Highlighting Aotearoa New Zealand research and scholarship: What we were reading in 2023

In 2023, we published four issues of volume 35 of our journal, including an issue of Te Mau and a special issue on reproductive justice (See Beddoe et al., 2023). These issues included 27 original articles, three viewpoints, two practice notes, and 16 book reviews. Following on from previous editorials that analysed “What we’re reading” in a particular year, we offer below another analysis of the top 15 most-read articles for 2023.

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that the most-read article published in 2023 was a special editorial on Justice for Palestine included in issue four (Ballantyne et al., 2023). This was a statement by editorial collective members on the situation in Palestine. In the context of the genocide, we were all witnessing on our television screens and the silence of the IFSW on this matter, we felt compelled to comment. Since that editorial was published in December 2023, the horrifying death toll has not stopped climbing, and despite the statements made by the International Criminal Court to halt the ground invasion of Rafah, Israel continues its assault on Gaza and the West Bank unabated. The editorial collective continues to express our utmost solidarity with the Palestinian people and our deep concern for the future prospects of an international rules-based order that respects all peoples’ human rights, including the right to self-determination. As we stated in the editorial, “If social work can’t advocate for a just settlement, if it can’t name the abuse of power and self-interest that perpetuates the suffering of the Palestinian people, the global profession is morally bankrupt and simply part of the problem” (p. 14).

The editorial sections of academic journals are usually formal and conventional in style and serve to do little more than introduce the contents of each issue. For that reason, they are usually the least read part of a journal. However, since three of our editorials made it into the top 15 most widely read in 2023, our journal seems to be an exception to the rule. It may be because we use full titles instead of the standard editorial epithet. Our editors also tend to use the opportunity to add topical material that does more than introduce the content. However, we suspect that, in the case of the editorial by Beddoe (2023), it was the newsworthy nature of the editorial that caught the attention of our readers. Liz announced that our mahi on the journal had been formally recognised by the Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work Association by the awarding the editorial collective the Social Work Research or Education Award and the John Fry Memorial Supreme Award in the 2023 ANZASW Social Work Awards. In the editorial, Liz noted that the journal continues to make a significant and well-respected contribution to scholarship in Aotearoa and internationally, with 47,000 users accessing journal articles in 2023, 20% of whom are visitors from outside Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our journal is committed to enabling new voices, and we actively encourage master’s students, with the support of supervisors and others, to craft their work into articles for publication. The value of that process is evident in the article by Renau et al. (2023). This article was based on a study completed for the MA (Social Policy) at Massey University and featured in our top 15 most widely read articles. The article explored how practice standardisation and
the culture of compliance associated with neoliberal managerialism impacted the ability of social workers to provide support and advocacy for marginalised people. The social workers who participated in the study described limitations on their actions that seemed clearly related to managerialism, “All the participants recognised that management and contract requirements had negatively affected their ability to advocate for their clients” (p. 52). Yet, the authors identify what they refer to as a “neoliberal blindness paradox” (p. 53) in that the social worker participants seemed unable to reflect critically on the neoliberal context, emphasising instead a micro-level practice focusing on personal empowerment and individual solutions. This work suggests the need for further research exploring the impact of the neoliberal political imaginary on social work practice and promoting alternative visions of critical social work, including alternative organisational settings such as social work cooperatives and collectivist forms of service delivery. How, for example, is neoliberalism understood through a colonial lens in an iwi-based social work organisation?

Documents are often overlooked as rich sources of data in social research or considered mere carriers of textual themes. However, as Atkinson and Coffey (2011) argue, “Documents are not neutral, transparent reflections of organisational or occupational life. They actively construct the very organisations they purport to describe” (p. 77). This is especially true of government policy documents and reviews of organisational practice. We welcome the work of researchers willing to undertake the detailed, close reading necessary to offer a thorough content analysis. Fitzmaurice-Brown’s (2023) reading of the six separate reviews of Oranga Tamariki in 2019 offers valuable insights into their common areas of concern and the tension between reformist solutions and more radical transformational perspectives. As the author argues, “There is a clear need to take a more structural approach to child-protection reform, interrogating the underlying causes of poor outcomes rather than assuming those outcomes can be improved within current policy paradigms” (p. 17). We are not surprised that this article is one of the most widely read of 2023, and we suspect it will remain a valuable source for practitioners and policy researchers for several years to come.

The Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work Journal editorial collective was delighted to publish an issue of Tu Mau in June 2023. Unsurprisingly this has been a very popular issue with the comprehensive editorial and three articles featuring in the top 15 most-read articles for 2023. In a comprehensive editorial, that does so much more than introduce the issue, Crichton-Hill et al. (2023) discuss two significant themes to foreground the scholarship to come. The first theme is the impact of Covid-19 on Pasifika people and social work. Citing a rich range of research from various disciplines they start by noting the way the pandemic highlighted existing inequalities, noting the severity of job losses, illness, family stresses and mental distress experienced in Pasifika families. In addition, the restrictions on social gatherings of the lockdown period including the outright bans and limiting number impacted on families’ ability to come together for funerals and other milestone events.

The second theme related to the experiences of Pasifika social workers. In particular the Auckland August lockdown in 2012 exacted an “emotional, physical, spiritual, and social toll on many workers. Pacific social workers experienced an increase in their workload, were asked to support new Covid response initiatives (Dalhousie, 2023) contributing to public health measures and addressing family hardship whilst “simultaneously facing increased responsibilities on the home front with caregiving responsibilities” (Crichton-Hill, 2023, p. 2). Changes in work focus, the increase in electronic communication in practice created new
challenges for practitioners who value the strength of relationship created in face-to-face practice.

In one of the top-15 Tu Mau articles, Cleverley (2023) reports on a qualitative study that explored culturally informed understandings of wellbeing for I-Kiribati people. Kiribati is a small nation in Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, where climate change is already having a profound effect and where the “cascading effects of increased global temperatures have impacted small island nations, contributing to displacement” (Crichton-Hill, 2023, p. 5)—including the driving of increased migration of I-Kiribati to Aotearoa New Zealand. Cleverley identifies four key findings from her research: I-Kiribati perspectives of wellbeing; family and home as central to I-Kiribati wellbeing; the importance of the preservation and maintenance of cultural practices; and the centrality of community connection in wellbeing. Maintaining cultural heritage and practices is even more crucial in the event of displacement from island homelands.

Cleverley (2023) makes several recommendations based on her research: to increase the diversity of the Pacific workforce and to reduce some of the barriers that prevent I-Kiribati from accessing health and social services. Secondly, to ensure that more Pacific workers are contributing to management and decision-making to ensure engagement in policy making. Finally, Cleverley argues for increased involvement and collaboration between service providers and Pacific minority communities to build positive relationships important for working with smaller communities such as I-Kiribati.

An article by West explores how social workers engage Pasifika children with disability, and their families. Acknowledging that, for Pasifika families, accessing disability services in Aotearoa New Zealand is a complex undertaking. Disability support systems in Aotearoa New Zealand are challenging to access and Pasifika families face dual systemic barriers due to racism and ableism. West’s findings highlight the structural, cultural and personal oppressions experienced by Pasifika families that need to be addressed for social workers to successfully practise with Pacific families. An important finding is that Pasifika families value all children as gifts and may not experience that grief that may occur in response to disability in other families. “Understanding this in practice was crucial, with participants discussing the hurt caused by practitioners who insist on working through the grief process they felt families should be experiencing” (West, 2023, p. 17).

West’s article is a good example of how small-scale research can generate important insights to improve practice and cultural understanding.

