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# An activist reflects: personal narratives as a tool for social change

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An activist reflects:  
personal narratives  
as a tool for social change

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June 2014

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy

## **Certification**

I, Ian Miles, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

## **Abstract**

In 20 years of activism I frequently found the quality of interpersonal relations to be so poor, and the damage to myself and others so profound, that I wondered whether struggles for social change were counterproductive. It seemed to me that projects for social change could benefit from some research into both the philosophies and techniques that had the capacity to create more ethical and productive social relations. I use the narratives of personal experience as the map for this thesis. In using my own experience as a guide I hope to show how the socially created and sustained self can use moral reflection and mutual recognition in a social context to pursue political and social change in a way that creates, sustains and repairs ethical and productive social relations. The schemes I suggest do not replace or surpass other ways of relating, but rather offer a guide for those who wish to see greater and more serious attention given to what constitutes good social relations in situations of conflict.

I begin by sharing a narrative about how I decided on my approach. I then explore the idea of mutual recognition as a response to the problem of domination. In particular I explore the work of Jessica Benjamin, who anchors her work in an exploration of infant identity development. Next, I explain the approach to conflict of the Alternatives to Violence Project in New South Wales, focusing on Restorative Practices as a mechanism for the application of mutual recognition in conflict situations. The work of Benjamin and the AVP (NSW) processes are critiqued and situated in the wider context of their relevant literatures. Through this process a methodology for the project emerges.

Using my own experiences, I demonstrate the self-recognition component of the mutual recognition process by giving detailed narratives of events in which I was involved. These episodes become case studies for demonstrating the techniques I have described, thereby showing that overlooked possibilities for social change exist within the narratives that construct and sustain the self. The thesis proceeds on the understanding that both social change and ethical conduct revolve around the ability of individuals to have a malleable, social and inter-subjectively realised self, and thus extends itself to the effort of expansively detailing how this may be done.

Using the Restorative Practices as a guide, I then exhaustively reconstruct the events portrayed with a view to demonstrating the possible way events could unfold if I had used the processes of AVP as a means to attempt mutually recognitive relations in the situations described. Finally, I discuss some of the limitations and implications of the model I have explicated. In particular I note some limitations in using ideas of rights and justice — two ideas often central to the work of social activists — and suggest an alternative, grounded in an appreciation of the contextual nature of ethics and actualised through greater skills in moral reflection and communication.

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# 1. Introduction

The idea of writing a PhD thesis, such as that which now begins here, emerged for me in the late 1990's, as I tried to draw from my own experience as an activist some general conclusions about why, it seemed to me at the time, activism often seemed to fail. My general thesis at the time related to how dominant constructions of reason (which I saw as 'instrumental', 'technocratic' and 'patriarchal') were embedded as metaphysical and ideological discourses in the culture, institutions and people, against which activists often pitched their struggle. Along with some practical impediments that brought the project to a standstill, I came to see the project as intellectually flawed, and the idea lay dormant for a decade.

One of the many problems with the project, which remains pertinent to the new one that emerges here, is that the evidence from my own personal experience didn't seem to suit the 'constructions of reason' model I was trying to build. The many documents, which were my primary sources, dealt with the ceaseless negotiation between (broadly) the community and government instrumentalities, politicians, scientists (and other technical 'experts') as we differed over how to deal with the complex problems relating to water/environmental management in the small towns of Scarborough and Wombarra, north of the city of Wollongong, on the east coast of Australia. The more I looked at the endless years of paperwork in which this battle had been fought, and the more I continued to take part in the issue as it dragged on for the better part of a decade, the more it seemed to me that, whilst I continued to imagine I saw the dread hand of the offending reasoning practices on a daily basis, something seemed to be amiss at another level. I became more and more convinced that it was not so much our reasoning and cognition that blocked progress and resolution of our differences, but our identities, personalities and emotions.

There was a difference between the kind of evidence that appeared in the written statements and counter-statements of our positions, and what was happening during the face-to-face negotiations. Whilst I was not documenting the latter, it was the interpersonal interactions that interested me more. It seemed to me (or perhaps 'seems',

as it is reflection over the years which has brought this clarity to what was then a largely inchoate feeling) that personal intransigence, lack of communication skills, and in fact a lack of interest in each other's needs and feelings were greater stumbling blocks to resolution of the issues than the different constructions of reason, or discourses, which may have undergirded our positions. This was made absolutely clear to me by my own behaviour at the final meeting of the last round of negotiations on these flooding/environmental issues (the building of the so-called 'Scarborough/Wombarra Tunnel') where, in a mixture of outrage and powerlessness, I uncharacteristically 'lost it' and yelled at and threatened a group of 'engineers and bureaucrats'. The content of my outburst was essentially that it was pointless talking to them at all, as they didn't listen and didn't care. It was accompanied by a threat to disrupt the lives of one of the members of the group, in a way I hoped was roughly comparable with the disruptions to life being borne by members of the community by the project at hand.

These actions represented my relative abandonment of relationship with the people and institutions involved in intervening in our community on the flooding and environmental issues that commonly involved us all, and of any attempt to discursively resolve our differences. Interestingly I have little regret or shame about the issue ending in this way, although with hindsight I would have certainly handled the issue differently. As I related the events of the meeting back to the members of the community I was representing, they too had no real problem with my behaviour. One person told me that they were glad I had expressed what I had, and that this in fact summed up community sentiment. Another commented that they were amazed that I had not had an outburst like this long ago — given the intolerable contempt with which the community had been treated for years on this issue. Another fellow community member reiterated his warning of a year before, that I should never have agreed to be on such a committee and negotiated in the context as it had been set — we were providing 'window dressing', namely an appearance of consultation about the final phases of the project in which we had no power or say at all. The overwhelming response from the people involved was that the community had lost nothing in losing this forum of discussion (which was the apparent consequence of my

actions), and that there was an honesty and integrity to the hostile silence that now lay between the contending parties.

Articulating our feelings had become more important than sustaining relationships with the 'other'. My outburst appears now as the almost inevitable consequence of a relationship in which I felt that my needs, and thus the needs of those I was representing, were not being met. These 'needs' were not just to have the solutions we wanted to the collective problems faced by all, but needs to be listened to, recognised, and treated with respect. In retrospect, the only time the community voice seemed to get a response was when we flexed our muscle. Demonstrations, media releases, petitions and letters to officials, in which we variously cajoled and threatened, kept us in the power play for control of the issue. When I see people now who were involved in the struggle, apart from not getting the resolutions we wanted, most of us remember the disregard with which we were treated. The scar of the ocean outfall on our local beach is matched by a scar on our collective psyches.

It is still tempting now, as it was then to, lay the blame for the failure of negotiation on the 'other side', even though it was my own actions which brought the final curtain on our meetings. In fact, much as the preceding paragraph suggests a cliché of a dull unresponsive bureaucracy grinding down a defenceless community, our own behaviour was far from perfect. In our protests and demonstrations we resorted to parody, put downs, and stereotypes as expressions of our anger and as tools of manipulation. An even handed examination of the events would, I am sure, find much that would make me shudder at the conduct of myself and my fellow community members. What is more useful, and the reason why I recount this episode here, is to draw from these events some insights that explain the shift in my focus from meta-narratives underlying the conflict to an interest in how communication can be used to create, sustain and repair relationships in conflict. These relationships themselves, thus constructed, become an embodiment of ethics and a vehicle for positive social change.

If I were to have continued down the road of looking at some of the discourses and reasoning practices, via the documentation available on this issue, this may have indeed unmasked some hidden structural assumptions that moulded the debate, but I felt I would have been missing something significant. It is in teasing out what this significant ‘thing’ is, and how to approach its study, that I now turn. Suppose for a moment that my assessment, that the members of the committee weren’t listening and didn’t care, was accurate. No amount of compelling logic about environmental restoration versus what we labelled the ‘techno/bureaucratic fix’ was going to change anything unless something within either party changed to make the needs and feelings of the ‘other’ a matter of intellectual or moral interest. Whilst prevailing beliefs and discourses were, and are, undeniably part of what makes people listen attentively or not, or take an interest in the feelings or needs of others, it is the way such positions are translated into actual communication between people that seemed to me to be the ‘coalface’ that anyone actually involved in such issues has to deal with to try to make progress on a day to day basis.

The shift from meta-narratives to interpersonal communication in my preoccupation with looking for positive change out of political and social conflict makes the new project taking shape here a very different exercise. Rather than looking at the meanings embedded in texts produced by the contending parties in conflict, I will be examining the minutiae of the way in which these texts are presented. Thus my major source material moves from the texts produced and recorded by participants in social and political conflict to the relationship between participants, communication skills, and the explication of feelings and realisation of needs of actors in these scenarios. The texts produced within the conflict described above, and indeed in most other conflicts I have been involved in, contain little that reflects in depth on the feelings and needs of participants, or the way this relates to communication skills and strategies. My own experiences in situations of conflict, and subsequent reflection upon these experiences, was what had shifted my focus and brought into existence my new ideas about how people could constructively engage in the politics of change. It is from this process that I now seek to distil something of value for others.

The idea that it is possible to meaningfully separate the part of the debate that deals with the needs and feelings of the different ‘selves’, and the larger narratives and discourses of culture within which they exist, is not unproblematic. At the risk of turning a substantial academic debate into a cliché, the relationship between structure and agency, as it appears before me here as methodological caveat, is something of a ‘chicken and egg’ problem. As an activist, action is often predicated on the idea that one’s actions can contribute towards structural changes that will positively improve the condition of those within the structure. Powerful arguments, by those interested in structure, usefully remind us that the actions that apparently stem from autonomous actors and selves are, in important ways, constructed and continually mediated in their nature by the structures they inhabit. Any attempt to examine and re-imagine the intricacies of social conflict that ignores human agency or the structural factors in which they are embedded, or indeed tries to establish a primacy of either, will run the risk of producing insights which are devoid of, or limited in, their understandings about the social world and the lives of people in which they seek to intervene.

I intend to explore an approach to studying conflict that concentrates more or less exclusively on the relations between individual agents. In fact, to put myself further out on a methodological limb, my primary source, or lens through which I view these relations, will be that of but one agent, and that agent is myself. I set out on this trajectory not to produce a work that is complete and holistic, covering every facet of the debates that attend such issues, but in the belief that in taking this approach, I am filling an important gap in the existing literature. The best way to describe how I came to this position is to take the reader on a journey through my attempts to understand what it was that was missing for me in existing research and scholarly models. This process should make clear where this project sits in relation to existing work in the area, and why such a methodology as I adopt is both intellectually satisfying and useful for those who wish to take thoughtful, ethical and personal action in social contexts.

In trying to find a way to begin a discussion about the way in which the ideas that underpin my thesis interrelate and connect, there seems no better place to start than with themes of interrelation and connection themselves. In the introduction to his book *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*, Erazim Kohak states: "... I have not sought to 'prove a point' but to evoke and share a vision. Thus my primary tool has been the metaphor, not the argument, and the product of my labours is not a doctrine but an invitation to look and see." (Kohak 1984, xiii). Kohak evidently feels there *is* a moral sense in nature, and though he produces a complex web of intellection and philosophical travail in support of this view, it is in its romantic invocation, in the central metaphor of the embers and the stars, that he places his hopes of opening up his reader to the vision he hopes to share. The metaphor is thus: the embers of a fire and the light of the stars seen against the background light of the modern urban setting are but a pale imitation of how we would experience the same embers and stars in the remote wilderness, free of the background light and noise of human civilisation. He continues: "Surrounded by artefacts and constructs we tend to lose sight, literally as well as metaphorically, of the rhythm of the day and the night, of the phases of the moon and the changes of the seasons, of the life of the cosmos and our place therein" (Kohak 1984, xi). The tacit claim of the book is that we are deracinated from our 'true' relationship with the cosmos and would be philosophically, practically and spiritually enriched by a reconnection with nature.

Engaging with Kohak's text, in the romantic spirit upon which it seems to rely, I have indeed drawn the ideas that form the philosophical and methodological hub of this work. Philosophically, Kohak's conception and employment of the term 'nature' are intellectually problematic for me, but the more general idea that giving value to connection and relation could generate a profound philosophical and practical basis with which to navigate and mediate our dealings with 'others' will inform my work here. Rather than systematically explore how the idea of connection underpins the thesis, the reader will find the idea of connection and relation as a recurring theme, which I will try and make sense of at the end rather than the beginning of the journey. Methodologically, Kohak's text has inspired in me the idea of illustrating the practical connections between

theory and life with impressionistic rather than empirical examples. Rather than collect experiences from life, in such a way as to claim that they may be, in some measured, specific, way, true for all, I will present what is true for me, and for others perhaps merely text or metaphor, and lead the reader on a journey of implications from these insights, which I hope will enrich our collective understandings of the subjects traversed.

Much, or indeed most, of what will be recollected here deals with my own experiences as an activist, and will be, I hope, useful for other activists or those studying social movements. This is an exercise in critical, reflexive and hypothetical reconstructive biography. I hope to demonstrate, and share, the value and content of such a process as a basis for more effective and ethical activism. The process that will anchor my analysis is the methodology of Restorative Practices, as interpreted and practiced by the New South Wales branch of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). Whilst deeply indebted to this model, the particular interpretation that appears here will be my own, and the practice that emerges will no longer be 'AVP'. The AVP model will be used as a framework for recounting my own experience, and targeting aspects of this experience for closer examination, in particular, my needs and feelings at any given moment. I will demonstrate this at length, not only to unmask my own interiority and its impact on the scenarios at hand, but to give enough depth to the process for others to use this practise in all phases of their activism: that is before, during and after engagement with 'others'.

A second theoretical component, which will be overlayed on the Restorative Practices model, is Mutual Recognition theory, as particularly described by Jessica Benjamin (1988). Benjamin's Mutual Recognition theory is a psychological explanation of domination, and the reading I make offers a clear non-dominative way of approaching relationships, and deepens the theoretical level of the AVP model and enriches its mechanisms of application to circumstance. I rely on the model of AVP used in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW). Both the AVP (NSW) restorative practice process and mutual recognition theory contain methods for relating self to other, in a way that enshrines care and gives value to both. I will return to the concepts of care and value later in the work.

My introduction to the idea of recognition as a possible ethical tool was via the work of Axel Honneth, whose contributions to the recognition debate are clearly anchored in the work of Hegel (Honneth 1995, 12–17). In an early work developing his idea of building a conception of morality from a theory of recognition, Honneth cites the work of Ernst Bloch. Bloch begins his exploration of morality in terms of human dignity, which he defines as the avoidance of personal degradation and injury. He continues, and is quoted by Honneth: “... it was only such negative experiences of disrespect and insult that turned the normative goal of securing human dignity into a driving force of history.” Bloch concludes that if people’s dignity was not damaged, “... economic privation and social repression would not be enough to drive practical revolutionary movement” (quoted in Honneth 1992, 187-88). This resonated strongly with the personal experiences, partly related to open this thesis. This for me contained the clue to what was missing in the study I had been attempting. Disrespect and the damage to human dignity thus engendered appeared to me through this lens as the deeper factors driving and characterising the environmental management struggles in Scarborough/Wombarra.

Honneth’s theory of recognition is based on the idea that three patterns of recognition, these being love, rights and solidarity, could assure dignity and integrity (Honneth 1992, 195). He claims: “Morality, if understood as an institution for the protection of human dignity, defends the reciprocity of love, the universalism of rights, and the egalitarianism of solidarity against their being relinquished in favour of force or oppression”. Critically, in terms of my own interest, he concludes that for this theory to be validated empirically it would need “... the support of historical and sociological studies that are capable of showing that moral progress is born of the struggle for recognition” (Honneth 1992, 200).

Applying this maxim to the experiences related, I could sense that it was damage to dignity and desire to protect dignity (of our environment as well as ourselves) that was driving our struggle. We had not, however, explicitly conceived our struggle as one for recognition, certainly not in the terms that Honneth describes. Neither had we recorded or codified our experience in a way that could be described as historical or sociological.



Honneth's ideas did however seem to be moving around my area of interest. The idea that moral progress could be made through struggles for recognition that protected human dignity was appealing after a struggle where I, and many in the community of which I was a part, had felt unrecognised and treated in such a way as to have our dignity damaged. However, I could not use the evidence I had to support this kind of claim. In fact my own experience proved to me only the negative image of this claim: that lack of recognition causes damage to dignity, and that lack of attention to this aspect had led many of us on both sides to morally dubious behaviour. It seemed to me that to make moral progress we would have to examine our experiences through such a lens as envisaged by Honneth and Bloch, and take this hard won insight to our next theatre of struggle. Evidence of moral progress would be seen in markedly changed behaviour. The question being begged here is what would those changes be?

In his definition of recognition Honneth mentions that for recognition to occur, it has to be inter-subjective: it has to happen between subjects. In this regard he quotes from the work of Jessica Benjamin. Upon studying Jessica Benjamin I found the missing link between theories of recognition and a description of the processes of recognition. Whilst Honneth draws attention to the damaging effects of misrecognition/non-recognition, he does not deeply explore how these concepts can be gifted as part of social intercourse. Benjamin's theory of mutual recognition, described in *The Bonds of Love* (Benjamin 1988), elucidates how, moment by moment, mother and child skilfully assert their needs and take time and space to meet the needs of 'the other', creating inter-subjective recognition. Mother and child, despite the obvious power differences, through a process of skilful reading of each other's behaviour build what Benjamin describes as 'attunement', and this attuned state is used to build an ideal condition of 'oneness' which Benjamin calls mutuality (Benjamin 1988, 18). Mutuality describes a state where mother and child are relating as equal subjects, resisting the temptations of domination, which would be for either side to push their demands to have their needs met in a way which obliterates the needs of the other, creating one or other of the parties as an object or means to an end of their subject. Relating this back to the question that ended the last paragraph, about what would positive changes, resembling moral progress might look

like: Benjamin's ideal parent/child relationship, thus described, gave me a methodology to pursue this question.

To draw out a possible methodology from Benjamin's work, I will first need to give a deeper explanation of her theory. Having done this my next step will be to find a mechanism to extend such a way of relating to wider social spheres, and ultimately political and social conflict. For this step I will draw heavily from the processes and methodology of the New South Wales branch of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). Finally, I hope to link these mechanisms to the possibilities for personal transformation in social contexts by anchoring them in a reflection and reconstruction of some of my own most significant experiences in the theatre of political and social struggle. Before embarking on these case studies I will explain to the reader why I take the unusual research step of subjective self-examination instead of the more regular empirical research involving many such subjects. If I am successful, the result will be an extended example of how we can approach political and social struggle, resisting the temptations of domination, and valuing and recognising other subjects and our relational context to them in a way which opens up the possibilities for creative positive personal change for all involved.

In summary I hope to build theoretically well-grounded techniques to

1. Resist interpersonal domination both by the self and the other whilst engaged in social and political action
2. Provide techniques for reflection and reconstruction that are of value during and after political activity
3. Build communicative techniques that harness the possibilities for mutual recognition
4. Theoretically and practically link personal and political transformation.

As mentioned earlier, Jessica Benjamin's theory of mutual recognition is a psychological explanation of domination, and one which, I will contend, offers an explanation of what lay beneath the outburst related at the opening of this thesis, and indeed much of the

unpleasant and stressful aspects of my experiences as an activist over the years. I believe my reading of Benjamin's theory of recognition also offers a 'way out' of such problematic ways of relating. Before examining Benjamin's contribution to this debate it is useful to sketch the problem of domination and situate it within the project I am developing here. One of the principal exponents of the relations of domination argument is Michel Foucault. What I shall do here is contrast the approaches of Benjamin and Foucault to draw out the how such approaches illuminate the kinds of scenarios of conflict regularly faced by activists.

### **Michel Foucault and domination**

When I first began to write about the approaches to understanding domination used by these two writers I thought of Foucault's explanation of domination as a sociological one and Benjamin's as one located around human agency. I now believe this explanation is too simplistic. Foucault is interested in charting the operations of power. For the most part Foucault prefers to focus quite deliberately on *relations* of power (Foucault 2000, 291), rather than power itself, which he describes in terms of neutrality and ubiquity. For Foucault, while power is "mobile, reversible and unstable" (Foucault 2000, 292) its operations are not incompatible with freedom. What Foucault calls domination occurs when "... power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies to modify them, remain blocked, frozen" (Foucault 2000, 283). Foucault's explanations of the solidification of relations of power, that often take the form of what he calls normalisation, are executed in embedded discourses and often end up transforming power into a disciplinary agent.

These means of understanding power relations and domination would have suited the sort of explanations I first sought to apply to my experiences in activism, where discourses and normalisation may have illuminated the dominance of patriarchal, technocratic and instrumental reasoning in the debates which surrounded the struggle over environmental management in Scarborough/Wombarra. Foucault's insistence on the term relations of power, which locates domination in systemic imbalances and fixities, casts only limited light on the actions of those individual actors. Where Foucault does return to examine

personal agency is in his concept of resistance. Pivotal to Foucault's idea of resistance is making visible the operations of power and the 'care of the self'. Foucault offers the notion of genealogy as "... a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from ... subjection, to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal, and scientific discourse" (Foucault 1980, 85).

In 1984, Foucault was asked if the concept of care of the self, in relation to resistance, risked becoming dominative because of its lack of attention to 'others'. In his reply Foucault claims that the risk of dominating others arises "... only when one has not taken care of the self and has become slave of one's desires" (Foucault 2000, 288). A depth of self-knowledge, Foucault continues, means "... you cannot abuse power over others. Thus there is no danger". Whilst Foucault's description of self-knowledge that attends these claims is impressively deep, he offers no substantial link between self-knowledge and avoidance of the kinds of power solidifications he sees leading to domination. In fact later in the interview he offers a weak, and indeed to my eye unreconstructed, patriarchal explication of such a linkage. He claims: "He who takes care of himself to the point of knowing exactly what duties he has as master of a household and as a husband and father will find he enjoys a proper relationship with his wife and children" (Foucault 2000, 289). Knowledge of self and visibilities of power relations, he claims, will free the human agent from 'historical knowledges' (normalisations and discourses) and leave power mutable, flowing and transferable.

Whilst I agree with Foucault's claim, here implicit, and later explicit, that self-knowledge and self-reflection are foundational for ethical conduct (Foucault 1984, 68) — which here *I* implicitly and later explicitly will link to non-dominative relations — I fail to see, and to my mind Foucault fails to demonstrate, a necessary link between them. There seems nothing in self-knowledge or the process of reframing knowledge and power in terms of its visibility which guarantees against power becoming stuck, in the way Foucault sees as leading to domination. The profundity in Foucault's writing is the recognition of the essential neutrality of power, and that it leads us to an examination of power relations in a search for understanding of domination. But having done this his writing is heavily

weighted to sociological understandings of these relationships: once an agent who has ‘cared for themselves’ and self-reflected is ‘free’ of normalisations and discourses, and power is flowing freely, Foucault offers little explanation of how such an agent will relate. What kinds of approach to communication would they favour? How will they respond to the ongoing pressures around them that tend towards power solidification? How will self-reflection and care of the self manifest in behaviours that resist domination?

Returning to my scenario in which I, as a community delegate, abandoned disciplined communication and yelled at and threatened a group of ‘bureaucrats’: if I or any other member of the committee had resisted domination in the way Foucault describes, what would we have said or done that was different, and how would this have affected the way the situation unfolded? Tracing genealogies may yield insights about how the situations are constructed, or how discourses become dominant and are used for domination, but it gives me few tools with which to navigate the particulars of a circumstance. It is here in which the theories of Jessica Benjamin are useful. They offer not only an explanation of why I felt unheard and disrespected, and ultimately behaved in a way which almost certainly made my interlocutors feel the same way, but how the moment-by-moment interplay of power relations could be challenged and possibly turned around into non-dominative ways of relating. In challenging the relations of domination in a moment-by-moment interpersonal setting I believe we can find ways of relating that not only ease the damage done by domination but achieve functionally better outcomes for all.

### **Jessica Benjamin’s theory of mutual recognition**

Benjamin’s theories are useful to this analysis as they offer a way to connect the disparate theories examined thus far, and a way out of some of the conceptual impasses that seem to plague them. Benjamin, like Freud, from which the theory owes its genesis, sees domination as a psychological problem, rather than mainly sociological as implied by Foucault. For Freud, relations of domination and submission are seen as the only way to escape the vicissitudes of the Hobbesian state of nature. For Freud, that some submit to the domination of others holds the only possible escape from a society that resembles

Hobbes's war of all against all. Benjamin is not satisfied with Freud's polarity here, for her the binary opposition between instinct (aggression) and civilization (domination) creates an intellectual impasse. Submission to domination does not, according to Benjamin, deal with the aggressive impulse or explain how or why domination works: Benjamin is thus critical of Freud's failure to acknowledge domination as a two way process (Benjamin 1988, 4). For domination to occur there must be submission or obedience. "Obedience, of course, does not exorcise aggression; it merely directs it against the self" (Benjamin 1988, 5). Even for Freud, obedience in the first instant in the parent-child relation is secured not by coercion, but by love. Not only is coercion not the sole cause of obedience, but the idea that relations of power are always bad is also rejected. Benjamin in her argument here quotes Foucault: "If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?" (Benjamin 1988, 4). Benjamin concludes: "To reduce domination to a simple relation of doer and done-to is to substitute moral outrage for analysis" (Benjamin 1998, 9-10). It is in unlocking the complexities of these relations that Benjamin finds hope for escaping the exclusive polarities of Freud.

Benjamin offers us an alternative reading of Freud that sees domination as "... a problem not so much of human nature as of human relationships — the interaction between the psyche and social life" (Benjamin 1988, 5). If obedience can be secured by love, why does it seem to often be enforced by domination? Relations of domination are not inevitable; they are a consequence of our nature and our circumstance. Where Foucault finds inevitability, Benjamin rediscovers possibility. If domination is constructed, it can be deconstructed or avoided. Benjamin's work is rooted in the infant-parent relationship, but she doesn't exclude the idea that the positive and non-dominative relations she sees as possible in the infant-parent relation can be maintained into adult relationships by the same attention to the subtleties of relating she describes in the early childhood scenario.

Benjamin claims "... domination originates in a transformation of the relationship between self and other" (Benjamin 1988, 12). To make sense of this claim it is necessary to look closely at what Benjamin argues constitutes a non-dominative and healthy

infant/parent relationship. For a relationship to be non-dominative, the polarities of assertion and recognition need to be held in balance. The maintenance of this balance is in turn rooted in the need to differentiate appropriately between self and other. Benjamin defines recognition as a two way process involving self and other: "Recognition is that response from the other which marks meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self. It allows the self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way" (Benjamin 1988, 12). To make sense of ourselves we need our actions to be situated in context. The attention of others gives us a mirror by which we see the world confirmed, and our actions made real by tangible effect. Benjamin, however is critical of the concept of the mirror here, and she notes in the case of infants that the child needs to recognise difference and similarity at the same time, to confirm not only self, but the recognition of another self to which it is connected, and yet differentiated. A child must learn that others are not objects and to deliver confirmation of other selves, equally autonomous and also requiring confirmation. In this way a child learns that recognition is reciprocal, that it "... includes not only the other's confirming response, but also how we find each other in that response" (Benjamin 1988, 21). A child needs to learn, what as an adult will be essential for non-dominative relations, that recognising is as important as being recognised, and that both need to be done in unison and in equal measure for a full exchange of what Benjamin refers to as 'mutuality'.

This process of mutual recognition can only be attained if both parties effectively assert their selves. Benjamin is clear to note that the process of reflection so vital to mutual recognition must come with an assertion of self. This assertion is the part of the confirming response containing difference, and requiring acknowledgement as such. Benjamin functionally defines domination through this lens: "... domination and submission result from the breakdown of the necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition that allow self and other to meet as sovereign equals" (Benjamin 1988, 12). In the case of the infant-child relationship, Benjamin points out that mutuality exists in spite of the enormous inequality in power between parent and child. This has important implications for adult subjects. Whilst adults are usually on more of an equal footing in terms of power than a child and parent, they are nonetheless usually manifestly

unequal in the skills used in life to take and use power. Benjamin's claims about the infant-child relationship must create some optimism about the possibility of establishing mutuality as a result of recognitive exchange in adults.

Rather than define recognition, Benjamin makes sense of the concept in a wide-ranging discussion in which she explores the constitution of the term via the relationship between a series of core, related concepts. Benjamin (1988, 17–19) draws on research from the 1950's (by attachment theorists Bowlby, Mahler and Stern) that suggests that the infant is fundamentally socially driven, as opposed to the passive and dependant conception of infancy embraced by Freud. She points out that infancy research by the 1980's was suggesting models of reciprocity rather than instinctual gratification or separation as explanations for the basic drive of the infant (Benjamin 1988, 26). Even gratification is increasingly seen as a cooperative activity that involves mutuality, and where the primary focus is on reaching attunement with the mother. As previously mentioned, attunement is a state of 'oneness' where total (or strong) connection is achieved cooperatively and interactively, and where individuality and subjectivity are preserved. This is achieved by mirroring sameness, and reflecting back difference in a tension where the combination of resonance and difference open ways to recognition which transcends the master and agency response where desire is actualised by actions in which one or other simply treats the other as an object which needs to be acted upon to respond in a way which meets the needs of self alone. In the infant-parent relationship this is often achieved during play (Benjamin 1988, 27).

This ideal state of mutuality and attunement delivered in part by mutual recognition, which seems to often be established in the infant-parent relationship at an unconscious level, can, and often does, easily go astray. In the 1960's psychologist Margaret Mahler was at the forefront of a movement that saw dysfunction and damage in the infant-parent relationship in terms of separation. The separation of the child from parent as identity emerged was seen as a possible locus of damage or trauma, with the process of individuation marking the passage from dependence to independence or possible inter-dependence. Benjamin is critical of this position on the basis that it represents both a false



representation of original oneness, and post oneness separation. The separation from oneness argument, she claims: "... contains the implicit assumption that we grow 'out of' relationships rather than becoming more active and sovereign 'within' them. That we start in a state of dual oneness and wind up in a situation of singular oneness" (Benjamin 1988, 18). By the 1980's, and here Benjamin draws on the work of Daniel Stern, research was showing that infants are never totally undifferentiated from the mother: they seem to have an innate sense of self from the earliest stages, and in the words of Benjamin, an infant seems to be "... primed from the beginning to be interested in and to distinguish itself from the world of others." (Benjamin 1988, 18). Benjamin concludes that where the infant-parent relationship is most likely to go wrong is not during some separation between the two, but a failure to maintain mutuality and attunement through the change of the infant's activity and assertiveness within the relationship.

Benjamin argues that when the balance between recognition and assertiveness is disturbed or fails, the search for recognition becomes a power struggle, and assertiveness becomes aggression, and the beginnings of what we have been referring to as a relationship of domination are seen. Benjamin concludes on this point: "In an ideal balance a person is able to be fully self absorbed or fully receptive to the other, he is able to be alone or together. In a negative cycle of recognition, a person feels that aloneness is only possible by obliterating the intrusive other, that attunement is only possible by surrendering to the other" (Benjamin 1988, 28). When this process fails the infant is forced to prematurely develop boundaries for the defence of self, and doesn't achieve the more permeable boundaries between self and other where experiences of union without the loss of self are more possible. By the age of one year, Benjamin argues, a child is experiencing conflict between its own desires, the claims of others and the desire to remain attuned. In an ideal situation the child will have begun the process of learning how to negotiate competing desires/needs of self and other without damaging the sense of social attunement that Benjamin argues may be a fundamental drive. In a negative cycle a child may feel forced to either break this attunement by entering a power struggle in an attempt to meet its own needs, or the desire to remain attuned can be converted into submission to the will of the other.

So what are the implications of this theory for those who are seeking ways of being or ways of taking positive social action, outside or in opposition to relations of domination? The first of these, but not within the scope of this thesis, is that the parent-child relationship is vital for grounding the human subject in a balanced way of asserting personal needs and recognising the needs of others, and conducting the negotiation of these tensions in a way which sustains and supports the social connection of subjects. For a thesis which begins at the point of political or social action, often with damaged subjects unskilled in negotiating needs, the question becomes how can we approach taking positive social action in a way in which all subjects have the opportunity to recognise and assert needs in an ongoing tension which delivers, what Benjamin would argue, the deepest desire/need of a sense of attunement and mutuality with our fellow subjects.

Political and social change, or attempts to foster it, traditionally involves a degree of contestation, and depending on the type and scale of change sought and/or achieved, an amount of power struggle and domination. With power struggle and domination there will usually be some damage to people touched by the struggle. Some people are likely not to have their needs heard, others' needs will be heard and not satisfied at all, and even those who get their needs completely or largely met are likely to sustain some damage during the process. The process of struggle to negotiate competing needs in the political and social environment for both (so-called) winners and losers is one of high anxiety, particularly if the issues are felt strongly. Alfie Kohn quotes psychoanalyst Rollo May: "competition is the most pervasive occasion for anxiety in our culture" (Kohn 1992, 123).

Alfie Kohn in *No Contest*, his critique of competition, looks at the work of Karen Horney, who suggests that the neurotic person may project their own fear of losing onto others, and therefore not want to 'win', for fear of damaging others. Kohn suggests that, in fact, it is not merely neurosis that drives this fear, but legitimate empathetic and experiential knowledge that the act of 'winning' often does damage others (Kohn 1992, 121–22). In Benjamin's terms, those who 'win' a political or social struggle may well

feel a loss of mutuality and civil connection because of the unmet needs of others that their 'victory' entails. It is possible that in a culture where competition is deeply embedded, such a feeling of lack of mutuality becomes pervasive, expected, and thus sublimated and normalised. Such a situation would explain Karen Horney's assumption that fear of damaging others underpinning a fear of winning is a projection and a neurosis. Cultural manifestations of lack of connection, mutuality and attunement, such as alienation, loneliness and depression, can then be pathologised as problems relating to the individual, where in fact they may relate to the cultural poverty of a society that has devalued connection in favour of satisfaction of personal need or interest.

It is precisely in such normalisation that theorists such as Foucault find the politics of domination. It is in the exposure of such hidden mechanics of domination that Foucault believes resistance to domination can be cultivated. This thesis also works on the assumption that exposing normalising discourses is important, and the intellectual dissection of my own experiences can be an instructive example of the kind of critical reflection on self that constitutes part of this process. Rather than attempt a comprehensive exposure of all normalisations, power relations and domination extant in the situations recounted, I propose to look at a particular set of possibilities for political and social action, which appear to have been normalised out of the debate. In particular I would like to examine the possibility that the mutuality and attunement sought by a child in the infant-parent relationship as a first order need is retained as a fundamental need during adulthood. My supposition is that discussions about rights have marginalised discussions about human needs. Later in the thesis I will return to the question of whether rights are a suitable basis for establishing and maintaining good recognitive social relations.

It may be precarious to argue that the mutuality and attunement sought between parent and child during early childhood would also be sought in other adult relationships through life. Indeed Benjamin herself notes that as the child grows and establishes more of its self in relation to the mother, so must the manner of the mutuality and attunement change in response. In adulthood the degree of mutuality and attunement found as a child

is often sought and experienced in the bonds of erotic love. In healthy erotic love adults once again find the safe space to be a whole self, where the barrier between self and other is permeable, and mutuality, attunement and connection can be experienced without any loss of self. The parent-child relation and the bonds of erotic love can be seen as ideal states of mutual recognition, but it is not my intention to claim that we should seek a similar degree of connection with all others in all situations, and to translate the mutuality and attunement ideally experienced in infant-parent or adult erotic love relations into an aspiration for all people in their daily social and political exchanges. What I am interested in building is a perspective on political conduct that places mutuality and attunement with others on the map as a desired and sought outcome. The ideal states of mutuality and attunement experienced by people in ideal relations become a pivotal grounding in good recognitive relations, which then need to be translated and reapplied in other situations. The endeavour of this writing is to give the reader an idea of how this translation may appear in the more complex world of political and social contestation.

Benjamin argues that the bonds of love can create and sustain deep connections between people and hold the tension between the assertive needs of self and the recognitive needs of self and other. The level of conflict, and the often violent or coercive means undertaken by many to establish personal assertive needs at the expense of social recognitive needs, is testimony to the fact that peoples and cultures in general are not successful in translating the kind of ideal relation they may have had some experience of in infancy and adult erotic love relationships into their adult lives, in the sphere of interpersonal relations, workplaces or political or social action. It may be that as individuals and a culture we do not bring the qualities of love and playfulness, that seem to be states that allow us to deal with the tensions and contradictions of self and other in ideal infant-parent and adult erotic love relations, to other spheres of our adult lives. Benjamin concludes her opening chapter: "... a theory or a politics that cannot cope with contradiction, that denies the irrational, that tries to sanitize the erotic, fantastic components of human life cannot visualise an authentic end to domination but only vacate the field" (Benjamin 1988, 10). I set out to reconstruct my own experiences with optimism and a belief in the idea that humans have a desire to connect and experience

resonance and mutuality with the parts of the self echoed imperfectly in others. This is done with a view to sketching what is possible in politics and social action which builds, sustains and repairs these ideal tendencies towards social, cooperative and loving relations with others in the difficult and challenging scenarios thrown at us in the conflict of political and social life.

As well as offering hope and possibility in the aspiration towards non or less dominative relations, Benjamin's close attention to studying the minutiae of exchange between subjects offers both a lens to view, and a mechanism to meaningfully dissect and reassemble, experiences of political struggle such as those which seemed impervious to analysis described earlier in this introduction. In Benjamin's analysis of the infant/parent relationship, she devotes much time to the concept of 'face play'. As the infant is non-verbal, the expressions on the faces exchanged between mother and child chart the flow of attempted mutuality, as assertion and recognition of needs happen, moment by moment. In adult relationships, and in particular relations marked by social or political conflict, the exchange is more complex. As adults, facial expressions and body language still communicate a vast array of information, particularly about the emotions we are experiencing. They are also used as part of our armoury of skills with which we seek to meet our needs, and the needs of others, and navigate consciously and unconsciously our social domains. By adulthood we have usually learned verbal skills, and the social habits that attend them. The complex and varied social forces, discourses and cultural norms that construct us are by this stage dauntingly manifold and interwoven. If we are to attempt something like Benjamin's mutual recognition in political and social life we must go towards understanding self, other, the relations between self and other and the context they inhabit. Such a project is clearly the work of more than one thesis, and it will be important to explain the 'how and why' of my intended preoccupation with the self and the self/other relationship, as a contribution to beginning a cultural discussion about the possibilities for the practice of mutuality in social and political conflict.

## **Gender, negation and identity**

Before explaining the methodological decision to focus on my own experiences, there are two more points about Benjamin's mutual recognition theory that need explication in terms of its application as a model to this thesis. The first point relates to the centrality and importance of gender, and the second relates to what she calls negation. These points relate, and both are particularly important, for those who may wish to explore the political ramifications of the theory. One of Benjamin's contributions to the debate about the infant/parent relationship is to stress that the beginning of identity for the infant — the recognition that it is not its mother — is also the beginning of a process of individuation within, not separation from, the relationship. This individuation is experienced differently by male and female children, and here I draw from Carol Gilligan's compilation of research by Nancy Chodorow (which also plays a significant role in the formation of Benjamin's position). Mothers and female children, by virtue of the similarity of gender, remain more connected, experiencing attachment and identity individuation simultaneously. Male children, by virtue of perceived difference by both parties, experience a 'more emphatic individuation' where connection and attachment are less likely to be experienced, or experienced strongly during identity formation (Gilligan 1982, 7–8). This initial experience of individuation for boys which may result in a less empathic and connected person, who then, points out Gilligan, tends to be culturally amplified, defining masculinity in terms of separation. By contrast femininity, both in its self and cultural manifestations, tends to be defined in terms of relationships (Gilligan 1982, 9–10).

The functional expression of these differing identity profiles can be seen in gender behaviours. Men tend to be more autonomous, and less interested in relationships. Gilligan notes that male children are more likely in play situations to ignore damage being done to relationships to meet their needs of stimulation by continuing the games. Female children tend to abandon games when the game threatens the interpersonal connections between participants. These patterns continue into adulthood. Traditionally men struggle in the domain of relationships and women with separation. Men tend to be less empathic, and thus more likely to commit acts of behaviour that damage others

(Gilligan 1982, 9–10). Women are less likely in general to want to damage others, being more likely to experience empathic pain themselves by doing so. This may partly explain the overwhelming evidence that shows men (in western industrialised societies) are far more likely to commit acts of violence (Scheff 1997, 86). Applying a theory of mutual recognition to politics shows us that in general men may find adapting these strategies more challenging, and that practices of relating that lead to relations of domination may be more deeply embedded in male behaviour. I shall return to these gender themes through the thesis as they emerge to colour the issues in question, and in particular to Gilligan's idea of an 'ethic of care' as a possible philosophy useful in approaching ethical questions (Gilligan 1982, 62).

The second point, about negation, emerges in Benjamin's work as she clarifies her theories in response to the debates her original theory created with other theorists (Benjamin 1998, 79-108). On the whole the theorists who committed their critiques of Benjamin to paper found her positions contributing substantially to debates about domination but found her use of the concepts of autonomy, self and subject to be problematic. One critic, Scott (1993), goes as far as to suggest that Benjamin has created a 'myth of harmonious reconciliation' (Benjamin 1998, 92). My interest here is to explore how the theory of mutual recognition is deepened and clarified, so rather than reproduce the complex debates that are engendered I shall concentrate on the emergence of the improvements and detail which have implications for my work here. In *The Bonds of Love*, Benjamin (1988) points out that during the period described as rapprochement, a child will experiment with gratifying its own needs at the expense of the relationship. If the mother allows the child to explore this, without resisting and creating a power struggle, the child will usually find that the annihilation of other leads to an aloneness that is undesirable and will return to mutuality of its own volition (Benjamin 1988, 41). In *The Shadow of the Other*, Benjamin (1998) explores and clarifies the idea of how breakdowns in mutuality and descents into domination are regular and inevitable, and how these can be negotiated in ways that honour an overall trajectory towards mutuality. Here the role of negation is important for reconciling otherness.

## Critiques of Benjamin

In response to the critique that self and other are primarily discursively rather than psychologically produced (Weir 1996), Benjamin suggests that if either of these notions are used exclusively to displace the other they become falsely totalising. Thus Benjamin's 'I' includes otherness, sustaining agency in the face of "a clash of culturally instituted subject positions" (Benjamin 1998, 93). During the periods where mutuality gives way to domination, Benjamin suggests that a negation of other takes place. This negation is important for the self to define itself in opposition to the other. Subjects must withstand and survive this negation to proceed with a sense of self that now includes the negated otherness and repairs mutuality. The danger, as noted in Scott's comment on the myth of reconciliation, is that repair based on the denial of negation creates a "... false closure of contradiction" (Benjamin 1998, 97). Benjamin concludes that repeated cycles of breakdown and repair, which include a recognition of negation, are likely to create faith in the cycle itself as part of a larger cycle of recognition: "Politically, the possibility of mutual intersubjectivity is predicated on the very difference that also leads to the continual misfiring of recognition, the very plurality that strains subjectivity" (Benjamin 1998, 101).

Benjamin's critical distinction is that otherness should not be synthesised into self in a way which elides the difference. She concludes: "This requires a self that need not aim at a seamless unity of consciousness by exclusion, by mistaking a part for a whole. A self that allows different voices, asymmetry and contradiction, that holds ambivalence" (Benjamin 1998, 101). Self remains imperfect and incomplete and holds within it a sense of threatening other that is survived and felt. A mutually recognising self stands in what Benjamin calls the third position, which occupies the space between realities to hold different voices rather than deny its polyphony in favour of an illusionary unified self, and a "... potential space outside the web of identifications" (Benjamin 1998, xv). Benjamin concludes poetically using the metaphor of shadow: "Owning the other within diminishes the threat of the other without so that the stranger outside is no longer identical with the stranger within us — not our shadow, not a shadow over us, but a separate other whose shadow is distinguishable in the light" (Benjamin 1998, 108).



The implication for my analysis, in terms of applying this to politics, is to acknowledge that negation of otherness and maintaining differences will be part of struggles for recognition. Rather than using struggle to create an illusion that differences can be obliterated by recognition, one must acknowledge recognition as a cycle that includes negation of otherness and the upholding of differences. Recognition in politics should not be conceived as a process of finding what we have in common and eliding our difference — it is learning to survive and be comfortable with a different and negating other, one that we must hold within us, a self that has learned to live with the fear of obliteration of self inherent in otherness. A mutually recognitive, political self will be fragmented, permeable and unstable and renounce the illusory comforts of recognition that continue to place otherness outside of self. We should not expect the politics of recognition to be a tidy, predictable and comfortable process. Mutual recognition as politics will not be a magical process where we all discover we are the same and stop damaging, misrecognising and attempting to dominate one another, but one in which we accept and work with these tensions as a process where it is possible to create sustain and repair communities of relational, permeable, differentiated selves that can survive and grow, incorporating rather than dominating or annihilating the uncomfortable strangeness of others. It is to the end of explicating how this process can be realised, and how these tensions can be held in balance, that I will subject my own experience, through the multiple lenses of AVP and its attendant values and communicative ethics, to a rigorous reflection and reconstruction.

Another critique of Benjamin's work is made by Allison Weir in her book *Sacrificial Logics*. Weir argues that Benjamin's account of the individuation process of the infant conflates self-assertion with separation (and thus autonomy) and recognition with relationship (Weir 1996, 72-73). Weir claims that this leads to an unsustainable linear connection which sees the process of individuation and separation equated with domination, resting on an unproved assumption that "... severance of primary identification should necessarily produce an objectifying (and hence dominating) attitude." (Weir 1996, 78). In terms of my intended application these critiques contain a

useful caveat in terms of absolute rendering of theory, and imprecise use of terminology. Without 'buying in' to a position on whether Weir's critiques are conclusive, they produce a cautionary response. For me, Benjamin's theory entails a case for how the individuation process, which involves a degree of autonomy to assert and respond to desires and demands for recognition, can slide in and out of domination as to an extent assertion of self seems to relate to negation of others, which if given free reign represents a move towards domination. The problematisation of any given word in this equation will see this theory requiring a growing web of qualification and explanation. For scholars who wish to pin down theories of human development this is indeed a useful exercise. For my analysis, I am interested in trying out Benjamin's theory as a lens for perceiving tendencies and possibilities that pervade human behaviour: it is a way of exploring human relationships, not reducing them to evidence in an academic argument.

Recognition is not the sum of relationship. For example, and again here Weir's critique is useful, Benjamin concerns her theory with the *affective* communication as this constitutes the main medium of communication for the infant/mother relationship (Weir 1996, 75). Adult relationships, to which I will be applying the theory, whilst continuing to use affective ways of relating, also use skilled verbal and non-verbal signals to negotiate their needs in the self-other context. Benjamin's concept of attunement as one of the goals of relating is clearly related to affective communication. The way we describe the aspiration towards connection between adults that is created and sustained by affective and cognitive communication may well be as often described by a more general term such as understanding. Similarly separation is best seen as requiring an element of autonomy rather than the two being synonymous, as Weir suggests Benjamin may be interpreted. I will use Benjamin's theory as a lens through which to view adult social and political interactions. I do not necessarily support the idea that separation, individuation, domination, recognition, attunement, understanding, and negation always occur at a particular time and place and follow each other in a predictable and orderly fashion. These ideas remain a series of tensions and possibilities through which it is possible to create a framework to navigate social relation not an absolute model that predicts and explains human behaviour.

For the purposes of my analysis, Benjamin's theory is best described as an enabling model: it gives me a way of organising and understanding an aspect of ethical relationships, and a lens through which to examine the ebb and flow of power within them. I am mindful of not using it as a totalising frame for all aspects of relationship, but instead as a useful way to understand the dynamic of balancing personal and social outcomes in human relationships. The critiques, briefly sketched above, serve to deepen and enrich the vocabulary with which we might try to apply the ideas to actual circumstances, rather than 'prove' or 'disprove' it as theory. These debates will reappear in their application to the explanations and reconstructions of the narratives used to illustrate these theories in the core analysis of this work.

I do however take a series of assumptions from Benjamin's analysis, which I need to share with the reader as understandings from which this analysis proceeds. Human beings are born with social impulses, and therefore creating and sustaining relationships is important for personal human psychological health, and the health of their communities. Whilst the extent and nature of these relationships vary between different subjects, creating and sustaining relationships is a basic human need, and humans relatively deprived of this social connection will tend to be personally and socially maladroit. Mutual Recognition, as described by Benjamin, relates to the moment-by-moment negotiation and balancing of the need to both sustain these relationships, and meet more personal, less socially conceived needs. With the added layer of formal tools for its practice, and what I will later describe as an 'ethic of care' (Gilligan 1982, 62-63), Mutual Recognition offers a way on examining, understanding and improving the kinds of interpersonal relationships in social and political conflict which, as I described earlier, are often left out of conventional analysis of these situations.

### **More critiques of Benjamin**

Two further points relating to my use of Benjamin's idea of mutual recognition as a navigating tool during social conflict are developed by Diana Tietjen Meyers. Meyers critiques and builds on Benjamin, adding useful depth and dimension to the roles of self-

recognition and empathy in operationalising mutual recognition as a moral strategy. Meyers claims of mutual recognition: “Properly understood, mutual recognition is a relationship in which empathic understanding of others comes together with self judgement to sustain moral judgement” (Meyers 1994, 120). Meyers lists quite exhaustively the forms that recognition may take, including “affirming, validating, acknowledging, knowing, accepting, understanding, empathizing, taking in, tolerating, appraisals, seeing, identifying with, finding familiar, loving” (Meyers 1994, 123). Unlike Benjamin, she doesn’t include negations as part of the recognitive equations, seeming to under-estimate both the importance of difference in sustaining subjectivity, and the eventual inclusion (as opposed to synthesis) of difference within the definition of self that Benjamin persuasively argues is pivotal to the deepest levels of mutual recognition. Where Meyers does enrich Benjamin’s thesis is in detailing the processes of self-recognition as part of the recognitive process, and considering the role and limitations of empathy in building and sustaining moral judgement.

Meyers claims that Benjamin elides the question of self-recognition as part of her mutual recognition thesis (Meyers 1994, 127–28). Without taking a position on this claim per se, Meyers’ case for the importance of the role of self-recognition as part of mutual recognition is usefully reiterated here for the implications it has on my own use of personal narratives to demonstrate the role of moral reflection as a component of the greater depth I hope the idea of mutual recognition could bring to moral behaviour. Central to Benjamin’s practice of mutual recognition is that partners in the exercise must retain their own subjectivity: they should demand not to be treated as objects. Meyers delineates a deeper appreciation of how self-recognition is vital to this task. Meyers claims that cultivating moral identity and attempting to actualise it in life form the backdrop to being able then to reflect on one’s own actions and find coherence in relation to ascribed ideals (Meyers 1994, 129). The resultant process of mutual recognition by such a self-recognising agent is not one where one judges one’s own actions against a static created view of self but an ‘improvisational process’ where “one interprets the moral significance of a situation by seeking an enactment of one’s moral identity that takes into account one’s empathic insight into others” (Meyers 1994, 132). Having made

sense of one's self, the constraints introduced by the needs of others necessitate a reframing of the moral questions faced, that is, one must move from an act that seeks only private coherence of self-understanding, to one that acknowledges the ongoing creation and mediation of a social self who seeks and requires the recognition of others. Meyers concludes: "Though individualized, moral ideals cannot be self-centered or self-erasing" (Meyers 1994, 130). For mutual recognition to work a person must be able to take moral actions that both are internally coherent and negotiate with the social world to allow others to sustain their own self-recognising behaviours.

Self-recognition as seen by Meyers as a reference point for moral judgement may be more familiarly understood as being true to oneself and having integrity. Part of feeling good about oneself is to have an idea of what sort of a person one is, and to act in accordance with this, even given the malleability needed to negotiate shared realities of moral value where others have similar needs. Importantly the ideas we create and sustain or alter about ourselves through reflection, which we call our identity or our self, exist as, and through, acts of imagination. Our apprehension of others, how we relate to them and their apparent needs are also created and sustained through acts of our imagination where both our rationality and empathy are acts of construction that enable us to make sense of others and relate these to our own narrative imaginings of self. The level of skill, experience and insight which creates, sustains or changes these narrative imaginings of both self and others will probably be reflected in both the complexity and richness with which we are able to construe ourselves and others, and the way we navigate the problems of difference and otherness we encounter as we begin to negotiate our shared reality. This vision of how the self is created, sustained and changed locates moral growth in the improvement and exercise of our reflective moral imagination. Benjamin's thesis here is that as human beings we are innately interested in the social outcomes of attunement which could flow from an enhanced skill in understanding and navigating the content and intersections of imaginary selves.

A more pragmatic view is held by Richard Rorty (1989), who suggests that training in sympathy and concern for one another is a more useful way of getting to a variety of

positive social outcomes than enforcing philosophically dubious ‘foundationalist’ concepts like rights. In line with his belief that our interest in not damaging others and having good relations with others stems from our sentimental affiliation with others rather than an innate social interest or mutual need for recognition, Rorty suggests that one of the most profound examples of training in this regard is in engaging with acts of moral imagination in literature. Bryan Turner playfully reduces Rorty’s political position about seeking social outcomes in human interaction which stems from this idea as: “... we should encourage our children to read the novels of Dickens ...” (Turner 1998, 40), and dismisses it as “... admirable but limited and probably complacent.” Whilst, I believe, as I will later detail Lynn Hunt does, that indeed the novel can be profoundly important in building empathy, and as Rorty does, that inculcation in complex and morally driven narrative (such as one finds in literature) can be one of the most profound sources of learning moral reflection, Turner’s objection does however suggest the need for works such as I embark on here, to actively ground political and social activity in the imaginative skills of moral reflection on self and other, and the complex negotiated reality they share.

## **Empathy**

A key part in mutual recognition and allowing others to self-recognise — an act that privileges difference — is empathy. Meyers suggests that Benjamin’s account of mutual recognition in infancy is based on sympathy between parent and child, and that her theory would be served better by stressing the empathetic nature of the relationship. Benjamin’s concept of attunement seems to relate to sympathy rather than empathy (Meyers 1994, 125). Again without taking a position about Meyers’ interpretation of Benjamin, it is clear that the theory both makes more sense, and is more useful to my endeavour, with empathy being the emotional stance of the actors. The basic distinction between empathy and sympathy is that sympathy denotes shared feelings, and empathy understanding of feeling without sharing the subjective state. A classic example of the distinction may be a situation in which two siblings share sympathy with one another over a lost parent. Imagination of the other’s state is less required, because they share a similar though not identical experience of grief. To an onlooker, their grief is understandable by an act of

imagination that one had lost one's own parent: the siblings sympathise, and the onlooker empathises. Empathy, as Meyers observes, allows, and in fact demands, that one retains one's subjectivity, and engages in an act of explicit imagination to comprehend the emotional stance of the other. The subjectivity required by Benjamin's mutual recognition, and the assertion of difference and similarity in dynamic balance, may not be engendered by the sympathetic stance suggested by attunement. When I use the term attunement in this thesis, I will be using it to denote an empathic emotional stance: a recognition and celebration of similarity that does not emotionally overwhelm the expression of subjective difference. This empathic stance — a positive grasp of similarity that does not ignore or incorporate difference — could also be similar to compassion.

Meyers continues to distinguish between empathy and compassion, and in so doing reveals some major limitations about empathy as a tool for moral judgement, and as a recognitive tool in social relations. Empathy, as felt or imagined, is simply information. Practised skilfully and deeply, with astute observation and appropriate listening, one attains information about the emotional disposition of others. The portrayal of this empathy to the other sends information to the other that their emotional disposition is comprehended. Attunement, as used by Benjamin, implies that this information and the expression of it are used to bring two subjects into a harmony, a mutual grasp of each other that enables them to socially coexist without domination or submission fundamentally driving the relationship. Without such a positive orientation empathy is ethically neutral. Meyers points out that once gained empathy can be used for non-recognitive and non-ethical means. The classic example she uses is where lovers who once used empathy to understand and meet each other's needs, can, when the relationship breaks down, use this same empathically gained information to wound and damage one another in the disappointment of love's apparent failure (Meyers 1994, 31). Meyers also reminds us that empathy is situation specific and inherently evaluative (Meyers 1994, 35–36). Our evaluation of a person in one moment may be accurate and when reflected back with good communication skill, build both empathy and mutual recognition. If this evaluation is projected into the future as a generalisation, empathy is suffocated by judgement and is likely to be read as projection, that is as a perception of the other locked

in the past that doesn't permit change nor relate to them as they are in the moment. In reality the differences between empathy, sympathy and compassion may be difficult to delineate, with it being more common for people to feel, exhibit or experience some degree of all of these states in a simultaneous, overlapping and constantly varying fashion. Harnessing these states in a way that may be useful for positive personal and social transformation could be summed up as experiencing the differences and similarities with others in a way that builds connection where possible, and sustains the differences important to both identity and mutual recognition. Empathy, sympathy and compassion, and the skills in cultivating, displaying and interpreting them, may be required to navigate mutually recognitive relations with others in an ethical and productive way.

