

Their stories, our history: Mike O'Brien

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article reviews the life contribution of Mike O'Brien to the fields of social work education, research, and practice over his 55 years in the field.

APPROACH: Using interviews, publications, and letters of support written for Mike's Queen's Service Medal awarded in 2018, a chronological and thematic consideration is provided which demonstrates Mike's significant contribution in linking teaching, theory, practice, policy, research, and advocacy in making a difference for the children and families of Aotearoa New Zealand.

CONCLUSION: The overriding theme of Mike's career emerges as a determination to highlight the social work and social policy responsibility to address issues of child poverty at both micro and macro levels.

Keywords: Biography; social work history; Aotearoa New Zealand; social work education

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This article is part of the *Their Stories, Our History* series, which details the lives of people who have made a significant contribution to the history of the profession of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. The article begins with an exploration of Mike's early life and career in social work, his practice as a social work educator and academic, his work with the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), and his various advocacy/voluntary roles in relation to child poverty. The article continues with a consideration of some of Mike's reflections on the highs and lows of his career and ends with author conclusions. The research and analysis was completed by author 1, with author 2 joining the writing stage of the project.

Methodology

This project followed a life-history method (Ritchie, 2003). In a life history, the "researcher and the participant construct a

narrative in a collaborative fashion, utilising multiple data sources such as one-on-one interviews and observations (Tierney & Lanford, 2019, p. 2). As such, information for this article has come from a range of sources: in the first instance (and following ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee), Mike himself was interviewed by the lead author on two occasions. Mike suggested people whom he believed could comment on different aspects of his contributions to social work over time, and signed permission forms for them to disclose information about him for the project. Three people agreed to be interviewed, with interviews taking place between January 2021 and March 2022. Another source of information came from letters of support which author 1 had obtained while making application for Mike to be considered for a New Zealand Order of Merit in 2017. The authors of those letters were subsequently approached and asked if content from their letters could be used

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to support the article. Ten people signed consent forms for this information to be used. Finally, information was also obtained from material written by Mike, or about Mike, that had been published over his lengthy career in social work. Mike reviewed and commented on drafts of this article.

This article is therefore based upon transcripts from interviews, written content from letters and publications, and presented within the article in a combination of chronology and emerging themes.

Mike's early years

Mike was born in Lumsden, Southland, where his father worked on the railways at Athol. He spent most of his childhood in Riverton where he went to the local Convent school and then on a scholarship to St Kevin's College in Oamaru. He began working life at 14 in the freezing works in Southland and then worked in various labouring jobs while a student. He started a BA at the University of Canterbury while in the Holy Name seminary in Christchurch and finished the degree following completion of the Diploma of Social Work programme at Victoria University in Wellington.

Mike talked of two core elements from his background that have come together to shape much of his subsequent work around his passion for social justice issues: his working class experiences and participation in unions while at the freezing works, in particular, and the strong family commitment to Catholic social teachings and the notion of service as an important part of contributing to the wider community. Both his parents gave widely to family and community activities and were active in social causes of the time: his father was a very active member of his local trade union. The extended family's Irish history was an important part of this background (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 15/09/22).

Becoming a social worker

Mike related that the beginning of his interest in social work began when he was enrolled in the seminary in Christchurch, with the realisation that the priesthood was not really the direction that he wanted to pursue. An address on child welfare from the then District Child Welfare Officer, Michael Lyons, triggered his interest in social work and he started a social work traineeship in Christchurch in 1965. At this point in time, social work, and social work education and training in Aotearoa New Zealand, pathways into social work were largely through practical work experience rather than formal professional training. The social work association (NZASW, later ANZASW) had been formed only the year prior. This paid traineeship enabled him to combine his ongoing university study with six months' practice experience in different settings.

I remember the very first bit of work that I did. I wasn't in the office, it was between Christmas and New Year. The then boys' home in Stanmore Road, they used to do a 2-week camp thing on Banks Peninsula. I spent 2 weeks in tents, and God knows what, with a group of teenage kids who had been placed for one reason or another in child welfare care. And then we spent probably the rest of January working at the Stanmore Road Boys' Home and then moved into the office in Christchurch. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Mike then worked in youth work for the Young Catholic Workers in 1967 and recalled:

At the end of that year, youth work, in those days, it wasn't particularly well paid, so I went back home to Southland and got a job in the freezing works to try and pay off some debts and we [Mike and his future wife Colleen] were about to get engaged. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

While in Southland, he applied for a job with the Invercargill Child Welfare office, beginning work there in 1968. According to Nash (1998, p. 154), this was a pivotal time for the development of professional social work in Aotearoa, with estimates of only 15-16% of social workers having a professional qualification (either from Victoria or gained overseas), and perhaps another 24-45% having been through short courses at training centres such as Tirimoana and Taranaki House (Staniforth, 2015). Fewer social workers in the non-statutory sector would have had professional qualifications at this time.