In a shift in focus to consider social work education in Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, Waqa et al. (2023) share the reflections of students, graduates and junior staff from the University of the South Pacific (USP) from a talanoa on “Culturally relevant social work in Oceania”. This top-15 article notes the greater inclusion of Indigenous social work knowledge and theory. The authors conclude that social work education has an over-reliance on Western knowledge and practice frameworks and argue for the development of Pacific specific social work education that maintains Pacific cultural identity; includes Pacific Indigenous knowledge; uses Pacific languages; addresses issues relevant to Pacific nations and communities; and uses culturally inclusive and responsive assessment practices. Climate change loomed again as an issue of significance emphasising the importance of including aspects of cultural identity, traditional knowledge and Indigenous resilience: “This is important specifically as global economic crises are looming in addition to climate change issues experienced by “Small Island States” [which] can lead to displacement of population groups and loss of identity, culture and ways of being” (Waqa et al., 2023, p. 36).

The talanoa reported in this article was
very positive about future developments for social work in Oceania, advocating for development of higher education in social work and the promotion of social work scholarship and research. The launch of a book at the event where the talanoa took place highlighted the growing Pacific scholarship in the region (Ravulo et al., 2019).

In a time of great upheaval and significant concerns about the relationship between government and Iwi, Lewis et al.’s (2023) article is timely and has emerged as one of the top 15 most read in 2023. The authors’ starting premise is that community-based Māta Waka (pan-tribal) organisations which provide a range of services to tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori who are not mana whenua are frequently overlooked in discussions of Crown–Māori partnerships. Lewis et al. reported on a Kaupapa Māori study designed to examine the expectations that kaimahi working for a Māta Waka Kaupapa Māori service provider have of other organisations that: partner with tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori; and partner with Māta Waka.

In a rich and engaging article, Lewis et al. (2023) draw on findings from wānanga with kaimahi, to illuminate the principles and values that guide their practice, using these as a foundation for exploring the complexities, challenges, and opportunities inherent in building effective partnerships with statutory child protection services on behalf of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau Māori across differences in mandate, power, world views, and guiding frameworks or tikanga Māori. The study findings have implications for current Crown–Māori partnership efforts and, by extension, for the wellbeing of tamariki, rangatahi, and whānau Māori. The authors make the case for significant change to the “top-down, performance-focused, Westerncentric contracting models to investments ... which in ways both subtle and forthright, disrespect and devalue Māori ways of being, knowing, relating, and doing” (p. 16).

Two of the top-read articles in 2023 were by Deverick and Mooney (2023a, 2023b) and, taken together, provide a rich resource for budding bicultural researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The authors report on a study that was a bicultural collaboration between a Pākehā researcher (a tauira, student) and a Māori social work research supervisor. The first article (2023a) describes the methods they used to conduct the study, and presents a reflective account of the process, in an effort to use a decolonising lens. Deverick and Mooney argue that this reflective process helps acknowledge and take account of the wider social, political and historical contexts in which we practise and research social work. This article will undoubtedly already have proved useful to Pākehā keen to engage in bicultural research processes in studies that engage with Māori participants and in teaching research methods. It describes wider issues of accountability, relationships and supervision, as well as interpersonal aspects such as interviewing processes. The authors provide a realistic account of the tensions inherent in this kind of research and explore how cultural humility can inform the application of these concepts and practices in interview settings. Questions such as “Do all Māori researchers/social workers feel confident with karakia? If not, what might be alternatives when the process is recognised as tikanga” (p. 21) are posed for future exploration.

In the second article, Deverick and Mooney (2023b) explore the personal bicultural practice journeys of four social workers. The complexities of colonisation in social work practice and education are outlined through the presented findings highlighting the importance of shared understandings of te Ao Māori and differing, diverse journeys. A key recommendation presented by Deverick and Mooney, through the voices and experiences of participants, is a need to bridge the gap between policy and practice. This article has no doubt found a readership amongst Pākehā and other tangata tiriti social work students as they
navigate the challenges and commitments of bi-cultural practice. The authors note that “courageous conversations for bicultural partnerships to succeed and flourish” are needed in social work (p. 45). Alignment with social work values requires working “within discomfort” to support others to do the same: “collaboration, tātaihono, means undertaking this māhi together; only this will keep the fire burning bright well into the future” (p. 45).

