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AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND
SOCIAL WORK

VOLUME 36 • NUMBER 1 • 2024

ISSN: 2463-4131 (Online)

A call for social work resistance to the rollback of socially progressive policies

Following the defeat of the sixth Labour Government of New Zealand at the October 2023 general election, it took six long weeks of negotiation between three political parties—ACT, the National Party and New Zealand First—before the current coalition government emerged. Made possible by the mixed-member proportional electoral system, this three-party alliance brought to power two smaller, more extremist parties on the coattails of the larger, centre-right National Party. Despite their combined vote share of 15%, the smaller parties were given immense power as 'kingmakers' in the process. The subsequent political bargaining process led to many sacrifices being made on the altar of consensus generation. The result was an ambitious '100-day plan', as well as longer-term political projects, that expressed the concerns and bugbears of the two extremist parties with very little headroom for National Party's policies at all. The outcome is a curious amalgam of policies with several underlying themes and idiosyncrasies.

Underpinned by a return to essentially conservative social values and neo-libertarian ideals, the coalition's mishmash of policies include deregulation across policy domains (particularly climate-related), reducing workers' rights, removing any recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi, rolling back almost all of the previous government's socially progressive policies and adopting more punitive approaches to crime. Examples include the repeal of legislation ensuring fairer pay and stable work conditions, the closure of plans for the nationalisation of water infrastructure (colloquially known as 'three waters'), requiring specific time in schools to teach reading, writing and maths and banning cell phones, reducing health system wait times, disestablishing the Māori health authority Te Aka Whai Ora (set up to develop a more responsive health system and the reduction of health disparities) (see Baker, 2024), repealing the smokefree legislation that was enacted to reduce smoking across the population and challenging the provision of food in schools programmes.

This government also, aligned with its populist leanings towards conservative attitudes toward matters of reproductive rights, genders and sexualities, implicitly threatens reversal of progressive changes in their term ahead. We signalled these threats in our previous editorial (Beddoe et al., 2023). As early as November 2023, they announced plans to remove some aspects of gender and sexuality in school-based sex and relationship education (*Stuff*, 2023; *1News*, 2023), calling on the trope of 'parental responsibility', which, like their attack on school lunches, responsiblises parents, ignoring the advice of experts. Within the same ideological frame, they challenged the progressive move to provide period products in schools (Ministry of Education, 2023), a policy based on research that girls skip school when they cannot afford period products. Parents must provide, they opine, or they are failing. But schools provide toilet paper and water to wash without question, as do all public facilities—so why not provide the necessities for menstruation—another bodily function? (Murray, 2024).

All these matters—school lunches, sex education and period products—become the topic of scornful dismissal by populist MPs (largely rich, white, older men), and they do this by braying to their disaffected base, calling on tropes of parental responsibility that are only a skip away from 'a man's home is his castle'. What next? Perhaps the government should de-fund family violence services because they think women

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should act responsibly and leave dangerous relationships using their own resources?

These changes all reflect conservative notions of equity and freedom from within a neo-libertarian paradigm, promoting an extreme version of individualism, downplaying the need for social solidarity and diminishing the government's role, scope and size. All overlain with constant plays to a settler colonial notion that universalist approaches to policy equate to equity and fairness. This latter aspect of policy includes a concerted rejection of te reo Māori (Māori language) in public ministry and government operations as well as a rejection of Māori rights to sovereignty or governance under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (te Tiriti o Waitangi). This is consistently reconstructed within government rhetoric as a threat to equality rather than an expression of it. In line with this, a further win for ACT was that there would be a referendum on the principles of te Tiriti O Waitangi, the state's founding document that sets out the rights and responsibilities of iwi Māori and the Crown. This move has been soundly criticised and will be the subject of protest in the years to come (see for example, Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2024). ACT was unhappy that te Tiriti was finally beginning to influence legislation and policy, and their referendum is a scarcely concealed effort to replace te Tiriti obligations with a universalist doctrine, rather than one that guarantees rangatiratanga to Māori, and redress for breaches of it. Without this, it is wholly distorted. As John Campbell (2024, n.p.) wrote, the Treaty Principles Bill is "not so much a re-evaluation of the role of the Treaty as an abandonment of it" as part of a 'new colonialism'.

Taken together, these changes have led to policy fractures, breaks, continuities, circularities and, inevitably, resistance. Each new government creates an overlay of what already exists, rather than a clean break from the past, leading to complex, multi-faceted refractions of political ideology, interests, alliances and outcomes. Policy path dependency operates beneath new (old) rhetoric and initiatives. This mix of old and new shapes public and social policy and the conditions for social and community work practice. Grassroots mobilisation, resistance and protest are also invigorated, the strongest tools for saying no.

In one of the most insensitive of its policy announcements, felt especially in the Muslim community as we passed the fifth anniversary of the massacre of 51 worshippers at two Christchurch mosques, the coalition government has agreed to re-write the Arms Act, with the possibility of allowing competitive sports shooters access to semi-automatic weapons (*1News*, 2024). Semi-automatic weapons were banned by Jacinda Ardern's government, with near-unanimous parliamentary support, following the mass shootings in March 2019. However, the cause of "Firearms, freedom and family" is now championed by ACT MP and Associate Justice Minister Nicole McKee (Walters, 2020). Perhaps the most bizarre outcome of this coalition government is the prospect of a gun-owning former spokesperson for the Council of Licenced Firearms Owners now leading firearms reform. The Imam of the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch has described the prospect of changes to the law on firearms as "alarming" (Williams, 2024).

At our planning meeting in late January, the Editorial Collective decided to seek contributions to a special issue: *Resistance and rangatiratanga in a time of political change*. Here we call for articles that focus on these recent political changes in Aotearoa New Zealand including:

- Critical analysis of the underpinning ideology and likely impacts of specific policy changes (including but not limited to health, justice, welfare, child protection, education, Māori sovereignty).
- Linking of current changes with their historical context including aspects of continuity, fracture and recurrence.

- Projects of resistance in any area of policy change and the methods and effectiveness of this resistance.
- Consideration of how social and community workers can respond to the inevitable challenges of policy demands and effects that may be at odds with notions of social justice, human rights, empowerment or collective wellbeing. Is this another nail in the coffin of social work? (Maylea, 2020) or is there still a 'world to win' (Garrett, 2021).
- How legislative repeal will, or will not, influence change in the specific areas, that is, analyses of legislation in wider context.
- The re-framing of the Treaty articles and principles as they are applied in legislation and the significance of this for Māori and non-Māori, with applied examples (for example, in child protection, justice or health).
- An analysis of the implicit discourses surrounding te reo Māori and the effects on its use in various settings.
- Social problems-oriented or constructionist pieces examining the re-framing of key words, concepts and discourses in political or media texts that represent or critique these changes.
- The effects on practice contexts of any changes introduced as part of the new 2023 coalition government.
- Analyses of the effects on already-marginalised communities of these changes, and how social work might respond (for example, gender minorities, working class, welfare recipients, migrants).

We welcome contributions and details of the call and guidance for authors are available below[1].

In this issue

In "Whānau Pūkenga – Survive, normalise, flourish: Peer support for Indigenous academic social workers", Hannah Mooney (Ngāti Raukawa ki te tonga, Te Āti Awa, Ngā Rauru, Te Āti Haunui a Pāpārangi), Ange (Andrea) Makere Watson (Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Mutunga, Taranaki Tūturu), Deacon Fisher (Ngāpuhi), Paul'e Ruwhiu (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou) report on the development of group designed to support and develop Tangata Whenua academics and students to contribute to a robust social work programme. Whānau Pūkenga aims to address the challenges Māori academics face in the university setting. Mooney and her colleagues emphasise that the retention and support of Tangata Whenua academic staff must be a priority to honour the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to deliver social work education that meets community expectations and the requirements of the Social Workers Registration Board. Indigenous and minority group experiences of barriers in the academy are well documented, and Tangata Whenua academics can find working in predominantly Western tertiary institutions challenging. Decolonisation, growth and inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and liberatory spaces need to be prioritised if social work aims are to be realised and Māori staff are, not just retained, but supported to flourish.

Over the course of the publication of this issue of the journal, many parts of Aotearoa, and indeed other parts of the world, still grapple with the significant impacts of climate events like Cyclone Gabrielle in 2023, and other disasters. The anecdotal stories on the ground in Aotearoa during the summer of 2023 are of social workers responding to this disaster, volunteering to shovel silt, donning PE gear to retrieve belongings, providing networked support for the distribution of essentials and attending to the basic welfare and housing needs of those who have lost everything to floods, slips and cyclonic winds. Social workers will be more than usually interested, therefore, in the timely insights offered by Kathryn Hay and colleagues, who further report on their research project examining the role of social

workers in the management of disasters. In "Secondary stressors and counselling within social work practice following disaster", Kathryn Hay, Lynne Briggs and Sue Bagshaw examine in-depth case studies of social work disaster practice, including the 2004 Whanganui floods and the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. The participants in this research offer valuable insight into how social workers, personally and professionally, respond to such events and how this practice could be formalised and strengthened.

The article articulates the transferability of social work skills to disaster work, and highlights the need for adaptability and creativity in the face of unprecedented circumstances. Emphasis is made on the reality that social workers may be both victims of disaster and central to the community or national response. Social workers bring a holistic perspective to challenges faced, acknowledging complexity and the need to work at multi-levels of impact. A significant recommendation from the study is to strengthen existing networks and develop more effective communication processes between agencies and services. Developing formal partnerships with disaster management and civil defence structures is offered as a way of streamlining responses. It also recommends specific skills development for social workers at the tertiary level, ongoing training for all social workers, and the creation of a group of skilled, disaster-response social workers to be ready and called upon when necessary.

In "Grace Millane: 'She should have been safe here'", Katelyn Appleyard and Shirley Jülich explore the way news media framed a publicised murder of a young woman in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2018. Employing a singular case study research design, Appleyard and Jülich examined how news media framed the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane and whether it was consistent with journalists' guidelines for reporting violence against women (VAW). Previous literature reports that victims and perpetrators of VAW were othered to obscure them from the context of the larger social issue that VAW presents and that victims were blamed for their assaults. This research found that rape myths were reproduced in the media reports of the prosecution and were intensified by a lack of adherence to reporting guidelines for journalists. Othering and perpetuation of rape myths result in Grace's story being viewed as apart from the significant social issue of violence against women in Aotearoa, New Zealand, ignoring an important social issue. Social workers are not immune to the powerful messages communicated in media framing of violence. Appleyard and Jülich conclude that it is vital for social workers to be vigilant in advocating for their clients and committed to promoting the principles of human rights despite the rape myths that are prevalent in wider society.

This journal holds many stories of social work history in Aotearoa New Zealand, a rare collection of social work journeys undertaken by practitioners, educators, and researchers, and of the profession itself—the progress of social work education, professionalisation, child protection and health social work (for some of many historical accounts see, for example: Fraser & Briggs, 2016; Hunt et al., 2020; Staniforth & Nash, 2016; Staniforth, 2022; Staniforth et al., 2022). Each story adds to this country's unique landscape and whakapapa of social work, adding insight into who we have become through times of social and political change. In this issue, Barbara Staniforth (who has made a significant contribution to recording our history) and Carole Adamson offer "Their stories, our history: Mike O'Brien", an article about Mike O'Brien and his 55-year career in social work.

Using interviews with Mike and his colleagues, Staniforth and Adamson take us through O'Brien's early life in social work when qualifications were in the early stages of development, and

few social workers were qualified. They describe his motivations behind becoming a social worker and his involvement in the development of community services and welfare reform. Mike was a well-respected social work educator and researcher known for his ability to bridge the gaps between social justice, policy and social work practice, for making theory practical, and for finding ways to address structural and grassroots tensions. His research and academic contributions were internationally recognised, and he was appreciated at home in Aotearoa for his support in challenging systems and policies which disadvantaged marginalised populations.

O'Brien's career moves through generations of political and social change, highlighting the intersecting dimensions of inequality and poverty and the potential of our profession to work across multiple levels to bring about change. Given the intense challenges social work in Aotearoa has faced historically, reflecting on a social work career with people like Mike O'Brien inspires and encourages inspiration for the difficult times inevitably ahead.

It is a reality that many social work clients live in poverty and access state-funded support in the form of welfare benefits. As practitioners, many of us know the struggle of engaging with the benefit system ourselves or in supporting clients. Alastair Russell and Charon Lessing's article: "How well does social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand prepare social workers to work with people claiming welfare benefits and what could be done better?" acknowledges the critical role social workers can play as advocates. In recognition of this role the article explores the vital role social work education can play in resourcing students to be advocates and to support clients engaging with the benefit system.

The article reports on the findings of eight semi-structured interviews with recent social work graduates who discussed their experience of social work education alongside engaging with realistic welfare benefit advocacy scenarios. The research found that recent graduates seemed unprepared to support people who were accessing benefits. Russell and Lessing conclude that individual or collective advocacy is either not taught (or not taught in sufficient detail) in social work education, leaving many social workers unprepared to support those living in poverty or claiming a benefit. They recommend the use of a poverty-aware paradigm and realistic benefit advocacy scenarios as part of social work education. This new work complements Russell's earlier article on 'competent solidarity' (Russell, 2017). This is a timely article that, while focused on gaps in social work education, also challenges social workers to think about their role as advocates for clients within a neoliberal environment that blames the individual rather than supports those seeking state assistance.

In "Social work formulation: principles and strategies for mental health social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand", Jo Appleby, Kendra Cox (Te Ure o Uenukukōpako, Te Whakatōhea, Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Porou), Karyn Black and Natasha Marsh note that, while social workers are important members of multidisciplinary mental health teams and formulation is a core skill in mental health practice, there is little published guidance about what strong social work formulation looks like. This article was developed as the authors reflected on their experiences of learning and teaching social work formulation and awareness of the paucity of published guidelines for social work formulation. As mental health social workers, they had struggled with the dominance of deficit-based paradigms and aimed to promote a social model grounded in social work principles thereby strengthening the social work professional identity in mental health.

In another article with a focus on social work identity; "The string to my kite: How

supervision contributes to the development of a newly qualified social worker's professional identity", Lynn Bruning, Kathryn Hay and Kieran O'Donoghue report on a qualitative study of supervision in social work. The study reported in this article aimed to explore how newly qualified social workers perceived supervision. Bruning et al. employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and views of eight newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in relation to the continuing construction of their social work identity, the challenges they faced in their transition from student to practitioner, and their adjustment to their new professional status. A focus was on how supervision acted as "the string to their kites, anchoring them to their professional foundations". The authors conclude with a recommendation for a more intensive approach to supervision in the first year of practice.

In the first of several articles in this issue that consider the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social work, Margaret Alston, Carole Adamson, Jenny Boddy and Kelly Irons present "Social work and telehealth", which describes social workers' experiences in adopting telehealth and their views on how it may continue to be used as a mode of service delivery. Alston et al. draw on a narrative review of the literature and a mixed method survey of 208 Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand social workers (71% of whom were from New Zealand). Social workers reported many challenges, including problems such sparse and sometimes unreliable information and communications technology (ICT) services, particularly in rural areas, and, for some, a necessary reliance on personal equipment. Client interactions could also be impacted by issues of access to ICT services and equipment. As has been reported elsewhere in the literature consulted for this study, social workers noted personal challenges during Covid-19, such as the need to home-school children during the pandemic and difficulty separating work and personal space and time. Despite the challenges reported, the authors noted agreement from many social workers that telehealth should be retained because of the benefits for clients who struggle to attend face-to-face meetings.

We continue to gather valuable insight from the extraordinary experiences of the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. In "'They are my tribe': How a self-organizing women's group built a sisterhood that improved well-being and increased social connectedness", Doris Testa offers the findings of research about a group of women in Australia who gathered regularly to swim at their local beach. Testa personally observed this gathering of women in her community and was curious about its development and the experience of the women involved. Through her research with them she explores how groups grow organically around an activity, the physical and social benefits, the nature of belonging and the link between emotional and environmental 'geographies'. She examines the notion of blue spaces, the benefits of swimming as an activity and the value of being in the natural environment—all of which link to well-established literature about criteria for good mental health.

The research found barriers to belonging to such groups, however: swimming skills and confidence in the sea, and proximity to blue spaces, ethnicity, the cost and time involved, the fear of the "male, white gaze". The feminist notion of sisterhood, however, of community and belonging, of solidarity, empowerment and amplification of women's voices is offered as a framework to remove these barriers, and to advocate for, and encourage, participation.

In "Application of the critical intersections model to social work with young parents in Aotearoa New Zealand", Victoria Holden uses Beddoe and Maidment's critical intersections model (2009) to examine the challenges faced by social workers who work with young parents. Drawing on the intersectional approach espoused by

the model, Holden outlines the cultural imperatives to engage with Māori young parents, especially given their greater chance of becoming young parents. She deconstructs some of the discourses around being a young parent and, by utilising critical social theory, analyses the issues relating to stigma and discrimination for some within this group. The creative use of a composite case study derived from placement is put to good effect when applying these concepts to a realistic case scenario, bringing the theoretical discussion alive. Emphasising cultural humility and the skill of establishing rapport in the context of a therapeutic relationship, Holden deftly applies theory to practice in this special context of practice.

The journal welcomes practice notes that can encompass practice across the gamut of social work activity and the three included in this issue reflect the breadth of possibilities. In the first practice note, "Ongoing benefits of a knowledge-exchange project codesigned with students", Irene de Haan, Cherie Appleton and Jerry Lo also focus on an innovative programme that developed during the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020. The immediate impact of the lockdown was anxiety and uncertainty about student placements, which was very stressful for students and staff alike due to the requirement of placements for degree completion and professional registration. The authors, a team of social work educators codesigned a collegial knowledge-exchange project (KEP) combining academic knowledge and practice wisdom gathered through students' consultation with academic and practice experts. The KEP main components were to provide a focussed analysis of practice research, interviews with social workers, production of a "practice briefing", application of the knowledge gained to a "real life" practice story and sharing accumulated knowledge. The authors provide a pedagogical perspective, highlighting their learning about promoting professional communication to underpin collaborative work, and the usefulness of an intensive orientation to practice context before students begin placement.

In the second practice note, Tony Stanley provides an overview of "The Oranga Tamariki Practice Framework—Setting out, explaining, and reinforcing our practice approach." In this, Stanley highlights how the practice framework described integrates and promotes the Aotearoa New Zealand *Code of Ethics* and the Social Workers Registration Board *Practice Competencies*, while enabling and driving sound and ethical professional practice within Oranga Tamariki. Stanely argues that this framework ensures that social work practice is then delivered, experienced, led and quality assured based on the discipline of social work rather than comprising risk-aversive reactions to practice tragedies or the volumes of bureaucratic policies and procedures that become outdated and less functional over time.

In the third practice note, "LOVE—A tool for making ethical decisions" Jermey le Comte explores how social workers regularly engage in complex ethical dilemmas. Understanding professional codes of ethics is just a necessary first step and often insufficient to help them to make ethical decisions. Le Comte shares a practical supervision tool, LOVE, that arose from their experience working in several different professional roles: supervisor, trainer, and professional body ethics panel member. The LOVE tool aims to help safeguard social workers while they navigate ethical dilemmas by assisting them to systematically consider the different lenses within the practice, such as legal and organisational requirements, professional values, and ethical codes, ultimately reducing the risk of them overlooking important elements.

This issue also contains four book reviews. Georgina Guild reviews *The Strengths Approach in Practice: How it Changes Lives*" by Avril Bellinger and Deidre Ford. Andrew Davidson reviews *Creative Writing for Social Research: A Practical Guide* by Richard Phillips and Helen Kara. Eileen Joy reviews *Governing Families: Problematising Technologies in Social Welfare and Criminal Justice* by

Rosalind Edwards and Pamela Ugwudike. Finally, Darren Renau reviews *The Politics of Children's Rights and Representation,* edited by Bengt Sandin, Jonathan Josefsson, Karl Hanson and Sarada Balagopalan.

Liz Beddoe, Emily Keddell and Neil Ballantyne, for the editorial collective

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Endnotes

1 Full articles or viewpoints will be due July 1, 2024? Please see the author guidelines for information about preparing and submitting your article. https://anzswjournal.nz/anzsw/information/authors

ORIGINAL ARTICLE
THEORETICAL RESEARCH

Whānau Pūkenga—Survive, normalise, flourish: Peer support for Indigenous academic social workers

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Indigenous and minority groups experiences of barriers in the academy are well documented (Calhoun, 2003; McAllister et al., 2019; Mercier et al., 2011; Walters et al., 2019). Therefore, it is no surprise that Tangata Whenua academics encounter challenges in the Aotearoa New Zealand university setting. There are systems and processes that do not align with Māori worldviews and can be tokenistic. Globally there is a need for decolonisation, growth and inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and liberatory spaces in the academy (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015; Ruwhiu, 2019; Walters et al., 2019; Zambrana et al., 2015).

APPROACH: In these environments it is essential that Tangata Whenua academics can support each other to flourish through the power of the collective. In 1993, Tangata Whenua academics teaching social work at Massey University formed a peer support group, now recognised as 'Whānau Pūkenga'. This article focuses on the advent of this peer support model and how it has changed over time. Key issues are discussed that highlight how this model enhances the experiences of Tangata Whenua academics and students to contribute to a robust social work programme. Discussions are framed around the themes *survive, normalise* and *flourish*. In this article 'Māori' and 'Tangata Whenua' have been utilised interchangeably. Tangata Whenua is the preferred term because it acknowledges our Indigenous connection to the whakapapa whenua, whakapapa tangata.

Keywords: Indigenous; peer support; academic; social work; Tangata Whenua; Māori

Tertiary education and the foundations of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand have been primarily based on imported, Western perspectives. It is now a requirement to practise biculturally and be competent to work with Tangata Whenua and the expectation is that this is integrated into social work education and practice. Tangata Whenua academic personal and professional identities are often integrated which is an asset to the academy, but can create additional roles and responsibilities (Burgess, 2017; Ruwhiu, 2019) leading to 'brown-face burnout' (Hollis-English, 2012, 2016; Moyle, 2014). Therefore, the retention and support of Tangata Whenua academic staff must be a priority to honour the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and to deliver a robust social work programme that meets community expectations and the requirements of the Social Workers Registration Board (McAllister et al., 2019). Traditionally, Tangata Whenua academics can find working in predominantly Western

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tertiary institutions challenging. Indigenous and minority group experiences of barriers in the academy are well documented (Calhoun, 2003; McAllister et al., 2019; Mercier et al., 2011; Walters et al., 2019). Decolonisation, growth and inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and liberatory spaces need to be prioritised (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015; Ruwhiu, 2019; Walters et al., 2019; Zambrana et al., 2015).

Considerations need to be made for who teaches decolonisation and indigenisation frameworks. Particularly how they are delivered to a Tangata Tiriti (non-Māori) audience and how tauira Māori are supported, especially if they are in the minority when discussing and exploring their culture, and their colonisation and racism experiences. Tangata Whenua academics play an important role in the delivery of this content, assisting tauira through sometimes difficult learning and transitions. This is especially important in a social work applied programme. Tangata Whenua academics have additional responsibilities due to the Social Workers Registration Board requirement for Kaupapa Māori and bicultural content, teaching and learning to be threaded throughout the programme. Therefore, we argue that Tangata Whenua academics need to support each other in a collective capacity by utilising a peer support model.

This article introduces a group called 'Whānau Pūkenga', four Tangata Whenua academics in the School of Social Work at Massey University. It will include a history of how this peer support group was formed and how it has been maintained. Personal and collective experiences are shared including how challenges have been navigated and successes celebrated under the themes, survive, normalise and flourish. This article provides insights and guidance to promote cohesion and collective wellbeing between Indigenous academics as they negotiate similar spaces. A glossary of terms is provided.

The whakapapa of the 'Whānau Group'

The Massey University social work programme was established in 1975 by Merv Hancock and Whaea Ephra Garrett (Te Āti Awa) (Dale et al., 2017). From the beginning it was envisioned that the course and content include Māori topics and strive to graduate bicultural social workers, capable of working effectively alongside Māori. The importance of attracting Māori and Pacific students was recognised as vital for the social work profession for meeting the needs of the social service user demographic (Dale et al., 2017).

In 1993, a group of Māori academics teaching in the social work programme came together to establish what they called the 'Whānau Group'. It was a mutual support group that offered leadership and advice to the school regarding Māori content in the curriculum, and other concerns and needs. The group offered support to, and focused on, the retention of tauira Māori. Key members of the Whānau Group over time included: John Bradley, Vapi Kupenga, Rachael Selby, Wheturangi Walsh-Tapiata, Dr Leland Ruwhiu, Hayley Bell, Justina Webster and Gail Bosmann-Watene.

Rachael Selby worked at Massey University for many years and mentored and advocated for other staff in the school and university-wide. Rachael retired in 2016 handing the leadership responsibilities to Dr Awhina Hollis-English who had started in a social work lecturer position in 2010. In close succession came Hannah Mooney, Dr Paulé Ruwhiu and Ange Watson who also joined the school bolstering the number of Tangata Whenua staff. In 2017, the Whānau Group consisted of these four Tangata Whenua academic staff, and while we were in different academic positions and a couple of us were having children, we were lucky to be a consistent group which enabled us to strengthen our collective impact and responses. We worked closely together to support each other at the beginning of our academic careers, sharing

similar experiences and insights with each other. We were naturally drawn to one another and would get together to consider what we needed to be successful and fulfilled in our roles and to consider how we could make a difference to our school and ultimately to the tauira who would be working with whānau Māori. We requested a regular time to come together outside of the university to wānanga at the marae as Māori, in a Māori space, and to discuss key personal and professional issues. This was supported by our Head of School, Professor Kieran O'Donoghue.

Establishing Whānau Pūkenga

In 2017, during our first wānanga, the Whānau Group took time to reflect on our name and our role in the school. We decided to rebrand and instead called ourselves 'Whānau Pūkenga'. We retained the kupu 'Whānau', as this acknowledged the whakapapa and founders of the group including all the work completed before us. We also believed that we modelled the qualities of a whānau, we respected each other as more than colleagues and felt deeply connected. The term Pūkenga was added to recognise the knowledge and expertise of the group members, skilled and versed in social work teaching and practice, drawing on our different strengths and experiences as Tangata Whenua social work practitioners and academics. The term also recognises the group's role in supporting the School of Social Work whereby we are often called upon for advice and leadership regarding te ao Māori.

As is a natural part of a workplace, whānau have come and gone from the group over time. Awhina left Whānau Pūkenga and Massey University in 2018. In 2019, Marjorie Beverland joined (leaving when she completed her PhD) and, in 2022, Deacon Fisher became a part of the roopū. The hope is that Whānau Pūkenga, regardless of membership, will continue to flourish well into the future.

Surviving, normalising and flourishing

Historically, it has been challenging for Tangata Whenua to establish themselves and flourish in a Western tertiary university setting. In a recent study, Staniland et al. (2020) purported that there continues to be an underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in all levels of higher education. They found that Māori academics struggle with lack of fit in sometimes hostile environments and that they strategically navigate a way through these environments and carve out the spaces that work for them. In addition, the majority of Whānau Pūkenga began our social work careers in practice fields, not necessarily with the aim of entering academia. We aspire to do more than just 'survive'. We want to normalise te ao Māori in the university setting and thrive and flourish in our respective careers. This section explores the 'surviving' theme.

Surviving

Many tauira Māori and kaimahi Māori feel out of their depth in Western university settings. It can feel like an uncomfortable, foreign environment because the systems and processes are not their own, do not fit with Māori paradigms and can be tokenistic. Whānau Pūkenga regularly discuss the challenges of Western, monocultural, hierarchical, patriarchal university systems and ways to navigate these spaces in order to learn how to 'play the game' and retain our authentic selves. The 'game' here refers to the dominant structures, systems and processes that dictate success in academia. Whānau Pūkenga are playing the game our own way through peer support and strategic planning, by connecting with Māori and academic mentors to enhance our career pathways, and through synergetic relationships with our Tangata Tiriti colleagues. These have provided the foundation for us to ground ourselves within the school and across the university.

Normalising

As mentioned, research has shown there is a need for decolonisation, growth and inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies and liberatory spaces in tertiary education (Kensington-Miller & Ratima, 2015; Ruwhiu, 2019; Walters et al., 2017; Zambrana et al., 2015). The Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) outlines the long-term strategic direction for tertiary education (Tertiary Education Commission [TEC], 2020) and the TEC claims the focus should be on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and mātauranga Māori and tauira Māori should be able to succeed as Māori, while protecting their language and culture in a tertiary education environment (TEC, 2020). In a bold move, Massey University declared themselves a Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led institution in 2018, "This necessitates the embodiment and enactment of the principles and provisions of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the embedding of Indigenous Māori knowledge, values and belief systems in curriculum design and implementation" (Severinsen et al., 2023, p. 1). The policy has set the scene for these to be enacted and delivered.

The university should be supporting tauira Māori to succeed through utilising Māori worldviews in teaching and learning. If the content is informed by mātauranga Māori and the teaching is delivered by a Māori lecturer, with the appropriate knowledge and skills, then students are able to relate to the content and the person delivering the content (Curtis et al., 2015). Our social work programme aims to enhance the identity of Māori social workers who are working in important roles in their communities. Whānau Pūkenga have been passionate and committed to normalising te ao Māori in our own teaching, research and learning and within the School of Social Work. We do this by bringing our own 'flavour' of being Māori, delineating between bicultural and Kaupapa Māori teaching and learning content, encouraging the wider team to grow with and alongside us, having opportunities to wānanga and meet regularly for personal and professional development, supporting kawa and tikanga, and providing assistance to tauira Māori as well as Tangata Tiriti students.

- **Bringing our own 'flavour'**

Bringing our own flavour involves Whānau Pūkenga bringing our authentic selves to the university setting, bringing our te ao Māori worldviews with us, and being unapologetically Māori. It also recognises our unique positioning; that we come with our own knowledge and stories from our personal, whānau, hapū and iwi lens, and professional experiences.

- **Difference between bicultural and Kaupapa Māori**

Whānau Pūkenga developed a Kaupapa Māori and Bicultural policy in 2017 to provide guidance for the School of Social Work. We realised it was important to define and distinguish between the bicultural and the Kaupapa Māori teaching and content within the social work curriculum. In social work the term 'bicultural' is regularly utilised when referring to things Māori with the aim being that social workers should be able to practise from their own cultural positioning. We argued that bicultural refers to a partnership between Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti. This, on its own, does not include Kaupapa Māori and mātauranga Māori (te ao Māori derived content, teaching and learning), therefore this needed its own acknowledgment, separate to bicultural definitions. The policy delineated who should teach in these spaces. Tangata Whenua should exclusively teach Kaupapa Māori content whilst all staff can teach bicultural content, teaching from their own cultural position, worldview and lens. The policy also covered the need for consistent messages about te reo Māori use across teaching and marking (use of macrons or double vowels, encouraging kupu Māori use without direct English translations), and school commitment to rangatiratanga, whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga

(for example, through whakatau and whakamutunga processes for tauira). An example of Tangata Whenua staff teaching Kaupapa Māori is when Whānau Pūkenga take third-year Bachelor of Social Work students and first-year Master of Applied Social Work students on noho marae for three days as a compulsory part of the two degrees.

