

Navigating dilemmas of community development: Practitioner reflections on working with Aboriginal communities

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Please cite as:

Cameron, Jenny; Hodge, Paul; Howard, Amanda; & Stuart, Graeme, 2016, 'Navigating dilemmas of community development: Practitioner reflections on working with Aboriginal communities', *Community Development*, 47(4), 546-561.

Abstract

Intrinsically, community development involves navigating dilemmas. These dilemmas have intensified as neoliberal "arts of government" become more widespread and a "results agenda" more entrenched. Recent studies explore how community development practitioners manage the ambiguities of this current context. This article contributes by exploring how practitioners who work with Aboriginal communities in Central and Northern Australia navigate the dilemmas they encounter. Consistent with other studies, we find that practitioners draw on the foundations of community development practice while also responding to the specific characteristics of the setting. We discuss three principal strategies used by community development practitioners (patience, "letting go," and negotiation), and we identify the implications for deepening community development practice and shifting the policy setting. This article demonstrates how even in a context that seems tightly prescribed by neoliberal arts of government practitioners are actively finding ways of valuing and supporting community knowledge, priorities, and time frames.

Keywords: dilemmatic space; Aboriginal/Indigenous; practice

Introduction

In their book *Development work: Ethical challenges in regeneration*, Hoggett, Mayo, and Miller (2009) characterize community development as inherently a practice of negotiating dilemmas. This largely arises because community development operates in the interface between the state and civil society, a positioning that can mean that community development practitioners are simultaneously both “in and against the state” (p. 3). This tension has intensified with the rise of “neoliberal arts of government” (Ferguson, 2009, p. 166) such as New Public Management which imports ideas and practices from the private sector into the public sector. As Westoby and Ingamells (2012, p. 387) highlight, the “drive for quick measurable outputs from short-term projects” does not support “the long-term development goals of communities and give[s] rise to many practitioner dilemmas” (see also Ife, 2013).

An emerging area of scholarship focuses on how this context shapes the day-to-day practices of those who work in community development and allied areas such as human services. One finding is that far from being passively “acted on,” these practitioners are actively navigating the current context and finding ways of infusing their practices with human-centered values that prioritize relationships between people (e.g. Askew, 2009; Mayo, 2013; Sawyer, Green, Moran, & Brett, 2009). These studies contribute to a body of research, associated with Lipsky’s (1980) seminal investigation of “street-level bureaucrats,” that explores how front-line workers use discretion to “develop techniques to salvage service and decision-making values within the limits imposed on them by the structure of the work” (p. xiii) (see also Durose, 2011; Hupe & Hill, 2007). This article contributes to this scholarship by investigating how community development practitioners who work with Aboriginal communities in Central and Northern Australia navigate the dilemmas associated with this context. Consistent with other studies, we find that these practitioners are working in a context that is tightly prescribed by what Ife (2012, p. 11) has called “the tyranny of the project.” Nevertheless, the practitioners find room to maneuver and to actively value and support community knowledge, priorities, and time frames.

Like others who have researched the practices of community development, we find Hoggett et al.’s (2009) concept of “dilemmatic space” a useful lens to examine the maneuvering that takes place in a seemingly constricted context. We start this article with the concept of dilemmatic space and discuss how it features in other studies of community development practice. We then provide background to highlight some specific features of the dilemmatic space of community development work with Aboriginal communities in Central and Northern Australia and to briefly describe the study we conducted. We find that community development practitioners are using three strategies to navigate this particular context: patience, “letting go,” and negotiation. We discuss these strategies and highlight the parallels with findings from other studies. We conclude by exploring the implications of these strategies for both deepening community development practice and shifting the policy setting.

Dilemmatic space

The concept of dilemmatic space was initially used by Honig (1994) to refer to the ways subjects are constituted through the inevitable dilemmas they negotiate. Honig distinguishes this idea of the subject’s dilemmatic space from the dilemmas that arise when pre-existing subjects bring their different values and commitments to a given situation. For Honig,

dilemmatic space points to a different form of politics which entails negotiation within the subject, rather than between subjects. In the context of community development, the idea of dilemmatic space has been developed by Hoggett et al. (2009). They characterize dilemmatic spaces as “ambiguous settings” in which there is “no longer any obvious right thing to do” (p. x). The subjects of community development—community development practitioners—are torn between competing and conflicting pulls. Community development practitioners thus work in complex, uncertain, and ambiguous contexts and have to make decisions and take action even though what is “right” is not clear. Hoggett et al. remind us that this ability “[t]o recognise complexity and yet still retain the capacity for action requires considerable, intellectual and emotional resources” (p. 30).