I started working in the child welfare office in Invercargill in April 1968 [...]. I spent some time working in Invercargill and working out western Southland, which is where I had grown up anyway, and families and towns that I knew then, the latter part in eastern Southland and up into Queenstown. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

While I was there I applied and got accepted into Tiromoana (see Staniforth, 2015) – it must have been 1970, I think, because in Tiromoana, I did a month and then went back home and came back for a second month, and while I was there, Ruth Manchester [Social work educator and director of Tiromoana Training Centre 1970 to 1975] said “why don't you apply to go to do a departmental bursary, to go to Victoria University?” which I did and [I] got in. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

The social work programme at Victoria University in Wellington (initially, University College) was the site of this country's first social work programme, having begun in 1949 as part of the post-war boom in social services and a concomitant demand for social services qualifications (Nash, 1998). Mike attended Victoria University in 1971 and 1972 and did one placement at Marriage Guidance in the Hutt Valley and the second placement with the

school guidance counsellor at Wainuiomata College. Many of the students who attended the Victoria Diploma in Social Work programme were bonded to the government after their studies and Mike then spent six months back in the Child Welfare Office in Christchurch and went on to the Child Health Clinic, part of mental health services that had recently been transferred to the Hospital Board. Nash (1998) suggested that the Hospital Boards—the forerunner of what over time have been called Area Health Boards, District Health Boards and currently, Te Whatu Ora—made a significant contribution to the expectation that social workers be qualified. Mike related:

I did probably 18 months or so there and then was appointed as senior social worker at Princess Margaret Hospital where they had restructured the social services into two teams, an acute care team and a continuing care team, which was working with department of psychological medicine and department of geriatric medicine. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Child poverty—the driver for Mike's work

As a main driver for future work, Mike's social services experience combined with his working-class upbringing in rural Southland led to his specific focus and passion to be that of child poverty and its alleviation: this remained the constant feature of his later academic and teaching career.

Even now, working in Invercargill in the mid-60s and I can still see going to houses on two occasions within three weeks and invariably something happened on a Friday afternoon and you would finish up with families in major crises. So [...] in those days we had a thing called something like 'special assistance for needy families' I think it was called and we could provide a grocery voucher for families. [...] Friday so there were a few families—three weeks apart in

south Invercargill—going in and literally looking in pantries and there was quite literally nothing in the cupboard, absolutely bare boards. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Whilst working at the Hospital Board in Christchurch, this motivation developed into involvement with systemic and structural responses to poverty:

We (I was Association President 1976-1978) used to meet regularly with both the Minister and with the Department [of Social Welfare] [and I] was involved with the establishment of the Council of Social Services in Christchurch which was just getting underway at that stage. John Fry had been the previous Association president, was working with the city council at the time. We worked quite hard to get a local council of social services which was really an umbrella group that then became part of a national structure. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

I remember the [NZASW] association period being very busy, it was a fear that the National government that we struggled with, going to a lot of discussions and debates about issues about unemployment, about issues around poverty, about issues around social services provision, because there were some quite significant shifts going on at the time. It was just after the introduction of ACC and just after the Royal Commission on Social Security which was published in 1972. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

As Mike's comments here illustrate, the span of time whilst he was NZASW president, and then beginning his academic career, occurred during significant social and political changes in Aotearoa. The consolidation of the social work profession was shaped by forces as wide-ranging as the rise of tangata whenua resistance to colonisation

(the Takaparawhau/Bastion Point protest against forced land alienation in 1977-78) and 'Rogernomics' (the neoliberal economic philosophy espoused by the Fourth Labour Government between 1984-88). Mike's early years contributed to his ongoing social work and academic career, always maintaining a focus on child poverty and welfare reform. We now weave together the social work professional, academic and leadership elements of his professional life, always with the knowledge that what underpins his work has been his commitment to social justice and the alleviation of poverty.

Education for a purpose: Mike's postgraduate journey

Mike had finished his BA degree at the University of Canterbury after he had completed his social work studies at Victoria. It is clear from his involvement with the Council for Social Services and with ANZASW that he saw the reduction of child poverty to be as much a matter of policy and welfare reform than as the purpose for grassroots social work. This tension within social work has been present from the days of Booth, Addams and Richmond, and is acknowledged in Nash's 1998 thesis on the history of social work education in Aotearoa (Nash, 1998) and in many of Mike's subsequent publications (see, for instance, O'Brien, 2011a, 2011b). Following an academic research and employment path enabled Mike to consciously span this tension.

