to the escape from hopelessness achieved through risky behaviour (95).

Richard Eckersley's extensive work on young peoples' well-being, vision of the future and social realities, is another surprising omission from the reference list. However it is promising that the research reflected in *Hope: The Everyday and Imaginary Life of Young People on the Margins* goes some way toward an investigation of hope and future thinking among young marginalised Australians.

Debra Zott