Studies about community development practice that use the concept of dilemmatic space reveal three characteristics of the dilemmas encountered. First, there are the inherent dilemmas that emerge from community development’s location at the interface between the state and civil society (Hoggett et al., 2009), also described as “the practice-policy interface” (Shevellar, Westoby, & Connor, 2015, p. 26). For example, Hoggett et al. highlight how the community development role of strengthening civil society through activities such as building and supporting community and voluntary organizations can be in direct conflict with, and even challenge, the state and its agendas. Second, there are dilemmas associated with the spread of neoliberal techniques and technologies—“the neoliberal arts of government” identified in the introduction. This is particularly evident in the uptake of the “results agenda” (Eyben, 2013, p. 13) that positions community development as a short-term service delivery activity and prioritizes quantitative measures of impact. This agenda is in tension with the importance that community development places on long-term relationship-building activities (see also Shevellar et al., 2015; Westoby, 2014). Third, there are dilemmas associated with the specific context in which community development is being undertaken. For instance, in their research into community development and disaster recovery, Shevellar et al. (2015) identified a disconnect between the policy and program framing of community development as being concerned with residents’ psycho-social recovery in the aftermath of disaster, and the “on-the-ground reality” that what residents wanted most was assistance with highly practical and infrastructure-oriented matters such as getting accreditation to use chainsaws (so that in future disasters, such as floods and cyclones, residents could immediately start the recovery by clearing fallen trees). These priorities were not easily accommodated within the policies and programs as these matters were considered as being outside the scope of community development. These three dilemmas are also evident in our research on community development work with Aboriginal communities in Central and Northern Australia, as we discuss later in the article.

It is one thing to identify the nature of the dilemmatic space of community development; what is perhaps more important is what this means for community development practitioners and their day-to-day work. Generally, the research finds that community development practitioners hold a set of values and principles that provide them with a compass to steer by, particularly as they respond reflexively to the situations that arise on an almost daily basis (see also Hoggett et al., 2009; Shevellar et al., 2015; Westoby, 2014; Westoby & Botes, 2013). These findings are consistent with the broader body of research based on Lipsky’s (1980) study of the discretionary practices of street-level bureaucrats (e.g.

Durose, 2011; Hupe & Hill, 2007). In one recent study, Laws and Forester (2015) capture stories from urban practitioners (including several community development workers) across the Randstad region in the Netherlands. They highlight the ways that street-level workers are constantly practicing and performing “responsive improvisations” (p. 15) as a means of engaging with:

the tension between demands on the street for judgment, invention, and a responsiveness both to the particulars of an unfolding situation and the demands from “top-floor suites” for standards, routines, and accountability. (p. 31)

This idea of improvisation is a powerful metaphor for capturing something of the skill and artistry involved in working in the dilemmatic space that is community development. Crucially, as Laws and Forester (2015) point out, improvisation is not a case of “anything goes;” rather, it involves creating something new and fresh through a process of deep listening and responding to others, while drawing on previous experiences and an accumulated knowledge of the context and background.

The setting and the study

In this research we explore the ways that community development practitioners navigate the dilemmatic space of working with Aboriginal communities in Central and Northern Australia, and we have our ears attuned to their improvisations.¹ The dilemmas that are inherent to community development are present, as are the dilemmas associated with the neoliberal arts of government. However, in this context the neoliberal arts of government intersect with what might be called longstanding “colonial arts of government” which positioned Aboriginal people as a problem for governments to deal with; tragically in the past this resulted in periods of annihilation, protectionism, and assimilation. We argue that the colonial legacy continues to shape the policy and program setting, exemplified by the overwhelmingly top-down approach that successive governments have taken.² Hunt (2010) describes this setting as one in which “things are often done *for* or *to* people rather than *with* them” (p. 2), and she points out that this approach is at odds with development efforts overseas (see also Campbell & Hunt, 2012).

In the last few years, these neoliberal and colonial arts of government have been unleashed on Aboriginal communities in an especially harsh way through two initiatives that heavily impact the context in which community development practitioners work. The first resulted from the public release on 15 June 2007 of *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* – “Little Children are Sacred,” the report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. The Northern Territory National Emergency Response (also known as “the Intervention”), announced several days later, took a heavy-handed approach by introducing wide-ranging measures including alcohol restrictions; compulsory income management (which meant suspending the Racial Discrimination Act); enforcing school attendance; compulsory health checks for children (although this was quickly changed to voluntary health checks); the compulsory leasing of township precincts without the consent of land-owners; and the provision of unprecedented powers to the police and government-appointed business managers.³ The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples concluded that “[t]he way in which the intervention was devised and imposed disempowered individuals and communities, and thereby contradicted and

undermined the Federal Government's stated policy of encouraging community capacity and personal responsibility" (2011, p. 2). Although the Intervention ended in 2012, it essentially continues through the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act which came into effect in 2012 and will continue until 2022. Thus community development practitioners face the dilemma of working, for some years to come, in a "prevailing environment of increasing external control" (Campbell & Hunt, 2012, p. 209).

