

Celebrating LGBTIQ Social Work – Panel Discussion on Intersectionality and Diversity.... Having the courageous conversations!

NSW AASW Panel.... 27 February 2018.

It was an absolute privilege to be the MC and facilitate the discussion panel celebrating the 40th year of Mardi Gras and focussing on how we as social workers position ourselves in the “being, thinking and doing” in engaging and working with the LGBTIQ+ community.



The panel members were inspirational with all of them sharing their stories and journeys. Relating this to how this may look and impact on our practice as social workers was a core theme for the night.



Discussion surrounding how individual or fragmented labels that are applied by society and service providers has a negative impact as it does not reflect how people who identify as LGBTIQ+ see and face the world, nor more broadly, how many face the world. A great example was provided by Denise Beckwith regarding people with disabilities who are already facing barriers (including systemic/structural barriers), and then ‘layering or complicating understanding’ of service providers and practitioners with issues of choice of sexual identity. This really challenges the existing social construct and raises the importance of diversity and the many facets that makes the individual. Fragmentation and individual labels are an issue.

The panel then discussed anti-oppressive practices, and the importance of critical social work theory (as did the discussion relating to Queer and Crip theory), but all times I asked panel members to reflect on social work practice, and the core social work principles of social justice, human rights and equality.

Another great example of the night was from Chantelle Martin. Chantelle spoke about how far the support and acceptance of transgender sex workers has come within society, and again the importance of the individual living in a diverse world. Seeing people for who they are as a whole, and the importance of not fragmenting the different parts or identities of lives that intersect is pivotal. Another key point from Chantelle was that of respect - respect of difference and educating for understanding.





TL Tran, our CALD champion on the panel, discussed how language is pivotal and highlighted how multiple barriers impact. TL described the difficulty when your language doesn't have a word that describes how you identify yourself. The impact of culture, identities and religion is a very difficult road to navigate, however we cannot forget what is at the core - an individual! Another key point that TL raised was that of the metro centric focus on services and the void of services beyond the great divide. This issue has a significant impact on the LGBTQI+ communities in the rural and remote parts of the state - of being isolated, of being unable to find "safe" services due to the fragmented service system. A further barrier is the "you don't fit my eligibility criteria" rhetoric. We as social work practitioners need to view everyone as a whole. As I stated numerous times throughout the evening we need to educate, we need to communicate, and then educate some more. Typically as humans we only know what we know We don't know what we don't know ... we (social workers) have a role!

Fiona Magee... a social worker practicing in the drug and alcohol area really challenged us all regarding normalisation of drug use in the LGBTQI+ community and the associated issues that pertain to that. Issues relating to mental health and engagement with mainstream related services was a core discussion, as were the issues of embracing intersectionality in addressing broader mental health issues of depression, anxiety and stress (and the relationship to drug usage).



Jack Whittaker discussed the concept of "personal to the political"..... taking individual narratives and raising them holistically to advocate and empower for change. Jack made a very significant point regarding how social workers have had involvement throughout history and we have been there supporting and challenging the discourse. Whether it was the time of sitting beside those going through the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's to supporting the feminist movement, and recently the marriage equality legislative change. We at times forget we (as a profession) have successfully guided and achieved change, and can continue to challenge and change structural issues for the end goal of social justice.

I had the opportunity to broadly discuss the notion, and the practicalities of change....by being yourself... holding onto that passion as to why you pursued being a social worker...as catalysts for change, as influencers! Change starts small. It is incremental and we, as advocates of social justice, should ensure the momentum continues. We are currently at a key change point in social history in Australia, and social workers have a role to continue to agitate and empower for change. Social workers are in the policy space and the political sphere. At times I think we forget that social workers are trained in the micro, meso and macro and work beyond the individual based interventions sphere. Social workers make great leaders, are change agents, and are powerful political advocates.



The panel discussed the impact of the marriage equality vote process with lots of discussion focussed on the negative impact that occurred. Impacts included the harm caused by the divisive advertising, and subsequently the loss of key people and family members to those in the LGBTQI+ community. The legislation has come at a cost. As we begin to celebrate the freedom of the federal legislation, there is still more to do at the jurisdictional level (in many but not all the states and territories) in particular the recognition and legislation of forced divorces for those who have transitioned and identify as transgender.



Bringing it back to the focus of the panel discussion... well embracing intersectionality and diversity is the start. Social justice is the core of that and what we do as social workers. The panel demonstrated how recognising and positively engaging with the concept of intersectionality plays a positive part, a fundamental role to both our practice as individual social workers, but also how we can influence change at the political and structural level. We need to really celebrate the intersectionality and diversity of individuals, not only of the LGBTQI + community, but for society as a whole.

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.....but more importantly...Cate... a social worker who wants to make a difference!