- **Encourage our team to grow with and alongside us**

Whānau Pūkenga continues to encourage the whole team, individually and as a collective, to participate in things Māori, particularly in areas that impact the whole school. When we developed our policy, we presented it to the management and colleagues. We wanted to give feedback on our progress, check in with them, and gather the team's thoughts, ideas, and commitment regarding the policy. We called this process 'working at the border' as coined by Dr Leland Ruwhiu, one of the original members of the Whānau Group, "Being prepared to work at the border involves negotiating an equitable, safe space for interactions to occur, in order to enable a sense of real communication, to be clear about one's bottom lines, and to act to elevate the importance of co-constructing the rules and tools of engagement" (L. Ruwhiu et al., 2016, p. 84). One of the policy items was to have a whole school wānanga, as we were clear about what we wanted, but we wanted others to contribute and feel part of any plan going forward. The wānanga was to be held at Te Rangimarie marae in Rangiotū. To prepare for the wānanga, we have contracted an external facilitator so that Whānau Pūkenga can be part of the team and not facilitate. The team were sent a pepeha and mihi structure and encouraged to participate in a mihimihi process with a final day that is focused on future planning. A key aim of the wānanga is to discuss Massey University's Paerangi Framework and plan for implementation in our school. Paerangi is a Māori-centred, teaching and learning strategy (Massey University, 2019). Severinsen et al. (2023) argued that teaching staff who integrate these Māori concepts and a Māori perspective of "best educational practice" enhances the learning experience of tauira Māori and non-Māori students (p. 1).

- **Wānanga and meet regularly**

School management support Whānau Pūkenga to hui regularly (usually monthly) to kōrero regarding many kaupapa for example, school matters, curriculum development, student and te ao Māori initiatives. We may have a question or request from a colleague to contemplate, we discuss this collectively and provide our response following this, rather than having to manage such requests individually. We are clear that this collective approach is our preference in order to avoid 'brown-face burnout' (Hollis-English, 2012, 2016; Moyle, 2014) and the feeling that we are talking on behalf of all Tangata Whenua. It also capitalises on all of our strengths. Whānau Pūkenga wānanga at least once a year (with the possibility to grow to twice a year). These usually take place at Te Rangimarie marae in Rangiotū where we have held wānanga for three days to revitalise, rejuvenate, and strategise from a te ao Māori perspective. Some of the planned activities have included inviting Tangata Whenua academic mentors, Rongoā pūkenga, discussing topics such as Matariki, maramataka, and local manawhenua knowledge of Rangitāne. It is also a space and place of togetherness, to practise te reo Māori, to waiata, kai tahi and moe tahi.

- **Support for tauira Māori**

For tauira Māori to succeed in tertiary education it is fundamental that they receive whānau and financial support, have strong relationships with lecturers and tutors, have access to peer and tuākana support and culturally safe spaces and havens where a whānau environment allows for supportive group work (Theodore et al., 2017). There

also needs to be access to strong Māori leadership and role models and culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching practices (Theodore et al., 2017). For tauira Māori, education is a collective endeavour, not a personal one (Curtis et al., 2015; Greenwood & Te Aika, 2008). Tauira Māori want a better life for themselves and their whānau, and positively contribute to hapū and iwi developments.

Historically, Māori and Pacific students have been underrepresented in university study (Coxon et al., 2002) and have faced challenges in participation, retention and completion, particularly when compared to Pākehā students (Curtis et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2011). They have lower completion rates in bachelor and postgraduate qualifications compared to other ethnic groups (Ministry of Education, 2019). In general, Indigenous students have high rates of attrition and the lowest rates of participation and success across university programmes (Garvey et al., 2009; Madjar et al., 2010). In recent years, more tauira Māori are enrolling in university and this growth impacts current Tangata Whenua staff workloads when there are not similar increases in the number of Tangata Whenua academics to support tauira Māori (McAllister et al., 2019).

It is important for tauira to have supportive Māori lecturers and to see themselves in these positions. This has played an important role for us (Whānau Pūkenga) and our development over time, as undergraduate tauira, Māori social workers and then moving into academic positions. Other support systems that aided us included belonging to Māori support groups and Māori scholarship programmes that encouraged connection through whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and collective learning. Whanaungatanga encourages tauira to form support networks that enhance not only their spiritual and social lives but also their academic performance (Macfarlane et al., 2019; Waiari et al., 2021) and is vital to tauira Māori success in university programmes (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2019). Ako involves reciprocity of learning between teacher and student and recognises students' knowledge and expertise in what is brought to the learning environment (Berryman et al., 2019).

Whānau Pūkenga supports tauira Māori in the School of Social Work in numerous ways through study planning, pastoral support, provision of research supervision, social work placement support, and so on. One example is that we have set up hui at least once a semester to practise whakawhanaungatanga across all year levels, inclusive of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. This allows for the tuakana-teina model of support whereby the more experienced students can tautoko the newer students, develop peer relationships, and create a whānau model of support that enhances reciprocal learning (Curtis et al., 2015; Greenwood & Te Aika, 2008). It provides opportunities for the Tangata Whenua staff in the school and other support staff to introduce themselves and kōrero about the mahi that they do and ways they can assist tauira. We also include coordinators of scholarship programmes, for example, Te Rau Puāwai Māori bursary programme attending to discuss their entry requirements and application details to help tauira be successful in their applications. Appropriate support systems are crucial in university settings for tauira Māori to succeed (Theodore et al., 2017). Tertiary education environments that foster whanaungatanga, ako and tuakana-teina mentoring will assist tauira Māori to achieve academically.

- **Support for Tangata Tiriti students**

All staff have a role to support all of our students, however Whānau Pūkenga and other kaimahi Māori also play an important role supporting Tangata Tiriti students through the programme and to prepare for practice. As mentioned, Whānau Pūkenga

must assist with exploration of Kaupapa Māori issues, teaching Te Ao Māori concepts, and application and reflection of these in social work practice. In addition, kaimahi Māori tend to take the lead exploring concepts such as white privilege, stereotyping, bias and racism. In the future it would be good for this to be a shared responsibility for both Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti, recognising the importance of challenging our biases and anti-racist practice in social work.

Some challenges

We often reflect on the work we are undertaking regarding whether it is over and above our usual work expectations. This leads to discussions about whether we continue to do a task, change it or choose not to do it. This is not an uncommon issue for Māori, particularly those working in 'mainstream' organisations. As mentioned earlier, Hollis-English (2012, 2016) and Moyle (2014) discuss the concept of 'brown-face burnout' where kaimahi Māori have additional expectations placed on them that could lead to workplace stress and burnout. This is one concern about a 'Te Tiriti-led' aspirational space, whilst it is an exciting commitment, often this is led by Tangata Whenua staff and not always recognised or adequately supported. This makes the peer support model essential as we support each other to discuss and decide on boundaries and guidelines for practice. For most activities we have continued to do the additional work because we are committed to the bigger picture of all Māori flourishing in university settings. An example of this is putting the Kaupapa Māori and Bicultural policy together. This was not requested of us, but we created this initiative because we saw the gap. It is our responsibility to be kaitiaki of the tikanga in the school and we take this role seriously.

An early challenge was moving from working quite individually, as is the structure of the job description, to working more collaboratively. As mentioned earlier in the article, as individuals we would be asked for cultural advice and input and to sit on committees or groups, often being the lone Māori voice. This was problematic, adding to workload, and leading to feelings of isolation and discomfort when making significant decisions on behalf of 'all Māori'. This created an unsafe environment. We regularly discussed the need to have more than one voice present in all spaces, although recognising that this also adds to the workload as there are fewer of us. While we have a Kaihautū of our roopū, we work as a collective and we value the strength of our collective influence. Our key mātāpono is 'working together'. We have started to make leeway on this, and fewer people are approaching us as individuals now.

Flourishing

Looking forward to the future, we want Tangata Whenua staff and students to flourish in the university environment. Whānau Pūkenga will continue to provide ongoing support and advice in the School of Social Work to ensure that te ao Māori perspectives are authentically integrated and 'normalised'. This means that Māori perspectives are fully realised so that we do not have to think too much about them. We will continue to provide robust support to each other and encourage each other to grow personally and professionally. We are committed to supporting our students, in particular, our tauira Māori. We want to produce well-rounded, critical thinking, reflective social workers who can work effectively alongside whānau Māori.

In addition, we have moemoeā for ourselves as individuals and as a collective in order to flourish. For some of us, our moemoeā is to develop our capacity to learn and speak te reo Māori and increase the use within the School of Social Work. One of us is developing research and writing post-PhD and three of four of us are currently pursuing PhD completion. Exciting developments include leading out our 'all-of-school' wānanga and building on Massey

University's Māori principle-based teaching and learning strategy, Paerangi. We have also established a wider peer supervision group of Māori social work academics working across four universities in Aotearoa. This developed further after Whānau Pūkenga presented on the importance of peer support for Māori in the university setting at an Indigenous social work conference in 2022. An issue was identified whereby some Māori social work academics are on their own in their programmes and therefore need to reach further afield to join a collective.

We have discussed the need for Māori academic mentors to support us to further our careers in academia. It is beneficial to have ongoing advice regarding our roles in teaching and research by mentors who have knowledge and understanding of the university systems and processes. Our current school leadership provides reciprocal support and endorses our aspirations wholeheartedly. There are also wider university initiatives that align to our school commitments, promoting Te Tiriti o Waitangi and retention of all tauira Māori.

Conclusion

This article has presented the necessity and value of a peer support model for Tangata Whenua social work academics, Whānau Pūkenga. Insights have been shared of our journey through the concepts, survive, normalise and flourish. Massey University aims to be Te Tiriti o Waitangi-led which requires that Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Māori knowledge, values and beliefs are integrated into the curriculum. Whānau Pūkenga plays a major role in this implementation and therefore requires reciprocal support to normalise this approach in the School of Social Work. The overall aim is for a robust social work programme that delivers effective social workers for the benefit of our communities, whānau, hapū and iwi. It is essential that Tangata Whenua academics are supported in order to avoid 'brown-face burnout'. In turn, tauira Māori will be supported to flourish and succeed. Regardless of whether the support is there, find your people! If they are not within your school or team then look outside. Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini. The strength is in the collective.

Received: 20 September 2023

Accepted: 29 November 2023

Published: 16 April 2024

Glossary (most taken from *Te Aka, Māori dictionary online*)

Ako – to learn, study, advise

Aotearoa – Māori name for New Zealand

Hapū – sub-tribe

Iwi – Tribe

Kaimahi – worker/staff member

Kaihautū – leader

Kai tahi – eat together

Kaupapa Māori – Māori approach/topic/practice

Kōrero – to speak, discuss

Kupu – word

Māori – Indigenous to Aotearoa

Manaakitanga – respect, generosity, care for others

Manawhenua – local Indigenous peoples, jurisdiction over land or territory – power associated with possession and occupation of tribal land

Marae – courtyard – the open area in front of the wharenui, where formal greetings and discussions take place. Often also used to include the complex of buildings around the marae.

Maramataka – Māori lunar calendar

Mātāpono – principles

Matariki – Pleiades cluster of stars, Māori new year

Mātauranga Māori – Māori knowledge

Mihi – to greet, thank

Mihimihi – speech of greeting

Moe tahi – share sleeping space together

Noho marae – Stay at the marae

Paerangi – name of the Massey University teaching and learning strategy, Paerangi means horizon.

Pākehā – New Zealander of European descent

Pepeha – sharing connections to people and places that are important to you

Pūkenga – skilled, versed in, lecturer

Rangitāne – Manawhenua in Te Papaieoa, Palmerston North

Rangatiratanga – The right to exercise authority, autonomy

Rongoā – Māori medicine

Roopū – group

Tangata Tiriti – non-Māori, people of Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Tangata Whenua – Indigenous people of the land

Tauira – student

Tautoko – support

Te Ao Māori – The Māori world, Māori worldview

Te Rangimarie – name of Rangitāne marae utilised for noho and wānanga

Te Rau Puāwai – Māori bursary programme at Massey University

Te Reo Māori – the Māori language

Te Tiriti o Waitangi – te reo Māori version and different from the English version (The Treaty of Waitangi)

Tuakana-Teina – the relationship between an older (tuakana) person and a younger (teina) person

Waiata – song, to sing

Wānanga – to meet and discuss, forum, educational seminar

Whakapapa – ancestry, genealogy

Whakapapa tangata – ancestral lineage

Whakapapa whenua – land ancestral lineage

Whakamutunga – to conclude, end

Whakawhanaungatanga – the process of establishing relationships, relating well to others

Whakatau – to welcome

Whānau – family group, extended family

Whanaungatanga – a relationship through shared experiences and working together which provides people with a sense of belonging

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Secondary stressors and counselling within social work practice following disaster

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This paper is the second of two (Briggs et al., 2023) detailing the outcome of a mixed-method study examining the mental health and wellbeing of a randomised sub-sample of 60 clients who attended the Canterbury Charity Hospital Trust Counselling Service following the earthquake that struck Christchurch on 22 February 2011.

METHODS: This paper focuses on the results from semi-structured interviews with the study participants. Open-ended questions explored: 1) secondary stressors that impacted participant wellbeing; and 2) experiences of counselling at the CCHT.

FINDINGS: The findings highlight several secondary stressors for participants including practical and financial assistance, social contacts, and disrupted employment and education, all of which continued to impact on their wellbeing. The experience of counselling varied with mixed views on its value, the skills of the counsellors, and the benefit of having counselling with a practitioner who had also experienced the traumatic event.

CONCLUSIONS: Overall, the initial counselling was viewed as a positive contributor to the participants' recovery, however practitioners, including social workers who offer counselling services, must be mindful of shared trauma, demonstrate emotional regulation, and have relevant knowledge and strategies for a range of client interactions. Continuing professional education, such as webinars and involvement in communities of practice on post-disaster social work practice, are recommended so social workers can better understand the longer-term impacts of disasters and equip themselves for future disaster-related practice.

Keywords: Disaster; secondary stressors; insurance; counselling; wellbeing; social work

Context

Canterbury, a province in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, had two major earthquakes with thousands of aftershocks relatively close to each other. The first, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit the town of Darfield, 40 kms away from the city centre on September 4, 2010. While there were no direct deaths recorded because of this earthquake, it did require the rebuilding of many homes and businesses. On February 22, 2011, a magnitude 6.8 earthquake occurred in the city of Christchurch with 186 recorded deaths, 7171 injuries, and extensive structural damage to property, buildings, and infrastructure (Potter et al., 2015).

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 19–31.

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The impact of a natural disaster goes beyond the main event as the accompanying emotional, psychological, and psychosocial consequences have short-, medium-, and long-term impacts on residents in the area (Alston et al., 2018; Hoang & Noy, 2020; Johal & Mounsey, 2016; Nguyen, 2020; Potter et al., 2015). Any disaster can lead to a range of confusing and intensely frightening emotions where initially a person may feel emotionally numb, have a sense of disbelief, anger, guilt, or grief. In addition, a range of secondary stressors can create recurrent acute stress and further impact on a person's wellbeing which may, for some, lead to a sense of demoralisation, or non-specific psychological distress, that can inhibit their quality of life for many years to follow (Briggs et al.,2023; Fergusson et al., 2015). As found by Johal and Mounsey (2016), the effects of secondary stressors can be highly significant in prolonging the physical, welfare, and psychological needs of those affected. Consequently, responding organisations need to remain cognisant of ongoing impacts that may persist for longer periods of time (Johal & Mounsey, 2016). Recommendations from an extensive research project on the effects of the Black Saturday bushfires in Australia (Harms et al., 2015) noted the importance of further research on the prolonged grief experiences of disaster survivors. Understanding the longer-term impacts of distress caused by disaster may lead to better service provision especially for people experiencing ongoing mental health problems.

Charity Hospital

The Canterbury Charity Hospital Trust (CCHT) was established in Christchurch in 2004 to facilitate the provision of free elective health care to patients with selected disorders who were otherwise unable to access treatment. One week after the February 2011 earthquake, the CCHT trustees, recognising how the sudden, and potentially massive unmet need for counselling could overwhelm the local health services, established an early intervention counselling service. Fifty-six qualified health professional volunteers were recruited (Bagshaw et al., 2013; Briggs et al., 2016). The volunteers included social workers, counsellors, and psychologists (Cooper et al., 2018). All held professional registration or membership of a professional association and were considered equipped to provide basic counselling and psychosocial support.

In the main, the CCHT counsellors offered a brief intervention or triage service to adults seeking psychosocial support (Cooper et al., 2018). Although there is considerable variation in clinical settings where mental health triage services may be operating and service delivery models vary (Sands, 2007), the essential function for the practitioners offering counselling at the CCHT was to ascertain the nature and severity of the presenting problem and to determine whether an urgent referral to mental health services was required. Following the brief screen or initial assessment of the client's presenting problems at the CCHT most clients were offered one or two follow-up sessions.

The initial phase of the service lasted approximately 6 weeks with the demand for acute stress counselling declining by the middle of May 2011. Over the next few months, clients still attending the counselling service were reassessed and, where appropriate, people with existing mental health problems were referred onto the local health and community services. Some clients continued to attend the CCHT until their issues were resolved; however, the focus of this article is not on this longer-term trauma support.

During 2011 and 2012, a total of 858 patients (23.2% male, 76.8% female; mean age 48 years; SD = 19.2; range 4 to 93 years) attended 1784 counselling sessions (Bagshaw et al., 2013). The main interventions employed consisted of cognitive strategies to deal with stress, anxiety, and sleep

disturbance alongside some specific training in the use of relaxation methods.

Counselling and disasters

While counselling is often associated as being provided by qualified counsellors, Staniforth and other social work scholars have shown that it is a legitimate aspect of social work practice (Booysen & Staniforth, 2017; Kjellgren et al., 2022; Staniforth, 2010). Certainly, in the case of the CCHT, social work was one of the professions that offered counselling (Cooper et al., 2018). Booysen and Staniforth's (2017) research with Aotearoa New Zealand social workers signalled many of their participants used counselling skills in their practice although they distinguished themselves from being counsellors. The Social Workers Registration Board *Scope of Practice*, while not mentioning counselling specifically, refers to social workers being able to:

> … identify strengths, needs and support networks to prioritise goals that will enhance social connectedness, and assist in addressing life challenges and major events. (SWRB, 2020, p. 2)

Disasters affect peoples' lives in many ways resulting in changes to family and social relationships, employment, education, and other roles in life. Following a disaster event, social workers using counselling can support people to understand emotional responses and may offer hope in the chaotic environment. This initial counselling often focuses on setting realistic and manageable goals that can assist people with not becoming overwhelmed by the enormity of their perceived or actual challenges. Boyd et al. (2010) recommended setting short-term goals as they provide a foundation for dealing with the demands posed by the disaster over the medium to long term. As Trope and Liberman (2003) suggested, focusing on short-term goals can reduce the preoccupation of dealing with long-term tasks thereby assisting the affected population to gain a sense of control over their immediate environment.

Counselling sessions soon after a disaster event can be of considerable value; however some people may require further support for trauma months or years after the disaster event to address ongoing distress or demoralisation (Briggs et al., 2023). The impact of secondary stressors such as loss of family or community members, employment, homes, or finances may especially affect people's ability to regain a sense of purpose or desired quality of life (Alston et al., 2018; Harms et al., 2015; Hoang & Noy, 2020). Early experiences of counselling, however, may influence whether people access future counselling or other forms of support.

Counselling professionals require strong practice skills in grief counselling, listening and engagement (Hickson & Lehmann, 2014). In addition, the participants in Hickson and Lehmann's (2014) Australian study of social workers' practice following bushfire events, stressed the importance of practitioners having confidence in their clinical practice skills and being comfortable working in a complex and uncertain environment. Nightingale et al. (1997) suggested that *disaster counsellors*, that is, practitioners who are offering counselling following a disaster, need to focus on supporting people to attend to their everyday practical needs thus respecting their strengths and own problem-solving abilities.

If the counsellors have experienced the disaster event themselves this adds a layer of complexity to the counselling relationship as the trauma is shared (Baum, 2014; Cooper et al., 2018; Tosone et al., 2015). While this may facilitate a greater sense of understanding of the effects of the disaster, the counsellor needs to ensure that this shared trauma is managed appropriately within the professional relationship (Nightingale et al., 1997). Professional boundaries and emotional self-regulation therefore need

to be maintained to enable an effective counselling process that maintains a focus on the client rather than the practitioner (Hickson & Lehmann, 2014). Shepard et al. (2017), in their research on the impacts of wildfires in Canada on families and children, noted that counsellors who are also survivors of a disaster or other traumatic event need to watch for signs of exhaustion, numbness, and over-involvement with clients. In more recent research focusing on social service practitioners and shared trauma in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Tosone (2021) emphasised that shared trauma refers to the practitioner having both a direct engagement with the traumatogenic environment and the trauma narratives of the client. This makes them "more susceptible to the blurring of professional and personal boundaries, increased self-disclosure with clients and the development of posttraumatic stress" (Tosone, 2021, p. 3). Relatedly, Baum's (2014) analysis of the shared trauma experienced by Israeli social workers in the context of war highlighted that practitioners who experience lapses of empathy toward clients can become distressed, especially in periods some time after the initial traumatic event. Conversely, he also highlighted that personal growth may also be a direct consequence of working in a disaster context (Baum, 2014). Psychosocial support for the counsellors themselves is essential and may commonly include the maintenance of self-care plans and strategies and regular supervision (Cooper et al., 2018; Hickson & Lehmann, 2014).

This paper contributes to the current literature on disaster practice and, in particular, the experiences of people who engage in counselling immediately following a disaster event and the impacts of the event on their longer-term mental health and wellbeing. The findings are drawn from a mixed-methods study, with the quantitative findings being outlined in a previous publication (Briggs et al., 2023).

Method

The study was undertaken using a mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011) to enable multiple perspectives and triangulation. The quantitative elements of the research included the use of wellbeing and demoralisation scales and the findings from this part of the study indicated that the CCHT participants had poorer mental health overall when compared with the 2007-2008 New Zealand National Health Survey (Briggs et al., 2023). Richer descriptions of participants' experiences related to their longer-term wellbeing were then generated using open questions and are presented below. As the aim of the research was to explore secondary stressors and the concept of demoralisation in this context it was important for some years to have lapsed between the initial disaster event and the research.

Permission to access the CCHT data base was granted in 2018 after discussion with relevant staff and ethical approval of the research was granted by the New Zealand Ethics Committee (NZEC 2017-34) and Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2018/074). Every client who had attended the counselling service within 12 months of the 2011 earthquake was identified and allocated a de-identified study number. A randomisation tool (Urbaniak & Plous, 2013) was then used to recruit a sub-sample from the 858 who had attended the hospital for counselling.

As other researchers (Fergusson et al., 2015) have found, recruiting participants following the earthquake was challenging and we similarly found that many contact details on the CCHT database had changed. Another complicating factor was the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic from February 2020 as participation in the study required attending the interview in person. In total, 60 clients

from the total sample of 858 (7%) were able to be contacted, recruited, and interviewed by members of the research team between 2018-2020.

At the interview, the participants firstly completed a questionnaire specifically designed for this study. This included socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, education, living situation, employment status), referral source, dates and numbers of counselling sessions attended (see Briggs et al., 2023 A set of open-ended questions was then used to guide a discussion about the participant's experience of the counselling received and factors that impacted on their mental health and wellbeing following the 2011 earthquake. Questions focused on the immediate and longer-term impacts on their wellbeing, whether the earthquake changed their life dramatically, helpful and unhelpful strategies to manage the identified stressors, their current emotional state, and experiences of counselling at the CCHT. All the interviews were digitally recorded, downloaded, transcribed, and thematically analysed (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Data collection and analysis were carried out manually by two experienced researchers. The first researcher conducted a detailed line-by-line analysis of the information contained in the interview transcripts to identify major codes and developed a thematic framework to capture the analytically significant features of the data (Ritchie et al., 2014). Linkages between codes were then mapped to elicit substantive and identifiable themes related to the identification of secondary stressors as well as experiences of counselling. Once saturation had been reached and final codes were assigned, the data and coding were then reviewed by the second reviewer using the same process to ensure a consistent and robust process (Bryman, 2014). Based on this process of identification of the final themes, the close agreement between the two reviewers relative to data extraction and the thematic coding process, inter-rater reliability was assessed as being high according to Gwet's (2014) guidelines.

Findings

The longer-term impacts the participants had because of the February 2011 earthquake and the ongoing aftershocks varied—often due to where they were at the time of the quake, their financial and living situation, family and other support systems, and previous life experiences. The participants identified secondary stressors that affected their ongoing wellbeing as including practical and financial assistance; maintaining social contacts; employment or education changes. The participants' experiences of counselling from the CCHT varied with concerns highlighted about the emotional regulation of counsellors and their knowledge of appropriate strategies.

Many of the participants agreed that the earthquake had dramatically changed their lives, and not only for a short period after it occurred. Some described this as "having to restart my life" (1) and that it "changed my future" (10). The emotional effects were also noted with a participant commenting it, "Shattered my ability to feel safe … Still feel angry about it" (28).

Several participants disclosed they were still experiencing psychosomatic symptoms, including sleep disturbances such as nightmares, tearfulness, and nervousness which they connected with having lived through the earthquake:

> Struggle going into town, have panic attacks, still have nightmares, every now and then. (41)

> … can't go out – panic attacks on anything over 1st floor. Can't cope. (45)

A small number of participants acknowledged their ongoing use of antidepressants or other medication to assist with feelings of anxiety or irritation which they attributed to the earthquakes. In the

intervening years, between the earthquake and the interview, many participants had been forced to move house either temporarily or permanently (1, 17, 47); had employment interruptions (2, 5); or experienced multiple impacts simultaneously including relationship, employment, financial and health impacts (3, 32, 51).

Practical and financial assistance

While practical and financial assistance was experienced by many participants following the February 2011 earthquake, it was also noted as a key secondary stressor. Initial practical assistance included City Council staff clearing debris (37); organisations such as the Salvation Army and the Red Cross delivering food and other essential supplies such as blankets and torches (8, 22, 27); and water carriers arriving in the neighbourhood (23).

The availability of immediate practical assistance varied, often due to locality, and for some, did not continue for very long (27). Other participants emphasised that, while practical assistance such as support to stay in a motel was available straight after the earthquake, there was a longer period before financial and other assistance was offered:

> It took them quite a few days to get into the swing of stuff and then we got a Red Cross grant and I kept going to WINZ and saying look we've walked away with nothing, they couldn't grasp that concept. They didn't particularly want to help initially … The insurance company gave us a little bit of money, but it didn't really cover anything. (24)

The frustrations and challenges associated with insurance claims, and the length of time these took to be addressed were frequently connected with the earthquake having had a significant long-term effect on participant lives (2, 33, 26). For example, participants stated they "fought" EQC (23); took EQC to court (47), found EQ unhelpful and were "still fighting them" (54); "appalling the way we were handled … ripped off by insurance company" (6); "had to fight for assistance with rent money from insurance company" (6).

One participant believed that engaging with the insurance company was an ongoing trigger for them which exacerbated their anxiety (33). Another commented:

> … it took me 5½ years to get the money out of the insurance company … you were constantly hounded trying to sort out the insurance or someone suddenly decided to send you a letter after 5 o'clock at night and it's like they don't think, they'll send it to you late at night on the Friday night and you'll think urrrgh what does this [email] mean ... So it was tough. (24)

Even when participants resolved insurance claims, housing issues were sometimes still present:

> We rented seven different rentals that was a lot… That was in the period until we settled with the insurance company and then I couldn't get a house because I couldn't find one that was suitable to live in … I'd become too unwell and so in the end I bought an existing [house] … probably 6 years later, the one I've got now… (24)

Social contacts

Maintaining social contacts, including with work colleagues, was noted by several participants as important for their initial and longer-term wellbeing after the earthquake (14, 22, 26, 27, 34, 35, 36). Maintaining social activities such as exercise with friends, church, or engaging in community activities like art class continued to contribute to maintaining wellbeing (3, 4, 38, 47, 53, 59). Helping in the community and thus feeling a sense of purpose was also recognised as important for some participants (4, 57).

In contrast, losing social contacts was a negative consequence of the earthquake for many participants, often caused due to the need for people to move neighbourhoods or cities or change employment (3, 4, 18, 24, 29, 39, 44, 45, 48, 49). A lack of understanding from friends who had not experienced the worst aspects of the earthquake were also noted as impactful on relationships (21). One participant discussed how friends asked about the money she had received from insurance companies and intimated she had financially benefitted from the earthquakes, which she denied:

> … a lot of people were nasty. They thought we'd get something more than what we got and all sorts of nonsense. People would say the most awful things and I would almost never discuss it or never talk about it. People out of the red zone didn't get it … A lot of people showed their true colours. (24)

Other participants suggested that the loss of social contacts was caused by their own decision to self-isolate from others, often due to the trauma of the earthquake, or because it was too sad to stay connected (15, 24, 31, 47, 48). Resettling into a new neighbourhood was challenging as it was difficult to trust new neighbours and find new services, such as doctors and dentists (37).

Survivor guilt was discussed by one participant, as this had led to her losing connections with previous friends, particularly those who had been hurt or had experienced extreme hardship following the earthquake (25). In addition, this participant explained that friends outside of Christchurch had little understanding of the realities of life post-earthquake and so they also limited their social contact with them.

Employment and education changes

Employment impacts were felt by several participants in the initial aftermath of the earthquake if buildings were "munted" (8) and they could not retrieve belongings or return to their office. Moving buildings due to their destruction or high level of risk was also noted as occurring both immediately after the earthquake and for several years following (16, 17, 49, 58). Many participants described ongoing anxiety linked with their employment or workplace with one participant stating they were "put on notice because of stress" (20). Continual worry about entering buildings, including workplaces, was highlighted (28, 34, 47, 48) and one person bluntly stated they "felt frightened in the building [which led to] a loss of enjoyment of work" (52). Other participants lost their jobs or were made redundant because of the earthquake (31, 44) and this led to financial pressure, sometimes resulting in being unable to maintain mortgage repayments (25). Employer support also differed in both the short- and longer-term with some employers considered unhelpful and lacking in empathy (5, 9, 25, 37).

Several participants were at high school or enrolled as tertiary students at the time of the earthquake and, for some, this affected their longer-term study plans (10). Other participants stopped their apprenticeships due to stress (20) or found their education was very disrupted (8, 31, 35). One participant claimed the earthquake "… impacted on learning at school [as I was too] scared to go to school as I had to know where my mother was all the time" (40). Similarly, another participant commented: "You couldn't even think straight because you were terrified about the next earthquake and then you couldn't settle…" (24). These impacts consequently affected their study and employment options post-schooling (24).