By 1978 I was thinking about picking up a postgraduate qualification. I had a vague idea that might be useful at some point along the way. I got increasingly interested in some of the real issues around what was happening for families, particularly issues around children and child poverty. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Mike attended the University of York in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1979 and 1980. He describes it as a "fairly standard Master's",

with a collection of taught papers and a thesis that considered the influences and shape of the 1980 Child Care Act in the UK. This required that he become steeped in the tools of policy analysis:

I knew the New Zealand literature, but I didn't know the UK material: working through the key influences, meeting with some of the key people. I even managed to meet with David Owen, who in those days was a British Foreign Secretary and spending hours in the British Library just finding documents of various kinds. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Mike had been encouraged by the University in York to convert his MA into a doctorate, and he wrote to Merv Hancock, who was then head of social work at Massey University, to see if there was any potential funding available. "So Merv came back to me and said, look, he couldn't find any funding sources but there is a job back at Massey if I was interested" (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20). Nash (1998, p. 165) noted an NZASW survey which estimated that only 17% of social workers had a relevant qualification (with health having a far higher proportion), indicating that Mike entered the academic workforce at a key time in which to build a qualified social work workforce.

Entering into doctoral research whilst employed to teach social work at Massey thus enabled the joining together of two key elements of Mike's career, his own pursuit of education and knowledge that informs child poverty and social policy, and the commitment of his academic career to develop informed and qualified social work graduates:

I think that sense about having highlighted ... how important those very basic things about getting a meal on the table and not feeling the pressure of "how am I going to provide for the kids and

where is their lunch coming from today and how am I going to get them to school adequately clothed and how am I going to keep them warm?" and all of those kind of very basic things which I have been able to keep talking about that and I guess the university context allowed me to do that, in the sense that one of the beauties about being in the university was it gives you not only a mandate but an expectation that you will do that. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Mike's doctoral thesis (1991), entitled "The problem of poverty, ideology, the state and the 1972 Royal Commission on Social Security", is considered an important social policy thesis (Dale et al., 2017). In this study, he critically examined and reviewed the Royal Commission report and the ideological perspective of poverty within it. This thesis still has direct relevance for the current debates about poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand (Dale et al., 2017).

I'd done that focusing on the '72 Royal Commission on Social Security, not so much what it recommended, but what did that say to us about the role of the State in relation to issues about poverty and inequality, and I got increasingly involved [in the debates]. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

A commitment to social work education

There are many roles associated with being a social work academic. These include programme development and administration, teaching, research, leadership, mentoring as well as making contributions within a university, but also at local, national and international levels. During his academic career, Mike was engaged in all of these areas, whilst remaining committed to the alleviation of child poverty as the driver for all his work.

Mike had begun his academic career in 1980 at Massey University in Palmerston North. Massey had been the first programme to establish a four-year BSW programme, in 1976 (Dale et al., 2017), closely followed by Canterbury and Otago. At this time, there was a growing demand from statutory agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) for social work graduates. Indeed, the funding of DSW summer internships for students can be seen as having supported the growth of university social work degrees whilst concurrently introducing discussion into the role of the state in suggesting suitable curricula. It was only in 1978 that the social work association endorsed the view that social work education and training could be sited outside of universities and in teacher training colleges (and later in polytechnics and wānanga), a move that did not eventuate until the 1980s (Nash, 1998). Mike joined the Massey BSW programme as its second cohort graduated, and remained in Palmerston North until 1991, after which he and his wife, Colleen, moved to Auckland to be part of the development of the social work programmes at Massey's Albany campus. Mike recalled the move:

We had literally just shifted house in 1991 and had a housewarming at our place and Ian Shirley, who was the Head of School, said to me on the Saturday in the middle of the housewarming, "can I talk to you on Monday morning?" So, Monday morning, he said, "look would you go to Auckland?", having just moved into a new house! We didn't get stuff unpacked and we came to Auckland at the end of, I think, late 1991, early 1992, to start the programmes in Auckland. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

As well as the undergraduate BSW, the Albany campus also began to offer the Diploma in Social Science (Social Policy and Social Work). After the Ministry of Education indicated that they would not fund a

two-year postgraduate diploma, Massey developed the two-year Masters of Social Work Applied, which began in 1997.