A further concern about empathy and mutual recognition as tools for ethical reflection relates to what Meyers calls the distortions created by dominant social norms. Meyers explores this via a discussion about moral identity, itself a vital component of the self-recognitive aspect of mutual recognition. When Meyers claims that the possibilities for empathy are truncated by social distortions, what she commonly means is that dominant social norms often involve embedded judgements about social situations (Meyers 1994, 128–129). Common examples relate to class, ethnicity and gender, where the dominant culture selectively values people depending on these characteristics. Meyers points out that a subject who is unable to reflexively critique these norms will be hampered in both capacity for recognition and mutuality (Meyers 1994, 128). There is of course no such thing as a value free judgement, and no person can be expected to practise a form of recognition of others free of such 'distortions'. For Meyers, a solution lies in the constitution of moral agency: self-recognition is linked to moral reflection. In contrast to certain psychological strategies which separate the person and the behaviour, Meyers suggests that moral identity involves cultivating a sense of self which connects who you are with how you behave: "By cultivating one's moral identity, and bringing one's conduct into conformity with one's moral ideal, one recognises oneself" (Meyers 1994, 129). The moral reflection 'am I the sort of person who would do that?' is the classic



question of self that links this self-recognition to current behaviour and demands integrity.

Meyers concludes her discussion on the relationship between mutual recognition, self-recognition and empathy with two long statements — both of which I will reproduce here. The first sums up how these three factors can be brought together in a way that diminishes the distortions of value that breed relations of domination:

... self recognition in the context of mutual recognition is not static. It prompts people to review the ideals they embrace and, to renew or revise their commitments in the light of insights of other's lives. Informed by empathy, self recognition enriches the moral ideals people conceive for themselves and protects against distorted judgements of value (Meyers 1994, 130).

One of the most profound stands we can take against domination is to continually review what we think is a good moral identity, and thus a good way to behave, in light of the ongoing experience of difference. The second quote alerts us to the limitations of such an ongoing review, and is particularly important given the anti-social behaviour often experienced during social and political struggle:

People sometimes behave in ways that rupture communication and enforce isolation despite ongoing relationship. They become so absorbed in their own projects that they fail to notice anyone else's needs, or they seize decision making power, and ignore dissenting voices. When this is so and cannot be changed, tolerating it is counter productive as judged by the standard set by the need for mutual recognition. (Meyers 1994, 131)

When attempts at mutual recognition are failing through one party's inability to recognise others, the type of practices I am recommending should be put aside in favour of some form of nonviolent action that refuses to continue to cooperate with the ongoing situation, and challenges it in a way that, whilst no longer mutually recognitive, pursues its

challenge to the status quo according to a set of principles that avoid as far as possible damage to others. Nonviolence leaves the slate relatively clean for a return to attempts at recognition later, without the legacy of damage and distrust left by the methods of violence.

There are implications in this discussion on empathy and moral reflection, through the lens of Meyers, for those who may wish to target moral identity as an opportunity or object for social and political transformation. Firstly, empathy, whilst valuable and perhaps indispensable for quality mutual recognition, is ethically neutral. Harnessing empathy as part of any transformational process will require particular skill to adapt it positively to social and political scenarios. I hope this thesis will make some of the journey toward explaining and illustrating how this can be done. Secondly, moral reflection, again if it is to become part of a strategy informing the use of mutual recognition in social and political struggle, will require a critical reading of the immediate context and the wider cultural backdrop. In particular, aspirants will have to school themselves in the ‘distortions’ of culture that contain the hidden trajectories of domination. This too will be illustrated in the case studies where the mutual recognition idea will be applied to the reconstruction of social and political struggle. Finally, self-recognition is vital to mutual recognition. The case studies will illustrate situated self-reflection, showing how recognising the self is vital for broader moral reflection and contributes to the transformative potential of mutual recognition in a social and political context.

## **Methodology**

The episode in which I described myself as ‘losing it’ with a group of ‘bureaucrats’ was one of many, both prior and later, where my political activism propelled me into conflict with others. Thankfully it is one of few where I have been openly hostile and aggressive to my partners in these experiences. Having said this, my relations with others have often been, in terms of the preceding discussion about domination and mutual recognition, riven with the full spectrum of possible relating, from intense feelings of solidarity that may contain much mutuality, to strong feelings of antipathy and objectification where I

have been judging, dominative or just indifferent to the feelings and needs of others. I don't propose to indulge in a retrospective of the efficacy or ethics of my conduct over years of involvement in committees, blockades, protests and various other forms of conflict I experienced both 'with' and 'against' others. As I suggested earlier I do want to distil something useful from these experiences. Before I describe the 'how' of my methodology, it is important to share with the reader why I have chosen experiences of self to illustrate a potential way of relating that is about navigating the self-other relationship.

The first thing to acknowledge is that this exercise is intended to be both an exploration of mutual recognition and an illustration and practice for the reader and 'with' the reader. Self-reflection and self-analysis have been part of my life as long as I can remember. I have always reflected and analysed myself and my actions, and my aim in doing this has been, consciously or unconsciously, to understand myself, my place in the world and my relations to others in a way which helps me better meet my needs and live a happy life. Analysis of others and the context we inhabit has been a natural partner to this inner search, and at times the separation between the two seems artificial or blurred. Perhaps like most of us, sometimes self-analysis yields great insight and seems pivotal in actual changes to my behaviour in ways that could be positioned as personal growth. On other occasions poorly practised self-reflection has led to self-obsession, narcissism, or over dependence on cognition, in a way that has shut down the important information offered by feelings. This writing is part of an ongoing personal agenda for self-understanding as a tool to both deepen my ethical agency with others and help me find the things that make me happy. This presentation, in a public format, is based on the idea that weaving my journey into the scholarly debates on which it touches will also make a worthwhile contribution to others. The following discussion of methodology weaves my personal search for understanding with the more specialised and particular demands of academic research.

The traditional approach to research involves collecting an array of evidence with a standardised, quantifiable procedure, and making general claims about observable

relationships and commonalities that may lend support to a particular proposition. I have already made clear, in the introductory exploration of the work of Erazim Kohak, my intention to illustrate and share an idea rather than attempt to establish either the truth of a particular proposition or the veracity of my personal recollections. My decision to do this relates to my earlier sharing of a sense that something was missing in the initial, more empirical, intentions of the project relating to constructions of reason that contained the seeds of this current project. My methodology is constructed to try to catch this missing property that I will call the interiority of the individual actor. I will now explain why the interiority of the individual actor is important, defend my decision to base this research on my own interiority, and share with the reader both the process I will use to do so and the kind of ‘knowledge’ that such a process produces.

### **Reflection, identity and narrative**

Thomas Scheff in elucidating his ‘part/whole analysis’ explores a very similar sense of what is missing in traditional analysis. He begins with a lengthy quote from Milan Kundera, part of which I will reproduce here, as it catches deftly the dilemma at the heart of my methodology.

When we study, discuss, analyse a reality, we analyse it as it appears in our mind, in our memory. We know reality only in the past tense. We do not know it as it is in the present in the moment when it’s happening, when it *is*. The present moment is unlike the memory of it. Remembering is not the negative of forgetting.

*Remembering is a form of forgetting.* (Scheff, 1997, 15; emphasis by Scheff)

The implications of this comment for my project are interesting. Most obviously it warns me, and my readers, that memories of events related here are not reality, but rather representations of reality. My experience of events annihilates the event itself and replaces it. My remembering and reflection of the event in turn replaces the emotional event (experience) that occurred in response to the stimulus of the original event. And so on. Whether we claim, as Baudrillard does, that the created reality or ‘simulacrum’, ‘copies’, replaces, and is thus more ‘real’ than the ‘original’, or merely acknowledge the

distinctions between them, we must acknowledge that the reality of an event cannot be captured: it is lost in the moment of its occurrence, and what remains are our reconfigured, reconstructed versions of our original experience of the event. Proust, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, explores Henri Bergson's proposition that memory is, at least in part, physical, and thus any reflection and reconstruction of events is begun, located and to some extent predetermined by, what happened in the brain during the event itself. Although Bergson's and Baudrillard's claims are beyond the scope of my explorations here, I repeat them here to acknowledge that the accounts of events upon which this work rides are a thing of their own, separate from the events themselves, like all accounts offered by any of us.

Far from invalidating the process of remembering and reflecting, the above discussion shows the importance of the act of reflection upon experience, as it is how we fundamentally constitute our reality in response to events. Endless iterations of experienced events and their reflections become our narratives about ourselves and about the world we inhabit (Giddens 1991). I choose to focus on this process of reflection, within the self, as it leads me to the conclusion that if people are to change, in ways I hope will be positive, it is in this configuring and reconfiguring of narratives about self and the world, which occurs in our experience of events and then again in the accounts we produce for ourselves and others as we reflect upon them, that the possibility for change exists. Experience and reflection are related. The reflection builds narratives that become filters for new experiences. New experiences are viewed through the lens of our reflections of previous events. Reflection contains within it the possibility of modifying the lens by which we view our experiences, and thus offers the possibilities of new experiences of what may seem to be similar events, and therefore new fodder for reflection, and so on.

Much analysis seems to want to pin down some kind of reality outside the conditional, contextual and imaginative concept of reality implied by the preceding discussion. To find commonality in experience and shared narratives which define a collective reality is as important socially as it has been in the understanding of our physical world by what

we call science. As was noted in the discussion of mutual recognition, constitution of self happens in relation to constitution of others and the self-other relationship. A focus on personal experiences and their reflection and reconstruction is not a process that divorces itself from others. We both define ourselves with personal narratives built inter-subjectively and establish collective realities through the same process. As Scheff observes in his analysis, literature has been traditionally the domain where the minutiae of personal responses to stimuli are richly explored. The detail of personal response to experience and the reconstructive labours of reflection are largely missing from the social sciences. It is this which I find missing in accounts of politics that attended my first attempts to discuss my experiences as an activist. It is to this end that I will focus on the minutiae of interpersonal communication and its implications for projects of social and political change.

Scheff's part-whole analysis seeks a reincorporation of emotional detail into quantitative and qualitative analysis. My approach here is to demonstrate and open up the process of reflection, in a social context as a tool for personal and political change. Methodologically I will remain anchored in the personal, and this requires another level of explanation that I shall begin through the lens of Lynn Hunt's book *Inventing Human Rights*. Hunt's central thesis is that the widespread reading of the epistolary novel in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century was the most critical factor in establishing the popularity of the concept of universal human rights. David Bell (2007) argues that a closer look at Hunt's work contracts the argument away from the larger (historically dubious) claim suggested in the title, to a more sustainable claim about how the novels in question, in particular *Pamela* and *Clarissa* by Richardson and *Julie* by Rousseau, were instrumental in building and perhaps reframing the existing cultural practices of empathy and autonomy, and how a society more replete with these qualities, and more socially active in their use, quickly embraced the emerging cultural discussion about rights to shift the idea from its place in political and philosophical debate into one of a widely held self evident truth. Hunt's thesis has a number of implications for my exploration of the role of personal feelings as they relate to possibilities of mutual recognition as a tool for navigating social and political struggle. To this end it is worthwhile having a closer look at some of the specific

claims Hunt makes about emotions and cultural movement, and how they illuminate my own preoccupation with personal narratives as a vessel for political and social change.

The most important of Hunt's claims, in terms of this project, are those that are based on quite recent scholarship by neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists, and these claim that "... the ability to construct narratives is based in the biology of the brain and is crucial to the development of any notion of self" (Hunt 2007, 32–33). This sits well with Anthony Giddens' claim that identity is fundamentally constituted by narratives. For Giddens our sense of self is built by repeated stories we tell ourselves about the experiences we have. Ultimately this constructed identity becomes one of the lenses through which we view future experiences. Neuroscientists see this as a physical process where experience fires a chain of responses that become embedded in the biology of the brain, reactivating to define new experiences in terms of the old. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are define, at least in part, the way we see the world. For this to change, Hunt suggests, needs strong emotional experiences to move us in such a way that new information is taken in to the narrative stream rather than redefining or reshaping the new information in terms of the existing narrative trajectory.

This leads us to Hunt's central claim that the experience of reading the epistolary novel, in particular the personal narratives which involved direct expressions of personal suffering and moral outrage generated by perceived injustice, produced changes in the brain which materialised as new ways of viewing self and the world and their relationship. The epistolary novel gave a glimpse of the 'interiority' of others. With the act of imagination required by the novel, readers found themselves resonating deeply with the feelings of others: experiencing empathy. Empathy, as Hunt points out, is an act of imagination that posits the experiences of others are markedly similar to those of our own. Empathy, like other emotions, is biologically rooted and mediated by personal and social experience. The notion that universal rights could be self-evident is predicated on the experience of empathy. For this to have happened, argues Hunt, "ordinary people had to have new understandings that came from new kinds of feelings" (Hunt 2007, 39). The centrepiece of Hunt's research is a compelling account of just how widely read these

novels were, and how those who read them were powerfully emotionally affected and transformed.

It is this idea of social and personal transformation via emotional experience, in particular, empathy, which leads me to examine and present the active reframing of my own interiority in a social context as an important contribution to the understanding of this link in the chain of possible personal and social transformation. My hope, as could be deduced from the account I give of Hunt's work, is that readers will empathise or at least personally connect via narratives with the accounts I relate and be moved and open to some kind of change in the way they view the matters I raise. Unlike the epistolary novels in question where extremes of what may be called sentimentality are meant to sweep the reader towards empathy for the characters, I intend to appeal to a mix of feelings and a sense of logic. As narrative constructs our identity, it is in the rewriting of these narratives that reconstructs our identity. In reflecting on my actions in complex social interaction, I offer the reader a glimpse of my interiority, part of the narrative that constructs my sense of self. In reconstructing these episodes according to the principles of mutual recognition and guided in this rebuilding by the techniques of restorative practice as used by AVP (NSW), I hope the reader will be able to experience the relationship between theory and practice. In remaining anchored in the personal I hope to show reflexivity in action, moving the reader through action, reflection and reconstruction (namely, personal change). My purpose here is not to *prove* that mutual recognition is possible in politics by amassing empirical evidence, but in the terms quoted from Kohak earlier in this work, to evoke and share a grounded vision of possibility.

Hunt connects the rise of the process of imagining that feelings, just like the readers of the novels in question, as hooking into and giving social momentum to an already present debate about universal human rights. Undeniably useful in protecting human dignity that such a conception has been, I will argue that universal human rights have also produced a body of problems that often get in the way of interpersonal recognition. To this end, both my writing and the processes it suggests will try to harness the empathy or imagination of the reader to the task of understanding human feelings and needs. In doing so I will be



illustrating and sharing series of possibilities for relating which anchor human ethical exchange in listening, hearing and perhaps understanding the feelings of self and other, and then negotiating the human needs as interpreted through these states. The idea of rights, I will suggest, often leads to situations where particular and actual human needs are obscured by a political debate in which established rights are claimed and exercised. Thus political struggles are defined by the struggle to articulate, claim, establish and uphold rights, based on the assumption that rights are protecting human dignity. Often however one set of rights can end up excluding or diminishing others. Rights end up embedded in law and social practice in ways that diminish the capacities of some to claim and defend the rights that are supposed to safeguard their needs. This means universal human rights have to be continually arbitrated, and the inherently political processes of arbitration inevitably see some rights upheld to the exclusion or diminishment of others. Like most aspects of social life those who are more powerful, often systematically reinforced or propelled by inequalities of wealth, gendered and class riven social structures and discourses, establish their own protected human dignity at the expense of others. This analysis will refocus the reader to the ongoing negotiation of human needs, away from the familiar politics of arbitrating rights. Where Hunt charts the cultural enlisting of empathy for the establishment of human rights, I will be suggesting that my readers stay with their empathic response to the situation, rather than generating abstract political or social arrangements for protecting the needs in general cases that may resemble the particular.

### **Personal narrative and methodology**

My next task is to share with my reader the reasons behind my practice of using my personal narratives as a means for illustrating such a method of ethical navigation. The more usual process would be to take a wide sample of personal narratives, adopt a codified procedure or lens through which to understand, place in context, and draw more general conclusions about specified aspects which the narratives address, pertain to, or offer insights about. The methodological problem with using only one, personal, narrative is that it offers no comparative cases for assessment of similarity that could give the basis to claim that any specific claim or insight is an example of wider phenomena.

Generalisations flow from a series of iterations of related evidence. Further to this, the fact that the singular narrative is my own raises, for some readers, the problems of my personal bias and agendas that might diminish the veracity or objectivity of the accounts. I shall address these two distinct and yet related propositions, so my reader is left in no doubt exactly what this thesis seeks to explore, and to a more limited extent establish as generalisations.

Firstly I will examine the point about using evidence to create an argument to establish propositions or generalisations. My personal narratives take place in a social context. Much of what I relate concerns social and political events which were the site of much conflict, and the narratives that emerged, my own included, can be used by social scientists to understand these events through a variety of lenses. Disciplines such as history, politics and psychology could all read my narratives as texts, to be measured up with other texts relating to these events, to make general claims either about my texts themselves and how they are redolent of me, or their contextualised place in the documentation that constitutes the scholarship about the issue within the discipline. Terri Orbuch's work on accounts identifies the work of Erving Goffman (1959) as representing the early orthodoxy on how to use or view people's accounts in the social sciences (Orbuch 1997, 457). Goffman's approach to people's accounts is sceptical. Accounts are seen as 'justifications' or 'excuses' and as part of a 'performance' designed to maintain the self in a social setting. This picture is deepened by Orbuch (1997, 459) to show that this process of self maintenance gives individuals a "sense of control and understanding of their environment" and allows individuals "to cope with emotionally charged and stressful events", "produce some degree of closure", "provide a greater sense of hope" and "establish order in daily relational experiences". The prevailing assumption is that personal accounts are subjective statements mostly concerned with sustaining the identity and position of the subject themselves. The explicit assumption follows that it is the task of the social scientist to 'read' these 'texts', and the resulting synthesis of the debates by such scientists constitutes the framework by which we can tentatively give meaning to the events in question.

Goffman's orthodoxy reveals an embedded hierarchy in the idea of accounts, which on closer examination lies unresolved in debates about methodology and what constitutes evidence, knowledge and knowing. In Goffman's analysis, the scholarly reader is able to convey legitimacy to a text, by the process of reading, assimilating and reconstituting it (often in relation to other texts) within the appropriate scholarly context. The idea that the producer of the account can mediate, contextualise or situate their own text within in the debate themselves, and that the text can then be directly read by others and be of value, is not considered. This raises deeper questions about who is reading these texts and for what purpose, and whether texts need to be contextualised, assimilated and judged for their authenticity or accuracy. Goffman's assumption seems to be that because personal texts are subjective, they can only be given value when read or reconstituted through an objective lens. Such a proposition is a common assumption in culture outside academia, with people's personal accounts given little validity unless they are able to appeal to objective standards or authoritative support to substantiate their claims. In a world riddled with power plays, dishonesty, ignorance and genuine uncertainty it is of course no wonder that any claim made is treated sceptically, and norms emerge for judging the veracity or usefulness of the accounts themselves. Two important possibilities are blurred by this situation. First is the possibility that subjects can produce accounts that are as situated, contextualised, and valid as any synthesised, mediated reading of their account produced by a social scientist. Second is the idea that a subjective account, lacking in the qualities defined as giving value by social scientists, could be just as valid without being mediated by social scientists.

The clear implication of this discussion is that people's accounts are indeed simply texts, and searching for definitive meaning within or about them will be unsuccessful. The process of giving them meaning does in fact lie with the reader, and it may be the concept of gift (within giving) that helps us out of the procedural impasses created by lack of definitive knowledge. It is our desire to find truth or a definitive reading in texts, to produce a body of knowledge in which we can lodge predictive and explanatory powers, that creates the need for discussions about what processes can indeed confer legitimacy and consistency to a text or particular reading thereof. Scheff (1997, 7) calls this the

double crisis of representation and legitimation: how can we present the other or oneself when we don't really know either, and how can we produce results that are reliable? With this in mind, that the reader accept the accuracy or veracity of my presentations of the circumstances described in this thesis is not important. For those interested in the politics and history of the events in question I hope my text will add to the body of evidence used to compile such understandings. For those interested in authorial intention, it has been mine to recall and reproduce events as close as possible to my understanding of their actuality. The circumstances I relate here share a process for examining one's own interiority, by a process of reflection, in a social context, with a particular view towards establishing the highest degree of mutuality. Importantly this shared process of reflection, to allow for and indeed enhance the possibility of mutuality, will be geared to allowing others in the social setting to see the value of such an approach, and even take the space to begin this process themselves should they desire. What therefore matters in the examples chosen is that they reflect the complexity and depth of social relations in situations of conflict, and that my own reflections on my interiority also resonate with readers as being redolent with the dilemmas of human subjects. In this way I ask of my readers, or perhaps attempt to conjure, the imaginary extension of empathy described by Hunt in relation to the epistolary novel.

The question of consistency and reliability remains an important methodological consideration. To this end the means by which I present my narratives and the reflection upon them needs to be documented, as it is indeed my hope that readers will be interested in reflection and using such a process toward the end of mutuality, and attempt to use the processes described, or a critical reading thereof, in their own lives. The narratives I have selected for the study come from the period of the late 1990's and early 2000's, and surround my involvements in a community struggle to save the cultural and environmental heritage of Sandon Point, among the northern suburbs of Wollongong, 70 kilometres south of Sydney, NSW, Australia. My involvement in the issue began in the early 1990's, and overlaps with the incident I used to illustrate the reasons for the change in the nature of the my first attempt at expressing my frustrations with movements for social change in a scholarly format. I have chosen these narratives because they were the

most recent, the richest in complex context, and the most personally interesting to me. I kept no notes or diaries relating to the events in question. What is recalled here is the labour of memory and, as I noted earlier, this alone sets the narratives clearly apart from what may have ‘actually happened’. As I write, I have distinguished between events I feel I remember clearly and those for which my memory is cloudy, and acknowledged detail that has been clearly lost. Again I stress, it is constructing scenarios of complexity, that are lifelike, that is the importance of the narratives. The reason for using my best attempts at accurately recalling the past as a vessel for the illustration is that they meaningfully elaborate the intimate interior context of actions, filling the scholarly void of this detail, illustrating how such detail can be meaningfully incorporated in debate and inform an approach to ethics with the demands and offerings of mutuality. The most important methodological consideration is the means by which I reflect upon the episodes and then hypothetically reconstruct them in a way that infuses the imperatives of mutuality.

The tool of reflection I will use is the restorative practices model used by the New South Wales branch of the Alternatives to Violence Project, which I have been a part of since 2004. I will examine the methodology of this branch of AVP in detail. There are reasons for this that lie outside the centrality of the model for my project. Only a little has been written academically about the work of the AVP community, and this study can usefully provide a documentation of its processes and begin or enlarge a critical debate about its efficacy in its intended purposes. To this end I will explain the model in its own terms before developing my own adaptation as a means to explore the possibilities of mutuality in social conflict. I will explain the AVP restorative practices model in full directly after the narratives so the methodology for examination and de/reconstruction directly follows the narratives to which they will be applied.

Before I begin these narratives I need to say a little more about the methodology for telling the narratives. The first part of the restorative practices model is to ask all involved what happened, usually personally directed as: what happened for you? Thus the invitation is not to share an attempt at an objective account of what happened, but one that focuses on the experience of the speaker. The communicative conventions that

accompany AVP in concentrating on personal experience try to omit judgement and interpretation of ‘others’. Thus an account of another’s behaviour in yelling at the person recounting the incident may be expressed as, “Fred stood up, walked towards me, and in a raised voice, called me an idiot”, rather than, “Fred was abusive and aggressive,” which names and judges the action. In staying with personal feelings the teller can describe their feelings, using “I statements”, such as “I felt abused”, which locates them in their feelings about what happened, rather than in analysis of the other. I will develop the theory behind this approach after the telling of the narratives, when I give the full detailed account of the AVP/Restorative Practices (AVP/RP) model. At this stage it is enough for the reader to know that the point of the narratives is self-exploration, which has nothing to do with judging, blaming or evaluating others, which is a task the process leaves to the others themselves.

For the purposes of this study I will enlarge and change the AVP/RP model to suit the wider purpose of my adaptation of the techniques to more active life situations than that for which they were envisioned. Narratives, both personal and cultural, are the way we build and sustain our identities. My project for personal change in a social context targets this process of identity formation and maintenance, believing that, as Hunt suggests, the stories we engage with can *affect* us, and change the stories we tell ourselves about who we are as a result. My task will be to harness the empathy of the reader towards the importance of the practices of mutuality, rather than as we saw in Hunt’s analysis of the epistolary novel, the belief in universal human rights. To this end the stories I tell will relate to not only the actual incidents of conflict, which I will place under the microscope of the AVP/RP model, but a range of other experiences which seem to me to be redolent of the wisdom I see in this process. These are the surrounding experiences that were part of the process of making sense of the episodes I describe, and as such I will repeat them here to give context to the stories I intend to evaluate in depth.

Thus the reader will receive from me some stories that I will share simply as context. I will situate these with an analysis of their importance, but not subject them to the more rigorous dissection via the AVP/RP model. Perhaps like the experience of reading a

novel, I hope these situated, but unsystematically reflected narratives, will speak for themselves. They will perhaps present themselves as experiences containing an understanding of the issues at hand. I shall try to share these with the reader more directly, through analysis, rather than through the vessel of the model.

Subsequent to the outburst with which I began these writings I have had another decade of experiences as a social and political activist. This has involved a cycle of periods of intense involvement, followed by breaks and reflective recesses where I either ‘burned out’ or took a break just in time to avoid burn-out. During this time I appropriated, created and abandoned many theories about what makes activism ethical and effective — or not. Having seen many explanations of myself and my activities come and go, including some that seemed profound and deep and others that revealed themselves quite quickly to be some kind of wilful self-deception, I am now reluctant to present my current understanding of these years as definitive.

The episodes I now choose to reflect upon here are among the most recent, and represent perhaps my most mature interventions in social and political conflict. They are complex examples which involve myself — a white, middle class, university educated male — in an activist community of which I had long been part, itself part of a wider social community, acting in concert with local indigenous community ‘against’ a large company that enjoyed significant support from elected representatives and the planning bureaucracy, plus a small amount from the local community.

The notion of community is itself an interesting field. Iris Marion Young details some of the critical discussion about community, and her own definition encompasses much of the debate and dovetails well with discussions about mutuality and social constructed subjects central to the arguments that drive this thesis. Community, she relates, invokes ‘a conception of the person as socially constituted, actively orientated towards affirming relations of mutuality, rather than solely towards satisfying private needs and desires’ (Young 1990, 228).

Each of the categories of ethnicity, class, education and gender, which I named here to paint a general picture, rather than one which accurately portrays the complexities of the actors and their connections, was riven with division and cross affiliation that defy the easy clichés with which I have introduced them. I will not attempt to develop or explain this context in any general way, beyond that which I have just done. I will paint the context through the moments and episodes as they emerge in my narratives. I am not trying to comprehensively or accurately map the reality of these events. What I am doing is looking at episodes through the lens of my personal experience of them. The context I give is the context that I apply to give myself personal meaning. I am looking at my past experiences as examples of mutual recognition, rather than trying to achieve a full and comprehensive understanding of them.

What I hope this approach will yield is a step-by-step account of how one might attempt mutual recognition in a social and political context. I will not be suggesting that mutual recognition is the sum total of my ethical calculus. The wider question of what would constitute a comprehensive ethical approach to the issues at hand is not my area of enquiry. I make a case, I believe, that mutual recognition is a vitally important part of ethical behaviour, and that it is commonly abandoned in a means and ends collision in the hurly burly of politics. In my own case I can clearly recall an episode, at Jabiluka, in Australia's Northern Territory while blockading a uranium mine as a part of a larger strategy to get recognition and protection of Aboriginal Australians' traditional relationship to country, where the kind of mutual recognition I describe and now enshrine as a critical part of ethical behaviour, was ignored, as those who were working at the mine became a means to our end.

Blockading can be used to illustrate the complex ethical issues that exist in the wider ethical equation. In a rights based debate, in terms of the Jabiluka example above, I and hundreds of other activists decided to block workers' access to their place of regular employment because we felt this employment was part of a wider picture where Aboriginal Australians were being denied their traditional relationship with country. The workers in this example are at risk of being devalued as objects in our ethical calculus,



and simply becoming a means to our ends. Like many activists we were guided by the politics of nonviolent action. At the risk of being at once facetious, reductive and colloquial about such endeavours, nonviolent action, as we practised it, was the art of being polite and friendly to people while we pissed them off by stopping them from doing what they wanted to do. While mutual recognition does not discount or supersede such endeavours, it is aimed at deepening and adding to the ethical calculus of such moments by actively engaging in relationship, making an attempt to understand the needs of others and considering modifying the approach based on these interactions. Mutual recognition is not a new ethical theory to replace outmoded ways of acting, rather it builds upon other approaches and suggests ways we can continue to take action for rights and justice that take greater account and care for the individual human subject.

### **The Problem of Self**

Whilst the preceding discussion explains, and to some extent defends, the use of personal narratives to explore and illustrate the uses of mutual recognition as an ethical and functional tool in social and political conflict, I can not proceed without locating it within the debates about the self in analysis, and the possible solutions to the problems discussed within them suggested by proponents of autoethnography. In the following section I will be looking at how scholars have looked at the self, and in particular the methodology of autoethnography as a solution to some of the problems of using the self in research. I will then locate my own research intentions within the scope of this discussion.

Smith and Sparkes (2008) looked at a wide variety of research involving the self, and defined four ‘typologies’ or general categories of ways in which scholars tend to view the self in research. The first of these, which they call the ‘psycho-social narrative self’ (Smith and Sparkes 2008, 8–9), stems back to a conception of the self which is seen as having developed in the period of the enlightenment and romanticism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Irving Howe (1992, 250) points out that this is the period when the self “attains the dignity of a noun, as if to register an enhancement of authority.” Smith and Sparkes define the salient attitudes to this view as being that the interiority of self is given primacy over its social dimensions. The self is seen in this view as comprising an identity

which is an internalised life story continually developed and refined through the subject's own self-reflection.

Charles Taylor further breaks down this conception of self into what he calls the Autonomous and Expressionist self, and finds the roots of this 'inward' (self defining) and 'modernist' self even earlier in the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> Century (as quoted by Louis Sass 1992, 20). The Autonomous self relates to a Kantian and Cartesian perspective based on radical freedom, and the Expressionist perspective more closely relates to an inter-subjective view, where self, though personal, is realised through relationship with others (God, Nature or People). All of these ways of perceiving the self were a departure from the pre-Aristotelian self where meaning and value were seen as generated externally. Critics of this conception of self find it fails to recognise how the self is constructed, and find the view of a self-authoring self that is coherent and unitary or whole to be a dangerous metaphysical fiction. This critique informs the following three typologies described by Smith and Sparkes.

Smith and Sparkes define the following three conceptions of self as: the intersubjective narrative self, the storied resource narrative self, and the dialogic narrative self. As we progress through the categories as listed, the self is conceived as more and more socially constructed and less and less the product of the interiority of the subject. The intersubjective view, which roughly corresponds with the work of Jessica Benjamin, and my own project, is that ideas of self are produced in an ongoing dialogue between an interior subject with agency, and an outside world that shapes, constrains and frames the process of identity formation (Smith and Sparkes 2008, 11). The storied resource model downgrades the role of interiority to suggest the subject merely mediates the competing social trajectories it experiences (Smith and Sparkes 2008, 16). In the final category, the dialogic self, the subject is reduced to the point where it is perhaps seen as merely the site of these competing trajectories. A conception of the self cannot be performed extra-linguistically, and as such the idea of self is completely dependent on an inherent frame pre-dating the existence of the physical embodiment of the subject (Smith and Sparkes 2008, 20). At this end of the spectrum writers usually avoid the term 'the self' and refer

only to ‘the subject’ to avoid any ‘foundationalism’ implied in the former term (Levine 1992, 10).

The difference between self and subject is well summed up by Gallop and Burke (1987, 106):

The “self” implies a center, a potentially autonomous individual; the “subject” is a place in language, a signifier that is already alienated in an intersubjective network.

Interestingly, Gallop and Burke note that the former tends to be used by (US) feminists interested in using a strong sense of self (in relation to women’s identity) to enfranchise the culturally marginalised, and the latter used by French feminists for “subversion of the subject” which suggests such identity based projects are inevitably dominative and need to be dismantled (Gallop and Burke 1987, 106). Being interested myself in projects for social change which enhance lives or values hitherto systemically disadvantaged, I too am interested in positive, social conceptions of self (fictional or otherwise) which may be empowering for those currently less empowered. There may well be advantages to social and political action that stem from a rigorous deconstruction of self and create a subject who acts in the world in socially useful non-dominative ways. I shall leave this exploration to others.

In this thesis, I explore the possibilities of personal and social transformation that may be possible within and via the interiority of the human subject. The self I am interested in is a wilful act of construction: an imagined self that watches, monitors and intervenes in its own cultural production. Like Giddens, I see this approach to interiority as contained in a series of reflexive narratives: “The reflexive project of self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems” (Giddens 1991, 5). Smith and Sparkes quote Ezzy (1998, 251) concerning the dynamic between emerging narrative identity and abstract systems: “narrative identities are formed in a complex

interaction between events, imagination, significant others, routines and habits, and the structure of soliloquy that forms each person's self narrative". This relates to Foucault's idea that we should try in so far as possible to take charge of our own production, to which I would add, in the context of the current project, that we try to produce a self that can (wants to) mutually recognise others and behaves in such a way as to enhance the possibility that others may also have the desire and opportunity to mutually recognise.

A final caveat on this idea is introduced by Bridget Byrne who suggests that in producing ourselves, we are not uncovering a truth or discovering a truth about ourselves, and no final product is ever achieved: we remain contingent and contextual — a work in progress in a constant process of "creation and re-invention" (Byrne 2003, 31). Whilst Byrne notes that "The subject is best understood as a process", she also notes that in the process of narrating the self "The fiction of a whole or coherent self may be created ..." (Byrne 2003, 30-31). For me, an acknowledged fictionally created self, whether it claims to be unified, coherent and whole or otherwise, is interesting. Furthermore as Chris Barker points out "identities are contradictory and cross-cut or dislocate each other" (Barker 2003, 232). Depending on the issue, using myself as an example, my construction as a middle class post-materialist 'progressive' may vie for supremacy over the way I construe experience with my 'maleness'. In understanding and being involved in the creation of the fiction or fictions, a person will be potentially more open to identity change or other constructions of meaning that are mutually recognitive. An identity regarded as some kind of inner truth may be less open to the processes of useful identity change. It is in the process of identity creation that I see the most profound possibilities of personal and social transformation. Creating a system for mapping, observing, directing and, most importantly, inviting (rather than coercing) people to take an interest in endeavours that can lead us towards a sense of social progress through identity work will be the point of the personal case studies and their hypothetical reconstructions offered here.

## **Autoethnography**

In engaging in a project that uses the interiority of personal narrative to examine the way such narratives can be shaped in favour of mutually recognitive strategies for personal and social change, methodology is crucial. If not in strict application, the methodologies described within autoethnography appear the most promising for ensuring that the project can be approached from and included within the scholarly canon. Deborah Reed-Danahay sums it up as a device for making the identity and or life mapping discourse of an individual part of the broader cultural debate (Reed-Danahay 1997, 9).

The best way to introduce autoethnography is to give a functionalist description of what it intends to do. John Austin defines autoethnography as a cross between autobiography and critical psychoanalysis (Austin 2005, 17). Unlike a conventional autobiography the narrator's voice is not authoritative: it acknowledges its own subjectivity and rigorously exposes, to the best of the narrator's ability, the factors relating to its own construction. The resulting narration is hoped to provide a textual representation of self that is (Austin 2005, 20, quoting D. Foley) "... a living, contradictory, vulnerable, evolving, multiple self, who speaks in a partial, subjective, culture bound voice." The point of this almost obsessive desire to qualify such self-produced, self-reflective texts is to remove or minimise the possibility that such texts will be read as truth, and the potentially powerful biases contained within previously invisible narrator's voice will now be plain for all readers. This approach enables the rich possibilities contained within a person's memory of their experiences to be shared, with enough information about the subjectivity of the source for the reader to read the work as a text, and make their own journey towards interim meaning with the assistance of the writer who has laid bare much of the information required to critically evaluate the lenses through which the presenting self has shared their material.

In my own case, I have already made it clear that my reasons for putting my own memories of experience under the microscope have a definite trajectory. I am interested in distilling particular kinds of insight from particular incidents from my own politically engaged past, to help illustrate a particular idea about how mutual recognition, practised

with a set of communication skills, may be a useful way of approaching social and political conflict to produce, in a general sense, different sorts of outcomes to those produced under more conventional coercive political and social strategies. A careful balance will need to be preserved between giving enough information about the narrator for the reader to be aware enough to usefully understand how the writer and his experience have been constructed, but not so much that the writer (me) becomes the centrepiece of the investigation rather than the ideas and strategies that emerge from the dialectic of critically reflected experience and bodies of scholarly thought intended to work together to illuminate the usefulness of the approaches contained herein.

So what will an autoethnography look like? This contains two separate dimensions: what information should I supply to the reader to render my subjective recollections open to a multiplicity of readings, locatable within the scholarly canons to which it is germane, and how can such recollections then usefully be read?

In terms of the first question, there are two layers that can be explored. One is my placement among traditional labels of privilege and domination: race, class and gender being the most familiar catch-all typographies. This is important here, as I am ‘white/Caucasian’, male, middle class, English-speaking and university educated, all of which locates me as being constructed under or within the emblematic banners of traditional privilege. Whilst there is no certainty that anyone, myself included, conforms to all or any of the stereotypical possibilities of construction associated with these labels, there can be no doubt that those bearing these stereotypical formulations of social placement are amongst the most empowered and dominative categories of people on the planet. Given this information, the reader can make their own readings of the texts produced to determine whether my ‘membership’ of these categories affects the way I have interpreted my experience and thus interferes with the efficacy of the exercise. I must acknowledge immediately that the kinds of solutions I am proposing to interpersonal domination will be most easily available to post materialist bearers of privilege such as myself. To have the time, confidence, social position, access to

education, and relative financial security that allow the development of high level communication skills is very much more of an opportunity for ‘people like me’.

At first glance this could make the whole project look like it is designing a solution only available for a privileged few, or worse still be an attempt to ‘beef up’ the most socially empowered with even more tools for domination. As I have already mentioned, one of Foucault’s concerns with power relations is about when they are stuck and not moving:

... [when] power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen. When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political, or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of domination (Foucault 2000, 283)

Strategy based on mutual recognition, whilst inevitably trapped within language and the constructions of power that stem from it, is a clear attempt to use communication to open up spaces to negotiate needs, rather than enforce or establish abstract norms. The strategy aims not to deny, constrain or remove privilege from certain elements of society, but to accept the power where it lies and to ensure it remains mobile. This means training people to reflect upon themselves and their use of communication, in order to begin the process of transformation from using such power to coerce others or enforce abstract norms (even those thoughtfully constructed to attempt to satisfy some idea of fairness) to one where communication is used to work out the possibilities of collaboratively establishing the needs of all. If indeed I unavoidably wear the cultural uniform of the oppressor, and the strategies I propose are most available to others like myself, then it stands to reason that a strategy aiming to help ‘us’ transform and use power with less domination is well targeted. Having said this, it does not remove the need to dismantle privilege and open up the possibilities that such strategies will be more available to all. As I shall note later, attempts to ‘level the playing field’ help the aspirations of mutual recognition and mutuality, but many if not most conflicts will occur between people of

vastly different communication ability, bedded deeply in differential access to power. It is important that, whilst the strategies suggested here seek some sense of empowerment for all, they do not rely on such 'equality'. Any system that required such a position of communicative equality as its beginning point (Habermas for example) would seem unlikely to find many starters.

The second layer of personal revelation, which interests me more, is reflection on personal motive and the impact of emotions and social construction on the minutiae of my decision-making process. This layer is the site of potential self-reflection and therefore reconstruction and invention and imagination of the self. To the extent that we are self-defining and creating, whatever autonomy exists within the constructions of culture and language is practised as we make the decisions in the world.

Autoethnography helps in what Austin (2005, 19) describes as the "... excavation of identity." From this tension, between the constraints of often hidden construction and the agency of the subject trying to build an identity through the narratives established by their own actions and reflection, identity itself emerges. Giddens (1991, 45) points out that: "A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour nor — important though it is — in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going". Thus if my reflections here are going to adhere to the autoethnographic model, and illuminate my own identity processes, they need to show the relationship between actions, social constructions and the identity building narrations themselves. Ultimately, I, like all those involved in reflection, can only assess some of the factors that construct identities at any given moment, the selection or non-selection of any particular factor is as subjective as the subjectivity it seeks to unmask. Successful performance of this aspect of reflection will rely on a blend of good judgement, depth, rigour and economy to make the project work without spilling out to Proustian proportions. Readers must make their own evaluations of my success at this endeavour.

Andrew Sparkes (2009, 306) sorts through the debate that tries to separate legitimate autoethnographical research from gross self-indulgence and narcissistic navel-gazing (just to name two of the epithets flung at the approach: see Coffey 1999). Sparkes points



out that any research can be guilty of the failings listed above, and emerging or experimental methods such as autoethnography may be more usefully seen as seeking to do different things than traditional research. He continues therefore that an orientation towards research that stresses what research *might* do rather than what it *must* is more useful to allow innovation and growth in research in general. Sparkes is critical of Hammersley's (1990) use of the criteria of plausibility, relevance and credibility, as a form of foundationalism that creates a 'gatekeeping orthodoxy' that in turn ends up rejecting 'extreme' forms of autoethnography, as well as what are termed by some (Wallingford 2004) postmodern and post-experimental writing. My work here will not be a radical ethnographic approach such as (for example) 'fictocriticism', and whilst I find Sparkes' critique of Hammersley compelling, I am satisfied that what follows can be judged (or evaluated) through the lenses of plausibility, relevance, credibility and, most of all, usefulness.

Sparkes embraces what he describes as a non-realist/non-foundationalist position (Sparkes 2009, 308). This position collapses the distinction between subject and object, and with it any methodology claiming it can establish a social truth independent of our constructions. But he is quick to assert that this needn't leave us stranded in a quagmire of relativism where anything is permitted. Sparkes quotes Schwandt (1996): "Contingency, fallibilism, dialogue and deliberation mark our way of being in the world. But these ontological conditions are not the equivalent to eternal ambiguity, the lack of commitment, the inability to act in the face of uncertainty". How then are we to evaluate autoethnography? How can we separate a good one from a bad one? Answering these questions leads me to the second of my questions about how this work can be usefully read.

Once again Sparkes' work is useful here. He states, in the article from which I have already extensively quoted here:

... just as principled, informed and responsible decisions need to be made about the form of representation used by ethnographers, so the same should hold for how judgements are made about the representational forms chosen.

As well as critically reflecting on my own accounts so as to enable a multiplicity of critical readings and a situating of this work in other scholarly contexts, the reader must remember that I have produced a subjective text using my own recollections of experiences of events long passed. The accuracy of my recollection, whilst important to me, is not the centrepiece of the enterprise. The work should richly convey both a depth of reflection in its hypothetical reconstruction and a method that others can follow, if not as a strict template, then as an example illustrating an attempt to navigate the terrain, which is rich in learning possibilities. The Restorative Practices process, as used by AVP (NSW), and described later in the thesis, will, I hope, go a long way toward offering a framework for this reflection. The depth of reflection should include my estimations of appropriate context, the emotions attending the circumstances and an evaluation of their impact, and critical evaluation of my intention, and the practical and psychological factors that I understand to have distorted my intention. The reader is asked not to accept these explanations of my own understandings of my behaviour as fact, but as demonstrating the kinds of questions that should attend moral reflection in a political life. Similarly my recollections, understandings and appraisals of the social constructions that contextualise events will inevitably be partial, incomplete, and otherwise questionable; this is the terrain where all recollection and reflection must operate. What matters is that the narratives are richly nuanced, and cover a range of the kinds of questions that many actors will face in complex conflicts that are spawned by struggles for social change.

## **2. Sandon Point around 2001 — A narrative**

I arrived at the temporary picket line at Sandon Point, an area between two suburbs of Wollongong, 70 kilometres south of Sydney, at around 4am in the morning. Members of the community I had lived in for the last decade had set up a picket line to attempt to stop a housing development on land many of us thought to be culturally and environmentally significant. We'd been given a tip off that this was the morning that Stockland (the company wanting to develop this land) intended to break the picket line and begin the development. The community had had an active picket running at the other end of the site (about a kilometre away) for many months already, but when it became clear that work was to begin at the other end, we quickly set up the ad hoc cluster of tents at which I now arrived.

For me the issues were, as always, complicated and intertwined, but can be simplified for the reader. A large company was engaged in a venture to make much money out of an intended housing estate that seemed (to many in the community) not to be based on demonstrated need, on environmentally sensitive land of great cultural importance to local people, especially so for Aboriginal people. The studies that had been done to assess the viability, suitability and value of the project seemed to those of us opposed clearly unsound, and likewise there was little real democracy in the way the various stakeholders had been consulted over the decades of lead-up to this moment. I arrived at the picket that morning with a small cluster of others to take direct action intended to hamper or halt the housing development, which now appeared to have official sanction to proceed.

The AVP approach to recounting and working with such events is to locate the discussion in feelings, and later the relationship of these feelings to needs — for all involved. Given that this is a solo exercise in reflection, and one conducted years after the events in question, what I write here will be a little different. Firstly, my memory of my feelings is anchored in recalling them by the labels I gave them at the time. AVP works best when feelings are shared in terms of sensations experienced as opposed to more broad labels. For example: 'my heart was racing, and my breathing was quick and I felt like yelling' is

more useful than 'I was angry'. The former explanation of one's emotional situation gives all involved the chance to explore the feelings in their complexity and learn about what they mean. The latter example tends to conclude with a label, stifling potential exploration and learning. Janet Rainwater, for example, gives a four-point map or what she calls 'magic questions' with which to interrogate oneself in the moment of experience (related to what one is doing, thinking, feeling and how one is breathing) in order to explore the experience and physicality of emotions. These open the reflector up to learning more deeply from what they are experiencing (Rainwater, 1989, 11). For those in the moment this could form a useful checklist for grounding us in an experience of our feelings as opposed to quickly summing them up. The actual sensations I experienced are now forgotten, and I only remember the name my memory has given them. This may be oft the case in such matters, and it is therefore useful for the reader to see how work is done within these limitations.

My feelings, as I remember them now, were a mixture of hopes and fears. The hopes were of course that the actions I was going to take would be part of some change in the directions I believed to be 'good'. The fears included a growing feeling of powerlessness and that the things I was seeking to save were steadily being destroyed.

I also knew well the good feeling of solidarity in taking strong action with others for what I believed was a collective ideal. Such actions for me, in the past, had created strong feelings of belonging and ontological comfort: they helped create and sustain a sense of meaning and coherence about who I was and what I was doing in the world. The desire for these feelings was, and is, strong in me. By my own analysis I related my strong desire for connection and meaning to a sense of isolation and disconnection in early life, particularly during school where I had experienced myself as an 'outsider'. Aside from close friendships and 'love' relationships, and a resonance with creative arts and artists (particularly music and literature), in 'radical' politics I had felt a sense of belonging and meaning matched in few other areas of life. I arrived with expectations about how I was going to feel, and concomitant fears of disappointment should this not be realised. I will

say more of my specific expectations about the way the events might unfold, and my role in this, as I discuss each particular incident in more detail.

As I arrived, there were 5 or 10 people in or around the tent, and a bunch of young people (early teens perhaps) milling around on the road around the development site. A group of security guards — hired by the developers — were stationed about 50 metres away inside a fenced enclosure. It didn't take me long to see that something in the way of interaction was already taking place between the young people and the security guards. Two boys aged around 12 or 13 appeared running out of the darkness laughing breathlessly, to the eager interrogation of their fellows. They had, by their own account, been pelting the security guards with small rocks. I had a quick conversation with the adults in the tent, which revealed that incidents such as this had been going on all night. The tone with which they shared this information with me was one of wry or perhaps even cynical amusement. At this stage of my life I had been an activist for over a decade, had been involved in a few direct actions, and had, what I thought at the time, clear and lucid ideas about the ethics and efficacy of conducting such actions. It was my opinion that 'violence' (which was broadly how I defined what appeared to be happening) was in general both unethical and counter-productive. This idea was accompanied by a sense of responsibility. Given what I thought to be a level of insight about such issues, and that no one was putting a case against what was happening, I felt I must do so. I was not completely confident about doing so, and had to overcome a little fear to begin.

My relatively immediate response was to intervene. The young boys were still milling round sharing the excitement of their recent 'raid'. I walked up to the group and said — something to the effect — that pelting security guards with rocks was not a good idea. I gave them a brief explanation that 'we have to deal with these people later' and it was therefore not in our interests to have them angry with us. They offered some attempt to justify their actions (which took the form that nobody else had seemed to object to what they were doing) but my sense was that they agreed to stop. My feeling was that my position as an adult gave me authority in their eyes, and it was this, rather than any real attempt at arguing my case, that made them quickly comply.

My next step was again fairly spontaneous. I walked down to the security guards, caught their attention, introduced myself by name, and identified myself as one of the protesters. I then apologised for the behaviour of the children, and advised them that I would try to keep them (the children) in check if they tried such behaviour again. I also undertook to raise the issue of the children's behaviour with my comrades, and to try to establish a general policy of behaviour that excluded operating in this fashion in the future. Before taking their leave I also invited them to tell me if such behaviour happened again, and indicated I would be happy to attempt to intervene and 'keep our people in line'. My memory of their response is unclear except to say it was cautiously received, and the exchange ended without any firm sense of having established anything but a beginning.

On walking back to the tent and greeting the adult picketers (most of whom I now knew through being active on the issue for some time) I was informed (again with some amusement) that some of the adult picketers had also been verbally 'winding up' the security guards all night. In particular she referred to one picketer who had been giving them a particularly hard time. This hard time apparently involved repeatedly telling them to 'fuck off' and abusing them for carrying guns. The guns had been an issue all the day before. When they had originally turned up they had come (they said) straight from another job, and maintained that the rules governing their carrying arms did not permit them to take them off until they finished the job and returned the guns to the lock up. They stated that they had no appropriate storage for the guns on site here. There had been much anger and unsuccessful negotiation on this issue the day before, but the exact details of the exchanges were not known to me.

I quickly sat down with the man concerned and said — as I had to the boys — that I didn't think it was a good idea to wind them up — particularly as they had guns. This provoked a major outburst at me, the substance of which will form the largest part of my recollection and analysis here.

The man concerned was an Aboriginal man, staying at the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE), which had been set up nearby to protect important cultural sites threatened by the development. For many opponents of the development (myself included) it was respect for these sites, the embassy, and Aboriginal people concerned, that formed the strongest part of our opposition to the intended development of the land. He informed me quickly, bluntly and with some heat that he was a traditional custodian of the land, and that he had been charged by his lawman to defend this land, and he would do so as he thought fit. He also made reference to the impropriety that I (a non-Aboriginal person) would try to tell him (an Aboriginal man) how to behave on his own land. At the time this had the effect of completely silencing me — the issues related to continuing along the trajectory on which I had begun seemed suddenly so complicated as to make continuing foolish. My response (the exact wording of which is lost to me) was to apologise and agree to drop the issue and make no further attempt to persuade him to my view, or change his behaviour.

My emotional response to this rebuff was strong. My strongest feeling was shame, in causing offence, in general, and in particular to an Aboriginal man whose interests I believed myself to be defending and on whose land I considered myself a guest. I also remember feeling angry: the way I positioned myself with the beliefs mentioned above was in fact being used unfairly against me, to silence and censure. There was also a sense of failure relating to my inability to not only stop the actions I considered violent, but that I had mishandled raising the issue so badly that I had effectively terminated debate on what I considered important issues of violence and nonviolence, and the ethics of our collective conduct. Often in such circumstances I find myself overwhelmed by feelings and so unable to make a quick summation of the feelings triggered that I withdraw. Whilst I physically remained in the tent with the person concerned and a few others whose identity I don't remember, I effectively dropped the debate and the issue and lapsed into silence.

Some explanation of context is needed here to make sense of my response. My own view of the history of Australia, also shared by many people in the political and social sub-

culture within which I often operated, made relations with Aboriginal people, and concerns for their rights, in need of special attention. My reading of history was that Australia had been invaded and colonised, and that the injustice against (the invaded) Aboriginal peoples was considerable. Furthermore the extent of this injustice and concomitant ongoing disadvantage seemed to be not fully appreciated by the Australian culture at large. To my mind this made those who did acknowledge this situation subject to an ethical imperative (however imprecise and difficult to define) to take special responsibility for positively changing circumstances for Aboriginal people wherever possible. As an Australian of non-Aboriginal background I had therefore accepted some degree of responsibility for being part of whatever movements and actions I could to redress both the injustices and the disadvantages felt by Aboriginal peoples. These were significant factors in my decision to become involved with issues at Sandon Point some 10 years previously and, in particular, to be involved in an attempt to prevent the proposed housing project via direct action.

My sense of myself as an ethical actor who had, or was attempting to, shed association or identification with the oppressive actions of the dominant non-Aboriginal culture seemed at the moment to be challenged by the response I had received. I had been actively involved in indigenous issues for some years, and had a history of involvement of which I was proud. I had participated in cultural awareness workshops to study how to relate to Aboriginal people more appropriately. I had been arrested defending Aboriginal land at the Jabiluka uranium mine in Australia's far north. I had played a significant role in the local opposition to the federal government's so-called ten-point plan that I like many others had seen as the final act of dispossession of Aboriginal people in the long and shameful history of European invasion of Australia. Furthermore I had 'painted up' and participated in ceremony with local Aboriginal people to take on what to me were quite sacred responsibilities to care for local 'country'. In short I had a strong image of myself as a person who had looked carefully at the political and social circumstance I had inherited, and taken regular, strong and thoughtful action to redress the injustices and disadvantages of Aboriginal Australians. In this context to be told more or less to back



off and keep my advice to myself sparked off an internal dialogue and a complex brace of ethical issues that I would now like to unpack.

### **Restorative Practices: an introduction**

As a means of unpacking this incident I intend to adapt the tool of Restorative Practices, in particular how restorative practices are used by AVP (NSW). Restorative Practices are used widely in counselling and conflict resolution as a way those involved in the conflict can be guided through a process that aims to explore people's feelings about what happened and ultimately, as the name suggests, restore relationships to a healthy state. I believe the model can have a wider application as a means by which an individual can systematically unpack their own experiences and subject them to examination. This approach may not yield the same restorative quality that the group work model hopes to deliver, but it could prove an excellent model for re-assessing one's own actions in circumstance. By applying this model to unpack and deconstruct my own experience, I hope to show that such a process of self-examination will unveil a way of approaching social action that places the valuing of social relationships at the epicentre of motivation, and shows attention to interpersonal communicative detail to be a critical and undervalued basis for ethical behaviour.

Restorative Practices involves the asking of a number of simple questions. In the group setting a facilitator would ask each participant in turn the following questions.

- What happened?
- What was the most difficult part of this experience for you?
- What did you do that you would now do differently?
- What do you think needs to happen to restore any relationships that have been damaged?

The system was designed to work in prisons and is pitched at a level that doesn't necessarily need high-level cognitive skills, and is designed to deliver learning outcomes experientially. Restorative Practices are usually used as part of a larger workshop

situation and are delivered with a complex series of exercises for building community, group security, and a set of communicative conventions that seek to establish respect, recognition and judgement-free communication. In terms of adapting such a model to the world of action outside a workshop situation, success may hinge substantially on the practice of these communicative conventions, and be judged in terms of personal transformation rather than immediate social change. Personal transformation then hopefully enables more useful action in social settings, itself helping others to transform their own behaviour. This can be particularly powerful if the transformed person is one who is highly influential and in a position to either facilitate or hinder social progress.

What I hope to achieve by applying this process to my own experience is to demonstrate the impact that interpersonal communication can have on the unfolding of a political event. It is my belief that change at the level of interpersonal communication is the most possible, most effective, and most ethical way of approaching political and social change. It is not my intention to use the above process to ‘prove’ my beliefs as stated above, or to try to invalidate, or rank at some lesser level, the actions of those pursuing change by other means. What I present here is an invitation to look at and test out the possibilities that exist in transforming the way we communicate whilst acting for social change.