Counselling

Reasons for participating in counselling sessions at Charity Hospital after the February 2011 earthquake varied. Common reasons included heightened anxiety, desire to learn new strategies for coping with

trauma, loss of social contact, employment, and financial issues including insurance claims.

Positive aspects

Receiving counselling was viewed by some participants as the most important support or assistance they received immediately after the 2011 earthquake. Counselling for these participants was described as "excellent … changed my life" (19), helpful (28, 31), provided reassurance (22), confidence-building (23) and that it "got me out of the victim role" (37).

Meeting with a counsellor who had lived through the earthquake themselves was viewed positively as they could better understand the trauma experienced by the participant (1, 27, 31):

> It was good to be able to talk [to a neutral person] and to somebody who got what we were going through … I think it was just more the fact they had the empathy, they listened. (24)

The participants also appreciated having their feelings validated by the counsellor as 'normal' after the earthquake event (3, 9, 10, 41, 50):

> It helped, made me feel not the only one very scared. I hoarded food and other things. (39)

> I think just hearing that what I was going through was normal and that actually I was doing quite well in terms of the whole processing [of the] experience and I guess just even knowing there was somebody here to talk with about what was going on in my head really. (10)

Being able to talk with a person who was not family was also highlighted as a positive aspect of the counselling experience (11, 16, 33, 44, 47, 56). This enabled them to speak more freely and honestly. One participant described it as "nice having someone for myself" (17) while another commented, "… good talking to someone who was not family … had to be strong for everyone else" (44). At times, speaking to the counsellor also enabled some participants to acknowledge and discuss previous trauma (2, 52) that had resurfaced due to the earthquake experience:

> I think the talking ... it kind of broke something ... perhaps the earthquake allowed me to grieve [for her father who had died many years earlier] … Coming in and talking did help. (11)

Some counsellors provided participants with practical tools such as positive self-talk techniques, relaxation tapes, sleeping strategies or completed referrals such as to a physiotherapist (3, 6, 23, 31, 32, 33, 36, 41, 51, 58). Other counsellors provided information, for example, about the role of the Earthquake Commission (4).

Although counselling was seen as a positive experience, some participants had mixed emotions about their situation:

> I do think it was helpful … I had one session because I didn't think I probably deserved to take up their time for more. Because there were people that had no, their houses were destroyed, you know they had no jobs. (27)

> I think I was suffering from survivor's guilt because we'd nothing happened to my family. Yeah and nothing happened to our house and yeah it was just really strange … It's good just to be able to say it to somebody else that's not, you know in your circle. (7)

A small number of participants were still attending counselling at the time of the research interview, especially if they were experiencing ongoing anxiety.

Negative aspects

Some participants felt the limited number of sessions available to them meant they were not

adequately supported (12, 16, 17). Developing a professional relationship with the counsellor did not always occur and this impacted negatively on the counselling experience (5, 42, 43, 57). Further, some participants were left dissatisfied with the counselling due to the perceived limited skills of the counsellor:

> Didn't like [the counselling]… it was frustrating, "no we can't help you", "no we don't deal with that". And that was really difficult and I was slightly angry about it ... I felt not heard and it surprised me. (15)

> I saw two people. The first one just patted me on the back and said I would be okay and the other one didn't listen. (28)

> Wasn't listened to. I was left feeling a failure. (18)

Of concern was an experience of one participant wherein they said, "… remember my clinical notes went on my records which impacted on future insurance" (50).

Counsellors were not always seen to be managing their own emotions appropriately with their clients. One participant described their counsellor as "traumatised as well … blind leading the blind" (31), while another said the counsellor "just told me all about himself" (54). Counsellors from outside of Christchurch were not always experienced positively (54) or considered helpful:

> Counsellor hadn't been through it, cried in the interview, focused on the wrong thing. (38)

> The counsellor came to Christchurch after the earthquake—she was terrible … cried, didn't help. I had to help her. (59)

Not all participants found the counselling helpful regarding guidance or strategies (52) as illustrated in these comments:

> … pleasant enough to talk to but no strategies to help with anxiety. (46)

> … didn't engage with me at all and made silly suggestions. (51)

> No help from counselling. The counsellor didn't seem to know what to do. (59)

A candid response from a participant suggested that, although the participant had been referred to counselling, it was not a process that greatly contributed to their wellbeing:

> … but counselling didn't really work to be honest. That's probably not what you wanted to hear. I don't think that there was anything unhelpful, I just don't think counselling necessarily worked for me ... (25)

Support from doctors, family, and faith in God were mentioned by some participants as more useful than the counselling they received (43, 59).

Discussion

The aim of the study was to highlight secondary stressors that were continuing to impact on participants several years after the 2011 earthquake and to consider the experiences of initial counselling these people had received from Charity Hospital social workers and other practitioners. The participant narratives offer insight for social work practice now as well as for future disaster situations.

Disaster events can affect people in different ways and, for some, the psychosocial and financial affects, including both tangible and intangible losses can be long-lasting (Alston et al., 2018). Moving into new neighbourhoods and re-establishing themselves in new communities and employment for instance, was stressful for many participants. Hoang and Noy (2020) examined the impact of the managed retreat process for Christchurch residents in the Red Zone and their results signalled that wellbeing was affected by social relations and suggested policymakers should develop

future programmes that establish and encourage social capital. Similarly, Harms et al. (2020) posited that "… factors such as social connectedness … mediate the adverse effects of disasters on people and communities" (Harms et al., 2020, p. 15). Timely and uncomplicated financial and practical assistance also supports the wellbeing of those affected by disaster. Disorganisation and difficulty associated with the Earthquake Commission and insurance claims (Nguyen, 2020) added to the distress of many participants with some still embroiled in insurance disputes. As Hoang and Noy (2020) noted, the insurance claim resolution process following the February 2011 earthquake experienced significant hurdles and delays, and this consequently negatively affected the quality of life of claimants. Improvements in this area are necessary to limit stress for future disaster-affected claimants.

As the results in this study indicated, counselling can be a means of support for people immediately following a disaster event**.** Social workers offering counselling should have strong relational skills and attributes, such as listening, prioritising, affirming and boundary setting (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). Goal setting and providing strategies that people can implement after the counselling session is also important (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). These are perhaps commonly expected micro-skills for social workers (Booysen & Staniforth, 2017) that can also be drawn upon, in nuanced ways, in disaster practice (Hickson & Lehmann, 2014). Advocacy is a core component of social work practice (SWRB, 2020) and social workers need relevant knowledge in a post-disaster environment to be able to advocate for services users, especially as people in stressful environments may find rational decision-making challenging (Nguyen, 2020). Awareness of appropriate services to refer clients to when outside of their scope of practice is also essential. Beyond the individual counselling relationship, social workers can contribute to community development through connecting people into new environments and addressing ongoing needs (Alston et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2014; Munford & Sanders, 2019).

Cooper et al. (2018), writing about the perspectives of the CCHT counsellors, noted that some of the social workers and other practitioners found an element of reciprocity in the counselling relationship due to the shared experience and consequent strategies following the earthquake. This was mirrored by the participant narratives that suggested the counsellors helped to normalise the experience and they generally preferred to see someone who had also experienced the disaster event. While shared experiences may assist with building rapport, Cooper et al., (2018) maintained that counsellors should retain clear boundaries in the therapeutic relationship and ensure their engagement is client-centred. van Heugten (2014) emphasised that human service workers in the post-disaster space "must harness their emotional responses so that they can continue to be of service to others" (2014, p. 69) and so a balance between engagement with clients and disengagement is required. Being able to establish strong professional boundaries (Baum, 2014; van Heugten, 2014) and manage the specific impacts of disaster work, such as emotional labour (Du Plooy et al., 2014), is essential for effective disaster practice. The concept of shared trauma in social work disaster practice requires further exploration (Tosone et al., 2015), although recent analysis following the Covid-19 pandemic is of considerable value (Tosone, 2021).

The participants in this study who found the counselling less valuable tended to associate this with the attributes and behaviour of the individual counsellor. Alston et al. (2018) suggested that some social workers are ill-prepared for the scale of complexity of the social issues that result from disaster events. Not all social workers or other practitioners are well suited or equipped for delivering

professional services following an emergency and may need to self-select in terms of their engagement (Cooper et al., 2018; Hickson & Lehmann, 2014). Understanding their transferable skills and their management of self in chaotic and unpredictable contexts prior to a disaster event may assist social workers with determining their suitability for certain post-disaster tasks. The broader socio-political environment also impacts how social workers and other practitioners may respond in post-disaster contexts. Government policies, for example, are levers that determine availability and accessibility of resources, including funding for essential services. The Charity Hospital delivered the initial counselling service following the February 2011 earthquake because they recognised the pressure on hospitals to do brief screens around the mental health of local community members (Cooper et al., 2018). Ongoing engagement by social work professional organisations with government and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to highlight the importance of initial mental health and counselling support for people in disaster-affected areas is necessary. In addition, Yumagalova et al. (2021) have noted that, in previous disaster situations, there have been tensions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous response and recovery systems and methods. They recommend a more coordinated systems response to disaster management including the recruitment of Indigenous volunteers to assist organisations working in affected communities. Indigenous social workers could be pivotal in these spaces, albeit provided there is adequate resourcing.

Calls for the ongoing or sustained training of social workers in counselling skills as well as stress management, problem-solving, ethical dilemmas, and moral distress in relation to disaster practice are not new (Booysen & Staniforth, 2017; van Heugten, 2014). Harms et al. (2020) suggested that education and training on social work practice in a disaster context can reduce secondary trauma and contribute to more helpful responses following a disaster event. Similarly, Hickson and Lehmann (2014) identified a need for specific training for people engaged in disaster response as well as consideration of whether disaster practice could be seen as a specialist area of practice. Given the anticipated increase in future disaster events, in large part due to climate change, this is worthy of further consideration by registration and professional bodies as well as training institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the meantime, the establishment of a community of practice focused on social work disaster practice in New Zealand's professional association, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), could offer a useful new forum for discussion and lesson-learning. Establishing partnerships is a key component of social change (Munford & Sanders, 2019), and collaborative efforts between the ANZASW and NEMA could also facilitate opportunities for cross-sector training to strengthen social workers' current knowledge on causal effects of disasters as well as future service delivery by social workers (Huang et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Traumatic events, such as a natural disaster, impact people in different ways over time. The effects of the 2011 Christchurch earthquake were significant for many residents, including those who sought counselling support from Charity Hospital. Secondary stressors can continue to affect wellbeing and quality of life long after the initial disaster event.

Counselling within social work practice is a legitimate task in post-disaster contexts, as was evident in this research. It does, however, require skill and a keen awareness of emotional labour, especially when there is a shared trauma between the practitioner and the client. The preparation of social workers to be able to counsel effectively in these circumstances requires further consideration at both qualifying and post-qualifying levels.

Establishment of a 'social work in disaster contexts' community of practice in ANZASW as well as webinars and other training opportunities could allow social workers with an interest in this type of work to extend their current expertise, thus equipping them for effective future disaster practice. Further research on individuals' experiences of counselling following a disaster event and whether it is seen to meet their needs would add to the current literature. At a policy level, highlighting the importance of adequate resourcing of government, non-government, Iwi and Māori mental health support services immediately and in the longer term, following a significant disaster event, is also important. Ensuring people have access to culturally appropriate disaster responses also requires further attention together with consideration of how to best recruit social workers with the skills or attributes needed for specific disaster events (Yumagalova et al., 2021).

A limitation of this research lies in recruitment. Only a small proportion of individuals who received counselling from CCHT following the February 2011 earthquake were recruited and the sample may not reflect others who were still significantly traumatised from the earthquake events or had not valued the counselling experience. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic also affected the researchers and participants' ability to connect during the lockdown periods thus extending the data-collection time-period. While these limitations should be acknowledged, the participant narratives offer insights into their experience of secondary stressors and the initial counselling experience that have value for ongoing social work practice in disaster contexts.

Received: 20 January 2023

Accepted: 15 September 2023

Published: 16 April 2024

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Grace Millane: "She should have been safe here"

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This research examined how news media framed the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane and whether it was consistent with journalists' guidelines for reporting violence against women (VAW). Previous literature on media reporting of VAW has found that victims and perpetrators of VAW were *othered* to obscure them from the context of the larger social issue that VAW presents and that victims were blamed for their assaults.

APPROACH: Employing a singular case study research design, we conducted a thematic analysis of the documents that reported on the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane. Some 25 articles were extracted from the Newztext database, an archive of Aotearoa New Zealand newspaper sources. Five themes were generated from the texts and were compared to previous literature about news media reporting on VAW.

CONCLUSIONS: This study concluded that journalist guidelines, although available, do not seem to be widely used. This has led to victim blaming and minimising sexual violence in the news media.

Keywords: Violence against women; rough sex gone wrong; media reporting; guidelines for journalists

Grace Millane was a British backpacker who visited Aotearoa New Zealand in 2018 as part of her overseas experience. Assisted by a dating application, she arranged to meet a man on the eve of her 22nd birthday (Owen & Saxton, 2018). That night, he murdered her (Edwards, 2020). She was missing for several days before her body was found. This tragedy became front-page news and has been described as the most publicised murder case in Aotearoa New Zealand history (Henshilwood, 2019). The man who murdered Grace is intentionally unnamed throughout this article to minimise any further attention on him and to focus attention on Grace and other victims of violence, hence we refer to Grace by her first name to personalise her.

Grace's death is one of countless examples of VAW for which Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the highest rates in the OECD. Between 2009 and 2018, 125 women died as a result of intimate partner violence (New Zealand Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2021). Since 2014, Aotearoa New Zealand has recorded yearly increases in the number of reported sexual crimes (United Nations, 2018). Despite this, one of the narratives that emerged following Grace's murder was that "she should have been safe here," a statement from then Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern (Owen & Saxton, 2018). This emphasis on Aotearoa New Zealand being a safe place for women is in contradiction with its statistics for VAW.

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 32–44.

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According to the Social Workers Registration Board (n.d.), one of the key competencies of social workers is to "promote the principles of human rights and social and economic justice". The role of the social worker is two-fold: it is examining and challenging the mechanisms of oppression that advance power and privilege (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2023) whilst supporting clients to survive the social conditions they are exposed to. Social workers are appropriately positioned to understand the mechanisms of social inequity and how these operate within the media arena. The media has the authority to reinforce the power of the abuser by isolating victims and reinforcing myths about worthy and unworthy victims (Anastasio & Costa, 2004). This should be interrogated to bring about social change.

Research from the UK found that headlines reporting on domestic violence tended to blame victim-survivors for the abuse they were subjected to, and in the case of femicide, their characters were often attacked (Lloyd, 2020). Lloyd cited several headlines in the UK media specifically in relation to the trial prosecuting Grace's murder: "Grace Millane was a member of BDSM [Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism] dating sites and asked ex-partner to choke her during sex, court hears" (*Evening Standard*, 2019); Grace Millane murder trial: Backpacker died 'accidentally during sex … Backpacker died 'when sex act went wrong' (*BBC*, 2019)". This raised the question as to whether the media are reporting responsibly on VAW in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Given the extensive reporting about Grace, we opted to examine the coverage of the murder trial and the narratives to which the public and victim-survivors were exposed. Grace's family similarly experienced the media attention and no doubt read many of these news reports. We acknowledge how difficult this would have been and note that they have used the international attention to raise awareness of VAW (Hutt, 2020). We, too, aim to raise awareness of VAW, by presenting the research undertaken by the first author as part of her master's of Applied Social Work. The second author, her supervisor, comes from a background of reading and researching in the sexual violence sector.

This article begins by focussing on the terminology used in the field of VAW. We then outline common rape myths and describe the role of the media in upholding myths in the way VAW is reported. We go on to briefly describe the various guidelines available to journalists reporting on VAW, before discussing the research methods and presenting the findings of the media analysis. We finish by exploring the implications of the research findings.

Terminology

The terminology used when referring to crimes of VAW is contentious. Gender-based violence, often used interchangeably with VAW (World Health Organisation, 2021), speaks to any harmful act directed at a person due to their gender (UN Refugee Agency, n.d.). It aims to acknowledge that this kind of violence occurs because of the subordinate status of women in society compared to men. The United Nations has defined VAW as:

> Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (United Nations, 1993, p. 2)

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organisation as:

> Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless

> of their relationship to the victim, in any setting including but not limited to home and work. (Krug et al., 2002, p. 149)

Intimate partner violence refers to behaviour occurring within an intimate relationship causing psychological, physical or sexual harm (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, n.d.). Family violence refers to violence that occurs in the context of a family within the home environment (World Health Organisation, 2021). Similarly, the Aotearoa New Zealand Domestic Violence Act 1995 refers to violence inflicted by a person in a domestic relationship, not necessarily intimate with the victim.

These definitions are criticised for their gender neutrality. While people of all genders can (and do) experience violence, sexual violence, such as what happened to Grace, is a gendered crime with men overwhelmingly reported as the perpetrator and women or girls overwhelmingly reported to be victims (Chelsea-Jade et al., 2022; World Health Organisation, 2005). For the purposes of this article, the term *VAW* is used as it draws most attention to the fundamental role that gender plays. While it could be contestable as to which form of VAW Grace was subjected, she was indisputably the victim of VAW.

A concept that features in this article is *othering*. To *other* means to separate and distance from other perpetrators or victims as well as the wider public (Carll, 2003). Othering is a process of alienation achieved through stereotyping, isolating behaviour and imposing a narrative (Renau et al., 2023). It is frequently used to explain or justify rape myths that facilitate sexual violence.

Rape myths

Burt (1980) described rape myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists—in creating a climate hostile to rape victims" (p. 217). Further, these myths included the false beliefs that women can resist being raped, they ask for it, only bad girls are raped, women regularly make false accusations of rape, and rapists are sex-starved or insane. Later, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) built upon this, concluding that rape myths are generally false beliefs widely and persistently held to justify the sexual aggression of men towards women.

Coverage of specific events is imperative given the powerful, educational function of media (Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). It has been argued that the reproduction of myths in the media regarding sexual violence and intimate partner violence provide the script for men's violence towards women (Edwards, 2020). These scripts then continue to be reproduced in private settings where VAW largely takes place. This is further replicated in public arenas such as courtrooms, to which the media has access.

New narratives supporting rape myths are continually developing. Rough sex gone wrong (RSGW) is increasingly gaining traction as a rape myth and is providing men with readily available defences to justify VAW. RSGW goes hand in hand with victim-blaming (Edwards, 2020) and was prominent in the prosecution of the murder of Grace (Yardley, 2020). It reframes male violence as part of a consensual sexual relationship involving sadomasochism in cases that result in death (Yardley, 2020). Even women's attempts to resist are branded as "play acting" in a "rape game" (Edwards, 2020, p. 300). This poses a serious challenge due to the overlapping nature between definitions of rough sex and sexual violence, (Chelsea-Jade et al., 2022).

In prosecutions of RSGW trials overseas, defence stories have claimed that the victim initiated rough sex and that it was their preferred form of sexual intercourse (Edwards, 2020). Evidence suggests that some juries have been persuaded by this narrative and delivered *not guilty* verdicts as a result. Some 43 instances of this occurred between 2000 and 2018 in the UK alone (Edwards, 2020; Yardley, 2020). However,

rough sex resulting in accidental death is not well evidenced. Consensual rough sex, typically, is not correlated with violence or injuries that are more than superficial (Burch & Salmon, 2019). It should be remembered that it is not relevant— if Grace wanted rough sex, she did not ask to be murdered.

VAW and the media

News media are very influential in determining what is topical to the society in which they are reporting (Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). Such influence is a powerful tool for drawing attention to problems such as VAW and has the potential to drive legislative and social change (Impe, 2019). However, at its worst, media influence can fuel VAW, reinforce stereotypes and contribute to obscuring social issues (Dissanayake & Bracewell, 2022).

Decisions regarding what is and what is not newsworthy are largely filtered through a western, heteronormative, male lens, that contributes to the world in which society operates (Carll, 2003; Gilchrist, 2010). This has implications across all aspects of this social issue, from the likelihood of women experiencing abuse to seek help, to the justice process where jurors, lawyers and judges are informed by the media in their social environment (Carll, 2003; Fanslow et al., 2010). News media have been heavily criticised for their representation of VAW as isolated events, where blame is assigned to either the victim or perpetrator who are othered (Carll, 2003; Sutherland et al., 2016).

Victim blaming in VAW is often justified through persistent and pervasive myths about the morality of women through the interrogation of their behaviour and disbelief that the event was as severe as reported or occurred at all (Milesi et al., 2020). This can be seen in the binary that media will often reinforce between good and bad victims. Good victims are "seen as innocent and worth saving or avenging, whereas bad women are seen as unworthy and beyond redemption" (Gilchrist, 2010, p. 3). These binaries justify the value of some lives over others and serve to mediate feminine sexuality (Gilchrist, 2010). Similarly, perpetrators are also othered through news representation as being sick or disturbed individuals. This supports the myth that VAW is a result of a particular pathology without examining the social root of the issue: the unequal position of men and women in society (Carll, 2003, p. 1603; Wardle, 2007). However, Carter et al. (2014) differed from Carll (2003), concluding that in domestic violence reporting, perpetrators are often portrayed sympathetically. This narrative emphasises that an otherwise normal man was compelled by outside forces in a spontaneous incident that has resulted in violence (Yardley, 2020). Whether the perpetrator is othered or framed sympathetically, the structural causes of VAW remain unacknowledged.

The media have also focussed on the valuing of certain subgroups of women over others (Stillman, 2007). For example, news media's almost singular infatuation of reporting on VAW that occurs against young, conventionally attractive, wealthy, white women. This phenomenon has been coined "missing white girl syndrome" (Stillman, 2007). Research in this field has found that indigenous women and women of colour are not only underrepresented but largely invisible in the media despite their overrepresentation as victims of VAW (Gilchrist, 2010). Gilchrist's (2010) study found that First Nation women in Canada were five times more likely to experience a violent death than other Canadian women and they received three-and-a-half times less coverage in the media. Further, any articles were shorter and not likely to appear on the front page of print media. There are likely to be similarities across other indigenous populations globally, including Māori. This research does not aim to focus on this issue, but it is important to acknowledge its significance.

Media guidelines for reporting on VAW

Guidelines for journalists exist in a variety of forms. The Associated Press Stylebook first published in 1977 tends to focus on grammar and usage (Boston University, n.d.) and has little advice for reporting on sexual violence other than being mindful of local legislation regarding terminology. Wood et al. (2013) found similar in their review of *Intro: A Beginners Guide to Professional News Journalism* which provides guidance for journalists in Aotearoa New Zealand. They found a mere "three sentences – in a 453 page book – that are both inadequate and inaccurate" (Wood et al., 2013, p. 9).

As a response to media reporting of VAW, many countries have developed guidelines for journalists to monitor the way in which they report these tragic events (Sutherland et al., 2016). Guidelines specifically developed for reporting on domestic and family violence in Aotearoa New Zealand (Edmond & Hann, 2007) suggested journalists:

1. Identify the murder/incident as domestic violence.
2. Place it in the context of local and national statistics and recent events.
3. Provide information about the nature of domestic violence.
4. Use experts as sources (including referrals to helping agencies).
5. Name family violence as a crime.

Guidelines specific to reporting sexual violence provided the following six points for journalists to consider when reporting sexual violence (Wood et al., 2013).

1. Sexual violence is not "just sex".
2. It is rare for a survivor to lie about being raped.
3. Violent stranger danger sexual violence is rare.
4. Unfortunately, rapists do not stand out.
5. Being raped is worse than being accused of rape.
6. Sexual violence has no excuses.

These guidelines were further developed with the sexual violence sector to provide a more comprehensive set of best practice for journalists (Toah-NNEST, n.d.). They have been available since approximately 2018, however we were unable to locate a copy in the public domain.

The *AP Stylebook* and *Intro: A Beginner's Guide to Professional News Journalism* have an online presence and were relatively easy to locate. They are accessible to the media in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere, but with their focus on language usage have little relevance for reporting sexual violence. Those guidelines developed specifically for the family violence and sexual violence sectors are relevant, particularly the sexual violence guidelines, but difficult to locate. The media are unlikely to be using these guidelines due to their inaccessibility. This contrasts with the strict *Media Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide* (Ministry of Health, 2021). Codified in Sections 71 and 71A of the Coroners Act 2006, guidelines to assist media were established by the Suicide Prevention Office in collaboration with a cross section of Aotearoa New Zealand media organisations.

Research methods

This project used a single case to study media reports. Any woman who has died from VAW is worthy of being the focus of a case study. For the purpose of this research where only one case was studied, an influential case was chosen for the extent of data that it provided (Wiebe et al., 2010). For this reason, the murder of Grace was chosen as the case to examine, however, Grace's case is not necessarily representative of others (Babbie, 2016). Due to the extent of reporting on the case, and the heightened attention devoted to it, the reporting is likely to have an increased impact.

Data was collected using the Newztext electronic database, an archive of over 19 Aotearoa New Zealand newspaper sources. Among these 19 newspapers are the two

largest producers of online news, *Stuff* and the *New Zealand Herald*; together, they have the largest readership base (Roy Morgan, 2021). The database was searched by using the keywords "Grace Millane" with a date range that encompassed the period of the murder trial and was limited to *Stuff* and the *New Zealand Herald*. Potential articles were screened by reading the headline and the first paragraphs of the article to ensure that each article in the data pool met the inclusion criteria. The articles were excluded if they did not meet the criteria or were duplicate articles. Although the media landscape is increasingly diverse, we limited the inclusion of articles as follows:

1. Articles were published between the 4th of November 2019, when jury selection for the trial began, to the 22nd of November 2019 when the jury gave their verdict.
2. The articles must address the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane.

Document analysis was used to generate themes from the news articles using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The first author examined each article to familiarise herself with the data set and coded the emerging common themes. New codes were established where needed for emerging themes. Articles were then reread by both authors to ensure that the codes and themes were accurate. Although the process of data collection was unobtrusive, the method of data analysis of documents was not. Researchers use their own cultural understandings of the social world to engage with the socially constructed meanings embedded within the documents (Bowen, 2009).

Ethics

The project was peer reviewed, and it was determined that an ethics approval was not necessary as it was analysing data available in the public arena. The primary focus of this research was the way news media engaged with this story, the ethical issue at the forefront was the potential impact of using Grace's story as a topic of research, especially for people who knew and loved her. We did not reach out to Grace's family as we did not have ethical approval to so do. The data highlighted a previous victim of this perpetrator which has been commented on in the findings below. We endeavoured to be particularly sensitive from the outset to ensure that both Grace and the previous victim were upheld with dignity. This at times was challenged by the data which highlighted the ways journalists did not achieve this sensitivity. However, it is our hope that social workers and others will support the need to continually draw attention to and challenge injustices to promote change.

Limitations

As with any research, there are limitations to this data-collection method. By analysing media articles alone, a relationship cannot be drawn between media reporting and societal behaviour or thinking and, therefore, the impacts on victim-survivors remain unknown (Scott et al., 2014). Due to the scale of this research, generalisation is not possible, subsequently the extent to which the findings of this research are applicable to other cases is unknown. The in-depth analysis of one case would not be considered representative of most acts of VAW in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019). It does, however, provide further opportunities for research to be conducted on a bigger scale that could compare the findings of this research to other cases.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the news articles revealed five themes. The first two themes, victim blaming and minimisation, are related to the rape myths discussed above. The third theme focussed on how the perpetrator was othered by focusing on his maladaptive psychopathology. The fourth highlighted other factors that were framed

as contributing to Grace's death and the final theme outlined how journalist guidelines were not followed.

Theme 1: Victim blaming

Victim blaming is a response that both implicitly or explicitly suggests that the victim is to blame for the sexual violence they have experienced. Across the 25 articles, 11 articles included victim blaming language or narratives that were used covertly in the context of RSGW. An example of a narrative that was heavily reported was Grace's sexual history included sexual acts from past relationships, dating application use and websites linked to bondage, domination, submission, and masochism (BDSM). While the BDSM narrative was dominant across the 25 articles, only twice was there reference to the ways Grace had safely participated in these sexual acts historically.

Other examples of victim blaming language included lengthy quotes from the perpetrator where he described Grace initiating rough sex: "Grace brought up the topic of bondage and asked him to hold her down and grab her neck" (Hurley, 2019b, np; Owen, 2019a, np); "Millane enjoyed her partner putting his hands around her neck" (Hurley, 2019d, np). There were 22 other sentences across the 25 articles with similar connotations that enhanced a victim-blaming narrative.

Theme 2: Minimisation

Minimisation or downplaying the significance of Grace's death, was evident across the 25 articles. Grace's death was frequently referred to as a "sexual misadventure" (Hurley, 2019f, np), a "perfectly ordinary, casual sexual encounter between a young couple" (Hurley & Leask, 2019a, np) or "A perfectly ordinary sexual encounter" (Gay, 2019a, np). Several references were made about Grace being strangled as "an act designed to enhance their sexual pleasure that went wrong" (Hurley & Leask, 2019a, np). These versions of what occurred that night came from the defence lawyer's argument, which was a significant part of the trial. However, more care could have been taken by journalists to minimise the impact this kind of testimony has in enhancing rape myths in their reporting.

In nine of the 25 articles, similar minimising language was used to describe not only Grace's death, but a previous victim of the perpetrator. This person described the perpetrator suffocating her during a sexual act by holding her down so that she could not breathe. She had to pretend loss of consciousness for him to stop. In all the articles that described this, it was never referred to as an assault or a criminal act. Instead, it was referred to as the "suffocation episode" or the "incident" (Gay, 2019b). One article in which the previous victim's story was the main narrative, the headline focused on her emotional response to being asked to continue giving evidence the following day, rather than her testimony of assault. The article and its headline minimised the serious nature of the assault. By contrast in another article, this victim's story was headlined: "I was gasping, I couldn't breathe" (Hurley, 2019e,np) giving appropriate attention to the seriousness of the assault she survived. However, even in this article, her story is minimised by not referring to what happened to her as an assault or a criminal act.

Theme 3: Othering

Carter et al. (2014) found that, in news media reporting of domestic violence murders, perpetrators are framed as either being model citizens whose actions are a surprise, or that their maladaptive psychopathology is the cause of their actions. The latter was certainly how the perpetrator of Grace Millane's death was framed. The majority of this framing is on attributes that other him. In every article he is framed negatively with particular attention devoted to his "labyrinth of storytelling and lies" (Hurley, 2019a, np) "A pathological liar" (Leask, 2019, np)

The articles referenced the inaccuracies told to police or the dehumanising actions he took following Grace's death, including photographing her body, going on a date, and his Google search history.

Theme 4: Other factors

Other factors, such as the consumption of alcohol, were used in the media as an explanation as to why Grace had died, rather than acknowledging her death in the context of VAW. In seven of the 25 articles, both Grace and the perpetrator's consumption of alcohol were used as an explanation or as a contributing factor to the cause of her death: such as "Tequila seemingly the choice of alcohol for the night" (Hurley & Leask, 2019b, np) Comments made in articles included "alcohol was a factor" (Owen, 2019b, np) "alcohol could inhibit the way a person bounces back" (Hurley, 2019c, np) and how the perpetrator and "Millane order[ed] several more drinks" (Hurley & Leask, 2019b, np). This angle further contributed to blaming Grace for her death.