In 2000, the School of Social and Cultural Studies was formed at the Albany Campus. Mike served as Head of School from 2000 to 2007 and was then appointed as Director of Social Work and Social Policy across both Palmerston North and Albany Campuses until 2008 (Dale et al., 2017). Balancing academic leadership, Mike continued to contribute to community group and professional development, giving generously of his time and knowledge, as discussed in a later section.

Mike continued in an academic role at Albany until his first "retirement" in 2011. He then moved to the University of Auckland, where he continued teaching, research, and supervision until his second retirement in 2023.

So I went to Auckland when I finished at Massey, had a bit of a break, and did three days a week at Auckland for probably seven or eight years, mostly supervising PhD students, trying to develop some of the PhD programmes and did some undergraduate teaching in a social policy class. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Mike's contribution to teaching and learning

Mike O'Brien has made a considerable contribution to thousands of social work students, both at Massey and The University of Auckland, in his teaching and academic publications about social and economic policy (Lunt et al., 2008; O'Brien, 2008; O'Brien et al., 2008). Anne Hurley is a Sister of Mercy and community worker. Speaking from her knowledge of Mike as a lecturer and a social policy adviser with the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, she reinforced the impression of Mike's teaching and communication abilities:

“I was greatly impressed with the way Mike presented himself. He was so down to earth. I won’t say simple, but easily understood, and he made sense, and he touched a chord” (A. Hurley, personal communication, 18/02/22).

Professor Michael Belgrave (Professor of History, Massey University and joint author (with Christine Cheyne) of the widely used social policy text O’Brien et al. (2008), described the impact that Mike has made in theory and practice in social justice. At a time when there was much social upheaval and protest, Belgrave (personal communication, 18/01/21) described how Mike moved beyond Marxist theory to an appreciation of the importance of working in multiple ways to bring about change, using critical theory:

... the most important thing about that critical theory model is that it forced people to engage with the institutions of the state and society, rather than just reject them ... to engage with the Department of Social Welfare, with the state, you couldn’t just contract out from your political action. It wasn’t just consciousness raising ... it had to be something more critical, and that was central for a department that was producing social workers who were going to have to work in these institutions.

Belgrave (personal communication, 18/01/21) considered that Mike’s particular strength is/was that he placed social work in a wider social context of poverty and inequality, whilst not losing sight of the need to apply this knowledge in practice:

... he really linked the ideas much more strongly into the practice of being a social worker in that teaching area [so that students were] critically able, you know, they could come into an organisation, could be part of that organisation, and they could effect some sort of change ...

This commitment to making social policy and welfare reform real and relevant to social work students and practitioners can

be illustrated through reference to many of Mike’s publications (for example, O’Brien, 1999, 2005, 2011a, 2011 b). Whilst conceptual in social policy content, his work clearly aims to inform those who have responsibility to deliver services to those in need. Belgrave developed our understanding of how Mike enabled student understanding, through his strong relationships with students and his willingness to engage with big issues. Mike, he said, was “always engaged and practical and real and you had a plan and made things happen...” (M. Belgrave, personal communication, 18/01/21).

Passion and scholarship: Mike’s research contribution

University employment in Aotearoa New Zealand requires social work lecturers to actively engage in their own research contributions, as well as performing, as both Mike’s origins and career choice and as the Education and Training Act 2020 suggest, as ‘critic and conscience’ of society. Professor Christa Fouché, who worked with Mike at both Massey University and The University of Auckland, reflected that:

Mike has maintained an active research programme across many years—one that has led to many national and international publications and produced evidence for many policy and practice directions. His work is the only major New Zealand contribution to international studies on welfare reform and food poverty and includes a strong academic focus, but also a strong focus on the application of that knowledge to contemporary social policy, social service and social work issues. As such, his research conduct is not only respected by academics nationally and internationally, but also very highly regarded by social policy and social work practitioners alike. (Personal communication, 4/12/2017)

Mike commented that he saw his role very much as a balancing act:

... trying to get balance between what was required in academic requirements and what was required in terms of trying to keep that relevant, meaningful, with what was going on in the field and [...] all the time in terms of which way, where do I put the energy, where do I put the time, what am I doing here that contributes to that? (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Mike explored the tension between the expectation that academics are present on an international stage, and the relevance of his research to an applied and Aotearoa New Zealand context. He commented on his commitment to making research applied:

So I enjoyed the international connections that I had and there were times I thought, "oh gosh, it would have been great to have done more of that". But then you say "what would I have to give away?" Well, the only [thing] that I could see that could go would be the links with the social services field and social work practice and that didn't seem to be [right]. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Mike added that his Scandinavian connections resulted in reciprocal research and knowledge exchange between Sweden and Aotearoa New Zealand, and these are acknowledged elsewhere in this article as being of great significance.