The Restorative Practices system is designed to be performed in groups. I will adapt this process to one of self-reflection and personal change. Firstly I will use the process to interrogate and critique the actions taken (by me). This will involve questioning both the actions taken and the motives that lie underneath them, and the construction of identity that lies, again, beneath. I will then attempt a reconstruction of the event based on communication practices rooted in recognition, respect, and compassion. I hope this will illustrate and share an approach to social action that creates, sustains and restores relationships. After using this brief example to introduce AVP and the use of Restorative Practices, I will tell the rest of the story in the depth and context it requires. This will be followed by a thorough examination of how AVP is intended to work and a breakdown of how I intend to adapt the model to political and social life. This will pave the way for the

largest section of the thesis, in which I imaginatively reconstruct how the situations could have been different if approached with the adapted AVP rationale.

## **What Happened?**

So back to the incident with the Aboriginal man at the picket caravan. What happened? I arrived at the camp, saw children throwing rocks at security guards, I explained why I thought this was a bad idea and they stopped. I tried to open up a relationship with the security guards based on the idea that I would be trying to prevent them being subjected to further actions of this kind. I implicitly offered myself as an interlocutor in such future situations, but this idea was not explicitly accepted or rejected. I then had a dialogue with an Aboriginal fellow protester about aggression toward the security guards and he told me to mind my own business. I quickly abandoned this discussion and agreed to make no further attempt to tell him what to do. This is a neutral mechanical description of what happened. This kind of neutrality is favoured in the AVP process because it is free of overt judgement — no attribution of intention or ‘moral’ judgement is made about the intention of actors. In a group setting this is desirable as it gives participants a chance to find their own interpretation at the level of intention, rather than accept the ‘reading’ of intention by another. The philosophy of AVP is based on a belief that people will come to recognise and take responsibility for their actions and intentions when invited to reflect rather than be confronted with some one else’s interpretation, however accurate and insightful such an interpretation may be. Given that my overall aim is to assess and analyse my own actions I will depart from this process here, and attempt a reading of my hidden intention.

Critical Theory tends to be sceptical of authorial intention, particularly when attempting to ‘read’ another, but also in regard to self. It therefore problematises the notion of self, reconfiguring it as a socially created concept, and thus applying the same critical process to a reading of self as it would to anything else. For my purposes here this is not an issue. Whilst my aim is to unpack my own intention with the utmost veracity, the truth (should we choose to believe that such a thing exists) is not important here. My purpose in elaborating hidden intentions, judgements and assumptions of language and tone could

equally be achieved by hypothetical constructions of great sophistication, such as we may find in a novel. What matters is that the examples mirror the kind of complexity of human relationships and their ethical intricacies so as to be actually applicable in a situation a reader may encounter: critical reflection on self doesn't uncover truth about self — it rather deepens possibilities of multiple interpretations of self and the circumstances within which it finds itself embroiled. It is this complexity that all who attempt to make sense of themselves and others acting in the world must engage.

So back to my understanding of my own intention, starting with my interaction with the children: the most obvious surface intention was to stop the children throwing rocks. Some of my reasoning for this intention was straightforward and unproblematic: it is illegal and socially unacceptable to commit acts of harm or possible harm against others. Even if it wasn't illegal, my constructed beliefs about violence directed me to position it as 'wrong', and my position as an adult, and an experienced activist and the person who happened to be there, made me feel I should act to prevent what was happening. I am most interested in looking at this situation in terms of respect and recognition. Without attempting definitions of either of these terms — although I will later — my belief was that the children, and the adults by their tacit acceptance of what was transpiring, were both disrespectful and unrecognising of the security guards. My personal belief system was (and is) that lack of recognition and disrespect lead to a diminishing or breaking of relationship, and injury to human dignity. In pursuit of a doctorate at Sydney University in the late 1990's, a few years before the events in question, my readings on recognition and respect had convinced me that the work of securing human dignity (the 'human' part of which I had redefined in deep ecological terms to include the total biosphere) should form the backbone of my ethical practice. It was my mission then, as it is now with these writings, to 'sell' this idea to others by the example of my conduct, or by way of argument or discussion.

So I should note that my beliefs about respect and recognition related not only to my own behaviour, but extended to my expectations of others. So my beliefs at the time demanded that I should intervene to try to control others' behaviour that I regarded as

problematic. To accomplish this, my opening engagement with the rock throwers was to convince them that their actions were counterproductive. My argument was that throwing rocks at the guards would simply annoy them and make them more difficult to deal with and therefore it accomplished nothing, and made our picketing job potentially more difficult. I made no mention or even implication of the issues of respect or recognition. The implication of both my argument and my tone was that they should desist. So my reading of my actions is that I attempted to convince the youths to stop throwing rocks, without specific request to do so, with a functionalist, rather than ethical argument. My confident and expectant tone allied with my authority as an adult and my projected confidence as an experienced activist (which, to the subjects of my intention, would, I imagine, be indistinguishable). I can't make any attempt here to understand the response of the youths, I can only note that after a few short remarks from them which were a mixture of excuse, justification and explanation, they desisted and removed themselves from my proximity.

My reading of what transpired with the security guards is that I made a spontaneous unilateral decision to offer myself as a liaison between the picketers and the security guards. This came from a belief that I had the experience and skills to perform this role, and the seeming absence of anyone else to do it. Underneath this lies an assumption that a person was needed to fulfil this role and an assumption about the immediacy required. On reflection the perception I had about the immediacy required comes from my own elevation of the importance of the issue, and a need to cast myself in the role of 'peacemaker' so that my role in the events that transpired would confirm to me and others how I wanted to see myself. In a sense I reframed the event as requiring, as a matter of urgency, what I myself most needed to do to confirm my own narrative of self. The line between my reframing and how I presented it to myself at the time is blurred by the fact that a good case can be made for my actions in terms of their social appropriateness, which obscures my need to act in a way which confirms an important part of my identity.

The second part of this interaction was with the Aboriginal man at the picket line. Having made the ‘stand’ against the actions of the rock throwing youths, and then been informed that the adults had been behaving similarly, I felt almost obliged to attempt to change their behaviour as well. My original feelings about why I should intervene to try to change the behaviour of others were now reinforced by a sense that I should be consistent, and finish what I had started. I sensed my behaviour was very much in the public domain, and wanted to my actions to be successful, in terms of my original intention, and for my pride, to be seen to be successful. Not only were my beliefs about what constituted appropriate behaviour here, at stake, but the human pride not to be seen to ‘fail’ in public was also engaged. In the moment I acted very quickly — my response was more or less a kneejerk reaction to being challenged. This seems to reinforce the idea that confirmation of my own identity as a thoughtful and experienced activist was as much or more at stake than the issue of violence or nonviolence.

But the new situation was more obviously problematic for me. The Aboriginal man was resident at the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE). SPATE was set up by local Aboriginal people as a response to the discovery of a culturally significant burial site. The Embassy was a symbolic and actual presence on the land to protect this site and other significant sites threatened by the intended development of the area. This was the reason the Aboriginal man was at the picket, and my main reason too. I had a clear sense of being on important Aboriginal land, and of the injustices suffered by Aboriginal people in relation to land over the last two centuries. Cultural sensitivities were clearly required of me here. Whilst over the years I had given these issues much thought, in the moment, other than a general awareness of the depth of the situation, I thought not at all, and after the fellow picketer had challenged me to apply the position I had taken with the children to the adults, I simply sat down with the Aboriginal man and launched into a justification for my actions.

I reiterated the same position that I had related to the youths, that ‘winding up’ the security guards was not a good idea. As related above, the response from the Aboriginal man was quick and heated — he let me know he was on his land, and charged by his

lawman to defend it, and he would do as he saw fit. I felt completely silenced. I quickly said that I understood, respected his position and said I would drop the matter. Two factors probably were at work here to make me back down so quickly. Firstly, to hold my ‘experienced activist’ identity I could not afford to be positioned publicly as having acted inappropriately on such an issue of cultural sensitivity. Secondly, there was an underlying truth to the claim that he was making: I was here at the invitation of the embassy he was representing, and I was putting my case to change his behaviour without any attempt to understand or acknowledge his position. The conversation quickly terminated itself and whilst I sat with the group under the picket umbrella for a while yet, I made very little further contribution to conversation, and none on the subject which had moved me to open the dialogue. I was a muddled tumult of feelings, and an inner dialogue raged all morning. I felt publicly shamed that I had given offence to the people I was trying to support. I also felt unfairly silenced. I felt the weight of history in the words of the Aboriginal man and whilst contributing to an ongoing disrespect of Aboriginal people was certainly not my intention, I felt that my actions had been placed in this category. I struggled at length trying to understand whether in fact I had behaved inappropriately, or whether I had been framed to look this way — or both. I also still felt a desire to pick up the argument about the ‘ethics’ or usefulness of the rock throwing and abuse, but had lost my confidence to speak after the discussion that had ensued. The debate remained a monologue in my head, and to this day I have not raised the matter with the Aboriginal man, despite numerous subsequent interactions.

### **What would I do differently?**

The next step if I were to process this in an AVP group would be to ask, what would I have done differently? To lay bare my internal process I intend to enlarge the question to, what would I have done differently and why? In AVP as in some counselling models, the question ‘why’ is usually regarded as too demanding and coercive. My departure from the AVP model here is to more deeply interrogate myself for the benefit of the reader. AVP is careful to avoid judgement being placed on others, or indeed on self. I shall depart from the process here to deeply critique my own actions. The point of this critique is not to judge, but to provide a working model of how behaviour may be usefully laid

open to examination for the purposes of learning — not judging or blaming. In asking why in this way I can answer in terms that develop my ideal conception of how to approach social action in a way that recognises, respects, values and honours relationships. I will attempt to rebuild a response that demonstrates both the beliefs in action and their contextual rationale. I will make no attempt, as some hypothetical reconstructions do, to guess or imagine responses to my posited ideal responses, although I will make clear the possibilities for responses that I believe the ideal approach opens up.

## **Preparation**

In an ideal situation, on approaching the picket line that morning I would have been better prepared. I would have spent time building relationships with some of the people involved, to have more trust, understanding and thus stronger ground upon which to continue or commence ongoing or new relationships that were possibly going to be challenged with conflict. As I will detail later, relationship building is vital to the whole process of AVP, and in a workshop process much time is given to building community and trust before people begin to explore relating in conflict. Social action is an interesting arena to apply theoretical conflict transformation models of this sort, because social action often marks a low point of trust and community between contending parties. Conflict often arises and explodes because of lack of relationship and community, and groups of people take action to secure their perceived needs ‘against’ the parties perceived to be damaging their interests, or the interests of another who they rise to defend. Groups may have some time to build relations between themselves — and indeed social action groups often form as an expression of an already existing community of interest. This was the case here. I had some relationship with the general community of picketers, and some personal relationships with people ranging from mere acquaintance through to substantial friendship. Conversely, my relations with those who were traditionally framed as opponents were either non-existent or poor. In the cases of the limited involvement I had with the ‘developers’ and members of the wider groups of people trying to get the development going, relations had been often openly hostile, and little effort had been made to make them otherwise: interactions had been framed completely in an adversarial way where I and others in the community had simply



strongly opposed their actions without making any serious attempt at a relationship based on understanding who they were or what they needed or wanted.

The most obvious thing I would have done differently is to have taken more time to think before acting. Some circumstances leave the actor with no time to think, and a quick response is called for. In retrospect this was not one of them. Neither the children nor the Aboriginal man were currently engaged in activities causing great harm. The situation had been going all night, but there were no signs that anyone had been hurt, or that nerves were frayed to the extent that someone was in danger of ‘snapping’ and behaving precipitately. A moment’s analysis of this — simply asking whether I needed to act immediately or not — may have yielded a quick answer that no immediate action was needed. If I had decided not to act, it is hard to know how the situation would have developed, but almost certainly no one could have thought I was taking a stand in support of the stone throwing.

My next step could also have been more cautious. Given that I was moved to act, if I had the moment again I would open my relationship with the children differently. Instead of launching straight into my argument about the counter-productivity of verbal abuse and rock throwing I could have introduced myself, in a light conversational tone, and asked them what was happening.

### **Communication in the moment**

I will now look in a little more detail at how I could have communicatively approached the situation with the rock-throwing children. In particular I am interested in the kind of opportunities that may present through the use of open questions. Open questions strongly relate to an AVP (NSW) principle called ‘shining the light’ that I shall detail in the next chapter. The question placed to the children of ‘what is happening?’ may have had the effect of offering them the chance to review their own actions in dialogue with me. In this dialogue I could continue to support this opportunity by using ‘open questions’ — these are questions that make it difficult to answer with a simple yes or no — usually beginning with a ‘what’, ‘how’ or ‘why’. The questions would be aimed at

making them reflect critically on their actions — without judging what they have done as ‘wrong’. Another possible question would have been ‘how long has this been going on?’ allowing me to get the history of what had been happening in more detail, and inviting the children to share and review their own role in the matters that had transpired. Another more specific question that could help the children more directly examine the connection between their actions and their motivations or needs could be ‘what happened just before the first rock was thrown?’

After information gathering and invitation to reflect on motive and need, critical assessment could begin with questions like ‘how did the security guards respond when the first rocks were thrown?’ Questions such as this draw the questioned into an engagement with the consequences of their actions. This process could be continued with a question like ‘how did you feel when they said they were angry or frightened?’ If this process went well, when I felt a dialogue of some substance was forming, I would continue with this part of the AVP style debrief by asking them if they would have done anything differently if they had faced the situation again after obtaining new information about the events in question. Should I be faced with people thinking they would behave differently, and expressing feeling such a regret, shame or embarrassment, I could then consider the final phase of the AVP model which would be to ask them what they believe needs to happen to restore relationship. Ideally the process would happen while the incident was still fresh, involving all parties and facilitated by someone independent (as much as is possible) of the circumstances. Such a process as outlined above will not necessarily happen quickly. It could potentially happen in the moment, or over days, weeks or even longer after the initial incident.

The next part of the interaction, to which I can apply the ‘what would I do differently?’ self-interrogation, concerns the security guards. I would still have engaged with the security guards. I would have introduced myself to the security guards and apologised for the rock throwing and abuse. I would not however have offered myself as a go-between in the case of further such incidents unless I had the support of the group to do so. With this in mind I would have raised the issue in the appropriate forum and offered myself as

a candidate for potentially filling this role for the group. In terms of my interaction in the moment I would therefore simply let them know that personally I did not agree with such tactics and would be raising the matter with the group as soon as I had an opportunity.

Finally to the situation with the Aboriginal man from SPATE. This situation is the most difficult. Again, my first step would be to begin to build relationship rather than attempt to raise the issue at hand directly. Relationship in this situation was actually more obviously complicated than relationship in either of the other two just described. The fact that the man in question was Aboriginal and known by me to have an important role in SPATE transforms the relationship into one of cross-cultural communication. In fact, as I shall explore later, situations such as the other two described are replete with hidden assumptions and sub-cultural differences that upon close examination may also exhibit a rich complexity, and need similar special recognitions and respect to those more obviously cross-cultural.

What is important here is to acknowledge the general context of post-colonial Australia, my particular beliefs surrounding this, and the expectations this generates for me about my own conduct. My own belief — which had drawn me into this situation and other similar ones before it — was that Australia had been invaded and settled without the consent of Aboriginal people and that questions of sovereignty and relationship to land by all those living in Australia were still deeply contested issues. At a level of social justice, Aboriginal people, it seemed to me, still in general had less access to resources to defend their interests in this regard than many or perhaps most other Australians. I believed that Aboriginal people at Sandon Point had legitimate interests in the land there that were not being properly respected, and my primary motivation in being at this picket was to support them in this regard.

My own understanding of Aboriginal culture and how to relate to Aboriginal people in a way that accounts for our shared context had been heavily shaped by my experiences previous to this incident. Some of the most powerful experiences are worth sharing here as a demonstration of the kind of contextual reflection we all must make to make sense of

our attitudes and behaviours, and in particular to make sense of my own here. One of my major insights in relation to being with Aboriginal people is the importance of listening. The point about listening is perhaps best illustrated by two stories of interaction with Aboriginal people, both of which happened as a consequence of collective social action towards shared goals. Before proceeding with these stories it is important to say a few words about my position as a non-Aboriginal Australian writing on matters pertaining to Aboriginal Australians. Michael Dodson, a prominent figure in the Aboriginal community, observes:

Since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality. Under that gaze, Aboriginality changed from being a daily practice to being ‘a problem to be solved’ (Grossman, 2003, 27).

I have no wish to contribute to the practice of non-Aboriginal Australians making claims about Aborigines or Aboriginality. What follows relates to my experience of interaction with Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal people, and any ideas distilled from these interactions remain my interpretations. It is important to honour the people whose living culture led me to begin my personal journey, and I thank and acknowledge those who have shared their insights with me, and hope that the ideas I have formed as a result of these interactions may be useful to all people taking constructive social and political action. I make no claim that my interpretation of the experiences I shared with Aboriginal people defines in any way Aboriginal people or Aboriginality. Attempting to understand Aboriginal people and Aboriginality involves *hearing* the words of the people themselves. The chief purpose of the stories I now relate is to encourage other non-Aboriginal social activists (particularly those whose actions may impact upon Aboriginal people) to consider the value of listening to these voices, and the value of promoting the cultural practice of honouring Aboriginal voices.

Appropriately to conclude this caveat I continue with the words of Michael Dodson:

Nearly suffocated with imposed labels and structures, Aboriginal peoples have no other choice than to insist on our right to speak back, to do as the old man said: to build and represent our own world of meaning and significance (Grossman, 2003, 28).

Particularly in relation to Aboriginal people, and an idea that can be extended as an approach to include relations with all: I speak for myself and seek to create spaces where others can speak for themselves. What follows is a reflection on some of my own significant listening experiences, particularly involving Aboriginal people. The task of relating this to scholarly work on listening I shall leave to the discretion of the reader: the purpose here is to demonstrate the role of working with memory to reflect on how and why we do things, and how we might do them differently with the insights so gained.

### **The listening ceremony**

In the early 1990's I became involved in a social movement in my local suburb (Wombarra, about 8 kilometres north of Sandon Point) whose intention was to restore local creeks and waterways that had been damaged by mining operations directly above it. The damage to natural hydrological systems had led to chronic flooding problems, and after a few houses had been damaged and a person nearly drowned, community and government instrumentalities began to take action and address the issue. Two major responses emerged. The first, championed by the community (two groups: Scarborough Action For the Environment — SAFE, and Wombarra Preservation — WP), was to restore the natural creek systems, and augment their function with non-invasive, environmentally sensitive infrastructure, and to remove any houses left at risk at the completion of the project. The second, generated and supported by the local council, State Rail organisations and government instrumentalities (and supported by a small number of local residents), was a major underground stormwater tunnel.

Wombarra Preservation, of which I was a significant member, opposed the “Tunnel” as we called it, and championed what we called a bio-engineered reconstruction of the natural creek system. The struggle against the Tunnel became a large public movement

and resulted in numerous public protests, an industrial ban on the site, and questions in parliament, before the Tunnel was eventually built in spite of public opposition. During this process Wombarra Preservation engaged with the local Aboriginal community, attempting to involve them in the ongoing struggle to find the best response to the flooding on the land. It proved difficult to find Aboriginal people with significant ongoing relationship with the land in question, and the traditional owners who were liaised with took no significant role in the dispute. To the extent that they shared an opinion, the Aboriginal delegates on the flooding committee ended up in support of the tunnel option.

However the process was not wasted, and the fact that traditional owners were involved in decisions pertaining to the land to which they retain profound connection represented a significant step forward in planning processes in which they were usually routinely ignored. Connections were also made, and members of Wombarra Preservation began to build links with some local Aboriginal people and explore the wider questions relating to how we should relate to the land upon which our community was founded. One of the products of this relationship was a listening ceremony. The listening ceremony was conducted by an Aboriginal man (who I shall call 'G') with significant local connection, evidence of this being the attendance of a significant local Aboriginal Elder. My understanding of the explanation given as a rationale for the listening ceremony was that when traditional owners had been absent from 'country' for a significant period of time, a listening ceremony was the first step towards rebuilding or forming a new relationship with the land.

We began the ceremony by painting our faces with special ochre. My memory of the explanation shared with us at the time was that the painting of the face symbolised connection with the land: that we were (or should endeavour to be) at one with the land. The point of the exercise was to rediscover connection with the land, and the beginning of this process was to sit and listen. As we moved toward the space where we would sit and listen, we moved through the smoke created by a small fire of green leaves. Such a 'smoking' ceremony is often used by local Aboriginal people; I have experienced such

ceremonies both prior and subsequent to this event. The ceremony's role was to remove any negative energy from the recipient before entering a new space, particularly when a 'clean' energy is required for the new space. G gave us all clap sticks, which we lightly banged together while approaching the site: my memory of the explanation given for the role of this was to announce to the spirit of the land that our approach to the space was friendly and well intentioned. G then sang a short song in an Aboriginal language, the meaning and import of which were not explained. We then simply sat in silence for a period (I can't remember the exact time — it may have been about 15 minutes) and were invited by G to simply listen to the land and hear its stories or silence.

After the ceremony we reflected on what had happened. Some participants shared that the land had 'spoken' to them, or that they had felt themselves 'called' to establish forms of reciprocal relation to the land, and indicated that they felt the land itself was to some extent a conscious party to the relationship. My own experience, the only one that I can reliably recall and reflect upon, did not enter the realms of 'mystical' experience briefly alluded to above. Instead what I experienced was very similar to what one might experience in forms of Buddhist meditation.

In meditation a usual simple introductory practice is to sit comfortably, with a straight back, and to focus one's attention on the cycle of breath, and to abandon conscious thoughts. What usually happens, even with experienced meditators, is that thoughts arise that distract one from the attention to the cycle of breaths. The practice of meditation involves the letting go of these thoughts and continually returning of attention to breath. There is much skill and subtlety in the approach to this simple task, which I shall not attempt to explicate here, but a few comments on the intent of such a process is useful to shine some light on my experience of the listening ceremony, its implications for the practice of listening in general, and as it relates to communication skills pertinent to social action.

The broad intention of Buddhist meditation practices, as outlined above, is to draw the attention of the practitioner to the habits and attitudes of our mind. Over time, as

awareness of the mind increases, the meditator may have the experience of greater control over the many activities of the mind. Examples of this may be greater control over obsessive thought cycles related to aversions or desires, or things that have happened in the past or may happen in the future. In theory, with this greater awareness of how the mind works, the meditator may seek to abandon unhelpful or destructive habits of mind which may cause themselves or others suffering, and develop habits of mind more conducive to happiness.

The listening ceremony can be interpreted similarly. However, the focus of concentration, rather than being on the mind or the self, in this case seemed to me to be external to the self: the physical and non-physical aspects of the world around us. For me, non-physical aspects could be usefully understood as people's experience of the spirit or energy associated with physical objects. So during the ceremony we focussed our attention on listening to the space and land around us, and sensing any non-physical energy or spirit associated with the space we occupied. I can only speak for my own experience. Physically I heard the sound of the wind and the sea, the humming of insects, the background of traffic movements, and the breathing and movements of my fellow participants. My own experience of any spirit or energy associated with place is difficult to quantify, and almost impossible to separate from the activities of my imagination. Much like my experience of meditation, I found my mind wandered from the task of simply observing or experiencing, and moved into the realm of speculation, imagination and remembering.

At the time of the events described above I felt the exercise to be quite valuable, though I can not claim any necessary relation between what I experienced and what I subsequently came to understand, or the intentions in that regard of our ceremony's conductor. Recalling the incident now, it is hard to distinguish my learning from this episode from subsequent related incidents that have amplified and deepened this initial experience. What I now choose to share, as an insight from the episode, is as much a reading of the experience through this lens from years later, as a remembrance. In this light it is useful



to share a more general sense of my current wisdom on the matter of listening, which owes its genesis to countless listening experiences and post listening evaluations.

One of the major insights about the general subject of my listening is how difficult it actually can be, how I often don't listen even when I appear to be, or even when I am trying to do so. As mentioned previously, like my experience of meditation, my experience of the listening ceremony was that I spent much of the time thinking, evaluating, assessing — even analysing my responses thus far, and potential communications about them with others. My reflection now, as I am moved to write here, is that much of my time in politics, or situations of 'argument' or discussion, is spent with significant loss to my attention as a result of the inner dialogue that begins evaluating and formulating responses to what I am hearing. This is perhaps because my experience of such discussions and arguments is that if I don't respond quickly and effectively, my input will be disregarded in favour of those who are quicker. Particularly in political discussion and argument, participants often speak and respond quickly, and bombard their 'opponents' with information in such a way as to overwhelm and make useful or intelligent responses difficult. My understanding now is that real listening is complete concentration on the event being listened to, and that in so far as possible, analysis and planned response in the moment of listening detract from the possibilities of understanding given by a process of total attention. Experience in AVP workshops with different styles of listening shows that the person being listened to also feels more 'heard' and understood when the listener gives complete concentration to the task of listening. I will detail some of these listening techniques when I examine the AVP methodologies in the next chapter.

A second set of insights from the listening ceremony relate to beginning the process of a new relationship, or trying to build community. One of the things that can be seen in the practice of the listening ceremony is a giving of value to endeavour by granting or gifting one's time. In modern industrial societies where time is often equated (as the cliché states) to money, to take time to embark on an activity that does not seem at first glance to have a tangible outcome becomes difficult and is frowned upon, and we are

encouraged to cut corners to meet deadlines. Listening deeply to others can be a casualty of such a way of being.

To begin a new relationship, or to begin a process of deepening an existing one, experiences such as the listening ceremony remind us that we must be prepared to give it our time, and give an opportunity for it to proceed in directions established by the emerging dynamics of the new relation itself. The imperatives or intentions we may bring from our selves or the seeming imperatives of the context to which we hope to apply any advantage gained by the emerging relation may interfere with the process of listening with an ear to what may be possible in a more general sense. The sitting and listening to the land placed us in the situation of contemplation of the nature of other and relation to other, prior to any actions intended to begin connection. The moment we begin to act, we begin to attempt to influence, build, change, coerce — to fashion the relation to that which is useful, or imagined by us to be desirable or philosophically sound. The act of sitting and simply listening, open to possibility, creates the opportunity for that outside ourself to move towards us (or not) and/or establish itself free of our demands and expectations. Listening can be an act of grace that allows the speaker the opportunity to speak free of the distortions that will be introduced as soon as we respond, affirm, deny or offer our own interpretations of whatever is shared by the speaker or situation.

The rituals accompanying the ceremony were to me a deeply important part of setting up the possibilities of good listening. This was so not only in the case of the actual focus of the current listening — which was the physical and non-physical environment in which we were situated — but also the possibilities of listening relationships between the participants. Some of the relations between participants and those leading the practice were already ongoing and possessed many of the dynamics of long-term ongoing relationships; others had little or no relationship. In terms of the experience we were having — beginning a relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples aimed at joining us in respectful contemplation of how we might pursue joint ongoing care of the space we were sharing — the ways of relating that we were embarking on placed us in new relationships potentially transcending or altering previous ties.

For me, the sharing of ritual, such as smoking, face painting and sitting together in contemplation, was effective in creating the potential beginnings of different ways of relating, and new and ongoing shared purpose. Because the ritual I experienced was peculiar and particular to the circumstance, closer thought was given to the fact that we were beginning an intentional sub community within the larger active community taking social action — itself a sub section of a larger geographic community, which in turn was a subsection of a larger political community, and so on. Both the object of our shared purpose and the ways of relating we may share on this journey were brought into focus by the presence of the ritual, which created sharing situations outside of our usual relationships, and clearly directed towards the shared endeavours that had brought us together.

The actual rituals themselves were also of such a character to give some guidance as to the possibilities of new ways of relating we could consider — although I cannot say with any certainty that this was so for anyone but myself, or that it represented the intention of the leaders of the practice. Such parts of the ritual as clapping sticks to symbolise friendly approach remind me of the importance of signalling to new potential social relaters the good will of my intended relation. The painting of the face, to remind us that we are adnate with the land, reminds me to honour the implicit connection of all things, and to attempt to relate in ways that break down the process of what Simone de Beauvoir (2010, 17) calls creating an ‘other’ in opposition to Self.

Prior to the listening ceremony was the smoking ceremony. The role of the smoking ceremony was described to us in terms of cleansing. Being smoked involved our guide lighting a fire (this was done with some care, though at the time I took no care in committing the particulars to memory) and then participants walking through the smoke one by one. The act focussed me on letting go of any preconceptions and baggage I may be holding on to that would affect the way I experienced and understood what was about to happen. I can’t speak for how successful I was in this endeavour, merely that the ritual

act of cleansing certainly created an intention to be open and non-judgemental to what I was about to experience.

We then approached the listening site lightly clapping wooden sticks together. The purpose of this part of the ritual was to announce to the land that we were approaching with peaceful intent. Our guide explained that this process has a long tradition in Aboriginal culture. The signalling to others when entering what was seen as their space is intended as an act of respect and acknowledgement of the pre-existing relationships to which the newcomer is not yet privy to or part of, and an offering of openness to begin a process of potential inclusion in ways prescribed or offered by the 'other'.

Again for me this was very effective, in that it focused my thoughts clearly on the implications of entering the spaces and relationships of others with respect and recognition. In this case the thing that was recognised was the value of the pre-existing ways of relating, and the way of showing respect for this was to approach relating with some gesture that attempted to show, by action, the valuing or openness to valuing the as-yet-not-understood relations into which one is about to enter.

Finally, as the experience was an unusual one, at least for the non-Aboriginal members of the group, a debriefing followed in which we shared what we had heard or experienced during the ceremony. Even though I already had (in some cases substantial) relationships with many members of the group, I felt a deeper commitment to explore both how we might care for the land and the implications of this as a collective enterprise. The analogy that comes to mind is of a couple who have co-habited for a long period of time, and through marriage are invited to reassess and deepen their relationship through a public display of bonding and commitment. To this day I feel a responsibility to care for the local land that I feel is sacred, and the public, voluntary ceremonies in which I partook are I believe central to the strength of this feeling. If my commitment periodically wanes over the years, the recalling of these events and this ceremony always reawakens my sense of value about caring for land and people.

## **Listening to ‘Dootch’**

The second experience with local indigenous people that deepened my understanding of the importance and value of listening happened at the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy a few years later. I had already been heavily involved in supporting the Embassy for some years and knew most of the Aboriginal people who regularly stayed there. I had of my own volition started a process that led to the writing of a letter (written by me, and approved by what I deemed to be significant members of the Embassy) to the United Nations detailing the activities and role of the Embassy and asking for support, in terms of the Draft Report on the Rights of Indigenous People that the Australian government had given its signature, but not its ratification.

One night at the regular Sunday evening picket get together one of the central figures at the Embassy, its spokesperson, Ambassador Dootch Kennedy, asked me to go to the Embassy so we could talk. He had, he said, something he wanted me to do. I arrived at the Embassy one morning, as arranged, (bearing milk and bread, which I knew from experience were nearly always needed) and after greetings and a cup of tea we sat on the lightly grassed sand dunes by the beach adjacent the Embassy and began to talk. In fact my host did much of the talking, and my regular rejoinders in conversation were mostly aimed at clarifying just exactly what he wanted me to do. I quickly noticed some irritation in my host whenever I tried to direct conversation towards my end of finding out the task he was going to offer me. I gradually let go of this approach and settled in to the task of listening and responding to what it was he was saying and going with the flow of his interest without trying to search for the ultimate goal of his inviting me to the Embassy that day.

Once I had let go of my own fixation with ‘getting to the point’ and finding out specifically what task lay in store for me I relaxed into the day and began to enjoy and understand what was happening. In relation to the meditation exercise mentioned previously, I began to pay attention and listen to what was being said and abandoned the distraction of analysing or speculating about what was left unsaid, or what may come later, or had passed before. Like the listening exercise years before, once the activities of

speculation, imagining and remembering were stopped, and real listening began. I noticed as I worked to be fully present in this way, the initial awkwardness in our communication eased and my host began to share quite deeply.

Much of what was said that day was quite personal and it is not appropriate or necessary to share it again here. In terms of my learning outcomes, I left late in the afternoon with not only the history of my hosts' family, his art practice, his theories on Aboriginal language, kinship ties, responses to displacement and dispossession and the politics of the collective struggle we shared, but an awareness of how important these understandings are to working together on the issues we faced. By the end of the day I realised what an important day it had been. For all of my previous years of work intended to help the condition of Aboriginal people, this was the first time I had dedicated a whole day to listening. Even the talking I did do that day became geared towards generating the space for my host to continue the sharing that was happening as a result of the communicative roles we played: he talking and me listening, a style of listening that included facilitating further talking.

Though I had been to talks where Aboriginal people had talked and I had listened, this was the first occasion in which I had had the privilege of doing so person to person as opposed to person to group. The distinction is important as the sharing that happens one on one can be far more personal, and geared toward shared relationship outcomes. Such a way of relating opens up the possibility of coming closer to real knowledge of the person's needs and desires and thus, to the attentive listener and learner and potential helper, a greater possibility of understanding what the person would actually find helpful and supportive. Without real relationships we are placed in the role of imagining or analysing and trying to understand what it is we may do to help, or if indeed our help is desired or welcomed. By the end of the day what was important to my host, and his feelings and needs, was more apparent to me. Ultimately, of course, these remain my interpretations, but they were now based on something more solid: actual personal experience of personal communication more explicitly geared to sharing information about feelings and needs than I had ever experienced with an Aboriginal person before.

I realised, and this process of realisation deepens as I write now, that much of the work I had done in writing public documents aimed at drawing attention to what I saw as the denial of rights for Aboriginal people, was precisely that, namely what I saw but not necessarily what Aboriginal people saw. So whilst some of what I had done had resonated with the Aboriginal community (and from the profound and warm thanks it received in some quarters I know some of it did), other actions had been more about my own sense of injustices done to others than the actual feelings of those on whose behalf I imagined I acted. I sensed rather than knew that some of my actions were perceived with indifference or even anger by members of the Aboriginal community. On reflection now, it makes sense to me that this may have been because my actions were based on intuited need rather than actual experience and knowledge based on close sharing and experience.

Even in situations where we (or I) believe substantial understanding has been reached, life is full of circumstances where we find we are mistaken or deluded. The important point here is that the more substantial the relationship, the greater the chance of accuracy in intended support. What I learned that day was that in spite of my deeply held feelings about Aboriginal rights, this was the first time I had actually given primacy to listening deeply to find out what I could do to help. Long, deep and substantial sharing can still lead to erroneous judgement. However experiences here show me that directed, non-analytical/speculative listening increases our chances of achieving a deeper understanding of the speaker's needs and feelings.

### ***The Advertiser solidarity statement***

Further reflection shows me that my sense of wanting to help was based more in alleviating a sense of guilt than actually making a difference to the object of my intention. A second reflection followed this, and in fact is only solidifying into clarity as I write here, though a nascent form of this insight was brewing as I left the camp that day. The role of my own need for recognition as a driving force behind my passion for the recognition for others became clear to me as a result of my engaging to write public documents as part of the Sandon Point struggle.

Much of the previous work I had done with/for Aboriginal people over the five years preceding the events just related had been driven to a large extent by feelings of guilt and shame. In general the guilt and shame related to a sense that in general white middle class people such as myself enjoyed a wealth and opportunity in life not shared by most Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people consistently rated much worse than non-Aboriginal people on social indicators such as life expectancy, rate of imprisonment, suicide, general health, mental health issues, drug addictions, unemployment, poverty and infant mortality. Such a picture is true for nearly all indigenous peoples living under the imposed culture of a colonial power or post-colonial situation.

In the early part of my life I had little appreciation of this. My earliest memory of my political attitude to Aboriginal issues (when I was just starting university as a seventeen year old) was that the invasion had been a great injustice, but we were all the same now, and the past was best forgotten. One day whilst debating the issue with two friends who were trying to persuade me to go to a land rights rally I experienced a change. As my friends boarded the bus to go to the rally and disappeared down the road I was possessed of a strong feeling that my attitude was wrong: I was being uncompassionate, and my attitude was based on ignorance about the conditions experienced by Aboriginal people in Australia. I made a mental note to myself that next time there was a rally I would go: my friends were 'right' and I was 'wrong' (a belated thanks goes out to John K and Craig L for starting me on this journey). I still remember the feelings of shame and guilt: they related to my ignorance, my lack of compassion, and a sudden recognition about the extent of my privilege and how closely it was related to the disadvantage of others. My response to this strengthened steadily through experience of the world and education, until by the early 1990's (about a decade later), with the assistance of a close friend who was an anthropologist and had much experience working with Aboriginal people in Central Australia, I became involved with Aboriginal people in taking action broadly aimed at redressing these injustices and tackling the discrepancy in our life situations.



My first really significant engagement in such issues was involvement in the formation of the Illawarra Social Justice Network, the prime mover in this being the above-mentioned close friend and former anthropologist, Bruce Reyburn. After the group had been meeting a few months, the Federal Government, a Liberal Government led by John Howard, commenced a response to the High Court's 'Wik' decision. Richard Bartlett's (1997) summary of the Wik case and the Howard government's response gives historical depth to, and resonates with, my own recollections here. The Wik decision saw the High Court rule that pastoral leases, granted mostly in the early days of settlement, did not invalidate previous land ownership situations, thus leaving the door open for Aboriginal people to make legal claim related to their prior occupation of the land. The Howard Government moved swiftly to introduce what it called the ten-point plan. This plan was clearly aimed at shutting this opened door, and securing land ownership for pastoral leaseholders to the exclusion of any prior claims made by Aboriginal People.

A small group of people in the area where I lived formed the Illawarra Social Justice Network with the idea of discussing ways of taking action to place social justice issues back on the local political agenda. The group quickly moved to take on local indigenous issues, and soon turned itself into Illawarra Residents for Native Title (IRNT). IRNT staged numerous public information events, including a 'Sea of Hands' event, which was a mass participation event staged by many similar groups across the country as a demonstration of mass public support for native title. The group liaised frequently, and established good relations with many local Aboriginal groups and individuals. My own role as a co-ordinator of this was significant, and through it I had a lot of direct involvement with Aboriginal people, and began the journey of learning how such relations might work partly through listening to Aboriginal people and partly by trial and error.

Even after the dissolution of this particular group the networks and connections continued to operate through other similar groups and more informal connections. When the Embassy was formed, for example, I like many others simply dropped in, introduced myself to those I didn't know or was introduced to new Embassy people by those with

whom I already had relations. During this period I instigated two major projects. The first was the writing of a document sent to the United Nations that detailed at length the perceived infractions of indigenous rights in terms of various charters on the rights of indigenous peoples. The second was the publication (in a local newspaper) of a statement of support for the Embassy and its struggle, from the local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. The statement was published in *The Advertiser*, a free weekly Wollongong newspaper, on Wednesday, 24 July 2002, under the title “Sandon Point: Show Respect For Aboriginal Heritage”.

There is much in the above worthy of close analysis, and later in this writing I will analyse some of the conflicts that accompanied these efforts. What I will restrict myself to for the current endeavour is an analysis and comment on my own motivations, and the reflections on these motivations inspired by the listening ceremony and the day at SPATE with the prominent and influential member of the Aboriginal community. I hope to show how the insights garnered from these two episodes can be used to inform an alternative way of approaching the various dilemmas faced in navigating these endeavours. In terms of the restorative practices model it will show the link between the reflection engendered by the ‘what happened?’ and ‘what was the most difficult aspect for me?’ questions and the ‘what would I do differently?’ question.

Firstly, whilst some members of the Aboriginal community were interested in the struggle in terms of broader issues of indigenous rights, sovereignty and genocide (these were my, perhaps very academic, preoccupations), many were not. In fact, and I was aware of this at the time, some members of the Aboriginal community saw the Embassy as an embarrassment, and any attempt at framing the welfare of Aboriginal people in terms of land rights, genocide or sovereignty as divisive and damaging to the interests of the Aboriginal community.

The second observation follows directly from the first, in that to some extent the attempt to ground Aboriginal issues on the south coast in debates about land rights, sovereignty, genocide and dispossession came from my own preoccupation with these issues. These

may well be valid and useful ways of understanding issues facing Aboriginal people and building a response to the disadvantages they endure; but I did not arrive at this way of approaching the problem as any kind of response to what I was hearing from Aboriginal people themselves. My framing of Aboriginal ‘issues’ in this way definitely came from study and activism. This is not to say that I did not share a real, useful and mutual engagement with these issues with Aboriginal people, rather that, as a frame for involvement and discussion, it preceded any actual involvement with Aboriginal people and therefore was clearly not a product of me listening to Aboriginal people and coming to see that this was a way which reflected their needs or feelings.

Whilst I received some encouragement after setting out in this direction, and could make a case for these projects being on the whole a good contribution to the Aboriginal community on the South Coast of NSW, the projects clearly related to my own ways of understanding and acting in the world. Without dismissing the many positives that may have come from these endeavours, I would like to examine some of the conflicts that arose during the publication of the two significant public documents that were the product of my initiatives and labours. In particular I would like to explore and examine the way in which these projects were not the product of listening to others’ needs before embarking on endeavours aimed at addressing their needs, affected the outcomes of the projects, particularly some Aboriginal people. Finally I will examine my response to the conflicts with Aboriginal people that resulted from the way these projects were conducted.

At this point it becomes necessary to deepen the analysis and critically examine my process in generating these documents, and show how ungrounded they were in terms of listening. The document published in the Wollongong *Advertiser* in 2002 had its roots in another similar publication in which I had been involved in the mid 1990’s. Wombarra Preservation, which was opposing an ocean outfall (“the Tunnel”) in Scarborough/Wombarra, had been consistently portrayed as a minority interest on the issue by much of the media, some public officials and members of Government supporting the Tunnel option. In response to this we had decided to publish our case in

the local newspaper. We took out a full-page advertisement detailing our opposition to the Tunnel, and listed the names of all the people who supported the no-tunnel options in small print at the bottom of the page. Each person whose name was included contributed a small amount of money. This strategy proved that indeed the numbers of people opposing the project were not a minority, and had the added bonus of involving people in the cause and funding the advertisement and the struggle.

At one of the regular, informal community meetings at the community picket line I suggested that we try a similar project at Sandon Point, concentrating on the threat to Aboriginal culture posed by the intended housing development. The mixed group of people at the picket on the evening were, I remember, cautiously supportive, but stopped short of actually endorsing the idea.

At this point it is worthwhile looking at this first step I had taken to ‘seed’ the idea, in terms of process. The individuals and groups that came together in loose unity to oppose the development at Sandon Point had no formal structure. As such there was no formally accepted way of introducing an idea for collective action. My understanding of the informal procedure was that decisions were taken at irregular public and semi-public meetings. The public meetings were advertised by bill-postering, word of mouth and media announcements, and decisions were often made or perhaps just ratified by a show of hands.

As with many groups, loose or otherwise, there was an informal way of making decisions and deciding on tactical directions. My understanding of this procedure was that regular phone calls, meetings at people’s houses, in the street or at the picket line or tent embassy, were responsible for generating day-to-day responses to interactions with Stockland (‘the developer’), the state government and the local council. Patterns of personal relationship, membership of other related groups (for example the Northern Illawarra Residents Action Group — NIRAG, or The Illawarra Greens) often affected who talked to whom and to what end, as all of the various members jostled for the power

to make their particular sense of how to define and conduct the defence of our community interests.

My own position should be detailed here. I was a member of the Illawarra Greens, Illawarra Residents for Native Title (IRNT), and later Northern Illawarra Treaty and Reconciliation Group (NIRTAG). My own motivation was definitely coloured by my membership of these groups, my personal affiliation and connection, and my own self-interest.

As a member of the Illawarra Greens (in fact I was convenor of the group for some of this time), I often sought to marry my activities as an activist with the activity of the Greens. After I had raised the idea of publishing a statement of support for the endeavours of SPATE at the community picket, I also canvassed the idea at the Illawarra Greens monthly meeting. By this stage I had spoken to Ambassador Dootch Kennedy and he was generally supportive of the idea, and at my instigation attended the local Greens meeting at which the idea was canvassed. The proposal was easily endorsed given the combination of the support of the Embassy Ambassador, my personal influence and position as convenor, added to a demonstrated long-term willingness on behalf of the local group to get involved in projects aimed at supporting Aboriginal people. In fact the group indicated its willingness to fund such a project should the donations of the people putting their name to the public document fail in itself to garner the required money for the publication.

Having secured the interest of the Embassy Ambassador, I was quickly able to reintroduce the idea back at the regular Sunday night informal community meeting, and a meeting at my house was organised to begin the task of writing, securing consent for the text from all involved parties, and publishing the resulting document. The Ambassador undertook to secure the consent and support of all the relevant Aboriginal people, and I undertook the writing of the actual document and consulting with the wider community. Drafts were circulated regularly, via email, and printed versions. As the text kept changing to reflect the input and critiques of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people,

the process was lengthy (it took nearly two months) and sometimes heated. Several people, some seen as significant, threatened to withdraw support for the document if certain word or phrases were not removed or softened. In particular the use of the word genocide was seen as inflammatory, and in spite of my own desire to use the word (it was I who had introduced it), I eventually acceded to the argument to have it removed on the basis that more people were likely to endorse a statement which had a less judging and blaming tone.

On reflection I see myself as clearly trying to change the debate to a more 'heated' level and shift its language to reflect ways of framing the debate in which I was more competent. Debates on sovereignty, land rights and genocide were areas where I comparatively 'shone'. In part I wanted to use my skills publicly and be validated as an intellectual and an activist. This is not to diminish the fact that I believe these debates to be important, and that public engagement with them would eventually flow through to increase the quality of life of Aboriginal people and Australian life. The fellow activist who had teased me as to what I was going to say to the Aboriginal man after I had spoken to the children at the picket on the morning of the rock throwing also, I remember, had clear reservations about taking the debate in this direction for fear of excluding many mainstream community members. Her participation in patiently (and some times not so patiently) arguing with me about these issues helped produce a document that still raised important issues but did not alienate the wider involved (and potentially involved) community.

Before continuing the story it is useful to consider more deeply my motives and *modus operandi* for the project. Motivation is a complex issue, and no one can claim to have full and accurate insight into the motivation of self or others. The possibilities for taking social action that I will try to demonstrate in this work will depend on people's capacity for meaningful self reflection, encompassing some understanding of their constructed selves and how this affects the way they think, feel and act. It follows then that the methods I will sketch will prioritise the processes that sharpen and deepen these skills. What I will be doing here is demonstrating the kind of self-reflection necessary for

grasping the role and impact of motivation on how social action plays out. I will not be claiming that such a process is accurate or faultless. As said before, the contingencies of memory and recollection, whilst perilously subjective and uncertain, are in many cases all we have for making sense of ourselves and our actions. This is where we must go for reflection to be a useful contribution to re-imagining other possible ways of tackling similar situations in the future.

The communicative scenarios I was part of were ‘set up’ in part by the way my motivations shaped the ‘who, where and why’ of the interactions. For example the fact that I chose to involve the groups I did, and approached the particular people within them that I did, is highly significant. In so far as I could, I chose to interact with people I knew and groups with which I was familiar. Because the relationships with people and groups were known to me, I felt I had more of a chance at getting what I wanted. I chose to gain the support of the Illawarra Greens because I was a powerful figure in the group. In many ways NIRAG was the community group most representative and connected with the issue at Sandon Point. My relations with many of the members of NIRAG were very good, but I was unlikely to hold sway at a meeting in the same way I could at the Greens. Thus I approached significant members of NIRAG with whom my relations were strong and sought (and succeeded in gaining) their support to raise the matter at a NIRAG meeting. The SPATE Embassy Ambassador’s support was essential, because without his support the project would stand no chance of working. I had worked with him on the United Nations document, and indeed it was he with whom I spent the significant day listening just described in the last section: our relationship and political sense of how to approach issues had some history, and my impression was (and is) that our political beliefs and desired outcomes were very close. With his support people naturally fell in with the idea, in spite of some members of the community being suspicious of the Greens involvement being an act of at least partial electoral opportunism.

Throughout the years of the struggle at Sandon Point I consciously sought to work with people in the community I felt to be influential and likely to be supportive of my particular ‘angle’ on the issues. For example, my interest at Sandon Point tended to be

focussed on the issues relating to Aboriginal people. Whilst I cared deeply about environmental impacts and, to a lesser extent, public amenity, I spent much of my activist hours directly focussed on Aboriginal issues. In a struggle where people's energy and time is limited, a tension emerges as people often try to control the direction of the energy and time of the group in the areas they see as most important. I was clearly engaged in this struggle and spent much time 'talking up' Aboriginal issues to maintain their prominent place in the agenda of the movement. Some members of the community were not that sympathetic or interested in the Aboriginal aspects of the issue, and were more focussed on saving remnant wetland, creeks and forest, or managing infrastructure issues like flooding and traffic. Indeed when I was first involved my initial focus had been on saving one of the main creeks from being turned into a drain. Once I became aware of the extent of the Aboriginal connection to Sandon Point, this quickly became my main focus and I gravitated towards others who felt the same. Thus it was that those more preoccupied with non-Aboriginal issues were not included in my initial attempts to get the project up and running. My fear was that some of these people would not support the project as it sidelined environmental issues. This was not a major issue as the majority of people involved (like myself) were supportive of all of these issues. Indeed the final statement reflected Aboriginal people valuing of environmental issues along side other aspects of cultural heritage.

In launching the project under examination, I was very much in the middle of such a struggle to set agendas. By the time the idea of the public statement came to larger aggregations of our informal meetings, I had won the support of most of the major and influential players, and thus to some extent its acceptance by the broader group could be seen as a *fait accompli*. It is my experience that such *fait accompli* situations are understood clearly by some, and by others felt vaguely as a sense of not really being part of the decision, and not really being included and valued by the group. As public movements involved in social actions move forward in their struggles, slowly but surely a backlog of resentment and disempowerment starts to grow amongst those who, for this, and perhaps other reasons, are not feeling included and valued. When moments of conflict arise, as they did in this situation, many of these hidden feelings rise up to affect



the way the conflict plays out. My selective and strategic negotiations to begin this project quite possibly made those not included aware they had deliberately not been alerted to the project until it was safely assured of support by those with more power and influence.

A harsh way of describing the actions detailed above would be to say that as a conscious act my motivations were to exclude and/or diminish the input of others in the group whose agendas may have been different to my own. It seems clear that it would be almost impossible to pursue social change without at some point using one's power or skill to achieve desired outcomes that inevitably hinder others from achieving their desired outcomes. There are not always win/win scenarios. In trying to construct a way of approaching social action that honours relationships as a thing of value, I am not seeking a morally pure way of acting where I never use my power or skill to achieve my ends to the disadvantage of others. Depending on one's ethical calculus, such actions could be judged as right or wrong or the various areas of grey between such polarities.

Though such actions as described above are surely fair game for ethical judgement, it is not my intention to do that here. What I am interested in doing is examining the negative consequences of this kind of common political machination. I will do this by following through the narrative to explore the impact of how I used communication to achieve my goals, and the impact of my strategies on the relations of value around me, and the outcomes of the project. In reconstructing the event as a hypothetical I will then suggest ways in which communication could have been used in a way that gave value to relationships whilst still using power to achieve my ends.

The major indigenous player in the scenario was the Embassy Ambassador. I am not privy to the processes he engaged in within the Aboriginal community to support and move this part of the project to its conclusion. I can only describe my communication with him. The Ambassador had thrown his support into the project quite early, and had actually come to the local Greens meeting where the decision was made to support the project financially and logistically. It was his intention that the published statement

should carry the weight of agreement of (what he considered) all of the major indigenous players who had some connection to the land in question. My role was to simply keep giving him updated versions of the intended text that he could then present to significant players. At no stage did I question his processes or try to involve myself in this part of the process. It seemed to me to be a matter internal to the Aboriginal community, and as I knew few of these people and groups, and was unskilled in the protocols of approaching the situation, I was happy to be left out of it. As will be apparent later this intentional omission was not without negative consequences.

The initial inspiration for the text of the statement came from a statement written by some people from the Embassy, and presented at a sit-in staged at the Sydney offices of Stockland. A short handwritten note elucidating Aboriginal connection to the land at Sandon Point, how this connection was being violated, and how this violation was part of an ongoing wider and historical process in Australia, was presented to representatives of Stockland during the occupation. The statement 'reclaimed' the land, and used the term cultural genocide to describe what was happening at Sandon Point, and implied that this related to the history of Australia as a whole.

I was present when the two Aboriginal men from the Embassy presented their declaration to staff at Stockland on the morning of the occupation. I was delighted that the 'ante' had been 'upped', and that strong statements of claim to the land had been made. The statement reflected my own deeply held convictions in relation to the injustices done to Aboriginal people in general and in particular to cultural heritage at Sandon Point. At the end of the occupation most of us left peacefully of our own volition after a few hours in the offices. In my enthusiasm, with the blessing of the two men concerned, I rushed down to the offices of Greens state parliamentarian Ian Cohen to write a press release. It reiterated the statement delivered by the Embassy men and gave the full support of the Greens to the statement, reiterating Greens support for the Embassy and the community movement opposing the intended Stockland development. The press release was issued by Ian Cohen's office late that afternoon.

Apart from the writers of the statement, and a few people at the blockade, and Ian Cohen and his office staff, I made no real attempt to consult about the wisdom of such a move. The idea to make such an event public and political was my own and reflected my own desire to move the content of the political struggle at Sandon Point into debates about land ownership, dispossession, and cultural destruction. My sense at the time was that the writers of the statement were pleased that it would be broadcast into the public arena. Likewise the few at the blockade with whom I shared the idea were also supportive. Those choosing to be involved in an occupation represented, almost by definition, the more radical and militant part of the community opposition to the Stockland proposal. At the Greens office, response to the idea seemed a little more cautious. My enthusiasm, and the fact that I was by then a well known and experienced activist who had worked with them before, meant they were prepared to do a press release of this sort based on my reputation and conviction. Both of the Green parliamentarians and the NSW Greens as an organisation had given ongoing support for indigenous and community struggles in general, and in particular Sandon Point.

The press release was picked up by the media; the *Illawarra Mercury* — Wollongong's daily newspaper — rang the Embassy's Ambassador late that afternoon for comment. The Ambassador (knowing nothing of the events of the day at Stockland) declined to comment, and the paper did not run the story. When I heard this information the following day, I quickly realised how poorly thought out my conduct had been. I had run with the whole idea without doing any consultation at all about the effectiveness and propriety of such a release. I had made no attempt to establish the feelings of the wider Aboriginal community about such a public claim, nor had I talked with the wider active community opposing the Stockland development. With something of a sense of shame I let the matter drop, and was pleased that no one chastised me for my conduct, or even seemed to notice what had transpired.

It was pretty clear to me at the time, and crystal clear with the passage of time that marks then to this writing, that the motives, strategies and content for the whole press release were all heavily influenced by my own needs, and the interests of Aboriginal people and

the wider community at Sandon Point in whose name I was ostensibly acting came a fairly poor second. At the time I was becoming well known as an influential activist at Sandon Point. My academic training, and now years of activist experience, had given me good writing and research skills, and a good sense of strategy in political action. I enjoyed being useful, and enjoyed the centrality, importance and esteem it seemed to afford me amongst the community and amongst my close active friends. The sense of belonging meant a lot to me. As a young man at school and university I had often found myself on the 'outer'. I struggled to find motivation and meaning in the world. Increasingly activism was giving me community and meaning where in the past I had emptiness and solitary obsessions with music and literature. My desire to have more and more approval from the community fuelled an impulsive and ultimately quite selfish episode, which saw me ignoring the needs of others to charge ahead with something that I was very lucky did not damage myself or the communities of interest I purportedly represented.

However, these events, and my actions, were not without repercussions. Once the idea of a public statement in the newspaper had gained a substantial support amongst the Sandon Point activists, I reintroduced the statement tendered on the day of the Stockland occupation as the centrepiece of the public statement. I took control of the writing and editing of this statement and took responsibility as author in the published document. The statement generated by these two Aboriginal men did indeed become the centrepiece of the newspaper publication. The statement appeared in bold black lettering, in the middle of the page. It read:

We the sovereign peoples of this land from the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy are reclaiming our sacred traditional areas on behalf of all Aboriginal Nations. Ceremony is in place and will be ongoing until instructed by our elders. We have an obligation to do this for our land, our ancestors, our warriors, our people, our culture, and our future generations. We will put a stop to this cultural genocide and desecration that has been going on since 1788.