Theme 5: Lack of adherence to guidelines

The articles indicated that the guidelines for journalists reporting sexual violence and domestic or family violence (Edmond & Hann, 2007; Toah-NNEST, n.d.; Wood et al., 2013) were not used. Only one of the 25 articles put Grace's death in the wider context of VAW in Aotearoa, New Zealand. As Mau (2019) pointed out, "violence against women takes many forms". Three reports contextualised Grace's death in VAW, another three articles included relevant information about VAW, four included expert testimony or outside experts that gave further information about VAW, but none included helplines for victims or perpetrators of VAW. There were two articles that significantly highlighted Grace's death as fitting within the wider societal issue of VAW and one that appeared to follow most of the journalists' guidelines for reporting on family violence as outlined above.

In every article, Grace's death was described in a way that made it clear a crime had occurred. Reports were cautious as to how the crime was labelled given the ongoing nature of the trial during the reporting period. Yet, as previously noted, another victim's assault was not highlighted as a criminal act, despite her being suffocated and held down non-consensually during a sexual act. While some articles acknowledged Grace's death as fitting within the wider societal issue of VAW, warnings of graphic content were provided in seven of the 25 articles, all of which were produced by the *New Zealand Herald*.

Discussion

The predominant rape myth that was reported throughout the news representation of the murder trial, was RSGW. The violence towards Grace was discussed as being part of a consensual relationship whereby her death was a tragic accident (Edwards, 2020). This is evident in quotes from the defence lawyer with the sentiment that this was "a perfectly ordinary sexual encounter" (Gay, 2019a, np) with the emphasis on the BDSM narrative. Although in Grace's particular story her perpetrator was found guilty, this is not always the case for victims whose stories do not make the news. The degree to which the RSGW rape myth impacts juries is largely unknown, although there is some evidence suggesting that juries have been persuaded by this myth and delivered not guilty verdicts (Edwards, 2020). The impact of the emphasis on the rough-sex narrative is that it highlights the hurdles victim-survivors have to go through to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the police, the court system and the public (Bows & Westmarland, 2017).

The RSGW rape myth emphasises that women are responsible for what happens to them including their deaths, further obscuring the structural inequality that is

the true cause of VAW (Yardley, 2020). In this sense, the attribution of alcohol playing a fundamental role in causing Grace's death also places responsibility on Grace because of her choices. Quotes such as "the backpacker [had] several drinks on the night she died, including tequila shots and cocktails" (Hurley, 2019g, np) emphasised the choices Grace made and framed them as having contributed to her death. This highlights that for women to achieve legitimacy, and therefore status as a good victim, each decision they make leading up to their assault is scrutinised with the advantage of hindsight to discredit them (Bows & Westmarland, 2017; Burt, 1980; Gilchrist, 2010; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). This pattern of discrediting the legitimacy of victims means they are not only scrutinised for their actions immediately leading up to their assault, but also in other areas of their prior lives.

The use of minimising language throughout the articles was an example of what happens to victim-survivors when they report or tell their stories. The description of the abuse used varying degrees of minimisation. For Grace, most of the language that minimised what happened to her were quotes from the defence lawyer who argued that her death was the result of an accident. This highlights the challenge journalists face to accurately report on events but also to consider the implications and authority they have in that reporting.

The minimising language was even more apparent in the story about the perpetrator's previous victim. The abuse she survived was not described as a criminal event despite being physically suffocated by the perpetrator and feigning unconsciousness to stop the assault. Instead, this was referred to as the suffocation episode (Gay, 2019b, np). Given the high status attributed to Grace's case because of the public attention, her story was likely minimised to a lesser extent than the previous victim who was not afforded the same status (Stillman, 2007). Such reporting is likely more representative of the experience of victims' media coverage (Dissanayake & Bracewell, 2022; Ringin et al., 2022; Stillman, 2007).

The reproduction and proliferation of rape myths in media representations have provided the script for VAW which is then reproduced in both private and public arenas (Edwards, 2020). A surprising finding of this study was how this script would present so plainly. In a few articles, the perpetrator's explanation of the RSGW rape myth was detailed in an extensive and dominating way. In the context where the victim's narrative cannot be shared, it allows for the perpetrator's uninterrupted authorship of the events and marginalisation of the victim's voice (Carter et al., 2014).

Grace's character was put on trial in the courtroom and then broadcast in the public arena through the news media (McGlynn, 2017). Her previous sexual relationships and dating application use were extensively reported on with entire articles focussed on this aspect of the trial. This framing of Grace served to reduce her credibility as a victim and implied that she was more likely to consent (McGlynn, 2017). Although the defence lawyer stated there would be no blame or shame assigned to Grace throughout the trial, the emphasis on her sexual history served to reinforce the binary between good and bad victims and mediate feminine sexuality, thereby blaming and shaming her (Gilchrist, 2010).

Perpetrators are either portrayed sympathetically or othered with an emphasis on their sick or disturbing nature (Carll, 2003; Carter et al., 2014). The latter was certainly true in this case, which possibly contributed to the high levels of public scrutiny of the perpetrator before his trial even began. The impact of othering detracts attention from the institutional power relations that underpin violence between men and women (Livholts, 2021). Notably, the perpetrator's actions were described after the trial as

"callous" (Owen, 2019c, np) highlighting possible maladaptive psychopathology.

This research found that rape myths were reproduced in the news reporting the prosecution of Grace's murder and were exacerbated by a lack of adherence to any of the reporting guidelines for journalists. The impact of these two factors meant that Grace's story was isolated from the context of all forms of VAW in Aotearoa New Zealand, ignoring an important social issue (Carter et al., 2014). This is of particular concern in Grace's story due to the scale of interest attributed to this singular event by the public and the media, meaning the powerful, educational function of the media was not optimised (Christian, 2018; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). This has concerning implications for victims and perpetrators of VAW as it perpetuates the violence victims experience in the way it represents them (Livholts, 2021).

Conclusion

We aimed to interrogate how journalists used their authority to construct the prosecution of the murder of Grace Millane. We concluded that through their covert victim-blaming narrative, with its roots in a western, heteronormative, male lens, the reporting of this trial "did violence", not only to Grace, but to all victim-survivors (Carll, 2003; Gilchrist, 2010; Livholts, 2021). Journalists have significant power in framing the way readers understand social issues (Bowen, 2009). Interrogating their authority and their contribution to the construction of a social issue like VAW is imperative and the responsibility of all, including social workers.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, social workers are challenged to understand the mechanisms of oppression, interrogate power, authority, and privilege, and advocate for human rights (Social Workers Registration Board, n.d.). However, social workers are not immune to the power and authority of the media. The prevalence of VAW in Aotearoa New Zealand suggests they are likely to be working with clients who are victims of sexual violence, family violence and more generally, VAW. They need to be vigilant and ensure they are not replicating the messaging in media reports. Further, they need to understand that media reports can isolate victims of VAW and reinforce the rape myths. The challenge for social workers is to advocate for their clients and promote principles of human rights in the face of the media's power in upholding the rape myths that are prevalent not only in the media but also in our communities. Further research should be undertaken to determine the extent of the media impact on social workers and how this influences social work practice.

The wider field of VAW is continually challenged by the differing terminology used to describe such a diverse scope of violence. The emergence of new myths such as the RSGW myth is evidence of the ever-changing landscape of myths regarding VAW (Fanslow et al., 2010). Guidelines for reporting sexual violence need to be regularly reviewed and updated. They not only need to be accessible but also an accepted industry standard supported by newspaper editors. The strict guidelines on reporting suicide are an example as to how this could be successfully achieved. Consideration could be given to legislating the commitment to accurate and respectful media reporting, an expectation that is contained in Section 3 of the Victims of Offences Act. This could have a powerful impact on how VAW is presented in the media and, consequently, how it is perceived in society.

Received: 9 November 2023

Accepted: 12 December 2023

Published: 16 April 2024

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge Grace Millane, her loved ones and all those impacted by

violence against women. We see you and your suffering and walk alongside you towards a future where everyone can thrive.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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

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

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 45–59.

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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 biennual 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 Christion 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 earnt 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 political 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 did[1] 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".

Received: 24 August 2023

Accepted: 21 January 2024

Published: 16 April 2024

Note

[1] O'Brien, et al. (2008)

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

How well does social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand prepare social workers to work with people claiming welfare benefits and what could be done better?

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: A foundational purpose of the social work profession is the pursuit of social justice. From its beginnings social workers have worked with people living in poverty and experiencing injustice and social workers continue to do so. In Aotearoa New Zealand these people have eligibility for a range of welfare benefit entitlements. The Aotearoa New Zealand welfare benefit system has been subject to neoliberal reform and is judgemental, monocultural, punitive and complex. Without advocacy support, people are unlikely to access all their welfare benefit entitlements. It is therefore essential that social workers are highly knowledgeable about the welfare benefit system. This article summarises initial exploratory research that asked the question—how well does social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand prepare social workers to work with people claiming welfare benefits and what could be done better?

RESEARCH METHODS: The research used reflexive thematic analysis. The flexibility of this method allowed for a constructionist epistemology, a critical theoretical perspective and a critical ethnographic methodology. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with recent social work graduates. Each interview included realistic welfare benefit advocacy scenarios.

FINDINGS: The data strongly indicated social work education curricula do not adequately address welfare benefit issues. Consequently, social workers are unlikely to competently support people to access all their benefit entitlements. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding this issue. A poverty-aware paradigm and use of realistic welfare benefit advocacy scenarios within social work education are recommended.

KEYWORDS: Social work education; welfare benefit advocacy, welfare benefit scenarios; neoliberalism; poverty aware paradigm; solidarity

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 60–74.

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A group of Aotearoa New Zealand social work academics have recommended an alternative to the current core competencies as set out by the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB). This includes "Kotahitanga: Social workers work to build a sense of community, solidarity and collective action for social change. We challenge injustice and oppression in all of its forms including: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence" (Ballantyne et al., 2022, p. 83). The Aotearoa New Zealand welfare benefit system perpetrates acts

of injustice and oppression upon people needing to claim welfare benefit payments (Baker & Davis, 2017; Morton et al., 2014; Neuwelt-Kearns et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2010; Russell, 2015, 2017; Russell & Bradford, 2022; Stephens, 2019).

This article summarises research that posits welfare benefit advocacy has been neglected by social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research included a literature search that found no academic literature regarding welfare benefit advocacy social work course content (Russell, 2022). It has been suggested that "social workers do not consider the supplying of material assistance to be 'real' or 'professional' social work" (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009, p. 237).

The need for welfare benefit advocacy

In 2018 the Labour-led government established the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG). WEAG conducted a comprehensive review of the New Zealand welfare system and found that "Each year over 630,000 people receive payments from the welfare system" (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019, p. 5).

Table 1 provides further statistics regarding the number of people annually receiving six different benefit payments as of December 2018 (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019). This is far from an exhaustive list of all benefit payments. In reference to the amount of money people receive from welfare benefit payments, WEAG found that the "level of financial support is now so low that too many New Zealanders are living in desperate situations" (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019, p. 6).

Table 1. Number of People Receiving Particular Welfare Benefit Payments as of December 2018

Benefit payment	Number of people receiving this payment
Jobseeker support	134,557
Sole parent support	59,877
Supported living payment	95,317
Accommodation supplement	302,840
Disability Allowance	233,570
Unsupported child benefit/Orphan's benefit	11,547

Additionally, the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG) stated:

> Evidence is overwhelming that incomes are inadequate for many people, both those receiving a benefit and those in low-paid work. Current levels of support fail to cover even basic costs for many people, let alone allowing them to meaningfully participate in their communities. In New Zealand, poverty and benefit receipt are strongly associated. (p. 7)

WEAG described the welfare benefit system and associated legislation as being complex and difficult to understand. WEAG argued that the system's use of punishment/sanctions have been shown to be counterproductive. In short, WEAG recommended fundamental change to the welfare system based on whakamana tāngata: "at its heart our approach is about treating people with dignity" (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019, p. 6). The fundamental change WEAG recommended has yet to occur.

The current welfare benefit system is monocultural (Stephens, 2019). Gray and Crichton-Hill conducted 16 focus groups and interviews with Māori and Pasifika women in receipt of Sole Parent Support and concluded that the treatment of these women by Work and Income (W&I) staff was consistent with "the broader context of racism in this country" (Gray & Crichton-Hill, 2019, p. 5). Gray and Crichton-Hill provide a quote from a Māori woman who describes her approach to being inside a W&I office, "We don't do what's normal for our culture. When we're inside those doors we keep our culture outside. And when we come back

out you can put your culture back on" (Gray & Crichton-Hill, 2019, p. 9). This further amplifies the need for welfare change based upon the whakamana tāngata approach (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019).

A research project by Community Law Canterbury examining the legal needs of people on benefits used a variety of research methods including 50 in-depth interviews of representatives of relevant agencies and people receiving welfare benefits, analysis of statistical data from government agencies and community law centres, a literature review, and an online survey (Morton et al., 2014). Their study identified three key findings: first that the main problem for the people receiving welfare benefit payments was poverty linked to inadequate income. The second finding was that people applying for benefits experienced a power imbalance when dealing with W&I at both the institutional and individual case manager levels where W&I has the power to decide to approve or decline benefit applications. The third finding was that there were both positive and negative experiences of interactions with W&I. However, negative experiences and the stigma of being on a benefit overwhelmingly influenced these interactions. The research identified a glaring discrepancy between W&I's policy of people receiving 'full and correct entitlements' and people's experiences with W&I. Factors preventing full and correct entitlement included the complexity of benefit eligibility criteria resulting in people not understanding the criteria and not knowing what information to provide, a perception that case managers withhold information about entitlements, reliance on internal policy that appeared inconsistent with the legislation, and pressures on case managers. Arising from the impediments to receipt of full and correct entitlements, the research found that the "most significant enabler to receiving entitlements was to have an advocate or informed support person to help apply for benefits and/or challenge Work and Income decisions" (Morton et al., 2014, p. 9).

Research methods

Braun and Clarke (2022) viewed the positionality of the researcher as a potential resource within the research process. I have previously set out my positionality regarding my rejection of apolitical social work course content, the need to work in solidarity with people in poverty, my views on the apparent lack of a social work response to welfare benefit advocacy and the existence of a toxic culture within W&I (Russell, 2015, 2017; Russell & Bradford, 2022).

The research design included semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2013; Brinkmann, 2018) with eight social workers who had graduated from three Auckland-based social work courses between 2014 and 2021. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the research participants.

Use of semi-structured interviews allowed for use of an interview guide containing four realistic benefit advocacy scenarios and 10 questions asked of all participants. During each interview, follow-up questions were asked to further explore participants' responses providing a depth of data (Bernard, 2013; Brinkmann, 2018).

The benefit advocacy scenarios were formulated from my welfare benefit advocacy experience. The scenarios depict realistic situations and people's needs for individual welfare benefit advocacy support. They were used to at the start of each interview with the intention of establishing the participants' knowledge of welfare benefit entitlements, their knowledge of an advocacy process, and to provide an indication of their practice regarding welfare benefit entitlement issues. What the participants said, and did not say, was analysed using a social welfare law textbook (Stephens, 2019) and my personal knowledge and experience. Responses to these scenarios are a significant part of the findings section below.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data (Braun & Clarke,

2006, 2019, 2022). This is a six-stage recursive process where progress from one stage to the next is not linear necessitating returning to earlier stages to ensure the analysis answers the research question.

Stage One: data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes

Each semi-structured interview was recorded using a speech-to-text computerised transcription application (Otter.ai PRO). I corrected errors by listening to the recorded interviews and making necessary changes. Comments were added to these corrected transcripts to begin to identify relevant content as a start of theme development. On-going familiarisation occurred throughout the process as each interaction with a data transcript was an opportunity to further develop understanding of meaning.

Stage Two: systematic coding

Data from each semi-structured interview were entered into a spreadsheet with columns headed – Interview, Page, Line, Code, Text, Quote, Cluster, Explanatory Note, Scenario, and Question. Each interview was initially coded separately. Page and line numbers were recorded, and the relevant text was added. A quote column was used to identify potential quotes for use in final report writing stage. A cluster column was used to begin grouping data together. An explanatory note column was used to briefly clarify issues that I identified. Scenario and question columns were used to identify the relevant scenario or question from the semi-structured interview guide.

An in-depth analysis of each interview resulted in the development of over 1600 codes. From these codes over 70 clusters were developed.

Stage Three: generating initial themes from coded data

With over 70 clusters I began to develop initial themes bringing together clusters and not including others that were not relevant to the research question (Terry et al., 2017). I repeatedly asked myself reflexive questions, for example: does this cluster assist in answering the research question? To facilitate this process, I used the spreadsheet containing all eight interviews to create further spreadsheets for each of the four scenarios and each of the 10 semi-structured interview questions. Spreadsheets were created to facilitate focus on code clusters enabling the development of initial themes, for example, 'child focus', 'include advocacy', and 'link theory/practice'. Relevant quotes from the interview transcripts and my comments were added. I began to write brief summaries of my analysis of the data and developed three initial themes and sub-themes.

Stage Four: developing and reviewing themes

Data from the above were then cut and pasted onto sketch pads for each of the three initial themes. I brought together quotes and my comments from each participant to each of the semi-structured interview guide scenarios and questions using the filter of relevance to the research question. This active process showed consistency of responses from participants.

Stage Five: refining, defining, and naming themes

Ongoing use of a reflexive process and discussions with my academic supervisors were used to refine, define and name themes. This culminated in the development of two over-arching themes.

Stage Six: writing the report

Writing the report is a part of the analytical process and provides further opportunities to refine and define themes. The report should tell the 'story' of the research process and findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings and discussion

To assist in the overall analysis and discussion of the findings reference is made to pertinent literature.

This discussion will focus on findings pertaining to advocacy. Two interconnected forms of advocacy are relevant. These are collective advocacy where "people work together to advocate for systemic change to law and policy, and to reform the ways law and policy are put into practice" (Russell & Bradford, 2022, p. 12), and individual advocacy where "advocates work with individuals and families to support them in accessing the resources and other assistance they need at the interface with government agencies and other service providers" (Russell & Bradford, 2022, p. 12).

The reflexive thematic analysis process developed two overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Theme 1 is 'individual welfare benefit advocacy is either not taught or not taught in sufficient detail'. Theme 2 is 'what should be taught'.

Theme 1 emphasised what the participants identified as absent from their social work degree course content. This is corroborated by the analysis of responses to the welfare benefit advocacy scenarios. The analysis also discusses what the participants identified was relevant to welfare benefit advocacy, and to what extent, in their social work degree course content. Furthermore, the consequences of what was *not* taught are discussed.

Theme 2 sets out a need for practical individual welfare benefit advocacy education and posits a need to link social work theory to the practice of welfare benefit advocacy that includes both individual and collective advocacy. The use of realistic welfare benefit scenarios as a tool for use in teaching these forms of advocacy is discussed. A need for inclusion of a coherent welfare benefit advocacy process within social work education is postulated as this could enhance social work practice.

Theme 1: individual welfare benefit advocacy is either not taught or not taught in sufficient detail.

The identified gap in the literature where no academic literature relevant to the social work profession was found regarding a specific need for welfare benefit advocacy skills supports this theme. Essentially, if there is no academic literature on a topic it is unlikely to be a focus of tertiary education. Kevin, who attended the University of Auckland, states:

> My education in my experience did not teach anything around the particular applications of WINZ [Work and Income] advocacy. So, I would not have been aware generally of any specific benefits, any specific payments, anything specific I should be asking for, or skills even of relating to, or talking with, or advocating for tāngata [people] in a WINZ environment.

He did not recall any reference made to the Social Security Act 2018. The lack of Social Security Act course content is significant because all of Aotearoa New Zealand's welfare benefit entitlements are contained within the Social Security Act 2018 and regulations, programmes and Ministerial directives deriving from this Act (Stephens, 2019). Knowledge of the range of benefit entitlements and their eligibility criteria can only be gained by familiarity with the Act. The participants describe either no reference to this Act within their courses or a minimal focus on it; whereas seven of the participants referred to legislation relating to the welfare of children being taught.

Anna and Sally stated that their Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) course did not include the Social Security Act. However, Mark referred to the Social Security Act 1964 being included in a Politics of Change paper, "you were somewhat analysing legislation and understanding the politics of it without necessarily getting into the use of it."

There was an Advocacy paper that was available for the three participants who qualified from Unitec in either 2019 or 2020. Whilst Carol did not recall the content of this paper, Margaret recalled, "we did look a little bit around entitlements and getting people what they need to work, what they needed. [...] there wasn't a lot of it." Regarding the Social Security Act Margaret states, "We didn't really look at the Social Security Act itself specifically on the course."

John, differentiating between individual and collective advocacy, states:

> So, my social work course wasn't about this, and this is the thing that pissed me off a little bit, there wasn't enough advocacy, this is what advocacy looks like. Sys, systemic change, advocacy more look like fighting the government, you know. So, so there was systemic change. Advocacy didn't consider your everyday battle with WINZ.

John is describing an absence of a link between social analysis and the ability to support people with their immediate needs to access all their welfare benefit entitlements.

This global definition of social work states:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, n.d., para. 1)

To be consistent with this definition there should be a theoretical basis to the actions of social workers that has an explicit social justice purpose. Individual and collective welfare benefit advocacy offers an opportunity to enact this purpose.

Given the lack of individual welfare benefit advocacy course content, as indicated by the participants in this research, it is rather self-evident that there would be few, if any, links between social work theory and individual welfare benefit advocacy within the three social work courses the participants attended. However, there is a clear link between poverty and the welfare benefit system (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019). It is therefore useful to consider the participants' experiences of theory pertaining to poverty and its causes.

The three participants from MIT provided differing perspectives. Mark speaks of lecturers teaching about neoliberalism, Marxism, and colonisation. Anna identifies a:

> Te Tiriti o Waitangi paper, understanding the journey of the people. So, looking at history, where Māori were and where they are. And the shift of that, and how poverty is now quite prominent within Māori communities.

Anna is describing causative links between breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the prevalence of poverty within Māori communities. Whereas Sally, who qualified a year after Mark and Anna, identifies a lack of poverty-related theory, and states, "Like in our course, we didn't really discuss much about it. It was only brought up to our attention when we did, you know, community service. So, yeah, that's about it." The 'community service' she refers to consisted of "giving out food parcels and stuff like that". She is describing an almost total lack of any course content pertaining to the existence of poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The one participant from the University of Auckland and the four from Unitec are

clear that their courses included theory that explained why poverty exists including course content regarding major historical sociological figures and the impacts of colonisation. Karl Marx is "recognised as one of the principal moulders of modern thought" (Crotty, 1998, p. 115). However, Carol sees no connection between Marxist theory and individual welfare benefit advocacy. She expresses her frustration with Marxist theory, and questions its relevance, stating:

> Yeah, Marxism, [...] you research the theories, and then you can't write an assignment on that. Whereas doing an assignment on here's your case study, what benefits would you do, or what would, where's the advocacy or where would you direct this client to, or how would this look as if this was your client?

Marx provided a critique of the exploitation and alienation inherent within capitalism (Crotty, 1998; Freire, 2017; Harrington, 2005; Marx & Engels, 2010) which could assist in explaining links to, and the motivation for, neoliberal welfare reform. Helen expresses a similar frustration to that of Carol, questioning theory arising from historical course content stating:

> They reverted all the way back to the industrial, the industrial revolution and but it never – and colonisation, like they reverted back to so much historical stuff, which is, kind of, I would kind of not agree with but there are probably aspects of that have impacted today but not full aspects, you know, and so today's poverty nothing. Nothing really, […] I don't think anyone could explain it.

Both Carol and Helen indicated that significant social theory, for example Marxist theory or a critique of colonisation has a limited influence on their social work practice. Helen indicates that the causes of poverty are inexplicable and, if so, implies that theory in general has little practical use in relation to the existence of poverty.

Most participants indicated the social theory taught did not influence their understanding of contemporary poverty nor did this theory influence their practice.

Neoliberal capitalism and its hegemonic influence has been the subject of considerable academic social work focus (Hyslop, 2016a; Keddell, 2017; Morley et al., 2017; Neuwelt-Kearns et al., 2021; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020; Timor-Shlevin & Benjamin, 2020). In contrast, neoliberal welfare reform has been the subject of very little academic social work focus (Beddoe & Keddell, 2016). The neoliberal emphasis on individual fault, resultant individual blame has influenced the current welfare benefit policy and practice (Bennett, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2010; Rebstock et al., 2011). It is significant that the participants did not make connections between the inherent exploitation of capitalism, its current neoliberal form and resultant neoliberal welfare reform. Some participants identified that neoliberalism was included in their course content, but this does not appear to extend to any in-depth discussion about neoliberal welfare reform. Consistent with this reform is the presence of a toxic culture within W&I.

Morton et al. (2014) reported "beneficiaries described the dehumanising effect of the delivery of welfare in Aotearoa New Zealand" (p. 55). They also found:

> … many beneficiaries described overwhelmingly negative treatment they had received as clients of Work and Income, descriptions that were supported by representatives of community agencies. This negative treatment had a pervasive influence on their interactions with the benefit system at all levels. (p. 55)

Furthermore, they found "a widely held view amongst those that we interviewed that there is a culture of withholding entitlement information" (p. 56) and that some people would not apply for welfare benefits to minimise their contact with W&I preferring to rely upon charity. This research

is consistent with the data from the research participants.

Margaret describes how people are treated at W&I:

> Oh, really poorly. I think [...] there is quite a toxic environment in, in Work and Income and it filtrates through and so even people who come into work with a, with best plans and wanting to help people get sucked into that kind of system which doesn't treat people respectfully, is judgmental, doesn't believe what people are saying.

She is suggesting that well-intentioned staff are likely to succumb to pressure to conform to a prevailing culture within W&I.

Kevin talks about a distinction he has observed W&I staff make between people deserving of welfare benefit entitlements and those who are undeserving of these entitlements. Other participants variously described W&I staff as gatekeepers, behaving as if the benefits paid were their own money, treating people as numbers, withholding information, and treating people inhumanely.

The presence of a toxic culture emphasises the need for advocacy support in an environment where there is "an inherent imbalance of power between beneficiaries and the government department that makes decisions about their entitlements" (Morton et al., 2014, p. 55).

The responses to the welfare benefit advocacy scenarios indicates the implications of the lack of welfare benefit advocacy social work course content.

Analysis of welfare benefit advocacy scenarios

The word limits of an academic journal article preclude an in-depth discussion of all four scenarios. Each scenario is presented here along with a Table summarising the participants' responses. A more detailed discussion of Scenario 4 is presented and is indicative of the lack of awareness of issues raised across the four scenarios. Each scenario is headed with the individual welfare benefit issues raised by the scenario. It is followed by the scenario as presented to the participants. A table then summarises the participants' responses.

Tables 2-5 below set out issues pertaining to a scenario and the participants' awareness of relevant issues. Each table records the participants who made no reference to an issue. This lack of reference to an issue implies the issue would not be considered by a participant when engaged in welfare benefit advocacy. The numbers refer to each participant individually.

Scenario 1: Food grants, discretion and review of decision

"A sole parent with 4 children is about to move into Kainga Ora (Housing NZ) housing. She identifies a need for a $450 food grant. Work and Income has approved a $200 food grant because the sole parent has had 3 previous food grants in the past 5 months totalling $350.
As the family's social worker what actions would you take?"

Table 2. Participant Awareness of Scenario 1Issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of food grant criteria		1,5	2,3,4,6,7,8
Aware of discretion		3,5	1,2,4,6,7,8
Aware of Review of Decision process	7	1,2,5	3,4,6,8
Would lodge Review of Decision	7		1,2,3,4,5,6,8
Would discuss Review of Decision with person			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8

Scenario 2: Advance payments, discretion, debt repayment reduction, and temporary additional support

> "You visit a family (2 parents with 5 children) at their 3-bedroom home. The parents and the children are sleeping on mattresses on the floor. You are told they are in rent arrears totalling $4000 and have been given notice to attend a Tenancy Tribunal hearing. The weekly rent is $680. You are also shown a letter from Work and Income stating the family owe Work and Income $10,000 and are repaying this debt to Work and Income at the rate of $50 per week. The parents have no paid work and receive job seeker support, accommodation supplement, winter energy payment and family tax credit.
>
> As the family's social worker what actions would you take?"

Table 3. Participant Awareness of Scenario 2 Issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of advance payment criteria	–	–	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Aware of discretion	–	–	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Aware of potential eligibility for rent arrears advance payment	5	7	1,2,3,4,6,8
Aware of potential to reduce weekly W&I debt repayment	5	1,2,7	3,4,6,8
Aware of potential to access advance payment to buy beds	5	1,2,4,6,7	3,8
Aware of potential to apply for temporary additional support	7	–	1,2,3,4,5,6,8

Scenario 3: Accommodation supplement, child disability allowance, disability allowance, arrears payments and temporary additional support.

> "A family (2 parents and 3 children) has been referred to you. One of the children who is 6 years old has severe autism. The mother works full-time earning $1200 per week before tax. She has had the same wage for 3 years. They have been in their current house for the past 2 years and pay weekly rent of $700. When they first moved into this house, they got a food grant from Work and Income and have received several other food grants from Work and Income since then. They receive no on-going payments from Work and Income.
>
> As the family's social worker what actions would you take?"

Table 4. Participant Awareness of Scenario 3 Issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of CDA eligibility criteria		2,3,5	1,4,6,7,8
Aware of potential AS eligibility for family with paid work	7	5	1,2,3,4,6,8
Aware of potential eligibility for arrears payments			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Aware of disability allowance criteria	7	1	2,3,4,5,6,8
Aware of potential temporary additional support eligibility			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8

Scenario 4: Unsupported child benefit and arrears payments

> "A grandmother contacts you because she is in rent arrears with Kainga Ora [A state social housing agency]. She tells you that she is struggling with bills because she has 2 grandchildren to care for. These grandchildren have been in her care for the past year. The children's parents live overseas and both have on-going drug abuse problems. She went to Work and Income when the grandchildren came into her care and was told to go to Inland Revenue to get financial help. When she talked with someone from Inland Revenue she was told to go back to Work and Income. She didn't understand what she had to do and gave up trying to get any financial help for the care of her grandchildren.
>
> As the family's social worker what actions would you take?"

Table 5. Participant Awareness of Scenario 4 Issues

Issue	Fully Aware	Partially Aware	No reference to issue
Aware of UCB eligibility criteria	7	2,4,5	1,3,6,8
Aware of potential UCB arrears payment			1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8

This scenario focuses on eligibility for unsupported child benefit (UCB) and consequent eligibility for an arrears payment. The criteria for eligibility for UCB are contained within Section 46 of the Social Security Act 2018 (Stephens, 2019). There is a need for there to be evidence of a breakdown in the child's family that means the natural parents are unable to care for the child and that there is an intention for the person applying for UCB to be the principal caregiver for at least one year. The Act provides no definition of what constitutes a family breakdown (Stephens, 2019).