Research supervision

In Mike's academic positions at both Massey and Auckland, he has been engaged with numerous Master's and PhD candidates, a contribution mentioned by many participants for this article. (Both authors of this article had Mike as a doctoral supervisor.) His commitment to both knowledge-based and relational practice was noted by Professor Christa Fouché:

He has supported many postgraduate students with particular learning needs or challenging circumstances to succeed in

their studies. It is notable that at least 16 of Mike's Doctoral and Masters students are making contributions as University academics. His mentoring of staff has extended beyond helping them to develop as research supervisors—he has also realised that many are new to academic careers and he has taken an active role in assisting with course and assessment development, and in the development of research plans. (C. Fouché, personal communication, 04/12/2017)

Mike estimated that he has probably supervised over 30 PhDs from the first one in 1992 to the last in 2023. One of the notable achievements arising from Mike's engagement with doctoral students is that he has continued to publish with these scholars beyond their graduation (Staniforth et al., 2011), adding to his over 80 research publications on record at the University of Auckland.

Leadership and mentoring in social work education

Mike O'Brien's position as a social work educator at Massey developed into leadership roles when he relocated to the new Albany campus in Auckland, where eventually he became Head of School.

So I really found it a really interesting kind of exercise trying to move from [being] just on the social work programme to a broader kind of piece of work on the development of social sciences at Albany, because most of the schools only had two or three staff. We were lucky that we had a bunch of really good academics, I think, in that group, people like Kerry Howe as historian, Catherine Rountree as anthropologist and Paul Spoonley, sociologist—there were many others. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Managing the institution was, Mike suggested, an extension of his passion for equity and opportunity:

It always seemed to be that an important part of academic work was managing the institution, getting the institutional rules to have enough flexibility, responsiveness, to meet the needs of students really. And particularly I was thinking about that before in terms of in Auckland, [the] range of diverse cultural backgrounds which students, who bring different sets of approaches to learning, different kind of engagement with academic lives, different kind of managing, competing kind of personal [...] challenges alongside their academic world, particularly for some of the students we had—and trying to manage the institution so you got enough kind of flexibility in institutional rules if you like. I'm sure there were some of those we broke along the way that we managed (and manipulated, I suppose, would be the only word to use). (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

An immediate challenge within the Auckland environment, in particular, was getting leadership and teaching right within a multicultural context. Having been a university lecturer during the time of the publication of Puao-te-Ata-tu (1986) (the seminal report that challenged the racism within the child welfare system of the Department of Social Welfare), and the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act of 1989 (which rebalanced the attention of child welfare legislation and policy onto whānau as opposed to the individual child, and which aimed at retaining tangata whenua children within their iwi, hapū and whānau), Mike was very aware of the importance of social work's bicultural commitment and how sometimes universities were not very responsive to this. While drawing on his own origins he commented on the need to work from everyone's knowledge and strengths:

I think the other interesting thing for me, [...] that too is important and brought up in rural Southland and operating in such a diverse kind of Auckland environment, [is] about what is appropriate in terms

of trying to think about issues, about working in a diverse both bicultural and multicultural kind of context. I'm sure I never always got that right at all, but the constant challenge about working with students who come with different sets of cultural capital of their own. The institutions frankly are sometimes not very good at acknowledging and having to kind of think about what does it mean in terms of working with Māori students, students with Pacific backgrounds, various Asian communities. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Wider contributions to social work and social policy

Aside from Mike's contribution to academia, he has continued to contribute to several different areas over the course of his career. These include energy given to the social work profession, his policy, advocacy work and media presence on child poverty, and to the statutory and NGO engagement with social justice issues. Margaret Martin is a Sister of Mercy and registered social worker who lives in South Auckland. In her view (personal communication, 04/03/22), he is "a social justice champion, who has worked tirelessly for change to systems and policies that disadvantage and marginalised people in our country, [...] particularly, the poor and vulnerable, especially children."

Simon Nash is a previous student and former academic colleague of Mike's, and stated that Mike has been relentless in his campaign for social justice, "over decades of social reform, and in response to governments of all political persuasion, Mike has continued to press his very important messages about poverty and inequality" (S. Nash, personal communication, 6/12/17).