Close on the heels of the Intervention was the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Close the Gap) which was signed by the federal, state, and territory governments in 2008 to "close the gap" that Indigenous Australians face in life expectancy, child mortality, education, and employment in comparison to other Australians. The Agreement followed the Millennium Development Goals approach and set targets such as halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018. Altman characterizes Close the Gap as an essentially technical response to complex problems, with the approach being driven by what he calls "a simple equation, dollars in, statistical gap-closing outcomes out" (2010, p. 267). This leads to narrowly conceived programs that address immediate concerns (such as child mortality), but do not take into account the wider socioeconomic, cultural, and political context and complexities.⁴ This means community development practitioners are working in a context in which measurable outputs are prioritized leaving little room for community development's concern for longer-term community building and for practices of flexibility and creativity. Nevertheless, as we discuss shortly, community development practitioners are finding ways to insert community development practices and processes into their activities as they navigate this dilemmatic space of working with Aboriginal communities in Central and Northern Australia.

In what follows, we draw from 26 interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff working in a range of organizations in Central and Northern Australia.⁵ Potential participants were identified through networks of organizations. Some of those interviewed worked in named community development roles while others worked in areas such as education and training, environmental management, health, and even infrastructure provision. Nevertheless their work is strongly allied to community development because of the practices and processes they use and the types of outcomes they are working towards. The interviews, which lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. In the interviews and later analysis we deliberately listened for the ways participants spoke about the dilemmas they faced in their day-to-day work as well as the practices they used to navigate these dilemmas. Sometimes those we interviewed found it easier to describe the dilemmatic spaces in which they were working, and deeper questioning was needed to unpack the practices that assisted them in navigating these spaces.

In the discussion below, we do not distinguish between comments from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners, for this runs the risk of essentializing and dichotomizing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives. Those we interviewed have multi-faceted identities and perspectives shaped by diverse experiences of race, including being members of the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children who were taken from their parents and placed in homes or with families in other parts of the country; being members of Aboriginal families through marriage and other kin relationships; being members of other marginalized groups

who have recently arrived in Australia; and being members of the dominant, privileged “white” population.

Practices for working in dilemmatic space

From the interviews, we found that practitioners encountered a series of dilemmas in their work and were improvising along three main themes as a means of responding: patience, “letting go,” and negotiation. For each theme, we start by identifying the dilemmatic space and then discuss the practitioners’ responses. We also highlight connections with findings from other research on the ways that practitioners navigate dilemmatic spaces.

The practice of patience

One dilemmatic space was created by tensions around time frames. Funders and policy makers (chiefly the Commonwealth, and State and Territory governments, but also aid agencies and philanthropic organizations) expected outcomes in relatively short time frames, while communities worked with much longer time frames. Practitioners universally understood that working with communities required a long-term commitment to building relationships and gaining trust, reflecting community development work in general. They also understood the specific challenge of working with people whose lives have been indelibly impacted by colonization. As a result, practitioners spoke of the constant juggle to manage pressure from funders to achieve and report on complex social and economic outcomes within unrealistic timeframes, and pressure from communities to wait on community decision-making about whether, how, and when programs and projects could proceed. In this dilemmatic space practitioners have to maneuver between different expectations. Nevertheless, those interviewed prioritized community time frames as they viewed any work with Aboriginal communities as impossible in practical and ethical terms unless they worked with these time frames.

In order to work with community time frames, practitioners repeatedly spoke of the importance of the practice of patience. Patience involved setting aside, for a period of time, the expectations, imperatives, and outcomes required by programs, projects, or services. Frequently practitioners used terms such as “hanging out” to describe activities that may not seem related to the immediate program or project but nevertheless are about the deeper and more essential relational work that ultimately results in community “development.” Here are the various ways that one practitioner described this practice:

Often there were days when the community didn’t want to talk. We just hung around in the community, and helped them out with other things ... So it was good to walk around with the community and just spend time there. Like I said, some days I didn’t do anything. Just hung around and talked to people.
(Interview 7, pp. 3-4)

I just sat back and listened and talked and chatted ... it’s not ever about the subject matter. It’s about what’s happening. There’s a football carnival on or there’s ceremony happening somewhere or people are getting together. Generally, it’s those sorts of yarns that bring out that sort of relationship over time. (Interview 7, p. 8)

Such practices are familiar in community development work, and in some ways the relationships that are being fostered by hanging out are the mainstay of community development. Westoby (2014, p. 76) also refers to the crucial role played by seemingly unimportant activities such as “endless informal meetings” and emphasizes the time-intensive nature of this relational work.