In this scenario there is a clear family breakdown and the children have already been in the grandmother's care for a year. Dependent upon the age of the children, as of 1 April 2022 weekly UCB rates vary from $254.95 for children under 5 years old to $296.42 for children aged 14 years or older (Work and Income, n.d.). This grandmother is missing out on a weekly UCB payment and is also potentially eligible for a back-dated arrears payment of over $13,000.

Four of the participants made no reference to awareness of unsupported child benefit eligibility criteria.

UCB eligibility criteria do not include a need for any court process to establish custody (Stephens, 2019). It is my experience that W&I staff often mistakenly require this court process to have occurred and it is necessary to challenge this misconception. Anna describes her work with a grandmother who is caring for her grandchildren relating this to Scenario 4: -

> Because it's kind of relevant to a case that I've just picked up with a nana who's just had her children in her care but we're financially supporting her with food at the moment. And so that's where the thinking of that coming through the Courts and knowing that she's legally got custody of her grandchildren, has now set a pathway she can pursue some financial support through Work and Income. What that looks like is new to me again, I'd have to research it myself.

She gives an example of how the misconception that a Court process to establish custody is part of the UCB criteria has delayed the application process for the UCB. A social work service based on this misconception has provided food for a grandmother and her grandchildren rather

than proactively supporting her to receive the UCB. The outcome of any custody Court process should not delay payment of the UCB.

None of the participants referred to the potential eligibility of an unsupported child benefit arrears payment. This implies that an application for arrears would not be made, and a potentially substantial arrears payment would be foregone.

The above tables showing the participants' lack of awareness of welfare benefit issues contained within the scenarios, and the more detailed discussion of responses to Scenario 4 strongly indicate that the participants' social work degrees did not adequately prepare them to support people claiming welfare benefit entitlements.

Theme 2: What should be taught

All eight participants expressed their support for the inclusion of individual welfare benefit advocacy in social work education. Carol stated, "Oh, definitely need it. I think, yeah, practical advocating skills, role playing, or scenario grouping. [...] there's definitely room to improve our skills, rather than waiting until we're out in the field to develop our skills." Helen, confirmed this need, stating, "Yes, definitely yes", and added:

> If I had known this prior to going into the field I wouldn't have struggled with helping the – I just learnt as I was doing the mahi, you know. So, I was learning as I was learning with my own patients on like, shit, this is, you know big. We need to be doing this now.

They are describing a need for individual welfare benefit advocacy skills to support people experiencing poverty and experiencing difficulties accessing entitlements from W&I and that welfare benefit advocacy is a significant part of their social work practice. They both indicate it was necessary to learn some advocacy skills once employed as a social worker and it was possible to do so. However, the findings from the above scenario analysis indicates the existence of significant gaps in the participants' knowledge and the decreased likelihood of people accessing their full welfare benefit entitlements. A 'learn on the job' approach seems to be unreliable.

Anna differentiates between knowledge and voice, giving as an example of knowledge: -

> Well, like for example, myself, [...] – you're not told about entitlements, or what you are entitled to with Work and Income. So, how do you know if you don't know? So, that knowledge, yeah.

She contrasts this lack of knowledge with an emphasis on voice within her course where:

> It was beautiful to see the shyer ones come through that had no voice. And like towards the end of year one finally find a voice and having the strength to use it, to stand proud and you know, just to speak to their truth and being able to do that.

Anna is describing an emphasis on the development of student self-confidence and self-esteem. Whilst having self-esteem and confidence are important, it is also important to build upon these to enhance social work practice. An emphasis on social work students' personal development runs the risk of perpetuating what Chereni (2016) described as the prioritisation of psychotherapy and other individualised interventions in preference to addressing structural causes of poverty. This is consistent with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility/fault and negation of social causes of poverty. The students, once qualified and employed as social workers, are unlikely to do individual welfare benefit advocacy work because they lack knowledge of it.

Other participants also identify a need for course content regarding practical

individual welfare benefit advocacy skills. The participants who had attended Unitec whilst there was an Advocacy paper provided express a similar view. Margaret wants more on "how to work with WINZ. How to get people what they need is, is crucial. It's basic survival stuff […] Just more how to, [...] get things sorted."

John states, "Definitely with WINZ more, more practical kind of, I don't know, [...] more stuff that you use on a daily basis."

The lack of connection between the theory taught and practical advocacy skills has been addressed in Theme 1 and is further emphasised by Margaret who stated, "what we were given was pretty good. But specific stuff that we do on a day-to-day basis, a lot of it wasn't even touched on" and by Carol's experience that theory taught within her course is not helpful when confronted with the W&I toxic culture that leads to declining lawful welfare benefit applications.

The inclusion of realistic welfare benefit advocacy scenarios similar to those used in this research was identified as a possible way to provide a realistic context within which to link theory and individual welfare benefit advocacy skills. Carol states:

> I think that having those scenarios, or scenarios similarities of that and we worked in a group and had to facilitate it more. More practical knowledge and understanding of Work and Income would be awesome because it's a beast. And it's a big one.

She is identifying the difficulties people experience accessing welfare benefit entitlements as having a significant adverse effect upon people's lives and identifies the need for "more practical knowledge" along with an "understanding" or analysis of the welfare benefit system. This need for analysis leads us back to a theoretical basis, for example neoliberalism and neoliberal welfare reform as the basis for both individual and collective welfare benefit advocacy.

Further supporting use of realistic scenarios, Anna stated:

> I'd definitely like to see some lived experience scenarios that have been, had positive and negative outcomes, whatever they are. Because there are some that we don't really talk about the scenarios that you've given, the examples, there's none of that.

Without any previous course content portraying the realities of individual welfare benefit advocacy Sally found the research scenarios to be a useful introduction.

> It was good to actually see the scenarios because I know that's something that I will be, you know, dealing with if I do want to become a SWIS (Social Worker in Schools) in the future. And these are actually the kind of real-life scenarios, so, it was actually a good eye-opener.

Use of realistic scenarios also facilitated revelations of experiences within the participants' whānau or their own personal experiences. Whilst discussing Scenario 4 that focused on a grandparent's eligibility for unsupported child benefit because she was caring for her grandchildren, Sally talks about being in her grandparents' care: "they were able to get money to, you know, to help and support me with my schooling as well."

John, in response to the question, how easy or difficult was it for you to respond to these scenarios? stated it was a "Bit difficult." He clarified this:

> I was out of home when I was about 14. I was on the independent youth benefit. That's what it was called back then. I had nowhere to stay and if, so – I grew up within the system. So, so all

> that comes into my, you know, all those experiences [...] are brought with me. And yes, hard, you know.

John goes on to state: "for me it was institutional racism, I think, that led me to social work. Like, I grew up in, in abject poverty". Mark, when discussing Scenario 3 that included a whānau with a disabled child acknowledged he also had a disability. He went on to describe personally feeling dehumanised by interactions with W&I staff when receiving welfare benefit payments.

The participants expressed a strong personal connection to the situations portrayed in the research scenarios. This adds to the validity of using scenarios as part of any future welfare benefit advocacy social work course content.

Conclusion

Data from the participants indicate that welfare benefit advocacy, as either individual or collective advocacy, is either not taught or not taught in sufficient detail. This suggests social workers are unprepared to competently support people living in poverty and needing to claim welfare benefits. Also, they are unlikely to advocate for systemic changes. Professional social work's commitment to social justice implies this is a valid area of social work practice.

Realistic scenarios have the potential to form the basis of social work welfare benefit advocacy education. The scenarios may also prompt discussion of a range of personal experiences that can be linked to the experiences of the people social workers support and to wider social issues.

Within social work academic literature there are numerous examples of recommendations for social work and social work education to challenge neoliberal orthodoxy (Beddoe & Keddell, 2016; Darroch, 2017; Fenton, 2021; Hyslop, 2016a, 2016b; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009; Morley et al., 2019; Morley et al., 2017; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020; Saar-Heiman et al., 2017). Welfare benefit advocacy provides an opportunity to challenge neoliberalism's influence upon the welfare benefit system thereby linking theory to practice. A Poverty Aware Paradigm has the capacity to further clarify and solidify relationships between theory and practice.

> … the paradigm's answer to questions such as "What is the nature of poverty?" and "What are the characteristics of poor people?" Is that poverty is a violation of human rights and that people in poverty "fight" and "resist" it on a daily basis. [...] the paradigm's answer to the question "Where should a social worker position herself ethically when working with people in poverty?" is that PAP entails social workers "standing by" people in poverty representing their knowledge and advocating for their interests in society. (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020, p. 1171)

Welfare benefit advocacy is consistent with both the above global definition of social work and the conscious acts of solidarity between social workers and the people needing their support alluded to by Saar-Heiman and Gupta (2020). Effective welfare benefit advocacy has the potential to give practical expression to the social work profession's expressed commitment to social justice and can explicitly link theory and practice.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their time and considered comments.

Received: 2 April 2023

Accepted: 31 January 2024

Published: 16 April 2024

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
THEORETICAL RESEARCH

Social work formulation: Principles and strategies for mental health social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Social workers are important members of multidisciplinary mental health teams and formulation is a core skill in mental health practice. However, there is little published guidance about what strong social work formulation looks like. As a group of mental health social workers, including Māori and tauiwi (non-Māori), experienced and recent graduates, we identified a discrepancy between the importance of a social work perspective on formulation and the lack of guidance available to us. We propose some key principles for social work formulation in Aotearoa New Zealand. This theoretical article is designed to encourage our mental health social work colleagues, new *and* experienced, to engage in formulation that is informed by social work values and knowledge.

APPROACH: As a group of mental health social workers, we approached this task with a mix of theory and practice. We conducted a literature review of both social work formulation and Māori formulation, then discussed how these approaches align with the social work knowledge base in Aotearoa New Zealand, social work core competencies, and our experience of mental health practice. From this approach, we identified six key principles for social work formulation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

CONCLUSIONS: Strong social work formulation has a tangata whenua or bicultural lens, is collaborative, strengths-based, ecological, has a social justice lens and is whānau-inclusive.

Keywords: Formulation; mental health; clinical social work

As mental health social workers, we wrestle with the tensions of bringing our social work values into services embedded within medical models. A social work lens on formulation is one way that we resist dominant deficit-based paradigms and promote a social understanding of mental health difficulties. In this article we present key principles for strong social work formulation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our purpose is to strengthen the social work professional identity within mental health practice through the discussion of principles and practical application of social work formulation.

The idea for this article came through our experiences of learning and teaching social work formulation and realising that there are few published guidelines for social work formulation. We have reflected on how important formulation skills are and how

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 75–88.

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difficult it can be to bring a social work lens to formulation in practice. Social workers can easily be co-opted into the dominant medical model, including the lens on formulation.

Formulation is a core component of mental health practice. It is a way of conceptualising why a tangata whaiora (service user) is presenting in this way (Bagster et al., 2021). While assessment can be used for diagnostic classification and identification of needs and strengths (Macneil et al., 2012), formulation goes beyond diagnostic categories to understand a person's unique context. It is the distinct skill of capturing the essence of what is going on for someone within an explanatory model. Good information-gathering during an assessment is a prerequisite to formulation. Ideally, formulation is co-created with tāngata whaiora (plural of service user), with a shared understanding of current problems and resources to inform intervention planning (Crowe et al., 2008).

Formulation is a skill that requires both adequate training and practice (Bagster et al., 2021; Selzer & Allen, 2014). All formulation is informed by theory, including discipline perspectives (Crowe et al., 2008; Johnson & Boyle, 2018). Therefore, there can be many ways of formulating an issue. Social workers are important members of multi-disciplinary mental health teams and are responsible for bringing a social work perspective to formulation.

Our process for identifying the key principles for strong social work formulation involved a team approach. All the authors are mental health social workers. We looked at the existing literature on social work formulation and Māori assessment frameworks, reflected on our social work training and mental health practice, and collaboratively identified the principles for strong social work formulation. Following our overview of the literature, each principle is discussed with practice considerations and examples.

Social work formulation literature

The existing literature about formulation includes a variety of discipline perspectives. These are helpful to understand how to structure formulation using the commonly used 5P model. There is also general agreement in the literature that formulation should be a collaborative process that evolves with new information, and that formulation is informed by theory. There are social justice models of social work formulation and local literature about the process of assessment with Māori, focusing on relationships between people, time, and place within the socio-political history of Aotearoa New Zealand.

5P model

Formulation often follows the 5P model, examining how a person is presenting, along with their predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating and protective factors across various biopsychosocial domains (Macneil et al., 2012). Selzer and Ellen (2014) offer an example of how to use the 5P formulation matrix to gather and organise information about someone, using a matrix to identify biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors across the five 'Ps'. That information is then reorganised into a narrative summary to answer the question of how a person arrived at that point, and what factors have been influential and continue to be important.

Formulation is tentative and collaborative

Formulations are tentative hypotheses, evolving with further information and changing circumstances (Dean & Poorvu, 2008; Selzer & Ellen, 2014). Ideally, formulation is co-created between the clinician and the tangata whaiora (Macneil et al., 2012). Social workers Dean and Poorvu (2008) reminded clinicians of the power we hold, "therefore, we must choose the words we use in a formulation very carefully, and hold them lightly, always ready to be

changed" (p. 598). However, tāngata whaiora input is often lacking in the formulation process and clinicians have been critiqued for using formulation to communicate jargon with other clinicians, rather than as a collaborative process done alongside tāngata whaiora for their benefit (Bagster et al., 2021). Collaboration should be between clinician and tangata whaiora, but instead is more often between clinicians without meaningful input from tāngata whaiora.

Application of theory to formulation

Formulation is theoretically flexible. Multiple theoretical perspectives can be used for formulation based on the clinician's theoretical frameworks and the needs of the tangata whaiora (Bagster, 2021; Dean & Poorvu, 2008; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Selzer & Ellen, 2014). Examples of theoretical perspectives include feminist, biological, social justice, cognitive, behavioural, psychodynamic, systemic and cultural. Social workers may use multiple lenses in formulation. Crowe et al. (2008) presented how different theoretical orientations can be applied in formulating from the same case study information. They made the point that the theoretical lens influences both formulation and intervention planning, highlighting the importance of the theoretical lens. In the *Power Threat Meaning Framework,* Johnstone and Boyle (2018) encouraged clinicians to move from the deficit-based question of 'what is wrong with you?' to asking, 'what has happened to you, how did it affect you, what sense did you make of it, and what did you do to survive?' This demonstrates how the theoretical lens of the clinician affects the questions they ask and how the formulation is created.

Social work lens

There does not appear to be any literature from Aotearoa New Zealand about social work formulation, as distinct from assessment. However, in the United States, Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt (2004) suggested that social workers look at both risk and resilience across all levels of an ecological framework, from the micro- to the macro-system. This is an ecological approach that focuses on problems and strengths, understanding a person in their environment. It flows on to interventions aimed at bolstering strengths within each system.

Dean and Poorvu (2008) suggested that social workers begin formulation with a social justice perspective, examining how social forces impact on tāngata whaiora. "These forces include the devastating effects of poverty and violence along with prejudices enacted in relation to gender, race, age, class, ability, sexual orientation, and other differences" (Dean & Poorvu, 2008, p. 599). They presented a constructivist approach to formulation, with multiple ways of knowing (ecological, cultural, psychodynamic, systemic, biological, and spiritual components), where the tangata whaiora voice is privileged in a collaborative process of formulation. They also challenged social workers to identify our own social identities and power in relation to clients, alongside our assumptions and limited ability to understand others' experiences.

Canadian social workers have discussed how power is understood and used by mental health social workers. Lee (2022) invited social workers to "deeply consider how they are positioned to knowingly and unknowingly exercise professional power whilst constructing clienthood to align with professional and institutional agendas in assessment" (p. 4378). They discussed the importance of centring the experience of tāngata whaiora, to listen to and believe their story whilst resisting institutional agendas to formulate in ways that are distinct from how people experience their own lives. McLaughlin et al. (2022) discussed the challenges of integrating social justice and clinical practice into a critical clinical practice that is both people-helping and society-changing. Mental health social workers have struggled to retain a focus on social justice within medical models

that focus on the individual. Brown (2021) explained, "social workers are trained to attend to the social context of people's lives, but despite this … mainstream service delivery and practice remain strongly rooted in individualizing biomedical approach and demand social workers compliance to this hegemony" (p. 645). Brown (2021) suggested that a narrative approach is helpful in examining dominant discourses and unpacking power. A social justice perspective in clinical practice includes an analysis of the historical factors perpetuating inequity, paying attention to power, advocacy for social change, clinician reflexivity, and social work values (McLaughlin et al., 2022).

Aotearoa context

Māori theory and models of assessment can inform formulation in Aotearoa New Zealand. A Māori approach to relational care recognises the embeddedness of tāngata Māori within their whānau, hapū and iwi (Hollis-English, 2017; Pōhatu, 2013; Wilson et al., 2021). Māori models of assessment emphasise a collaborative approach between tangata whaiora and clinician, underpinned by whanaungatanga, wairuatanga, and aroha (Hollis-English, 2017) and mana-enhancing practice (Ruwhiu, 2001; Wi-Kaitaia et al., 2021). While there are several Māori assessment models, four are briefly presented here: *Te Tapatoru, Meihana Model, Te Ara Waiora a Tāne,* and *Dynamics of Whanaungatanga*.

Te Tapatoru model is a Māori model of understanding a person's overall wellbeing through examining their connections to people (ko wai), time and place (he wā pai) and to genuine and meaningful activities (he kaupapa pai), highlighting the importance of connection for tāngata Māori when engaging with mental health services (Hamley et al., 2023). The Meihana model is a collaborative and holistic approach to assessment using the steps of a hui process, in which clinicians consider ngā hau e whā (the four winds of Tawhirimātea)—how colonisation, racism, migration and marginalisation impact Māori. These four factors are integrated into formulation, alongside individual and whānau factors (Pitama et al., 2017).

Bush et al. (2019) have discussed the implementation of the Te Ara Waiora a Tāne model, a kaupapa Māori approach to mental health assessment. This is based on the *Mahi-a-Atua* model of mental health engagement, assessment and intervention based on Māori creation stories, looking at the three baskets of knowledge that Tāne brought back from the heavens. Clinicians use conversation and a whiteboard to visually represent the journey of Tāne, using this metaphor to gather information about challenges, strengths and supports. This is an example of using culturally meaningful stories and visual modes of communication to collaboratively create a formulation.

Grown around the seed of the foundational *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (Durie, 1994), the *Dynamics of Whanaungatanga* (Tate, 2010) model expands from the four critical pou (pillars) that form hauora (wellbeing) to also consider how other internal, external, and relational factors impact tangata whaiora. A person's connection to land (whenua), people (tāngata), and spirituality (ātua); their goals and aspirations; and the potential or real restrictions needed in their life to reach wellbeing (tapu and noa), are assessed through a lens of tika (what is right), pono (what is true) and aroha (love) co-created by the tangata whaiora, clinicians and whānau. When used in its entirety, this formulation is then carried through to the intervention and healing (hohou i te rongo) phases of the model.

Each of these assessment models encourage clinicians to engage in formulation that is relationally co-constructed, informed by the socio-political context, and based on Māori worldviews on the interconnectedness of people, wairua, and whenua.

Social work formulation in Aotearoa New Zealand

We have identified six key principles of social work formulation in Aotearoa New Zealand, from the existing literature and our own reflections on practice. Strong social work formulation is:

- framed from a tangata whenua or bicultural approach
- collaborative
- strengths-based
- ecological
- has a social justice lens
- is whānau-inclusive.

These principles are aligned with the global definition of social work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2023) and with the core competence standards for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand (SWRB, 2023).

We present three case studies to illustrate how these principles can be used in social work formulation. Each of these case studies is hypothetical and written from our collective practice experienced, based on common presentations. However, these are not the stories of real tāngata whaiora. Each formulation follows the 5P process of discussing the presenting, predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating and protective factors, although not necessarily using that language. They each look at these factors across multiple systems.

Charlotte

Charlotte is a 14-year-old Pākehā girl who was referred to youth mental health services for panic attacks. Charlotte lives with her parents and 12-year-old sister. She attends a private school, in a wealthy neighbourhood, that has a high focus on academic achievement. She also has many extra-curricular activities. Charlotte began to experience panic attacks when studying for school exams. She felt intense pressure from herself, her parents and her school to achieve well.

Charlotte has grown up in an environment with high standards. Her parents both work in demanding jobs and have high expectations of themselves and their children to achieve financial, academic and career success. Charlotte's parents both came from working-class families and want the best for Charlotte. Charlotte's family fondly remembered relaxed beach days when the children were younger but had little unscheduled relaxation time recently.

In meeting with Charlotte and her family, her parents realised that they had been fearful of financial struggles for their children, so had pushed them hard to achieve at school and in extracurricular activities. Additionally, Charlotte's mother had experienced physical abuse as a child (from her own mother) and had connected that abuse experience to the financial stresses her mother experienced. She wanted to protect her children by ensuring that they were financially supported. Upon reflection, Charlotte and her family recognise the negative impact of this pressure for the children. They would like to have more balance but are unsure how to change entrenched habits. Charlotte's family are influenced by the values of their social group, supported by societal values that connect a person's value to their achievements and wealth.

Sam

Sam is a 28-year-old Māori man who was referred to forensic services following violence towards his wife. Sam grew up in a small town with few community resources and high unemployment following the closure of the main factory where many of the families worked. As a result of the factory closure and ensuing poverty, many of the men in the community joined gangs and were involved in drug distribution. Sam grew up in an environment where poverty and violence were common. As a child he

was subjected to significant physical and sexual abuse by people known to him. He was close with his mother, aunt and grandmother. His grandmother died when he was 10 years old, and since then Sam has heard the voice of his grandmother talking to him and supporting him.

Sam is a skilled sportsman. There were few opportunities for sports in his community, so his mother and aunty supported him to get a sports scholarship to go to boarding school in a city a few hours from home. Sam excelled in sports there but was socially excluded by his peers. He experienced racism from the students, their families, and some teachers. He also experienced physical abuse from older boys at school. Sam experienced nightmares from the childhood abuse and was worried about his safety from the other students. He would ensure he was the last to get to sleep each night and slept poorly.

Sam's mother and aunt have always been supportive of Sam. They moved to the same city to be closer to him, and they have all been attending a local church. Sam has been married for 7 years to a woman he met at church and together they have two children. He works as a physiotherapist and coaches his 5-year-old son's soccer team.

Sam was recently violent towards his wife in the context of PTSD triggers. He was experiencing flashbacks of the childhood abuse and lashed out at his wife. He is deeply remorseful about this and has no history of using violence. He believes he is becoming like the men he grew up with and worries that he will lose control again and become increasingly violent, despite this being a solo occurrence. He worries that he is not fit to coach the soccer team and is concerned about what his colleagues and church family might think of him if they find out he hit his wife.

Sam's PTSD and anxiety can be understood within the context of his childhood trauma, both in the family home and at boarding school. He has developed a heightened threat response and has used sport to help him manage these physical symptoms. Sam has the support of strong women but worries that he may reproduce the violence he experienced from men. This level of worry reflects his strong commitments to his family, his faith and his community, and the incompatibility of his use of violence with his values.

Tane

Tane is a 70-year-old Māori man who was referred to mental health services with physical symptoms of depression. His wife died 2 years ago, and Tane has been increasingly socially isolated since her death and his retirement. Additionally, recent health issues have impacted his ability to drive, and he is not yet confident in using public transport. Tane spends a lot of time working in his shed and is a skilled carpenter. He likes to make wooden toys for his grandchildren, who live in another city.

Tane spent his first few years with his parents, grandparents, and siblings in a rural area. He spoke te reo Māori at home. After his mother died when he was 6 years old, Tane was removed from his whānau by the state. He was adopted into a Pākehā family and did not see his whānau again. He was punished for speaking te reo Māori and was brought up without any facilitated connection to te ao Māori. For many years Tane felt ashamed of his Māori heritage and often pretended that he was not Māori. However, recently Tane has expressed interest in reconnecting with his whānau and learning more about his iwi and Māoritanga.

His depression can be understood within the context of his disconnection—socially, physically through his lack of transport, and disconnection from whānau and culture. As he has begun to face some of the impacts of his disconnection from whānau, he is grieving the way of life that was taken from him and going through an identity crisis

in trying to understand more of his Māori culture.

Principles of formulation

We propose that strong social work formulation is based on six key principles. Drawing on the case studies presented above, we discuss how the principles of biculturalism, collaboration, strengths-based, ecological, social justice and whānau-inclusive practice can be applied in formulation.

Tangata whenua or bicultural approach

A tangata whenua, or bicultural perspective, that is grown from the foundations of te ao Māori is critical to social work formulation in the Aotearoa context and aligns with the first core competency of social work practice (Social Work Registration Board, 2023). The term *bicultural* is applied to social workers who value Māori knowledge, recognise the impact of colonisation, understand Māori concepts of wellbeing, and who practise with self-awareness (Wi-Kaitaia et al., 2021). For Māori social workers, a tangata whenua approach incorporates all of these aspects within an embodied Māori worldview informed by Mātauranga Māori (Eruera et al., 2021).

Māori perspectives of hauora are varied, however the importance of relationality—whether this is whakapapa and whanaungatanga or the interdependence of the elements that influence an individual's state of hauora—is central. The concept of whakapapa, the iterative genealogical links that stretch from the deepest void of Te Kore through to the farthest mokopuna yet to be welcomed into Te Ao Marama, is the primary explanatory force in te ao Māori (Marsden & Royal, 2003). Whakapapa connects us to our tūpuna and mokopuna living, passed, and yet to be; to land and water; to environments physical and metaphysical; to history and the future. Whakapapa can be used to explain everything from natural phenomena (Marsden & Royal, 2003), the impact of colonisation on research and education (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), to social issues such as family violence and mental health (Sadler, 2007). In a recent example of whakapapa being used to explain how historic events impact contemporary individuals, Pihama et al. (2022) argued that both perpetrators and survivors of sexual violence are inheritors of a whakapapa of imported gendered violence and harm, including the attempted destruction of land, culture, and language that created—and uphold—social issues that disproportionately impact Māori.

If whakapapa is the thread connecting every individual to their past and future, then whanaungatanga can be considered the net that connects each individual to their wider whānau, their networks, and communities. For Māori, the relational ties to hapū, iwi, waka and the whenua, awa or moana that connect to these communities, are crucial elements of hauora, identity and mana.

The significance of wairua, very broadly defined as spirituality or the spiritual world and a person's connection to it, is an aspect often missing from tauiwi conceptions of mental health. Wairua, however, is a core element in Māori perspectives of hauora, and should help form the basis of a bicultural social work formulation. Traditional Māori concepts that are illustrative of mental distress, such as pōrangi (a state of being often translated as "mad") and kahupō (a state of desperation and pain caused by wairua being divorced from the body), have an inherent link to te ao wairua (Lawson & Liu, 2010). Mooney et al. (2020) encouraged clinicians to consider cultural explanations for how tangata Māori may present to avoid misdiagnosis of depression. Similarly, for Māori the concepts of matakite and mākutu may carry a heavy importance that bears the added weight of inherited or otherwise historic gifts or troubles.

For Sam, both his strengths as an individual and as part of a whānau, as well as his trauma and trauma responses (including violence towards his wife), can be formulated by understanding whakapapa. Sam has been loved and supported by close women in his whānau since very young, including his grandmother whose voice he continues to hear. The whakapapa of harm in Sam's home community and the racism and violence he experienced at school continues to impact him today—as does the history of love, support, and protection from close women in his whānau. These threads can be traced further back to the economic deprivation and limited opportunities and support available to whānau and unemployed people in his hometown. The whakapapa of gendered violence, racism, and inequality stretches further back, to the imposition of Western colonial ideology and economic relations that introduced different norms about the social position and worth of different groups in society. At the same time, Sam's determination to resist the gendered violence he witnessed as a child also has a deep history, as family violence was considered so contemptible in pre-colonial Māori societies, and as it was punished so severely at individual, whānau, and hapū levels, societies, it was virtually non-existent (Mikaere, 2017). Sam's connection to his faith, the value he places in his church community, and his spiritual connection to his grandmother are critical aspects of understanding Sam's life, and present significant opportunities in supporting his recovery from trauma and in abstaining from violence.

Applying a tangata whenua or bicultural lens to formulation for Tane would consider his disconnection from his whānau and whakapapa as a central aspect of his distress, and as a focus for support and potential recovery. Tane's struggles with identity, given his removal from whānau as a child, and his forcibly fractured connection to his whakapapa and web of wider whanaunga relationships. Similarly, his exposure to racism and lack of support in maintaining his culture, reo, and relationships with his whānau, hapū, and iwi with his adoptive family have impacted his understanding of self and his wairua as a tāne Māori.

Collaborative social work formulation

The significance of collaborative mental health practice has been well established (Bagster et al., 2021; Macneil et al., 2012). At the heart of collaborative practice there is a call for tāngata whaiora and whānau to be active participants in their recovery journey and for mental health clinicians to welcome and value the skills, knowledge and experience that tāngata whaiora and whānau bring with them. Social work as a profession is well positioned to take a collaborative approach to practice. Values such as citizenship, empowerment and collective responsibility underpin social work practice and inform social work's collaborative approach. Collaborative practice can be thought of as a coming together between the social worker and tangata whaiora in a joint decision-making process to define goals and work towards these shared goals.

Collaborative social work formulation involves the tangata whaiora and the social worker having a therapeutic conversation to construct meaning or make sense of the distressing experiences. The practice of collaborative formulation is premised on the understanding that formulation is an ongoing process that develops over time. Collaborative formulation involves the social worker inviting the tangata whaiora and their whānau to share their explanation of the situation and to explore the meaning they attach to these experiences. The social worker also shares their clinical knowledge and practice wisdom to offer tentative wonderings or hypotheses to the tangata whaiora. Following these conversations, the formulation can be changed or adapted to suit the new understanding. In other words, the social worker and tangata whaiora

engage in a constructivist process in which a shared understanding of the nature of the challenges is co-constructed.

There may be times when a tangata whaiora, their whānau or the social worker have different views on formulation. A collaborative approach is still available in this instance, with the social worker engaging in a transparent conversation about the different views, partnering with the tangata whaiora to identify commonalities across interpretations, as well as areas of difference. All views are then included in the formulation. For example, an initial formulation of Charlotte's difficulties may include the parents' views that the pressure they place on Charlotte for academic achievement helps to protect her against future disadvantage, while also noting the social worker's view that the same pressure is a precipitating factor for the panic attacks. A collaborative approach is not just about having a shared understanding of the issues, it is about the process that the social worker engages in with the tangata whaiora and their whānau.

For social workers engaging in collaborative formulation, it is important to remember that this process provides a narrative explanation that seeks to answer the question of why this person is presenting in this way at this time. This stands in direct contrast to psychiatric diagnosis which limits a person's experience to a cluster of symptoms. When done as part of a collaborative process, formulation can be an empowering experience for tāngata whaiora that helps contextualise, and therefore normalise human experiences. A collaborative approach to formulation can occur even when a diagnosis is not supported by the tangata whaiora and their whānau.