Six Aboriginal organisations (and hundreds of local people) put their name to the statement, which also included a longer statement outlining the community's objections to the intended housing development with reference to infringement of the rights and interests of Aboriginal peoples.

The original statement of claim written by the two Aboriginal men at the Stockland occupation had a subtly but importantly different wording. During the editing process members of the Aboriginal community advised me that the original wording was not appropriate, and that to gain support of the wider Aboriginal community some words should be changed to make the statement more inclusive. I had little knowledge of the issues involved, and accepted the information I was given and accordingly changed the wording, accepting the assurances given that the representatives thus directing me would satisfy the necessary protocols for the change. On the day of publication I was telephoned by one of the two Aboriginal men who were responsible for the original statement. He was extremely angry and demanded that I explain why I allowed the change of his original text. I replied that other members of the Aboriginal community had directed me to do so. He responded that I had no right to make such a decision and that any permission to change the statement should have come directly from him, and I had no right to delegate such a responsibility to others. I felt immediately to be in the 'wrong' and that I had handled the matter badly. Accordingly I admitted as much and apologised profusely. This was evidently unsatisfying to the Aboriginal man, who, after expressing his anger for some time, informed me that I had betrayed his confidence and I would never be trusted again. He added that my behaviour was typical of the behaviour of non-Aboriginal Australians, and demanded that I return the original statement and never use it again for any purpose. I have honoured this request in what I have written here, and omitted both the original wording, and any reference to the portions of the text changed.

By the time of the intended publication, in spite of the fact that much of what I observed in myself in the above paragraph was known to me, I approached the publication of the claim with some of the same desire for my own recognition. The difference in this occasion was that I was wiser to the perils of unilateral action and approached

consultation on the matter with much greater care. As noted earlier, when I began this section of the narrative I engaged in some degree of ‘politicking’ to see that the idea of publishing the claim got off the ground. Once the idea had some degree of support and social momentum I applied myself assiduously to making sure that this time the publication would have the support of as many interested parties as could be mustered.

The actual decision to sponsor the project financially was taken at a Greens meeting with the Ambassador from SPATE present, supportive, and in fact driving the idea with some enthusiasm. The Greens agreed to fund any portion of the project not covered by community contributions. The task of fundraising was taken on by volunteers from the group. The task of writing the document and negotiating its support in the non-Aboriginal community was taken on by myself, and in the Aboriginal community by the Embassy Ambassador. The process of writing and negotiating a text that would be widely supported was a long one. Numerous drafts were posted at the community picket and Embassy. Regular email updates were sent to those with access. Numerous meetings were held at my house by what might be called the informal executive or ‘brains trust’ of the movement. No one was ever excluded from these meetings, though they were often organised informally. Whoever might be in conversation at the regular Sunday night gatherings at the picket, or hear mention in a conversation on the street, might end up at my house for the regular discussions and editing sessions. It is perfectly possible some people may have felt excluded or not had knowledge of the meetings and been unable to have input, but in the end a wide variety of people attended, suggested changes and had their ideas incorporated in the final text. Without doubt most of the people at these meetings tended to be people I wanted to work with, from within the circle that tended to agree with me.

I kept regular contact with the Embassy Ambassador, and he attended a couple of the meetings at my house where the editing/discussion group met. I have almost no knowledge of the processes undertaken by the Embassy Ambassador in attaining the support of the six significant Aboriginal groups that put their names to the final document. During the time, as I asked for updates on how it was going, he often

remarked somewhat vaguely that he was going down the coast to see significant elders and community figures and would be talking about it. My sense was that I should trust him, and allow the process time and openness. In the final days, when we were on deadline as the space in the paper had been booked, the Ambassador told me that in order to gain the support of the necessary people in the Aboriginal community, the original text of the Statement of Claim would have to be changed. He made a handwritten change to the draft I had on me, and the matter was accepted by me and the rest of the informal editing group almost without question. The Ambassador told me he would handle the matter of the change and its impact on concerned parties. Again I have no information about anything he may have said or done in this regard.

As a prelude to what I may have done differently in this episode, I would like to reflect on the implications of the foregoing in terms of the conflict created by my own need to be recognised via assisting the public recognition of others. In amongst my own desires to confirm my own identity as an activist to myself and to others was a genuine attempt to give recognition to local Aboriginal people, in particular to all those with whom I personally interacted. The point of this exercise, when I begin a reconstruction of how I might have behaved differently, is to establish how reflection could be related to positive personal and social change. In actuality my attempts to gain recognition for my self via the social recognition of others were almost certainly hampered by me not really listening to the needs of the others I sought to recognise, and by pursuing my own need for validation with insufficient consideration for others.

The next task is to re-imagine these incidents in a way where my conduct would assist to open spaces for all concerned to have their needs met. In order to do this, it is useful to look in depth at the Alternatives to Violence Project and its methods.

### **3: The Alternatives to Violence Project**

#### **AVP: history and philosophy**

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) grew out of collaboration between Quakers and inmates at Green Haven Prison in New York State in 1975. Its general aim is to encourage the application of nonviolent strategies to conflict. More broadly it hopes to encourage people to adopt ways of relating that avoid the causes of violence. Whilst AVP views conflict as a normal and potentially healthy part of social experience, to be approached constructively as an opportunity for positive change, it also works on the belief that good communication practice can diminish the both amount of conflict and its negative (violent) impacts on social life. AVP is practised in workshops with the intention of building skills and transforming attitudes that can be applied in situations of conflict beyond the workshop context. The backbone of AVP's practice is that if conflict is experienced in a cooperative community context by people who are healthily affirmed by themselves and others, the possibilities for resolving or transforming conflict are maximised. AVP therefore structures its workshops so that participants will experience cooperation, community and healthy affirmation, and acquire the skills to create and work within such environments wherever they experience conflict.

Pivotal to AVP methodology is working through the expression of feelings to cooperatively meet the needs of all. AVP believes that our emotions are the key to understanding our needs. Underneath all feelings, they argue, are legitimate needs. The core of AVP is to pay attention to the feelings, understand the needs that lie beneath them, and then find cooperative, nonviolent, non-coercive means to meet the needs of all. AVP also intends to establish a particular kind of community that positively supports this process. Whilst AVP makes no particular claims as to the kind of good feelings it hopes to build between people, it is clear they hope some degree of empathy, sympathy, compassion and even friendship and love will be created, sustained and be possible to repair when broken, within the community setting and its practices. Later I will explore



the relationship between these feelings between people and my preferred terms of mutuality and mutual recognition.

I will now set out to locate AVP's approach within the broader spectrum of writings on nonviolence. My guide in exploring these connections is to find where AVP is similar to major nonviolent theorists in order to show where it intersects with the literature. This is not an attempt to give a thorough review of such literature, but rather to show the reader where AVP sits in the field and how the similarities and differences illuminate the methodologies in a way to make them more useful to my own applied case study here.

In this chapter I will explain the basic methodology of AVP, my adaptation of it for the purposes of a practical method of mutual recognition, and where such endeavours relate to the existing body of work on nonviolence. To do this I will look at three broad areas of research within the field and show that AVP's contribution relates to the existing frameworks used by others. The three areas I will examine are: general theories of nonviolence, nonviolent communication, and workshop techniques for nonviolent skill building. AVP makes contributions to all of these areas. These contributions, whilst importantly distinct from other such methodologies, bear a close relationship to other existing approaches. I will compare the AVP approach to those it resembles. The subtle differences shared by such comparison should illuminate and locate AVP's contribution to the body of existing work, and thus place my own adaptation of AVP in meaningful scholarly context.

In the following sections, I examine relevant work by George Lakey, Chris Crass and Gandhi interpreters Joan Bondurant, Arne Naess and Mark Juergensmeyer. Then I look at the Restorative Practices model adapted by me from AVP (NSW), which is very similar to Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (NVC) processes. What these theorists have in common is the avoidance of social damage and the embrace of philosophy and tactics to actively encourage the possibilities for socially positive relations in situations of conflict. The Gandhian theorists discussed here integrate active resistance without recourse to physical violence, using philosophies of truth and self-

sacrifice. Lakey and Crass take a more organisational perspective, grounding resistance to violence and domination in structured approaches to the ways communities connect themselves whilst resisting. In the case of Crass, seeking to animate organisational strategies with ideas of love links closely to Gandhian philosophy-of-truth trajectories. Rosenberg concentrates on the interpersonal tactics for avoiding socially damaging interactions, careful choice of language being his main focus. John Burton's human needs theory, in turn, links the AVP idea of using careful communication, in the style of Rosenberg, to open up possibilities of organising and acting in ways that obviate the causes for violence by making sure human needs are met. I hope to use AVP and mutual recognition as the conceptual and strategic glue to bind these diverse approaches into a fresh approach to organisation and active resistance to domination in political and social struggle.

## **Lakey and Crass**

Initially when describing AVP processes to academic and activist colleagues, a number of people suggested I look at the workshop organising methods of George Lakey, a prominent nonviolence trainer. In his book *Facilitating Group Learning* (2010), there are some clear parallels with AVP. Lakey prioritises working with and nurturing a specific group culture, and recognises the importance of the group themselves doing the work (Lakey, 2010, 8–10). His idea of 'stalking the teachable moment' may indeed be very similar to the idea of 'shining the light' where the facilitator is seemingly passive until an opportunity arises for strategic intervention when a participant has arrived at the point where change is most possible (Lakey, 2010, 8). Lakey acknowledges cultural context and social constructions of power more explicitly than AVP does, and his writing is replete with useful suggestions about how facilitators can identify and minimise their embedded privilege (Lakey, 2010, 197–203). Valuable as the ideas are, an approach that is less precise and more broadly philosophical would seem to be more useful in helping build a more intuitive and situational approach to working in groups for social change.

In the late stages of the thesis I encountered the work of Chris Crass (2013), and his summation of the insights gained through his engagement with 'women of color

feminism'. I found in his *Towards Collective Liberation* a deeper focus on the connection between personal transformation and political and social struggle than was evident in the (albeit useful) work by Lakey cited above. Crass quotes Ella Baker, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: "Fighting for social transformation must also be about transforming the individuals involved" (Crass, 2013, 162). Summarising a long quote from Ari Clemenzi, a member of the anti-racist Catalyst Project collective, Crass sums up the feminist praxis idea of organising from a place of love:

In practice organizing from a place of love means working to shift the culture of political spaces to be transformative where we support each other to grow rather than compete with or tear each other down. (Crass, 2013, 259)

I found Crass also in sympathy with my own work here: Crass engages with and validates involvement with complexity, working with long, often personal, narratives to illustrate complex and situational challenges to activists working for change. He concludes: "Facing the complexity of reality is one of the most radical steps we can take" (Crass, 2013, 163). The processes used for personal and systemic change are unique, and the telling of the story shares the building of an equally unique personal and collective response to circumstance. Though like AVP, it is hoped that this will inform our own approaches to similar circumstances, it avoids making too many general claims about the best ways of doing activism, preferring philosophy animated by narrative and reflection to any codified measures and practices as the nourishment for our organisational palette.

Like AVP and my own work here, Crass acknowledges and works with the centrality of feelings and the telling of stories in reframing and rewriting the self (Crass, 2013, 112–116). Like Lakey, and Giddens mentioned earlier, Crass reminds those entering the realm of working with the possibilities of self-transformation that self always needs to be seen as partly systemic (Crass, 2013, 116). Finally, I remarked earlier in the thesis that motivation is critical. Any or all of the techniques mentioned here, such as building empathy, can be used strategically to gain advantage rather than assist transformation. I

found Crass again resonant here, commenting that struggles: "... must be based on a longing in our bones, in the depths of our hearts, for a world that meets all needs" (Crass, 2013, 267). It is in these preoccupations — a desire to see the needs of all met, from a place of love or compassion — that the greatest similarity between the AVP/Mutual Recognition ideas that I explore can be found.

Many of AVP's workshop exercises are similar to exercises one may experience in team building in organisations, and interpersonal communication strategies used in counselling. AVP's insistence on focussing on personal change by empowering the actor seeking change owes a debt, like many counselling practices, to the ideas of client-centred counselling developed by humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers. AVP's techniques are not new, but the systematic application of such ideas to political and social action as a framework for building mutual recognition is, to my knowledge, beginning in this thesis. In all cases AVP has important differences with these theorists, and analysis of these differences illuminates some of the new insights and practices that I hope my work here will bring to the debates.

### **AVP and Gandhian philosophy**

AVP's general approach is remarkably similar to that of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, which seeks to honour and satisfy all parties involved in a conflict, and avoid the use of violence in doing so. The debate around the use of coercion in Gandhian nonviolence is perhaps the most interesting in terms of locating AVP in the literature. According to Joan Bondurant, a leading interpreter of Gandhian philosophy, Gandhian nonviolence has always contained an element of 'positive coercion' (Bondurant 1958, 10). Coercion is deemed positive (sometimes actually called nonviolent coercion) if it is non-intended and mitigated by the willingness of the nonviolent practitioner to position themselves to take the brunt of suffering engendered by their actions (Bondurant 1958, 11).

Arne Naess (1974, 92–93), a prominent philosopher, is critical of what he calls Bondurant's 'easy acceptance' of the paradox of coercion in Gandhian nonviolence. Naess quotes Gandhi's definition of ideal democracy as a case in point, where

nonviolence and coercion are clearly placed as binary opposites, implying in fact that they may be mutually exclusive (Naess 1974, 93). To add complexity to the position, Naess continues to note that whilst Gandhi himself clearly found acceptance in using coercion in his struggles, he also noted that it was a compromise to the true spirit of satyagraha (Naess, 1974 93).

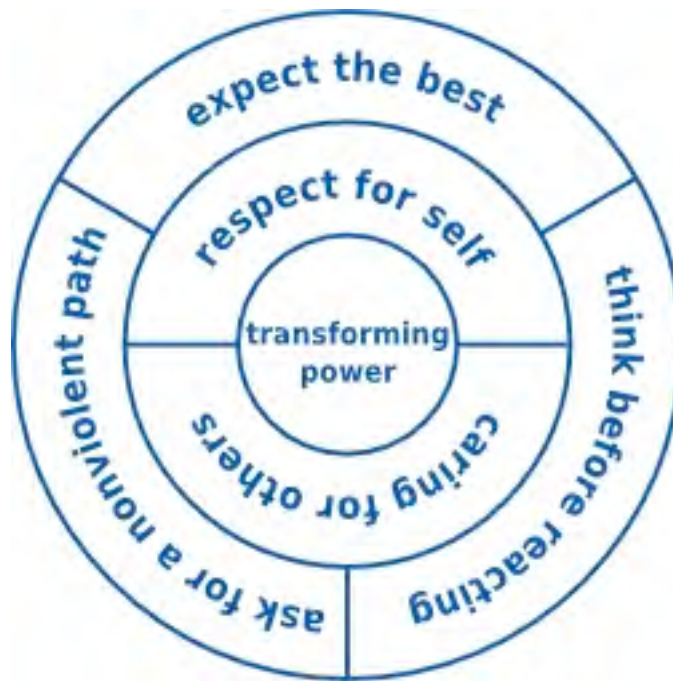
Gene Sharp notes in his review of Bondurant that “a more detailed analysis of the relation of persuasion and coercion in nonviolent action in general and in satyagraha in particular is still needed” (Sharp 1979, 69). It is within this apparent lacuna that AVP’s contribution to the debate may be found: closer perhaps to Naess’s interpretation, but a position on its own, separate to either of the above. AVP’s stance on coercion is clear — it seeks to avoid it altogether — but like Gandhi it may be forced into some kind of compromise by a reality that simply doesn’t see movement without friction. AVP’s emphasis is not in trying to distinguish coercion from nonviolent coercion, or even coercion from persuasion, but in creating spaces and relationships that maximise the possibility of personal reflection and personal responsibility for change. AVP’s idea of shining the light (bringing attention to a problematic moment where reflection may lead those in conflict to recognitions ultimately useful for self-transformation), whilst it represents a minimal intervention, must qualify as directive, if not coercive, as it reframes the incident to which it applies as worthy of attention, implying a problem and the probable need for change on behalf of the actors involved. Ultimately it represents more of a commitment to avoid coercion, with its emphasis away from coercion (the use of “... moral force to induce another to do something against his will” as defined by Sharp 1979, 69) to a forcible reframing of events to induce moral reflection and allow or promote self-change for all parties.

The question of the role of the self in Gandhi and AVP may shed further light on the question of coercion and where the real locus of intended change lies in each. Gandhi’s philosophical and spiritual interest in truth and self-realisation would seemingly leave him sympathetic to a strategy, such as AVP’s, that emphasises self-reflective processes conducive to self-transformation at the expense of coercive acts towards others.

According to Naess, for Gandhi, truth, god and self-realisation are interdependent processes, each component part ultimately unrealisable without the other (Naess 1974, 34). The self needs to be purified so that truth can be glimpsed (Naess 1974, 29). Gandhi's idea of a purified self may be quite similar to the transformed social self to which the self-reflective approaches detailed here are ultimately hopeful. This 'real' self is similar to the self — as seen by Buddhists and the quiet ego movement (mentioned later) — as a small fragment of a larger social and or cosmological picture. Gandhi's favoured term is the 'great self' (Atman), which is opposed to the 'small self' of ego (Naess 1974, 41).

In contrast to the above view, Gandhi's practical involvement in a life spent confronting serious ongoing oppression on behalf of an entire culture (and indeed other cultures) left him, as noted above, pragmatic about coercion. The differences between Gandhi and me in terms of the spaces we historically have occupied are the key to making sense of this apparent conflict. I, as a white middle class man, whilst often advocating for others suffering oppression, usually have had the luxury of not facing life and death situations, or indeed (for the most part) serious damage to my own needs or interests. The approach to conflict I advocate here is one that may have appealed to Gandhi's deepest practice of satyagraha. Minimum coercion approaches have a place in quite extreme situations, especially in the formative stages of struggle to 'head off' the need for such pragmatic coercive approaches that may well become inevitable when or if 'best practice' fails to deliver the desired change. Here, the differences between AVP and Gandhi may be more substantially seen to be due to the differing contexts of their main sphere of application.

Both Gandhi and AVP hold beliefs about the dignity of life being violated by violence and coercion and concentrate on upholding this dignity in both the means and the ends of their actions. Couched in positive terms Gandhian nonviolence places virtue in the search for truth and life-affirming action that seeks to nurture (Juergensmeyer, 1984, 27 and 29). AVP embodies similar values in the visual mandala that guides and integrates their philosophy: caring for others and respect for self are linked together in the middle ring of the mandala.



AVP mandala (from <http://www.avptampabay.org/img/mandala.jpg>)

The most profound difference is that, in place of Gandhi's search for truth as the animating principle of all action, AVP holds the mission to finding, validating and satisfying the needs of all. Mark Juergensmeyer, in adding his own reflections to his summary of Gandhi's philosophy, suggests the concept of double advocacy (Juergensmeyer, 1984, 149–151). Double advocacy extends the search for truth to searching and advocating for all truths: truth here is people's deeply held realities. This idea begins to resemble more closely the AVP idea of cooperatively searching for and satisfying the needs of all. Truth in AVP and Jessica Benjamin's terms could be described as the need for social relations of mutuality, and pursuit of this truth is about creating opportunities or circumstances for such truth to be plain to all, and thus the tools for advancing such a way of relating to be attractive to all social beings.

Theorists such as John Burton suggest that satisfying human needs remains the core of conflict resolution: those whose needs are unmet will continue to agitate the social circumstances until they are satisfied. Burton draws distinctions between needs, values

and interests (Burton, 1990, 9–11). Needs are basic and more or less similar for all (food, shelter, social validation), values are culturally specific motivations (identity and security) and interests are circumstantial (economic and social position). AVP regards all of these motivations as legitimate, and seeks to nonviolently negotiate a means for all to safeguard their needs, values and interests. Whilst not explicitly declared, a hierarchy exists with needs at the top of a pyramid, and values and interests being more negotiable than needs. As Johan Galtung points out: sometimes conflict may be explicitly about clearly perceived needs or values, or muddy and poorly understood, with interests embedded and invisible within social structures (Galtung, 1989, 22). AVP's mission is to work with people's feelings to unravel and clarify these needs, values and interests, within a created community structure that sustains relationships conducive to a process where all parties can find ways to meet as many of these drives as possible.

A critical difference between Gandhi and AVP emerges in the field of taking action. Gandhi's idea of *tapasya* (Juergensmeyer, 1984, 52–53) — willingly taking on suffering — may seem at odds with AVP respect for self, and would seemingly be at odds with Jessica Benjamin's idea of mutual recognition in which we should see an equal balance of asserting our own needs and the needs of others. Benjamin is clear in pointing out that allowing your self to become an object to the other is antithetical to mutual recognition. Not requiring others to recognise you as a subject fails both subjects, allowing domination and submission to frame social relations (Benjamin, 1988, 23–24). However a closer look at these principles reveals they may not be as contradictory as they seem. As noted earlier, whilst mutuality is a desired state, it is not a constant state. Much ebb and flow of power and transgressing of boundaries often happens in the pursuit of mutuality, and the idea of bearing the suffering of this on one's own shoulders may not be out of sympathy here if it constitutes a staging point towards an eventual goal of mutuality. Application of Benjamin's mutual recognition to Gandhi's *tapasya* would seem to require some later commitment to healing and restoration to (re)establish mutuality thus damaged by allowing oneself to become an object in this way. Alternatively, skilled practice of self sacrifice may be able to present itself outside the domination/subordination paradigm, as an act of empowerment in a social exchange of mutual recognition where the taking on of



suffering is known to both as an empowered act in the framework of ongoing relationship. In both cases the nurturing spirit of action and the search to meet the needs of all remain the core principles.

## **Rosenberg and AVP**

In terms of means, AVP's approach to communication is very close to the idea of nonviolent communication (NVC) as advocated by Marshall Rosenberg. Once again the impulse to nurture and care can be found as an animating principle at the core of the theory. The specific AVP (NSW) tool I will be using for the deconstruction of the episodes from my own life related earlier is the four Restorative Practice questions. Before detailing them, it is useful to examine Rosenberg's NVC communication process to show where a process such as AVP sits in the spectrum of existing communicative strategies. Rosenberg states: "Speaking peace is a way of connecting with others that allows our natural compassion to flourish" (Rosenberg, 2003, 9). Two points here are critical: that we are *allowing* something to flourish rather than trying to create it, and the implication is that the quality in question — compassion — already exists and requires only *nurture* to take its place at the forefront of our consciousness. The clear assumption here, shared by AVP as we shall see later, is that human beings are naturally social, and freed from negative cultural constructions, we will desire similar happiness for our social partners as we do for ourselves. All it requires is for us to learn ways of relating which allow these social feelings to emerge, and the techniques to then negotiate the complex web of conflicting needs that are associated with these feelings and our less social or anti-social feelings.

Rosenberg continues to explicate the kinds of skills required to communicate in this way and describes a four-part process designed, when practised with the skills he stresses, to guide us through conflict in a way he suggests will optimise the chances of such flourishing (Rosenberg, 2003, 188). The first step is simply observation. This corresponds closely with the first of AVP's restorative questions which is 'What happened?' This question requires us to reflect and recollect our observations of the event(s) in question. As I shall seek to demonstrate with my own recollections, to be done

usefully, in a way that optimises the possible social utility of the exercise, there is an art to such recollection. AVP encourages and enshrines in its listening practices that we pay special attention to describing events without judgement. For example rather than recounting, ‘Fred got angry when I called him an idiot’, AVP would have us simply say, ‘When I called Fred an idiot he went red in the face and kicked a chair over’. This simply describes what happened, leaving Fred free to name or describe his own feelings.

As well as the neutral description of events AVP bids us to pay special attention to the feelings involved in the situation, our own and others involved. AVP believes that understanding the feelings involved is critical to understanding the unmet needs of participants in the scenario, and along with John Burton (as mentioned earlier) regard meeting the needs of all involved as critical to the nonviolent resolution of the conflict: in my terms it is crucial for optimising feelings of relative mutuality.

Understanding feelings and needs constitutes the second and third tiers in Rosenberg’s NVC process. AVP’s second restorative question is ‘What was the hardest part for you?’ This directs participants directly to begin the examination of their feelings and linking them to needs. For example Fred, in the above scenario, may share that he felt disrespected and judged after being addressed as an idiot. From this we can deduce his need to be respected and not judged.

Rosenberg’s final stage of NVC is requests, which self evidently deals with asking for what you need. AVP’s third restorative question ‘What would I do differently?’ links needs with requests, with the differences imagined being actions that (hopefully) meet the needs of all. Again in relation to Fred in the above scenario, the person who called Fred an idiot may choose to say ‘I disagree strongly with what Fred said/or did during the conflict we had’. AVP’s final restorative question — ‘What needs to happen to create, restore or repair the relationships which may have been damaged by the conflict?’ — links the request phase of NVC with the beginning of the problem solving negotiation. This may involve Fred saying, ‘I need to know that when we discuss our strong differences in the future I will not be judged and disrespected for my views’. I will

elaborate the restorative questions in more detail before exploring how they may be adapted to the more complex reflection and actualities required by social and political conflict.

## **AVP workshops**

It is useful to have a close look at the ideal AVP workshop conception of community and its beliefs about cooperation, and less explicit assumptions about communication practice, before trying to apply a variant of this model to social action outside the workshop situation. AVP's intention is to create a particular kind of community — a safe and challenging community, where personal growth and transformation are possible. AVP's approach is progressive and cumulative. A workshop begins with creation of community. This typically begins with what they call an icebreaker. The function of the icebreaker is simply to begin with light exercises aimed at creating an environment where participants with little or no relationship can begin to drop the barriers that usually distinguish the relationship of 'stranger' from that of people beginning a relationship. Such activities usually involve sharing names, sharing something simple and unrevealing about self. In AVP ground rules are then shared; in HIP (Help Increase the Peace: an adapted form of AVP designed for schools) some of the more radical practitioners are experimenting running workshops with no explicitly declared ground rules. I will return to this idea later as such an approach may be more suited to the less controlled and less controllable space in which much social action transpires. AVP's rules — no put-downs, affirm yourself and others, confidentiality, listen (and don't interrupt), right to pass and volunteer yourself only — relate to ways of communicating (Garver and Retian, 1995, 10). Underneath these rules are some assumptions about ethical communication practice, without which the rest of AVP's conflict transformation model would be useless. In my reconstruction, I too will use these ideas as a backbone to the application of the Restorative Practice model.

## **AVP communicative assumptions**

'No put downs' relates to negative comments about others. Any comment or indeed body language designed to diminish or challenge the validity of others is a put down. At

its most obvious level this could be something simple like saying ‘how could you come to a workshop dressed like that?’ or ‘what a stupid thing to say’. It could also take the form of rolling your eyes when someone speaks, or winking at another participant conspiratorially to ‘share’ mockery of a person for something they have said or done. All of these behaviours elevate or entertain the self at the possible expense of others. It is totally acceptable, and indeed positive, to appropriately challenge participants whose behaviour may be negatively affecting the acknowledged goals and processes of the group, but any negative evaluation should address the behaviour or action of the person in question, not their basic validity as a person and as an equal and respected member of the group. It is possible and perhaps likely that we will struggle to respect some aspects of some participants, a situation very likely replicated in most groups from families to workplaces, political parties and community action groups. Whatever problems we may have with people or their behaviour, a fundamental mark of respect to them is to never ‘put them down’.

The key function of this communicative assumption is creating a community where people feel safe and secure. Underlying this assumption is a deep one about security being a common need of people, which in a general sense would seem relatively unproblematic for the vast majority of people. A common cause of violence is what is often referred to as the ‘spiral of insecurity’, where people as a result of feelings of insecurity behave in a way — such as demonstrating their power — that makes others feel insecure, who in turn then respond by making their power to defend their interests plain, causing the original person to feel more insecure, and further ‘strut’ their power, and so on, until both parties are likely to use their demonstrated power and behave violently or coercively in defence of their now increasing insecurity.

AVP’s second communicative assumption, or rule — affirm yourself and others — would seem aimed at creating a counter strategy against such a spiral of insecurity. The role of affirming yourself, relates very closely to the type of process described earlier when looking at the work of Louise Porter. A core assumption of AVP is that violence (or to use the broader critical concept — relations of domination) occurs when people

can't meet their legitimate needs by cooperative, consensual and communicative means. As such the thrust of AVP revolves around creating spaces where people can learn these skills to meet the needs of self and community. AVP believes that attempts to change others are almost invariably coercive — even the distinction between convincing and coercing blurs due to inequalities of access to the tools used in convincing. Thus AVP's approach is to place personal change at the core of its strategies for transforming power. Respect for self and others is a core AVP principle, and is one of the concepts embodied in the AVP Mandala, which is a visual representation of key values of AVP expressed in a circular interlocking of ideas. So the affirming of self is seen as one of the first building blocks for learning to respond cooperatively and communicatively in a community setting. Louise Porter suggests that children learn self esteem or value through being given information and allowed to conduct the evaluation of self at a personal level (Porter, 1997, 34–35). As was suggested earlier, praise removes the responsibility and privilege of self-evaluation from the recipient. Thus AVP engages people in the task of self-evaluation and building of self-esteem with self-affirmation. AVP believes that many people, not only in prison where AVP originated, but outside in the freer world, are damaged at the level of self-esteem and like children need to learn the basics of valuing, starting with the self. AVP usually embodies this idea at the beginning of workshops with exercises that ask participants to share something they like about themselves with others.

Affirming others is the obvious sister concept to affirming self. The idea of affirmation, whether of self or as a gift given to others, is usefully separated from related concepts such as recognition and respect and from the now sidelined and rejected concept of praise. I start with a common-sense definition of affirmation from its root of 'firm'. Affirmation is then to give firmness and solidity to something. Recognition carries overtones of conveying a level of understanding about the thing just engaged with, and respect adds the idea that the thing encountered is given value. Affirmation is a more general and lighter version of giving validity and showing understanding of something. Affirmation carries no necessary sense of understanding, and doesn't seek the reflective qualities of respect — which also conveys a deeper engagement with the quality of that affirmed. Affirmation simply positively acknowledges the other. In terms of affirming

others we are simply indicating we are seeking to give general reassurance to the person without the deeper level of engagement required to give recognition or respect. It is in essence the gift of optimism about the general being of another. So affirming others can be done by simply taking people at their own general estimation of themselves in the most general of ways without critical examination of how their conception of self may 'stack up' against some measure of actuality.

Confidentiality is the third of the AVP communication 'rules'. Confidentiality simply requires that information shared in the workshop situation not be shared with others outside the workshop situation (with the exception of any information that requires a declaration to certain outside authorities as required by the law — such as a person confessing to criminal activity or mandatory reporting of children at risk). The function of this provision is primarily aimed at creating security for members of the group. People can share their feelings and discuss problems of a sensitive nature without fear that disclosed information will reach the ears of others who may in some sense use it against them. The provision also builds trust. Participants, in beginning to communicate, learn to honour other participants as capable of respecting each other's needs. To regard and treat others as capable of moral behaviour is one of the preconditions of respect. A potential critique of this rule is that it could begin a process of 'othering'. In creating specific communities, or in particular giving to the new community something that is unique to the new creation — in this case shared information that cannot be shared with other communities — we could begin a process that carries with it identity or belonging but also the exclusion of others. I will return to later to the problem of creating community without excluding or 'othering'.

The fourth rule is to listen — don't interrupt. This rule contains the first fully expressed prohibition in the form of a 'don't', married with a more positive admonition to activity. As I have already discussed in relation to my own engagement with indigenous listening practices, listening is at once a powerful learning tool and an offering of value to those listened to. Interrupting is seen as a devaluing of the person interrupted. To interrupt is to claim precedents for the utterings of self, and can be an attempt to consciously or

unconsciously dominate the speaker. It can also arise from inattention or ignorance. However it arises, it is likely to have the impact on the speaker of diminishing or devaluing both the content of what is being said, and the speaker. As verbal communication (often, but not exclusively) is the main tool of AVP, it is important to be careful with its use. To be listened to and heard seems to be a fundamental need of people, and in AVP this is almost elevated to the sacred. Like most rules, there are exceptions, although these are not explicitly expressed in AVP training manuals. For example, facilitators reserve the right to interrupt in the interests of the group, thus a participant who is speaking in a way which is perceived to be damaging the interest or core values of the group may be politely interrupted and invited or asked to cease or pause. Some practitioners of the closely related HIP project take a less interventionist role, and would almost, or perhaps never, take the right to attempt to silence another. Almost all systems have a hierarchy and means to enforce the prohibitions or rules they create. I will look at AVP's approach to these questions and the hierarchies and power relations they imply later in the engagement with the case studies of my own interaction.

As a positive, listening is seen as an honouring of the speaker, and a means of helping others meet their needs. AVP explores a number of different listening approaches and it is interesting to examine the implications of each in turn. In some exercises participants take turns in listening to each other. One person will speak for two minutes, while the other listens. The listener will then be asked to respond by simply summing up in one minute what the other speaker has said. This process will then be repeated with the roles of listener and speaker reversed. In a workshop situation participants will then 'shuffle' to experience the exercise with all other participants so all have an opportunity both to speak and listen to every participant. This exercise has a number of functions. On the subject upon which participants are invited to listen and speak, subjects may be chosen to give the speakers an opportunity to share something positive about self or others, which builds the affirmation process already discussed. The process also practises the task of being silent and giving attention to a speaker.

If listening is to be a way of showing value to the speaker it is important that we do it in such a way that this is communicated. This can be done in a number of ways. Firstly, attitude of listening is vital. A facilitator may invite the listener to listen with a particular non-verbal response to the speaker. One such example would be to listen in an open and generous manner, but without affirming verbal or non-verbal responses. Often when trained in active listening, in a counselling situation, the listener may give what are called 'minimal encouragers'. These are small noises, movements or occasionally words to reassure the listener that we are engaged in what they are saying, such as leaning slightly forward towards the speaker, nodding, smiling, or uttering small affirmative noises, or words such as 'mmm', 'ok', 'I see' or 'yes'. The 'open and generous' manner suggested by AVP is to give attention either without or with a minimum of such encouragers. The benefits of such approaches become clear when one is engaged in the act of listening to a group or series of people. If in a situation of conflict where the act of listening to each is being witnessed by other involved parties, the affirmative listening skills such as minimal encouragers can be read by observers as giving validity to the subject of the speaking. If the information contained therein is contested, this can lead to the observer feeling the listener is being 'taken in' by the speaker. In such a circumstance the skill of neutral but attentive listening is useful, as it can affirm the listener without necessarily been seen as validating the content of the speech.

The role of summation is also worthy of examination. In AVP the role of summation, as with the neutral listening practice, is to affirm the speaker, not the content of the speech. Summation reflects content, and perhaps feeling, but does not evaluate or judge content. The primary value of summation is to show that the listener really has listened, thus affirming by the gift of time and attention. The second role is to reflect back information that aids the process of positive (useful) self-evaluation. When reflecting information it is important not to simply 'parrot' the speaker's words, but to show you have assimilated the information in your own words in a way that still emphasises the original ideas. A useful distinction I use is the difference between interpretation and evaluation. Evaluation apportions value, whereas interpretation acknowledges the distinction between what they have said and your understanding of what they have communicated. Reflection of feeling



is important to show that you are attentive to the non-verbal aspects of communication. Again, it is important to avoid naming of feelings, which is evaluation, and to simply reflect the observable phenomena. For example, if a speaker burst into tears, you can reflect back that the related experience was emotional for the speaker, without attempting to name the feeling. The role of AVP is to open up the possibilities of self-evaluation, not to do the evaluation for participants. The assumption here is that the gift of listening, without judging or evaluating, affirms and creates possibilities for self-reflection in the speaker that are of benefit to their possibilities of personal transformation.

The sixth rule in AVP is the right to pass. This guarantees the right of participants to absent themselves from any part of the process at any time. The underlying assumption here is that people may, for a variety of reasons, prefer to not take part in some aspects of AVP's process. This may be because they are threatened, disturbed, or even bored with parts of the process. Whatever the reason, the right to pass in any exercise, or to leave the group circle for periods, is given so that people may make decisions about what they wish to participate in. In practice, facilitators may gently 'reinvite' participants to take part in activities after they have initially declined. Sometimes this takes the role of reinviting the group for second comments to avoid the person feeling targeted or in some cases a direct second offer of a chance to speak when the first offer has been declined. Because the process of AVP is cumulative, and one exercise build on the previous, participants who use the right to pass too often, and miss sections of the workshop deemed vital for their ongoing participation, may be eventually deemed to have missed too much of significance to continue the process. So whilst the rule is in place to ensure participants security from any activity that they may deem not in their interest, there is undoubtedly some pressure or coercion to complete certain parts of the workshop to be able to continue, and some encouragement, which may be or seen to be coercive, to participate at any given moment. This issue emerges in social action where those who participate in all levels of the struggle end up more able to have effective input within the group and the struggle. As a general rule, involvement builds competence that in turn can build personal power to a level where domination can emerge. In the critical reflection during the case studies, I will explore how these issues can be managed.

That the facilitators reserve this right to reinvoke a participant to speak, and to suggest that a person leave the group if they have missed parts of the workshop deemed essential for continuing the ‘journey’, reveals assumptions about facilitators which give them leadership roles in the group and questions the desire for total equality of participants, and the belief that the process be totally voluntary. My experience of seeing facilitators exercise this ‘right’ seems to me to indicate that facilitators feel a ‘duty of care’ towards participants. By this I mean that where I have seen facilitators reinvoke a participant to speak on an issue that they have previously declined to do so, it has been because they feel the participant will benefit from the second invitation. This in turn can mean the facilitator believes that a participant will gain more out of the workshop by taking the option to speak. Under this belief is the assumption that to gain from the workshop a participant needs a certain level of involvement, and may need support to overcome the resistances to participation that people often have (e.g., shyness, passivity, cynicism) that stop them making the most of the workshop situation.

In some cases I have seen facilitators suggest to a participant that they cease participation. This has occurred when participants have chosen to leave the group for a period and missed aspects of community building or basic knowledge or experiences in the workshop situation that are deemed vital for properly participating in later parts of the workshop. This may mean the facilitator believes the person may be at risk in some way, or may compromise the safety or legitimate learning expectations of the rest of the group.

In both these cases the assumption of facilitators seems to correspond closely with the idea of duty of care. In having set up the workshop, they feel responsible for the safety of participants and the efficacy of the group. It is important to note that this sense of duty of care could be misused to exclude or pressure a participant, and it must be recognised as an empowerment of some members of the group over others. In such situations it is difficult to imagine such inequalities of power being removed. At best Foucault’s idea of making power visible so it can be understood, challenged or resisted if necessary would seem to be the best way to guard against its misuse. My own experience as a participant

and facilitator is that power issues are downplayed in workshops — that is that they are not really explicitly confirmed or denied. The rationale seems to be that to draw attention to power elements in the workshop is to distract from the more useful ways of relating being built. It is undeniable that power struggles emerge between facilitators and participants. In most cases the formal rules and conventions are sufficient to manage such conflict in ways that do not require a formal acknowledgement of power relations to move through the situation in a way sympathetic to AVP principles. Again it will be the task of the case studies to reflect on my own struggles with these types of situations that emerged in social action, and show how application of AVP philosophy and communicative practices could mitigate against the misuse of such power, rather than attempting to create ideal environments where such power is removed or systematically deconstructed.

The final AVP communication principle I would like to look at is to ‘only volunteer yourself’. Closely connected with this is to express yourself using ‘I’ statements, and a corresponding avoidance of the use of the word ‘you’. ‘Only volunteering yourself’ means that participants should speak from personal experience and only offer to say or do things on behalf of themselves. It also means that participants should avoid making generalisations that their own experiences are necessarily true for others. ‘Only volunteer yourself’ is in part a safety rule and also a strategy for creating opportunities for personal transformation. In a safety sense it ensures that participants do not publicly indulge in making assumptions about other people’s feelings. AVP is very clear that its strategies for understanding thoughts and feelings operate through listening and relating to people. This avoids, in so far as possible, deducing people’s feeling or thoughts by logic: ‘you must feel sad because your mother died, because all people are sad when their mothers die’. People are intended to be made safe by this rule as they are assured that people will not make assumptions about them. Relationships will be more experiential than deductive, and AVP’s assumption or hope is that this builds authentic relationships based on what people actually share, not on deductions based of previously learned systems of beliefs and inherited cultural understandings.

As a learning tool, volunteering self is part of beginning to learn the tools of self-reflection, and part of AVP's emphasis on personal transformation. Often, the process of generalisation, which begins when we make claims about the thoughts and feelings of others, leads us to an orientation of trying to understand the world, not just the speaker in question. By encouraging participants to concentrate on their own experience of things, the process of examining how to change self, or at least the manifest behaviours of self, we begin to focus on changing self or at least our behaviour as a means to get our needs met and allowing the space for others to go through a similar process in a social, negotiated setting.

The use of 'I' statements and the relative avoidance of 'you' are both tools to reinforce the approach of searching for personal transformation. By using the term 'I' we make it clear to our communicative partners that what we offer is our own feeling and not necessarily a generalisation about others. In this way statements are less likely to take on a sense of being part of an 'argument' aimed at convincing others that the opinion or thought shared should be accepted as true for all. Using the word 'you' can often seem like the speaker is telling the listeners something about themselves. Even if this is a positive statement it still undercuts the personal transformative strategies preferred by AVP. Consider, for example, the difference between the following two statements: 'You are a very good listener' and 'I find you a very good listener'. The former tells the listener something about themselves, whereas the latter tells them something about the way you feel. The first imposes opinion the second shares opinion. The second also has the merit of giving information that the recipient can use to build their own understanding of self, whereas the first is given as a fact or judgement, and does not invite investigation.

Underneath these communicative assumptions in AVP, the concepts of respect and recognition can be located. I would like to probe more deeply into the assumptions about ethical and optimum ways of relating that are embedded in these values. Axel Honneth, on beginning his discussions of a theory of recognition, draws on the work of Ernst Bloch, in particular Bloch's idea of human dignity (Honneth, 1992, 187). Bloch defines human dignity (negatively) as the avoidance of personal degradation and injury. He

continues with the claim that the “... normative goal of securing human dignity ...” has become “... a driving force of history.” (Bloch, 1986, xxxix). Honneth develops this to claim that human dignity and integrity are dependent on the experience of intersubjective recognition (Honneth, 1992, 188). Jessica Benjamin explores this idea further, claiming that, “The need for recognition entails this fundamental paradox: at the very moment of realizing our own independence, we are dependent upon the other to recognize it” (Benjamin, 1988, 32).

AVP’s rule ‘respect yourself and others’ seems to be clearly related to this belief that we need others to recognise and respect something of us in some way, or relating is possibly going to be injurious to our integrity or dignity. The question of what it is that is respected or recognised and how this is communicated becomes the issue of critical importance to those who would, as AVP does, attempt to set up intentional communities practising these ideas, or apply these beliefs to situations of social conflict in the world outside the workshop.

## **Respect and recognition**

Respect, recognition, integrity, self esteem and dignity seem to be pivotal concepts in trying to find ways of relating that protect human beings from injuring themselves and each other in the task of socially relating. For most of us social relations seem fundamental to being human, and so the task of minimising the amount of suffering we endure whilst relating, as Bloch suggests, is one of the primary pulses of humanity. So any systematic way of approaching these questions, such as AVP, needs to be clear about what all these terms mean, and how they relate to each other to provide ways of relating that are hopefully less damaging or, more optimistically, set the foundations for growthful and enjoyable social interactions.

One of the early western philosophical definitions of respect came from Kant (1785/2002). His idea of respect was simply that people should not use each other as a means to an end: we are all ‘ends’ (free) and not ‘means’ (instruments). The practice of this idea of respect would hinge on one’s skill at relating non-coercively, thereby leaving

others free to pursue their ends without interference. Like Bloch, Kant also invokes the idea of dignity (as a thing that must be protected) and claims it to be the “supreme limiting condition of every man’s freedom”. In Kant’s terms, dignity is damaged if a person is used as a means by another and the user has behaved disrespectfully to the ‘other’ whom they have used as a means to their end.

Critics of this definition, from the relations-of-domination perspective, are dubious that such relations of respect as posited by Kant could be a reality. Simone Chambers, for example, claims that Kant’s idea of respect is predicated on metaphysical assumptions of human rationality, self-direction and autonomy, which, in a society where relations of domination are ubiquitous, is impossible (Chambers, 1996, 5). Chambers further claims: “Whatever rules of public debate we think are fair are really rules that allow some to dominate others — allow some to win the argument and others to concede” (Chambers, 1996, 6). We are manifestly unequal in our abilities: whatever ways of relating we agree to as ‘respectful’ will favour the abilities of some to use their skills to use others as a means to their end. The assumption in the relations-of-domination argument is that it is inevitable that any actor thus empowered will use this power, and therefore relating outside of the paradigm they propose is impossible.

A closer look at the claims that it is impossible to escape relations of power and domination yields some useful insights and appropriate caveats, but does not in my view cast the dead hand of impossibility on ways of relating that significantly diminish the pernicious impacts of the pathologies observed within these theories. To begin, I believe it is important to separate claims about the ubiquity and all embracing nature of power relations from the stronger claim of relations of domination. I hope to show that the Kantian position, which may provide a helpful metaphysical basis for a communicative theory such as that engendered by AVP, is sustainable under the critiques offered by these two arguments.

At the epicentre of this debate lies the human actor. To what extent this actor is rational and autonomous, or directed by the ongoing social and biological circumstances of their

creation, is the first point of debate. People such as those who propose systems like AVP and Habermas's communicative rationality theory tend to take the more optimistic, less deterministic view that it is desirable and possible, as exercises of will and rationality, to transform the way we relate to minimise or, more optimistically, eradicate the operations of power and domination from human relations. On the other side of the equation the human actor is seen as a creation continually shaped by embedded ways of viewing the world and relating. Persuasive claims can be made to suggest the processes we describe as reason and rationality are themselves products of systems of thought that are blind or biased in terms of gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality. The very language of debate and trajectory of commonly held values is, in this way of seeing the world, totally biased, usually towards categories of people who have systematically profited from the dominant ways of assembling knowledge and understanding and navigating the world.

The human actor, rational, autonomous or otherwise, spends their life trying to satisfy their needs. As well as the more visceral needs for food and shelter are the needs for respect and recognition from those with whom the actor is sharing their world. Where resources are scarce, or perhaps even just finite, not all players will be able to get their needs met, and in some cases needs of parties may be mutually exclusive. For example a community of 100 people that only has access to enough food to sustain a community of 50 will be unable to meet the needs of all, and for some to meet their food needs will mean others consequently will not. In a community where power relations are a significant part of the means of getting needs met, the most powerful will get their needs met and the least powerful will not. In the above scenario, the 50 most powerful will eat well and the other 50 will not. The relations-of-domination argument is slightly different: the most powerful will use power to dominate the less powerful. Under such a construction politics and discourse will systematically oppress those outside its operations. The most powerful will control not only food, but also definition and discussion of food, and ideas about the ethics of its distribution. These powers will be used to consolidate domination and oppress those thrown to its margins.

The debate about respect and recognition, or perhaps, more generally, ethics and morality, concerns both the distribution of resources and the methodologies by which distribution is contested and delivered. Ends and means, and their relationship, are the unavoidable subject of moral enquiry. Most writers, at least those on the ‘left’ of politics, seem to agree in general terms that the ends of society are the welfare of its participants, and that violence and coercion are not a ‘good’ means by which to establish these ends. My writing here falls squarely within these beliefs, but the quest for ethical action and outcomes becomes more problematic as we begin to look at these propositions with greater criticality. Just what is society, who are its participants, what constitutes their ‘welfare’ are questions in themselves; and the members of a society will have a range of opinions about who is included, and what access they should have to common resources.

The point of an intentional community within larger intersecting subsets of communities is to set up ways of relating, to some extent insulated, protected or separate from the larger communities within which it lies. Those like AVP, whose aim is to set up ways of relating that create opportunities for personal transformation into ways of being that are more respectful and less coercive, face the task of operating within a system that is locked into ways of relating, that could be characterised, as some suggest, as relations of domination. The polarities of this argument express themselves in rather absolute terms. Foucault’s classic relations-of-domination argument posits that relations of domination are inescapable. A slightly ‘softer’ claim is that power relations cannot be transformed. On the opposite side, theorists like Habermas and Honneth try to create, respectively, coercion-free communication situations and conditions of recognition and respect, which imply the absence or diminution of these dominative and power based relations.

I don’t believe these polarities are a useful way of constructing debate on these issues. For those of us interested in attempting, what could be called by some, idealistic or utopian ways of relating, and the intentional communities to create and sustain ways of relating that challenge, oppose or perhaps transcend these paradigms, the question is not whether it is possible or impossible, but whether the attempt leads us closer to the kind of communities we envisage, and further away from what we find unethical or damaging in



the wider communities of which we are also a part. The relations-of-domination argument reminds us to be mindful of how we are constructed, and how dominant ways of relating and viewing the world will, often quite insidiously, reimpose their constructions and power relationships on those seeking to relate outside or beyond such culturally embedded norms. An attempted ‘utopian’ theory or practice of community or communication that did not, amongst other things, consider how we are constructed, by gender, class, culture and experience, would be liable to reinvent discourses that may tend to set up processes of construction, perhaps invisible to the creators, that feed into some of these dominant paradigms, and that consequently threaten the kinds of community and communication strategies sought.

So, returning to the AVP community building strategies: to make sense of the possibilities they create, and the limitations inherent within them, they need to be deeply interrogated for the subtle and ubiquitous traces of domination and power relations. This can be done at a theoretical level, which I will do to some extent here, but the real work for those who intend using the model will be eternal vigilance, or perhaps more subtly, mindfulness of action that is critical in the actualising of any theoretical way of relating. It is to this end I use case studies to show how these issues can be confronted in actuality, and the solutions I share are illustrative rather than conclusive.

## **AVP and community**

The most significant basis on which to critique the communicative assumptions inherent in AVP would be that it is blind to the impact of manifest inequality of access to communicative tools. As quoted earlier, whatever communication strategy is adopted, or perhaps just accepted, consciously or unconsciously, will advantage some participants over others. Communication, whilst it is chiefly carried out via language, cannot be separated from the context of speaking, or the non-verbal communications that accompany speech. It follows therefore that before embarking on a critique of AVP’s communicative assumptions, it is useful to examine the other two pillars of their overall strategy — community and cooperation — as these two workshop principles complement the communication strategies outlined above, and go some way to answering the possible

critiques, and in particular the inequality of communication skills suggested above. I will return to this critique after detailing a more complete picture of the AVP approach.

To explain AVP's conception of community I draw here from Newton Garver and Eric Reitan's 1995 pamphlet *Nonviolence and Community*, which is an important attempt by AVP practitioners to place its strategies in some context. Community is described by Garver and Reitan as a condition amongst people accompanied by sets of attitudes and feelings. An ideal AVP community is characterised by the feelings and attitudes of belonging, safety, respect and caring. These attitudes and feelings help actualise and encourage the strategies for interaction, namely communication, cooperation and nonviolent conflict resolution. Garver and Reitan quote from the *AVP Basic Manual* to explain community in terms of relational needs, and distinguish it from society and other forms of grouping and relation through the personal character of the interaction given by the relational needs model. They claim:

... in order to grow and develop, people need community, for a sense of belonging, and they need to know that the community is safe for them, so they will be free to take the risks of change. So that community will be safe for all, it needs to require cooperation, respect and caring from all its members for it and for each other. It needs its members to plan and work together, and it needs nonviolent ways of challenging and turning around those who would abuse it.  
(Garver and Reitan, 1995, 24)

This definition is distinguished from the more general grouping of society by the familiarity and personal nature of the association that is deemed vital for both the development and maintenance of community. Garver and Reitan (1995, 25) conclude that, "community is not so much a state of affairs as it is a dynamic, dialectical process". It is a way of approaching relations rather than the actual situation and context of the relationships.

Community, as envisioned above, is the indispensable context for the communication strategies previously explained. Garver and Reitan detail how AVP workshops attempt to build the personal and familiar ways of relating to build community. Simple ways of relating such as laughing together and eating together, familiar forms of address and seeing each other regularly play an important role in building personal connection, and these forms of socialisation all occur early in AVP workshops. One of the first steps in an AVP Basic Workshop is the adoption of what is called an Affirmation Name. All participants are invited to share with the group their name, and an attached affirmation with which to be addressed by other participants in the workshop context. Such names are usually simple, obvious and positive. For example I have used the Affirmation Name of 'Interesting Ian', a person named Cathy might choose a name like 'Calm Cathy' and so on. By taking on a name that is positive and particular to the workshop setting, the process of personal and particular relations needed by the AVP sense of community is begun in a light and hopefully unthreatening way.

The process is continued by exercises designed to invite people to share experiences in which people express something of their personality in a way that encourages laughter, or at least light hearted and 'warm' interaction. AVP calls these exercises 'light and livelies'. An example of a 'light and lively' is a game called 'The Big Wind Blows'. This game starts with a person (usually a facilitator would start the game) in the middle of the circle of seated group participants. The person in the circle will then say 'the big wind blows for all those ...' and then select something about their own person that may be shared by others, such as 'for all those who had a cup of coffee this morning'. At this point all those in the circle who had indeed had a cup of coffee in the morning would jump up and move to a different seat. As there will be seats available for all but one, the last participant left standing, unable to find a seat, becomes the new person in the centre of the circle to say 'the big wind blows ...'. The game is similar to musical chairs, except it involves sharing something simple about oneself, and finding that simple thing shared by others. Usually this makes participants laugh or at least smile and experience mirth collectively. It also shows participants that they have things in common, if only at a basic level. The aim is to keep the game light, and participants seem to naturally avoid

declaring things about themselves that may be confronting, such as having spent time in prison or having had a child die. These exercises continue at regular intervals and may create options for sharing at a deeper level as the sense of community safety grows. During AVP workshops participants also prepare meals together, eat together, and clean up together, which allows a more natural mixing and relating away from the formal exercises of the workshop. In this way people can begin sharing and connecting in ways that are mutually comfortable.

At the same time as beginning the task of opening up possibilities for a sense of belonging via the exercises designed to begin familiarity, AVP tries to set in place ways of relating that make the community feel safe. AVP has a number of exercises in its early stages designed to build community safety. One exercise aimed at creating at least a feeling of safety, if not an actuality, begins with participants joined in a circle and invited to share what they need to feel safe and what they can bring to the group to make others feel safe. The intention of this, rather than to proscribe certain behaviours or declare certain ways of relating ‘out of bounds’, is to allow or encourage the group to set its own safety boundaries. Participants are encouraged to make statements about needs as ‘I’ statements, to make it clear that the statement of need is their own, and not automatically assumed to be a universal or widely held belief or liable to be supported by the group at large. The ‘I’ statement is usually accompanied by the use of the personal affirmation name to personalise participants’ possibilities of connecting to each other’s needs. Such a statement may be ‘My name is Interesting Ian and what I need to feel safe in this group is to not be interrupted’. Depending on how the group wants to proceed, these needs might be written up and placed in view of all participants for the duration of the workshop. The exercise has the dual function of everybody becoming acquainted with their own and other participants’ needs, and taking responsibility for being mindful of these needs during the process.

The second part of the equation —responsibility— is encouraged through the statement about what the participant can do for other’s needs. This statement, also made as an ‘I’ statement, is phrased as an offer: ‘My name is Interesting Ian, and to contribute to group

safety I can offer to listen and not interrupt'. Whilst this process will not create an exhaustive list of the possibilities of action that may make participants safe or unsafe, it introduces the process of taking responsibility for personal and group safety, discursively, cooperatively, with the feelings of self and other the guiding light rather than prohibitive or prescriptive allocation of rights and do's and don'ts as we may see in the political constitution of a society. The point of the process is not to set up a foolproof safety net where people are guaranteed not to be injured, but a process where individually and collectively the group cooperates and communicates about collective needs. This part of the process does not engage with the possibilities and problems inherent with clashing or mutually exclusive needs. Communication and cooperation to deal with conflict over collective and personal needs is addressed later in the workshop when community building has reached a strong enough level to begin responding to challenges.

Respect is another of the actualising strategies on which the sense of community is predicated. Garver and Reitan (1995, 26) comment: "The strategies of interaction that help define community for AVP are rooted in the respect that all members have for one another and therefore for one another's needs and interests". This seems to presuppose a number of things. The strategies for interaction appear both to define and form community, and yet this statement seems to indicate that respect of members is foundational rather than constructed. The statement also seems to presuppose that this foundation of respect for each other flows directly into respect for one another's needs and interests. Respect, as noted earlier, is a stronger claim of relation than the affirmation that begins community building in an AVP workshop. In trying to understand what respect may be, I'm avoiding trying to define it comprehensively, instead looking at aspects of how it works and is understood in the contexts of its use. In this instance, Garver and Reitan seem to be making a general, but unspecific, claim about the existence of understandings that people have, of and between each other. It is not clear whether this respect that participants have for each other is intended to have been established by the workshop conditions or context, or is assumed or is uncritically adopted through general beliefs about universal human rights and value. A second assumption seems to be that this condition of respect engenders an understanding of needs and interests between

participants. My sense is that AVP intends to build personal and inter-subjective valuing and understanding of and between participants, and the assumption that these conditions already exist is a dangerous one.