Dyer and Chisnell’s (2023) inquiry into trauma-informed practice and care for social workers in care and protection roles was another popular reading in 2023. Trauma-informed practice continues to attract a considerable following, and this study adopted a qualitative methodology to explore the perspectives and experiences of care and protection workers. The study asked practitioners questions about their knowledge and training and the support they receive when working with trauma-affected clients. The study found that, although practitioners had a good understanding of trauma and its effects, the implementation of trauma-informed practice was less clear. As the authors argue, “Understanding trauma is not enough, trauma work needs to be capitalised on with an ecological model that incorporates micro, macro, and meso levels” (p. 85). Concerning support and supervision, the study found that “Practitioners seem reluctant to engage in reflective supervision with their supervisors due to concerns about how it may impact their work” and that—in common with the findings of many other studies—“supervision is consistently being prioritised for case management, and time restraints impact the ability for discussions around self-care and emotional resilience” (p. 87). The authors end with a series of recommendations, including that social workers should be trained in the implementation of trauma-informed practice and that there should be trauma-informed supervision training for social work supervisors.

In another exploration of the emotional impact of social work practice on practitioners, Gallagher and Cooper (2023) interview social workers working in end-of-life (EOL) care to discover their views on methods of self-care. The authors find that each one of their participants had personal experiences of death and dying and “they all stated that they had drawn on those experiences throughout their work” (p. 97). They also found that their participants had developed reasonably “robust personal self-care strategies that were practised regularly” (p. 97), including healthy eating, taking time to relax, and ensuring quality sleep patterns. Regarding professional self-care strategies, debriefings and access to regular individual and peer supervision were also valued by each participant. Whilst all participants had experienced some job-specific training for working in EOL care, employers did not always prioritise this, and participants expressed a need for further training related to their specific job roles. Participants also “believed that embedding self-care promotion into training would be beneficial for social workers” (p. 98). The authors conclude by urging education providers to offer further training and development opportunities in EOL care.

In an increasingly diverse Aotearoa with a growing refugee and migrant population, studies that attend to issues for these socially stigmatised population groups are critical. In their popular article, Ayallo and Kelly (2023) pay close attention to the operation of the victim-survivor family violence visa (VFV) by interviewing a sample of both ethnic victim-survivors and supporting non-medical practitioners. They find that victim-survivors’ access to this visa was often challenged by cultural factors preventing them from providing the evidence required. These factors included that the most prevalent form of violence was psychological and hard to prove, that violence was often perpetrated by more than one family member, and that the history of family violence often occurred transnationally,
including the country of origin. The study also found issues created by a lack of information about the operation of the VFV amongst both migrant women and their supporting practitioners: “Therefore, a great deal of community-based education is required within ethnic communities about partnership visas, the VFV policy, and the availability of social and legal aid programmes for ethnic communities” (p. 110). Concerning social stigma, the authors note that “Honour and shame are central concepts in most ethnic communities” (p. 111), with family breakdown often leading to family and employment exclusion. In this context, “the VFV visa is also a form of proof to their families that the relationship breakdown was not their fault, a form of evidence to prevent such exclusion” (p. 111). The authors conclude by arguing for a “more humanitarian and compassionate approach” to the VFV visa policy (p. 112) including allowing access to work permits, healthcare, education and work and income benefits while any visa application is being processed: “Such critical provisions provide sustainability, prevent further abuse due to financial dependency, allow the victim-survivors to establish themselves and give them more time to consider their immigration options” (p. 112). Scoping reviews provide a useful resource for future researchers and for those in practice who want access to a synthesis of relevant research.

In another top-read article Jackson et al. (2023) explore the existing research on Aotearoa New Zealand women’s experiences of substance use, alcohol and drug services. Although substance abuse and its adverse effects have been widely researched, the experiences of women, particularly mothers who access services, are often absent. Undertaken to inform the development and delivery of a new residential addiction-treatment parenting programme for mothers and children under the age of 3, the authors drew conclusions relating to how substance use, alcohol and drug services can be more responsive to the needs of this client group. Key learnings from the review included recognising the influence of male partners as well as the role of stigma and cultural context in shaping women’s engagement with substance use, alcohol, and drug services. The authors further identify missing voices within research relating to older women, sexual minorities, wahine Māori, and other ethnic minorities. The article concludes with some suggestions for social practice including the importance of education for social workers and the maintaining of a non-judgemental attitude and open-mindedness towards women engaging with these services.