The national and international breadth of Mike's community and social engagement was acknowledged again by Christa Fouché (personal communication, 04/12/17):

Mike is highly respected for his representation of the communities we serve, at various University, Ministerial, Governance, Practice and Community forums and committees. His contributions as an active member of a number of professional bodies is most notable. He is an executive member of the Child Poverty Action Group, and chair of the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services Poverty and Social Exclusion group and a member of the Council's governing body. He has provided compelling consultancy on poverty and welfare reform to the Ministry of Social Development and collaborated with Statistics New Zealand and the Office of the Community and Voluntary Sector on several projects. His leadership attracted international recognition as recipient of the Astrid Lindgren Fellowship at Vaxjö University, Sweden, for work on global issues for children.

Mike's commitment to systemic responses to poverty led to his involvement with NZASW, the professional association representing social workers, which began whilst he and Colleen were living in Christchurch in the first years of his social work career.

And while I was there, I had done a stint as branch president of the Association in Christchurch and [...] then went to the Association's biennial conference in Auckland, I couldn't tell you off hand what year it was, and while we were there I was asked to take up the national presidency and John Dobson (the psychiatrist that I was working with, he was also chair of the psychiatrist association—whatever it was called at the time)—John said, "look, that's fine, you take whatever time you need". So I went backwards and forwards to Christchurch and Wellington quite a lot. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Lucy Sandford Reid (personal communication, 19/10/2017), a previous chief executive of ANZASW, continued the narrative, "Mike was President of ANZASW from 1976–1978, and was the 7th President of the Association. Mike was made a Life Member in 1992 in recognition of his outstanding contribution to ANZASW".

Mike was an active member of the Public Questions Committee and more recently the Social Justice Committee. As such, he has often been the public face of social work for issues-based commentaries. The following is an excerpt from the letter that the ANZASW Board sent to Mike on his retirement from the Social Justice Committee:

The Board wishes to acknowledge your long and dedicated contribution to the ANZASW Social Justice Committee. You have been a member of the SJ committee since it was established. You have provided crucial knowledge, experience, insight and research perspectives. Your academic background is matched by your practice insights. You have demonstrated dedication to exposing the causes of inequality in our society as well as offering alternatives solutions... (as cited in L. Sandford Reid, personal communication, 19/10/2017)

Mike has given generously of his time and professional energy in his engagement with social service agencies such as the Sisters of Mercy and Auckland City Mission (see DeHaan & O'Brien, 2002):

I did a chunk of time on the board at the City Mission and again that grew out of a conversation with the then City Missioner. I got invited—I must have spent six years, I suppose, on the board of the Mission and quite a lot of time until a year or two back with the inequality group with the Council of Christian Social Services, particularly focusing around the role of faith-based social services particularly [...] around issues like housing, mental health [...] but also around the broader

issues [like] what was it that generated the demands on families and generated the inadequacy of housing and how might they respond to that? (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 26/11/20)

Mike was a Director of the Board of Te Waipuna Puawai, a community development programme in East Auckland with a strong focus on sole parents, from July 1999 until September 2014. During a considerable part of this time he was also the Chairperson. Judy Whiteman, a board member of Te Waipuna Puawai, commented that:

Mike is a most humble, understated but skilled man in the area of community development and has always worked to influence policy that enables change. At the Board table he was passionate, thoughtful and wise with regard to the direction of Te Waipuna Puawai, and welfare of families and children in particular. His approach came from the heart and was always supported by strong academic principles and coherently presented facts. (Personal communication, 06/10/2017)

Trevor McGlinchey, Kaiwhakahaere Matua Executive Officer, New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, the umbrella group for Christian social services (personal communication, 05/09/2017), commented that Mike's commitment to child welfare:

... continues to inspire the membership of the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) to seek real structural change for poor and vulnerable children in New Zealand. His determination that every child will live in a New Zealand society that provides full support to enable them to thrive has made a real impact on social service and child support services throughout the nation. His passion has moved support agencies from services which provide immediate supports to address immediate needs to organisations which advocate for long term solutions to eliminate child poverty and child harm.

Many of the drivers for Mike's career have crystallised in the work for the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). Susan St John, Honorary Associate Professor of Economics, University of Auckland and prominent economics commentator with the Child Poverty Action Group (personal communication, 24/07/2017), commented on his leadership, advocacy and academic contributions that combined "sound professional work with a willingness, through involvement with many NGOs, to make the theory practical and to give back to society":

I have worked with Michael O'Brien in various capacities since the early 1990s especially in areas of social justice and policy. In 1998 he became an executive member of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and has remained a very active contributor to our group ever since, regularly providing sought after media comment on social welfare. CPAG is New Zealand's largest children's research and advocacy group, and is a leading children's charity in New Zealand, comprised largely of volunteers. He became the Convenor of CPAG in 2010-11 and later the Co-Convenor for the years 2011-2013, arduous time-consuming unpaid roles. This public role in CPAG follows and complements his involvement in a large number of other NGOs such as the Auckland City Mission and trusts such as the JR McKenzie Trust and Te Waipuna Puawai.

