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# Editorial

## Will the oppressed ever be able to participate in the Social work profession?

*Anaru Eketone*

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This editorial emerged from concerns I have over the increasingly stringent employment practices by Oranga Tamariki: Ministry for Vulnerable Children and their decisions over who is acceptable to work as a social worker or caregiver within their organisation. We all understand the motivation to limit risk to already vulnerable whanau and their members from unsuitable workers, but we are hearing of regions employing blanket bans on those who have ever come to the notice of courts or had accusations against them. This is concerning, especially when we look at the supposed emancipatory nature of social work. Mandatory social work registration is on its way and could be in place by 2019 with the Social Work Registration Board deciding who is fit and proper with people who have, what we could call, 'backgrounds of interest'. Currently, applicants for registration have the opportunity to explain their journey, state their case by proving they are changed people. Each person is reviewed on a case-by-case basis and we have some interesting characters who are allowed to be registered.

My worry is that Oranga Tamariki are not only locking out some of these 'interesting characters', but by excluding people with certain life experiences, they are in danger, by default, of only allowing in people who conform to certain middle-class-type backgrounds.

In 1999, I did a work-related trip around the North Island with a couple of Māori colleagues. We were on a fact-finding tour looking at Māori and mainstream providers and gleaning what we could use back in our home region. One of the services that stood out to me was an organisation that had a very high percentage of Māori and Pacific clientele. They had seven social workers, only one of whom was Māori. I was stunned that an organisation dealing with so many Māori and Pacific peoples had only one Māori or Pasifika worker. When I asked why they replied that the organisation had made the decision to employ only social workers who had a social work qualification, as it was in those days, B-level or equivalent. Few Māori had a qualification and so the organisation had hired a further six non-Māori social workers to work in this community. While the next piece of information could potentially put me on dangerous ground, please bear with me to the end of argument. These six social workers employed by an organisation to work with primarily Māori and Pasifika families and individuals were South African immigrant social workers. I realise I am talking about six disparate workers who had grown up and probably trained under an apartheid regime. Who, for the benefit of themselves and their families (we all make those same kinds of decisions to benefit ourselves and our families), moved to New Zealand where their training and qualifications gave them priority in employment. I have no idea how they did. I would not be surprised if their training and professionalism were a true benefit to the organisation they worked for. I also believe there were many Māori working in that community who could also have made a valued contribution both to the organisation and the community.

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The only generalisation I feel confident making is that many of us who are Māori or Pasifika would have looked at them with some suspicion and a degree of mistrust that they would have had to overcome with patience and goodwill. They had come from a racist society, we have no idea whether they stood against apartheid, whether they colluded with it, or were active supporters of a racist regime, but as social workers we like to hope that they were part of the emancipatory struggle at all levels.

The purpose of this anecdote is not to berate an agency that ended up only being able to employ South Africans in 1990s New Zealand, it is to point out that when we make clear-cut, hard and fast rules about who can work as a social worker, it can privilege one group in society and marginalise another.

One group we are in danger of marginalising further are Māori men. We need more Māori in social work and we need more men, but in a 2007 report the Department of Corrections reported that 30% of all Māori males between the ages of 20 and 29 have a criminal record where they are serving sentences that are administered by the Department of Corrections (Dept. of Corrections, 2007). Thirty percent of all our young men. Some of them stay in a cycle of crime and prison, but many, many thousands do not. Many were failed by the education system, many were failed by the health system and many were failed by their own whanau. When I worked as a youth worker in South Auckland, I dealt with hundreds of young people and their whanau. I believe that every parent I came across genuinely loved their child. What I did come across were individuals and whanau that were struggling in a multitude of ways and that did not always make the best choices, as well as young people, many of whom sometimes also did not make the right choices.

Māori make up 15% of the population, 40% of apprehensions, 43% of all convictions and 50% of the imprisoned population (Dept. of Corrections, 2007).