In our study, however, practitioners talked about a micro-practice of patience in which relationship building proceeded at a pace that is perhaps unfamiliar to many. One practitioner gave the following example of this micro-practice:

So you approach a house and there's a fence. You wait first until you get invited and then you can come in and then you come in. (Interview 16, p. 5)

What is striking is the attention the practitioner gives to each step in the process: you approach a house, you wait, you can come in, *then* you come in. That the practitioner distinguishes between the last two steps, between the invitation to come in and actually coming in, suggests a deliberate slowing down so that each step—literally and figuratively—can be carefully considered. This may seem a small and trivial example, but this practitioner’s account is indicative of how others talked about the practice of patience in this context, and the degree of attention they gave to the essential community development work of building relationships.

Practitioners also spoke of being taught, even disciplined, by communities to be patient, as one practitioner described:

The relationship is a much longer process and it takes a long time to build. It’s like [Aboriginal] people are watching people [workers]. They’re observing the person’s [worker’s] mannerisms, they see people come and go every day, carrying messages or services and they just ignore them, don’t turn up. People [workers] waiting for half a day, two days for someone to turn up for a meeting. So it takes much longer. (Interview 6, p. 13)

Here the community is exercising agency and setting the time frame. They are waiting, watching, and deciding whether or not to participate. In this setting, workers have to practice patience as communities carefully scrutinize them and determine whether or not to participate. The scrutinizing of practitioners continues even when communities invite practitioners in or decide to participate in meetings:

People watch you, how you sit down ... So they watch you, where you’re going to sit. There will be a chair or there will be a tin drum or the floor and so depending, the person might sit on the ground. So you can choose to sit on the chair, on the tin drum or on the floor and so that will tell them already how you’re going to position yourself. (Interview 16, p. 5)

This practitioner highlights the embodied practice of community development work and the messages about respect that are conveyed in micro-practices. For the practitioners interviewed this attention to seemingly simple interactions is a critical antidote for heavy-handed approaches, such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or for superficial “community consultation” processes. It also suggests that practitioners have an acute awareness of the ways that communities might hold them to account. This resonates with Hupe and Hill’s (2007) discussion of the multiple ways that street-level bureaucrats are held accountable, not just in top-down ways by their managers and administrators, but also

sideways by their peers and bottom-up by the citizens with whom they work. Importantly, in our research, accountability is not just about the results and outcomes achieved but how community development practitioners interact with communities and conduct themselves from the outset (as the practitioner above highlights, even the way a practitioner initially seats her or himself is loaded with meaning).

When practitioners are able to practice patience at the micro-level and earn people's trust, what results are the relationships so valued in community development:

They can see it ... that it isn't just a white four-wheel-drive with a government number plate on. "That's someone coming out who's really interested in what I'm thinking, who wants to sit down on the same blanket." You know, people like to sit down under a tree, no separate ones, you know? (Interview 6, p. 13)

Overall, by practicing patience, practitioners are responding to the different cultural frameworks that are implicitly and explicitly part of community development work, and thereby respecting and responding to community nuances, voices, and actions.

The ability to practice patience was sometimes possible because practitioners were fortunate enough to work in organizations that understood the time frames required. This gave practitioners some leeway and even protection to work with community timelines. Sometimes practitioners were able to practice patience because they worked with communities that were willing to push back against imposed time frames, as one practitioner described:

It was a really long process, which meant that it went at their pace. Although governments and everyone else were probably trying to push them to do things a lot quicker, sometimes those things just don't happen. It's probably frustrating for someone, who's providing those services. But for the community, they were actually going through that process fairly slowly, and measured and considered around their decisions. For the better, I think, as well. (Interview 7, p. 6)

In this example, we find a community exercising their agency by establishing the pace of the project and process. This highlights how in navigating the dilemmas of community development work, practitioners in various ways are acted on, including by funders but also by communities.