... He has written extensively about his time in Sweden that is immensely helpful to those of us who work in the welfare field. In 2010 Michael chaired the influential Alternative Welfare Working Group in 2010, providing vital leadership exposing the reality of life in a benefit. In that year he also convened a public forum on welfare.

Māori, Pacific peoples, women, families with children, those with disability and/or those caring for another person with a disability

are significantly over-represented among those living in poverty (Stats NZ, 2023). Mike (personal communication, 12/10/23) comments on how these intersecting dimensions of inequality and poverty are essential to both understanding poverty and acting to reduce it and mitigate its cruel effects:

Sometimes in focusing on these multiple dimensions of inequality, the critical importance of money in shaping people's lives is lost or downplayed – money matters. The literature and experience is clear – income poverty has a powerful influence on the lives of very many of the families and issues that social workers face daily; when linked with the other structural dimensions of inequality, the experience is significantly compounded. Reducing, or better still, eliminating material poverty would make a major difference to the lives of those families and individuals.

Mike's writing, research, teaching and service work has struggled with holding the intersecting dimensions together (he would say, with varying success).

The personal is political

Throughout this article, Mike's own voice and that of some of his colleagues and former students have reflected both his own drive for change and the alleviation of poverty, and the finely tuned balancing act between relational and strengths-based social work practice, and a commitment to effective intervention through policy, education, advocacy and research. Never 'just' an academic, not only a social worker but a respected researcher, many of the contributors to this article highlight just how this balance illustrates the man:

Annie Weir, Director, Impact research, a major international social evaluation programme, (personal communication, 21/09/2017), commented:

Mike has been a champion for many disadvantaged and marginalised groups and has offered expert critique and comment on government policy designed to help them. Mike is an accomplished scholar and author who has earned our deepest respect. He is deeply committed to making a positive difference in people's lives and was championing strength-based approaches to service delivery long before it became fashionable.

Above all, there is a values-based quality that many mentioned. Howard Randal and Annette Direen, social work educators, student unit supervisors and life members of ANZASW, (personal communication, 23/06/2017), are two social workers who have known and worked alongside Mike in various professional and education spheres since the 1970s:

Mike epitomises the values that are inherent to social work and is respected as a role model by the profession, students and others. His articulation and constant pursuit of social justice for the socially and politically disempowered is encapsulated in his outstanding efforts and long-term commitment to research and bringing the plight of child poverty to the awareness of New Zealanders.

Mike in his own words

This article is not a valedictory, nor is it a critique of Mike's career to date, but rather the opportunity to take a snapshot of what Mike and others have considered to be some of his most important contributions within social work and social policy. He is, of course, primarily a son, a husband, a father and a grandfather, and a friend and colleague to many. It is fitting that we summarise the highlights of his career through the use of some of Mike's own words.

Mike talked about highlights within his academic career:

I think probably the highlights for me would be around the opportunity to develop programmes right from the very early days in Palmerston North where the MSW was established ... developing that in the Albany context, in terms that they weren't new programmes, but we had to develop and work out in the Albany environment, a whole new environment. And then developing the postgraduate programmes—the MSW or the diploma as it was before that, the MSW, the MA, working with the PhD programme in Auckland particularly, and trying to develop some of that. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

I think it was always for me the student achievements when I think about some of the highlights. The stuff that students had done—many of them as you know including yourself [referring to author 1] who got into academic work, but not just the academic work ... I was at the launch of the child poverty monitor a week or two back and ran into the assistant children's commissioner, Barbara Phillips, who greeted me very warmly and reminded me of her time as a postgraduate student. Students appear in all sorts of settings and some of them I remember for all sorts of things, some probably they wouldn't want to be remembered for. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Generously, Mike also considered that his academic colleagues also provided some of the highlights in his experience.

I suppose one of the other bits that really sticks strongly with me [...] was just the number of really talented, able, energetic, committed people that I've worked with over the years. [...] we were able to appoint both at Massey, and certainly at Auckland, people who were enormously capable, people who were really collegial in the way in which they worked, [...] who were really [...] bright, who were strongly committed to students and student life and student wellbeing and

student learning, who were committed to social work and social services in all sorts of multiple and diverse ways.