Both society and community undoubtedly survive and/or flourish in relation to some sense of social connection or ‘capital’. Some level of respect and understanding is clearly required to allow communities to work together and establish common ends. That communities and other social units, however envisioned, can come together and make up larger aggregations of society, nations and cultures similarly suggests that respect and understanding between communities also exists at some level. The critical point for AVP lies in the nature, quantity and quality of the respect assumed. Most participants would enter a workshop with a level of respect for their fellow participants that probably corresponds to the amount of respect gifted to strangers that they would normally have in the greater collective of society of which they are a part. Most people are parts of subcultures or friendship circles and experience a stronger identification, or more ease of connection, with certain sorts of ‘strangers’ than others. We may find ourselves according a greater initial starting point of respect on the basis of race, gender, or various measures of social standing based on profession, education, tastes or political orientation. Gender or race/ethnicity, may be easily read on a first visual contact, and class and education may be quickly ascertained upon first speaking. Deeper orientations towards politics, taste and social situation may then begin to emerge through initial discussion. There are interminable ways in which people may begin and continue the process of understanding and perhaps valuing each other. Whether this ‘matures’ into respect and recognition is similarly complicated.

In beginning a small intentional community in a workshop setting, people will arrive with complicated identities, uneven and unequal relations to each other and the greater society of which they are part. Participants’ skills to adapt to the new circumstance and intended community-building process will also be uneven and unequal. Some participants will be able to take their place in such a community more easily and effectively than others. Those already skilled in communication and cooperation — particularly if their practice

of these skills corresponds to the ideas of these concepts held by workshop facilitators — may find themselves not only more comfortable but more able to shape the practices of the workshop in a way that suits them. What passes for respect, recognition, community, cooperation and ‘communication’ will be at some level contested. A dominant way of relating to and through these concepts will be established by those most able to participate in the ways of relating that form them. The functional definitions or practices of respect, explicit or less explicit, will be more expressive of those participants better skilled in controlling the process of formation.

Given these complications, it would seem dangerous ground to assume, as Garver and Reitan seem to, a ‘respect’ for each other, and concomitant understandings built upon it, especially in the early stages of workshop formation. Any respect that exists before, during or after an AVP workshop will be its own peculiar type of respect and understanding, needing to be analysed and understood on its own merits. My own conclusion is that some form of respect will pre-exist between participants, and its continued existence, growth or diminishment will need to be charted and understood in its own terms. The extent that we can usefully talk about respect in these situations will rely on the workshop participants being able to articulate and express what happens in the workshop in terms of how people use the idea (or not) of respect to mark their emerging relations. My own adaptation of the restorative practices model for social action will make a much weaker assumption that potential interlocutors will probably be interested at some level in the possibility of positive relations. I would consider it highly likely in situations of social conflict that rather than be granted respect as one may be in a workshop setting, I will have to work hard to overcome initial feelings of disrespect and hostility to build the possibilities of good relations or mutuality. In short I would reframe Garver and Reitan’s expectation of respect into an embrace of its possibilities, in which acting towards the other as if respect is nascent, possible and desirable replaces the sense that it already exists. This is a respectful orientation towards the other, rather than an expectation or assumption of already existing respect.

AVP's assumptions about respect have important implications for the conflict resolution model they adopt, as it is recognition of interests (self, other and community — and the relationship between them) that constitutes the context for the possibility of resolving conflicts based on mutual meeting of needs. Garver and Reitan (1995, 26) say that:

When conflicts arise, they are addressed by examining needs and interests which underlie conflicting aims and then seeking courses of action which satisfy as far as possible the most important needs and interests of all disputing parties.

AVP assumes that (1) respect is sufficiently present to make people interested in each other's needs, (2) all parties will be able and interested to learn how to express and understand their own and each other's needs and interests, (3) all parties will be able to identify the 'the most important' ones, and (4) participants will be able to see/define the distinction between needs and interests — again relating to both self and other. Garver and Reitan actually go as far as to claim (1995, 27) that the AVP system will work as an ideal community and "value equally the needs and interests of every member". Whilst the egalitarian spirit of such a claim is probably an important one in terms of the positive value it places on all participants, there seems no inherent mechanism to appraise or ensure this 'equality' of value. AVP's practices of trying to ascertain and satisfy the needs of all are clearly a useful strategy for the valuing of people, but whether it does so 'equally' would be much harder to establish. For my purposes it is enough that these techniques offer a way of giving value to all. Whilst it would be my hope and ambition that a measure of equality exists in this valuing, this is not a claim which I would make about this process, either for AVP or my own adaptation. Equality is frequently cited as an animating spirit for many social and political endeavours. A sense of roughly proportional valuing and reciprocity would seem fundamental to both AVP and my own adaptation of it here. Such an idea appeals to a natural sense of fairness and give and take in relationships — and continued reference to the idea, in the fashioning of ways of relating, seems appropriate. Where some sense of equality and reciprocity does not exist in relations between people, we may see it as self evident that relations of mutual recognition would be less likely and less profound. Beyond this, specific claims that



procedures flowing from such systems could or should deliver ‘equality’ in some way would seem problematic. As such I will continue to appeal to it in the work that follows and, like Garver and Reitan and perhaps many others, not explicitly establish any specific measures to ‘pin it down’ or actualise it.

The final term mentioned by Garver and Reitan in association with community is caring. Garver and Reitan’s work is contained in a short pamphlet — a form explicitly defended by them as a form that is easy for readers to digest — and as such doesn’t always meaningfully detail definitions of what they mean by some of their key concepts. Such is the case with ‘care’. Perhaps, like equality, it was felt that the term was easily graspable and unproblematic in its common usage and therefore didn’t require explanation. I feel the term requires some examination. To examine the concept of care I’d like to begin by asking some rhetorical questions which highlight why such an investigation is useful. Why do people care, in general, and about or for particular things? People tend to care with diminishing intensity as things outside themselves that they may value become less close and less interwoven into their lives. Thus people tend to care most for their own lives and well being, then for immediate family and close friends. In most cases people ultimately care less for physical objects (such as houses, cars) than for people. A pet dog may rate less highly than a child, but more than the family car in terms of how much people ‘care’. Community or communities (as people are usually part of more than one) are usually something that people care about. Caring in this case means that they experience it as valuable, or perhaps necessary for their own continued happiness, and their behaviour, of caring, nourishes and supports the valued ‘thing’.

Why does AVP single out caring as necessary for community, and what is it that members of such a community care for or about? AVP, whilst carefully and deeply thought out, does not approach its definitions as a rigorous academic work might, and the result for those trying to unpack the explicit intention of usage seems to be a conceptual blurring. Terms like respect, affirmation, positive regard and caring seem to be used somewhat interchangeably. There is however a core value underpinning the use of all of these terms, usefully articulated here to make sense of their use of ‘caring’. The answer to

these questions, and some sense of conceptual clarity and simplification, can be found by returning to some of the key elements in AVP's mandala: 'respect yourself', 'caring for others' and 'expect the best'. For AVP to work participants must have a sense of positivity about themselves and others, and be able to actualise this positive regard as expressions of care — actions that nourish and support the 'target' of the positivity. To do this a participant needs to believe in, and have the skills to identify, what it is in themselves and others that they value, and to desire and have the skills to nurture and defend these qualities in self and other. The final step of AVP is to try to understand the needs and interests of self and other that support these qualities of value, and learn cooperative realisation of the needs and interests in this regard of all of the community. Caring occurs in an AVP sense when participants give value to this endeavour and actualise this felt value in actions that support its execution.

### **AVP and care**

At this point it is worth bringing Carol Gilligan's ethic of care back into the debate to link notions of equality, care and community, and self. Gilligan notes that, paradoxically, it is the experience of inequality coupled with interconnection in the parent-child relationship which gives rise to an ethic of care, which she notes is a vision of possibility, not a given but an animating idea: "... the vision that self and other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power, things will be fair, the vision that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt." (Gilligan, 1982, 62–63). Like Erazim Kohak's idea that there is a moral sense in nature, cited earlier, Gilligan's claim is best seen as an inspired way of seeing relationships extrapolated from an experience common to nearly all. Care, then, like identity, is an act of imagination: in this case one based on the experience of interconnection where the needs of all (both) are considered of unimpeachable value. Equality is thus reframed from a claim about actuality or entitlement to a reciprocal gifting of value.

In relation to the concept of caring it is useful to have a closer look at the idea of 'expect the best' that is one of the components of the mandala that AVP uses to express the inter-relationship of its core ideas. Expectation can be read in a number of ways. The 'heavier'

version of expectation can almost be read as a demand, and perhaps be understood as a form of coercion, as it can relate to beliefs about what self or others should do. Such demands upon self can lead to people failing in regard to what they expect of themselves, and others may be seen to fail in terms of what we may expect from them. Expecting the 'best' in these terms raises the bar very high and entails almost inevitable disappointment as no one always performs at their best. Such a reading of 'expect the best' would have to be accompanied by a sister concept of how to respond to ongoing unmet expectation, and the communication skills to express your expectation without it falling into the category of demand. Expectation may also be confused with needs or interests, the expression and communication of which are essential to all participants in their task of relating in the AVP way. As much as it will be important for AVP practitioners to understand and distinguish needs from interests, they will need to separate their possibly 'demanding' expectations as well.

The lighter way of construing 'expect the best' (which I will use in my model) is as an encouragement towards optimism or positivity. Whatever ways of relating we try to shape in our relationships, workplaces, and wider political actions, some sense of the possibility of betterment and fulfilment of possible or idealistic conceptions of being does seem to be a prerequisite to any system working well. It would be almost impossible to begin any endeavour collective or otherwise without a sense of hope or possibility. Many people will arrive at an AVP workshop damaged by life experiences and will have difficulty investing in any new way of relating that promises them a better life. 'Expect the best' is, for me and I think many AVP practitioners and participants, merely a recognition that without a sense of hope and optimism AVP will struggle to make an impact. What is interesting is that the AVP manuals and writings do not address this deeper question of the importance of hope and optimism, or how to deal with the probabilities that many participants will be disillusioned and hopeless. AVP's way of relating would listen to people's feelings, and if people's feelings are negative and hopeless, then its theory would move us to hear these feelings and validate that this is what the person feels. This should not mean that we endorse disillusionment or hopelessness, but it does mean not to deny people's experience or feelings should they

arrive at a workshop in this (negative) space. AVP hopes its process of building community and cooperation through caring and communication of feelings may be healing of negative feelings such as disillusionment and hopelessness, but it is quick to point out that though it may be healing, it is not and should not be approached as therapy.

A final thought about the notion of ‘expect the best’ is worth noting, though this thought may be more of a speculative aside whose place in the argument is unclear. In my years of experience of AVP there is often, perhaps even usually, a presumption of ‘good will’ and — for lack of a more scientific or accurate word — an atmosphere of optimism assumed and projected onto/into the participants and the workshop by the facilitators. Similarly there is a confidence in the ‘technology’ of the AVP process to deliver its intended outcomes.

Deep levels of optimism and belief in particular ideals or processes can seem, particularly to those who do not share them, self righteous, precious or even deluded. When we interact with people whose confidence that what they have experienced will likely be true for us, it can seem that they are less interested in us, and our feelings and views, than in sharing their own. Such an attitude of optimism and confidence can be read as the belief that the person has ‘all the answers’ and being not open to whatever we have to bring, for what is for the new participant, a new situation, and community only in potential. This can be particularly challenging for a participant who arrives at an AVP workshop damaged by life, short of natural optimism about the possibilities for positive change, and lacking in trust and good will in their general interactions with community and society. It would be easy for such people to feel their experience of life was being denied by the (generally cautious at first) expression of positivity expressed by AVP facilitators. AVP’s own emphasis on ‘I’ statements shines the light on the solution to this problem. Optimism and positivity are important both for the AVP inspired actor and their potential interlocutors, but the prospective social intervener should remember to ‘own’ their own experiences of these feelings in word, action and manner. To arrive at either a workshop or a scene of social conflict with self-conscious optimism and positivity, or the

expectations that others may have these feelings, may not be the best invitation to others to share the same emotional space.

Belief and optimism and their ‘opposites’ scepticism and pessimism are not always happy bedfellows. The latter two, when expressed with an equal and opposite intensity to that of the former two, can lead to a collision of orientations that throws the intended methodology of AVP into question. Though AVP should be (and in my experience is) open to methodological questioning, the debate about whether AVP works or how it could work better is not one that is usefully conducted in a workshop. This seems, in my experience, to be generally understood, and though some participants, myself included, have shared both pessimism and negativity, in general and about AVP process in a workshop situation, there seems to be a general understanding that a degree of credulity and faith is required to begin a new way of relating, and to start a potential new community. A final word on this issue, and one that raises the means/ends problem, is that the kind of optimism and belief often exuded by AVP facilitators, which I earlier speculated could be seen as self righteous, or precious, seems (in terms of my own experience of workshops — I have seen no research on this issue) to be effective in establishing the conditions of good will, respect and community that AVP tends to assume either exist or be quickly established in the early stages of the workshop. In my opinion, the assumptions of good will of participants, and belief in the effectiveness of their strategies, is a significant part of creating the conditions for both the good will and the effectiveness of the whole AVP project. Carefully expressed and cultivated in terms of the caveats expressed above, I would therefore intend to approach social conflict in my own model with as much optimism as I can muster without seeming to deny the experience of others.

There is a conundrum here. An AVP space at the beginning of a workshop is not a neutral playing field where new community can be built from the group up, with equal input by all. Participants, of course, know this. They know they are turning up to new situation, where there is a pre-existing map for the intention of how the processes will enable the beginnings of a new way of relating, and that this is set by ‘others’ to whom, as yet, they

have no relation beyond whatever contact has led them through the workshop door. Participants know when they walk through the door (or have at least been exposed to the information by which knowing is possible) that they are going to be expected to give themselves up to the learning of new ways of relating that are intended, self evidently by the title Alternatives to Violence Project, at engendering ways of relating that eschew violence. Whilst AVP operates at all times explicitly by invitation, it is not entirely clear the extent that people are being asked to voluntarily submit to a process they have not had the opportunity to understand the full implications thereof. As AVP is an experiential learning system, this is necessary. AVP places its belief in transformation as resulting from actual participation in its own workshops. The conditions of consent and openness that mark the workshops are highly unlikely to grace the theatre of social conflict. I will explore how to build this kind of consent and openness with communication in the reconstructions of my own experiences later in this work.

### **AVP and cooperation**

AVP's ideas about cooperation are also an important part of their overall strategy. Cooperation for AVP is both a philosophy and a skill. Philosophically AVP defines or understands cooperation relationally as the alternative to competition. In AVP (NSW), one of the critical theorists informing the *Sydney Facilitators Handbook* (AVP, 2010), which acts as both a practical guide to running workshops and philosophical inspiration, is Alfie Kohn. In his book *No Contest* Kohn describes competition as basically trying to 'beat' other people (Kohn, 1992, 1). Kohn cites Rollo May's work that suggests competition is the most widespread cause of anxiety in western culture (Kohn, 1992, 123). He further suggests that competition is learned, and is often a semi-conscious strategy to raise the sense of self-value by lowering the value of the other (Kohn, 1992, 99). In essence competition is the opposite of mutual recognition: it validates self at the expense of the other. Kohn distinguishes three overlapping ways of approaching potentially conflicting relationships involving other people: competitively (against), cooperatively (with) and independently (disconnected) (Kohn, 1992, 7). Kohn goes on to dismiss what he call the four myths of competition, that it is unavoidable, productive, fun and character building (Kohn, 1992, 9). Kohn draws on a wealth of evidence to suggest

cooperation is more fun, more efficient and yields better outcomes for all (Kohn, 1992, 211). AVP, and my derivation of it, tacitly accept Kohn's appraisal, and solidly base all conflict resolution strategies on cooperation.

AVP actualises its beliefs about cooperation through its focus on the concept of needs in a community context. Distinctions are drawn between needs and wants; needs are linked to cooperation and wants to competition (Garver and Reitan, 1995). Garver and Reitan are not explicit in their definitions here but relating the concept of cooperation to their ethic of community we can draw out some underlying assumptions. Garver and Reitan (1995, 40–41) say:

The ethic underlying AVP is committed to cultivating community with all those with whom one interacts in the course of ordinary human living; such a commitment involves acting according to strategies of community, and according to disciplines which open up hostile situations to the influence of Transforming Power.

Needs are seen as things held in common by all and therefore can be realised in a win/win situation by all using the discursive processes of communication. By working together (cooperation), we can realise our collective needs as they are defined in terms of community, and common to all. The assumption about wants is that they relate to self, are not held in common, and are thus potentially incompatible, and not necessarily resolvable in a win/win situation. Nevertheless the distinction between these ways of identifying what we want may be difficult to make in practice. How do we differentiate between a need to be affirmed and included by others (which AVP would accept as a legitimate need) and a desire to be praised, acknowledged or advantaged that has stepped over the line into narcissism, egotism or some other form of self-oriented, non-community-minded clamour for more affirmation than is required for social functioning? One person's requirements for feeling socially valued and included may appear to another as a wish relating to a self-orientated behaviour. Beyond the general claim that human beings need validation and inclusion, specific claims about the amount and type of affirmation needed

would seem entirely contextual and negotiable. Many people entering a workshop, or indeed in their regular normal social transactions, would not possess the communicative skills to make these quite complex distinctions, which may in fact have no clear actual basis but exist only as contextual and conditional claims established by agreement of the parties involved in communications.

If these are the kinds of distinctions required to distinguish cooperative from competitive behaviour, the system seems unworkable and a simpler distinction would seem desirable. The exercises performed in an AVP workshop shed interesting light on these questions without resorting to the complex reference to needs, interests, aims or wishes. There are a number of exercises used in AVP where participants explore cooperation non-verbally. In one exercise participants divide into small groups (3 or 4 people) and are simply given a long pole. Participants are given no direction about the point or goal of the exercise, and simply invited to stand together with one hand each on the pole, and then without verbal communication, do something (or not) with the pole. A common scenario is that participants then experience a non-verbal collective decision about what to do with the pole. Usually one or more participants begins to move the pole, other participants then have to decide to either 'go with' the movement, to resist it, or begin an opposing movement. Usually, the pole ends up being moved and placed in a particular situation, without a word being said. Participants will feel the movement of the pole and make a decision to cooperate with where the pole is moving, or to compete and establish an alternative trajectory, or perhaps passively accept the movements of the rest of the group without attempting to either support or oppose the emerging trajectory of the pole. After the pole is situated, participants are invited to share their feelings during the exercise; these may be frustration, anger, joy, humour, being oppressed by the rest of the group — whatever comes up for each participant. Generally this devolves into a discussion in which participants dissect the experience and try to establish 'what happened' for them and for others, and establish shared collective understanding of what transpired.

The aim of such an exercise is for participants to experience the difference between cooperation and competition in a simple collective setting. The experience is kept non-



verbal to avoid the pitfalls of trying to intellectualise the differences in closely related but importantly different motivations and their relationship to either cooperation or competition. The process starts to situate participants in how it feels to cooperate and compete, and importantly how other participants may have experienced the event, and each other. Thus begins, experientially, AVP's process of being attentive to one's own needs and desires, and the needs and desires of others, and how it feels to go through a process where the possibilities of balancing these motivations are explored through feelings, experienced then shared, in a non-threatening, small, intentional and immediately conceivable community. Such exercises are repeated through the workshop process, gradually introducing levels of complexity so the distinction between cooperation and competition can be learned by felt experience in a safe community setting. Participants can experience both strategies and notice for themselves through their own feelings, and through the sharing that follows, the impact these choices have on how the community functions and relates.

The implication of AVP's preoccupation with cooperation, and its negative attitude towards competition, is that competition is seen as not valuable, or certainly less valuable to community conflict resolution. A closer look at the pole exercise reveals that not only are the competing senses of direction for the intended situation of the pole important for learning and sensing of cooperation, but are important also for learning the role of contra-assertion of will and how to move through these tensions in a way which deepens rather than damages community and relations between people. If one participant begins to move the pole towards the wall number one, and a second participant has the idea to move the pole towards wall number two, we have a difference of intention that will lead participants to a direct confrontation with their own and other's needs, interests and desires. This situation opens up learning possibilities. Firstly the second participant can learn that it is okay to have a differing need, and to express that need as a counter-veiling pressure to the first person's need. This difference can be explored. Participant number one then has to decide whether to yield to the counter-veiling pressure, or to apply still more force in the direction of their original intention. They could choose, for example, to drop the pole or make eye contact with participant two and smile. Participant one may

reflect on the possible intentions of taking the pole to wall number two and decide that this is in the group interest, or that it is not a central need of their own to have the pole at wall number one. What is important is that participants engage with the process and are given the opportunity to reflect on the feelings and intentions of all, and that this creates opportunities for participants to deepen their understanding of themselves, others and the situations in life that may resemble the exercise.

The non-verbal nature of the exercise is important. It directs participants away from complex conceptual framings of needs and towards noticing feelings of self and other. The value of the post-exercise debriefing is in opening up the space to then make cognitive links between feelings and needs. Because the exercise is trivial and essentially meaningless, the conflict is often experienced as fun, and non-threatening. As such it often helps build community for later exercises that may tap into deeper feelings and needs and give the role-play a more lifelike 'heat'. The lessons to be learned in terms of applying this kind of exercise to a situation of social conflict are many. If you know you are going to have conflict on major issues, it may be useful to raise some smaller, almost trivial conflicts first. If we try in such a situation to use non-verbal skills, this may open up more space for feelings to be noticed. If we also debrief and talk/listen we can use this space to learn about the feelings and needs of all involved (including ourselves). If new groups of people experience the effectiveness and joy of cooperation early, the socially learned and culturally validated practices of competition, and what Kohn calls 'mutually exclusive goal attainment', may be less seductive (Kohn, 1992, 116).

Conflict over what to do with the pole may introduce new and useful ideas into a community, and the exercise should demonstrate that this is okay, or perhaps even enriching. What is important is how such challenges are introduced and dealt with. For AVP such a scenario in life would be dealt with according to AVP principles if all parties express their feelings and intentions, go through a process in which all parties are listened to, validated, and a decision made un-coercively which reflects the needs and interests of all. The conflict itself is a valid and useful part of the process in defining and asserting the range of options available to a community. Problems emerge when any participant

refuses to flow with the emerging consensus, or indeed is forced to yield to any enforced norm. What is hoped to emerge is not that one concept of being or intended action becomes conceptually sovereign, but that all ideas and possible actions remain a part of the process until all feelings have been expressed and a strategy for meeting all needs is agreed upon. What is valued here in the pole exercise is the opportunity to experience and reflect in relative safety, while working on a cooperative group decision.

To get a deeper sense of AVP's sense of community it is useful to look at some more of the techniques it employs to build the kind of temporary intentional community it imagines. When AVP talks about community, it explicitly says that communities must be safe and challenging. I have briefly examined some of the strategies designed to make AVP safe; it is important to examine what is meant by challenging, and the role of challenge in their conception of community, and some of the workshop strategies designed to build this kind of environment in ways that complement and don't undercut the safety aspect of the AVP equation. It would be too much to detail the incredible profusion of factors that would be desirable and/or necessary to creating, sustaining and repairing complex communities. As well as safety, AVP includes challenging as one of the key features of community worthy of special mention. The selection of challenging as a concept necessary for community suggests a valuing not only of the role that challenge plays in community life, but a valuing of the conflict that inevitably arises at some level when people are challenged.

AVP sets out to build the kind of community that enables and creates opportunity for personal transformation. To do this it must build an environment that encourages and permits change. Whilst most people recognise the value of change, personal or external, there is no doubt that many of us are uncomfortable with change, and that it can be upsetting or destabilising. Feelings of security can be based, in part, on routine and regularity. Both routine and regularity, as well as bringing security through certainty and predictability, can lead to an unwillingness to let go of old ways of being that may no longer be or perhaps may never have been useful. AVP hopes to create an environment that challenges by facilitating personal reflection of personal experience, with a strong

emphasis on locating people in their feelings, as opposed to rigorous intellectual analysis. The key tool for this endeavour is Restorative Practices. This tool will be the key tool for my own model of mutual recognition in political and social action.

## **Restorative Practices**

Restorative Practices are designed to be a simple, non-judgemental way for people to examine their own experience in a way that locates the possibilities for change, rather than judges the errors. After each exercise (or incident in ‘real life’) facilitators ask each participant a series of questions designed to help them unlock the potential for change inherent in what they have just experienced.

The first question, ‘what happened for you?’, is designed to encourage relocation in the events of the experience just passed. Usually answered in terms of an ‘I’ statement, an example of this could be: ‘I told Mary she was talking rubbish, she raised her voice and told me to shut up. I felt silenced and shamed and decided to withdraw from the conversation’.

The second question, ‘what was the hardest part for you?’, is aimed at focussing the participant on whatever it is in the experience just passed that has troubled or distressed them. An answer to this may be: ‘being yelled at’.

The third question, ‘what did you think went well, and what would you do differently?’, is aimed at helping the participant self define and evaluate both the positives and negatives of their own behaviour. An answer could be: ‘I’m glad I let Mary know I didn’t like what she was saying, and if I were to do it again I would tell Mary I disagreed rather than saying she was “talking rubbish”’.

The final step in restorative practices is to ask participants, ‘what needs to happen to restore the relations damaged by these interactions’. An answer to this could be: ‘I would like to apologise to Mary for judging and dismissing her views’.

At each stage critical reflexion is by invitation only, free of judgement, and related only to one's own part in the situation. People are in effect invited to challenge themselves in an environment that will create space and support them to do so. Whilst the example given above demonstrates an optimistic scenario where a participant identifies their own problematic behaviour, it is important for the facilitator to hear and value the speaker, even if the quality of the reflection seems misguided. In reality people who have been seriously at odds with each other will seldom reconcile as easily as suggested in these examples. Therefore the actual process may have to be repeated many times as participants respond about how they felt about what the other just said. For example, if the participant in the exchange above had reflected 'I'm glad I told Mary to shut up because she was talking rubbish', then Mary would be invited to reflect on her response to this, and in turn each would respond to each other's responses in this format until both participants are satisfied.

It must be remembered that such a process, whilst an opportunity for self-reflection and change, may not be taken up positively by participants. Restorative Practices creates opportunity, but it should not enforce self-examination that is geared towards personal transformation. The community should open spaces where people can challenge themselves, and support them in this approach. A participant who avoids, or does not use, the space for challenging their own behaviour should not be forced to do so. What makes a community safe and challenging is participant control over the circumstances and the manner of challenging. If a participant uses the process to continue to damage and judge others, there are two broad options. Firstly the process can be abandoned for the safety of other participants, or the facilitator can work with what is happening in the process. Again, for example, the facilitator can ask Mary how she felt when the other participant reinforced and re-expressed that she should shut up and that she was talking rubbish. If Mary said that this made her feel like crying, the facilitator would then ask the other participant how they felt in light of Mary's feelings and so on. The optimistic scenario is that through repeated contact with the feelings of others in this constructed situation, participants will learn or enhance empathy skills. The little research that has been done suggests there are some grounds for this optimism, and therefore that the further

exploration I am doing here is worthwhile. Marlow et al. trialled Rosenberg's nonviolent communication strategies in US male parolees and found a 'significant increase' in empathy skills after an eight-week course. (Marlow et al., 2011, 1). In one of the few formal studies of AVP's effectiveness (though not testing for empathy) in the prison environments for which it was mainly envisioned, Walrath (2001, 707) found that AVP practitioners had less conflict, less expressed anger and higher levels of optimism than the control group that had not participated in the AVP scheme. Importantly, whilst I am intending these processes to open up possibilities for mutual recognition, they are, like most if not all such systems, open to participants to use for ongoing behaviour that exacerbates existing problems (such as bullying). I will use the case studies to elaborate how to navigate these kinds of 'if/then' scenarios. I will also use the case studies to illustrate how to deal with abuse of the process in such cases.

## **Transforming power**

A look at some of the constituent ideas and practices of AVP cannot really do justice to what is essentially a system that has to be experienced to sense its value. As my ultimate purpose here is to share the possibilities that an AVP-inspired approach might provide during social action, it is in imaginative reconstructions of social action of my own experience I am anchoring my exploration. Before setting out on this endeavour there are a few ideas important to AVP that did not seem to fit neatly into the discussion thus far, which require explication before attempting the theoretical transplant from workshop to the complexities of wider social life. The most important of these is 'transforming power'. Transforming power is at the centre of AVP concept Mandala, but its definition, like power itself, is a little slippery, and never really subject to explicit definition. As such it will mean slightly different things to any member of the community. In many academic endeavours, inexactitude creates problems, and so it will here. But as I move further through this work, I am more and more convinced that leaving the interpretive space open on key concepts will be central to the reader making a personal embrace of its possibilities. What follows on the subject of transforming power, like much of what I offer here, is exploratory, not definitive.

My own understanding of the AVP concept of transforming power is that it occurs when power moves *through* us, as a consequence of constructive and cooperative community oriented behaviour, rather than being used *by* us as an act of coercion *upon* others. Transforming power is less an act and more an attitude of openness, an offering, a creation of opportunity. Personal power is used for transforming self, and opening possibilities for others to transform self. As a group, an AVP circle intends that the collective should have no power that can be used in relation to other collectives, or individuals or groups within the collective. Power in its old forms still exists, but to the extent that AVP creates arrangements that lead to empowerment, such created power is transformed from a thing that can be grasped and wielded coercively for the gain of an individual or group, to something that only exists for individuals in relation to themselves. If participants are faithful to the maxims elaborated above, the community thus constituted will not create coercive powers in relation to others; the context does not authorise or promote the use of power in any other way than (positive) personal transformation.

For AVP, the pernicious effects of power, as a thing used by people to coerce others, is an act of violence antithetical to the ethic of community. Power is intended to be transformed by changing it from a tool of coercion wielded by a wilful actor to a product of cooperative, communicative exchange. Power has its agency removed and is transformed into something that is undirected and moves as a momentary trajectory created by the collective vectors of collaborative, cooperative and communicative actors. Power in this sense is vague, ungraspable, and not subject to the singular will, and in AVP's optimistic scenario, not a tool of coercion for any member of the collective that generates it.

Along with transforming power, AVP practitioners often refer to an 'ethic of community' as a guiding attitudinal principle in conflict resolution. Garver and Reitan (1995, 30) define an ethic of community as "... a moral perspective which requires commitment to a certain kind of community". They continue to note that AVP believes in the "inherent value of all humans", and that this calls upon us to "... make universal community the

inherent end of our acts.” The words inherent and universal do not sit well with me, nor for that matter the seeming anthropocentrism in the use of the word ‘humans’. To place participants in the position of expecting them to commit to a concept of community that is conceived as universal and based on belief in intrinsic value is a big ask for a group of people newly gathered to experience someone else’s ideas about nonviolent ways of relating. The assumption of intrinsic value amounts to a claim that what is true for me is true for you, and can be (or be seen to be) a denial of personal experience.

These claims also seem at odds with other aspects of AVP. John Shuford’s (n.d., 5) comments on AVP’s rationale set the grounds for a critique of these assumptions: “Ours is a process of seeking and sharing, and not of teaching. We do not bring the answers to the people with whom we work. We do not have the answers.” Shuford continues to claim that sharing personal experience, and the valuing thereof, as the real AVP ethic of community:

We believe that all (that) experience is valuable, and that it can be built upon to make new lives. We try to draw out those experiences and help people look at what they have gained from them. In doing so we are in a constant process of learning from each other and from them.

Thus conceived, community is a space where people gather to support one another in a search for better ways of being. The ethic of this community is based on giving value (rather than assuming intrinsic value) to the transformative potential locked within each participant. The ethic also involves a trust in the process of AVP, to aid participants in unlocking this potential, via supporting reflective practices on their own and others’ experiences. Shuford’s ideas here sit well with my own idea of community as a possible place for collective reflection and reframing of a more social and contextual identity.

## **AVP and HIP**

One final diversion needs to be taken before beginning my reconstruction of my experiences. AVP was developed and intended for use in prisons, but AVP practitioners



also run courses for the community at large. Some interested parties have also adapted the AVP model for other, related purposes, such as I intend to do here. One such example that is particularly interesting for the task I have set myself is the Help Increase the Peace Programme (HIP or HIPP). The HIP project grew out of the experience of AVP in the early 1990's, and represents an attempt to bring its insights and techniques to young people, particularly in school environments. HIP shares the core belief that conflict is not inherently bad, and can be, and perhaps should be, seen as an opportunity for positive change and growth. In addition to this, HIP, at least in its original US manifestation, is based on the idea that many of the roots of violence can be found in the experience of societal injustice.

One particular innovation drawn from HIP (in particular in the work of Julei Korner) is the philosophy of 'shining a light'. I would like to look at the practice of shining a light particularly as it applies during Restorative Practices, which forms the backbone of the actual process of conflict resolution in AVP (NSW) and HIP. The idea of 'shining a light' introduces a new level of depth to the use of Restorative Practices that I hope to model in this thesis as both a conflict resolution strategy and a tool for reflective practice. The role of facilitator in Restorative Practices is to hold the space open to allow the participants to go through the process of 'listening to' and understanding each other's feelings and needs, asserting those needs, and finding ways of accommodating each other's needs in a win/win scenario. The skill in facilitating is to use the minimum of intervention to steer, allowing the participants to use their own skills and understanding to achieve their ends. A HIP facilitator will happily sit with silence, or intransigence, rather than simply tell participants what they should do. But there comes a time to intervene and steer through word or example. This is where 'shining a light' appears as the subtlest of movement in this direction.

Suppose for example one is facilitating a workshop and a participant begins to raise their voice and make judgemental remarks concerning another participant. 'Shining a light' refers to the process whereby the facilitator would bring attention to what is happening. But the bringing of attention is the only action taken by the facilitator and may take the

form of describing what has taken place. For example: ‘Person A has just raised their voice and called Person B stupid. How does the group feel about that?’ If for example the group has no strong feelings about what has happened and does not wish to explore the matter further, the facilitator would leave the matter to rest based on the presumption that only when the group as a collective or as individuals personally experience such events as worthy of further exploration can the next step be taken. The innovation of the shining-of-the-light philosophy is that even a question like ‘how did you feel when A raised their voice and called you stupid?’ is leading. This question from a facilitator almost presupposes there is a problem with the action in question. Even in such a case, where most of us object to behaviour in a workshop, AVP facilitators prefer not to direct to the behaviour itself, leaving that task for the participants. The task of a facilitator is to create the maximum opportunity for people to experience the problems with this behaviour themselves and to move through their own feelings, understandings and eventually possible solutions. More subtle facilitation may involve simply pausing and making eye contact with participants — merely creating a small space where, without explicit direction, participants feel able to reflect on the most recent interactions.

At the point where the group, or part thereof, does express a desire to explore what has happened in the circle, this is where we can use the idea of Restorative Practices to move participants into a space where it is possible to transform conflict into a possibility for personal transformation. Restorative Practices involves the asking of a number of simple questions. In the group setting a facilitator would ask each participant in turn the following questions: What happened? What was the most difficult part of this experience for you? What did you do that you would now do differently? What do you think needs to happen to restore any relationships that have been damaged? Restorative Practices as adapted by HIP and AVP in NSW is pitched at a level that doesn’t necessarily need high-level cognitive skills and is designed to open up the possibility of personal transformation experientially. Restorative Practices is usually used as part of a larger workshop situation and delivered with a complex series of exercises for building community, group security, and a set of communicative conventions that seek to establish respect, recognition and judgement-free communication.

If the exercises AVP run in workshops successfully build communication, cooperation and community they have established the conditions in which nonviolence can flourish as an option. But until people personally experience the problems with violent and coercive communication strategies, and experience listening, cooperation and community as effective strategies for simultaneously meeting their own needs and the needs of others, AVP seems unlikely to move them forward. AVP's task is to create groups, and exercises within them, that create the possibilities for experiencing personal insight.

Each and every emotion and social strategy pertaining to them is replete with implications and probably worthy of special consideration in terms of how to deal with them as they arise in a workshop or social life. I would like to single out shame and praise as worthy of special mention for the potential practitioner of mutual recognition in political and social life. It is therefore pertinent to look briefly at the role of the concepts of shame and praise as used by HIP in NSW to maximise the possibilities for personal transformation through the experience of the workshop. Many of us experience the concept of shame as negative — who remembers feeling ashamed as a positive thing? So my first response to hearing the expression 'shame is the gateway to heaven' in a HIP workshop was surprise. The logic behind this positive conception of shame is simple. When we experience shame, this is the personal recognition of something in our social relations being possibly awry and needing attention. Tony Webb (2003) in his thesis on shame suggests that the experience of shame that has not been understood and worked through (bypassed shame) may be the underlying cause of much violence and social dysfunction amongst people. Shame that is explored and understood may yield rich insight and possibility for transformation. The negativity normally associated with shame may come from the fact that we often experience it in unsupported environments, or it is 'put on us' by others. A HIP or AVP workshop offers us the opportunity to experience shame of our own volition amongst a community that sees shame as part of a learning experience, rather than ammunition to impugn our humanity. Simply by sharing our feelings, without anyone judging us or attempting to make us feel ashamed, we can experience shame as an opportunity instead of an indelible stain on our character.

Paying attention to praise, or its absence, is another one of the key inspirations I have experienced in HIP. HIP practitioners draw from the work of Louise Porter (1997), who in turn builds on the work of Alfie Kohn. Whilst Louise Porter's work is primarily aimed at children, HIP practitioners have found a wider application than just within workshops with children. The idea is seen as useful for adults, and in more than just workshop situations. I experienced this myself in a HIP workshop, and am now interested in applying these ideas to social conflict.

Praise is seen by Louise Porter as usually an act of coercion. By the act of praising we seek to control behaviour by affirming the behaviours we like, and usually as a corollary, not praising actions that are a problem for us. Praise is not effective in building self-esteem, as validation is attached to the performance of the activity in question rather than to qualities experienced by the subject as intrinsic to their being. Self-esteem, which is a prerequisite to ethical agency, is established inter-subjectively. What this means is to be able to give esteem to others we have to have experienced the kinds of social recognition that validate us, to learn how to validate others, and that mutual recognition and respect are the foundations of ethical relationship. By experiencing and re-experiencing healthy, non-coercive social-esteem-building in groups, we are learning to esteem ourselves and others, and the interdependence of feeling 'esteemed' and of 'esteeming' others. In terms of AVP's Mandala, this is respect for self and respect for others.

Acknowledgement, which is Porter's preferred tool of recognition, teaches us to take responsibility for our own creation of a healthy sense of self. By receiving information that values our contribution, without telling us we are 'good', we are forced to self-evaluate. It becomes us/ourselves who tell us we are good, and we thereby build the skills of self-evaluation. We are assisted by others who provide us with valuable feedback, but the responsibility for how we feel about ourselves is our own. Once again personal growth — in this case, through self-evaluation — occurs through taking responsibility for ourselves.

HIP's techniques for affirming without praise revolve around describing events rather than attaching value and judgement to the events themselves. Thus a facilitator who has just run a successful workshop might be affirmed by saying, 'Thank you for facilitating this weekend, I got a lot out of the workshop' as opposed to, 'Your facilitation this weekend was fantastic'. The former validates with thanks and shares that the experience was positive. Thus the facilitator is made aware that the work they have done is useful and appreciated — both vital for continuing to do what can often be difficult and tiring work. Most importantly this way of affirming leaves the responsibility for validation to the person themselves. We are given the information we need to make sense of ourselves as a valuable contributor to the community we are part of, and our part in a successful cooperative endeavour. Conversely, praise for our action separates us from the collective and cooperative nature of what we have experienced and reminds us that our competent performance is the attribute of value, rather than our self. Self-esteem built on performance is inherently unstable; if we fail to perform, we no longer have the means to identify ourselves as valuable, and consequently are liable to fail to see the value in others when their performance may also falter.

## 4: Reconstructions

In this chapter it is my intention to pull together the methodologies of the Alternatives to Violence Project and the possibilities for resisting or transcending domination inferred from the work of Jessica Benjamin. I hope to show, via a series of hypothetical reconstructions of the incidents described earlier, how these ideas can work together to build a way of ‘doing’ politics and involving self in the world of social action, which has as its primary directive creating, sustaining and restoring social connection and relationship through holding the tension between recognition and assertion of personal needs. Jessica Benjamin speaks of mutuality and attunement between parent and infant, or between adults in erotic love. In actuality experience of absolute connection and balance of these tensions will be rare, and it may perhaps be more common for such relations to be momentary, imperfect, or tinged with power struggles, and tendencies to dominate or allow domination. A situation where infant-parent and adult erotic love relationships continually have to work and struggle to maintain an approximation of this ideal state is far more realistic, and certainly more common. Similarly in politics and social action it is progress towards the ideals and the minimisation of domination, and the moderation of the damaging and dominative aspects of power relations that is realistically sought.

The idea I am hoping to build here suggests that communities or collectives of people however constituted — many or few, long term or short term, intentional or unintentional, created and sustained by commonalities or differences — could benefit from an increased degree of mutuality. The idea is that wherever people come together and interact they will find themselves in recognitive relations and balancing the potentially competing needs of self and other, as with the infant-parent relationship. The social need to recognise and meet the needs of others to attain a degree of mutuality will also be present. In political and social life, intimate and deep ways of connecting, which are appropriate and desired in parent-child relations or adult erotic love, are not the kinds of connection that are practical or even desirable. In some intentional communities, such as spiritual communities, close intimacy may be a sought outcome, or a product of

community life. In work places and spaces of social struggle intimacy may be less, and mutuality more formal, of a smaller degree and harder to sustain.

### **Benjamin revisited**

It is worth at this stage elaborating one further aspect of Jessica Benjamin's theory, as a connecting metaphor between infant-parent relationships and the world of political and social action. Benjamin (1988, 34) uses Mahler's label of rapprochement to describe the period in the life of a toddler (around 14 months) in which they experience the fullest tension between the growing strength of their own agency and sense of omnipotence and separation that emerges as they explore and attempt to actualise this feeling of power. Mahler et al. (1975, 76–77) note that children at this stage often express a *stronger* desire for connection and involvement, as awareness *of* and impulse *to* separateness most strongly emerge. If the parent is to successfully deal with this phase in a way that establishes the possibilities of ongoing mutuality, the challenge is to affirm the positive aspects of the child's agency (that they are capable of affecting the world) but to reflect back a sense of discomfort or annoyance at the objectifying aspects of the child's behaviour (that part of behaviour that demands that the parent responds passively to attempts to control and dominate).

Benjamin, drawing on the work of Winnicott (1957, 59–63), continues her argument by suggesting that in this phase, rather than impose upon the child the realities of life (and shatter illusions of omnipotence), a parent should open opportunities for the child to take initiatives that enable direct learning of the consequences of attempts at using power or agency for domination. If the parent reflects the natural annoyance, impatience and resistance that is usually provoked in such circumstances, the child will pay a price of relative disconnection, and loss of mutuality. A child who is successful in objectifying its parent, perhaps through the parent's lack of subjective resistance, will (according to Winnicott and Benjamin) feel loss, grief and emptiness (Benjamin 1988, 37–42). A parent who is prepared to let their child experience this without closing the door to ongoing mutuality allows the child to learn by its own experience that domination is an empty and unfulfilling way of relating. Furthermore, in going through a process with the

mother, it is possible and desirable for the child to enjoy its own agency and effectiveness in balance with the 'other' also exercising theirs. Effectively, in testing the boundaries of power and mutuality a child learns the mechanics and value of recognising others in balance with a personal need for recognition.

Within this example there is a powerful insight for ways in which we may begin to translate the possibilities for recognitive relationships in infant-parent relationships to those we experience in political and social life. The implication here is not that the search for mutuality evident in the infant-parent relationship is sought, attainable or even desirable in adult complex social relations, merely that the techniques of mutual recognition used in the earlier relation will prove beneficial in establishing good feelings, good relations and better instrumental outcomes in political and social life. Political and social struggle, like the infant-parent relationship, is marked by inequalities of power. Unlike the infant-parent relationship there is no pre-existing relation of love and mutuality as a point of reference or mitigating influence against using our power to dominate others. To the extent that mutuality exists, the commonality of shared community and living in the same culture under the same laws gives us a preliminary mutuality upon which to build. Whereas in the early infant-parent relation mutuality is built extensively through play, by later infancy mutuality is sustained during differentiation by a balancing by the parent that makes the ongoing mutuality safe, but gives the child a taste of the disconnected feelings that accompany the child's first attempts to dominate the parent. This relationship has some 'heat', as the child, and to a lesser extent the parent, will express anger and frustration and grief at various stages of the struggle. Political and social struggle is similarly likely to have some heat, and it is the aim of the would-be recognitive relater to balance these natural feelings and their expression with the cultivating and sustaining of existing social mutuality.

In line with AVP's philosophy of working with feelings it is important not to deny or diminish these (negative) feelings. It is these feelings, positive and negative, that contain the messages about needs that can hopefully be explored, not in the safe workshop situation, but in the midst of often uncomfortable collisions of needs and interests. Here



we can apply the insights of Benjamin and Winnicott. It is important not to impose ‘consequences’ on those we experience conflict with. If we are to act as ‘undominatively’ as possible, we should allow consequences to be experienced. To ‘stage’, overstate or understate our feelings is to attempt to use such feelings to the advantage of self and at the possible expense of the other, rather than allow them to be of possible use in exploring, understanding and potentially resolving the conflicts at hand. When we are the subject of attempts to dominate us, it is important we share our feelings of anger, resentment, or unhappiness with our relationship partners. Once again these can be shared in terms of ‘I’ statements. In the reconstructions I will attempt to show how this can be done in a way that maintains relationship, but allows for the possibility of those attempting to dominate to experience the negative (emotional) consequences of their actions. It is highly probable that initial attempts at this strategy in situations where relationships are poor, and empathy with the other not sought or valued by our ‘opponents’, that they will not be interested in learning from our expression of feelings. As with many idealistic systems where we seek to ‘be’ the change we seek, we may have to spend a substantial period of time demonstrating the potential of these techniques before we see others take an interest in the alternatives. Whilst it may be of value to explain our approach to others where we sense an openness to the strategies, often it will be in others experiencing a change in relations with us via our unilateral commitment to mutual recognition, and the strategies to enhance it, that may see others naturally take an interest in their part of a potentially recognitive scenario. Whilst the strategies I explore here may in some circumstances yield immediate positive results, potential practitioners should be aware that the likelihood is that real change in the way people relate and respond in conflict may be very slow, and often fail, particularly in situations where the level of negative feeling excited is deep or strong.

In political or social struggle, depending on the nature of the case, communities that are brought together may be fragmented into for and against, friend and foe — with relations within ‘camps’ being akin to work environments, or if the stakes are high, the experience of solidarity may propel relationships to a depth of brotherhood that opens up the possibilities for deep mutuality and attunement. Books such as the *Resource Manual for a*

*Living Revolution* (Coover et al., 1981) have looked at how such intentional communities can create and sustain their connection, and live, learn and grow through political and social struggle. Axel Honneth (1995) describes in depth how collective struggles for recognition can be important in the formation of identity and connection. Paulo Freire (1972) has contributed the idea that political and social action can be approached as learning situations, inherent in which is a valuing of what can be built in communities that struggle together. I hope to extend the work of these writers to look in more detail at communicative mechanics for recognition that is possible between ‘camps’ of people traditionally perceived as contestants or oppositions, rather than the intra-movement recognition that has been the focus of these theorists. The strategies I present here are of course ideally suited to intra-group dynamics, as a higher degree of mutuality and commonality are likely to exist given the relative level of pre-existing agreement which is foundational to many social action groups. I have chosen to explore the application in the harder area of traditional opponents to highlight the issues inherent in working with difference.

It is not unusual for people to be antagonistic to the ‘opposition’ and not include them at all in the sense of community, and only apply community-building strategies to ‘their own side’. The communication strategies described here will apply to all parties involved in relating. Whilst the strategies are applied to all those directly involved in the communication at hand, it also includes those not present whose interests are at stake. In political argument, we often speak for others, and whilst this in itself is an accepted and valuable part of political or social struggle, these needs of others will only be part of the equation indirectly expressed as the needs of self to advocate or support the needs of others. AVP is grounded in ‘I’ statements, and it is on the basis of personal recognition claims that these strategies are formed. Thus at Sandon Point, whilst a significant part of my involvement was grounded in supporting the claims of Aboriginal people to a certain relationship with land that was under threat by the actions of others, this advocacy will be addressed in terms of my own need to take such a position, not on any legitimacy derived from any perceived ethical leverage given by the position itself. Thus if in direct confrontation with a police officer who is trying to remove an activist from a picket line

whose purpose is to protect the needs of Aboriginal peoples: we would express our own needs as such: ‘... sorry officer I can’t co-operate, I need to support the traditional owners in their struggle for respect for traditional relationships to land.’ We can not speak for Aboriginal people, or derive legitimacy for our behaviour based on the needs of others. In the moment it is our needs and our relationship with the other that form the basis for understanding needs. Other party’s interests may inform our actions, but our actions and our feelings and needs remain our own responsibility. When relationships in the moment are created, sustained and repaired we can then raise the incorporation of the needs of others. This doesn’t imply our interests and needs are more or less important than those who we may be acting in solidarity with, merely that establishing proper relationships at the coal face of political struggle is the best point to begin the struggle for the macro-political changes we may have as our eventual aim. In professional counselling and teaching it has been shown that the quality of the relationship between counsellor and counselee and teacher and pupil is the primary determinant of quality outcomes. The chosen modality of teaching or counselling may indeed be important as well, but it is secondary to good relationship. I hope to inspire readers to explore the possibility that the same is true for the world of social conflict, and that by prioritising the quality of relationship over our tactics, strategies and moral outrage, we will be opening up the deepest possibilities for real personal and political change, and sustain and ‘deal out’ less interpersonal damage as a result of the deeper attention given to the needs of all participants in social and political conflict.

My approach will be three tiered in that I will elaborate on the possibilities engendered by what I could have done differently before the event, at the moment of the event and after the event. In each case the question ‘what would I have done differently?’ will focus on what I could have done to try to achieve greater opportunities for participants to be exposed to the idea of balancing assertion and recognition of needs, and to learn and practise the skills necessary to attempt it. The goal is to establish and sustain relationships that have a level of mutuality and connection, rather than relations based in the domination paradigm in which satisfying one set of needs ends is pursued to the exclusion or diminishment of the expression and fulfilment of others. The approach used

in each phase will be different. Pre-event reconstructions will look at possibilities for establishing relationships conducive to exploration of recognitive relationship and learning possibilities. In the moment of the event I will focus on possible responses to actual circumstance that open up possibilities to relate recognitively rather than dominatively. The final stage of the reconstruction will focus on what can be done to restore or improve relationships damaged by the interactions. It is not my intention to explore the possibilities for relationship healing in the same depth as the first two categories. This is not to suggest it is less important. Quite to the contrary, it is my belief that failure to establish good relations and the consequent damage to people at an interpersonal level will follow most political and social exchanges, making the need for healing communities after conflict, in fact, the subject for a major study in its own right. I will restrict myself to suggesting how the restorative practices questions can begin an exchange that may begin the healing journey for individuals or communities, but I will not attempt a hypothetical reconstruction of how this process might look.

The incident involving youths throwing rocks has already been partially and simply reconstructed earlier, by way of demonstrating the basic idea of restorative practices. I will now re-examine this incident using the three tiered approach described above, to demonstrate the range of alternatives for intervention in the situation available for the would-be practitioner of this alternative model of relating in social and political conflict.

### **What would I have done differently before the morning of the incident?**

If asked what I would have done differently my first response would be to have done some preparation before I arrived at the picket line that morning. In an AVP workshop, before setting the participants into conflict role-plays in which they practise and model ways of communicating and relating designed to optimise the possibilities of nonviolent conflict transformation, participants are taken through a long community building process. The AVP workshop model contains a basic and advanced workshop, each of which are run over two and a half days. Depending on the progress of the group, actual participation in conflict scenarios may not happen until the second full day of the workshop, or not at all, if facilitators are not confident about the capacity of the group to

deal with the interactions involved in a safe and respectful manner in which learning is most possible. Translating this into what is possible in politics is a complicated and skilled task. Sometimes we will be faced with scenarios that we are unprepared for, and perhaps no amount of realistic planning or forethought could have anticipated. Or the situation may appear ‘out of nowhere’ and involve people with whom we have no relationship, and no possibility of forming a prior relation. These situations can only be dealt with at the level of the second two tiers. This, however, was not the case at Sandon Point that morning. There had been plenty of time to prepare for what might happen when Stockland tried to break the community/union picket line.

Whilst to my knowledge I’d had no opportunity to meet or interact with the youths who were doing the rock throwing, I did have relations with many of the picketers, including some who were actually present, and I had also had the opportunity to meet the security guards who had taken up station the previous day. With regard to my fellow picketers, we had known for months that in all probability there would come a time when Stockland would attempt to start work on the site, effectively breaking the picket.

The community of people involved in the picket was diverse. Originally the picket was established by a small group of concerned local residents, who had lost faith in conventional participation in the issue, and decided that more direct and stronger statements of disapproval, and action to stop the development, were needed. The picket quickly attained enough public support to be stationed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and ran for many years. I knew a good proportion of those who picketed regularly (I was a regular picketer myself), and was close to the inner informal executive who had the most significant impact on the activities of the group. The picket also quickly drew the solidarity and support of the South Coast Labour Council — a local conglomerate that had many unions in its membership and attempted to act in the interests of the wider union movement in the local area. I knew and had good working relations with both the secretary and president of this institution, through both social interactions and previous struggles: I had been a community delegate on a committee established as a result of

another union ban ('Scarborough/Wombarra Tunnel'), some years earlier, in which I had worked closely with one of the above mentioned.

As a result of my long term and deep involvement (I had been involved in the issue for six or seven years prior to the establishment of the picket) and my education and interest in the broad idea of nonviolent protest (I had already begun but suspended a PhD that was effectively an earlier attempt at this thesis), I was in a better position than most to raise within the group ideas about how we should conduct ourselves when the almost inevitable clash between the picketers and the developers came. In fact there had been some informal discussion about the tactics the community should use, and whether there should be some attempt try to agree upon, or generate common values or codes of conduct relating to, how we could approach (what seemed to be the inevitable) conflict with emissaries of the developer, and 'the law' (who we were certain would be mobilised in support of developer interests, not those of the picketers or the Aboriginal community). In a discussion with a significant member of the picket community — who I often used as a 'litmus test' of the balance of community feelings — it was stated that any attempt to control the behaviour of people once the 'action' had begun would be not only ineffective but possibly divisive. At the time this comment had been enough to blunt my enthusiasm for exploring the issue: my level of confidence and energy to begin such a process dissolved easily in the face of the seemingly astute but hard-bitten cynicism of my fellow picketer.

If I were to approach the situation again, with the idea in mind of generating support for exploring action aimed in the broadest way at building the foundations or possibility for beginning a discussion about the way we could relate during the upcoming conflict, I would not be dissuaded so easily. This raises the very real issues of commitment and confidence in beginning and sustaining discussion within communities or groups that one may ultimately hope may lead to the exploration of the kind of recognitive ways of relating posited as an ideal here. In this case I had 'tested the water' with a person I felt was liable to be hostile to the idea, and this had the effect of dissolving some of the confidence and energy that I had to make a beginning. So for me, and perhaps for others

whose levels of confidence, courage, commitment and energy may be easily eroded, I would now begin by approaching those within the movement who were already open to such considerations. Whilst in the long run, members of the community who are hostile or at least not immediately open to the discussions I may hope to engender must be engaged with, it is important for those intent on such a beginning to build on the possible support that may already exist, as to act alone is to heighten the risk of failure and disappointment, of which people can usually only take so much before starting to become discouraged.