However, practitioners also identified that it was not always possible to resist the time frames imposed by program and project funding requirements. One interviewee reflected on a project that achieved its funded outcome (a piece of built infrastructure) but the process of having to meet project time frames meant there was not enough time for discussion, and as a result relationships in the community have been tested:

There were the funding obligations and when you've got to have things finished by and accounted and all that sort of stuff, it doesn't allow for that [time to talk] ... "Now I've got to acquit this. That means I have to account for this money and there are these time frames, otherwise we don't get our next [funding instalment]." So my manager was dealing with all of that, knowing that. So I think that process was probably a really big [issue]. It caused a lot of tension and disharmony ... So the project did actually get finished, but there's still a lot of tension. (Interview 21, p. 9)

As this practitioner highlights, the risk of working to an imposed time frame and not practicing patience is that even though one set of outcomes may be achieved, other unintended outcomes may also result. However, the risk of working to community time frames is that funding may be withdrawn and opportunities for future funding cut. This is the nature of dilemmatic space in which there is no right way forward and different decisions have different consequences. As much as possible the practitioners we interviewed leaned towards working with community time frames, but when this was not possible they sought ways of managing the consequences.

The practice of “letting go”

A second dilemmatic space that practitioners encountered was that of having to navigate between different and sometimes conflicting knowledge and value systems. One practitioner used the example of paid employment to illustrate this. In the predominant Western framework a job and a wage is valued because this provides the material means for achieving individual fulfillment. However, this practitioner encountered the perspective that a job and a wage were only valuable if they enabled someone to spend time with family and “on-Country.”⁶ Thus practitioners frequently found themselves in the dilemmatic space of having to implement and deliver programs, projects, and services whose objectives were at odds with the prevailing knowledge and value systems of the communities with which they were working. Also, sometimes those interviewed described encountering ways of being in the world and with others that exceeded their capacity to comprehend or explain. For practitioners who are employed because of their skills and training, these experiences of incomprehension could be confronting and destabilizing.

In order to work in this dilemmatic space, those interviewed spoke of the importance of “letting go” of their sense of expertise and learning to feel at ease in a space of “not knowing.” One practitioner described it in the following terms:

Not knowing ... is a good thing; it can be a strength thing too, of not knowing. Like we don't have to know everything or be an expert in our work space ... I can easily get stuck on my own world view, and miss all the other social and cultural parts. So in a way I am also learning. (Interview 6, p. 1)

Here the practitioner refers to letting go of the idea that they have to be expert in their work area, but also letting go of their culturally-embedded knowledge in order to be open to other ways of understanding and being in the world. Later this practitioner described this practice as “shedding your skin really, like a snake, putting a fresh one on” (Interview 6, p. 16).

Practitioners spoke too of how communities acted to “fast-track” the process in which assumptions about expertise and knowledge were overturned, as one practitioner recounted:

I'd like to go back to my initial introduction to working in Indigenous communities when I was lucky enough to walk into a scenario where a group of Elders sat me down in the dust to define the rules or look at the way they wanted learning to happen for them and their community ... from very early on I was taught to shut up and listen. I was coming in as the educator but I needed to be educated in order to be able to make a difference in that setting. (Interview 2, pp. 1-2)

In this example, the practitioner, a trained educator, had to let go of ideas about how training and education were to be delivered and respond to what the community wanted. Importantly, this process involved being “sat down in the dust.” This is an example of a community exercising agency by teaching the educator about what they wanted from education, signaled by the deliberate strategy of making this practitioner sit in the dust. This contrasts with the experiences described in the previous section where communities were more warily watching practitioners to see where they sat as part of the process of determining whether or not to participate.

In the interview this practitioner went on to discuss how this initial experience reframed education as a two-way process:

Don't go in with all the knowledge. Go in to learn. So go in as a person who is learning and willing to learn. The knowledge that you carry is what you share, it's not what you impose or not what you impart. People will get from you what they need ... In a community if you're there and you are prepared to listen or just be then people will engage because you're not imposing.

(Interview 2, p. 5)

In this context, not only is there a letting go of who has expertise and a recognition of multiple forms of co-existing knowledge, there is also a letting go of being able to anticipate what might result: “people will get from you what they need.” This suggests a purposeful practice of dwelling in uncertainty about even the influence we might be able to exert in the world and to simply “listen or just be.” This practice is patently at odds with the measurable targets and outcomes so valued by many funders. In the current context in which external expertise is prized and valued, letting go, not knowing, and just being are difficult practices. Nevertheless, for those interviewed these practices are essential if any differences are to be made.

This is not to say that there is no room for the knowledge of practitioners. As the practitioners above indicate, the knowledge transfer can be a two-way process. What is critical is knowing when to “shut up and listen” (to use the practitioner's words) and when to contribute. One respondent describes the following scenario in which practitioner knowledge made an important difference:

Sometimes when we're doing planning with people, somebody says, “Well, the highest priority (and we all agree) is a house.” And so this group might have \$50,000 and they'll say, “Yes, I know that you can get a house – you can get one for \$40,000, a really good one, three bedrooms” and this and that.