Strengths-based

Social work values and the strengths approach are aligned in the belief that every person has strengths, aspirations, and resources to bring about positive change (McCashen, 2017). Strengths-based practice is intertwined with a collaborative approach and with social justice. It avoids framing people as the problem, instead recognising the wider structural context of people's lives, aligning with an ecological perspective. A strengths-based approach is both a philosophical belief about people and a way of practising. Strengths-based social workers believe that hope is possible for tāngata whaiora and that tāngata whaiora are experts in their own lives. Social workers use strengths-based practice through asking the tangata whaiora questions to understand how they have managed difficulties previously, what internal and environmental resources are available, and their ideas for what a hopeful future looks like (McCashen, 2017). This is in direct contrast to a biomedical approach that focuses on disease and deficits.

A strengths-based approach to formulation applies to both the process and outcome of formulation. In the process of formulating, the social worker asks questions to elicit the strengths of the tangata whaiora, and in doing so encourages their active participation in co-creating a formulation. The result is a formulation that includes discussion of the problem, but also includes discussion of their resources and strengths. It is more than just adding on a sentence about protective factors; a strengths-based approach integrates protective factors throughout the story of a person's journey.

For Charlotte, her parents' willingness to understand her and improve family functioning are a strength and will be the primary focus of an intervention. Sam is also well supported by family, including his deceased grandmother who continues to comfort him. This family support, along with his family values and skills in sport are all strengths that facilitate recovery from trauma. Tane is a skilled carpenter, and this skill connects him with his mokopuna and gives him a sense of purpose and mastery.

Ecological

Social workers bring an ecological perspective to our work, seeing people in the context of their environments. Generally, it is common in mental health practice to include consideration of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem in formulation, which involves looking at a person's interactions with the people closest to them. However, an ecological perspective also involves consideration of wider systems, including how a person is impacted by their education or employment, their local community, media influences and involvement with other services. At the macrosystem, cultural beliefs, societal values, and the economic and political environment all impact on tāngata whaiora. Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context this includes recognition by the Human Rights Commission (2022) of the impacts of white supremacy, racism, and colonisation for Māori. It also includes societal values about mental health, gender, parenting, aging, productivity, sexuality, religion, and disability. An ecological approach to formulation recognises that tāngata whaiora are embedded within multiple systems of influence and considers each of these in the formulation.

Social workers seem to primarily focus on the microsystem in ecological formulation as many mental health interventions are located within that same system. However, through looking at wider systems of influence, social workers may be prompted to consider interventions at those wider levels. This may include work in the community, aligned with the Ministry of Health's (2023) strategic vision for recovery-oriented services. It may also include advocacy within the macrosystem level, aligned with social justice values inherent in social work.

An ecological lens has been applied to Charlotte's formulation, looking at the impact of macrosystem beliefs about achievement and how these have perpetuated her anxiety. For Sam, an ecological lens has highlighted the impact of factory closures on his hometown, and the flow-on effects for the community, including an increase in gang activity and the lack of sporting opportunities for Sam. An ecological approach also highlights the impact of Sam's schooling environment on him, and the experiences of abuse and racism. Ecologically, Tane has been impacted by retirement and the loss of workplace social connection, and historically was impacted by legislation facilitating the removal of Māori children from their families and the suppression of te reo Māori. Applying an ecological approach to formulation helps to put these challenges in context, and for Charlotte, Sam and Tane to recognise the structural impacts on them. This is an alternative to locating the cause of their distress within them personally and helps to counter self-blame and self-stigma.

Social justice lens

Social justice is a central tenet of social work practice. The commitment to social justice has been codified through local and international guiding frameworks. The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (2023) *Code of Ethics* and the International Federation of Social Workers (2018) *Ethical Principles* cement social justice as a core value for the profession. While there is no singular definition of social justice, it is often broadly thought of as being concerned with equality, tolerance, compassion, fairness, and participation (Friesen, 2007). Following this definition, it is easy to see how social work practice and issues of social justice are often entwined. After all, it is social workers' systemic perspective that allows us to see and hear the implications of colonisation, institutional racism, inequality, poverty, marginalisation, violence, and trauma in the stories of tāngata whaiora every day. Within mental health services, it is social workers' commitment to social justice that informs so much of our practice and is a defining feature of the profession. Given this commitment and the importance of social justice, how does this

inform social work formulation and what are the barriers to incorporating this?

A barrier for including a social justice lens to formulation is the predominance of the medical model perspective within mental health services. This perspective sees mental illness as a biological illness and takes an individual focus in treatment. For social workers working in multi-disciplinary teams, this can be challenging. The social worker role can be subsumed under the generic umbrella of mental health clinician. This sees social workers spending much of their time in other roles and duties that focus on individual treatment outcomes, leaving little time for social justice advocacy.

Formulation can be a useful tool in moving away from the biomedical focus of diagnosis and creates space for personal narrative to shape presentation. Part of this narrative can incorporate social justice issues if pertinent to the presentation. Examples could include thinking about the impacts of colonisation, economic inequality, racism, gender inequality, stigma, and discrimination as examples of social justice issues that could be linked to a person's experience of mental unwellness and therefore their presentation.

Economic inequality was a driving force in Charlotte's parents' concern about her future. Their own experience of financial stress clouded their ability to recognise the impact of their behaviour on Charlotte's mental health. Economic inequality and racism are features of Sam's story. He was impacted by poverty as a child, and then went on to experience racism at boarding school. Tane was significantly affected by colonisation and his forced removal from whānau, te reo Māori and whenua.

A framework that incorporates a social justice perspective that could be utilised in formulation is the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). This framework encourages conversations that shift the focus away from "what's wrong with you" to "what happened to you" as a way of acknowledging the social aspect of mental health. In taking this approach to formulation, social workers are open to learning from the experience of the tangata whaiora and exploring social justice issues and how they have impacted upon the person. There may be some tensions within multi-disciplinary teams about social justice versus pathology approaches. However, we argue that it is the role of mental health social workers to remind colleagues about social justice issues and to bring a trauma-informed and recovery-oriented approach to practice.

Whānau inclusive practice

The Māori philosophy of Whānau Ora is built on the recognition that people are embedded within whānau. Whānau Ora is about being whānau-centred to empower whānau to achieve their dreams and aspirations (Cherrington, 2020). This collaborative approach may be particularly beneficial for whānau Māori, many of whom may not have felt empowered whilst engaging with mental health services (Bush et al., 2019). When social workers collaborate with whānau to co-create the formulation, they recognise the expertise of whānau, who often know their loved one in a way that a social worker simply cannot.

Echoing the social work core competency to promote social change, collaborating with the whānau concerning formulation can be also effective in minimising the power imbalance between the social worker and whānau. Family members may provide insights concerning underlying world views which influence the person's approach to life. This may be especially important with those who come from a different background to the social worker. This focus on collaboration may subsequently allow interventions to be put in place that are responsive to the whānau as a whole, rather than to the individual (Pitama et al., 2017). An example of this could be linking older siblings of

a referred young person with a mentor. Similarly, whānau are empowered to see potential steps or interventions that they personally could put in place to support their loved one within their recovery journey.

There are potential challenges to implement whānau-led formulation. Whānau may not wish to engage with this process or the tangata whaiora may not wish their whānau to be involved, especially if there are issues of power and control. There may also be cultural considerations about how decisions are made in families. Families from collectivist cultures are more likely to make decisions based on what is best for the whole family or community, and there may be a senior member of the family who makes decisions on behalf of the tangata whaiora (Hofstede, 2001). This is important to remember, especially for Pākehā social workers who come from more individualist cultures with different understandings of the role of family in decision-making. In these situations the social worker must engage in reflexive practice, recognising their own assumptions about family and carefully balancing the competing demands of autonomy versus whānau inclusion, and safety versus inclusion. Instead of accepting initial expressed preferences from tāngata whaiora and whānau as immutable fact, social workers can continue to revisit this, especially as trust develops between the social worker and tangata whaiora.

It may become evident that challenges experienced within the family system—or trauma experienced within the formative years of life—are important factors in the formulation. The whānau may not be aware of the impact of these situations on their loved one. Alternatively, the whānau may be reluctant to share about challenging experiences or historical trauma. This may be due to a lack of trust in mental health services, or a sense of shame related to the incident. Furthermore, whānau may carry a sense of blame concerning the fact that their loved one is accessing mental health services, especially if the tangata whaiora is a child or young person. Parents may believe that their own personal life challenges or mental health journey may be the sole contributor to their child's presentation. It is important that social workers discuss these factors in a non-judgemental manner with deep humility and sensitivity, whereby the focus is on listening closely to the whānau, along with validating their thoughts and concerns (Crowe et al., 2008).

Using the example of Charlotte and her family, support could initially begin through engaging the whānau in a developmental assessment, where the historical context concerning her presentation could be explored, such as unpacking what the initial years looked like and their experience of managing the transition to school. Alongside this, this time could be used to begin to build a therapeutic alliance and discuss the current circumstances together with the whānau. Here, Charlotte's mother may talk about her own early years and the impact of her own experiences upon her approach to parenting. In addition, the social worker and whānau could together identify key protective factors, such as the bonds between each family member and their previous enjoyment of time at the beach.

Whānau-inclusive practice can also be used with adult tāngata whaiora. Sam's wife, mother and aunty are all important members of his whānau, and with Sam's consent, could be included in assessment and treatment planning. A whānau-inclusive approach to formulation could include the views of each of these family members. Even if Tane's children and grandchildren may not participate in the assessment process, a whānau-inclusive approach involves considering the impact of whānau in the formulation. The recent loss of his wife is a significant precipitating event for depression. His long period of disconnection from whānau, hapū and iwi has impacted on his wairua, identity, internalised racism, and his sense of belonging within his whakapapa.

His renewed interest in reconnecting to his Māoritanga is a protective factor, alongside his strong bond with his mokopuna.

The Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction (2018) recommended that mental health services partner with whānau. Even when this is challenging, social workers have a responsibility to include whānau as much as possible within formulation. This incorporates many of the previously discussed principles of bicultural practice, collaboration and taking an ecological approach to understand people's mental health in the context of their whānau and wider social determinants.

Conclusion

As mental health social workers, we bring a social lens to formulation that is informed by social work values. While it is easy to be co-opted into the dominant biomedical paradigm within mental health services, we have a responsibility to resist deficit-based framing of people's distress. We resist through using our social work knowledge to bring a critical lens that unpacks the systemic influences on personal distress and recognises people's strengths and resources. Our bicultural approach to formulation includes Māori explanatory models of mental health, including the centrality of relationships, connection of all things through whakapapa, the impact of intergenerational trauma, and consideration of te ao wairua. We engage collaboratively with tāngata whaiora, mindful of our power as clinicians, and seeking to reduce that power differential through co-creation of formulation narratives with tāngata whaiora. We have presented the key principles of strong social work formulation; tangata whenua or bicultural lens, collaborative, strengths-based, ecological, social justice, and whānau-based practice. Mental health social workers bring these approaches to our everyday clinical practice. We argue that these approaches are also needed in the specific skill of social work formulation, sharing our social work lens with tāngata whaiora and with our multidisciplinary colleagues.

Received: 21 August 2023

Accepted: 24 January 2024

Published: 16 April 2024

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The string to my kite: How supervision contributes to the development of a newly qualified social worker's professional identity

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: A social work professional identity is constructed through a period of education and training, including workplace experience. For students transitioning to professional work post-qualifying, there is a period of significant adjustment, requiring an anchor from which professional identity can continue to develop and grow. The study reported in this article aimed to explore how newly qualified social workers perceived supervision as the string to their kites, anchoring them to their professional foundations.

METHOD: A qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews explored the experiences and views of eight newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in relation to the continuing construction of their social work identity, the challenges they faced in their transition and adjustment to their new professional status, and the role they regarded supervision had in facilitating this process.

FINDINGS: An analysis of the narratives indicated that the NQSWs regarded supervision as essential in building confidence and professional autonomy and ensuring they remained engaged in the construction, maintenance, and ongoing shaping of their professional identity.

CONCLUSION: For NQSWs to successfully navigate the transition and adjustment from student to professional social worker, frequent and regular access to quality supervision in their first-year post-qualifying was highly valued in supporting safe practice and professional identity development. Ensuring a more intensive approach to supervision in the first year of practice presents both a challenge and an opportunity to social work employers and the regulatory body that sets standards for the social work profession in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

KEYWORDS: Supervision; newly qualified social workers; professional identity; social work education

An understanding of what underpins each social worker's unique approach to practice is referred to by Webb (2017) as a *professional identity*, encompassing the personal and professional aspects of the self. Professional identity is constructed by adopting the values, knowledge, skills, and behavioural norms identified by a professional group (Connolly & Harms, 2019; Harrison & Healy, 2016). As an ongoing, fluid process, it also

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involves constantly navigating the shared dimensions of the self (beliefs and values), knowing, thinking (knowledge and theory) and doing (methods and skills).

The foundations for a social work identity are laid during a period of higher education studies (Shlomo et al., 2012; Wiles, 2017). During their studies, students integrate their professional identity into a practice framework influenced by educators, student peers, field education experiences, and structures such as professional bodies and regulatory frameworks (Roulston et al., 2018). The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019) and the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) *Practice Standards and Code of Conduct* (SWRB, 2016) guide the construction of a social work identity. However, it is with the introduction to practical experience that the concept of professional identity comes to life (Webb, 2017).

Integrating theory into practice and understanding how to use their practice frameworks begins with student experiences of field education, as professional identity develops when students can share their thinking, values, and perspectives with other professionals (Wheeler, 2017). Field education also provides an avenue for students to develop resilience to manage the challenges and tensions they will encounter when leaving the relative safety of student life and entering the reality of doing social work (Webb, 2017). With placements regarded as a supervised initiation into the profession, the SWRB's (2021a) *Programme Recognition Standards* require students to have at least one hour of supervision with their field educator per week. Supervision is a process of professional learning and practice enhancement that enables students to reflect on, understand and develop, their emerging professional identity (Roulston et al., 2018).

The SWRB has the expectation that, once registered, social workers will continue to engage in supervision at least monthly (SWRB, 2018). However, it is argued that this expectation neglects to recognise the significance and challenge of NQSWs' transition from students to social work professionals, and under-estimates the intensive additional support needed during this vital developmental stage (Beddoe et al., 2020). Whilst ANZASW recommends its newly qualified members have a minimum one hour of supervision per week, Beddoe et al. (2020) argued that it is debatable whether this recommendation is implemented in everyday practice.

This article presents the findings of a small-scale, qualitative study detailing the rich stories of NQSWs. Three areas were explored: NQSWs' concepts of emerging professional identity, their experiences of supervision, and the ways in which supervision influenced and supported the development of their professional identity. The findings support the view that the first years of working life for NQSWs are pivotal for professional identity development (Miller, 2013) and that supervision is a critical site for this development to take place.

Literature review

A common theme in studies following NQSWs into the workplace describes their first experiences as a collision with reality (Newberry-Koroluk, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2014). The metaphor "hitting the ground running" was used by Donnellan and Jack (2015, p. 3) when considering the transition phase for NQSWs. Likewise, Fook et al. (2000, p. 79) described this challenge as being "…thrown into the 'deep end' of practice, frantically swimming as they were confronted with new situations for which they must take responsibility".

According to Harrison and Healy (2016), the first years of practice for NQSWs are crucial for professional identity development and a structured induction process and support is required. As part of a 5-year longitudinal study of Aotearoa New Zealand's new

graduate social workers, Hunt and colleagues (2017) explored support needs for students transitioning into becoming professional practitioners. Most respondents stated that they found their first year of work challenging, with disclosures such as: "nearly every day presents difficulties for me" (Hunt et al., 2017, p. 65). Local and international research clearly indicates that a mosaic of support structures is necessary for NQSWs to adjust to their new professional status, and supervision has been widely recognised as a key component of this package (Beddoe et al., 2020; Donnellan & Jack, 2015).

The purpose of supervision is to improve the social worker's ability to do their job more competently; help them grow and develop; maximise knowledge and skills; and work increasingly independently through the use of a supportive approach that instils confidence and self-belief (Nordstrand, 2017, Zuchowski, 2014). The literature emphasises that accountable social work is achieved through the structures and processes of good supervision (Jones et al., 2009; Kettle, 2015; O'Donoghue et al., 2018). Effective supervision was declared by Mor Barak et al. (2009, p. 3) to be "a vital aspect of service delivery in social service organisations". Supervision can also protect workers against stressful work environments, provide support during difficult times, and offer guidance for navigating job challenges and workplace cultures.

Research specifically dedicated to NQSWs' experiences of supervision is limited (O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2015). A British research report and toolkit produced for new social work practitioners highlighted that supervision assists with building NQSWs' practice confidence, caseload management and emotional support (Jones et al., 2009). Building confidence was achieved when supervision provided an avenue for knowledge and skill development. Caseload management is viewed more positively when NQSWs are given the opportunity to reflect on their work, rather than being told what to do. Of importance amongst the findings was the recognition of the value of a place in which NQSWs could discuss the emotional impact of the work (Jones et al., 2009).

Pack's (2012) study of an effective supervisory relationship for NQSWs discussed the importance of establishing safety. The context of safety in the supervision space referred to the ability of NQSWs to explore difficulties within their practice. Bogo and McKnight (2006) promoted a list of qualities needed by supervisors to create this space. These included being available, imparting practice wisdom, and utilising a communication style that was supportive and validating. Wonnacott (2012, p. 70) added that an effective supervisor understands the capability of the worker, is aware of their own impact on the supervision process and that the relationship can take on a "mirroring" effect.

The supervision experiences of Aotearoa New Zealand NQSWs have received some attention in the social work literature (Beddoe et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2017). Hunt et al.'s (2017) longitudinal study following the first three years of practice for NQSWs reflecting on differing experiences and quality of supervision. The study focussed on the frequency and effectiveness of supervision although effectiveness was not defined. Beddoe et al.'s (2020) study captured the experiences of NQSWs in the new era of mandatory registration and the requirement for 2000 hours of supervised practice post-qualifying for provisionally registered social workers to move to full registration. They found the frequency and quality of supervision was variable, more attention was needed on educational and developmental aspects, and that supportive structures were of value during this important phase of an NQSW's professional development.

Whilst the insight from the reviewed studies is invaluable, understanding the place of supervision in supporting NQSWs to continue to construct and consolidate

Table 1 Study Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years post qualifying	Sector	Field of practice
Sally	Female	50-60	New Zealand European	Two	NGO	Health
Joanne	Female	30-40	Australian	One	NGO	Pasifika
Sam	Male	20-30	New Zealand European	Two	Government	Child Protection
Julie	Female	30-40	New Zealand European	One	NGO	Health
Phoebe	Female	20-30	New Zealand European	One	NGO	Children and Families
Rebecca	Female	40-50	New Zealand European	Two	NGO	Children and Families
Alice	Female	20-30	Austrian	One	Government	Mental Health
Jessica	Female	40-50	New Zealand European	Two	Government	Child Protection

their emerging professional identities post-graduation remains a gap in the existing literature.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen to align with the exploratory focus of the study reported here, the key aim of which was to explore the ways in which supervision helps NQSWs shape their developing professional identities in an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Qualitative methodology enables researchers to examine social practices and processes, identify barriers and facilitators for change and discover reasons for the outcomes of interventions (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

A social constructivist perspective with an interpretive approach was used. At its core, social constructivism posits that individuals try to understand their worlds and develop meanings that correspond to their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The interpretive approach allowed the exploration of the naturally emerging dialogue from a series of interviews focusing on the understandings NQSWs assign to their experiences of supervision as they continue to construct and re-shape their professional identity (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Three areas were explored: NQSWs' concepts of emerging professional identity, their experiences of supervision, and the ways in which supervision influenced and supported the development of their professional identity.

Data collection

The research participants (see Table 1) comprised eight NQSWs in their first or second year of post-qualification who were receiving social work supervision. Participants were recruited through the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) and an Institute of Technology. Following an initial low response, a snowballing technique was applied. The researcher used their local and national social work networks to recruit participants. The research was approved by a University Human Ethics Committee.

Participants' supervision experiences were variable. For example, one social worker

had worked in the social work profession whilst studying and was experienced in receiving different types of supervision. Post-qualifying, this participant could draw on experiences from three social service organisations, in contrast to another social worker who was 6 months into their first social work position and had experienced only one supervision session. The participants engaged in semi-structured 60-to-90-minute interviews, either over Skype video conferencing or face to face in an agreed location. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed before being sent back to the participants for checking and approval.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify, analyse, and report on patterns and themes in the transcribed raw data. Discovering themes and patterns was achieved by identifying the commonalities within the participants' responses (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Time was spent listening to interview recordings and engaging with the written data to make notes on initial ideas. To address the trustworthiness of the ideas, the researcher kept a journal and engaged in meetings with her research supervisors. A chart was developed from the transcripts, which aided in the coding of specific content (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The coding process supported the researcher to construct potential themes and provided a system to connect data to each theme, generating a thematic map of the analysis. Refining and naming the themes required ongoing analysis to filter the specifics of each. Finally, categories were created with sub-themes attached (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To ensure consistency within the analysis, the researcher linked themes to how supervision supported NQSWs' developing professional identities, combining an analysis narrative with illustrative participant quotations using an interpretive approach that utilised existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

Three themes were constructed from the data analysis: (1) NQSWs conceptualisation of social work identity, (2) the challenges of transitional adjustment to a professional identity, and (3) the qualities of supervision that support the development of that professional identity.

Conceptualising social work identity

The participants held a range of views on how they conceptualised their social work professional identity, relating to their practice frameworks, values, roles, and tasks. Moulding their personal and professional social work identities together was of particular focus. Julie, for example, reflected on her studies as a personal journey of self-discovery, "I am just me … my social work lens is just part of my face now like it's a perspective, it's a way of life, it's a way of living". Sam, who had been personally shaped by his Christian faith, referred to his social work identity from a strong religious and philosophical stance:

> If I was trying to pinpoint the identity aspect of it and how much it ties in with who I am … I always think of this verse in the Book of James where it says true religion is this … to advocate for the widows and the orphans and to be unstained from the world, and I always think, you know, a lot of church is focussed on that whole aspect of being unstained and apart from the world, but very little seem to focus on advocating for those who are disadvantaged, and I sort of see my social work identity as finding a beautiful way to fulfil that command.

Four of the participants commented that the breadth of social work fields of practice made it difficult to articulate what the one overarching 'role' of a social worker entailed and therefore found that this was defined in part for each of them by the field of practice they worked in. Alice said:

Table 2 Participants' Experience

Name (pseudonym)	1st social work position	Employed in a social service before qualifying	Volunteer & community work before qualifying	Support work before 1st social work position
Sally		√		
Joanne			√	
Sam	√			
Julie	√			
Phoebe	√			
Rebecca	√			
Alice				√
Jessica	√			

> It's a hard one … my job is to assess suicide risk of people and assess their mental state, so that's my primary sort of task. But if I worked in a different job, I would explain it differently again.

During field education, participants were inspired by social workers and field educators/supervisors who demonstrated authenticity, relationship building and creative problem solving as key aspects of their professional identities. Julie explained, "she was so assertive and confident without being confrontational"; Sally admired, "the respect she has for people and clients, and I've seen their respect for her, and I think that stands out". Participants concluded that the qualities contributing to professional relationships began with a "passion for people", and that social workers and supervisors displayed "empathy", "warmth", and "genuineness". Creative problem solvers within the confines of policy and procedure, Jessica concluded were: "social workers who look outside the box and find different ways of getting around hard situations".

"Self-determination", "social justice", and "advocating for human rights" were highlighted as important components of the participants' professional identities. "Cultural competency" was touched on by two participants who worked in Kaupapa Māori and Pacific organisations whilst identifying as Pākehā. They held a desire to build on the foundational knowledge of cultural competence gained through their studies. Having "integrity" also strongly underpinned participants' social work identity. Some participants acknowledged social work identity through outcomes achieved with clients, the breadth of their field or practice specific roles and the daily tasks that they performed. Outcomes were expressed as "finding positive paths" to help those who were having challenges, "empowering" people to make change, and "advocating" for those who were disadvantaged.

In effect, a social work identity results from a process of understanding oneself as a social worker, underpinned by collective values that are articulated through the various roles and fields of practice social workers work within.

Transitional adjustment to a professional identity

The transition and adjustment to professional status required participants to come to terms with the tension between their initial expectations and the realities of social work. Table 2 provides information about participants' experience.

The time and effort invested in the orientation process by the participants'

organisations provided the first impression of professional work. Three participants felt satisfied, Alice received one day of orientation, that included online learning and then adequate time to observe staff before "easing" into the role. Phoebe felt that she was given enough time to settle in and appreciated that "the rest of the team were really supportive in taking me out on visits". Sam had 12 days spread over 6 weeks. In contrast, five participants felt dissatisfied. One described "… an utter nightmare and it was a big déjà vu from my placement … so I researched a lot". One participant would have preferred a mentor, and Sally who had previous social work experience implied assumptions were made when she asserted "… you know… stop! I need to actually get a bit more orientation stuff going".

Two participants indicated their organisation had expected them to manage the role and responsibilities from the day they began. For example, Julie recalled: "I remember my first day and the process, there was no process; there was no welcome … I'm supposed to come in here and do this job". Similarly, Joanne described the fear she felt as, "[i]t was a trial by fire".

Two participants worked for the same organisation in different sites and reflected on their initial work experiences. Jessica said:

> … that environment to go in with, with no guidance and to be dealing with very serious situations, where the decisions you make severely affect children and their families was a lot of responsibility … and I really needed somebody to be working alongside me with that, not just to be on my own.

Sam held a caseload by the second week due to staff shortages, but he felt able to meet the challenge due to the support of his supervisor.

> It definitely helped me to hit the ground running and to learn a lot more quickly on the go, but it meant that a lot of the cases were more prone to mistakes because I didn't know the processes …

Participants revealed additional challenges upon leaving the safety of the student space and going into their employing organisations. Four participants, two from the health sector and two from small NGOs, reflected on the difficulties of working within a multi-disciplinary team, feeling under-utilised because other team members did not have a clear understanding of their knowledge and skills. Four participants were so disillusioned with the unsupported transition and adjustment into their social work roles that they considered finding alternative employment. Jessica conceded that:

> It was terrible at the beginning, I was seriously thinking about leaving, I wondered if it was the right job for me, I was very stressed, I couldn't separate work from home and I, I was lost … I was completely lost in the first six months.

The various emotional impacts reflected in the participants' experiences highlighted the importance of organisations to provide supportive structures to assist NQSWs navigate this transitional period and invest in professional identity development. Without these structures in place, job retention, stress, and burnout negatively impacted on participants' social work identity.

Supervision that develops professional identity

The supervisory relationship, the environment, reflective learning, and the importance of emotional safety to build resiliency were identified as elements that supported the participants constructing their professional identities.

The foundation for a supervisory relationship begins with a supervision contract. All the participants had been introduced to a supervision contract during their field education so were aware of the formality and

context of the process. Participants articulated that the act of sitting down and talking about the contract in the first supervision session was a positive approach to building a relationship. Key areas within the contract were reported as "time, frequency", and "no interruption"; the working alliance "outlines basic expectations of supervisor and my own expectations"; and sessional format "check for me, client practice needs and then agency-related matters".

Trust within the supervisory relationship was emphasised as an important element for effective supervision. Sam spoke of his "connection" with an internal supervisor he could be open and honest with by saying:

> … I was able to trust her with a lot of the struggles that I was going through … telling her how I am feeling. It's just really supportive in the really practical ways of when I just don't feel like I can do a task my supervisors have always sort of stepped in and said don't worry, I've got it, let me help you and so I've found that really good when things get stressful.

A supervision relationship built on trust provided the context within which practice issues could be confidently explored without fear or shame and participants could learn and make meaning of those experiences.

The supervision environment was regarded by participants as the space they could concentrate on themselves rather than the service they were providing or the organisation they were accountable to. Sally said, "to get some headspace and get out of that busy world". Supervision was a reflective time in a quiet and secure setting, Pheobe stated, "I think about what I am thinking". Participants felt that supervision provided an opportunity for examining themselves and aspects of their professional identity, Sam described this as a place to "check myself". All the participants stated that supervision was the structure that provided quality assurance, (demonstrating professional social work with clients), and ensured that organisational policies and procedures were followed. Sally referred to this as "dotting of the Is and crossing of the Ts". This also provided confidence and reassurance to participants, that they expressed as: "on the right track", "slowed me down" and "I've done my job right".

Supervision provided the participants with essential learning and development opportunities that ensured the ongoing construction and reshaping of their professional identities. Reflecting upon practice was considered key to developing growth and competence, and whilst knowledge and skill were gained during training, these were re-shaped by cumulative experiences that were discussed in supervision. Rebecca stated:

> I try to be reflective throughout but it's a forced reflection and its reflection with somebody, articulating how I practise and what I'm happy with or what I'm not happy with, or I will do differently next time … it really helps to have the space to do that.

Taking ownership of their thoughts empowered participants to facilitate their learning, rather than being told what to do. Having the ability to reflect on their practice enabled participants to discover how they were reacting to experiences, to make changes that re-shaped their professional identities. Julie articulated this as: "it's giving me the confidence to and opportunity to reflect on what I do and find my own words for it".

Receiving feedback was an important aspect of the supervisory relationship for participants. Validating feedback was necessary to build confidence and have reassurance that they were providing effective services for clients. Phoebe described how validation gave her "peace of mind" when going home at the end of the working day. Similarly, Julie acknowledged

the importance of validating feedback, but also recognised the importance of being challenged in supervision which enabled personal growth and development as a NQSW. Receiving challenging feedback in supervision regarding unconscious behaviours provided Sam with valuable learning opportunities:

> I definitely learn a lot from it but it's the most uncomfortable feeling to realise that on top of everything else the way I am responding to a case or a situation is not the wisest or the safest or the healthiest … I need to be mindful of that … I need to deal with myself.

Participants identified supervision as a positive activity that provided the support and guidance needed to navigate the first years of practising social work. However, there were challenges for them in engaging in supervision that supported their professional identity development. Individual supervision for most participants was contracted in their first year of practice to occur either weekly or fortnightly, however, only two reported this arrangement had been consistent. Jessica, for example reflected on one of her earlier experiences which had emotionally impacted on her to the extent that she considered leaving the organisation:

> I would have to arrange the supervision—she never arranged it; I would have to fight to get it and it worked out to be about once every month, once every six weeks.

Similarly, two participants had to "fight" to even receive supervision, as "it wasn't a given". These participants were employed in non-government organisations and had to produce ANZASW policies to convince managers to invest in external supervision.

Even with these challenges, the participants were unanimous in identifying effective supervision as an influential process in constructing their professional identities.