In this issue

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to be a topic of interest in social work research. This issue includes three articles that explore different aspects of the pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. In “I am more me”: Post-traumatic growth for New Zealand healthcare social workers during Covid-19”, Christine Becker, Ksenija Napan and Shirley Julich contribute to this evolving research reporting a qualitative study that explored the experience of transformational growth for social workers who worked in healthcare in Aotearoa New Zealand during Covid-19. Using the lens of posttraumatic growth theory, their analysis develops a reading of how social workers responded to the significant professional stress that came with frontline work during Covid-19, and deep caring for their patients. Participants demonstrated a shared a strong self-identification with social work professional values and identity, which might have increased their likelihood of experiencing posttraumatic growth.

Addressing the impact of Covid-19 on supervision, Kieran O’Donoghue and Yuen Han Kitty Mo report results from a quantitative study in “Cyber-supervision during the Covid-19 pandemic: An exploratory international survey.” With the aim of establishing a baseline of these experiences data were collected from
195 respondents. O’Donoghue and Mo’s results showed that both supervisees and supervisors shared similar views about online supervision, which became necessary during Covid-19 lockdowns. A constructive view of online supervision correlated positively with overall satisfaction with supervision, while items less favourable of online supervision correlated negatively with overall satisfaction and evaluation.

O’Donoghue and Mo recommend that supervisors discuss their attitudes and cultural perspectives about online supervision early in the relationship where online supervision is planned.

In the third Covid-19 focused article, Hagyun Kim, Young Han and Donghyun Lee report on “The narratives of Asians amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand: Navigating a virtual realm in the context with anti-Asian racism.” Kim et al. explore Asians’ pandemic experiences and their impact on their quality of life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their study is grounded in symbolic interactionism, examining the stories of 26 Asians representing Chinese, Indian, Filipino and Korean communities. Covid-19 created significant disruption to participants’ lives, inducing anxiety and uncertainty. Online communication was essential to maintaining connections to family and friends. Participants reported heavy reliance on ethnic communities for support due to barriers to formal support systems. Echoing the findings reported by Park et al. (2023), North-east Asian participants reported distressing racism which targeted individuals with a Chinese appearance during the initial stages of Covid-19, resulting in reduced self-esteem and weakened societal belonging.

An ever-growing, rich body of scholarship of child welfare systems and practices is joined by a new article by Kerri Cleaver (Kātia Māmoe, Waitaha). Building on her previous article (Cleaver, 2023), where she explored Wāhine Māori reproductive justice in the child protection system, Kerri Cleaver extends her analysis in “He Whare Takata: Are wāhine Māori visible in Oranga Tamariki practice guidance?” In her previous literature analysis article, Cleaver provided a detailed description of pre- and post-colonial herstory. Cleaver’s work is grounded in a mana wāhine foundational position “that asserts the rakatirataka (leadership and self-determination) of wāhine and the inherent rights of wāhine as ‘he whare takata’, the house of humanity”. This second article examines the Oranga Tamariki practice and evidence centres, specifically auditing content produced following a high-profile child protection case, for evidence of a shift of practice that incorporates wāhine knowing, being and doing holding to the foundation of ‘he whare takata’. Cleaver’s conclusion is that a refocusing “on wāhine as the holders of future ancestors needs to be included alongside the rhetoric of whānau-centred practice, understanding that mana wāhine is inclusive of a paramountcy of the child position”.

In this journal edition, we have two linked articles by Jo Appleby, Barbara Staniforth, Susan Kemp, and Helene Connor (Te Atiawa and Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Rahiri and Ngāti Te Whiti), both exploring the intersection between Oranga Tamariki care-experience and mental health services. The first article “What interventions can CAMHS provide for young people involved with Oranga Tamariki? A review of literature” looks at the landscape of provisions and interventions for young people who have contact with our child protection system, Oranga Tamariki. The research reviews existing therapies while applying an analysis of cultural and intersectional needs, including what is available from a Māori positioning.