Then you're kind of like, “Well, you actually can't.” You know, so people's knowledge of what things cost in terms of big infrastructure or things is really - very often, people don't have any idea. (Interview 10, pp. 15-16)

The practitioner highlights that this places them in the position of having critical knowledge but having to contribute and share that knowledge in a way that does not undermine the community decision-making process.

We see parallels between the ways that the practitioners in our study are negotiating different knowledge and value systems and the academic literature on cross-cultural encounters that discusses the value of “not knowing.” Askins (2008, p. 243), for example, talks about the importance of adopting “a strategy of radical openness” which she describes

as a process of “retaining that disquieting/uncomfortable moment of unknowingness” (see also Wright & Hodge, 2012). For these authors, the experience of not being able to understand a situation or someone is a productive moment when preconceptions about our relationship to others and to the world around are unsettled, and new possibilities potentially emerge. This recognition of the limits to knowing and the potential of not knowing contrasts with the value that community development places on understanding the perspective of others and attending to local knowledge (e.g. Ife, 2013; Pawar, 2014). Here we have another perspective that recognizes that sometimes there are limits to our capacity to know and to understand. This is not to say that community development practitioners should not try to understand the viewpoints of others, nor that the viewpoints of community development practitioners are irrelevant (as highlighted above). Rather, recognizing that there are multiple ways of relating to the knowledge of others is one of the dilemmas of working cross-culturally, and especially with those whose knowledge and value systems are very different from the prevailing Western perspective.

The practice of negotiation

The third dilemmatic space that practitioners encountered was created by program, projects, and services that were tightly prescribed and left little room for incorporating community priorities or concerns, as one practitioner summarized:

So I think, from that point of view, working within the structures that we have and just how the training packages are designed and the whole funding thing and all that sort of stuff – so there’s not that much freedom in just how things are set up. (Interview 21, pp. 11-12)

Practitioners recognized that if they implemented programs, projects, and services as intended there was little likelihood of any differences being made or outcomes being achieved, and so they adapted where they could. Some explicitly called this a practice of subversion while others referred to it more lightly as a practice of “stretching the elastic.” We call it a practice of negotiation as we see it as a political process in which practitioners get things done while maneuvering simultaneously between the work they have been funded to do, the perspectives of communities, and practices of patience and letting go.

Sometimes the practice of negotiation occurred “on the spot” as practitioners quickly responded to unexpected circumstances. Sometimes the negotiation took place over a longer period and involved a more deliberative practice of stretching some of the systems that usually establish the parameters for how things are done. In one example, a practitioner described how an Aboriginal woman requested that she conduct training with others in her family group. The organization agreed but then had to negotiate various financial systems to pay her for this work.

Other instances of negotiation involved more comprehensive and long-term processes of redesigning programs and services. One practitioner explained the process of shifting a health service from a clinic-based model to an in-home model:

So it probably started more with myself talking with the [Aboriginal] women that I knew and then also with the people that had the funding for the governance, who have also been to the community a few times and been living in or have been doing stuff with communities a long time ... [but] it was led

by them [the Aboriginal women] – who needs to be invited, who needs to be consulted, which elders need to know about what's going on. (Interview 26, p. 22)

In this example, outcomes were only achieved as a result of proactive and ongoing negotiation between the practitioner, the health service, and community members. This practice of negotiation included listening, talking, adapting, and checking in as well as challenging both policy and community expectations. It involved a clear but flexible conversation about roles, work, power, and culture.

An element of the practice of negotiation is that risk is involved, whether the risk of handing over responsibility for training to community members, the risk of working on the margins of financial accountability, or the risk of devising a program that does not work. But the risk of not doing these things is that it takes away the opportunity for the type of learning that can only occur through what is familiarly called “failure:”

You must allow Indigenous communities to fail, not rush in with the white fellas going “Oh, it’s going to fail, we’ve got funding deadlines, reporting and we’ll just make up a report that makes it look good so we continue to keep it funded.” That culture tends to have a negative impact because without all this coming out with a safety blanket, we’ve got to let people fall, and fail, and learn from their mistakes. (Interview 22, p. 7)

The interviewee draws our attention to the dilemma that all community development practitioners inevitably negotiate of wanting to “step in” to try to make sure that things succeed (on one level) while also knowing that it can important to “step back” in order to build and strengthen community capacity and capability.