There are any number of reasons for this, one of course is actually committing crimes. However, there are subtle forces at play. I remember a visit to the Papakura District Court, before I left Auckland in the 1990s. I was waiting for a client to come before the court in what almost looked like a version of speed dating, where Māori after Māori came before the court, all pleading guilty. The only time it slowed down was when Pākehā appeared and always seemed to plead not guilty, usually with their own lawyer beside them.

It is something I appreciate about our culture, and I know I am speaking generally here, but I believe many Māori own their own sh\*t, more so than many others. In 2008, when the 'are you ok?' advertisements came out speaking against family violence, I approached my uncle who had been involved in putting them together and complained about them. I said, 'You know what message I get out of these ads? Māori have to be stopped beating their wives, Pākehā have to be stopped putting them down.' His reply was that they tried to get a Pākehā to talk about how they beat their wives, but they could not find one single Pākehā man prepared to go on television and admit to hitting their wife. For Māori it is no trouble to find someone who will own up to their abuse, take it on the chin and say humbly, 'Yeah I did that, but I really regret it.'

One of the outcomes of this facing up to what we have done is that it is, I am sure, much easier to get a conviction from charging a Māori than from charging a Pākehā. I have no

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idea whether this influences the tactics of what on the whole is a fine police force, but I do wonder if there is a temptation to travel down the path of least resistance.

Māori are more likely to be charged, more likely to not have diversion, more likely to be found guilty and more likely to be imprisoned, and, to our credit, more likely to own our own sh\*t.

One of the eternal criticisms of social work is the caricature of the middle-class, white do-gooder doing their bit by creating a safer community for their peers. The closer stereotype could also be the socialist / feminist / activist working to empower and enable the oppressed. The question is where does this leave the people who have reaped the benefit of this work? What happens if you do get your life together, and you make significant changes that are deep and long-lasting?

To its credit, the Social Work Registration Board (SWRB) takes every case on its merits. For those convicted of crimes they have to show a significant length of time since their offending. They need to show an understanding of why they did what they did and show a clear pathway of the work they have done to reinvent themselves. I know people who I trust who have done some awful things in previous lives who have turned their lives completely around so that in many ways they are unrecognisable from their previous selves. Are we saying that they have nothing to contribute to our profession? That their experiences, their inside knowledge of the context of our clients, their witnessing the roles of social workers in their own lives cannot ever be trusted?

The SWRB competencies include:

4. Competence to promote the principles of human rights and social and economic justice
5. Competence to engage in practice which promotes social change
8. Competence to promote empowerment of people and communities to enable positive change.

Are we saying that those who have had the easier lives are the only ones qualified to do this work?

As a profession, do we believe in change, do we believe that people can change, do we believe that society can change? Do we believe that the profession we put our hearts and souls, blood, sweat and tears into cannot assist in the journey of someone to come to healing both within themselves, their whanau and their community to the extent that they too can contribute to a field such as child protection?

If we don't believe that, then social work is nothing but a sham, a con, a way of controlling the poor and oppressed so that the middle-class can sleep safely in their beds. If we don't believe that people can change, then all our models, ethics, competencies and commitment to social justice only use social work to benefit the comfortable while ours are locked up, die years early or assimilate.

However, if we do believe that people can change, and we provide the framework and context to enter into the profession, then we are empowering a dynamic group of people

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who know what it is like to struggle, who know what it is like to fail time after time and know what it is like to be oppressed. But they also know what it is like to succeed, what it is like to regain their dignity and what it is like to change themselves and their whanau. Aren't they also the kind of people we want as social workers?

## References

Dept. of Corrections. (2007). *Over-representation of Māori in the criminal justice system. An exploratory report*. Policy, Strategy and Research Group, Department of Corrections, September 2007. Retrieved from [http://www.corrections.govt.nz/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/672574/Over-representation-of-Māori-in-the-criminal-justice-system.pdf](http://www.corrections.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/672574/Over-representation-of-Māori-in-the-criminal-justice-system.pdf).

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