The findings and recommendations set a foundation for the second article “How should CAMHS work with young people who are involved with Oranga Tamariki? A review of literature” looks at the landscape of provisions and interventions for young people who have contact with our child protection system, Oranga Tamariki. The research reviews existing therapies while applying an analysis of cultural and intersectional needs, including what is available from a Māori positioning.
Staniforth, Kemp and Connor provide guidance on working in mental health services with young people who come with care experience. They identify practice approaches, developing the initial scope of research on interventions with a specific focus on principles for engaging and supporting young people with a care experience. This group of service users are identified as requiring practice that engages holistically with the trauma that a foster system journey might include. Both articles fill an important gap in Aotearoa literature and practice analysis highlighting the complexity of needs when working across stigma, trauma, and mental health. The findings reinforce the importance of the key social work principles of relationality, rights, and collegial collaboration while challenging system barriers, including organisational and structural. A rich resource of practice information for social workers and health professionals working with Oranga Tamariki young people both in the system or after their transition into communities.

Delivering health and disability services in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand and other like nations is a growing challenge, with ever-decreasing resources and changing populations. Urgent solutions are needed as we approach the future with aging and growing populations. In response, a review of the health and disability sector conducted in 2020 called for significant reform in Aotearoa and the report Hidden in Plain Sight (HiPS) was commissioned by the Allied Health Sector, which includes social workers, to recommend how it might address issues raised in the review. The article, “Hidden in plain sight: A critique”, contributed by Mary James, Isabel Jamieson and Kate Reid offers a critique of this report, considering the extent to which the recommendations can be implemented from a social work practice perspective.

The principles of collaborative and interprofessional practice have long been mainstays of social work, particularly in the health sector, and the authors appreciate how these principles are put forward in this report to improve the efficiency and equity of service. The authors appreciate the report’s recognition of the value of allied health professionals, the diversity and significant size of the workforce and its potential to radically change the way health and disability services are experienced by people across the lifespan.

Despite the acknowledgement of the potential of interprofessional practice and allied health in general, James et al. express disappointment with the report. In their view, the historic challenges of interprofessional practice are not addressed view. Solutions are not offered for the continuing problems associated with the devalued role of social work within the traditionally hierarchical health service environment. Social work in the health setting continues to be relegated to a support status, rather than a primary role in patient-centred care. There is continued need for the role of social workers and their allied health colleagues to be better understood and for the health system to be restructured to make better use of their strengths. The authors also feel that funding issues and the complex challenges within the current contractual environment to devolve services to iwi and the community have not been adequately addressed in the HiPS report.

There is a sense of impatience in this article for a lack of attention to established practice and research to inform ways forward. The authors emphasise that good interprofessional models of care exist in the health system, within iwi services for example, or in the palliative care field, and recommend these be examined for increased understanding of their realities. The authors cite recent research in Aotearoa that evidences good interprofessional practice, its benefits and necessary conditions, including a high level of trust and ability to manage power dynamics. There is no shortage of this knowledge or of opportunity to vastly improve health and disability services in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This issue contains four book reviews. First is a review of Whāia te Ara Ora: Understanding
and healing the impact of historical trauma and sexual violence for Māori by Leonie Pihama, Ngāropi Cameron, Mereana Pitman and Rihi Te Nana, reviewed by Kendra Cox. Darren Renau reviews The Sage handbook of decision making, assessment and risk in social work edited by Brian J. Taylor, John D. Fluke, J. Christopher Graham, Emily Keddell, Campbell Killick, Aron Shlonsky, and Andrew Whittaker. Amy Hogan reviews Defining the boundaries of disability critical perspectives edited by Licia Carlson and Matthew C. Murray. Social work practice during times of disaster: A transformative green social work model for theory, education and practice in disaster interventions by Lena Dominelli is reviewed by Lynsey Ellis.

Neil Ballantyne and Liz Beddoe

References