Discussion

The findings of this small-scale study indicate that professional identity is conceptualised by NQSWs through a process of integrating their personal and professional selves and locating themselves within their unique practice frameworks. Observing varying styles of working, learning from role models and embracing opportunities for experiential learning influenced the participants in their perception, development, and realisation of their professional identities.

As social work students construct their professional identities during tertiary studies, they are influenced through field education. This process of professional socialisation provides students with the opportunity to observe the learning from the classroom modelled in practice (Wheeler, 2017). The influence of role modelling, shadowing, and conversations with experienced social workers makes a significant contribution in shaping professional identities. With the shift into a paid social work role, experiencing theory transferred into practice provides NQSWs with the opportunity to analyse other people's social work identities as well as gain a greater understanding of their own. Essentially, role modelling through practice and supervision, supports them to "gradually think, act and feel like a social worker" (Webb, 2017, p. 7).

Transitional change is experienced in various ways, bringing different levels of satisfaction for NQSWs moving from student to employee roles. How this evolves is dependent on the organisational context and the supportive structures in place for NQSWs to adjust to their new professional status. Consolidating their professional identity brings initial challenges that test NQSWs' resilience and confidence as the tension between ideal and real practice becomes more apparent (Newberry-Koroluk, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2014).

For participants in this study, starting their professional jobs with little or no orientation, with an expectation they would carry out the role and responsibilities from the first day caused stress, fear and anxiety regarding their performance and competency, exacerbated uncertainty, reduced confidence levels, and diminished job satisfaction, negatively impacting on their view of themselves as social workers. As the literature suggests, without supportive structures in place, this phase is challenging (Manthorpe et al., 2015). Therefore, there is a need for ongoing intensive support during this transitional period so that NQSWs can consolidate their professional identity with a growing sense of belonging, attachment to the social work profession and enthusiasm for their work.

Regular, frequent, and well organised supervision has been identified in the literature as a pivotal supportive learning environment that actively encourages the continuous development of professional judgment and skills. All participants in the study had been involved in supervision during field education, therefore, theoretically and through their student experience, had some knowledge of the process (Hay et al.,2019). Once in practice, negotiating a clear contract for supervision formalised the process, reflecting the significance of the activity and the active participation by both parties. Contracts are consistently identified in supervision literature as establishing organisational guidelines and clear role boundaries within the relationship (Davys & Beddoe, 2021; Morrison, 2005). As the narratives of the participants highlighted, the contract loses integrity when it fails to transfer into practice and the NQSW may become disillusioned and disengage with the process.

A combination of relational and environmental factors in the supervisory relationship enhanced the development of participants' professional identities. Davys and Beddoe (2021, p. 74) describe a "virtuous cycle of trust" process in the development of the working relationship. When the supervisor is responsive and respectful and there is shared investment within the relationship, this encourages the supervisee to be open and willing to share their work. This positive behaviour strengthens regard and respect from the supervisor because the practice of sharing fosters trust and mutual respect within the relationship (Thomas, 2022). The negative effects experienced by some of the participants in their supervisory relationship resulted from inconsistent sessions, lack of respect for the role of supervision, and a lack of guidance. Disrespecting participants' needs resulted in frustration, anger, and mistrust.

Quality supervision reassures NQSWs that they are practising social work with clients safely and are carrying out their roles and responsibilities professionally. As foundational knowledge and skills continue to develop through experience, having a support structure to explore and make sense of their practice with clients provides impetus for confidence and belief in themselves to grow (Hunt et al., 2017). Through reflection, NQSWs can discuss dilemmas, behaviours, and ethical issues, allowing for ongoing learning, as well as exploring feelings and emotions safely to gain a greater sense of themselves (Beddoe et al., 2020). Supporting NQSWs to explore difficulties and resolve conflicts helps to build resilience to navigate stressed and chaotic organisational contexts (Beddoe et al., 2014). Participants in the study valued the monitoring aspect of supervision as it provided reassurance they were performing to the expectations of organisational policy and procedures.

Participants acknowledged that receiving challenging feedback within supervision provided valuable learning opportunities. Heron (2001, p. 59) referred to challenging feedback as "uncomfortable truths" that are aimed at promoting change through

consciousness-raising. When Sam was confronted with aspects of himself that he had not previously been aware of, this provided a state of dissonance. Davys and Beddoe (2021) maintained that, through the supervision process of resolving the unsettledness, learning takes place and behavioural change occurs which, in turn, assists the re-shaping of professional identity.

Participants in the current study found that supervision provided the best environment for them to effectively explore their practice. Social work organisations are crowded, noisy and stressful environments, whereas supervision allows for doors to be closed and a quiet space that invites focussed conversation to be created (Davys & Beddoe 2021). Tsui (2005) maintained the physical setting for sessions affects workers' behaviour. Therefore, the space that a session takes place in matters, for example, the venue and physical properties like lighting and furniture arrangements. When sessions are private and uninterrupted, this encourages concentrated time that is conducive to open and honest discussion.

Regular supervision is an essential part of professional practice that is fundamentally linked to NQSWs' wellbeing and practice safety (Moriarty et al., 2011). Participants employed in government departments reported that inconsistent formal supervision sessions had impacted negatively on their developing professional identities. Their comments echo Manthorpe et al.'s (2015) study which found that when receiving infrequent supervision, NQSWs felt overwhelmed, experienced poorer working conditions and were less engaged in their work. Further, participants working in the NGO sector reported having to "fight" for the entitlement of supervision due to financial and resourcing constraints. The SWRB and ANZASW supervision policies specify that supervision supports professional social work practice and, as such, is fundamental to maintaining professional identity (ANZASW, 2016; SWRB, 2018). Essentially, supervision is a resource that social workers claim as part of their professional identity. Having to advocate for the right to have supervision de-values this assertion and puts NQSWs' practice and wellbeing at risk. Social work is a challenging profession carried out in an increasingly complex environment. When the environment provides barriers or denies access to supervision that NQSWs believe they are entitled to, and identify with, this inhibits their ability to develop and grow their professional identities.

Limitations

The qualitative design of the study was subject to limitations. Although the sample represented a range of characteristics, only a small number of participants' viewpoints provided the data and thus it cannot be generalised to other NQSWs. All participants identified as tauiwi (non-Māori, other peoples). The lens through which they understood their experiences therefore did not encompass concepts of Te Ao Māori.

Recommendations for further study

There are several recommendations to come out of this small-scale study. Considering the impact field education mentors and supervisors role modelling of professional identities has on social work students, exploring this in the context of identity formation and socialisation into the profession would make an important contribution. Using a larger representative sample would capture a more diverse cross-section of NQSWs, reflecting the values and experiences of those from a range of training institutes, multicultural backgrounds, gender, urban and rural settings, and fields of practice. It would be particularly valuable to consider how Māori and Pasifika NQSWs conceptualise their professional identities. Additionally, research into the ways in which workers who have registered through the experience pathway (SWRB, section 13)

conceptualise their professional identities would add to the richness of the literature around this important aspect of developing practice.

In line with the literature explored here, the study suggests supervision plays a vital role in professional identity development and the transitional phase of NQSWs adjusting to professional work. Further research could focus on the differences in supervision experiences between NGO and government sectors, how supervisors perceive professional identity and professionalism, how they identify as role models; their skill level; organisational support systems; professional development and training opportunities.

Conclusion

The transition and adjustment to professional work is a crucial developmental stage that ignites a new learning process. This study has highlighted the importance of regular and effective supervision within which NQSWs are able to continue to construct, shape and realise their emerging social work professional identity.

Given the inconsistent experiences of supervision reported by the participants, it is recommended that the SWRB review their supervision policy and consider reinforcing the significance of the activity, identifying specific expectations for professional supervision within the 2000 hours of supervised social work practice required post-qualification. It is recommended that consideration be given to NQSWs having weekly access to supervision in their first-year post-qualifying to ensure safe practice and positive professional identity development.

Raising the profile of supervision and providing clearer expectations has the potential to provide the momentum for government and community organisations to understand and prioritise quality supervision for all NQSWs.

Received: 5 April 2023

Accepted: 8 February 2024

Published: 16 April 2024

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
MIXED METHODS RESEARCH

Social work and telehealth

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The Covid-19 pandemic which swept the world in 2020, and the corresponding measures that were adopted in Australia and New Zealand to keep people safe, had a significant impact on health services delivery. While the pandemic led to serious impacts on mental health, financial circumstances and homelessness, for many social workers, the directive to work from home critically affected their ability to deliver services to vulnerable clients needing ongoing support. Telehealth was adopted by many services that had not previously used this mode of service delivery, which enabled social workers to continue to work with clients.

METHOD: Drawing on a narrative review of literature and a mixed method survey of 208 Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand social workers (71% of whom were from New Zealand), this article describes social workers' experiences in adopting telehealth and their views on how it may continue to be used as a mode of service delivery.

FINDINGS: Social workers note problems such as technology issues, including patchy information and communications technology (ICT) services, particularly in rural areas, and, for some, a necessary reliance on personal equipment; client interactions, including client lack of access to ICT services and equipment; and personal circumstances, including the need to home-school children during the pandemic, and difficulty separating work and personal hours.

CONCLUSIONS: Despite challenges, there was also agreement from many workers that telehealth is a strategy that should be retained because of the benefits for both clients who struggle to attend face-to-face meetings and for workers.

Keywords: Social work; telehealth; Covid-19; ICT

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 102–113.

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By 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic had led to over 6 million deaths and more than 580 million confirmed cases worldwide (WHO, 2022). The extent of the pandemic at that time, its rapid spread and the consequent health outcomes significantly affected social work service delivery. Following the detection and spread of the virus in early January 2020, countries across the world began instituting lockdowns, mandating that people stay at home. This paper focuses on Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, home for the authors, where the first major lockdowns occurred in March and April 2020. These required people to stay at home, not use public transport and limit outside activity. Planes were grounded, and businesses and schools closed. Workers across several employment environments, other than those deemed essential, were instructed to work from home and/or take leave. The closure of services and businesses led to many having their employment terminated.

These significant disruptions to economic activity led to a complete rethink of the way

services could be delivered at a time when it was largely deemed unsafe for workers to attend workplaces (Ashley et al., 2022). Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand social workers were not immune from these workplace disruptions and, like their social work colleagues elsewhere, were advised to work at a distance and to limit their interactions with clients (see, for example, Alston et al., 2022; Barsky, 2020; Dominelli, 2020; Gergerich et al., 2020).

This article addresses one significant change instituted by social workers across the world—the introduction of telehealth, or the delivery of services via information and communications technology (ICT) including by Zoom, teams and telephone, into areas of social work practice that had previously relied on social workers conducting face-to-face interactions with clients, colleagues and managers (Banks et al., 2020; Mishna Sanders et al., 2021; Mishna, Milne et al., 2021). While telehealth had previously been widely used in some areas of practice, including particularly health service delivery and telephone counselling services, Covid-19, and the lockdowns that accompanied it, exposed the need for social workers in other fields of practice to consider the use of telehealth service delivery and to address the ethical issues associated with delivering services to vulnerable people via on-line means.

This article examines the impacts of these changes on social work practice. From a long-standing commitment to face-to-face practice, many social workers moved to a necessary reliance on ICT to stay in touch with vulnerable clients, and with colleagues and managers. Drawing on a survey of social workers in Australia and New Zealand undertaken in 2020, we explore the views of social workers concerning telehealth, their initial reluctance to use ICT, how they overcame their ethical concerns, and the outcomes of the development of telehealth on their practice. We outline the way social workers and their organisations stayed in touch with clients, while at the same time maintaining an optimal level of services. We note the perceived positive and negative aspects of IT service delivery, but also the changes in the ways social workers have adjusted their practice.

While our overarching aim in the survey was to examine the impact of Covid-19 on social workers (see Alston et al., 2022), our focus here is an examination of the impacts of the increased use of ICT on social work practice during the pandemic. More particularly we ask—did the initial reluctance of social workers disappear when face-to-face work became untenable? Finally, we examine what these views might mean for the future of social work service delivery.

Social work response—initial reluctance to adopt ICT

Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand researchers note the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of social workers to deliver services as they had previously done. For example, Frey and Balmer (2021), writing on the impacts on New Zealand workers operating in a palliative care setting noted that the need to keep people isolated during the pandemic lockdown had a significant impact on patients, family and staff. Nonetheless, and demonstrating their initial reluctance, they noted that "allied health services transitioned to electronic communication where possible" (Frey & Balmer 2021, p. 4171). Similarly, Reay et al. (2021), drawing on their Australian experience noted that Australian mental health services experienced a sharp increase in mental health consultations and that 37% of these were necessarily conducted by telehealth.

International literature exposes the fact that Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand social workers were not alone in their dilemmas regarding the use of ICT. Harikari et al. (2021, p. 1644), in a Finnish context, described the significant degree of reluctance on the part of social workers to deliver what they refer to as "emotional work at a

distance" via telehealth. This led to much soul-searching for social workers whose practice relies on their ability to work with clients in close proximity, to undertake home visits, to build relationships and to respond to non-verbal cues.

Additionally, legitimate reluctance was based on very real concerns about the need to maintain privacy and safety (Banks et al., 2020; Barsky, 2020), to develop empathetic relationships (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2020), to maintain confidentiality (Csoba & Diebel, 2020), and to credibly read emotional responses (Dominelli, 2020). Workers worried that limited access to IT would impact their ability to deliver services to very vulnerable groups including the aged (Arthur-Holmes et al., 2020), those who are homeless, children in out of home care (Banks, 2020), the very ill, those critically ill Covid-19 patients who were restricted from seeing their family (Baker et al., 2021), and those struggling with mental health and opioid dependency that had reached crisis point during the lockdowns (Kim & Tesmer, 2021). From a cultural perspective, Hollis-English (2015) also noted social workers' deep commitment to face-to-face engagement to enhance the authenticity of the encounter.

Nonetheless, international researchers note that the driving force behind the need to find a solution was the very clear evidence of the 'essentiality' of social work services during a global pandemic, as described by Norwegian writer, Aaslund (2021, p. 375). She noted that the work of social workers was viewed as critical given the many people who were suffering. Nonetheless, factors associated with service users' inability to access services, workers needing to work from home, and increasing homelessness, health and mental health problems and poverty led to a rapid rethink of health service delivery in general, and social work service delivery in particular. Put simply and bluntly, despite the challenges, IT service delivery was adopted because of the necessity to maintain contact with vulnerable clients who needed services.

'Taming the technology'—going on-line

Consequently, the adoption of IT services in social work practice occurred across the world in 2020. For example, social workers in Albania immediately went on-line with various programs (Dauti et al., 2020). Archer-Kuhn (2020, p. 1010) noted that Canadians "embraced technology and found excitement in innovation through collaboration". Yet, in various countries, it was not necessarily a smooth transition for social workers and their clients. In fact, the way the technology was incorporated required significant adjustments, not only to practice but also to the way the technology was used. Aasback and Rokkum (2021, p.172), writing from a Norwegian perspective, noted that the technology had to be "tamed" and adapted to the needs and requirements of social work including facilitating the building of community and enhancing capacity for virtual interactions with clients. Israeli researcher Itzhaki-Braun (2021) noted that the crisis could be viewed as an opportunity, although one that recognises the challenges for social workers.

In a study of over 4000 social workers in Canada, UK, Israel and the United States of America (USA), Mishna, Sanders et al. (2021) argued that boundaries needed to be instituted because the adoption of technologies was so widespread and done with such haste that social workers were finding themselves on call all the time. Further, writing in the introduction to a special edition of the journal *Qualitative Social Work* (Aaslund, 2021, p.375) noted that, as feared, "the transition from face-to-face interactions to face to screen ones" did not enable informal relationship building or observational clues, and that "all were casualties of interpersonal social work practice during the pandemic". US researchers Abrams and Dettlaff (2020,

p. 302) suggested that social workers on the frontlines of the pandemic crisis were "building the bridge as we cross it." While Pink et al. (2020), reporting on their study with English social workers, suggested that workers shifted to digital engagement whilst still trying to maintain the same level of intimacy. Nonetheless, on a more positive note, Chinese researchers Ren et al. (2022) noted that, in moving to digital delivery, a surprising result was that social workers were now responding to new needs and new service user groups.

While these outcomes were widely noted, writers such as USA-based Disney et al. (2021), in discussing the work of mental health clinicians working with refugees, note positive and negative impacts of the move to telehealth. Negatives centred around difficulties with communication, technology access, and reading non-verbal cues. However, they also noted that telehealth services could ameliorate the lack of transportation and limited access to services in local areas. Nonetheless they indicate there were multiple barriers, including staff and client resistance, lack of training, technology access issues, and problems ensuring clients paid for services.

Others suggested limited IT access for some could be problematic. For example, Arthur-Holmes et al. (2020) noted that the difficulties for older people in Ghana trying to access services had led to many dropping out of the health care system. Further, Gibson et al.(2020, p. 671) suggested that, while older people in the US are more likely to be vulnerable to Covid-19 and poorer health outcomes, it is "a matter of social justice that they have less access to technologies and can become particularly isolated". This echoes concerns about client access to IT services and problems associated with patchy internet services in rural areas of Australia (Alston et al., 2022) and remote areas of Finland (Harrikari et al., 2021), where infrastructure available to access and deliver telehealth services is limited.

Adjusting to the ICT environment—A new appreciation?

However, while there were widespread concerns about the introduction of technology into the work environment, English researchers Cook and Zschomler (2020, p. 401) noted that, after the first two weeks, "the mood began to change", there was "greater optimism about the opportunities afforded by virtual practice" and there appeared to be an enhanced ability to have check-ins with clients "little and often". They also noted that, while there was still an acknowledgement of the difficulties associated with the introduction of telehealth measures, there was a much greater acknowledgement of the benefits and opportunities. This was also indicated by US researcher Cristsofalo (2021), who points to the benefits for workers and clients including increased access to services and the enhanced capacity it provides for the mental health system.

> Those who are disabled, homebound, have no access to, or cannot afford transportation or childcare, live in rural areas, or cannot travel outside their homes due to medical or mental health conditions currently have more access to health and psychosocial services in many cases. (Cristofalo, 2021, p. 401)

Challenges

However, while acknowledging the benefits, Cristofalo (2021) did not shy away from noting potential inherent problems, including a lack of effective technology. She cautioned not to abandon social work values in the rush to adopt this mode of delivery post-pandemic; to maintain vigilance in the context of the health care environment; and to guard against potential restrictions on face-to-face services that might be imposed by bureaucrats in the future. In summing up, Chinese writers Ren et al. (2022) noted that social workers have adapted technology to their purposes by responding to new Covid-19 related issues in their communities

by changing the resources at their disposal and working with other health professionals and policy makers to achieve more beneficial results. These experiences gave impetus to us as we became keen to explore the experiences of Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand social workers adapting to the pandemic environment.

The Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand research

Methodology

A survey was undertaken by a group of social work scholars based in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. This group (the Australasian Social Work Disaster Network) have been meeting periodically for several years via Zoom technology to discuss their shared interest and research on the increasing social impacts of disasters and the role of social workers in this space. In late 2020, the network turned their attention to the impact of Covid-19, noting that, across their countries, the pandemic was impacting the capacity of social workers to deliver services during the lockdown periods.

Method

Given the likelihood of further lockdowns, and the difficulties this would create if trying to do face-to-face interviews and/or focus groups, the group determined to conduct an on-line survey with social workers in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The survey was made available between October and December 2020 after workers in both countries had emerged from the first strict lengthy lockdown experience. The questionnaire was designed to cover a broad spectrum of issues including the personal, professional and practical impacts of the pandemic and an analysis of various aspects of the data has been published (Alston et al., 2022). Nonetheless, one of the critical issues referred to by social workers who completed the survey was the rapid impact of on-line delivery of services. In this paper we are focused particularly on this issue and the way social workers adjusted their practice.

Of particular relevance to this paper is that a number of qualitative questions gave scope for respondents to provide more detail on the issues emerging in their practice, the impact of Covid-19 on the organisation and work environment, changes made to practice, and the personal and professional impacts of Covid-19. While we are aware that using qualitative questions in a quantitative survey can be viewed as problematic, we note Boussat et al.'s (2018) view that qualitative comments in quantitative surveys allow a richer understanding of the topic. Notably, a majority of respondents to our survey constructed lengthy replies to qualitative questions, indicating their intense interest in the changes to practice delivery.

Ethics

The questionnaire and the research project were approved by the University of Newcastle ethics committee and responses were collected between October 2020 and December 2020. At this time, both countries had emerged from lengthy lockdowns and additional lockdowns had not yet occurred. This gave respondents the chance to reflect on their hasty introduction of on-line service delivery during the lockdown period in early to mid-2020; the challenges of on-line delivery; and their perspectives of this mode of delivery into the future.

Recruitment

Information about the online access questionnaire was disseminated through national social work bodies in both countries, via the Australia and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research body (ANZSWWER), and the Social Workers Registration Board in New Zealand. A total of 208 respondents completed the survey, 148 (71%) of these were from New Zealand and 60 (29%) from Australia. It would appear that a significant reason for this discrepancy is the policy of the Australian Association of Social Work not to distribute information about research due to the volume of requests.

Table 1 Characteristics of the Respondents

Country	Australia -29%	New Zealand – 71%
Sex	Female 84%	Male 16%
Caring responsibilities	Yes 45%	No 55%
Full-time work	Yes 75%	No 25%
Worked from home during lockdown?	Yes 60%	No 40%
ICT during lockdown?	Yes 78%	No 22%
ICT first time?	Yes 32%	No 68%
Issues with ICT?	Yes 44%	No 56%

Analysis

Quantitative data were managed using SPSS to produce descriptive data. The narrative qualitative responses were collated and downloaded into Word files and thematically analysed. This thematic analysis followed Braun and Clark's six steps—familiarisation with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes and generating a map of the analysis; refining and developing clear definitions and names for each theme "and the overall story the analysis tells", and reporting (2006, p. 87).

About the sample

Of the 208 social workers who completed the survey, a vast majority were female (84%), nearly half had caring responsibilities (45%) and most worked full-time (75%). In total, 60% of respondents noted they had been working from home for at least some of their time during lockdown and 78% that they had been using technology for telehealth services and work meetings. Nearly one-third (32%) noted that this was the first time they had relied on technology for work purposes and 44% suggested that they had experienced some problems. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the respondents.

Maintaining service delivery during Covid 19—initial reluctance

Like their international colleagues, the onset of Covid-19 interrupted the capacity of Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand social workers to continue delivering services to vulnerable clients. Workers noted that developing, maintaining and monitoring in-depth relationships was particularly problematic and that there were several activities and programmes that were closed or reshaped during lockdowns. These included group programmes, transporting clients in cars, home visits, and, for social workers working in the health field, the abandonment of outpatient services and outreach clinics. Those employed in crisis services explained that their service was reduced to crisis work only, and many pointed out that court hearings were delayed with consequent negative outcomes for clients. Those client groups particularly impacted by these changes included older people, those suffering from mental health issues, children in care, and the very ill.

Social workers confirmed that some clients were experiencing mental health issues, and that increasing rates of homelessness, financial difficulties, and family violence were evident. They noted that the psychological wellbeing of many clients was poor; that they were seeing more care and protection orders; that there were longer waiting lists; there was a need for increased emotional and psychological support particularly for older people; and an increase in clients seeking food support. These factors posed challenges for social workers who were delivering services to vulnerable people during a time when they were unable to meet face-to-face and telehealth was the only option. Respondent 3, a worker in a

family support service, pointed to problems associated with a reliance on technology to reach vulnerable clients:

> Our biggest challenge has been servicing clients with significant mental health presentations when face to face work was not possible and when they did not have access to technology. It has [also] been challenging to safety plan for families where children are at risk and families did not want to engage. (Respondent 3)

There was a general feeling that the introduction of service delivery via ICT was disruptive for clients, and difficult for staff and managers to adapt to—particularly when working from home. However, respondents noted that the lockdowns had created an opportunity for workers and clients to learn new skills and to try a different approach. For example, Respondent 115, a worker in a brain injury unit, suggested that, while various groups were disadvantaged by the changes, it had allowed staff and clients to upskill in the use of technology:

> A lot of service delivery moved to the virtual world thus it had a positive impact upskilling both clients and professionals.

A manager in a palliative care unit (Respondent 112) raised the difficulties associated with keeping in touch with staff who were working from home:

> I had to work hard to keep messaging and coms clear and offer additional support to staff to make sure they were well-informed and supported to interpret lockdown rules … and to manage fears and concerns raised about the reduced ability to support clients.

Taming the technology? — challenges and opportunities

The most cited impacts related to increased working from home and changes in patterns of work including changes in meeting arrangements and team support. In total, 60% noted that they had worked from home for at least part of their working weeks during lockdowns. Consequences of this practice noted by respondents were less peer-to-peer interaction, fewer opportunities to debrief with colleagues, lower morale, less cohesive teams and less trust. Workers reported a lack of engagement amongst some clients, a reduced ability when working with clients on-line to understand how they are coping or to be able to assess child safety concerns.

> Have been unable to visit children in care or to respond to high-risk situations. Children have no eyes on them as they are not at school. (Respondent 22, child protection worker)

They also noted that many clients lacked access to technology, or had problems associated with inadequate Wi-fi services and that there was less capacity to engage clients in group work.

> We struggled working remotely but got used to it, then as the [lockdown] levels dropped we had to rebuild trust again. My practice became lazy and I relied heavily on emails and phone calls. (Respondent 74, a domestic violence worker)

Workers reported that their work had become more fast-paced; that services were more stretched; that stakeholders had become more demanding; that there were less staff and so, more pressure; that some were carrying out work outside their expertise; that they needed to be more alert to the health of their clients; and that at times they felt they had to decide between the needs of different clients who might be equally vulnerable.

Some noted levels of burnout, being more stressed and needing more support. Others noted experiences of vicarious trauma, feeling less resilient, having reduced empathy and, a very few, experiencing physical pain

because of improper working equipment. For those juggling work and the overseeing of children's home schooling, these noted particularly complex levels of stress.

Respondent 44, a child protection worker, referred to the physical problems associated with having inadequate office facilities and pointed to the way her work and family roles were difficult to separate, particularly when home schooling was involved, causing significant stress:

> I got muscle pain, headache, uncomfortable pain in my hands due to improper work equipment … stress build up as juggling with different roles at the same time—teacher, mother, social worker. (Respondent 44, child protection worker)

Nonetheless, like their international colleagues, Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand workers noted that, over time, they began to adapt to the new environment in a positive way. Respondent 161, a community oncology social worker, commented that:

> Initially [working from home] was a big change, feeling more isolated from colleagues, less casual collaboration and support. Now the improved work-life balance is making it more challenging to go back. Further, she noted that, in a way Covid had a positive impact of pushing us to develop on-line services and video chat services.

Others reported that they had experienced very positive changes including more upskilling of staff in on-line platforms, more remote delivery of services enabling clients to continue to be supported, more training, a more flexible workplace, less wasting of time, more efficiencies emerging through the virtual platform, an increased capacity to work creatively and being less reactive in their approach to clients. Respondent 50, a child protection worker, pointed to the way that the changes to work practices had improved their service.

> We have learnt to work differently, and this has actually been better in many respects. (Respondent 50, child protection worker)

What appears evident is that several organisations and their social work employees began to adapt and adopt telehealth measures that had led to efficiencies. Like their international counterparts, workers indicated their own gradual movement to a new appreciation of the possibilities of telehealth.

> Initially very stressful … however the staff that did work through worked the best I have seen them. Collegially everyone got on well, pulled together and were flexible when needing to work in a different way. (Respondent 94, mental health worker)

Respondent 63 noted that telehealth has been embraced by her organisation. However, she does offer some reservations about the impact on collegiality.

> We are now a remote working capable agency—all staff have laptops, mobile phones, but it has meant we are isolated, connection and relationships don't feel as strong, we don't have our own office space like before. (Respondent 63, Whanau [i.e., family] development worker)

While many workers noted the isolation and difficulties associated with working from home, there were others who were enthusiastic. A group home worker (Respondent 130) noted "working from home was a big relief and I enjoyed it". A family social worker (Respondent 139) also supported the new working from home regime noting, "we were all able to work from home during lockdown. The work from home policy has since been developed. Our organisation is using smarter working habits developed during lockdown."

However, mirroring concerns expressed by social workers elsewhere about

management changing and reducing access rules, Respondent 142 cautioned that the introduction of telehealth services had led to management challenging home visiting policies.

> We are very management led and we [had to explain] why we needed to see clients. [This] affected social work practice by continually explaining to management the reasoning for contact.

Other significant areas of concern raised by respondents related particularly to access to IT services in rural and remote areas. Respondent 177 working in education noted "the inconsistent IT has been frustrating".

Taming the technology for social work practice

When workers were asked to respond to the practice changes resulting from lockdowns they planned to maintain, a majority (79%) of survey participants chose to answer this question and a surprising response emerged. Despite the challenges posed by telehealth, many workers acknowledged its benefits. Perhaps surprisingly, given the profession's long-standing rejection of telehealth, more than half (53%) noted that telehealth was the practice they wanted most to keep. The reasons for this included particularly that it was helpful for clients not to have to travel, and this was particularly pertinent for social workers dealing with rural clients. Several respondents such as Respondent 3 gave detailed responses to support this view:

> Offering clients the option and ability to communicate and participate via platforms such as Skype, Zoom and Teams, particularly for distant and remote clients, or clients having difficulty accessing support [will be retained]. (Respondent 3, a family worker)

A second reason for retaining telehealth measures noted by several respondents, including respondent 83, was that it was more efficient to run meetings and formal staff contacts:

> Meetings were carried out by Zoom and some have never gone back to in-person meetings. (Respondent 83, a health social worker)

Telehealth opens up the possibility of working from home and this was seen as a very positive benefit by 13% of respondents who argued for the retention of telehealth noting that this would enable more home-based opportunities.

> More working from home and meetings over technology. Makes you keep everything to task and saves a lot of time. More efficient. (Respondent 25, child protection worker)

There was strong support for a continuation of the working from home policy as long as it was supported by adequate IT access. Workers noted that working from home saves time, makes them work more efficiently and builds trust within the organisation, as noted by respondent 50:

> More people are working from home and staff are being trusted to complete work outside of the office. (Respondent 50, child protection worker)

A third reason given for the retention of telehealth related to social workers wanting to develop skills in telehealth.

> … the lockdown [acted] as a lever to encourage social workers to use technology. (Respondent 120, private practitioner)

Discussion

Despite social workers traditionally being deeply committed to face-to-face service delivery, the arrival of a global pandemic, and consequent lockdown policies, necessarily changed the way social workers approached their interactions with vulnerable clients. Mandatory lockdown procedures during the pandemic led to an inability to work with clients face-to-face and

a rapid reappraisal of the way services could be delivered. The lockdowns created, at first, confusion, followed by an initial resistance to undertaking practice at a distance and then a gradual considered adoption of IT options.