In my case, whilst I sensed my preoccupations with ethical conduct (not as yet formalised as the ideas I am building here) were not widely shared, there were a few who would have given such an idea wholehearted support, and a slightly wider group who would have been interested and at least initially mildly supportive of beginning a dialogue. In fact at later stages of the campaign, when we began locking on to machinery and building blockade devices, the small group of people engaged in these activities did have discussions about, and broadly endorsed the ideas of, nonviolent action in relation to the activities we were about to enter into. Such a group would have been an ideal starting place for opening up discussion about deeper recognitive communication strategies. If I were to prepare for the morning again, in the preceding weeks and months I would approach like-minded people and the nascent nonviolent action group to begin dialogues about attempting recognitive communication strategies in this setting. Such a group can also function as a place to practise the communication skills required for mutual recognition. One of AVP's key ideas is to learn new ways of relating by constant practice: it is useful to practise first amongst people who are responsive and interested, before beginning the much harder task of relating with others who are uninterested, uncomprehending or hostile.

In terms of applying an AVP mindset, this roughly corresponds with the idea, contained in the AVP mandala, of 'asking for a nonviolent path'. Not only is it important to have commitment, it is also important to demonstrate or exemplify principles in order to share the ideas and show how they apply. In this case asking for a nonviolent path is

communicating to others a need: the need to approach conflict nonviolently, or in this case the need to build, maintain and restore recognitive relationships between all actors involved in the conflict. Again it is important to demonstrate actual practice and frame needs in a personal manner. For example in public meetings or consultation within the group (which includes the developers and extended network of their supporters) I could state: 'I need to resolve this conflict nonviolently in a way that meets the needs of all of us'. One of the first steps must be to bring the new ideas into the discussion and to continually create spaces where people can engage with their potential value.

The idea of exploring and hearing the needs of the 'opposition' is the idea most likely to meet with resistance. It is possible that expressing a personal need for a nonviolent solution may be seen as an attempt to hijack the current modus operandi of the group, moving the orientation from political and coercive ways of stopping the development to a debate about ethical conduct. Whilst the approaches of nonviolence and mutual recognition are intended to be ethical, it is important to note (and to bring into the argument when and if resistance to the ideas occurs) that such ways of relating are also tactical and may be effective in establishing the immediate ends of the group's struggle. To this end, after formalising a group of like-minded people interested in applying recognitive relations models in political actions, I would begin a dialogue within the group about how we could broaden the appeal and practice of these ideas to the rest of the people involved in the struggle

In attempting to institute new ideas into the group dialogue, as well as having approached others to support you, if possible, it is then important to conduct this introduction of ideas in keeping with the principles espoused. At this juncture there are two broad approaches to attempting to influence the way people behave during the struggle. The first is to outright suggest alternative ways of relating and attempt to explain why such ways of relating are important, ethical and potentially effective in conducting social and political action. The second is to simply begin to act in accordance with the principles, and demonstrate by example their usefulness — this is embodied in the oft-repeated maxim: 'be the change you seek'. This second approach is critical: to attempt to institute ideas



about recognitive ways of relating intended to eschew coercion in a way that itself was coercive would obviously be hypocritical and counter to the whole endeavour. A question remains about how much information about the practices of communication being used is helpful or appropriate to share with others. On this point I will look more closely at the way AVP begins the task of introducing its ideas to new groups of people.

## **Building community**

An AVP workshop is a highly controlled environment. It takes place in a set place, at a set time, begins and ends with a set group of people, and is run in a formalised way, so that each workshop takes place guided by the same principles and contains many of the same activities. Whilst people from the ‘outside’ community are often largely unfamiliar with AVP and its processes, the facilitation team will have already completed the same AVP training and then met together to establish their own relationship and particular orientation to working as a team. AVP has many team building exercises that are designed to build understanding, warmth, and conviviality between facilitators. Facilitators also go through a process of sharing needs. By the time the facilitation team faces the workshop they have often explored their own strengths and weaknesses as individuals and as a team. These exercises and explorations, though not explicitly aimed at doing so, build something like Jessica Benjamin’s idea of mutuality, in that personal needs are negotiated within a strategy designed to build relationship rather than let relationships be damaged by contesting needs. At the beginning, facilitators often talk about ‘what’s on top’. This question, which each facilitator is invited to explore, begins the process of sharing by talking about each facilitator’s immediate emotional condition. The process continues by exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the team, and an examination of the conditions and the participants of the workshop about to begin. This process is repeated during the regular breaks to make sure both the facilitators are coping, and to micro ‘tune’ the workshop programme to meet the emerging needs of the particular group. This enables the team to try to deal with the range of issues that may arise with difficult participants, personality clashes between people within the team or the participants. Both in workshops and social conflict, recognition is not a task to be performed once and then assumed ‘in place’ while one gets on with the work: it is an

ongoing, moment-by-moment task. The expression ‘mindfulness’ is used by spiritual communities to describe ongoing attention, without judgement or obsession, to the subtle psychic landscape of life. Whilst getting on with matters at hand, a facilitator or social activist wishing to practise mutual recognition must keep part of their attention on the continually changing flux of the emotional exchanges abounding in the wider group within which their actions transpire. Mindfulness is pivotal to many spiritual traditions, and its centrality is backed up by the recommendation of meditation strategies for the cultivation of the mental skill for its practice. Similarly the practice of mutual recognition will require mental training and practice of a similar nature. AVP’s regular ‘check-in’ processes are a useful reminder of the centrality of the task of regular non-judgemental attention to self and other and the exchanges between them, and such a process will be equally critical for the practitioner of mutual recognition in social conflict.

The situation I faced at the picket line that morning, like most political and social struggles, contained very little of the careful controlled environment in which AVP takes place. Where it is possible to establish prior relations with other potential actors it is useful to do so, and with genuine attempt to begin relationship, not simply to ‘know the enemy’. In this case the security guards who were later bombarded with rocks and insults spent a number of days at the site, so some continuity and development was possible. AVP has a range of tactics that can be employed to break the ice and begin relationships, some of which can be applicable, but in an adapted form. For example, at the beginning of its workshops AVP uses an affirmation name. An affirmation name provides a form of intimacy that is positive and light and helps the named take on new possibilities of being simply through reminding people of the new context each time it is used. As previously discussed, AVP also has light-hearted games and activities. Given the potential antagonism or suspicion likely to accompany a protester and security guard relationship, such a playful introduction would seem out of place and difficult to institute without the controlled set up and expectation engendered by a workshop situation. A simple and unaffected introduction would seem less loaded — ‘Hi, I’m Ian, I’m from the community picket’ and an offer to shake hands would introduce, place in context and normalise the beginning of relationship in a situation where we could naturally expect some suspicion.

It is important during the introductions to seek, and commit to memory, the names of others. The use of personal names is a fundamental act of recognition. In an AVP workshop the use of a familiar name acts to remind participants of context. If a participant's affirmation name is 'Peaceful Peter', the invocation of this name during activities serves to remind people of the context which gives our relations meaning — that we are doing a workshop aimed at learning and practising nonviolent ways of relating. In the context of meeting and later relating with the security guards this is slightly different but equally important. If the security guard introduces himself as 'Michael' or perhaps 'Macka' this is useful for the possibility of retaining and restoring relationship in a later scenario where we may experience conflict. If, for example, during the rock throwing incident, I had known the names of guards, I would have had greater ability to establish or re-establish relations in which the negotiation of needs would be possible. If I had gone to the guards after the rock throwing, without introduction, and without knowing names, even an open question, such as, 'hey guys what's been happening here?', is not powerful in terms of instigating an active listening and exploration of needs as we will have little familiarity or trust. If they have met me and know my name some recognition may be forthcoming. If I am able to say, 'hey Michael, what's been going on?', I am reminding him that we already have a relationship, thus raising questions about whether it is worth sustaining, improving or restoring. The question, 'hey Macka, what's been going on?', is even more potentially useful as it reminds him that we have not only a relationship, but one with some intimacy, thus increasing the possibility of his valuing the relationship and behaving in ways that recognise and sustain the goodwill we may have generated. In such cases intimacy should not be presumed or over used: undoubtedly knowing how much intimacy is 'real' and/or appropriate relates to the practitioner's ability to 'read' the situation and relationship. The more one attempts and 'goes through' such situations with proper reflection, the more useful and accurate we must hope our 'readings' become.

It stands to reason, if my reading of Benjamin is accurate (that we retain desire for some mutuality and attunement in all our adult social relations), that the more we have done to

build relationships, the more effort will be made between us to do the things required to sustain rather than damage them. If after introductions we have a cup of tea and share a joke — better still. If during the cup of tea we find out we support the same football team, or like the same music, better again. But important and desirable as shared experience is to building connection, it is equally important to remember Benjamin's theories relating to mirroring. For the parent and infant it was vital, at the same time as mirroring commonality, to signal difference, as this process begins the exchange of mutuality with appropriate boundaries that prevent or guard against objectification. As with the parent-child relationship where the parent gifts the child power by stressing connection, so, in building relationship with a potentially suspicious other, it is useful to begin by exploring commonality at the expense of difference. Difference can be cautiously explored in its paradoxical relation to sameness. We may find similar commitments to different goals: passion for art in one may resonate with passion for sport in another. We may find commonality in drives, desires and needs, attached to different purposes. As connection is felt to begin, some reflection of difference is useful so that the process of recognition is conducted in a way that safeguards what is unique and personal about self, and joins what is common to both. This mirrors and reflects the hypothetical desired state of mutuality where we are free to be ourselves whilst experiencing connection with other. Encouraging our relationship partner to be comfortable with difference at the same time as exploring commonality will be vital later when we experience this difference as conflict, as our different reasons and purposes for sharing the same geography become apparent.

In terms of communicative strategies to achieve this exploration, and to retain the tension of sameness and difference with a tentative hope of some mutuality, again relatively light and undirected conversation offers some way forward. For example: suppose we had begun our conversation with something like, '... you guys been around here for long?' If I received an answer like, '... nah, haven't been down this way in years, I live up Penrith way', I could respond in a way which shares sameness with difference to establish something we share but also signal differences, demonstrating that we have things in common to build on and differences to explore, and that this process can be embarked

upon as part of the growth of respect and connection. An example of a response in this regard may be: 'I've been here a while now, but I remember when I came here from Western Australia it took me a while to feel part of the community here, but it's a great community and I settled in really quickly'. This response lets the individual know that I am a 'local', but that I too was once new here, and despite the uncomfortable feelings that can accompany being outside a community, these can be overcome. Such demonstrations of empathy wrapped up with difference are not automatically 'read' as such, and it may take repeated efforts to establish the balance of connection, separateness and mutuality in the way we may want; or perhaps we may be unsuccessful, with these efforts dismissed, ignored or misunderstood. If our relationship partners are open and receptive to the approach we may begin a relation of value to all. In any event there is no damage done in exploring the possibility, and much to be gained.

Personal motivation is critical here. If we establish connection in order to use it to have some leverage over others' behaviour at a later date, we have fallen into traps of domination. To use the techniques described in this paper as powerful tools to manipulate others would be totally counter to the purpose of placing the quality of the interpersonal connection before any other intended outcomes, and one to which we must direct the full extent of our own reflective abilities to prevent. Empathy in particular can be damagingly used against others, by gaining insight into a person's deeper self only to use it against them for the purposes of self. Connection should never be seen simply as a tool with which to control the actions of others, but as a thing worthwhile in its own right — as a condition of mutuality between people that establishes the kind of social situations that, as a general rule, make us happy, and create an optimum basis for understanding and meeting the needs of all. These are tools for the health of communities, not the means for sophisticated manipulations to attain our own needs at the expense of those of others. Hopefully, that we have become intimate with others and value the connections we have made will militate against their strategic use for personal ends, and both parties will feel more of a desire to sustain the relationships begun. It is important to remember that no one is automatically free of abusing the condition of intimacy, and we must be vigilant with ourselves and others where we observe it happening.

## **Support**

AVP facilitation is done in teams, so fellow practitioners can support each other, and intervene where they see a colleague falling into the trap of using techniques to advance the needs of self at the expense of others. In line with this, another thing I would have done differently would have been to arrange a fellow practitioner to accompany me on this venture to monitor the exchange. For example, a colleague who might suspect my dialogue of being strategic as opposed to connection building could intervene to warn me. Another example: suppose I asked the workers when they thought the trucks were likely to arrive. This question would be clearly aimed at using whatever degree of familiarity I had built to ‘fish’ for information useful to the blockaders. They could use the ‘shining of a light’ to ask me what I am doing, in order to alert me to my inappropriate question. Similarly, should I fail to recognise strategic or harmful interactions on behalf of the security guards, my colleague can either direct questions towards the guards, such as ‘why do you say that?’, to encourage their reflection, or to me — ‘how are you feeling?’, after a comment that could be abusive or manipulative, and where I have not seemed to notice and take appropriate action myself. Having a partner and therefore witness also enables debriefing after the exchange. During debriefing one can share what is working and what needs reappraisal. Our observer may share insights such as — they felt we ‘talked down’ to the guards or that we assumed too much good will, or pursued too much intimacy too soon, or on too little basis. An exchange one may feel was successful may be seen by an observer as less successful, or even deeply problematic and requiring much in the way of repair to re-establish even the basics of good relationship.

## **Expectations and priorities**

By the time a company has felt the need to employ security guards to protect what they see as their needs or interests, and the local residents, backed by the trade union movement, have felt the need to blockade the intended development, we are clearly facing a situation where relationships are poor, damaged or largely non-existent. It is important to recognise this and alter one’s aims and expectations accordingly. In approaching the security guards, to begin a relationship, my expectations of possible

mutuality and attunement would be low. Ideally I would love to have been able to get both picketers and security guards to engage in a workshop, in which all parties would learn and embrace the kind of recognitive relations and the communication strategies that engender them. My experiences in blockading Ranger and Jabiluka uranium mines in the late 1990's suggest to me that this is unlikely. In this case meetings were held between police and protesters to try to establish something like a code of conduct. When the 'heat' of the situations arose much ill will appeared, accompanied by verbal abuse, violence and other forms of manifest disrespect, from both sides of the dispute. The situation was also complicated by the participation of people on both sides who had not been involved in these prior discussions, new arrivals at the blockade, and the Northern Territory Tactical Response Group whose authority appeared to eclipse that of the local police with whom we believed we would have our engagement when the protests began. To expect people to be able to approach conflict in a new way when situations commonly engendering strong feelings arise would be optimistic in the extreme. Similarly to expect personnel to remain constant in the uncontrolled political and social world would also be setting oneself up for disappointment.

Given that relationships are already poor, the situation not readily controllable, and support for my ways of relating unestablished, I would adopt a damage control orientation. I would begin modelling respectful and recognitive relations with all those that I could, in the hope that some connection and mutuality could be established, which might create some learning opportunities for those involved and observing. Similarly it is hoped that degrees of connection between people will give some leverage in terms of preventing extremes of coercion and domination such as physical and verbal violence, most harmful to the human subject. Such an approach directly implies a hierarchy of damaging and dominative behaviours we would try to prevent. Most would agree that in such a situation preventing physical violence is high up in this hierarchy. My priority then in establishing relations would be to quickly find a way (in AVP terms) to ask for a nonviolent solution. It is important here, as with other examples, to use I statements and to pitch the comment in terms of needs, and in this case I would avoid the use of the term violence, to open the possibility of including more general acts of coercion, not

commonly associated with violence but nonetheless antithetical to mutually recognitive relations. In the case of the security guards, at this point, their behaviour, other than the wearing of guns, had not contained any hint of violence, and as such to mention a nonviolent solution may imply to them, perhaps unfairly, that they had behaved in a way that had already presaged violence. Based on the work of AVP mentioned earlier, it is useful in such a situation simply to describe the problematic action rather than label it and therefore deliver judgement. Implied accusation may reasonably be seen as coercive. It was the picketers who were behaving violently. In terms of communicating my needs to them, it is therefore appropriate to do so in a way that acknowledges that the threat of violence, at this stage, emanated from the picket line, but the needs I am about to make plain apply to all concerned. A statement that achieves this end may look thus: 'If I'm going to be involved here I need people involved in the picket to stop throwing rocks, and for all of us to work hard to settle any differences we have with fair communication'.

### **Building relationships and gathering information**

My next step, given the context described above and inspired by the philosophy of the listening ceremony, would be to actively listen and facilitate some openness on behalf of my new relationship partners. This should be done with a roughly equivalent sharing of self and exploring of other (as one would do in an AVP workshop with a formal designation of listening and speaking roles) to avoid the sense (or actuality) of either dredging for information or not showing active interest in the other by talking too much about self. If the security guards had seemed unwilling to talk, I could offer some simple prompts such as, 'is this your first job round here?' or 'have you been doing this kind of stuff for a while?' Any answers to these questions will help me understand whether they know the local area and politics and whether they are experienced in the sort of situation they are about to face, as well as allow me to neutrally engage in relatively light conversation where I take an interest in who they are. When, or if, relationships acquire some ease or sense of normality, comments such as, 'I hope our mob have been treating you okay', could begin the task of talking about how we are going to handle the conflicts we are likely to face, and a discussion where I could let them know what my needs are and invite them to share theirs, and optimistically how both can be met whilst retaining



the respect with which we have begun relating. Given the rock-throwing incident I would move as quickly as possible to the raising of how this had affected them, in order to ascertain the risk of further violence.

### **Non-verbal communication issues**

In terms of initial communication the nonverbal aspects of relation also need close attention. Whilst the primary focus of my work here is to examine in depth the verbal aspect of exchange, such measures as I describe could be enhanced or undermined by the nonverbal messages that accompany them. Applying the same theories of mutual recognition to nonverbal communication is more complex, and perhaps better researched in its own merit by a specialist, but a few examples will be useful to the work at hand. It is generally accepted in most counselling models and listening practices, and certainly practised in AVP listening, that in an Australian context the listener should lean slightly forward and make occasional eye contact with the speaker, to demonstrate active and interested listening. In meeting the security guards, we were all, in fact, standing up, and separated by the high wire fence of their temporary compound. Eye contact was the only measure of making connection at my disposal. Eye contact, like leaning forward is, like all attempts at communication, a two way process. If I had perceived the security guard persistently resisting or avoiding eye contact, or if indeed we had the chance to sit, and the act of leaning towards them seemed to induce discomfort, or a moving away, I would respond to this by gradually reducing the behaviours until I notice them attain a level of comfort. This attention to nonverbal detail mirrors the kinds of processes indicated by Benjamin's recognitive model, in that we offer something of ourselves and yet prove responsive to the needs of others, especially if our way of presenting and interacting is perceived as unwelcome. Such a process is a nonverbal negotiation of needs where we demonstrate we are responsive to the needs of others (making less eye contact or keeping a greater physical distance away from our relationship partner) and yet faithful to the task of asserting our own needs (establishing a more intimate relationship with eye contact and what we believe is interested and attentive body language) to build relationship and community by attentive listening.

It is important to note that in some cultures both eye contact, physical proximity and/or touching can be problematic, and attempts to institute such practices should be conducted in the spirit of an offer, not as an imposition. This means gestures initiating such practices should be done slowly, and minimally, with close attention to the response. This could mean making eye contact for a brief moment, then breaking if any negative reaction is perceived. Similarly if we move towards someone and they move away instantly, we can demonstrate our receptivity to their needs by moving away and concentrate on meeting our needs to establish relationship without physical proximity. In this case I noticed when I did talk to the guards their body language was classically unwelcoming (physically distant, arms folded, unwilling to make eye contact), which is understandable given that by this stage they had been the victims of rock throwing and abuse from members of the local community. My best response, in retrospect, would have been to have made my initiation of contact prior to these acts of aggression by my fellow community members. This would have involved trying to move closer, making sure my arms were by my side, and cautiously attempting to make eye contact as an accompaniment to my introductions, and watching the changes in their response as an indication as to whether they appear to be comfortable with the opportunities for intimacy I intend with word and action. If all goes well in such an introduction I could cautiously proceed to suggesting we have a cup of tea and chat longer, without the fence between us. If the guards remain suspicious, I could make the exchange brief, and make a similar low-level attempt later in the day, or perhaps the day after.

Another area where preparation would have been realistically possible, and with hindsight necessary, was building relationships with the other groups affiliated with the community picket, in particular people at SPATE and the South Coast Labour Council (SCLC). As it happens I had no relations of any significance with the SCLC during the blockading activities. This is not to say that their role in the matter was not important and the relationships not worth cultivating. I had reasonable, if not unproblematic, working relationships with the two significant office bearers of the SCLC, and some discussion of how we would relate in potential conflict would almost certainly have been useful in building these relationships in line with the model approach I have sketched for the

community picket, and security guards. By the same logic, relations with the local police and Stockland would also be useful, as they both may potentially have been (and later were) significant players in possible conflict. For this analysis, I will focus instead on the relations with the people at SPATE, as these interactions were most significant, interesting, and generative of the deeper issues of recognition this thesis explores. In particular the cross-cultural elements and post-colonial nature of the political setting of the exchange make it particularly worthy of deeper examination.

### **Cross-cultural preparation**

As detailed in the narratives earlier, I had had some involvement with local Aboriginal peoples over the previous few years, and as much of this had been through the mechanism of community-based environmental and social justice groups, I was familiar with the context of myself as an Australian of (mostly) Anglo-Celtic origin trying to be supportive of Aboriginal people still struggling for basic acknowledgement of their ongoing relation to place. I had been involved in blockading the Ranger and Jabiluka uranium mines for the dual reasons of opposition to the nuclear industry and supporting Aboriginal peoples to determine what happens on lands they had been traditional custodians of for thousands of years, and had in the last two hundred years or so been displaced from this role by colonial imposition. I knew from this experience that in addition to the usual issues one might expect to arise in collective struggle, I would be very likely to experience cross cultural communication issues. It was therefore very important to give extra attention to my relations with Aboriginal people to clarify or at least explore how our collective struggle would manifest.

I would now like to explore, through the dual lenses of AVP techniques and the theories of recognitive mutuality developed by Benjamin, how I could have prepared for collective struggle with Aboriginal people at Sandon Point. When AVP facilitators prepare for a workshop in the community (I will talk from this perspective because I have no personal experience running workshops in the prison setting) much work is done before the group of (usually) four facilitators take their place in the circle with the rest of the participants. The fact that the facilitation is conducted by a team is critical because

this acknowledges that the task ahead will require more than just one person to share the workload. In group interactions, much as we may try to get people to speak in turn and cultivate (not so much as control) the mood and disposition of a group with carefully selected language and exercises, many interactions will happen at the same time and the monitoring of the intended culture of the space will require the attention of many. AVP uses a concept called ‘holding the space’. Holding the space entails making sure the context of group involvement remains generative of both group safety and growth (possibilities for transformation): it takes several people to do this. For example if one facilitator is describing an exercise whilst unbeknownst to them a participant has begun to cry or exhibit signs of incipient rage, another facilitator can watch for this and attempt to positively intervene for group safety. Similarly, and simultaneously, another facilitator may be monitoring time, as time mismanagement can contribute to stress and draw attention from the task of working within the group. By dividing these functions in a team, we give ourselves a better chance of providing the group with the myriad of conditions required for workshop success.

The clear and simple implication of the above is that in an optimal situation I would not have gone alone to the picket line on that morning — I would have arrived with support (as mentioned in the possible reconstruction of initial dialogue with the guards). In this way, if I had still chosen to interact with either the children or the adults at the picket or the security guards, I would have had others to monitor the situation, to provide information about the diversity of events unfolding simultaneously, interact with others, build relationships, and most importantly share information and usefully share critical feedback about intended courses of action.

## **Team building**

This leads to the next critical point in AVP process, which relates to team building and (to the extent possible) sharing knowledge about who the team will be working with. The AVP team is usually worked out weeks or even months ahead of running the workshop, which gives time for facilitators to get to know one another, discuss how they like to work or what issues they may have within themselves or with other facilitators that may

influence the running of the workshop. In the final stages facilitators will prepare a draft plan for the workshop and meet a few hours before the workshop for fine-tuning. In the final hours facilitators will check in with each other about how they are all feeling and any last minute changes. This process will be conducted in AVP workshop style to begin to practise and reacquaint the facilitators with the practices they will be modelling.

The second task is to try to prepare for those who are attending the workshop. In AVP (NSW) a person will have been nominated as first point of contact with the organisation. Through this contact each person who wants to and will be attending the workshop is briefly (or sometimes fairly exhaustively) talked to about who they are and why they are interested in the workshop, and also given a précis of what AVP is, how it works, what they may expect and what is expected of them, in terms of the intended workshop. In preparing for the workshop this nominated person will share with the group what we know about each person attending, how it looks as a group, and what special needs and circumstances may be foreseeable. For example if a number of participants have been referred to the group for anger management issues, who may have a history of violence, it may be decided to include more exercises designed to build group safety, and avoid exercises that may be challenging, at least on the first day, until an assessment can be made of how the group is working, and whether the participants are coping with or understanding the AVP process. A facilitation team may be similarly cautious if there are a number of participants who have been the subject of domestic violence. Other factors may include many people from different cultures with language challenges, or special needs in terms of cultural appropriateness of exercises. Facilitators will check with each other as the workshop proceeds to monitor how the workshop is going to meet the particular needs of each group.

There is a large question mark hanging over the translation of these kinds of preparation into the kind of preparation that may be useful and possible in terms of dealing with the real life unfolding of politics, and in particular relating to Aboriginal people in Australia. At Jabiluka, all blockaders attended a cultural awareness workshop run by Aboriginal people. If I were to approach the situation again, I would have approached Aboriginal

people at the Embassy to run such workshops for at least the dedicated group I would form to practise the process I am now detailing. The understandings built during such a workshop would fundamentally shape the way in which to approach the struggle, and our ongoing relationships with Aboriginal people from that point. Here I propose to look at how an AVP (NSW) approach, combined with the insights from the listening ceremony, could have been woven into our preparation for our collective struggle.

I (we) knew we would be likely to collectively experience conflict, both with the developer (who would have more or less a monopoly of access to the law and agents of its enforcement with which to defend its interests) and with each other as we differ on the means and ends of our shared endeavour. So in preparing for this, instead of trying to deal with issues as they emerge on the ‘field of battle’, our first acknowledgement is that we need to do some background work. Acknowledging that the conflict was taking place on Aboriginal land and the centrality of being guided by their perspectives was as fundamental to my approach to the struggle at Sandon Point as my broad commitment to nonviolence, but the exact meaning of this in terms of the way we all behaved was something that would have to be built. It no longer requires a bevy of scholarly quotes to see that in Australia ‘White’ voices are privileged over those of indigenous peoples, and that in a multitude of ways we are potentially empowered by a culture that systematically disadvantages and marginalises Aboriginal people. We do not begin our hopeful journey together from a place of equality, and the tools we will use to shape this relationship are socially and linguistically built to sustain the often invisible unequal power relations that mark the broader culture within which we operate. Listening to Aboriginal voices is the critical first step to challenging these pervasive cultural practices.

My exploration of how AVP/Mutual Recognition might inform preparation strategies for the indigenous aspects of struggles at Sandon Point is anchored not in general scholarly commentaries, but in my experience of local indigenous voices. The inspiration for this approach comes from a conversation with a local Aboriginal woman (Betty Little) whose cultural awareness workshop I had attended prior to my departure to the northern territory to blockade the Jabiluka uranium mine. At the end of the workshop I informed her that I

was heading up to Jabiluka. She made a number of observations of importance to me: firstly that I should do another awareness workshop on my arrival at Jabiluka as the understandings begun in her workshop would need both reinforcement and adaptation to local circumstances, and secondly that I should return as quickly as possible, as, commendable as my motives for helping First Peoples in the north may be, my connections in the south should guide me to support local people as my primary duty.

During the workshop she stressed that much of what she was sharing came from personal experience: a goodly proportion of this experience was of profound disadvantage and suffering. Much of the workshop was spent telling her personal story, her connections to family and place: the stories that had in turn been told to her by her mother and to her mother by her grandmother to her mother and so on. Even as an Aboriginal woman whose credentials to speak on behalf of Aboriginal people appeared impeccable, she chose not to make claims on behalf of all Aboriginal people, but to let her experience speak for itself, and then talk to us about what we felt after hearing such powerful stories of suffering and injustice. My own feelings included guilt, shame and powerlessness. Whilst these responses were heard, my overwhelming impression was that Aboriginal people needed me to hear their voices and to take the responsibility and opportunity of being part of a cultural dialogue aimed at ensuring a better future. That journey (of my own inner feelings), hearing the voices of Aboriginal people and the weaving of them into a shared social and personal growth, is the best I can offer those who would set out on similar journeys.

I choose here to tell my own stories and re-imagining of the possibilities inherent in them. In modelling this process through the AVP/mutual recognition lens, I invite readers to pursue their own local, personal, reflective journeys into understanding how they can work with Aboriginal people to realise a better shared future that satisfies the needs of all concerned.

## **What would I do differently in terms of the indigenous aspects of Sandon Point?**

In an AVP workshop, AVP controls the workshop space, time and way of relating, and people come to the workshop to learn the AVP ‘way’. This is not the case in an issue such as we faced at Sandon Point. In fact, those local residents concerned about the environmental and cultural impacts of the proposed development were invited by Aboriginal people to join them in their struggle to preserve their relationship to land similarly under threat. When the community picket was set up less than half a kilometre from the already existing Embassy, a formal invitation from SPATE was placed on the notice board of the tent stating that we (the picketers) were given permission to set up the camp to ‘peacefully’ support SPATE (Salter, 2013, 121). The next step, about how we then negotiate our different strategies, needs and interests was never so formally established. Whilst the picket gave the movement a geographic locus, and the Sunday night meetings there became an accepted expression of community feeling, there was nothing in the way of the control and direction that mark the AVP approach to creating and sustaining a space to work towards shared understanding and expression of needs.

There is a good case to be made that groups, such as Aboriginal people, who are systematically denied appropriate voice in the social world at large, may also find themselves similarly disadvantaged within the smaller units of social activists working for social change. If cultural biases are embedded in language and interpersonal assumptions, then an AVP inspired attempt at mutual recognition will have to take some steps to acknowledge and address these issues. At the beginning of a workshop, an AVP facilitator acknowledges traditional owners on the land on which the workshop is held and asks participants to identify if they have any special needs. During its setup AVP facilitators also ask participants to share and support each other to understand and create the conditions needed to satisfy the safety of all. These are useful steps that can be taken in the spaces of social action. My interest here is to explore how listening and recognition practices may have been applied to the situations in which I was involved. What follows here is an exploration of how the AVP/mutual recognition strategies encompassed in the restorative questions I am using here might work to overcome or diminish systemic



disadvantage imposed on indigenous people by the culture in which the blockaders at Sandon Point find themselves embedded.

The incident at the picket that morning had showed that there was no necessary agreement about how we would organise and conduct our common defence of our needs. In an AVP workshop all people are introduced to each other and in the early stages of the workshop listening exercises are performed in which (hopefully) all participants get to speak and listen to all other participants. The discussion topics for these guided interactions are deliberately aimed at giving us the kind of knowledge about each other that helps us experience empathy and understanding. It is important to note that this information and intimacy is just as useful to a person who seeks to strategically undermine or abuse relationships for personal rather than group minded outcomes. As such, exercises in AVP follow the safety exercises. Similarly in social and political struggles, such as those at Sandon Point, building connections aimed in turn at opening the possibilities for recognitive mutuality may, if done without building group safety, also open up possibilities which empower those knowingly or unknowingly engaged in practices of domination.

So how do we build safety in a non-workshop situation to minimise the chances of such a misuse of intimacy and a range of other possible differences in terms of the way we conduct ourselves during collective struggle? One of the safety features used in AVP workshop situations that could apply ‘on the ground’ in a social or political conflict is the idea of all parties explicitly declaring what they need to feel safe. In AVP participants are invited to make statements in the line of, ‘what I need to feel safe in this workshop is ...’. Specifically the facilitators usually invite participants to make an ‘I’ statement about what they can offer to help others feel safe. This feature sits well with Benjamin’s idea of mutual recognition where in the same process we assert our needs and demonstrate responsiveness to the needs of others. There is no reason why this strategy could not be applied in situations of social and political conflict, and correspondingly nothing would have stopped me trialling such an idea with Aboriginal people while we were in situations of collective solidarity, before we entered situations of collective action. There

are two broad ways to approach this. Firstly I could organise a meeting of all involved to discuss the issues. The second option, which would be the one I would have pursued if I were to approach the situation again, would be to have the discussions individually with each of those likely to be involved. There were only five to ten Aboriginal people likely to be involved, so the task of talking to them all beforehand was, in this case, feasible. I shall concentrate here on the relationship with the Aboriginal man with whom I differed at the picket line the morning of the rock-throwing incident.

To begin this discussion I would simply ‘hang around’ the Tent Embassy waiting for a private moment to say something like: ‘... when the developers try to break our blockade it’s going to be hard. I’m committed to resolving situations nonviolently, and given that the struggle is going to take place on Aboriginal land I need to know how we can do this together’. This statement asks for a nonviolent path (my needs) and begins an enquiry into the needs of the other. Given what did happen on the day, I will pursue the hypothetical reconstruction to explore the possibility that the person involved was antipathetic to any attempt to control or shape his feelings or behaviour.

If, for example, his response to this was, ‘well I’m fed up. If developers set foot on this land I’m going to let them have it’, we then need to begin the task of negotiation. The task of the person committed to nonviolence, and hearing and meeting the needs of others, is to look for the deeper need underneath the feeling of being ‘fed up’. Being ‘fed up’ suggests that the person who has this feeling has consistently not had their needs met and has lost the sense that the people in question (in this case the developers) will even listen to their needs let alone make any effort to meet them. This is common in political and social action. We can often do little to change this: it is in fact why communities often resort to blockading and other forms of direct action. What we can do is acknowledge the feelings and the need to express them, and try to suggest nonviolent ways of expressing ‘fed-up-ness’. We need to see the distinction between the need to express feelings of disappointment and outrage, and the ‘non-need’ or desire to express these feelings violently. It would have been better to have a negotiation like this whilst in a calm situation of solidarity, rather than in the heat of the moment (as in fact I attempted

on the day of the rock throwing) when the feelings are heightened due to the latest act of disregard shown by the developers and their agents.

It is also entirely possible that even in the calm moments of relative solidarity, those with whom we are likely to be involved in situations of social and political conflict will simply not want to have a discussion about needs and/or safety. We may get a response such as, 'well, you've got your needs and I've got mine'. This may be accompanied by a breaking of conversational tie and the person moving away, signalling they feel the conversation is at an end and they are not interested in pursuing it any further. In AVP a person's right to not participate is respected, as it must be in life when our communication partner breaks the connection. If this happens I would respect the decision to break communication and try again later when we are reconnected. If the communication is not broken this is a great opportunity to hear about the 'fed-up-ness'. Before strategies to find ways of expressing this anger are pursued it is important to hear and acknowledge the anger. A response such as 'you've obviously had enough of this kind of shit' acknowledges the depth of anger and invites a further exploration of the factors that have led to the current emotional condition. It is vital to let the person share their feelings of anger. The more they have a space to share their anger safely and socially, the less chance it will spill violently out in a moment of crisis. Though the mutually recognitive approach stresses the two-way aspect of listening and sharing, given the cultural context, I would privilege Aboriginal voices. In this case I would give a lot more time and space to listening and facilitating the expression of the Aboriginal man. My own needs here, whilst important, are both more visible and more likely to be met due to my relative cultural advantage. Coupled with my insights from the listening ceremony, this suggests to me an almost open ended approach to the listening. Given that cultural disadvantage is unlikely to be significantly addressed at a societal level during the conflict, I would take as much time as I can give to listening to the feelings and needs of Aboriginal activists in order to give myself the highest possible chance of understanding their needs before significantly introducing my own into the discussion. I shall return to the task of negotiating these differing needs 'in the moment' in the reconstructions that follow, describing what I

would have done ‘in the moment’ in the absence of the preparations I have just suggested would have been appropriate before the events in question.

### **What I would do differently: summary**

The first part of my answer to the ‘what would I do differently?’ question has been to say I would plan more. I would employ communication strategies to build connection and the sharing and understanding of needs where possible. With each sub group within the struggle the approach is different. In the case of those already known to me to be sympathetic to the kinds of approaches I would intend, I would attempt to solidify our relationships and suggest that we pool resources in approaching the situations together, that we build our sense of team by doing exercises together aimed at building trust, understanding, and meeting of mutual needs.

In the case of my Aboriginal fellow blockaders, given what I saw as the cultural context of systematic, ongoing injustice against Aboriginal people, I would open up the possibility that they may share their needs about how we conduct our collective struggle as a prelude to introducing my own. Cultural sensitivity in this case involves empowering Aboriginal people to begin to shape the dialogue in which we form some collectively shared orientation, as the dominant (but often invisible to us) cultural trajectories tend to deny this. Assertion of my (our) needs in this case is secondary to Aboriginal people sharing theirs in their own time and way. At some point (and this remains a difficult and personal judgement) it becomes vital that we share our own needs to ensure a relationship of mutual recognition, not a passive one. Aboriginal people will need to know our needs if we are to set up the possibilities of mutually recognitive relationships. In all of these cases mistakes are almost inevitable. I shall return to the question of restoring relationships damaged by these errors in the third part of the reconstruction.

### **Rock-throwing episode: reconstruction**

The second part of this reconstruction is to consider what I would have done differently, in the moment, given that I did not do much of the sort of planning discussed in the previous section. Given that many situations do not present us with chances to plan

deeply, how to respond in the moment is perhaps the most vital skill in social action. The guiding principle for this reconstruction is the AVP-derived concept of ‘shining a light’. As described during the section of this work that dealt with AVP philosophy and practice, shining the light embodies the idea of bringing attention to something we feel may be a problem, in a way that contains a minimum of judgement and direction on those involved. Used thoughtfully and carefully, the ‘light’ should be shone on what is happening, not the people involved. It is important to note some of the differences between using this philosophy/technique in the general flow of life and using it in the more controlled environment of the workshop. In a workshop situation the participants are positioned in terms of how they relate to an intervention by the facilitator. The facilitator is by the nature of the constructed circumstance vested with a level of authority, or at least enjoys some confidence with the group to make such an intervention. This gives the facilitator both some power and a concomitant responsibility to use it for the purpose with which it is tentatively granted, in this case to skilfully assist participants in learning to approach conflict and relationship in the ways recommended by the AVP credo.

In approaching the rock-throwing children, the security guards and members of the community picket that morning at Sandon Point, I was vested with no such recognised power or authority. It is probable that I may have carried with me a sense of authority in such matters wrapped in my own conception of myself. I felt this, and may have been both guilty of projecting such a sense of self, and indeed been positioned by others as feeling thus empowered. In addition to this sense of empowerment, less personal and more culturally ubiquitous forms of empowerment or projected empowerment were likely to be in evidence. For example, my age (40s), gender (male), size (large), class (middle), education (tertiary) and ethnicity (Caucasian) are all categories of being that tend to be associated with either power or legitimacy in Australian culture. These are not formally granted conditions as much as unconscious social trajectories. If I am to shine a light unobtrusively, without felt judgement or blame, I must not only be aware that I have no formal recognition of others to place myself in this role, but I must, to the extent I can, in

Foucault's terms, expose the operations of power that may exist as cultural suppositions between myself and my new relational partners.

The list of characteristics that may at any given time empower one to the disadvantage of others may possibly be, if not inexhaustible, impossible to expose moment by moment, even if we suppose we are able to see and articulate them. The six categories I named above — age, gender, size, class, education and ethnicity — could each on their own be the subject of systematic analysis in terms of how attributions relating to these categories are created, amplified, and sustained within interpersonal relations and in the larger cultural and social groupings that constitute this country in which I live. Rather than despair at the enormity of such a task, I would like to use these categories, which could be argued are amongst the most powerful conveyors of hidden cultural power, to show how simple communicative steps can be taken to shed associations with power and legitimacy that may disrupt the kind of recognitive mutuality I seek to expound.

In this case the first category — age — is highly significant. In Australian culture, and perhaps most cultures, adults are given and can usually command more power and legitimacy than children. It is not my intention to examine any potential legitimacy that may be claimed or conferred by my status as an adult. My purpose is to explore mutually recognitive ways of relating that create opportunities for my relational partners to examine and change their own behaviours should they choose to do so. In keeping with this, any attributions of power or legitimacy that attend the relationship as we begin are best treated in such a way as to diminish their impact. As a middle-aged man my culturally embedded authority can be established or reinforced or unintentionally made manifest through speaking loudly or in an authoritative tone or emphasising my physical size by the way I occupy space. So my first cautionary principle in approaching the children would be to approach slowly and quietly, and speak in a tone and volume that is conversational and not commanding. Given the high possibility that I will still be first and foremost positioned as an adult with much of the attendant power and legitimacy of this position, my original idea of asking the children, 'what's happening?', may in fact be

too interrogative and demanding for the purposes of establishing the beginnings of a potentially mutually recognitive relationship.

Instead I would propose to say something like, ‘Hi guys I’m Ian’, and then leave a space for response. This places me more in the role of actively witnessing the events rather than positioning myself as someone with a right or interest in taking part in what is transpiring. A lower level of intervention would have been passive witnessing, which would be simply to be seen to be observing. As I perceived this level of witnessing already happening, and the gaze of others seemed neutral or even approving, this would make me feel obliged to take the more active witnessing role, of making contact and including myself in the action. Another virtue of this more active witnessing is that it conforms quite closely to Jessica Benjamin’s idea of the need to balance assertion of needs with recognition of the needs of others; the act of introducing oneself is in effect a request to be recognised, and begin a relationship. This active witnessing could be taken a step further in assertion by a statement like: ‘Hi guys, I’m Ian, and I’m with the picket and I’m here to check out what’s going on’. Such a comment not only requires recognition, but takes the first step in asserting my needs, putting all concerned on notice that I am taking an interest in what is happening, or more strongly, considering the events in question as ‘my business’. The identification with the picket is useful as it positions me broadly as ‘on the same side’, and also suggests some relationship of authority due to the implication that in thus identifying myself I may have or claim some representative status and therefore possibly some authority. The latter would suggest the beginnings of an AVP approach in terms of asking for a nonviolent solution (or at least opening the discussion that can lead to this later request), and in Benjamin’s terms the start of a balanced mutually recognitive relation, as I have both introduced myself, which is an offering of relation, and indicated that I will not be passive by alerting them to an intention and relation that asserts more of an interest in proceedings.

Passive witnessing is the lowest level of drawing the attention of those involved to their own behaviour, but can none the less be very powerful. The sense that we are being watched can be in itself a powerful moderator of our behaviour, as it can place us in the

position of imagining how our actions may appear to others and thus begin a process of self-examination that may be inoperative, latent or truncated in the heat of close involvement in the action. I may still, of course, be positioned as an adult, with much of the cultural baggage that attends this label, but in downplaying my authority I create the maximum possibility of the children beginning their own investigation into their own actions, rather than simply making them feel stopped in their 'fun' by a greater power. Active witnessing, in which we locate our position and intention, albeit in a hopefully subtle and 'undirective' manner, is less likely to be perceived as genuinely open to exploring circumstance, and more likely to be read as an intervention with the specific purpose of changing the person's behaviour. In this case I will explore the more passive witnessing embodied in the simple introduction, 'Hi guys, I'm Ian'.

The next step in my approach will be dependent on how the children respond to my introduction. One of the most important caveats in terms of applying theoretical models to actual circumstance is to retain some flexibility, and respond appropriately to events with a blend of what theoretical approaches would imagine or hypothesise as an ideal, and what seems possible and helpful. Again, it is possible to imagine an infinite range of responses to an overture such as this. I will focus on three general categories of response that seem most likely: hostility; confusion or uncertainty; and what I shall call 'apparent openness'.

Firstly, I would like to look at a hostile or negative response to my introduction. Hostility or negativity could come in a number of forms: I could be ignored, ridiculed, insulted or even open myself up to rock throwing at my own person. Depending on the severity of the negative response I may decide to stay on track with the shining of the light, abandon the approach by either removing myself from the vicinity and the event, or directly attempting to impose my will to change their immediate behaviour to something I feel is more suitable. I will follow the more idealistic line of continuing the philosophy of the shining of the light, and explore how this can be pursued when the potential relationship partners respond in a way that is apparently not conducive to mutual recognition. In terms of an example of the extent of negativity of the response I will stay with my own memory



of the mood of the day, so as to confine possible responses to a manageable number. My feeling is that the children would not have responded with outright hostility, but rather suspicion that my introduction, whilst pitched at the level of seeming to be a friendly introduction, was eventually going to be an attempt at either preventing or persuading them to cease the rock throwing. In short the negativity to my introduction is likely to be based on the reading of my intervention as not openly interested in the new relationship, but imbued with the hidden agenda to impose my adult authority upon them. I am imagining this may have been expressed by returning my greeting, but not offering their own names, with each of the children not making eye contact so that they do not become the specific target of my conversation.

My next step in terms of ‘shining the light’ would be to hold the silence. Rather than repeat the introduction or to begin a line of conversation aimed at opening a directed dialogue, I would simply hold my space, remain engaged by maintaining some eye contact and physical proximity and a relaxed friendly attitude. The aim of this ‘holding the space’ is to allow time for feelings to surface, and time for some reflection and hopefully a response based on feeling and reflection. My belief here is that the children probably feel themselves that the rock throwing is not a ‘good’ response. Most children will have been socialised with the idea that rock throwing is ‘wrong’, so trying to open up a conversation with this recognition as a learning outcome is patronising at best. What is interesting and useful is to open up the possibility, not of examining the ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of their actions, but a wider examination of motives and consequences. In simply leaving space, there is no guarantee that the children will reflect at all, let alone in the ways I hope might be useful. So after leaving a space it is useful to say or do something that may open the opportunity for this kind of reflection. The philosophy of shining the light is to allow the work, or the first steps, to be taken by the person. An extreme and idealistic practice would simply be to sit with the silence and wait until there is further response, and then work from this point. Let’s say for example one of the children, after an uncomfortable minute’s silence, then said ‘so?’ in the tone of ‘so what?’ Even though the tone is antagonistic, this is an invitation to dialogue, and I could then proceed to the statement, ‘I’m just here to check out what’s happening’, which is alerting

them to a more active interest in what is happening, beyond the most passive level of witnessing inherent in the introduction. And so the communication can continue letting the children come to a discussion about what is happening in their own time. This engagement also has the benefit of holding the children's attention and involvement (assuming I am successful) and thus bringing the rock throwing to a temporary stop.

Once discussions are begun it is then useful to consider what kinds of communication will open the children to the process of reflecting on their action, understanding and feeling the consequences and possibly considering changing their immediate behaviour. Using Benjamin's idea of mutuality it is important to recognise and reflect something of self and other in the communication process. Sometimes attempts to recognise and show empathy with children can be a little one-dimensional. For example to attempt to show empathy with them by adopting what you may believe to be their lingo can often fail to require them to practise their own recognitive skills. Thus an expression such as 'hey dudes, what's happening?' can be an attempt to show you are willing to try to 'speak their language', but perhaps may show little of the differences that require them to recognise you. Similarly, a more formal 'good morning everybody' may show little empathy and position yourself as adult and them as children. A happy medium is to communicate in a way which shows empathy for who they are, and presents something of the self that requires them to exercise their recognitive skills to make sense of you as an 'other'. This explains my choice of 'hi, I'm Ian' — in Australia 'hi' is informal but doesn't assume intimacy and familiarity as with 'hey dudes', and it is not as formal as 'hello' or 'good morning'; it neither tries to meet them at an assumed level of informality, nor overtly formalises in a way that may suggest an adult-child relationship.

There are also problems with altering your behaviour based on assumptions or guesses about who people are, or how they might prefer to communicate, in the example given — to try and speak in a 'lingo' deemed to be practised by a social sub-group of which you are not a part. These assumptions and the behaviours in which they are embedded may be interpreted as an inability or unwillingness to recognise people on their own terms, as this way of relating treats the person as a member of a category, not an individual. Such

behaviour can also be, or be perceived as being, inauthentic, as you are presenting the 'you' that you think will help them relate rather than the 'real' person. Whilst it is thoughtful to others to make ourselves more comprehensible or perhaps less threatening, this should never be done at the expense of authenticity. Our potential relationship partners need accurate information about who we are if they are to meaningfully begin the task of recognising us. We also require to see the 'real' authentic other, and need to model this authenticity. If we are to open up possibilities for mutually recognitive ways of relating, it is essential that we model the behaviours critical to its growth. The essence of practising Benjamin's theory here is to demonstrate empathy that hopefully makes the other feel acknowledged, at the same time as requiring them to recognise myself. This tension needs to be held throughout the exchange.

I do not propose to use recognitive relations as a response to actual violence. Taking a very simple definition of violence as the point where a clear threat, or actual presentment, of damage to the physical or emotional integrity of self or other, and as the point at which relations of recognition are abandoned, I will not be examining the applicability of my theories to such examples. Each person will have their own measure of where violence or the threat of violence marks a departure from social relations of a serious enough extent to break attempted engagement and concentrate more simply on preserving the self from harm. This is not to suggest that a mix of self-preservation, coercion and attempt at recognition are not always in action, or that the threat of actual violence is ever completely absent, or that the style of recognitive relations I have been sketching could have no place as a strategy of avoiding or diminishing the occurrence or consequences of violence. Rather, I shall simply restrict my study to the exploration of the possibility of recognitive relations as presented by these theories, and leave the examination of the possibility of recognitive attitudes as a response to violence to be explored elsewhere.

With this in mind I will now turn to the examination of how to proceed with such ideas given a highly positive response to the minimum intervention of a simple introduction. Suppose by way of example, that the youths answered my 'hi, I'm Ian', with an open and friendly demeanour, saying 'hi, I'm Mark, and this is Fred and Mary'. Such a response

opens the door to a more direct ‘shining of the light’ such as asking ‘what’s happening here?’ With a friendly introduction completed and relative goodwill established, such a question is now open rather than loaded with potential judgement and manipulation. The establishing of relationship via names stresses this as the primary source of my interest, not an investment in the events. Again, intent is vital here. If the establishment of relationship is a strategy only and not a primary concern, we are defeating our own purpose. In Benjamin’s ideal infant-parent relationship, real commitment to the relationship is evident, and based on fundamental biological ties. We do not have this resource in our encounters with the rest of the world, and indeed the relationships, such as the one I did have with the youths that day, may be momentary, and perhaps unsatisfying or unrewarding, particularly in comparison to the ideal infant-parent relation. The trick of pursuing such a way of relating in these situations is to treat/acknowledge such ways of relating as ends in themselves — a good way of being, independent of any particular outcomes.

In an optimistic scenario we can now begin to shine the light on the aspects of what is happening that we find problematic. Suppose for example the youths choose to respond with ‘we’re giving shit to the security guards’. In Benjamin’s terms it is important to register recognition of their actions, but to reflect back both our understanding of their actions, and our personal reservations about what is happening, thus requiring or perhaps inviting them to recognise us. On the other hand the AVP/Restorative Practices minimum intervention would leave out my own judgement and stick to a neutral description of what is happening, leaving the maximum space for a personal journey towards recognitive mutually communication practices, with low steerage communication content. To try to explain how these competing tensions can work I will examine a range of potential communicative responses that try to include all present players in the communicative scenario.

The first problem is that all players were not within easy communication distance. The security guards were only within yelling distance (a stone’s throw away). In the actual life event my intervention held everyone’s attention and I was able to ‘direct’ much as

one would if one was facilitating a workshop. But the events in question were not a workshop, and I was not directing them. It is possible that walking into the situation and introducing myself will still be placed as an intervention, and that after the mutual introductions have taken place, the people involved will be expecting that I have introduced myself for a purpose, and if I have held their attention they will in some sense be waiting to see what comes next in terms of my own actions. A truly minimum intervention could simply leave this space open, creating a consideration space for all involved, but the ‘what’s happening?’ response directs all within hearing range towards this examination. In an AVP workshop this question would be asked of all players, but in this case the security guards would be too far from the action to participate simultaneously. So in this response my intention would be to tackle the communication with the youths first, and then later, if I couldn’t safely engineer the groups together, to converse separately with the security guards.

A second problem presents itself, with a tension between differing approaches of my two otherwise compatible models. The AVP minimum intervention model would ideally simply create a space for examination, without trying to direct, control or prejudge the content or focus of any reflection that may be engendered via the ‘shining of the light’. In contrast the Benjamin model of mutual recognition would, at the same time as making recognitive gestures in the introduction, require or perhaps invite a return of recognition. The second approach is less passive, and by indicating the possible differences requiring recognition, can seem to judge the contrasted differences between the people — implying that the observable differences are those upon which the light is being ‘shined’. My own feeling here is that the decision to move from social connection to exploring difference within relationship will always carry a possibility of conflict. Benjamin notes this in the phase where a child begins to assert identity, and objectify the parent, that a smooth transition is seldom accomplished, with the child learning the value of the ongoing subjective parent with momentary confrontations in which there is a possible loss of relationship. This will be even more so in the kind of tenuous relationship that may exist in the hypothetical sketch engaged in here. The moment the ‘what’s going on?’ is said, the alert youths will sense the beginnings of my assertion of interest in what is going on.

They are required, or perhaps invited, at this point to either recognise or reject my interest in the matters at hand. The point at which to take the risk of asserting, requiring, or directing will always be intuitive, and improved by practice, and consideration. This is a good point to note, for a central part of the AVP process is to repeatedly practise these skills in role-plays. As well as practice in workshop situations, ‘real life’ is itself part of ongoing practice — errors will be made, and may well be able to be rectified later. I will return to the idea of restoring relationships damaged by such inevitable errors, after exhausting the possibilities of the moment.

### **Feeling and needs**

My next step would be to open up possibilities for those involved to understand their own and each other’s feelings, and to express these in terms of underlying needs. As the security guards are slightly physically removed from the scene of the action, pragmatically I would explore the options relating to the young people, leaving the security guards out of the interaction but open and on the alert for ways of bringing/allowing them into the exchange. Supposing that in response to my ‘what’s going on?’ question, I was indeed answered with, ‘we’re giving shit to the security guards’, or more neutrally, ‘we’re chucking rocks at the security guards’. A number of different approaches are available here. I could ‘shine the light’ on the incident by describing without judgement what is happening in terms of both parties. This could be done with a comment such as ‘so you’re chucking rocks at them, and they’re ducking for cover behind their sheds’. This comment introduces the idea of consequences, without blame. Blame or judgement would involve an interpretive comment like ‘you’re pissing them off’. I would not offer this judgement as I deem it important for the youths themselves to make the connection between their actions and the feelings of others. If the guards were within conversational distance, I could ask them, ‘... and what’s going on for you?’ or more directly with the leading question, ‘so how do you feel about being rained with rocks?’ If they indicate to me that they are not happy with this (as was the case in reality when I talked to them), then this is a response heard by the youths who are now faced with the reality that their actions have created negative feelings with guards.

Directly faced with consequences, the youths are more likely to reconsider their immediate actions.

As the guards were not within conversational distance, I could take the step of including them conceptually by speculating, 'I wonder how they're feeling about being rained with rocks?' This creates an opportunity for the young people to reflect on the feelings of the 'other', in their absence. It is also importantly different from saying as I did at the time that this behaviour was 'counterproductive'. By leaving out my judgement I not only save the early relationship from the backwards step of judging, but I leave the journey towards understanding any problems with this behaviour to the 'doers'.

It is the journey towards understanding that constitutes the object of my intervention. When answering the question of what was the hardest part of these experiences, my answer to myself was that it was the damage to the relational whole that constituted my ongoing distress about these circumstances. The beginning point to remedy this is to understand the needs and feelings of all involved. As well as understanding the feelings and needs of all present in the situation, it is important in an AVP style intervention to open up possibilities for the understanding and articulation of feelings and needs. In AVP terms all feelings have at their core a corresponding need, often in the case of negative feelings an unmet need. So in this case, the fact that the young people are throwing rocks at the security guards leads me to deduce that some negative feeling is associated with the security guards or their presence at Sandon Point, and this relates to an unmet need in the young people. It is facilitating a journey towards an understanding and useful expression of these needs and feelings that my intervention is directed. Whilst it is important in such circumstances not to presuppose the feelings and needs of others, given that many people in the community had opposed the development of houses in the area, and the security guards represented the first step towards the compromise of the community's relationship to this land, they were the ones to 'wear' the first expressions of anger and disappointment over what was happening. Whilst my own view of the situation was that the anger and frustration was being vented in the wrong way and at the wrong people, it is not leading the young people towards my opinion which guides the tenor of my

actions, but helping them understand their own feelings, relating these feelings to needs and expressing these needs and feelings to others. So my continued direction, in the absence of a three-way dialogue including the guards, is to open opportunities for the young people to self examine.