The issue of how practitioners navigate these types of risk was the focus of research by Sawyer et al. (2009). Their study was with community-based health and welfare professionals who increasingly work in a context in which risk assessment and risk management have become an integral part of their role. Some even argue that the work has been reoriented around managerial rather than therapeutic skills (p. 364). Yet Sawyer et al. found that these professionals are placing their role as therapists at the core of what they do—even if this means varying, even breaching, risk procedures. Sawyer et al. describe how professionals in this context take calculated risks by drawing on their professional experience to consider the various trade-offs involved. In one example, a social worker took the calculated risk of leaving a suicidal and self-harming client alone with his dog prior to it being euthanized. (The client did not harm himself, and appreciated that the social worker trusted him to be alone). The community development issues faced by the practitioners in our study may differ, nevertheless the practitioners are pushing the parameters of the programs, projects, and services, and taking calculated risks because of the benefits that they perceive are likely to result.

Implications

In this article we have presented the ways that community development values are being enacted despite the influence of neoliberal arts of government. We identify two main implications from our findings. First, there are opportunities to build communities of practice. It is through the discussion and reflection that takes place within communities of practice that

the current dilemmas and ways of navigating these dilemmas might be rendered more visible—thereby making the tacit and everyday practices of community development practitioners more explicit (see also Rawsthorne & Howard, 2011; Westoby, 2014). Such communities of practice can help bring together the myriad of resources that community development practitioners have on hand as they practice and perform “responsive improvisations” (Laws & Forester, 2015, p. 15). These resources include the wisdom they have developed through their day-to-day experiences and more formal professional knowledges acquired through education and training. The value of this type of practice support is evident in Shevellar et al.’s (2015) finding that practitioners with more community development experience and training seemed to be better able to navigate the dilemmas they encountered. Researchers can collaborate with practitioners to develop communities of practice by assisting in practical ways (such as organizing opportunities for discussion) and by contributing research skills in analyzing and articulating community development knowledge.

The second implication is centered on shifting the policy setting, and we identify three strategies that might be used. One is to undertake a systematic review of policies and programs that are consistent with the community development practices discussed in this article. This might mean learning from past experiences. For example, the Aboriginal-owned Rumbalara Football Netball Club in rural Victoria is a highly successful initiative that uses sport as a vehicle for broader community development. Rumbalara has achieved its success by capitalizing on various health programs that emphasized community control and community knowledge, such as the National Aboriginal Health Strategy from the 1980s and VicHealth’s programs from the 1990s (Rumbalara Football Netball Club Inc. & The Kaiela Institute, 2012). These programs also helped shape further initiatives such as a Victorian State Government-funded Aboriginal leadership program that specifically recognized that programs need to be “tailored to the community at hand rather than imposing the timelines of government, or other, policies and programs” (Victorian Indigenous Leadership Network, 2005, p. 22). In addition, there are reviews of several contemporary initiatives in which community development practices are foregrounded. For example, Campbell and Hunt (2012) discuss the activities of the community development unit of the Central Land Council, a statutory authority that represents some 24,000 Indigenous people from 15 different language groups in the southern part of the Northern Territory, and Hunt (2010) discusses the community development approach of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who are starting to work with Aboriginal communities. Collecting information about both current and past initiatives is an important means of building an evidence base about the types of policies and programs that create opportunity for community development practices such as patience, letting go, and negotiation. Furthermore, as Campbell and Hunt (2012) highlight, these examples are critical for communicating with those who are wedded to a top-down approach.

A second strategy for helping to shift the policy setting is to reveal the “true cost” of the approaches that generate the types of dilemmas discussed in this article, particularly the prevailing “results agenda” (Eyben, 2013, p. 13). For example, Westoby (2014) describes how state-employed community development practitioners in South Africa have become involved in the development of cooperatives. These practitioners face considerable

“instrumental pressures to form cooperatives as a numerical imperative” (p. 158), but this short-term and outcome-focused goal is at odds with the amount of time that it takes to build a truly cooperative culture. As a result, many of the cooperatives are likely to fail (something the practitioners are well aware of). Westoby reports that the experience “appears to be quite damaging to the potential future of a cooperative movement, and also to the lives of people who become members of cooperatives” (p. 154). As it stands the accounting approach only recognizes the number of cooperatives initiated and ignores the hidden longer-term costs that Westoby identifies. As researchers are finding in areas such as energy, health, and agriculture, there is considerable potential to start factoring in the true costs of current policy approaches, particularly by taking into account the longer-term effects (e.g. Shindell, 2015).

A third strategy to shift the policy setting is to resist current approaches by actively working against the state. In our interviews we heard stories of how community development practitioners worked behind the scenes to assist communities to lobby for policy and program changes. We also heard stories of how practitioners were calling on their organizations to decline funding for programs that would constrain their community development practices. In these instances practitioners were, in a sense, refusing to navigate the dilemmas. This is not to say that their community development work would be free of dilemmas; inevitably dilemmas arise, for as Hoggett et al. (2009) cogently demonstrate, community development is inherently a dilemmatic practice. Indeed, the very act of deliberating on whether and when to work against the state by actively resisting, or to work in and with the state by navigating and even accommodating prevailing policy agendas, is a dilemma that is at the heart of community development.

