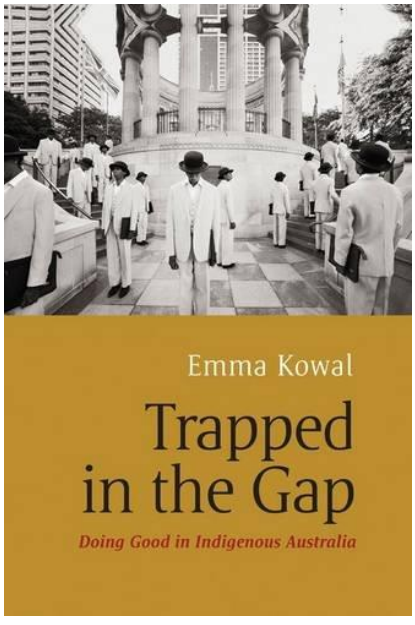


Trapped in the gap: Doing good in Indigenous Australia

by Emma Kowal

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Reviewed by Jenny Hutt

This book is about non-Indigenous practitioners working in Indigenous Australia.

Emma Kowal draws from her own experiences working in a health service in the Northern Territory and from an interesting range of literature to portray practitioners experiencing what psychodramatists might describe as a 'conflicted warm-up'.

It's relevance to non-Indigenous professionals and non-Indigenous citizens lies in its attention to the baggage we can bring to intercultural relating. Kowal adds to the expanding Australian literature about what might be termed whitefella work, including Sarah Maddison's (2011) *Beyond white guilt: the real challenge for black-white relations in Australia*, Clare Land's (2015) *Decolonising solidarity: dilemmas and directions for supporters of Indigenous struggles,* and Mark Moran's (2016) *Serious whitefella stuff: when solutions become the problem in Indigenous affairs.* Kowal says her study was partly inspired by Gary Foley, Aboriginal Gumbainggir activist and academic, who said, 'Don't worry about us, you work on your own mob.'

Kowal locates her study in what she calls the 'contact zone' where colonisers and colonised meet; a place of radical cultural difference. She focuses on a distinct sub-group of the broader progressive Australian

community who she calls White anti-racists, a group to which she belongs. She distinguishes them not so much by their actions to counter racism, but as a group with a shared culture, discourse and identity. She examines and illustrates the dynamics of this group in three settings.

The first is a Northern Territory health clinic where a disillusioned health educator doubts the impact of her work in 'closing the gap'. Closing the gap is an Australian government policy to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement, and employment outcomes. The second is a Darwin suburb where various sub-groups (including residents, city council and health workers) respond to the presence of displaced members of the Mangingrida community, known as 'long grassers' who live in the open and drink heavily. The third setting is at a series of conferences and meetings around the country where Welcome to Country[1] and Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners are conducted.

I found this last chapter of great interest as a stand-alone piece of writing. In discussing the origins of these ceremonies, Kowal cites traditional rituals which involve visitors waiting for long periods on the border of country to be acknowledged. Some rituals are not so much to welcome visitors, but to protect them from harm from the unfamiliar spirits of the country. Other contemporary expressions of welcome to country are thought to have emerged in the 1980s and spread in the 1990s, encouraged by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. The welcome to country is believed by some to have been adapted from the Maori *powhiri*. An early expression of this occurred in 1976 when an Aboriginal theatre group received a request to be welcomed from visiting Maori and Cook Island dancers.

Kowal observes professionals in the three settings tying themselves up in knots. One is because of a fear of doing damage. While they hope to see Indigenous people lifted out of disadvantage to participate fully in Australian society, statistically equal to but culturally distinct from other Australians, they fear that by 'closing the gap' they will be involved in destroying Aboriginal culture.

Another fear is of imposing on Indigenous people and in so doing, being a modern day assimilationist or missionary. For this reason, there is great ambivalence in exercising agency as a non-Indigenous person.

[1] 'Country' is the land of the traditional owners within an Aboriginal nation or language group.

This can mean remaining silent, underplaying their contribution, exaggerating the role of community members and reluctance to question anything an Indigenous person says. They may even 'valorise all things Indigenous and rebuke all things Western'. While these behaviours may reflect commitment to Indigenous self-determination, psychodramatists may also recognise them as restrictive solutions to the substantial focal conflicts[1] experienced by non-Indigenous professionals.

Kowal argues there is 'white stigma' at play. Whiteness is seen as a deeply discrediting stain, associated with exploitation, colonisation, imperialism and general dominance. And with it comes the felt need to undertake social 'performances' and 'speech acts' which makes non-Indigenous people recognisable as *good* white people: anti-racists. And of course at times, distinguishing themselves as *better* anti-racists than their colleagues.

The book is written in an academic style and took quite a commitment to read but it is fascinating. I particularly enjoyed that it highlighted a number of conflicted warm-ups and restrictive solutions to watch out for. It surveyed a wide range of literature (from the fields of development and whiteness studies) about the world-views of those working in the 'contact zone'. Yet, as it limited its scope to studying non-Indigenous people, it wasn't able to present a lively and complete picture of the context, and of the two-way intergroup role relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

However, I particularly appreciate that Kowal brings to light and makes 'discussable' several conflicts experienced by non-Indigenous practitioners working in Indigenous Australia. I think naming them is an intervention in itself. Her work is a good reference point for conversations which open out what ethical and effective partnerships between non-Indigenous practitioners and Indigenous clients and colleagues can be. Conversations which may interest professionals and citizens alike.

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[1] A focal conflict is experienced in a group between disturbing motives (such as the desire to make a difference) and reactive fears (such as a fear of being oppressive and of perpetuating oppression). A restrictive solution to these conflicts (rather than an enabling solution) fails to adequately honour both the motivations and the fears. See Whitacker and Leiberman's (1964) *Psychotherapy through the group process.*



Jenny Hutt is a Sociodramatist, TEP and Director of Training at the Melbourne Campus of Psychodrama Australia. She is a coach, facilitator and learning and development practitioner with groups and organisations. Jenny specialises in workplace diversity, leadership development and has a keen interest in intercultural learning. She is an associate with an Aboriginal majority owned consulting company and is currently engaged in 'two ways' projects with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients and colleagues.

She can be contacted by email: jenhutt@netspace.net.au