It is critical in such situations to avoid creating a sense of interrogation, but instead to approach the investigation out of general openness to the needs and feelings that may underlie the actions. It should include the possibility that what is happening is okay, and unfolding in a reasonable and useful fashion. The presupposition that the rock throwing is wrong or based on an inarticulate or poorly conceived sense of feelings and needs should be resisted. If I am creating a dialogue aimed at mutual recognition and exploration of needs and feelings then a neutral but interested listening attitude, as described in the AVP listening process, maximises the possibilities of a person feeling ‘heard’ as opposed to ‘grilled’ for information by loaded questions clearly intended to expose or trap them into admitting ‘wrongness’ and changing what they are doing. It would require too much detail to continue this reconstruction as an ‘if/then’ scenario right through to the many possible outcomes. Indeed these scenarios don’t so much as end, as go through a series of stages. Whilst we can create arbitrary beginnings and ends, the ‘struggle’ or processes designed at mutual recognition happen moment by moment and are ongoing at all times, but perhaps heightened at times of conflict, particularly in one such as described here where actual physical violence is beginning, and may escalate. My aim here is to sketch the beginning in terms of turning a situation around to create other possibilities.

### **Rock-throwing incident: cross-cultural aspects**

I will turn now to the second part of this scenario, involving my interaction with the indigenous man who was at the picket line observing my engagement with the young people. Again, I will deal with what I might have done in the actual moment, given what actually had happened between myself and the young people, and then, what may have been possible had he witnessed the ‘what’s happening?’ discussion rather than the ‘I think this is counterproductive’ conversation which had actually happened. In the first case I will begin where a fellow picketer (who I shall call ‘B’) wryly observed after



watching my intervention with the young people, ‘so what are you going to do about “L” [an Aboriginal man]? — he’s been winding the guards up all night’. The tone of the comment was of amused cynicism. This member of the community, with whom I had a good working relation in the struggle, was suspicious (often in an open and playful but nonetheless serious way) of my general affiliation with the Greens, and the idea that the struggle could be controlled and directed in any way. At the risk of overstatement my assessment of B’s attitude to the kind of aspiration contained in a thesis like this (a thesis that was already brewing, and often semi-articulated in my sense of strategy for the struggle) was that it was laudable, but very middle class, idealistic and more or less doomed in the face of human nature. The comment was provocative: it constituted a challenge of ‘ok Ian, here’s real life, what are you going to do now smarty pants?’ The comment was made within earshot of L, but I remain uncertain to this day whether he actually heard it. In any event, as I approached the small tent in which he was seated and talking to other picketers, eye contact was made and a discussion about what happened began.

My question, to myself, is what from this point onwards would I do differently than my original response, which was to share my argument about the counter-productivity of the rock throwing and verbal abuse. AVP principles are useful here. The first is to remember that I am part of a team. Contained within B’s playful challenge to my principles was a caveat of warning. I knew B to have a substantial connection to the Aboriginal community at Sandon Point, and that the connection was not just political, but extended to social relations ‘outside’ the struggle. B’s comment, playful and ironic, and also warning, could also have been construed not as just a challenge to my ideas, but an offer to share the wisdom she held. AVP workshops are facilitated by groups of four for precisely the reason that group situations require the attention and intervention of more than one to sustain the kinds of relations envisioned. Whilst as I noted earlier in the section on preparation, I had not really developed the possible support I had in the community for applying nonviolent principles (although to say this gives a level of coherence to my approach that at that time was not so developed), nonetheless the comment by B correctly responded to and offered a way forward in the dilemma in which

I found (placed) myself. If I were in the same situation again, instead of launching myself into a relation with L, I would take the time to respond to B in a way that explored the tensions within her remark, and in doing so open up the possibility of building the beginnings of a group-generated collective response to the situation we were all involved in.

My next step would be to ask for more information in a way that acknowledges I have ‘walked in’ on relations in progress. I would propose in line with this to say (to B), ‘I’ve obviously missed a lot this morning, what’s been happening?’ Rather than assuming I know what’s happening and moving immediately to my own problematic unilateral ‘solution’, such a comment shows that I am willing to take the time to work out what has happened, who has been involved, and what they feel and need. The listening ceremony at Wombarra contains a similar wisdom — honour the new relationship by tentatively approaching in an unthreatening manner, and then take the time to listen to and observe what has happened and continues to be present. If I had taken this time it is possible B would have shared then much that I came to know later, which would have counselled against choosing that moment to engage with L about his tactics for defending his relationship with place. And importantly I would have also created a space where B could have shared and explored her feelings, needs and possible insights about how to move forward collectively on our common issues.

In AVP, the facilitation team touches base and shares feelings before even beginning the plans for what may be involved in the day’s workshop. The first ‘sharing’ is usually that of current feelings, which AVP calls ‘what’s on top?’ In this part of the AVP process there is a chance for fellow facilitators to share a variety of feelings; it may be that they are excited and optimistic, or nervous and pessimistic, or even just tired and lacking sleep, or worrying about a sick child, relationship or work problem. In doing this co-facilitators become aware of each other’s strengths, weaknesses and likely orientations. After addressing ‘what’s on top?’ facilitators may begin to look at any particular problems for the workshop. This could include time constraints, the presence within the workshop of a person known to be prone to acts of violence, or another known to have

high sensitivities to particular issues. This space gives facilitators prior warning about the personal or situational factors that may cause them to modify usual practice, or take special care with particular issues. This checking-in process is repeated during each break, to monitor what is happening.

This process has a direct application in the situation I was involved with, even in the absence of a codified 'team'. When it comes to events in the world one has to work with the resources available. This does not mean that I attempt to co-opt B into an AVP style facilitation team, though if people are open to engaging in a situation in this way, then such a thing could be attempted. What it means is that I had the opportunity to encourage a solution to the 'problem', the problem being that we at the picket had no agreement or shared understandings about how we would approach the variety of conflicts we were about to encounter. My aim would now be to create opportunities for collaborative problem solving and mutually recognitive relations. My first step would be, as in an AVP workshop, to see who is involved, on both sides, and learn as much as possible about who they are. This includes identifying people who have similar purposes to myself and trying to find out what possibilities exist for us to 'join forces'. Thus the direction taken with B would be to find out the 'lie of the land', and then explore the extent to which she would support my attempts at generating collaborative problem solving. Thus, after B has shared (if she does) her views about what had been going on that morning, I could then choose to share my own feelings. Given that I already had a substantial relationship with B, I could move quickly towards the 'point' with a comment such as, 'I'm worried about the kids chucking rocks at the security guards' (this is predicated on the idea that I had chosen the 'what's happening?' as opposed to the 'I think this is counterproductive' approach).

In sharing my feelings and needs with B, I am in AVP terms beginning the 'asking for a nonviolent solution' and in Benjamin's terms beginning the assertion of self vital to a mutually recognitive working relationship, in which I don't, in my efforts to avoid coercion, allow myself to become a passive cipher, or subject. A facilitator, or in this case a person intervening in a way which attempts to facilitate (as at no stage have people

consented to my self appointment as a facilitator), has feelings and needs that are as important as anyone else's. One should never forget, even in the most altruistic-seeming interventions, that to assert one's own needs is a vital part of the recognitive relations to which we aspire. This space to share and work with B gives me the space to begin building a collaborative approach to how to deal with what will probably be a wide range of different perspectives about how we should manage our personal and collective behaviour in terms of the emerging situation at the picket. In particular, it gives space to consider how to approach the new situation with the respect I believe it to deserve. In essence my challenge here is to explore ways of approaching the situation at hand with the same kind of respect engendered in the listening ceremony.

My first assumption here is that building the relationship 'properly' is more important than stopping a repeat of the rock throwing and verbal abuse that I had been told was occurring. Once the conversational exchange with B had finished, I would then have had the information and social relationships in place to explore the more problematic relationship with L. Ideally, a recognitive exchange with B where we both listen to each other's feelings, and begin to negotiate our respective needs — and it is just a beginning, because both the expression of feelings, and the translation of these into needs, will be ongoing and moment by moment — will ultimately create a relationship where we can act collaboratively and yet continue to negotiate ongoing differences. When this is in process, only then is it suitable to open the more difficult cross cultural relationship engendered by the multiple claims of culture, ownership (or perhaps more appropriately here, custodianship) and law. This process was described previously in the discussion of 'what would I have done?' before the morning of the blockade to set up for the complex situations likely to be encountered.

My continued trajectory in terms of what had happened (my 'counterproductive' argument, which for a variety of reasons had succeeded in temporarily halting aggression) is now to deal with the relationship problems I had created for myself as a result of my public, unconsultative and unilateral action. Given my knowledge of B, the best possible scenario I may have been likely to achieve is gaining her support for the

idea that ‘we’ at the picket have a conversation about tactics. I knew from my conversations with her a few weeks previously that her personal position was something akin to ‘you can’t control people, once these things start people are going to do whatever they do and that’s it’, and that attempts to establish a general sense of ethics or conduct were ‘pie in the sky dreams’. The best I could hope for may have been her indulgence. However attempts to explore such possibilities are still useful as they keep the debate about tactics and ethics in people’s minds and give them a better grasp of the people who may elevate such concerns to centrality in day-to-day struggle. So even if my next step is unilateral, it is one that will be no surprise to those who are present (I would repeat the process I envisioned with B with any and all of the small group of picketers present) if I take the first steps to beginning a process of dialogue.

For me, the approach to L still warrants special attention, as L was the member of SPATE present, and in terms of what I understood, a representative of traditional owners who had originally given us (the picketers) permission to camp ‘on country’ in ‘peaceful’ support of the Embassy. Beyond this permission it was not known to me how our shared relationship in terms of defending ‘country’ should proceed. I lacked this understanding, and had already begun taking action where my ethics and tactics had just been publicly imposed on others. Rather than to continue on this trajectory, as I did on the day, my next step in interacting with L would be to draw on my understanding of the listening ceremony in terms of beginning a new relationship. I would then proceed by trying to establish a mutually recognitive relationship, and to use an AVP style of interaction to understand the feelings and needs of all, and only then move towards strategies for negotiating a way in which the needs of all could be met.

My first step would be to begin the relationship in a situation where a neutral beginning is no longer possible as I had already been publicly assertive of my needs and feelings before any relationship is in place. With this in mind my communicative intention has to take into account not only how to begin a new part of a relationship or situation, but also how to make best of the misjudgements I may have made. With the next communication I would be attempting to build community and the relationships within it, and trying to

establish possibilities for mutual recognition. In the final analysis, rather than have the cessation of rock throwing and verbal abuse as a prime motive, it becomes a hoped-for consequence of the kinds of relational communication that are employed. Once again, the words, actions and manner I choose would be nourished by my understanding of the listening ceremony, AVP principles and the desire for mutually recognitive relations. I would begin by physically approaching the group at the picket tent (which included L), with a warm but not effusive manner. My first words would be introduction and apology, and quite simply a statement of what happened: ‘hi everyone, I’m Ian, sorry I got carried away in the moment and started coming onto country telling people what to do, the idea of kids chucking rocks at security guards with guns freaks me out’. I would then add as a personal aside to L with whom I already have a relationship, a similar warm but not effusive ‘hi L’. There is much in this statement to be unpacked.

The introduction is important — in naming myself I make myself ‘a person’ to those who may not know me. Saying a personal ‘hi’ to L recognises our prior relationship, and the use of his name in particular personalises and recognises him in a way that a general ‘hi’ may not. The ‘warm but not effusive’ mirrors the clapping sticks and slow walk at the beginning of the listening ceremony. The warmth represents good will, and the lack of effusion, an appropriate caution. The ‘sorry’ immediately addresses the way I positioned myself on arrival at the site. It indicates that I understand that my behaviour may be a problem, and that I am open to dialogue regarding what has happened. The use of the word ‘country’ is chosen to show respect to L and Aboriginal people in general. ‘Country’ is the specific word used by Aboriginal people to talk about the land they have a relationship with. The use of this word acknowledges my respect for traditional ownership, and directs the apology with more specificity towards L. My personal introduction to L reminds him that we already have a relationship — I know him, and literally recognise him by naming. In line with AVP’s principles simple and regular exchanges form an important part of building community.

Finally, my sharing of the feeling — being freaked out — that underlies the actions I was seen to take begins the process of sharing feelings. This is perhaps the most problematic

part of the statement. Normally, in an AVP workshop, sharing of possibly confronting feelings would have occurred much further down the track when relations are built more substantially. In this case, given the situation, an explanation of my behaviour restores mutuality to the statement. A simple apology would seem to deny any validity to what I have done. In effect it may be read as an admission that I had no reasonable basis for what I did. Even though my explanation runs the risk of being an incomplete apology, I would rather indicate, even at this early stage, that there were reasons for the behaviour that I am acknowledging might have been inappropriate. In doing so it is important to exclude the word 'but' from the sentence, which could be seen as an attempt to justify my actions. I specifically chose the informal expression 'freaked out' to make sure the statement conveys more of my feelings, and less of my rationale. This constitutes the indication, in terms of Benjamin's theories, that as well as offering recognition, I will also require recognition. The explanation of my behaviour is offered as a direct invitation to understand my motives, at the same time as indicating — I hope — that now is the time for meeting and greeting, not debate about what has just happened. As well as signalling my desire for mutuality, it flags the AVP principle of 'asking for a nonviolent path'. It announces that I will be asserting other options to violence, at the same time as I note the inappropriateness of doing so without consultation. The final steps here, as per the listening ceremony, are to listen carefully to the responses given, and try to understand the feelings and needs contained within them.

It is more than likely that this apparently sophisticated approach will not immediately communicate all that I hope to my new communicative partners. Misunderstanding is very common and such an approach will often be misunderstood and provoke all manner of responses. I will now examine some possible responses to my communication and how I might deal with them, beginning with an optimistic scenario where the response seems tentatively positive. If, as I approach the sitting picketers, they begin to rise and acknowledge my address, I would move towards the closest and offer to shake hands and repeat my name, and make eye contact. The repeating of my name is in effect an attempt to draw a similar introduction from all. In each case I would make eye contact, say my name, and if they offer theirs, repeat the name back with a 'Hi, John, good to meet you'.

In the case of L who I had met but did not know well, I would say ‘L, of course, we’ve met down at camp’. Again this is to reinforce our shared history, reminding L that we are part of a shared purpose. In this case I would not choose to say ‘what’s been happening?’ as with previous encounters. The reasoning here is that I don’t want the conversation to lead too quickly to the rock throwing and verbal abuse situation. I want a chance to explore relationship and history in a more general and neutral sense before we begin the subjects where we are likely to experience conflict. In AVP, there are ‘icebreakers’, games and neutral community-building exercises that precede any attempt to explore conflict. So in this case I may begin with a neutral conversation such as, ‘how long have you guys been here?’ From this point my strategy will be to focus on active listening. By active listening I mean the use of ‘minimal encouragers’ — a counselling term that describes the affirmative sounds, gestures and words that show the speaker you are listening. These include such devices as leaning slightly forward towards the speaker, making sounds or words such as ‘uh huh’ and ‘yeah’, and asking questions to show interest such as ‘what happened then?’ or ‘how long did that take?’ It is also important in terms of mutual recognition that I share of myself to an equal level, and be prepared to be different at a low level, such as ‘oh, I’m lucky it only took me half an hour to get here, I live in the next suburb’, in response to someone telling me it took an hour and a half to drive from Sydney, where they live. In this way the conversation does not end up with me interrogating, or placing myself as ‘facilitator’ — I drop back to the level of participant, but one who tries to be skilful in terms of building connection between the people present.

In an AVP workshop, community-building exercises continue until facilitators feel the relationships are strong enough to begin exploring difference and conflict. Sometimes where community and understanding are not sufficiently evident, facilitators may decide that the group is not ready to explore conflictual role-plays or games. Sometimes facilitators decide to leave these out altogether, hoping that members of the group may return for another workshop to take the next steps. Actual uncontrolled or less controlled groups or individuals in a ‘real life’ setting are a more complex matter. It will not be my decision when to introduce topics of conversation or direct actions that plunge those



present into some situation where manifest conflict arises. It would suit my purposes if the group at the picket were happy to mirror all the stages of community building in a workshop situation, and then for me as the self appointed arbiter of when people are ready to experience conflict, to skilfully introduce the conflictual scenarios in a way I deem beneficial. It would be an exhaustive and exhausting document that mapped this full process. But, as with AVP, once we have shared something personal, had a laugh, and experienced each other as worthy of trust even at some minor level, when someone shares something personal, or makes themselves vulnerable and is respected, difference is able to appear more and more, and negotiation about difference can also begin. I have hopefully started the process of sharing vulnerability with my admission of possible error and apology over the incident with the children, to which they had all borne witness.

In reality, as I have suggested, it will not be me controlling the manner in which conflict begins to arise. To this end I will briefly explore how to deal with conflict that arises before we have built community, in terms of my AVP/Mutual Recognition model. Given what has been shared with me about the rock throwing and verbal abuse, both from the young people and members of the actual picket, it is reasonable to assume that members of the community are angry. Given my own long-term participation in the struggle, it was fairly clear that the security guards were the object of anger as they constituted the visible representation of the forces seeking to financially capitalise on the land that the community wanted to culturally and environmentally restore. I imagined that the feelings of powerlessness I experienced in the face of the seeming relentlessness of large corporations, paralleled with the forces of the state, were shared by many, as was the underlying explanation for the outbursts of violence occurring. It is therefore highly likely that expressions of this tension in the form of behaviour antithetical to the kind of struggle I have been envisioning here are likely to manifest again before community and relationship are built to the point I would prefer when engaged in collective action of this kind. Whilst picketing at the Jabiluka uranium mine in the late 1990's, I witnessed some creative and thoughtful nonviolent ways of taking action that dissipated these feelings of powerlessness, in a way that sent messages to our opponents that were peaceful but strong. The example I remember occurred in response to people at the camp being

continually harassed by low buzzing helicopters. Protesters gathered together in the open central area of the camp in the shape of a peace symbol. This had the effect of being able to take action, but to send a nonviolent message to those perceived to be harassing. This is useful technique, and one that could be used in such a circumstance as we faced together at Sandon Point, to ease the tension associated with ongoing powerlessness before it manifests in a less controlled and unproductive manner.

The AVP way of tackling such a problem, further shaped by an intention to open possibilities of mutual recognition, would be a little different. The AVP approach is to attempt to take people into their feelings, express them in terms of needs and then for all concerned to find nonviolent ways of getting their needs met. Those committed to mutually recognitive ways of relating will conduct the exchange of feelings and needs in a dynamic interplay of assertion and listening, in which the good feeling or positive relationship between the interlocutors will be important to the degree that it will not be worth risking by failing to listen, over-asserting personal needs or overly passive listening with a concomitant under-assertion of personal needs. The moment-by-moment balance of listening and assertion will guide the negotiation of needs away from the tendency to coercion in which the stronger party at any given moment may use their advantages to downplay the needs of the other satisfying the need in question at the loss of mutuality. The challenge for the AVP practitioner in the situation above is, rather than to suggest or take action to diminish the feeling of powerlessness, to work with people present to understand the collective need for personal empowerment in disempowering situations, and negotiate a collective and collaborative way of dealing with the anger that naturally begins to build when people consistently are unable to get certain needs met over a long period of time. This may end up being some kind of action such as was taken in the Jabiluka situation described above. The important difference is that the primary aims of the ‘activist’ or would-be AVP/recognitive practitioner is to open up the possibilities for those present to understand their feelings and needs and collaboratively generate action, rather than the feelings of disempowerment (and other feelings too) being effectively avoided with an action not clearly grounded in an understanding of the feelings and needs it is attempting to address. This difference is important, as the learning

in the former example is anchored to feelings and needs and shared by all. Without due process the tactic becomes possibly poorly understood, and can lead to a failure to address the deeper needs for appropriate self-empowerment by simply relieving the tension of apparent powerlessness without actually changing or acknowledging the power imbalances that are at the core of the distress. The AVP way centralises these long term learning outcomes as process, rather than leave them to chance and hoping those present will happen upon an understanding of the action that they have been part of.

The question here is: how, in this situation, would I open up such a process? My first caveat here comes directly from the AVP rulebook: only volunteer yourself. This can be deepened here to include not volunteering others and not presupposing their feelings as a basis for one's approach. Even though I may suspect that others are feeling powerless and angry, this may not be the case, and I may be projecting my own feelings. The best point to start is to volunteer oneself. In this case I would choose to combine the first two parts of AVP's restorative process — how I feel and what is the hardest part for me. Though I would like the time to divide up these tasks as one might in a workshop, so all have a chance to hear each other's feeling before concentrating their attention on the most difficult feeling, given the fact that some in the group had just been involved in violence, and the rest of us had witnessed it, moving quickly would seem appropriate. I would then begin with: 'I'm finding it hard seeing the fences go up on the site; I feel a great sense of loss'. I would then wait and see if this elicits a sharing of feeling from the rest of the group. If it doesn't, and there is silence or a change of conversation tack, I could then say, 'How are you guys feeling?' Observing the AVP rule about right to pass, it is important not to try and trap people into a process they may not want to participate in. If people do not want to share feelings, or begin to make judgements about mine, this is not a workshop, and I have no legitimate expectations that people should or could involve themselves in the kind of processes I envision. It is valid to make repeated attempts to steer the conversation into feelings, but the moment one sees resentment or irritation in the voices, faces or body language of others, this is the time to change direction. We should not damage our connection with others by repeated attempts to involve them in ways of relating to which they do not seem open.

In a workshop situation one can stop and ‘shine a light’ on what is happening, because participants generally give the facilitator the right to direct. At the picket I was not only subject to my own self-imposed philosophies, I was bound by a wider social etiquette about how to relate in groups. It is important on such occasions to continue to socialise ‘normally’. To attempt to impose new social ways of relating that ignore the more regular conversation conventions may well alienate people, and it is quite possible to end up to some extent ostracised by the group, as in the case where someone who attempts to continually draw the conversation back to their own spiritual principles can also end up being marginalised as a ‘crank’. It can still be valid to attempt to bring new ways of relating to a social or political grouping, but in doing so I will propose here a number of caveats that may guide someone like myself who is interested in applying principles such as those used by AVP or recognitive mutuality. It is not wise in such cases to use jargon, or even commonplace words in a new and specific sense. This will, understandably, be quite likely read as an attempt to overtly alter the current conversational practices of the group for one’s own purpose. Where different ideas or expressions are part of what we want to say, it is better to find a way of saying them with commonplace words and readily accepted meaning. Where a potentially new word or concept is being introduced it is useful to be mindful of recognitive mutuality while doing so. This means to introduce the new idea at the same time as stressing or drawing attention to the bonds that connect, in this case the presumed solidarity in opposing the intended housing development, and to ensure that relationships proceed with a balance, sharing both difference and sameness.

Changing communication practices takes time, effort and willingness. We should not presume our conversation partners to be interested in embarking on such an endeavour at any level. This means the best way to proceed is to model the new way of being, and wait for others to notice the different behaviour and take a positive interest. In line with this, and after sharing my own feelings, if others do actually share their feelings as well it would be my hope that this sharing of feelings would have the same dissipating effect, in terms of powerlessness, that the peace circle had at Jabiluka. But there are many presuppositions here that need to be noted and explored. It is entirely possible that I

misread the ‘powerlessness’ of my fellow picketers: the establishment of the picket may have given them a great sense of empowerment and the rock throwing may stem, for example, from a sense of excitement, and wanting to ‘bring on’ the impending clash. Sharing my own feelings relating to a non-positive state could also effectively be or be seen as bringing down morale and being defeatist.

This raises a range of interesting problems for anyone trying to share feelings, and negotiate needs ‘on the job’ outside the workshop situation. A caveat from the description of the listening ceremony is useful here. When we approached the site of the listening ceremony we symbolically signalled our respect for the unknown that we were about to enter. We created a space to open our new relationship in which we honoured the pre-existing relations and situation before we started ‘acting’ in the new environment. Whilst the picket is a ‘new’ environment, it operates within well-established complex webs of relationship relating to community and society as a whole. In terms of sharing negative feelings there will already be conventions relating to the appropriateness of sharing feelings that may be uncomfortable for others; these conventions will vary between groups and from situation to situation. In a sporting team, it would be considered a completely destructive act to share feelings such as ‘they’re going to thrash us’ just prior to taking the field. Many feel there is a relationship between confidence and performance. Not sharing feelings that may be seen to damage confidence is therefore a widely accepted social norm, and in the sporting scenario such feelings would be aired in the dressing room after the match. The challenge for the AVP/Mutual Recognition practitioner is to honour these conventions of ‘positivity’ without being untrue to their own feelings, if indeed these feelings may be the kind that other picketers are uncomfortable about hearing.

Taking a lead once again from the listening ceremony, this process can be begun by signalling positive intent, such as commenting, ‘I’m glad we’re all here taking a stand against this development. I hope we can do something that opens everyone up to working together and building a solution to this mess’. Such a statement would hopefully signal a number of positive things — a sense of collective endeavour in the first sentence, and in

the second sentence an inclination that joins hope (optimism) in a solution with a gentle testing of feelings with the ‘everyone being opened up to building a solution together’ suggesting an implicit criticism of the rock throwing which would of course run counter to this endeavour. The second part of the second sentence may also be seen as opening up the mutually recognitive dialogue as it signals, with different and carefully used language, an orientation towards action that may be different to what has been happening to date. Once again these are verbal signals and need to be accompanied by skilful non-verbal body language and actions. For instance putting the kettle on and asking people if they want a cup of tea also signals community building. Similarly, sitting rather than standing during delivery signals that not only am I intending to stay, but it diminishes any threat which could be suggested by standing over people. This is particularly so in the case with myself as I am a tall male. It is also useful to speak slowly and leave plenty of gaps in dialogue to allow others to enter the conversation. This can be enhanced by looking around the circle and making eye contact during pauses. If others do move to socialise, respond or differ, this is the point to use what AVP calls neutral but interested listening attitudes, which show genuine openness to what is being said without offering the affirmation or denial that can be seen as an attempt to begin to win support for one’s ideas through the application of selective affirmation.

It would be impossible, and perhaps not that useful or accurate, to try to reconstruct a hypothetical response to this situation through every permutation possible. I have been trying to give some detail to the shape mutual recognition and the system of AVP may give to such interactions. In line with this I will move on to an example of how the critical phase of assisting the group to move from understanding and expressing feelings to recognising the (often unmet) needs that lie underneath these feelings. The final stage of this operation, in AVP/Mutual Recognition terms, is to explore and utilise the nonviolent options for meeting these needs in a way that also builds mutual recognition between all parties. There will come a point where feelings are shared to the extent that a new feeling will begin to emerge. This will be the sense that enough feelings have been shared, and that the time has come to begin to look at what we need to do in response. There is no formula for recognising this point. As a facilitator of an AVP group, after the

group has gone through relationship and community building, listening and sharing feelings, facilitators will, if the group appears comfortable with the process thus far, begin to move towards the problem-solving part of the equation. In a community group, there is no one appointed to decide such matters, and the group will move according to its own internal dynamics and in response to external stimuli. The role of someone like myself is to skilfully guide this movement when it begins to manifest. If we believe the group is moving too quickly towards problem solving before social building and sharing feelings are appropriately developed, we can try, within the conventions of group democracy or decision making protocols, and at whatever formal/informal or undeveloped state such conventions may be at, to redirect the conversation back towards tasks that may be incomplete.

For example if a participant was to say, in the first 30 minutes of discussion, ‘let’s go over there and have it out with the guards’, I may respond with something to the effect of ‘I’m not really sure what we want to say yet?’ Should I begin to experience the sense that the group is now ‘wallowing’ in feelings and needing to move towards action, this also can be expressed directly as a question — ‘I’m feeling I’ve talked about feelings enough, I think I need to talk about what we’re going to do’. In both cases, these statements adhere to the rule of making ‘I’ statements and only volunteering oneself, but move towards using the ‘we’ statement when talking about collective action. This embodies the ideal of moving personal feelings of each towards a collaborative action involving all. The guiding principle for this movement is translation of feelings into needs. AVP’s assumption is that all feelings have underneath a legitimate need. The task for each is to understand what these needs are, and having done this collectively build a solution that meets as many of these individual needs as possible. In AVP terms, as a personal commitment I will be asking that this collective solution is nonviolent, and in Benjamin’s terms, designed and applied in a mutually recognitive fashion. In this case as in the other examples, after having made my own statement, the phase of listening to the feelings and needs of others continues the hoped for mutually recognitive trajectory that is my aim.

The task of translating feelings into the legitimate needs that may underlie them is perhaps the most difficult. The most difficult part of this is recognising the differences between needs, desires and interests. For the person, myself in this case, who would assist others in this way, I not only have to go through the process within myself, but interest others in going through such a process, and then skilfully assist without positioning myself outside or above the others in the group. In AVP, this is of course facilitated, the task is explained and people are given time and practice to learn this difficult skill. Thus my first caveat to myself is not to expect too much. What is important to me is that others should recognise this process as a useful one and invest time in attempting to practise these skills. I am not expecting that I will get the opportunity to suggest going through a formal attempt to practise this operation, but I can begin to model going through the process myself as a way of interesting others in the ideas. It is to this end I will devote my example. Should people take enough interest in what I am doing to actually enquire about the process, I would indeed attempt to facilitate something like an AVP process, such as described earlier. Such a process would involve all potential parties including security guards, police, children and picketers. I would in fact myself organise for a facilitation team to come down, and instead become a participant rather than facilitator. As this conventional AVP workshop procedure has been explained already, I shall now instead show how I might model the reflective process aimed at elucidating the needs that lie beneath feelings, and how to distinguish needs from interests and desires, without any undertakings from any of those present to participate in my schemes.

The next step is to model the expression of my feelings, and the attachment of these feelings to a need. For example, 'I'm a bit worried about a bad relationship developing between the picketers and the security guards': rather than immediately translate this into a need such as, 'I need to work together with everyone to find peaceful solutions to what's going on here', which I would hope to do at some point, I would invite others to share their feelings about what I have just said with a query such as, 'how are you guys feeling?', directly following my own statement of feeling. I may well get a response such as 'stuff them, they shouldn't be here'. Such a statement avoids making a statement about feelings and instead cuts to the perceived end point of the discussion which is basically to



contradict my unsaid but implied position that the rock throwing and verbal abuse were not good for them or us, and that I want to address this. My task in terms of keeping a conversation going productively is to show I have listened, but to redirect the conversation back to my enquiry about feelings. This can be achieved by reflecting back what I have heard (not parroting) as a feeling, and applying my own conversational interests (mutuality) at the same time, such as, ‘so you’re angry with them for being here?’ This describes the negative feelings about the guards, but doesn’t as yet include the second part of the statement, ‘stuff them’, which implies a disregard for their feelings and needs. At this stage I would regard the drawing attention to their disregard for others feelings as potentially being seen as setting myself up in judgement of them and unhelpful. Instead, to bring mutuality to the interaction and to continue the modelling of feelings, I would simply respond again with my own feelings. I would however first leave a space where others in the group may respond as well. This keeps the process group orientated, and avoids a kind of one-on-one directed ‘point and counter-point’ style argument developing between sections of the group, to the exclusion of others. When a space emerges, I would again state my feelings in the form of an ‘I’ statement made in response to the ideas contained in the person’s statement, not directed at the person themselves. This could take the form, ‘I’m angry about them being here too, and (rather than “but”) I want to work with them to find a way of restoring this place to what we all want it to be’.

### **Feelings, needs and identity shifts**

At this point it is useful to unpack the strategy underlying this approach. In the second part of the statement I am beginning to introduce the idea of my own needs attached to the feelings, without actually formally naming it as such in the conversation. This is to keep the conversation naturalistic and jargon free, and leave people free of the feeling that I may be practising techniques, rather than simply relating authentically. Once techniques become deeply felt and learned they will usually become incorporated naturally in one’s way of being and no longer the somewhat formal intrusion into normal relating that they may at first resemble when the user is first trying to assimilate them into their previous ways of relating. Whilst not as yet inviting others to begin the journey

towards translating feelings into needs, I have begun to model this myself. Another pitfall that may emerge at this point is the tendency of people in the group to deny or argue with my expressed feelings or needs. For example, it would not be unsurprising, after the comment about working with the guards to restore sense of place, that I may get a response such as, 'I don't want to work with them, I just want them to go'. This is not a set back, but again an opportunity to explore both the feeling underneath the want, and whether the want is in fact a need. The task of differentiating needs from wants is the part of the process that will involve discussion and argument about substantive issues, and this conflict, properly managed, should be seen as useful and healthy. My response on hearing an expressed want, particularly one I may find problematic, would be to try to take a step back and relocate the speaker in their feelings by saying, 'Why do you feel that?' This is an invitation to reflect on the feeling which may have driven their response, and hopefully a beginning or continuation of a reflective process.

What will follow should be the political part of the process, where all at the picket present their case for how we organise and act, and what we should do. This part will often be long, difficult and ongoing, but this is not to be shirked — by continually locating the arguments in feelings of participants, and trying to distinguish between the needs and wants/desires/interests that they express, we will be in the place where learning and change are most possible. Anthony Giddens, in his work on identity, notes that:

The reflexive project of the Self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems (Giddens, 1991, 5).

In relation to the situation at the picket and potentially being involved in AVP and mutually recognitive exchanges, people are being required by the style of interaction to reflect on how their feelings relate to the actions they take. This dissection of motive, commonly done retrospectively as an 'autobiography' in the mind of the actor, is what Janette Rainwater calls a 'corrective intervention in the past', and in her theoretical self-therapy system would be called a 'corrective emotional experience exercise' (Rainwater,

1989, 9). This is how we make sense of what we have done, and fit our experiences into the narratives that sustain our sense of self. By continually locating people in the link between action and feelings we are doing this self-reflection in the moment, rather than retrospectively.

Where AVP and recognitive mutuality hope to see change or transformation is at the identity level. Reflected experience can slowly change the narratives by which we sustain ourselves. In this case (the picket line again) my strategy is to open the possibility that participants will see they can get their needs for empowerment and expression not through acts of violence against the security guards, but through acts of collaborative endeavour. If this is experienced, and reflected upon either simultaneously or soon after, then the narrative has changed, and repeated experience of new narrative material will eventually result in a new narrative forming as part of the identity strand. At the point where collaborative and nonviolent behaviour have become part of the narrative that sustains identity, operating in such a way is a need, to sustain identity. At this point we have built a habit of mind in which collaboration, self-reflection and capacity to negotiate with others are greatly enhanced, and a nonviolent/mutually recognitive way of relating has a solid foundation. The key to both AVP and recognitive mutuality is practice, and the method by which to share the techniques is to demonstrate and model them, without trying to force other people to adopt them. If people do not see the value embodied in the practitioner's way of operation, or do not feel or value mutuality, then we must consider abandoning our task of introducing them to the techniques, and attempt to find more fruitful, and hopefully also ethical, ways of relating.

### **Restoring relationships**

The final task in this reconstruction of this episode is to look at the application of the last stage of AVP's restorative practices, which is to ask what I need to do to restore the relationships possibly damaged by the previous relations. The principle of restoration also applies to situations where there were no pre-existing relationships, though the task here may be to restore them to a neutral state where beginning a relationship on a 'good footing' may be possible. The fundamental principle guiding this process is that trying to

‘point the finger’ at someone believed to be in error, judging or blaming are not useful to restoring relationships. This part of the endeavour is also not therapy, though as AVP suggests it may have therapeutic value. What is important here is what people feel needs to happen for them to feel okay. If people have embedded trauma, and deep psychological damage that is a consequence of what has happened, or a legacy of previous life experience, AVP or restorative practices do not purport to address this — this is a matter for psychologists, therapists and counsellors. What this process can do is take people through the process of working out for themselves what their feelings and needs are, and share them. Actually implementing any strategies attained during this process becomes the next stage of engagement where the process begins again.

By way of demonstration of this part of the process I will begin by describing how I would share with others my feelings about what I think I need to do to restore any damage done to relationships by my behaviour during these related episodes. In an AVP workshop the task of restoring relationships occurs both in a sit-down facilitated session (with third parties placed in the role as facilitators) and at the end of the full workshop, after relationships and community have been built in a controlled environment. Almost inevitably this will not be the case in real life, and the example I will detail here is probably more like what we would experience in a non-workshop situation — unbuilt relationships in an incomplete community setting, with no third party facilitating for us, and no belief in or commitment to the kind of values embodied in a process such as AVP. Whilst we may attempt to share with participants the ideas of mutuality and nonviolence by way of example or actual explication (if invited to do so), in the end we have to be open to applying the principles in a hostile, or perhaps at least unhelpful, environment. In the actual examples given here, I made no special commitment (in the AVP/MR style) to rebuilding relationships damaged by what occurred, though where I had ongoing relations with L I made a special effort to reconnect, say sorry, and demonstrate ongoing support for causes we were both committed to, and did feel that over time our relationship returned to a more neutral and natural level closer to how it was in the beginning (with a sense of sharing a cause). The point in sharing this here is to make it clear that AVP is not the only way. There are many ways to repair and restore relationships — time and

positive gesture can go a long way towards healing damage, without a word being spoken, and for non-verbal or unskilled people, these kind of techniques may work better. It is not my intention to say that AVP is the only or best way. To quote a 'spiritual' truism: 'there are many ways up the mountain'. In fact this kind of approach is far from antithetical to the idea of mutuality. Allowing space, including by non-verbally indicating continued value for relationship and shared ideals, and acknowledging divisive differences, is a perfectly viable approach to eventually restoring the amount of mutuality that may be possible after differences and events have damaged a relationship. Here I will look at what I could have done if I were to apply a pro-active (and perhaps an approach more heavily biased towards language) AVP restorative practice, rather than the more passive 'time heals' approach that I took in actual life.

As the potential instigator of a relationship-mending process, it is useful to have done some reflection on what has happened before making the initial overture. Nonetheless, if a moment of positivity seems to be presenting itself, and an interaction seems to be an opening, then this will serve just as well, as the process should allow and encourage space for both to reflect on events. The best way of opening such a dialogue is directly, and here the slightly formal language that AVP may use may be appropriate as an indicator of the kind of process we want. Thus an opening such as, 'I feel our relationship has been damaged by what has happened, and I'd like to repair it', would be an authentic opening, and in terms of mutuality may indicate to the person that you are inviting them into a process that may be more formal and specialised than a routine interaction. Should the person, in this case L, indicate he is willing, my next step would be to let him know that I have a process in mind, and that I'd like to use an AVP style restorative practices model to facilitate the relationship repair. This is important as the use of technique without a formal declaration is liable to lead to L becoming aware that I am using a process in which I am skilled and he is unfamiliar thus empowering myself at his expense. As the debriefing process is relatively straightforward there is no reason why it cannot be shared and used on the spot. Because those familiar with the process will be able to use it more skilfully, it will be my task, if mutuality is to be retained or rebuilt, to match my skill level with L's, to assist him to be able to use the procedure. As the

instigator I then become facilitator and participant, and have to systematically shed the empowerment of this role, paradoxically, whilst continuing to play the role. Foucault's idea of making power visible is a useful guide to this process. This, when added to the insights from the listening ceremony for beginning a new stage of a relationship and the interest to establish mutuality, produces an interesting, difficult, but hopefully rewarding conceptual tangle of principles with which to navigate conducting a restorative conversation in the middle of 'happening life', as opposed to a workshop.

The insights from the listening ceremony are always useful to consider when embarking on a new stage of a relationship, as it reminds us to give honour to the already existing ways of doing things — particularly so in this case as cultural practice in Australia has been to deny or ignore the laws, customs and traditions of Aboriginal Australians in favour of European-derived legal and social practices. So even whilst I am confident that application of an AVP restorative model, used carefully and thoughtfully, should be inclusive of many traditions, my first step would include space to suggest alternatives. Once again this sits well with the notions of mutuality where my assertion of intent should be at once framed as a personal assertion of my own needs and one that acknowledges what connects and also encourages and leaves space for others to assert their own interest. Finally, I am about to suggest something in which I will be more experienced and empowered than others. Using Foucault's maxim, this power should be exposed to minimise the chances that it will be used in a way that constitutes domination. As these ideas are complex, it is best to state them as plainly as possible, and introduce them gradually, and ensure a congruence between the way I act and speak and the ideas themselves: they should be modelled at the same time as being introduced. Thus if the previous statement about feeling the relationship has been damaged is met with a seeming openness, my next step would be to say, 'I'm not happy about there being bad feeling between us because of what has happened, can we try and sort it out?' This opens the idea of restoring relationships without as yet suggesting any technique, states my needs as an 'I' statement, and asks for a journey towards repair as a 'we' statement, and still leaves the way open for the other party to assent in a way that may attempt to set some kind of parameters about how and when such a journey should or could take place.

## **5: A wider context**

As I have sought to illustrate an idea, rather than prove a point or test an hypothesis with empirical evidence, what follows by way of ending this work is not so much a conclusion, as an exploration and acknowledging of the possibilities that the foregoing illustration opens up. To this end I would like to share some further examples from my own experience that shine the light on the complexities of social and political life to which the theories I expound may hopefully apply.

The following example is shared in the hope of showing some of the complexities of mutual recognition. As Jessica Benjamin makes clear, mutual recognition, particularly during the phase of individuation between parent and infant, is not necessarily a steady building of mutuality. Loss of mutuality, due to overstatement and/or understatement of the needs of self, is part of the process. Damage to relationship is often an integral part of recognising its role and importance in our life. Finding the balance between needs is not always easy, and boundaries often are not discernable until those involved have pushed and pulled at the margins.

As an activist, many of the struggles in which I was involved coalesced out of a shared experience of unmet needs and violated boundaries. Without passing judgement on the effectiveness or ethics of a retributive transgression of the needs and boundaries of others, there seems to be a tipping point where, in the face of apparent persistent disregarding of needs and boundaries, the disregarded party will respond with a reciprocal violation. The following example of this phenomenon, from the Sandon Point struggle, is shared here in the belief that such incidents are best understood as part of the recognition cycle. There is perhaps a paradox here, containing an uncomfortable truth, that mutual recognition requires both misrecognition and non-recognition as an ongoing part of its constituent process. The following example does not attempt to decode or resolve this paradox. The emphasis of this thesis has been to look at the techniques that may increase the possibility for mutual recognition: this must include the part of the process where needs of others are wilfully transgressed.

In sharing this example of a confrontation at Sandon Point, I hope to shed some light on those aspects of revolt that may be construed as valuable in the context of mutual recognition and those that may be to its ultimate detriment. A clean division and distinction between the two may evade both rigorous analysis and practical discernment, and as such I offer no final categories or judgements. What follows here is a sharing of experience as an opening of debate, a map for navigating a complex landscape, and a meditation on the seeming inevitability of revolt when mutual recognition apparently falls apart.

### **Sandon Point site invasion**

At Sandon Point, shortly after the rock-throwing event, our blockade was broken, the site was fenced off, and heavy equipment was brought onto the area preparatory to the land being bulldozed for the beginning of the planned housing estate. This did not happen without great community opposition. At first when Stockland attempted to bring equipment on the site, hundreds of people sat in front of the machinery and had to be removed by police. Around 60 people were arrested, myself among them. After the crowds were removed by police, Stockland was further obstructed by activists erecting a pole tripod in front of the site entry. By the time the activist who sat at the tripod's apex had been removed, and Stockland was finally free to move on site, news came through that Aboriginal activists had been successful in gaining a court injunction against the work, and the few vehicles and pieces of machinery that had gained access were removed.

For me one of the most memorable, enjoyable but problematic (in terms of the theory I have been illustrating) events around this time happened after the fencing off of the site. A major protest was organised, intended to happen outside the gates of the compound, to register our anger at, and resistance to, the ongoing process of the project in spite of the damage to environmental and cultural heritage this involved. The morning of the action was bitterly cold (by local standards) with a howling wind carrying the bite of fresh snow on the southern Australian Alps. Some speculated that the bitterness of the day related somehow to the imminent desecration of Aboriginal spiritual places, particularly in light



of the death the day before of ‘Uncle Guboo’ (Ted Thomas) who many of us felt had given some kind of philosophical or spiritual leadership during the struggle. For me, these speculations and coincidences (as I choose to call them) were a wilful attempt to graft meaning on circumstance, but one in which I joined, perhaps seeking validation from some idea of the ‘cosmos’ where action in the world, our own and others, seemed to be failing us. This is not the first time I had observed myself and other activists taking succour from metaphysical imaginings. I should add here that to me a metaphysical imagining is not intended here as a pejorative, but as a potentially valid and useful way of interpreting and responding to events.

As the crowd began to swell and we speculated on what we could achieve, particularly in terms of how our eventual number could affect what tactics were available to us, I did a radio interview with a supportive student radio station in Sydney while others began to mill in front of the gates to the site. Whilst a debate between activists and construction officials was happening at the front gate of the site, another group of activists had been removing the connecting bolts of one of the side panels of the fence. As these activists quickly and cleanly removed a section of the fence, enabling easy quick access for large groups to enter the site, a large proportion of those assembled walked slowly but determinedly onto the site. I had suspected that something like this was going to happen, but as I had not been involved in the group who had removed the panel I was taken by surprise by the opportunity to enter the site and walked on without any clear idea of what I was going to do there. As I was relatively ‘in the know’ in terms of the blockade, I suspect that most of those the crowd were also taken by surprise and had no real plan when they entered the site.

The small number of workers and officials present made no attempt to physically or verbally impede our entry. Again I can only speculate as to the reasons for this, but because we, as a crowd, probably outnumbered them ten to one, they may have felt intimidated. I hate to think of how this scene may have unfolded if those on site had attempted to stop us entering the site. My recollection of the order of events is not clear, but some activists began to pull down sections of the fence. I decided to join in this

endeavour and began to make my way across the site to a section of fence a couple of hundred metres away on the other side of the site — as there seemed to be plenty of people in the immediate vicinity of the gates involved in the spontaneous dismantling process. As I began this movement, with a couple of close friends I noticed an argument ensuing between a small group of activists and an MLC — member of the NSW Legislative Council, the upper house of the state government — who was supportive of our cause and had entered the site in solidarity with us. The activists had tipped over the on site portable toilet and the MLC was suggesting that this had been a poor idea, and that we should not indiscriminately damage property but selectively target the fences only. The activists (who I did not know) were reacting with hostility, and telling the MLC something to the effect of mind your own business, and who was he to try to tell anyone else what to do. I decided to stay out of this argument. I knew the MLC well and was supportive of the position he was taking, and confident that he could handle and diffuse the situation. A couple of other activists had also stopped to lend him support, and I made a spontaneous decision to continue on to the other side of the site.

Away from the main action, I and a few other activists, again some who I didn't know, tore down the fences on the other side of the site. As we finished and returned to the entry of the site, almost all of the fences surrounding the site had been torn down and people were beginning to disperse. As we had now been on site for 15 or 20 minutes, people were beginning to leave in fear of the police appearing and beginning to apprehend us. A group of young people who had been involved were standing at the front of the site as I was leaving. As I left I cautioned them to not hang around as the police were probably on their way. Later I learned that they had in fact loitered too long and actually been arrested when the police did arrive. I can't remember how this unfolded, though I heard later that the parent of one of the young people had made a complaint about the arrest, as her child was a minor.

This event, and the micro events within it, could well be the subject of another exhaustive contextualisation and deconstruction. Instead I would like to focus on a particular type of problem it raises, to the exclusion of much else that is of genuine interest for reflection,

as a way of placing the theory that I have been explicating in a wider context. Rather than follow the restorative practices model again I will I go straight to the component of my feelings. The reasoning behind this is to get to the heart of what may seem to be a contradiction. In terms of the approach I have been exploring, my participation in the episode would appear at first glance to run in opposition to many of the values I have espoused — building connection and community, breaking down the us-and-them problem, fostering mutual recognition and creating spaces for collective problem solving are not readily observable in the invading of another's legally designated property, preventing their lawful endeavours and smashing their property without any attempt to create personal relationships. And yet, in terms of the way I felt, and indeed still feel, this day was glorious. It felt fantastic, and in recounting it, despite its admission of illegality, and many seeming limitations in terms of mutual recognition, I still feel these actions were warranted and appropriate.

My first thought about how to include this incident in my research was to use it as a means to further explore the importance of restoration after relationships had been damaged. The more I looked at it in terms of mutual recognition, the separation between building, sustaining and restoring relationships seemed a little arbitrary. Jessica Benjamin explores the idea that mutual recognition is the mutuality and balance of assertion of the needs of both self and other. She notes that at certain phases of the infant-parent relationship the child will probably explore the possibility of over assertion of personal needs to the detriment of the relationship. Benjamin suggests the best way of handling this is to allow the child to explore over-assertion, and carefully reflect back to the child enough emotional information for the child to reflect on its own actions. The child may also reflect on the relationship between over-assertion of needs and loss of mutuality and possibly then self-censor its own over-assertion and re-establish mutuality of exchange.

In political and social actions, even in optimistic and ideal settings, we are likely to be less invested in mutuality, and more likely to abandon it in favour of acts of assertion designed simply to meet our own needs. I want to explore the idea that these breakdowns in attempts at mutual recognition, even ones as strong as the fence demolition just

described, do not constitute an abandonment of mutually recognitive relationship but, like the infant-parent relationship envisioned by Benjamin, these are oscillations within the general paradigm of recognition. Whilst a move towards emphasising the restorative is useful after such an incident, it occurs within the same spectrum of possibilities for building a sustaining relationship that I tried to apply in the reconstruction of the rock-throwing incident.

I would like to recount some further detail from this episode by way of supporting this claim. I have already noted the exchange between the MLC and protesters regarding the tipping over of the site toilet. The exchange involved a debate about the limits we should impose on our invasion and damage to property. Whilst there might be disagreement about what the limits should be and who should decide what they are and who if anyone should enforce these standards, the idea that there were limits and that the invasion was not a free for all and complete abandonment of ethical practice was clearly accepted by all in the debate. Such an idea has common support in even extreme situations of violence such as war. The situations where all sense of ethics is abandoned are probably rare.

During the tearing down of the fences I had vaguely registered that one of the protesters had been taking photographs. I was later informed that this person was not in fact a protester but a senior official from Stockland. Many of us were in fact caught red-handed engaging in activities that within a legal frame of reference clearly constituted both trespass and wilful damage to private property. Whilst a few protesters who lingered on the site too long were arrested by police, and charged, Stockland officials never produced these photographs nor attempted to lay charges on the many people, myself included, who would have been easily identified and quite possibly successfully prosecuted and penalised.

Similarly, when we did blockade the site and were arrested, relations were quite cordial. Perhaps a hundred of us sat with linked arms blocking the roadway to deny entry to machinery. We refused to move and were dragged or picked up by police and removed to awaiting vans and taken to nearby Bulli police station. Most of us either resisted being

removed, or certainly chose not to co-operate with police. As I was being carried to the van, one of the police officers remarked (exact words are forgotten) ‘my back’s killing me — I don’t suppose you could walk for us’. I laughed and said ‘sure’ and walked to the van and took my place on the bench with my fellow protesters inside the van.

When I arrived at the police station the police were trying to decide whether to charge us. No one was detained in lock-up, and the police responded positively to our request to sit outside on the front lawn in the sunshine. They assented to this as long as we promised not to leave the station. Very quickly the police realised some protesters had used this opportunity to ‘escape’ and return to the blockade. They were clearly annoyed and told those of us that remained that we would now have to wait inside the station, though again no one was put under lock and key. Eventually, after a few hours we were told that we would not be charged, though our names had been taken, and we were set free. I immediately returned to the blockade, which took me about half an hour by foot. I arrived back at the site to see a protester removed, by crane, from a home-made wooden tripod with which we had blocked the entry to the site after the ‘human chain’ had been removed. Shortly after this a cheer went up as it was announced that Aboriginal activists had sought and successfully attained an injunction against the work. This was to prove a temporary victory, as Stockland went through the procedure of obtaining new permits and began work again a few weeks later.

Talking to activists in the hours after the injunction had been announced, I heard the story of the removal of the tripod sitter. The activist who chose to do the tripod sit was very experienced, which turned out to be a good thing as I was told he had been treated very poorly. When the human chain was removed, this was performed by local police, and for the most part with the kind of humour and low-level co-operation shown in the retelling of my own removal. The tripod sitter was removed by the tactical response unit, who had travelled from Nowra, an hour further south. The sitter was verbally intimidated, had his glasses, his water and his hat removed by the members of the unit. Some observers also claimed that the officers were unduly rough during the actual removal.

Anecdotally, the differences in treatment in my own experience and that of the tripod sitter are worth exploring. I had no complaint about the way I was treated. In some ways both police and I were almost professional actors playing to a script, with much of what happened fulfilling each other's expectations about what would happen, and the sorts of behavioural exchanges that occurred satisfying both of our senses of what was appropriate. The 'escape' by activists from the police station was seen as inappropriate and counter-productive not only by police at the station, but by the majority of activists who remained. It seemed that regular ethics manifested in the new circumstance, and that everybody was doing their job — ours to protest and be arrested, and theirs to enforce a particular interpretation of the law. A few minor scuffles aside where protesters resisted arrest a little too forcefully, much of the operation seemed to conform to our expectations of what would be appropriate behaviour in the new circumstance.

## **Discussion**

The reasons for this are a worthy subject of speculation. At the beginning of this work I quoted Erazim Kohak's vision that a reconnection with nature would profit human beings most deeply. My own take on this was that it is connection in general that generates moral directions. This grounds my speculation here. Local police and protesters had a mostly cooperative and trusting relationship, with the exception of the few who broke the trust of local officers by escaping their arrest. My own example conforms to my memory of the tone of the day: there was much laughter and lightness in spite of the intensity of our feelings. The relationship between the tripod sitter and the non-local tactical response unit was different. Depriving the protester of glasses, water and hat was clearly designed to make him uncomfortable and break his will.

As Jessica Benjamin points out concerning the infant-parent relationship, the isolation felt by the child when mutuality breaks down is the worst outcome for both parties. When the relationship is built on empathy and sympathy, then damaging this by over-asserting one's needs is not desirable. People in a community have a measure of this empathy and relationship, though obviously weaker than that experienced by an infant-parent connection. The chances are that a police officer arresting will have some connection to

the arrestee are quite high. In an earlier struggle in the nearby suburb of Scarborough the local police officer quipped to me when discussing the imminent community actions against an intended ocean outfall, 'I hope they don't, I don't want to have to arrest my wife'. In small communities, connections through habitation of place, having children at the same school or in the same sports team, friendship circles, etc., mean there is not only a sense of connection to be valued, but that one's actions are visible and will become known in your personal or professional circles. Both these factors militate against refusing the basic needs of the other, and instead encourage respect and recognition of the other as connected to self.

The tactical response unit had less chance of having such connection by dint of their regional displacement. Unlike local police they are also trained to be 'harder'. Being almost paramilitary, they share some of the training of military personnel, which is designed to decrease empathy with others to allow the soldier to commit acts of violence without the intrusion of feelings of connection to other (Grossman, 1995). My clear task here has been to elucidate, in great detail, how relationship and connection can be supported, allowing conditions of greater mutuality to flourish as a setting for ongoing consideration of the needs of all, as an important part of the ethical calculus for navigating the situation. Situations such as the violence toward the tripod sitter raise an interesting qualification in terms of my research. What could an aspiring practitioner of mutual recognition do when facing an 'other' who refuses to recognise or in fact attempts to damage or annihilate the activist?

My response is that the AVP-inspired practices of mutual recognition detailed in this work are not a complete solution to all of the problems of relationship during social conflict. The tripod incident is to me clear evidence for the need of the kind of techniques found in the social defence and nonviolence literatures (Burrowes 1996). This thesis is an optimistic offering, attempting to illustrate what may be possible, and some of these techniques may still be usefully adapted to situations where mutuality has clearly failed, but there will most likely always be situations where skills in social defence are required and a useful furthering of this work here would be to explore the overlap and application

of these ways of operating. Social defence aims to resist oppression and violence without playing into and supporting the cultural scripts from which they spring. Humour, absurdity and the unexpected form part of its armoury; social defence specifically avoids the use of violence. Its prime rule could be summed up as to not do anything that creates the cause for more violence, and instead demonstrate a commitment to the value that violence is unacceptable and unnecessary by resisting it in ways that demonstrate the value of nonviolent means.

An ideal practice of these techniques leaves the door open to restoration and continuance of positive relations when violence has ceased. As with the techniques I have described in detail, social defence requires that people should try to act on the assumption that relationships are ongoing and not do anything that risks their permanent damage. Beyond this, history tells us that there will be conflict that seems unsolvable, and which ends in total destruction of relationships and even costs many their lives. This warns me that there are times when no amount of inspired communication or resistance will work and that we arrive in some situations with very limited or no potential to resolve conflict in ways that create, sustain and repair relationship. When mutual recognition and social defence have failed, the final decision may face us with escape from the situation and abandonment of relationship, or violence against others, as a last act of self-preservation. The other option here is, of course, to allow the self to be destroyed.

