



kylie valentine, Acting Director of SPRC 2011–2014

At the end of 2011 I wrote my final 'from the desk of the acting director' note for the SPRC newsletter, which was still at the time a desktop published thing that was even printed and sent out to people. The director's note was privately called the homily by at least a couple of us who'd had to write it, and it was regarded with anticipatory horror every quarter by (I'm fairly sure) everyone who had to write it.

One of the most sensible innovations of recent years has been to dispense with it, although some people still miss the old newsletter.

My final note invoked the cliché-turned-Google-Scholar-logo 'standing on the shoulders of giants' to describe my debt to past directors and deputy directors. That still seems accurate, as does the rest of the note, and given its archival status I think I can be forgiven for having retooled it for this piece.

Recall the apocryphal exchange between Hemingway and Fitzgerald? F: 'The rich are different from you and me.' H: 'Yes, they have more money.' Social policy debates continue to pivot on this kind of idea, and on its inverse. Are they rich different from the rest of us? More importantly, are the poor different from the rest of us? Is that why they're poor, because they're feckless and irresponsible and caught up in dysfunctional cultures? Alternatively, but following the same argument of difference, are they poor because education and health systems are too narrow to accommodate diversity and benefit only the few, because institutions and cultures perpetuate inequalities, because practices and spaces are excluding, because differences around race, disability, language and Indigeneity are sites for the exercise of power and exclusion?

These questions are important, because they point to differences in the ways that inequality can be addressed. If Hemingway was right and the difference is money, the response required is primarily about redistribution. The task is by no means simple or apolitical, but its terms are clear: the most efficient and equitable ways of redistributing wealth. It requires analysis of things such as employment and income support policies, tax transfers and benefits, and economic flows between age groups. If, on the other hand, Fitzgerald was right and there are important differences between the disadvantaged and others, then addressing inequality demands attention to those differences. It requires cultural and social analysis in addition to economic calculations, and needs to borrow tools from anthropology, gender studies, and media studies, and to heed the lessons of childhood studies, disability studies, Indigenous studies, and postcolonial theory.

Both Fitzgerald and Hemingway were, of course, onto something. Our canvas needs to be both macro and micro, to address the technical questions of distribution and the social questions of practices and values. In its time, SPRC has been consistently unhesitating in taking on these tasks and occupying these spaces. Its past directors exemplify the scope and importance of social policy research, and of SPRC's contributions. Peter Saunders revitalised the study of poverty in Australia, and for decades has been measuring the extent and impact of deprivation. Ilan Katz studies whether programs and policies designed to improve the well-being of disadvantaged families and communities do so, and if so how. Peter Whiteford takes an international and comparative perspective on pension, welfare, and taxation systems. Kelley Johnson has led scholarship in the field of intellectual disability and in inclusive disability research. Lyn Craig measures rigorously and imaginatively the labour done by men and women in intimate and familial settings, and her work has also been pioneering in recognising these settings as sites of measurable labour. Each one of these researchers investigates multiple dimensions of disadvantage, and they each have generous, expansive concerns; but no-one would mistake the output of one for the other in the dark. They consider both who has less money than is adequate, and the everyday practices that cement disadvantage. Now Carla Treloar, who it is to be hoped will lead SPRC for many years to come, brings the insights of the decades-long research conducted at the Centre for Social Research in Health—on stigma,

marginalisation and the intersections of health and social policy—to SPRC. Her generosity of spirit and intellect, and her own formidable research program, accommodate all the Hemingways and Fitzgeralds in residence at SPRC. Our work is more important than ever, and her stewardship ensures that it will maintain its visibility and impact.