Conclusion

Building on Lipsky’s (1980) seminal work on street-level bureaucrats, there is a stream of scholarship in community development and related fields that focuses on the day-to-day practices of workers. As Sawyer et al. (2009) argue, this approach is an important antidote for studies that present a more general level analysis and ignore the lived experiences of practitioners. These generalist accounts tend to present a misleading depiction of workers as being acted on by the structural changes taking place around them rather than as actors who are responsively navigating the settings in which they work (see also Laws & Forester, 2015). In this article we have contributed to this area of scholarship by attending to the micro-practices of community development practitioners and the practices they use to navigate the dilemmatic space of working with Aboriginal communities in Central and Northern Australia. The practices of patience, letting go, and negotiation have parallels in other settings, but in the context of Aboriginal communities these practices are perhaps even more vital given the colonial legacy of dispossession and the current heavy-handed and top-down approach. In this setting, we find that practitioners use a practice of patience that extends the time frames of community development work. The often conflicting knowledge and value systems mean that practitioners were learning to let go of their expertise and to be comfortable with the uncertainty of not knowing. There are also negotiations that have to be carefully undertaken and that involve deliberating on the risks associated with different courses of action. These practices of patience, letting go, and negotiation take time and have to be actively fought for in a funding context that emphasizes short-term outcomes.

As we have hinted, there are two important qualifications to what we have presented. First, these practices do not necessarily originate with the community development practitioners; rather, they emerge in the context of dilemmatic space in which practitioners are both actors and “acted-upon.” Certainly practitioners are acted-upon by those who are incorporating neoliberal arts of government (such as funders and policy makers), but they are also acted-upon by the Aboriginal communities with which they work. We have highlighted moments when Aboriginal communities exercise agency to shape and even direct the practices of community development practitioners.⁷ This suggests that we need to augment the first dilemma of community development identified earlier in the article. By working at the interface between state and civil society, community development practitioners are simultaneously acted-upon both by those associated with the state *and* by civil society actors (in this instance Aboriginal communities). When using the notion of dilemmatic space it is therefore important not to over-emphasize the agency of the practitioner. Second, in highlighting the practices used to navigate dilemmatic space, we are not saying that practitioners should accept the current policy approaches. As we have identified, there are opportunities both for deepening the practices and for shifting the policy setting. Researchers can play a role in these two agendas by helping to make explicit the micro-practices of community development and highlighting the ways that different policy approaches can hinder or advance community development efforts.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the invaluable support of the late Peter Taylor and his colleagues at the Centre for Appropriate Technology. This research was made possible through funding provided by the Faculty of Science and IT at the University of Newcastle. We thank the community development practitioners we interviewed for generously sharing their time and insights. We also thank the reviewers for their astute feedback, which greatly improved the article.

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¹ Central and Northern Australia includes the Northern Territory, the northern parts of Queensland and Western Australia, and the northern part of South Australia. It includes hundreds of distinct language groups (and Aboriginal people in this area will sometimes speak five or six different languages with English being their sixth or seventh language). The history of “contact” is diverse, ranging from communities who for centuries before European colonization traded with Macassan people from Sulawesi (Indonesia) to a small group of Pintupi people whose first contact with Europeans was in 1984. This may seem a broad area; however, in our research we encountered organizations who worked across this area, and practitioners who over the course of their careers had likewise worked in various locations across this part of Australia. There are perhaps some parallels here to the complex and extensive network of trade routes that crisscrossed Australia prior to colonization (and that are very different to the imposed and even indiscriminate boundaries of states and nations).

² For a parallel point in the planning literature see Porter (2006).

³ Although this response was specific to the Northern Territory, concerns about the Draconian measures reverberated beyond the Territory's borders including in Aboriginal communities across other parts of Central and Northern Australia.

⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that the most recent assessment identifies that five of the six targets will not be met (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 6).

⁵ Those we interviewed ranged in age from their mid-thirties to their mid-sixties, and were an even mix of women and men. Participants also ranged in experience from those who had spent their entire careers working with Aboriginal communities in various locations across Northern Australia, to those who had come to this work within the last five years.

⁶ In this context, Country is used to refer to the land (or area) that Aboriginal people identify with. Being “on-Country” means being on the land that one identifies with and caring for that Country (and care can be expressed through activities such as walking on the land, gathering food, conducting ceremonies). Our words are limited in their capacity to reflect the importance of Country as the source of being *and* wellbeing, and therefore the deep significance of being on-Country.

⁷ We are grateful to the reviewer who pushed us on this point.