Even in these quite desperate circumstances, mutual recognition and social defence can inform the way we play these options out. Integrity to these principles requires that ethical relations with others should never be abandoned and the minimum damage be done to others to secure our own safety. If we are to suffer or commit violence, or abandon social relations in the course of our struggles, even this can be done with consideration of the legacy we leave for those who will experience the aftermath of these choices. These questions are essentially beyond my set purpose here. I raise them to acknowledge the limits of theoretical approaches to social conflict, and to invite their consideration by other researchers, that those who may face these desperate circumstances may have the support of theory to do so.



## 6: Conclusion

### **Theoretical implications — contextual ethics and human agency**

I will conclude this work by speculating about the implications of the kind of ethics I have been illustrating. My starting point was the belief that there was something flawed about the way I (and potentially many others) had been attempting to promote or create social change. Initially I assumed that social change was being limited by embedded discourses that were established and sustained by those who profited most from existing social arrangements. My sense on beginning this project was that this approach was missing something vital, and the deeper and more important blockages for change were not being uncovered by this mode of analysis. A thorough understanding of the impediments to social change conceptually buried in dominant discourses will always be important. My interest and exploration here has been to look instead at different approaches to social change that can be employed by the individual actor, which, instead of targeting injustice by unearthing the buried seeds of conceptual domination, concentrate on interpersonal recognition as a means of opening up the kind of social space where change is most possible. I believe the approaches I have illustrated here question deeply the usefulness of such ideas as rights and justice. Rather than relegating these concepts to the intellectual dustbin, what I shall do here, by way of conclusion, is to suggest a different way of using these concepts, and some more useful concepts to take the place they should vacate, as the primary tools of social struggle

During this work I have raised my concerns about the concept of rights. I would like to deepen this discussion now, connecting the problem of rights with the equally problematic conception of justice. A layperson's definition of justice involves the idea that the right thing has been done. If a wrong thing has been done, justice requires some form of action to redress the wrong. Commonly justice is seen as being served when a wrong doer has been found and made to account for the action involved. Sometimes this justice is retributive, with the wrong doer being punished for the actions, and in the case of the ideas explored here, justice is restorative, seeking to repair damage done to people and relationships as a result of what has happened. Justice is often linked to rights, with

infringement of acknowledged rights forming the basis on which to give the action in question its label of right or wrong. Both rights and justice refer to a body of established norms. These norms are embodied in the laws and processes and cultural assumptions by which we live, and often appear in scholarly literature under the label of universalist morality. It is universalist morality, as the fundamental underpinning of both rights and justice, with which I will now take issue.

Early in the writing of this work, I came across the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), and as I have suggested at various points, hoped that the ‘ethic of care’ might prove to be a useful alternative to concepts of justice. Gilligan’s ethic of care has proved to be, for me, another step along the journey of forming my own ethical position, and a situated journey through the debate that has surrounded Gilligan’s theory will hopefully place my work in the scholarly context appropriate to its content, and show how the case studies I have undertaken are generative of a new approach that is informed by these debates.

In the reconstructions of events that I explored, the scenarios were re-imagined using an ‘if/then’ structure. The proposed next action was usually clearly related to the possible responses to the previous intervention. This suggests an approach to situations that are so contextually dependant as to require moment-by-moment adjustment to the kinds of responses we deem both useful and ethical. Universalist ethics set a point at which we aim for — an outcome we see as just or fair. Situational ethics, guided by mutual recognition, anchor our navigation of situations in the feelings and needs of those involved, and relegate abstract principles of justice and fairness to being just another factor to be considered in the main task of protecting human dignity by the systematic and personal enquiry into what in each case is required to sustain the dignity (needs) of all actors involved. As justice, and the laws intended to embody it, is a community attempt to encapsulate the needs of all, it becomes an important measure of external norms that express the generalised needs of others not present and will always be an important piece of the puzzle in situational morality.

Politics as we know it often takes the form of appealing to universalist notions of justice and fairness as a tool with which to attempt to compel others to act in a way that such a conception of ethics may demand, to secure our needs and protect the dignity of ourselves or those in whose interests we advocate. The approach I am suggesting is that situational use of mutual recognition generates an ethical imperative that is grounded in ongoing pertinent moral reflection rather than a debate fixed and forced into the box of abstract rights and justice. The model I have explored suggests that this ongoing recognitive process is guided by the three related principles of listening, acting and reflecting. I have tried to illustrate, using the case studies of my actual experience and hypothetical reconstructions thereof, how these skills can be practised in the maelstrom of social and political action. The use of these skills is supposed to build the empathetic component of recognitive exchange to promote the maximum possibility of relations that build, sustain and repair the aspects of social connection that create opportunities for good situation-specific moral choices. In this chapter, I reflect further on the ideas of Gilligan and her critics and situate the idea of ethic of care in the model for mutual recognition as a basis for situational ethics and social change.

### **Gilligan and her critics**

Carol Gilligan's ethic of care idea emerged out of a critique of the work of her colleague Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg's psychological theories of moral development, according to Gilligan, had been developed with the exclusion of women and girls from his research (Gilligan 1982, 18). Kohlberg's claims that women and girls showed signs of lesser development than their male counterparts were challenged by Gilligan, who responded with the counter-claim that women and girls responded to ethical problems differently rather than deficiently as the Kohlberg scale suggested (Gilligan 1982, 19). Gilligan then ran her own research specifically targeting adolescent girls and women. The resulting book, *In a Different Voice*, critiques not only Kohlberg, but Erikson, Freud and Piaget and develops the idea of an ethic of care: an approach to ethics (or voice as Gilligan prefers to call it) more commonly found with women, but an orientation possible and, Gilligan argues, desirable for all.

There is now a voluminous body of scholarly argument around Gilligan's work and the idea of the ethic of care. I can only touch on a few fragments of this debate here. Nearly all of the critiques concede that the idea of the ethic of care has usefully enlarged the moral domain. I am interested in actualising the idea in political and social life, and will confine myself to the critiques that directly feed into the issues pertaining to this thesis, and may have implications for application.

Gilligan's ethic of care is built around critiques and anecdotes. In her initial reply to her critics, Gilligan remarks that she found a dissonance between women's experience and psychological theory (Gilligan 1986, 325). It is through these anecdotal stories, written in the personal voices of women, that she finds a different way of looking at ethical problems. Rather than participate in the cultural practice of silencing these voices, Gilligan searches for consonance and common threads to validate the moral insights inherent in these stories. What emerges from this is the ethic of care. As an animating principle, care "... centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships" (Gilligan 1982, 19). This is contrasted with morality as 'fairness', that is, tied to rights and rules. In terms of my thesis it is important to note here that the former is negotiated and liquid, the latter solid and enforced, or as Gilligan herself says "... absolute judgement yields to the complexity of relationships" (Gilligan 1982, 59). The closest Gilligan comes to defining or encapsulating the ethic of care is this statement: "... the vision that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt" (Gilligan 1982, 63).

A debate ensued between Gilligan and Kohlberg, some elements of which it is useful to explore here as they relate to how the idea of an ethic of care might relate to the ideas of fostering self-reflection and mutuality in political and social action. Gilligan's initial critique of Kohlberg was built around two major points: that in relation to moral decision making he sees investment in relationship as a deficiency in self, and responsiveness to others as interfering with rationality and objectivity (Gilligan 2011, 19–20). Gilligan notes that women's "relational sensitivity and empathic concern" see them judged as

deficient in development, when in fact these qualities mark the special contribution that women's voices can bring to moral questions (Gilligan 2011, 20).

Seyla Benhabib in her summary of the extensive Kohlberg/Gilligan debate notes that Kohlberg dismisses the idea that women and men have different patterns of psychological development, and claims the differences found by Gilligan are situational rather than gendered (Benhabib 1992, 150). Kohlberg also claims that 'care' orientations may apply to special relationships of family, rather than have a universal applicability (Benhabib 1992, 153). Further critiques follow about an ethic of care being incompatible with universalist morality (Benhabib 1992, 185), and that Gilligan's research may only be applicable to the white, professional and heterosexual women who make up her research base (Nicholson 1983). A final critique of her work revolves around her treatment of the self. Postmodern critiques find Gilligan's 'connected' and 'relational' self at odds with the 'fractured' and 'decentred' self favoured by their analysis (Benhabib, 1992, 196–197).

It should be noted right away that whether an ethic of care is somehow rooted in humanity in general or only in humans exposed to certain conditions, or in women in particular, or perhaps not a 'natural' predisposition at all, it remains a useful idea. Gilligan powerfully reframes her initial position in *Joining the Resistance*, as the title suggests, in a more overtly political light:

Over the past forty years, a confluence of evidence in the human sciences, coming from developmental psychology and sociology, neurobiology and evolutionary anthropology, has shown that we are, by nature, responsive, relational beings, born with a voice and into relationship, hard-wired for empathy and cooperation, and that our capacity for mutual understanding was — and may well be — key to our survival as a species (Gilligan 2011, 3).

Gilligan proceeds to show that these positive social tendencies can be lost or blunted by patriarchal culture, with the process and manner of loss different for men and women.

Gilligan claims that because women tend to define themselves more relationally, as opposed to the more autonomous orientation common to men, their morality is socially contextual rather than rule based (Gilligan 2011, 24–25). Rules enable an individual to disconnect from outcomes that may contain harm. The relational morality more common to women doesn't easily accept a disconnection causing damage to others: the other in this case remains relationally connected to the self, and damage to it (the other) can no more be tolerated than damage to the self. Patriarchy, she argues, requires that women silence this connected voice, and submit to the (patriarchal) divisions of self and other, reason and emotion, and mind and body — Cartesian splits that she notes, "... deform the nature of men and women" (Gilligan 2011, 204). Similarly men are required to accept these divisions, reinforcing the autonomous, disconnected self, resulting not in a silencing but a 'loud' self, less able to see, and less interested in, the feelings and needs of others.

Whilst I find Gilligan's accounts of gender differences and patriarchy compelling and resonant, I don't propose to enter into an argument to defend them here. What is critical is that the infant human's undeniable capacity for, and interest in, mutuality, seems to be significantly lost by adulthood to the paradigm of domination. This is not just because infants are only interested in mutuality with parents. Gilligan notes that research shows children to be also interested in social mutuality outside their own familial setting (Gilligan 2011, 51–52), which seems to work against Kohlberg's claim that care may be a special case of morality restricted to family.

My focus here is to foster this human capacity for mutual understanding and resist disconnecting rule-based approaches that more easily accept damage to the human actor. Whilst I am warmed with hope by the work of Gilligan, which suggests not only that such an approach will appeal to our human 'nature', and that both genders naturally resist these 'normalising' (patriarchal) forces during adolescence (Gilligan 2011, 35), such an approach would still seem valid and important, if less likely to succeed, even without a 'natural' interest from people. Whether care is gendered or not, it remains a quality worth inculcating into our social and political approaches. If it is gendered, as Gilligan suggests,

and I also feel, then men and women will benefit from an understanding of how patriarchy works, in order to enrich their resistance to its culturally embedded norms.

So, returning to the other critiques of Gilligan, that her theories are incompatible with a universalist morality and may only apply to the kinds of minorities in her sample group, do these critiques potentially limit the project at hand? For those attached to the idea of universalist morality, Seyla Benhabib suggests that an ethic of care is not necessarily mutually exclusive with universalism. Benhabib claims justice can be complemented by care, and distinguishes between an ethic of care and an “ethical orientation to care reasoning”. She concludes that Gilligan is best read as “... a contribution to the development of a non-formalist, contextually sensitive and postconventional understanding of ethical life” (Benhabib 1991, 180). Because we will undoubtedly continue to operate with a system of rights and justice, it is a welcome thought that an ethic of care can coexist with rule-based approaches.

The next point of contention, that Gilligan’s work may be representative and applicable only to the smaller culture upon which the research was based, contains a useful caution. In adapting the ethic of care derived from such a research sample, it would be wisest to attempt such an application in a similarly limited way. My idea of testing the idea in predominately white, middle class Australia would seem well based. Adaptation to a different setting may require further research on mutuality and identity in other micro-cultural settings.

Finally, there is the issue of how the self manifests in the work of Gilligan: what are the implications here for adapting the ethic of care into part of a positive approach to political and social action? If indeed Gilligan does seem to presuppose a solid and coherent self, in adapting the idea for my approach here I definitely look to those parts of Gilligan’s work that see the self as a malleable work in progress, and the site of potential resistance. Gilligan herself prefers the term voice to self, as it “... is embodied and in language, it connects psychology with biology and culture without reducing it to either” (Gilligan 2011, 177). The ‘care self’, Gilligan contends, is different to the culturally produced story

about self with its inherent distortions. In seeking to privilege the caring voice in political and social action we will not be feeding a coherent, static, reified self, but a voice re-narrating the self in a social context, in relation to the voices of other selves.

To summarise, three major issues emerging from these debates have major implications for this project. The first is whether ethics are situational as opposed to universal, or as Benhabib suggests, that the two positions can be brought to praxis. The second is whether the concept of an ethic of care applies only to special relationships, such as family and kin, or whether it may be more generally applicable. Finally there is a debate about the generalised as opposed to ‘concrete’ other, which has implications for how we navigate ethical concerns.

Claims for a universalist morality seem to proceed from a series of assumptions. By way of reviewing these I will take as an opening for the debate those defined by Benhabib (1992, 185). The first, which we will remember from the history of the popularisation of the idea of universal human rights, is that at some fundamental level we are all equal. A diluted form of the claim revolves around the idea of people being worthy of equal moral consideration. The second assumption (which is fundamental to my approach as well) is that the ‘concrete’ other is supported to the extent to which we show interest in their needs and interests. Thirdly, Benhabib claims that universalist morality is dependant on a commitment to intersubjective norms, which in turn are generated through ‘practical discourses’. She concludes, pertaining to practical discourses (and I quote here at length to problematise this position in terms of the context-dependant ethics I have explored in this work):

What a commitment to universalism in ethics requires from us in this context is to act in such a way as is consistent with respecting the dignity and worth of all the individuals involved and a willingness to settle controversial matters through the open and unconstrained discussion of all. (Benhabib, 1992, 186)



My reading of Benhabib here is that whilst we may project universalist morals as hopeful ideals, we must be open to adapt them to circumstance or be guilty of failing to acknowledge the personal value of unique people in unique circumstances. Such a position makes the methodologies for navigating such uniqueness critical.

### **Universalist versus situational ethics**

Debates about equality are an aspect of the universalist debate. In terms of the approach highlighted here, the claims for universal equality (and what I called the diluted claim that subjects are equally worthy of moral consideration) and universal rights need to be situated as an aspect of recognitive ethics rather than the desired endpoint of the moral equation. These claims about equality and rights more usually appear as assumptions or 'givens'. They are also usually intended, and interpreted, as a benign universal gifting of value, that creates some sense of an equal playing field to begin relationships and equal access to its decision making procedures when relationships enter conflict.

The distinction I would like to bring to this debate, which supports the mutually recognitive approach to social relations, is the distinction between gifting and 'given'. A given is something, by definition, we are not required to establish by our own actions or relations. We begin our interaction from a set point where we are told, and perhaps accept, that we are in some sense of equal value, or worthy of equal treatment, and have access to the same resources. The 'perhaps' attached to our acceptance or non-acceptance of this is worth exploring. The countless iterations of experience that have influenced our constructions of self and other may well see us arriving at the scene of social engagement with deeply embedded views of self and other that leave us unable or unwilling to accept, either consciously or unconsciously, these conditions of equality as givens. Power relations in society may find us ranking self and other. We may defer to elected officials or law enforcement officers, or feel entitlement due to our age, gender or expertise, which make us unable to construct others as having a 'given' equality. The most obvious example of this is racism, where racist people have been so drenched in ideas about the lower value of a particular group that they are unable to conceive value in the other.

We may feel, perhaps even in opposition to deeply held beliefs about forgiveness or restorative justice, that a person who has murdered or molested children (for example) has forfeited claims to equal regard or treatment. Or we may feel simply unable to give this regard even though we may still believe in the importance of doing so. Perhaps our own chronic self-worth issues may find us unable to imagine ourselves as of equal worth. Personal experiences that have led us to persistent moral failure (lying, thievery or violence for example) may leave us with feelings of intrinsic worthlessness. A failure in upbringing, where we do not attach properly or are not given unconditional love in infancy, may find us simply lacking the psychic building blocks to value self or other. This list, of situations in which people quite commonly may not feel and thus not be able to act in ways that honour the cultural conventions of ‘given’ equality, could be almost endless.

Quite apart from our capacity to accept and/or enact given concepts of equal rights and justice, they create a series of problems. The most important of these problems is the one posed for the application of situational ethics by the rigidity of rights. The situational ethics I have developed in this thesis rely on recognising the needs of all and developing strategies to meet them. It stands to reason, and it has been my experience in political action, that when a need is guaranteed to one party by an established norm, perhaps embedded as a legally established right, that party’s interest in the needs of others seems to diminish — unless compelled to do so by assertion of a counter right that has to be taken seriously in terms of social norms (particularly the law) or by other actions that endanger the easy satisfaction of the need. As was seen at Sandon Point, a developer who has legally established their right to build a housing development is likely to do so even in the face of many stake-holders who have manifestly not had their needs satisfied. Rights seem to create feelings of entitlement.

Nowhere is this better established than in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* where, having established the dubious right to a pound of flesh, the merchant is determined to extract what he is ‘owed’ despite the obvious intuitive inhumanity of doing so. One way of portraying the world of politics is as a pursuit of establishing one’s needs as rights, in

which needs of others are only heeded when they threaten the status of a right that is accepted as a social norm. The bloody-minded insistence on demanding satisfaction of all 'rights' often leads to the annihilation of the needs of those who are unable to establish or defend their own 'rights'.

It seems to me that a 'right', once established, has a tendency to make the owner thus invested lose an important ongoing interest in the human needs and dignity that such a concept came into being to protect. As a concept, rights, particularly when couched in terms of universality and inalienability, have, by apparently satisfying basic human needs with one conceptual and legal sweep, blinded us to both the possibilities and actualities of satisfying basic human needs by other means in the many situations of life where legal and social norms are failing to deliver intended outcomes. This should come as no surprise given that the original conceptions of universal rights intentionally excluded not only women and children, but as well the various forms of non-human life with which we share the world. The skills associated with an ongoing interest, understanding, and meeting of the needs of others have suffered from neglect in politics, because those able to do so are able in many cases to simply end this part of the debate with a successful invocation of a right. To challenge these many cases of what I would argue are inappropriate uses of rights that exclude the needs of others, what needs to happen is a move to reclaim the process of negotiating the actual needs of people. By engaging participants in conflicts with a view to involving them in debates about the values that underlie the formation of rights, we can re-experience the empathy that led to the popularisation of rights in the first place. Importantly, rather than move the debate to abstract principles in a way that enables us to disengage from this task because the problem is 'solved' and dignity has been protected, I advocate staying with ongoing empathetic negotiation of mutual needs as the basic substance of political and social engagement.

I propose the concept of 'gifting', via recognition, as a more useful and meaningful way of constructing intersubjective valuing. Inherent in the idea of gifting is that we give: we bring something positive, useful or enhancing to the situations we enter. But the thing we

bring is not created or purchased externally (like 'political' rights), rather it is built intersubjectively by those present. What we bring then is an openness to recognise and be part of an ongoing process where we are engaged in an ongoing task of negotiating a shared reality. This is a shared reality where no one can claim a right to automatically satisfy their needs at the expense of others. It is hoped that ongoing positive involvement in recognising the needs of others will build the empathy that can be missing in a way of doing politics where appeal to abstract rights has diminished our everyday involvement and exposure to the feelings and needs of others.

To extend the metaphor, people will be less inclined to demand their pound of flesh if divested of their right to do so, and forced instead to establish their need to do so, and to hear the needs of the other from whom the flesh is to be extracted. If we wish to disregard the needs of others we will no longer be able to blind ourselves to the damage this causes from behind the impartial disguise of 'rights'. Those who wish to extract a pound of flesh will be required to not only listen to the screams of those whose flesh is extracted, but have a dialogue with them about how they feel and what they now need to restore their personal happiness to pre-flesh-removal levels.

On the positive side, mutually acknowledged needs should form a more personal and meaningful raft of social rules and obligations, to which we can be at once more connected and more likely to adhere. Mutual recognition as understood by Jessica Benjamin finds value and function in both commonality and difference, with these supposed polarities simultaneously building relationship and connection through similarity, and boundaries between self and other through recognising difference. The gift we bring is to approach this task of valuing similarity and difference as defining both self and other inter-subjectively within relationship. The holy trinity is the self and the other and the relationship between, not as a given, but as they are built, in part by our volition and in part by social and cultural trajectories so complex and interwoven that they take their place unbidden in all three units of the trinity. To the extent that we can, by moral reflection and active mutual recognition in the moment, we create justice in the moment, not by adhering to rules designed to establish and uphold generalised values but by and to

the extent which we search for and address what is needed to maintain the dignity and value of self, other, and their relationship. This remains at each moment a juggling of the complex definition and redefinition of all three constituent parts, and is sustained by an approach to communication that tries to prioritise opportunities for ongoing moral reflection and understanding, sharing and negotiating the needs of all.

Earlier I claimed it was not my intention to set up a new way of doing politics and social action that obviates or excludes other approaches to ethics. A similar caveat operates here with the idea of gifting value in situational ethics and universalist moral explanations and requirements. Most cases of political and social action will almost certainly be taking place in cultures where universalist morality finds expression in laws and codes of acceptable behaviour. Adhering to generalised norms will often guide our situational navigation: but it should guide, not govern or obstruct.

### **The generalised and concrete other**

Similarly, I strongly advocate the centrality of the ‘concrete’ as opposed to the ‘abstract’ other, because one of the critical defining features of much activism is the defence of the dignity of others unable to be present and defend their own interests. Such others, by definition, become abstract. The legitimate interests of such others are manifold, and they are, even when known to us well, only represented by our ideas of them and their needs. The art of advocating for others is a subject worthy of study, in particular for the style of activism I have been proposing, as the job of the activist will be, as well as engaging with the possibilities of mutual recognition with those who are actually there, and able to some degree to engage in a process of exploring needs, to champion the abstract, and therefore imagined, needs of others.

Understanding of the needs of others (and perhaps indeed the needs of self) is, like the empathy discussed before, an act of imagination. In the case of those present, hopefully it is a skilfully informed act of imagination, grounded in the skilled listening and communication skills I have illustrated. In terms of those affected by, but not able or willing to be in, the situation at hand, we rely on understandings of their needs gained

prior to the scenario, or generalised appreciation of their rights or interests made sense of through the lens of negotiated norms. Thus at Sandon Point, I acted in support of the abstract other which I have called 'local Aboriginal people'. Whilst some Aboriginal people were present to engage with their personal needs, abstract notions of rights and justice were needed by me to mobilise and make sense of my political actions, which acted to propel me into the particular scenario in the first place. In the moment the decisions and actions I take remain my own. This means that the preferred or optimum strategy of an activist who is fighting for the needs of others is to help create a space where people can advocate for themselves.

How we marry the negotiation of both concrete and abstract others is important, and the mutually recognitive approach yields some insights to work through these dilemmas. When advocating for others, in whatever situation, we need to establish the extent to which those we are considering are willing to see us act to support their attainment of their needs, and of course to understand the nature of the needs themselves. If we have the possibility of direct relationship with these others, we can use the processes I have described to build relationship and explore needs within a mutually recognitive relationship, including discussion of the possibility of us acting in support of these needs when these others are not present or unable to act on their own behalf. In such situations, mindful of the perils of miscommunication and the limits of contextual application of agreements, we can enter the world and carefully advocate for these parties in the mutually recognitive ways I have explored.

A more complex and problematic scenario involves situations in which we are operating within the frame of abstractly imagined others. Whilst we can imagine, for example, that hungry people need to be fed, advocacy becomes more precarious as we begin to imagine the compromises these people may make to escape from hunger or starvation. Inevitably in politics, advocating for others we will face these dilemmas. Here the application of the 'I' statement, and the taking of personal responsibility it implies, is absolutely critical. 'I' statements are based on the idea that we speak only for our own feelings and needs, and

this, for many activists or those who take part in social and political action, will constitute a major change in the way they act in advocating for others.

Returning to the examples I have explored at Sandon Point, and to my own role within it, I will try to elaborate the implications of the last paragraph. When I was blockading at Sandon Point, I did so in the belief that I was supporting Aboriginal people to meet their legitimate needs for sustaining relationship to place. Whilst I remain confident after reflection that the support I offered was mostly helpful in meeting the needs of the ‘others’ in question, the approach I present here involves claiming only to represent my own needs. In this case my own need was to help address the continuing and inappropriate erosion of Aboriginal Australians’ needs. I draw no validity or moral leverage from my intention to support the needs of others — I act and relate and take responsibility for myself alone. Having done so, I am bound to then check in regularly with those I hope to support, to ensure that I am indeed contributing to a process of helping them meet their needs.

So where does this leave the debates about justice, rights and equality, so germane to the usual philosophic arsenal of the activist? For me these concepts, whilst they will always be relevant in the many cases where mutual recognition fails to resolve conflicts, are no longer useful for framing relationships between people in conflict. As a framing device in conflict they will tend to establish beliefs about the rightness and wrongness of potential solutions to which people will attach to the point where they lose their openness to other ways of seeing the issues. Commitment to these abstract ideals is likely to remain important to many people, particularly as various interpretations of these concepts are established as desirable cultural norms in social life, politics and, in many cases, as law. To this extent I will need to engage with these ideas in terms of understanding and trying to satisfy the needs of others. Those with whom I relate are likely, at least at first, not to understand or ‘buy into’ my proposed mutual recognition of needs as a basis for political exchange, and might remain committed to power based struggles to assert and establish their own preferred outcomes in terms of any or all of the concepts of justice, rights and equality. It is possible, and perhaps most likely, that others may construe their own needs

through the lens of cultural or personal ethics strongly based on a subscription to notions of rights and justice. The question of whether rights and justice satisfactorily protect the needs of self or other may not, for various reasons, be important or valid for many potential interlocutors. Whilst I feel that the opportunity to reflect on social life may find these concepts of less use than many would imagine, it would never be my position to actively undermine other people's conceptions of needs. Rather, my position aims simply to provide and support an atmosphere and space that creates opportunity for ethical reflection where other possibilities for rethinking human need in a more situation-specific (and possibly mutually recognitive) manner are possible.

It is not my intention to suggest that mutual recognition as a tool for ethical navigation of the social world, in conflict or otherwise, is either equal, just, right or even necessarily fair — though if I were to buy into the idea of establishing mutual recognition as having a place in a universalist morality I would suggest a good case could be made. My strategy instead is to continue to try to create opportunities for those I engage with to have contact with the ideas that generate and sustain mutuality, experience of its application (by people practising it — such as myself) and spaces to learn and practise the skills pertinent to doing it well, in both social and political life as we move through it, and workshop situations which represent a more controlled environment for safer and more concentrated skill building amongst people already engaged more explicitly and formally committed to the ideas in question.

By way of a small conclusion — here expressed as a tentative supposition — I think there would be a high degree of commonality between mutually recognitive situation-specific generated outcomes, and those obtained through a commitment to pursuing justice and rights through the various social mediations that they travel. The differences we are likely to see are fewer cases where abstract justice fails to protect those who have less power to advocate for their needs and shape the dominant discourses and social and legal practices through which justice is defined and dispensed. Effectively, the situation-specific moralities are less likely to impose cultural norms created for all situations that do not fit the particular example at hand. Situationally generated outcomes based on mutual



recognition and satisfaction of needs are unlikely to offend general conceptions of justice, but they may be at odds with the kinds of outcomes we may expect from the law, given that we have unequal resources to access and operationalise the law to sustain our needs. We may see such processes as advocated here generating outcomes less dependent on resources such as wealth and expertise, and outcomes that are less advantageous to the more resourced members of communities.

My approach here would see continued connection of Aboriginal people to land at Sandon Point as a need, and Stockland intended development as a desire for profit. Their real need — to make a living (as opposed to a profit) — could have been accommodated without destruction of important relationships to land by simply making a substantially smaller development, and consequently a smaller profit. My hope is that a mutually recognitive exchange would lead to an identification of ‘real’ needs on both sides, and that Stockland representatives, after building empathy with Aboriginal people, would be less inclined to take a ‘pound of flesh’, namely the destruction of Aboriginal relationship with land via the massive insensitive development. Given the history of capitalism’s disdain for the needs of indigenous people the world over, such a hope is surely fanciful. More modest goals, that some people on both sides of the political fence may understand and value each other a little better, and behave a little more sensitively next time, is perhaps a more reasonable and achievable goal.

It is difficult to imagine an ethical approach that leaves all within its intended ambit satisfied and safeguarded with the guidelines for behaviour it establishes. To this extent what I have illustrated here is no different. Where it hopes to be different is in the kinds of outcomes it generates when it works, and the kinds of damage that may be the outcome of its failures. Setting aside wilful distortions by those who misuse these strategies for personal strategic gain as another category of failure against which no system is safe, what I have done here attempts to set up a way of operating that stresses opportunities to identify and reflect upon the self destructive nature of the anti-social pursuit of personal needs at the expense of the needs of other, and maximises the

generation of socially mindful alternatives that can be generated and adopted with a minimum of coercion or domination.

I have developed and illustrated how the system might build opportunity and spaces for ethical reflection, and maximise self directed changes in behaviour that are clearly based on direct communication of the needs of all parties. The most obvious problem in any ethical theory that places communication in the driver's seat of its process is embedded communicative inequalities. The idea that we can establish a level playing field for communicative equality, such as proposed by Jürgen Habermas's communicative rationality, seems overly optimistic. The processes of social creation of selves and knowledge, and the ubiquity of power in language, gender, race and class, just to name the most obvious locations of difference, would seem to cripple the absolute success of such a project. The AVP model for negotiating needs in a mutually recognitive way is similarly not free from these structural expressions of difference and power inequality. Nor is it proof against expressions of human agency that wilfully intend to profit from such inequalities of power. Where such a system as proposed here is different is in its opportunities for reflective human agency to embrace difference and use power to transform social settings and human agency itself into trajectories for working with the creation of empathy as a direct tool for understanding and socially negotiating human needs. The approach I illustrate here neither guarantees ethical outcomes, nor is it proof against the abuses of power. However for those who are interested in, and dedicated to, the idea of socially negotiating human needs as opposed to participating in power struggles to define and apply abstract notions of justice to particular cases, and hope that this will protect human dignity and meet human needs, the system I have suggested here is rich in opportunity.

Returning to the debates generated in part by the work of Gilligan and Benjamin, I will now explore some of the implications of the position I have taken in terms of the dynamic concepts at play within this ongoing theoretical discussion. Through this process I hope to complete the task of situating my contribution to these debates, and pinpoint what are likely to be some of the major reservations that scholarly positions shed on my work. I

will begin by looking at the work of Diana Tietjens Meyers (1994). Part of Meyer's work is to look at the role of empathy in moral reflection. She grounds this discussion in an understanding, interpretation and reconfiguring of the theories of Benjamin and Gilligan, and other theorists active in the area. My proposed way of doing politics fits roughly into these discussions. I take from it some key assumptions, and leaven this with some important differences, to finish with what I hope is a practical and ethical way of doing activism, which is also a contribution to the debates that surround the possibility of meaningful situational ethics.

### **Practical implications**

New ways of approaching and conducting politics and social action will require a different set of skills to those usually required for participating in, and ethically navigating, activism. Where once intellectual grasp of issues and strategies to persuade and coerce others to act differently were the stock and trade of the 'would-be' social revolutionary, empathic and communication skills to open up the possibility of ethical reflection for all become the main tools of the trade. A simple theoretical model from the world of counselling describes the shift well. Looking at the therapist-client relationship, Carl Rogers (1965) in *Client-Centered Therapy* develops ideas for placing responsibility and direction of change firmly in the hands of the client. Similarly, the kind of politics I envisage here moves responsibility and the direction of change away from the sole purview of the activist to all participants related to the social sphere where the activist has been moved to involvement. Like the therapist in Rogers' process, the activists' role in the process I have sketched is to help everyone involved work through change and conflict, and support all participants in ethical reflection and action. The idea of steering the outcomes of this process towards the social outcomes deemed just, fair or right by the activist is greatly diminished. The paradigm shift here is that, rather than the activist positioning themselves as a leader or the person in possession of truth about justice, rights or even strategic insights pertinent to the resolution of the situation at hand, they become simply a person in possession of skills with which to open up possibilities for mutually recognitive conflict resolution in which the key players use and build their own

skills and understanding, to be guided or grounded by their own feelings towards solutions that satisfy the needs of all.

Therapeutic sessions often involve a separation between the understanding of the problem, and the feelings associated therein, and the problem solving phase where options to address change are begun. Similarly the methodology I have sketched has dealt mainly with understanding and reflecting on the ethical and practical social aspects of conflict during social action through the lens of the relationships between the parties involved. As in Roger's *Client-Centered Therapy*, this section of the process attempts to be as undirected as possible, and the activists' particular views about the direction of any change needed are not the central focus of discussion. Like Rogers in a counselling session, we are not attempting to change others but rather we are creating opportunities for change. Whether, when and how to change are decisions for the other. Our job as activists is to create situations where the other has space and time and appropriate setting to consider the 'when, whether and how' of possible change.

The literature and cultural knowledge on personal and social change is enormous. The opportunity to engage with them and find the particular frame or lens that helps us improve the quality of understanding of ourselves and the related quality of our interaction with the world will be very useful for those wishing to attempt the kinds of approaches sketched here. The sheer size and breadth of the so-called self-help literature suggests not only a wide interest in self-improvement, but that no single approach is enough for the wide variety of people and their concomitant 'problems'. One of the central political struggles, evoked by the possibilities I have tried to imagine, is the need to create access to these bodies of knowledge. This means making such cultural knowledge visible, approachable, and feasible for the widest possible variety of people. Inevitably no single approach will be useful to all, and the information and cultural practices that lie within these approaches are in themselves political and contested. It is engagement with, rather than absorption of, such approaches that may hopefully feed processes of personal and social growth.

AVP includes in its methodology easy access and affordability. Because it was originally developed for prisons, AVP pitches its initial communicative requirements at a low level. It also acknowledges the need for ongoing practice of new ways of relating, offering repeated opportunities within each workshop to practise communication strategies and repeated opportunities to do new workshops. AVP, like many such strategies, tends to present its own wisdom as a relatively rigid and change-resistant set of processes. The adaptation of the model here is not AVP. In line with this, the conclusions offered here are not an attempt to produce a final truth, but an interim report arrived at on a pause in the journey. As I have adapted AVP to suit the kinds of purposes that may suit the world as my perception encounters it, so the reader and possible user of such stratagems will depart from my offerings here on their own journey of adaptation.

As Brian Martin (2011) suggests in his *Doing Good Things Better*, improvement in whatever skill we seek to develop benefits from systematic study and regular practice. Engaging in listening, taking action, reflecting and considering possibilities for change suggested in the AVP model I have explored here go part of the way to satisfying the conditions for ‘doing good things better’ in that they practise skills appropriate to conscious social action. Mutual Recognition and AVP, as detailed here as actualising tools, both have, in their personal interpretations offered here by me, presuppositions about what is ‘better’. This work would not be complete without formal declaration of these values and how they relate to scholarly musings on such issues. I have already suggested that empathy, connection and mutuality lie at the heart of both goals and practices of the new approaches I have illustrated. I would now like to offer a systematic, theoretically grounded, summation of the shape and content of the personal transformation that I hope the processes of mutual recognition as a strategy for social action may involve.

Wayment and Bauer (2008) expound such a theory in their idea of ‘the quiet ego’. The quiet ego theory is based on a closely related assumption to what has more or less explicitly undergirded my own work here: that excessive self-interest damages the important, and perhaps central, social component of self-interest. Excessive self-interest

is, paradoxically, not in the interest of the self. Wayment and Bauer tease out this paradox in terms of the self-help literature and the concomitant social trajectory in US society. The self-help literature, they claim, has contributed to an unhelpful “cultural endorsement of excessive self interest.” Yet, they continue, books on “humanistic, prosocial forms of personal growth” (Wayment and Bauer, 2008, 7) that identify the problems of excessive self-interest, also abound, and are also successful in terms of sales and engagement with more scholarly approaches to the issues to which they pertain. The collection of work on the quiet ego that Wayment and Bauer present attempts to sharpen the focus on the prosocial, humanistic aspects of such endeavours, and in doing so they generate, or propose a systemic crystallisation of, ideas that I present here as a readily adaptable academic framework for the ideas I have explored in this thesis.

The essential elements that comprise the idea of the quiet ego closely relate to the ideas that have underpinned this thesis. The quiet ego literature claims that excessive focus on the self, and in particular a definition of self that excludes others, creates “social disharmony” and “diminished personal well-being, health, productivity, and self-esteem.” (Wayment and Bauer, 2008, 7). My personal experience that marked the point of departure for the ideas illustrated in this thesis would add to this list that the excessive focus on a non-socially defined self also creates and exacerbates social conflict, and limits possibilities for conflict resolution and social change. Lack of attention to the understanding and needs of others, and over determination to establish one’s own needs at the expense of the needs of others, are also, in terms of Jessica Benjamin’s model, the core definition of relations of domination.

The quiet ego movement’s programme to counteract this unhealthy focus on self bears a considerable similarity to the adaptation of Jessica Benjamin’s concept of mutual recognition as operationalised by the AVP communication models by myself in this thesis. The framing of the model is slightly different and sheds useful light on, and offers a more systemic general approach to, theorising the concerns at the heart of this thesis than I have attempted in this work. I will sketch here their model, and through this

engagement focus on some more general implications of my work for the participant in social and political action.

The quiet ego refers to an approach to self that re-envisioning itself as constructed and socially dependant, and therefore seeks to moderate those apparent demands by the self that emphasise its own needs at the expense of social arrangements. Writers often refer to this excessive or out-of-balance assertion of self as ‘loudness of ego’ and a corresponding moderation as ‘quiet ego’. They break down the advantages of such a position into four categories, each deemed to contribute to a way of being that is healthier for the self and contributes to the social world into which this self is hopefully integrated. The four categories are detached awareness, interdependence, compassion and growth. The more explicitly political and social activist approach to which I suggest these concepts may apply frame an attitude to self in social and political action that nicely encapsulates the redefinition and practices of self useful to, or perhaps even required by, a mutually recognitive approach to such situations.

The first of these, detached awareness, is quite close to the practice of mindfulness, itself defined as a kind of non-defensive attention, as proposed by spiritual practices such as Buddhism. The definition of mindfulness as given by Wayment and Bauer is worth repeating verbatim: “a subjective interpretation of the current situation in which that interpretation is not predicated on how the situation makes one feel about oneself.” (Wayment and Bauer, 2008, 12). This orientation towards experience opens the possibility of an alternative way of relating to others where we are less reactive, less orientated towards defending or establishing a sense of self, and thus more receptive and open to hearing the needs of others. This helps create the opportunity for the second of these categories: interdependence, which deals with mutual relations and hopes to create an integrated way of viewing self and others that enables the simultaneous grasp of difference and unity. The third category, compassion, also has a firm grounding in spiritual traditions, and relates quite closely to Gilligan’s ethic of care. Compassion is an emotional stance towards interdependence that honours or privileges acceptance and empathy for both self and others. It relates quite directly to two of the interlocking

aspects of the AVP Mandala: Respect for Self and Respect for Others. The fourth category, growth, is defined by Wayment and Bauer as humanistic or prosocial development. The idea of growth or development places the previous three categories in a trajectory and gives a long term, or ‘beyond the moment’, perspective or orientation to the way we act.

In this thesis I have used the idea of creating, sustaining, and repairing relationships as a framework for navigating ethical questions during social and political action. These four categories give shape to what it is within the relationship that is created and how it can be sustained and repaired. They also suggest a conclusion to my work here that sees the deepest level of the activist’s work in terms of a re-imagining of self and a consequential reappraisal of how we approach our projects for change. I will now reiterate the aim of this project, in a slightly different way, to stress its connection with three of these four principles of the quiet ego movement, to more starkly draw the contrast with more traditional strategic and coercive (or perhaps more softly — persuasive) approaches to social and political action, particularly those of the ‘left’ that concern themselves with creating, sustaining and upholding rights to provide justice or perhaps assuage a sense of injustice.

My project grew from my personal experience of disillusionment with attempts at social change that were primarily based on trying to persuade or coerce others to alter behaviours deemed unjust, unfair and damaging. The chief tools for these attempts involved persuading others that their actions were either unethical or ineffective or both, and that the measures proposed by the (would be) agents of change would be ‘better’ on all of these accounts. Whilst to some extent this process had yielded results, my own feeling was that the change was not substantial and that the damage to the social whole we sought to improve was considerable. Ongoing differences about the future of our shared communities were not being overcome by these struggles. If social learning was happening it was used to outwit each other in the next encounter, not to build understandings about how to reconcile difference and share our social world in a way in which we could all be satisfied. Many activists, myself particularly, grew disillusioned



and angry during conflicts where we met the same obstacles, driven by the same interests of those who sought to satisfy their own needs (or simply interests) with the minimum strategic concession to the needs of others. For all concerned the struggle was about winning or losing, with social progress coming off a very poor second. The lack of mutual recognition and social valuing between us was a disappointment deepened by the fact that we usually ‘lost’ the better part of what we hoped for in terms of social change.

I have sought to build a way of doing activism that is as non-coercive as it can be without abandoning its goal of change, and that seeks to avoid damage to any part of the social whole whose improvement is the motivation. The non-coercive element was framed in relation to Foucault’s idea of relations of domination, and social improvement was seen as creating, sustaining and repairing mutually recognitive social and interpersonal relations. Social and political change of merit was cast in terms of the balancing and meeting of the needs of all, rather than appeals to justice, that were based on establishing and upholding rights. My preference for this way of approaching politics was grounded in theory and explained, but again it has not been the work of this thesis to suggest that this way is ‘better’ than others in a general sense. It is offered as an alternative framework for those who share a commitment to exploring non-dominative ways of attempting social change and for those who believe they have seen other means both fail to deliver outcomes and damage the social relations they sought to improve.

What I have sought to do, in some detail, is to explicate exactly how such an idea might be applied. Whilst respecting the dynamic interplay between agency and structure, I have sought to elaborate how a socially located and mediated self can use the processes of listening to others, reflecting on self, and understanding and communicating feelings and their relationship to needs, to pursue this alternative vision of political and social action. It is to these techniques, which I grounded in mutual recognition and actualised through an adaptation of the restorative practices model used by AVP (NSW), whose implications I now wish to explore through the lens of the quiet ego movement, to show the centrality of re-imagining the self to the project as a whole.

The most obvious practical implication for political and social action of the change in focus I am suggesting is a move from direct strategic focus on what needs to change outside of us to what needs to change within. My own personal history with projects for social change always involved a sense of personal development, and to some extent this will be true of nearly all social activists: we build our knowledge of the world and self simultaneously through an overlapping involvement in both. For most activists the emphasis, in terms of the actions we take specifically aimed at social change, are targeted at things external to self: changing laws, political practices, and political culture, or decisions or non-decisions of government that we believe result in ways of being, distributions of wealth, power, or cultural advantage that we see as unfair, unjust or damaging to our collective social world.

The idea of changing this outward focus to one of transforming the self is not new. The ‘personal is political’ movement, familiar to many of us in its manifestation out of a period of intense cultural change in the 1960’s, is one example. The idea of ‘being the change you seek’, now a truism within activist circles interested in alternative ways of doing politics, is another manifestation of this impulse. What I hope is fresh is the idea of creating social spaces conducive to all involved to re-imagine or transform ‘selves’, as opposed to simply focussing on change for self. Both the quiet ego movement and my own mutually recognitive/restorative practices model have undeniably emerged within this trajectory, and I will now use the ideas of the quiet ego movement to focus to a sharper point my own specific contribution to this general area of endeavour.

The first of the quiet ego maxims — the quality of detached awareness — describes the necessary attention to locate the self in the social world. Wayment and Bauer note that the quiet ego is aware of its social construction. The more aware the self is of its interdependence, both as it is constructed and continually mediated (2008, 15), the less likely it is to behave defensively, and the more likely it is to grasp the needs of others. Wayment and Bauer point out that a low level of awareness about one’s own construction of self is associated with a relative lack of understanding about the contextual and negotiated nature of reality. The corresponding tendency to view reality as fixed and

graspable as truth reifies both self and other and diminishes the ability of the individual to build shared realities.

This point about awareness locks in with several aspects of my work here. This quality of awareness clearly is required to embark on the kind of mutual recognition I have extrapolated from Jessica Benjamin. AVP's systematic approach to creating interpersonal situations as opportunities for guided listening and reflection clearly creates spaces to explore needs and feelings of self and other as interdependent. The fusion of the two ideas I have suggested for political and social action tries to recreate these situations as environments to learn and practise the skills associated with such awareness. Detached awareness resists domination, as power is not used to establish the preferred realities of an atomised ('me') self, but a social self that tries to understand its created, mediated and thus interdependent relation with others. This may be close to Foucault's 'mastery of self', where the self is so aware of its relation to others that it naturally seeks to understand and interpolate the interest of the other in its daily movements.

The second quality of the quiet ego, detailed by Wayment and Bauer, flows subtly from the first. Interdependence is described as an integrated view of oneself that enables the self to simultaneously grasp difference and unity. This again corresponds quite directly with the state of mutual recognition described by Benjamin in the infant-parent relation and the adult erotic love bond, where self is able simultaneously to be itself and yet be permeable to, and completely accepting of, the different other. Benjamin's account deepens that offered by the quiet ego movement by noting the ongoing tension of this state as one where we are aware of difference and the possible threat this posits to self. If the self doesn't react defensively, the possibility of negation carried by the other builds a shared reality of difference and unity, without either being subsumed, obliterated or dominated. The AVP mandala carries the need to respect both self and other. Benjamin and the quiet ego movement deepen this with a philosophical explanation of how this can be done simultaneously. I have sketched how the communicative tools of AVP can be used to allow both self and other to experience difference and unity to maximise the

chances of a collaboratively established new social reality that can embrace the needs of all, without obliterating difference.

The third quality of the quiet ego adds a new dimension to the analysis I have offered. Compassion describes an emotional stance towards interaction without which the effective negotiation of needs will be greatly hampered. Wayment and Bauer define compassion as acceptance and empathy for self and others. It is an emotional disposition towards interdependence. Compassion is paradoxically both a condition for, and aspiration sought in, political and social life as imagined in the mutually recognitive approach to political and social conflict examined here. Without the generosity involved in including others in one's own imagining of the integrated self, the processes I have envisaged will struggle to make an impact. What I have proposed is perhaps not different from many other utopian schemes; it requires the good will of those involved to make it work. The techniques I have demonstrated work hard to open spaces for good will to flourish, but as I have seen in many an AVP workshop, the vicissitudes of life, or lack of access to the experiences that make growth possible, leave many damaged, stuck or perhaps simply unconvinced and unable or unwilling to imagine other ways of being and doing outside of those they currently inhabit. The AVP approach I have adapted here is not angry or frustrated with such obstacles. The idea of shining a light tells us that we can only illuminate possibility. A person's experience of change is their own, and they will do it in their own way, in their own time or perhaps not at all, or in a different direction than anticipated by AVP. The cliché relating to leading horses to water but not being able to make them drink is perhaps well placed here.

This thesis has worked on the assumption that increased empathy is the core requirement for realising the project I have envisioned. Lynn Hunt's idea that the epistolary novel was pivotal to the growth of social empathy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been important here. If I may be permitted a moment of grandiosity in my conclusion here, I believe that the cultural establishment of universal human rights, which Hunt sees as a consequence of the empathy generated by the epistolary novel, may have been one of history's great missed opportunities. As an alternative, if, rather than create abstract principles (rights) to

embody the things that empathy suggests are valuable, we work with empathy as a process which fuels the act of moral reflection, then empathy and moral reflection could become key players in a cultural practice of situational ethics, where we use mutual recognition to establish the needs of all. The simple distinction is between a society where we are prevented from acts that may violate each other's basic needs and one where we are empathically connected and therefore desire the needs of all to be met. The adaptation of the AVP model, I suggest here, cannot in itself build empathy: it offers the opportunity to experience and reflect upon the feelings of self and other. Without a positive orientation towards the experience of others, experience may leave us just as sour, dejected and cynical about ourselves as about others. I am supposing that many people approach novels to be entertained, enriched, surprised and consoled, to find things that appear or feel to be universal that connect us to the experience of others. Even in the existential novel, the experience of disconnection, isolation and meaninglessness is one we share and take comfort in, in a melancholy way.

So I shall conclude here with the invitation to the reader, that to make this idea work we could approach the potential collisions of social action with a similar imaginative and positive orientation to that by which we approach a novel — as an opportunity to experience sharing, connection and growth, even though, as in the case of the existential or post-modern novel, this may also involve some discomfort, confusion and challenge to our sense of self and other and the way they may intersect. I return again to Erazim Kohak's use of metaphor and invitation to look, see or imagine how an orientation towards reconnection may enrich the experience of life. With a little bit of structure and a few helpful techniques, and such a positive orientation, politics could be also re-imagined as less of a struggle for domination, and more a part of life where we experience connection and collaboration and learn and grow.

### **Further thoughts**

By way of final comment I would like to return once again to an episode from my own experience. When I had just turned seventeen, in my first year at university, I went to an on-campus meeting about anarchism. The speaker turned out to be a member of the

Freedom Collective. They had a small meeting room down an alley off High Street in Freemantle, a smaller city south of Perth in Western Australia. They published an irregular newsletter called *News From Nowhere*. Like many teenagers, my attraction to anarchism was shallow, and based on the strong urge for personal freedom, common in young adults in the process of escaping from parental authority. The discussions that were in progress were not about how rich our lives would be if we were free of all constraint, as I had perhaps naively imagined, but about how to resist the oppressions of the state. The primary focus of the group seemed to be not themselves as such, but oppressed groups, particularly the 'working class'. I sat in the meeting saying very little, struggling to understand who these people were and what they were trying to do. The parallel task of working out who I was and what I was doing was happening simultaneously. The first, and perhaps incredibly obvious, step towards political maturity was the recognition that politics was not simply about reframing the world to suit me, and where I was at: it was about juggling the complex needs of all. To do this, much understanding was required. I had to understand myself, others and our shared social context. Social context was not just the understanding of the ebbs and flows of big picture stuff like capitalism and communism, which I was studying in Politics 101. It was also the micro social environments of local groups and struggles, such as was going on in the Freedom Collective in Freemantle.

This unfolding of self and others all happened simultaneously and socially. And whilst this was a period of intense change and growth, to me it appeared that life has been and continues to be a perpetual unfolding of self, others and context, lived moment by moment, with the rug of understanding forever on the brink of slipping from under my feet as I walk the walk of daily politics and social struggle. The process of action and reflection within a context, where all the pieces require repeated attempts at understanding and recognition, and where they are all connected and in continual flux, describes my attempts to simultaneously navigate and have a positive impact on my social world. I have shared a fragment of my own experience under the retrospective lens of mutual recognition, to illustrate how such a process might be done better.

This returns me to the beginning of this thesis where I mentioned the work of Erazim Kohak, and speculated that the idea of reconnection fundamental to his work on the moral sense of nature will also be fundamental to the ideas I would explore in terms of the task of reflective social action. In this spirit I would like to mention a connection, on the idea of connection itself, between the ideas of Erazim Kohak and Carol Gilligan.

Kohak's metaphor, gained whilst gazing at stars and the glowing embers of a fire, both made brighter by the absence of the background light of 'civilization', is that modern life disconnects us from the 'reality' of nature. He says that by removing ourselves geographically from the manifestations of modernity, we can re-glimpse a vision of the whole of which we are part, and reconnect to its implicit moral sense. Gilligan, too, finds disconnection to be behind many of humanity's ills, and also finds that resisting disconnection is something like a panacea. In conclusion to *Joining the Resistance*, Gilligan states of Cartesian splits (of mind and body, man and woman, reason and emotion) that they have "blunted our ethical intelligence, fragmented our psyches, short-circuited our neurology, compromised democracy, and jeopardized our survival" (Gilligan 2011, 180).

Kohak claims that daily living in modern settings disconnected from nature has the potential to leave us blind to patterns and tropes in nature which could serve us well in ethically navigating our lives. Gilligan is concerned with disconnection at an intra-personal level. Patriarchy, she claims, disconnects people from themselves and their humanity. For women this means a silencing of their 'true voice', which is social, connected and empathetic, and for men a disconnection from feelings in general. Both genders, she claims, resist the disconnection, particularly during adolescence. Resistance to disconnection in both cases is where these authors see capacity for a more human and less dominative way of being.

Resisting disconnection is at the heart of the techniques I have sought to illustrate in this thesis. Connecting feelings to needs and understanding of self and other through active reflection and mutual recognition are the major hopes for the methodologies of AVP I

have adapted for my own critical reconstructions. This leads me to two further insights from Gilligan's *Joining the Resistance* that tie in the restorative questions I use here as a guide for critical reflection. These two ideas are 'true voice' and the difference between a 'good question' and a 'true question'.

## **Restorative questions**

AVP's four restorative questions are: 'what happened?', 'what was the hardest part for you?', 'what would I do differently?', and finally, 'what needs to happen to restore relationships damaged by the events?' The first question, 'what happened?', requires an objective account of circumstance and action. In my own accounts here, I extended this idea to include a critical reading of context, including the back stories, and a critical reading of the self, which acknowledges the subjectivity of self and exposes these constructions as well as possible to the reader. The second question, 'what was the hardest part for you?', extends this journey into self, requiring the subject to examine their emotional response to events, in order to explore the relationships between feelings and needs. In particular the focus is on relating feelings to unmet needs. The third question, 'what would I do differently?', relates to the problem-solving phase, when the subject begins the act of imagining how events may have unfolded if attention had been primarily focussed on seeing the event space as an opportunity for all parties to explore and reflect on their feelings and needs with a view to the needs of all being met. The final question, 'what would I do differently?', is the actioning of the insights from question three in a post-event scenario, retrospectively attending to the unmet needs of the original circumstance and the new needs generated by the failure to adequately navigate the original events. Whilst much can be gained by a solo reflection, such as I have done here, if social rather than just personal growth is desired, then a more complex collective process of social reflection involving all parties is required. The last stage in particular is most closely geared toward actualising social growth, and has only been sketched here; the more personal part of the journey in the first three questions has been the emphasis of this work.



For ease of understanding, these four questions have been presented as separate and sequential. In reality all four are likely to blend together and each require constant interface and re-examination. Gilligan's ideas of true voice and true questions, whilst particularly pertinent to the first two questions, yield some interesting insights applicable to the process as a whole, when they are used to nourish the reflective process. Gilligan describes the difference between a good question and a true question as the difference between asking, on one hand, a question to find out information you require and, on the other, seeking what you want (Gilligan 2011, 78–80). The former is strategic, and relates to navigation of the situation at hand. The latter relates to where you are emotionally drawn to explore. The true question relates closely to her idea of true voice, being that voice of the relational connected self. The true voice is often lost or surrendered in a patriarchal culture. Gilligan points out that culture asks us (more particularly women) to accept loss of relationship as collateral damage in exchange for culturally defined concepts of personal attainment, which may or may not have meaning for us. In fact Gilligan suggests that achievement, independence and separation are culturally supported at the expense of nurturance, intimacy and relationships (Gilligan 2011, 33–34). The true question is one that resists these cultural distortions and asks what is required to nurture and sustain selves in relationship, as opposed to what is required for separate, independent goal achievement. Gilligan suggests that holding on to this true voice and using our ability to 'spot a false story' is central to an ethic of care, and opens the door to "a path of resistance grounded not in ideology but in our humanity" (Gilligan 2011, 43).

It is precisely this terrain that the restorative questions, and the style of reflection demonstrated here, have sought to illustrate. The second restorative question, 'what was the hardest part for you?', guides us to emotional reflection. It seeks to engage our natural inclination to connect thoughts and feelings in order to spot a false story within ourselves. When I asked myself what was the hardest part in the stories I have shared here, the answer was the damage to relationships that had happened and was continuing to happen in the political and social struggles. This thesis has been animated by the belief that, given the opportunity and the skills to reflect, many people would also be deeply unhappy with the ongoing social damage rendered seemingly acceptable by a culture that

reifies separate and individual goal attainment at the expense of relationship. I have shared a simple four-step process of reflection that can be performed separately or collectively, retrospectively or in the moment. Like Erazim Kohak, I make no claim that the perspective shared here is some objective provable truth, though I hope to have shown that there are rational grounds that support it. Like Kohak, I have sought to share a vision of possibility, and like Gilligan and Benjamin, a mode of resistance to a domination based in the over assertion of a narrow and anti-social concept of self. It is not the only way, but one of many. This was my journey, and my hope is it may help others on theirs.

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