As I look back on that, I think about those colleagues [over] 30 or 40 years, people I work with [...], they were just fantastic people in every sense, both at a personal level, academically in terms of their values, their ethics, their commitment to what they did. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Students, too, have become part of the purpose of Mike's career:

I didn't come into university [for the] teaching, I was much more interested in writing and research, but interestingly enough I very quickly found ... I enjoyed the teaching [...]. But I got an enormous amount of enjoyment [...] engaging with first year students. I coordinated the first year programme for a few years in Palmerston North and seeing those students grow and change and develop over the four years in undergraduate programme and then hooking up with them again in their final year and being reminded of various things that had happened to them in their first years and sometimes running into them again subsequently when you are visiting students or at conferences or in other kinds of settings, and just seeing some of them develop and some of their progress. Yes, I contributed something to that and, boy, it is a really significant kind of privilege, I guess, you get to engage with them in a kind of way.

It is a two-way process for me. The engagement with postgrad students was very demanding, of course it was, but it was also very stimulating and very enriching in all sorts of ways as well. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

His contribution by way of research and publication was also identified as a highlight.

I was cleaning out book cases the other day ... and found stuff that I had written over the years and some stuff I look back on now and people still [use] a bit. I'm amazed at the text that Michael and Christine and I did¹ still sells quite significantly and is now well dated and ought to be thrown away a long time ago and updated, but it hasn't been. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Mike considered that his academic career has had the purpose of supporting and informing the work done by social service agencies.

I think the links with the agencies is probably another bit [...]—the City Mission Board, the Council of Social Services and the development work at the Waipuna Puawai and work more recently with the Peter McKenzie project. So those kind of external links, I think, [are] probably important ones and about having then contributing something to the field in the broader sense—both in terms of practice and in terms of social service development and all that goes around that. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Finally, though, the main feature of Mike's words, and the descriptions of his contribution by other people, is the coherence and overall intent of his achievements, shaped by his early experiences and exercised in practice, academically and through his commitment to meeting the challenges of poverty. Mike linked both his social work practice and his national and international policy work to this.

I suppose ... it goes back, in a sense, to a lot of stuff I did when I was working in child welfare in Invercargill in the early 70s and the more I worked in the social work programme, ... the more I realised how significant the poverty issues were and economic issues really putting a lot on the families I worked with. I sometimes feel we have lost a core part ... of social work ... in

more recent times, and [we have] engaged with a whole lot of other important issues, but at the expense of basic bread and butter stuff sometimes. It is no accident that a large number of the families, that people in care and protection work with, struggle to make ends meet. I'm not saying poverty is simply the cause but it is certainly an important contributor to the stresses that many of those families face.

... that kind of connection between academic life and day to day... delivery of social work services. It has always seemed to me that is a core part of trying to engage the students, to engage educationally with students, for students to feel what the link is between "what am I doing in the classroom and how does that link with what is happening for me in practice and for the communities and families and whānau and so on?" (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Considering where the fight against the impact of poverty has got to, Mike commented:

One of the real holes for me in our welfare network at the moment is just the way that has been allowed to develop [continued high rates of child poverty] and not be really energetically tackled and I don't want to sound fatalistic about it, but it is getting to the point where it is going to take an enormous commitment to turn that around in any sustained kind of way. I had a chunk of time as chair of the child poverty group and I remember saying on one occasion at the annual general meeting the thing I would like more than anything else would be to move a motion to close the organisation because it was no longer relevant. I fear we are further away from that now than we have ever been unfortunately. (M. O'Brien, personal communication, 17/12/20)

Conclusion

In this article, a brief review of the contributions that Mike O'Brien has made to

social work practice, social work education, research, and social policy over the past 55 years has been provided.

In 2018, Mike was recognised in the Queen's Birthday Honours' list as an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to social policy and education. This award was a public thank you and recognition of the many facets of the contribution that have been described in this article.

In 2023, Mike's last PhD student completed their PhD, and Mike may finally be able to step down from his university work. Mike intends to continue to work on child poverty issues, spend more time with family, learn te reo, and play more golf. Mike and Colleen (retired from being the Childcare Centre Manager at Massey, Albany) have been married for 54 years and have two children and two grandchildren, both of whom are currently at university.

Margaret Martin (personal communication, 04/03/2022), summed up her experience of Mike and likely that of most people who know him. She stated that notwithstanding all of his teaching, research, policy work and advocacy "he is a very humble, very humble human being".

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Note

¹ O'Brien, et al. (2008)

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