Despite major issues concerning sensitivity to client needs and issues with IT access mirroring issues raised elsewhere (Banks et al., 2020; Harrikari et al., 2021), surprising benefits were articulated by Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand social workers. These related largely to the ability to continue to deliver services, to enhanced access for some groups and to the adoption of on-line work practices. While many reverted, post-lock-down, to face-to-face service delivery, it had become obvious that for certain areas of practice, and for those clients who cannot easily access services, on-line delivery is not only possible but can lead to enhanced client relations. While telehealth is not appropriate in some areas of practice, for many a considered continuation of IT service delivery had been maintained by many social work services, and this has opened new opportunities for reshaped practice. This new appreciation of the potential of IT has extended to the maintenance of on-line options for meetings and other staff interactions, and the enhanced ability to work from home when viable. These changes are positive experiences for many workers who noted that this had contributed to better work–life balance. Further the introduction of telehealth options had led to skills development that was valued by workers.

At the same time, studies undertaken elsewhere (see for example, Arthur-Holmes et al., 2020; Disney et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2020; Harrikari et al., 2021) and our research highlight that vulnerable groups such as the aged, those with health issues, the homeless, and those unable to access IT services may be disadvantaged by telehealth. However, for those living in remote areas who have access to ICT, and those who cannot easily access services face to face because of health status or transport difficulties, the research reveals the advantages of enhanced access to services through telehealth.

This research also reveals that if social workers are to adopt and adapt telehealth for their practice, a number of factors must be addressed. These include ensuring vulnerable groups are not disadvantaged; that telehealth does not replace home visits entirely; that face-to-face practice is maintained; that workers have adequate equipment and training; that governments are lobbied to ensure access to internet services is universally available regardless of location; and that there continues to be enhanced services for vulnerable groups. Further, online communication needs to be mindful of cultural processes, for instance, culturally specific introductions and closure processes in online meetings (Te One & Clifford, 2021). Any adaptations in social work on-line service provision must be sensitive to First Nations peoples in Australia and mindful of the principles underpinning Te Tiriti o Waitangi in Aotearoa New Zealand. These include ensuring participation and equity for Māori people (Kidd et al., 2021).

The policy and practice implications emerging from this study include attention to ICT service access for all regardless of location; the optional provision of service delivery assistance and training for those who have no experience with service delivery via ICT; and attention to the standards of services received by vulnerable clients. We are also mindful of Werkmeister et al.'s (2023) research which counsels attention to workers who struggled with separating work from home, and were plagued by inadequate resources and poor planning. We would recommend the need for training and support for workers delivering services via ICT; an assessment and provision of adequate ICT equipment to workers and an appraisal of dangers for vulnerable clients whose behaviour might be being monitored. We would also recommend that delivery of services via ICT should be

mandatory in medical and allied health degrees. Finally, we would particularly caution against any wholesale moves to replace home visits with ICT service delivery.

Conclusion

Telehealth will remain just one factor shaping the way we deliver services into the future, yet it is a factor we must now consider as a very useful addition to social work service delivery. Face-to-face contact will continue as the dominant mode of practice in most areas because of the needs identified in this paper: the need to develop trusting relationships and respond to non-verbal cues, and for client safety and protection. However, this research reveals the need for the profession to consider how we might 'tame the technology' by building carefully on the strengths and advantages of telehealth to enhance social work practice, to improve the work–life balance of workers and to enhance the responsiveness of social workers in an uncertain future. We would argue there is a need for further research on the use of ICT in health service delivery, the impacts on clients, particularly the most vulnerable, and the needs of workers moving into an environment where ICT is becoming more accepted.

Received: 26 July 2023

Accepted: 29 September 2023

Published: 16 April 2024

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

'They are my tribe': How a self-organising women's group built a sisterhood that improved wellbeing and increased social connectedness

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Drawing from a perspective that integrates elements of both subjective and psychological wellbeing, this research explores the experiences of *The Jellies*, a self-organising, all-female open water swimming group. The article outlines how the women's participation in this group created a 'sisterhood' that enhanced and maintained their physical, social and emotional health, social connectedness and affinity for natural aquatic environments ('blue spaces'). This study offers insights into how social workers can act as intermediaries, aiding women in establishing sisterhoods of supportive networks and solidarity.

METHODS: The research employed a thematic analysis to explore the perspectives and experiences of 39 women who belonged to a self-organising, open-water swimming group. Recruitment was through purposeful sampling.

FINDINGS: The research sheds light on the importance of women-only spaces and their contribution to women's overall wellbeing, including fostering a sisterhood of solidarity and mutual support. Swimming provided a context for the women to address their need for physical activity, navigate their emotional landscape and create connections of belonging, support and solidarity. However, culture and gender norms and economic positioning excluded, silenced and marginalised some women from accessing blue spaces.

CONCLUSION: The findings invite social workers to rethink the use of blue spaces as a novel community-building asset and to learn from an organically formed all-women's swimming group about alternative ways to empower and sustain women's overall wellbeing. Social workers can gain insight into how women understand and formalise belonging, and how belonging enables, or not, women to navigate their environmental and emotional geographies.

KEYWORDS: Women; health and wellbeing; blue spaces; social work; sisterhood

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 114–126.

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The World Health Organisation (2016) has highlighted the role of urban natural environments for our health. In recent years, researchers (Denton & Aranda, 2020; Foley, 2015, 2017; Massey et al., 2020; Rousseau & Deschacht, 2020) have also documented the positive physical, cultural, economic and psychosocial wellbeing effects to individuals of 'blue spaces'—that is, aquatic environments, including

participation in swimming. Foley's (2015) qualitative research drew on environmental psychology to map the links between spaces, embodiment, movement, health and wellbeing. Challenging and replacing an androcentric approach to understanding self, society, nature, time and place, and focusing on the interactions between feelings, affects, bodies, matter and places, Foley (2015) concluded that swimming is a committed 'healthy act' drawn from an emotional geography and expressed through relationships—with place, family and others. Olive and Wheaton (2021), in examining relationships between blue spaces, sport, physical activity and wellbeing, have interpreted blue spaces as friendly therapeutic landscapes composed of play and communication. They note the physical, social and spiritual benefits that emerge from both individual and community experiences in blue spaces that enable social interaction and allow individuals to be part of a group.

Researchers who have focused on the immersive experience of swimming claim that it benefits mental health and overall wellbeing. Among these benefits are acute and chronic reductions in negative mood, increases in wellbeing and acute increases in positive mood (Burlingham et al., 2022; Massey et al., 2020). Finlay et al.'s (2015) study into Canadian older adults and de Oliveria et al.'s (2019) examination of elderly Brazilian women's mental health concluded that swimming positively affects the lives of older women and enhances their mental wellbeing; it evokes feelings of renewal, restoration and spiritual connectedness; and it improves stress and anxiety levels, self-esteem and quality of life.

However, researchers also caution against an indiscriminate generalisation of any findings that link age, swimming and enhanced wellbeing across the life span. Kiely et al.'s (2021) Australian longitudinal study examining the associations between social connectedness and mental health, and how these vary by age and gender, concluded that interventions (including blue water activities) that promote social connectedness to improve community mental health need to account for age- and gender-specific patterns, and recognise that poor mental health is a barrier to social participation. Notwithstanding Kiely et al.'s (2021) caution, the positive impact of swimming has been established as a proven contribution of urban environments to physical and mental health and overall wellbeing.

Access to blue spaces, and the positive impact of swimming on wellbeing, have been particularly relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is agreement that the global spread of Covid-19 has had a profound effect on all aspects of society, including mental and physical health (Britton et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Pouso et al., 2021), and on people's access to, and appreciation of, blue spaces. Interrupted access to nature focused people's attention on the 'nearby nature' available during the spatial constraints imposed by a range of lockdown measures across different countries and populations (Atkinson, 2021; Maharja et al., 2023).

Scholars (Britton et al., 2020; Doughty et al., 2023; Foley, 2015, 2017; Maharja et al., 2023) concur that the intentional use of nearby blue spaces and the immersive engagement available through swimming helped to mitigate the negative mental health impacts from the restrictions imposed by local and national authorities during Covid-19. In Australia, Schech et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study into the impact of the pandemic on the multi-dimensional wellbeing of individuals, involving 1002 women aged between 30 and 65. They found that the women's utilisation of blue spaces, and the social connection that blue spaces can provide, often played a key role in maintaining wellbeing. Similarly, Doughty et al.'s (2023) qualitative study of 30 participants, aged between 23 and 67, affirmed the agency of blue spaces as enablers of wellbeing. Humberston's (2022) ethnographic studies

of older New Zealanders and Canadians during Covid-19, regarding access to blue spaces during restrictions, challenged socially and politically constructed notions of old age, and arguments that older individuals are vulnerable and need to be kept socially isolated, as erroneous and serving only to reignite and reinforce negative notions of the aged person as vulnerable. It follows that women of any age can benefit from community-based activities and from access to urban spaces during times of restriction and beyond.

However, while the positive impact of access to blue spaces and swimming are a consistent theme in the literature, there remain groups of women who are excluded from accessing blue spaces because of their race or ethnicity. Woods et al.'s (2022) research into beach drowning prevention among the Australian multicultural community identified a number of gender and cultural constraints that prevent women from diverse backgrounds from accessing swimming. These included an absence of a sense of belonging, pressure to preference culture and cultural responsibilities before exercise, the cost and time involved in frequent beach-going, no (or poor) swimming skills, a lack of formal swimming lessons and a lack of confidence in ocean wave conditions. Sawrikar and Muir's (2010) focus on Muslim women in Australia, and their participation in recreation, found that the women saw recreation as an exclusively white institution, which was a barrier to their involvement. Lenneis et al.'s (2022) Danish study went further. They found that Muslim women who appreciated the connection between swimming and wellbeing and women-only swimming spaces were provided with a sense of belonging. In these spaces, the women felt comfortable and safe and were not only protected from males, but they could also avoid the 'white' gaze they encountered in other situations.

Social workers are not strangers to the feminist constructs of 'sisterhood' and the sisterhood's focus on fostering a sense of community, belonging and support among women, the amplification of women's voices, female empowerment, and acknowledgement and addressing of the intersecting factors that affect women differently based on race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability and other identities (Moran & Mapedzahama, 2023; Olive et al., 2021). Nor are they unfamiliar with the benefits of community-based activities as a means of actioning their mandate to engage, build relationships and participate in activities with community members (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020).

Notwithstanding previous research into the benefits of community-based activities such as singing (Hendry et al., 2022), the arts (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) and the use of community programs to build community assets (Cavaye & Ross, 2019; Ife, 2020)—along with the social interaction (Gao & Sai, 2020; Sokolova & Perez, 2021) and cognitive and emotional freedom provided by women-only spaces (Lenneis et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2015)—little has been done by community social workers to understand how the use of blue spaces by female-only groups can improve physical, social and emotional wellbeing. There is limited research on how such groups can develop sisterhoods that emphasise solidarity and mutual support, and empower and unite women, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Similarly, little Australian research has been done into how social workers can use women's access to blue spaces to bring women together, build sisterhoods that strengthen their bonds, and emphasise interdependence rather than independence between and among women.

The research project described in this article addresses this knowledge gap. By focusing on an all-female, open-water swimming group that initially formed in response to Covid-19 restrictions, the study explored how women swimming with other women

Table 1 Participant Age and Employment Status (N = 39)

Age	In paid employment		
	Yes	No	Prefer not to say
30–39	1		
40–49	6		
50–59	13	5	
60–69	4	3	1
70–79	1	4	
80–89		1	
	25	12	1

Table 2 Participants by Nominated Cultural Background (N = 39)

Cultural background	No. of participants
Australian	23
Anglo-Celtic	3
English	3
Irish	1
Italian	1
New Zealander	2
German	1
Scottish	1
Not disclosed	4
	39

built a sisterhood that improved their physical, social and emotional wellbeing and social interactions. In the following sections, the aims and methods of the study are presented, followed by the findings grouped by theme. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings, and an invitation to social workers to rethink the use of blue spaces to aid women in building community and improving overall wellbeing.

Aims

The aim of this research was to draw on the experiences of *The Jellies*, 39 women located in a bayside suburb in Melbourne, Victoria, who access blue spaces and participate in open water swimming. The research drew on the experiences of these swimmers to investigate what social workers can learn about how women use blue spaces and open water swimming to improve their physical, social and emotional wellbeing, and how such groups can foster sisterhoods that create a sense of community and support among women.

Methods

After the research received university ethics approval (HRE23-119), purposeful sampling was used to invite participants to complete a survey. The survey was distributed via a link posted on *The Jellies' WhatsApp* group chat site. The *WhatsApp* link gave participants access to the *Information to Participant, Consent Form* and *Survey*.

The survey, created with the use of Qualtrics©, comprised both multi-choice and open-ended questions. The multi-choice questions collected data pertaining to the participants' profiles, while the open-ended questions invited participants to share their experiences of belonging to *The Jellies*. Additionally, *The Jellies'* moderator gave permission for the group's *WhatsApp*

Table 3 Women in Paid Employment Status and Time of Swim (n = 24)

Age	Time of swim				
	6:15 a.m.	7:15 a.m.	8:00 a.m.	Varies	Not nominated
Not nominated					2
30–39	1				
40–49	3		1	2	
50–59	5	6			
60–69	1	3			
	10	9	1	2	2

Table 4 Age and Length of Membership (N = 39)

Membership length	Age						Total
	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	
1 year	1	3	4	3	0	0	11
2 years	0	1	3	2	2	0	8
3 years	0	3	10	3	2	0	18
4 years +	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
	1	7	17	8	5	1	39

messages to be accessed during the week of 10 to 16 July 2023. These messages provided a snapshot of both the volume and topics of interaction between *The Jellies* members. This served as a form of data triangulation (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

NVivo 10© software was used to conduct a thematic analysis of the data. This analysis involved several key steps: becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; and defining and naming sematic and latent themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Semantic themes included coding data at a descriptive or surface level participant characteristics such as context, participant age, employment status, cultural background, number of swimming days, motivation for joining *The Jellies*. Coding at the latent level required going beyond the surface level to a deeper level so as to capture deeper, implicit meanings in the data such as contextual codes (e.g., understanding membership within the context of wellbeing), metaphorical codes (e.g. blue space as a symbol of connection) and axial (e.g., relationship between employment and participation) codes. Thematic coding at the latent level identified four themes: *blue space, Covid-19 restrictions and deciding to swim*; *blue space, emotional geography and wellbeing; blue space social connection and wellbeing;* and *blue space, becoming more, changing and finding identities.*

Pseudonyms (an assigned number for each participant) have been used throughout the reporting of data.

Findings

Context

The Jellies is a group of women located in one of Melbourne's bayside suburbs, which has a median income of $1,792 per week (LocalStats, 2023). *The Jellies* was formed during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. During Covid-19 restrictions, limited exercise was allowed to within a five-kilometres radius from the family dwelling. Membership to the group is via word-of-mouth and is formalised, as noted by one participant, through an informal 'welcome' to the *WhatsApp* space. The group numbers 354 women; however, the number who actively participate has been stated to be between 80 ("I'm not sure how many are regulars ... I'd say around 80" – P11) and 150 ("Of 300+ on the app, probably only 1/4 swim regularly" – P2.

Participant profile

Thirty-nine women responded to the survey posted on *The Jellies' WhatsApp* page during the week of 3 to 25 July 2023. The participants' ages ranged from 30+ to 80+ years, and membership in the group was between one and four years (Table 1). The age group most represented was 50–59 years (middle adulthood). The majority of the 50–59-year-old participants were in paid employment (Table 1).

The participants' cultural backgrounds were predominantly Australian or European (Table 2). The profile reflected ancestries published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2021) for the suburb (English

Table 5 Swimming Pattern by Age Group (N = 38)

Swimming days per week	Age						Total
	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	
1 day	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
3 days	1	3	4	4	0	0	12
4 days	0	1	6	1	0	1	9
5 days	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
6 days	0	2	1	1	1	0	5
7 days	0	0	2	0	1	0	3
I swim when I can – no pattern	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
	1	6	17	8	5	1	38

25.9%, Australian 21.8%, Irish 10.6%, Scottish 8.0% and Italian 4.9%).

The correlation between employment status and participation in *The Jellies* indicated that employment did not hinder participation in the group. There was also little difference in whether women in paid employment swam at 6:15 a.m. or 7:15 a.m. (Table 3).

Membership in *The Jellies* spanned from one year to four years plus. The majority of participants indicated that they had been part of *The Jellies* for three years (Table 4). The 50–59-year-old participants were twice as likely to be members for three years or more.

Participants indicated that there were 2 weekday swim times available: 6:15 a.m. or 7:15 a.m. When asked for their pattern of swimming days, the majority of members indicated that they swam 3 or more days each week, with 3 days being the most regular pattern (Table 5).

Women aged 50 to 59 were nearly three times more likely to swim three or more days per week than women in other age groups. This same group was also more likely to have joined *The Jellies* when the Covid-19 restrictions were imposed in 2020.

The remaining data will be reported under the identified themes of *Blue space and maintaining wellbeing being during Covid-19; Blue space, emotional geography and emotional wellbeing;* and *Blue space, becoming more, changing and finding identities.*

Blue space, Covid-19 restrictions and deciding to swim

As discussed below, participants indicated that *The Jellies* swimming group began in response to the local government imposed Covid-19 travel restrictions. This section explores the participants' connections beyond the household, the use of blue space emotional wellbeing and social connection in combating loneliness during Covid-19. Included in the reasons, discussed later, was the need to find safe ways to exercise and also join activities that would maintain their social, emotional and physical wellbeing while adhering to movement restrictions (Table 6).

Participants recognised that swimming offered them safe opportunities for physical activity while living under the constraints of Covid-19 regulations. For some of the women, accessing the blue space replaced attending fitness facilities such as gyms due to closures: "I joined for exercise when gyms closed" (P1). It also satisfied the desire to find a physical activity that would also be safe: "Initially I joined for safety in numbers to swim out in deep water" (P2).

Moving beyond the physical and safety aspects of swimming, participants noted the

Table 6 Reasons for joining The Jellies

Reason	Total
Social wellbeing	27
Emotional wellbeing	26
Physical wellbeing	29
Combination of two or more reasons	16

physical therapeutic and restorative nature of swimming and cold water as "definitely a salve to aching muscles" (P3). However, not all participants experienced an ongoing link between physical health and blue water swimming. Twenty-six women indicated challenges associated with the physicality needed to maintain their swimming routine. These obstacles included: "lack of fitness – hard to keep up sometimes" (P4); "broken leg" (P5); and missing daily swims because "the ol' bod does not recover as it should" (P5).

Blue space, emotional geography and emotional wellbeing

The blue space played a significant role in shaping the women's experiences and emotions. These experiences included a growing emotional attachment to the blue space and its contribution to emotional wellbeing; the addictive nature of the blue space; the appreciation of the environment; and the centrality of blue space to connection with self and others. These themes are developed in the following section.

Comments from participants who had developed a sustained routine of swimming consistently revealed the nexus between the blue space, swimming and increased emotional wellbeing. They noted that swimming had become "addictive" and that the daily routine had added energy and motivation to their day. As one participant commented: "Now I'm addicted to cold water and the connection and wellbeing l get from being in it. An increased level of energy and motivation for the day's tasks after each swim, keeps me coming back" (P6).

The women's emotional landscapes changed somewhat when the routine of the daily swim was disrupted. Participants experienced feelings of dislocation and joylessness when absent from the blue space: "I have withdrawals when [I am] unable to go for my daily dip enjoying the enthusiasm, joyful vibes surrounding the space" (P5).

Eager to share the "joyful vibes" of their surroundings, 29 photos depicting images of the water, the sunrises and the late-night moonscapes were posted to *WhatsApp* in one week. These images were a way for the participants to connect, appreciate or enjoy aesthetically pleasing scenes of the blue space and surrounds. Participants affirmed the blue space as a place for contemplation and 'self' that they valued beyond the period of Covid-19 restrictions. For these women, swimming had become the context for more contemplative time beyond the pandemic and remains a "time to reflect and chat about day-to-day challenges" (P7).

Participants observed that the blue space helped them to navigate their personal emotional geographies when swimming alone or with a group. Over time, the women's connection with the deep blue space evoked "the emotional joy of being immersed in nature" (P6) and gave personal "time to reflect and chat about day-to-day challenges" (P8). For other women, the blue space allowed for "the sea and the warmth of *The Jellies* [to become] essential to survival" (P7).

Further to the participants' reflections on blue space, Covid-19 restrictions and deciding to swim, were views on blue space, social connection and wellbeing.

Blue space, social connection and wellbeing

As developed in following paragraphs, data indicated "blue space" and its symbolic representation of emotional landscapes, social connections, and personal growth. The blue space served as a multifaceted metaphor

that extended beyond its literal meaning of water, encompassing emotional experiences, social bonds, and individual identity.

Recalling the Covid-19 restrictions that confined individuals to their households, the blue space became a symbol of companionship and connection. Participants were of the view that the opportunity to join *The Jellies* and swim with others satisfied their need for companionship and connection beyond the household group. In this sense "[swimming] became about helping me live through Covid as an extrovert and not becoming depressed, lonely and disconnected. I have a wonderful family, but I needed more during this time" (P9).

Participants opined that establishing or strengthening social connectedness with other members, and strengthening their connectedness to the blue space, had become increasingly important. They felt that membership in *The Jellies* had not only assuaged their need for an expanded network of connections, but it had also developed their personal traits. Participants came to appreciate the overlapping growth in confidence and connection derived from belonging to *The Jellies* and were "grateful for all the amazing women who are extremely selfless and modest. The confidence and connection gained continues to serve me well in my day-to-day life" (P2).

For some, swimming with others and drawing on the established connections was conditional on the emotional landscape. For example, the context chosen for swimming was dependent on their emotional wellbeing and how, company, or not, responded to the need for connection:

> I love the support and community that the group provides, even if I tend to be more organic with my swim times. I tend to swim with a few from a smaller Jelly group on the weekends and just one other friend/jelly a couple of times a week. Often, I swim alone or with my husband. But I know if I want company there is a wonderful and supportive gang to call on. (P10)

As P10 went on to reflect, belonging to the group provided opportunities for engaging in other swim activities and participating in additional recreational and personally enriching events: "I will do the solstice swim and sometimes a monthly moon swim. It's amazing and strikes a chord with my inner "hippy" for want of a better word. People bring treats and candles and mulled wine." (P10)

Adding to P10's musings, was the relationship between membership of the group, a broadening of social connections and the role of both in contributing to emotional wellbeing. Participants agreed that regularly meeting each other outside the swim time for coffee, chats or organised outings had enriched their lives, formed or firmed friendships, and reinforced their feelings of unconditional acceptance:

> I love the connection and conversation, getting to know the women a bit better every time. I also love the little café, sitting by the beach in the open air, hot or cold, the dogs, the birds, bumping into other people from the neighbourhood. What's not to love! It makes me feel part of something very special. It makes me grateful and proud to live in [the area]. (P11)

This view was tempered by other participants who felt that these coffee catchups and group activities organised outside the swim times risked alienating and marginalising members who could not attend the activities. As P1 shared: "Sometimes people can't always make it and you swim alone. Like any social group, you connect with some people more than others. Some people can feel on the outer at times; not as included as others" (P1).

Participants were also invited to ponder whether branding of *The Jellies*, and access to

and purchase of branded products, fostered a sense of belonging and social connection.

Branding—"They are my tribe"

Over the period of 3 years, beanies, swimming caps and dry coats (swim robes) have been branded with *The Jellies'* logo—a jellyfish. Members have the option to purchase these items. Views regarding the importance of wearing the branded items varied. Eight participants did not feel that wearing *The Jellies* associated apparel had an impact on their sense of belonging or group identity. Other participants commented that while the brand was not important, it signalled the influence of the group's culture of warmth and affection on members' lives, as well as the expansiveness the group had provided to their life experiences. The following comment typifies this view:

> I love being able to identify another Jelly because it means there is another swimming buddy around. The branding was initiated as a joke about very clubby clubs which this group is not. People feel a great warmth and affection for what the brand represents to them and what it has opened up in their lives. (P12)

Twenty-eight participants commented that branding signalled the group's identity. As P3 stated, "they are my tribe". Affirming the brand's role in establishing a unique identity, 31 participants held the view that having access to *The Jellies* branded apparel created a sense of pride, familiarity and unity among members that would not otherwise be experienced. P13's comment exemplifies this sentiment: "I have been a tad reluctant to join in the branding but it's lovely now to be able to recognise a fellow jelly. It creates a bit of a spark and always a massive smile when you see another" (P13).

The role of branding and belonging to a tribe in sustaining emotional, physical and social wellbeing was particularly important for one participant who lived alone and had newly joined the group. She was of the view that the brand offered an easy way to navigate belonging and connecting: "It shows 'belonging', being part of a fabulous family, especially for many who live solo plus health issues to name a few life challenges" (P14). Branding also invited others to make and build connections beyond *The Jellies*: "Even swimming alone, I will often get stopped and asked questions regarding swimming and or the Jellies group" (P15).

Blue space, becoming more, changing and finding identities

The Jellies provided the context for women to "become more". As discussed in the following section, the blue space and group membership in *The Jellies* had a transformative and enriching impact on the lives of the women involved. Data suggest the metaphor of "becoming more" indicated that belonging to *The Jellies* had provided a context for women to embark on a journey of personal growth, self-discovery, empowerment and the formation of a sisterhood based around shared life experiences.

Participants indicated that they had "become more" as a consequence of joining *The Jellies*: more outgoing ("Putting myself out there to connect to people I have never met as an introvert"—P2); more connected ("I love the connection and conversation, getting to know the women a bit better every time" (P16); and more supported ("We have coffee, talk about issues affecting us, counsel each other, support each other, plenty of hugs, occasional tears, lots of laughs, encouragement" (P17). "Becoming more" had also extended to the importance of mutual support throughout the life span. For example, the majority view was that discussion among the women was supportive and provided additional opportunities to share each other's life experience. This allowed the women to draw on the wisdom of each other's lived experience, deemed by some in the group

to be "extraordinary" (P18). Conversations between women of a "similar age and/or stage of life led to great conversations and shared understanding of challenges" (P1).

This supportive sharing was affirmed as unique to the all-women's group and critical to women as they move through their life span. As P16 expressed:

> As I grow older, I value more and more my connections with women. I've never really been part of an all-women thing before, but I really see how beautiful it is. The energy is different, the shared empathy and lived experiences. The joy of sharing with women who share a common love of the water is very real. It's grounding, joyful in very simple ways.

Asked whether it was important for the group to be "all female", only two participants answered that they would not be averse to having men in the group. Their thinking was that the participation of men would provide different insights: "I actually don't mind if men, it would be nice to find out their perspective of life" (P20).

The majority expressed a strong view that the women-only group provided an emotional safety and a space where women could share their life experiences. There was a sense that these factors allowed the women a freedom of expression that would not have been otherwise possible. The women only group provided a culture that mitigated against women feeling "self-conscious or intimidated" and was "an important factor [in creating] a safe and inclusive group [where one could] express themselves and be heard".

Safety and inclusiveness were associated with a culture that was "noncompetitive, accepting of older women". Participants were of the view that such a culture was gendered and worked "because it is overwhelming[ly] female, female led".

Data revealed a link between swimming and a growing appreciation of their own bodies. As swimming activity increased, women noticed that they became more attuned and more appreciative of the physical body. Immersion in the blue space had afforded women the license and freedom to embrace their own bodies and to do so in a safe and non-judgemental space:

> I believe it was set up by women for women (or anyone identifying as a woman). We have monthly swims held on a full moon where people have the option of wearing whatever they want or nothing at all. This is something only *The Jellies* are invited to and is a private event. It's important to me as I highly value the sisterhood we have. (P22)

Adding further relevance to the expressed importance of embodiment and its implied impact on emotional wellbeing, P22 highlighted the importance of recognising and accepting that women "come in all shapes and sizes and cultural differences" and that body shape need not be influenced by cultural or societal expectations. The group likewise expressed the view that such groups offered an opportunity to create a sisterhood, where women could nurture women. P9 provided an international lens to this view:

> It's an institution that every beach town should have—we are not the first … and hopefully many more will come. I admired the ladies in Kardamila/Greece in 1999 on a holiday … they would meet every morning at the same spot at the harbour front … stand in the water / swim a bit and talk a lot … I could hear their happy chatter … I loved it … It took me 21 years to find such a group. (P9)

The international experience recognised that groups like *The Jellies* can become institutionalised and offer contexts that support and nurture women "becoming more".

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the profound impact of blue spaces on individuals' emotional, social, and physical well-being, particularly in the context of a women-only swimming group navigating government-imposed Covid-19 restrictions. The study reveals that women of various ages, regardless of employment status, accessed blue spaces, emphasising the universal appeal and inclusivity of these environments.

The study aligns with prior research, such as Britton and Foley (2021) and de Oliveira et al. (2019), highlighting the physically therapeutic nature of swimming and its sustaining of physical wellbeing. This therapeutic aspect of blue spaces, as emphasised by Burlingham et al. (2022), Foley (2015), Massey et al. (2020), and Olive and Wheaton (2021), contributes to the heightened and enriched emotional wellbeing and emotional landscapes experienced by individuals engaged in swimming.

An intriguing aspect illuminated by the study is the intersectionality between embodiment and emotions, forming a nexus that fosters both a sense of individual emotional and physical wellbeing as well as a sisterhood amongst the women-only group. Lenneis et al.'s (2022) and Lewis et al.'s (2015) research on women's use of blue spaces resonates, illustrating how women, in this study, found cognitive and emotional freedom to bond across generations in a supportive and safe environment. This freedom became a platform for creating a sisterhood that extended social connections, where women drew on shared life experiences to manage their individual circumstances.

The study also emphasises the significance of gender-segregated groups, revealing that women sought out such spaces to connect, including times beyond the group swims, supported by a sense of familiarity and belonging. The adoption of swimming apparel and the use of social media, as noted in the study, served as tools for formalising connections within and beyond the blue space. This innovative approach, echoing the findings of previous research, demonstrates how social interactions, group culture, and cohesiveness can build an effective community and community assets.

However, the study brings attention to an important caveat: the invisibility of women from ethnic minorities and those without proximity to the middle-class Australian or European bayside suburb. The intersectionality of poverty, culture, and gender may constrain these women, aligning with Sawrikar and Muir's (2010) suggestion that culturally bound roles can limit participation in groups like *The Jellies*. This highlights a significant challenge—some women are marginalized, unable to access the social, physical, and emotional benefits offered by blue spaces and women-only groups due to systemic inequalities and cultural constraints.

In conclusion, while the study underscores the positive impact of blue spaces and women-only groups on physical and emotional wellbeing and community building, it also raises awareness of the need for inclusivity and recognition of those marginalised by cultural and socioeconomic factors. It emphasises the importance of addressing these disparities to ensure that the benefits of blue spaces are accessible to all, fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for women's wellbeing.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that the participants were predominantly of white, Anglo-Celtic culture. It is recommended that further studies focus on cultures and ethnicities other than white, Anglo-Celtic backgrounds to better understand how women who use and create activities that access blue spaces can be more inclusive of women from other cultures and ethnicities.

Conclusion

The sociality of swimming in gendered segregated spaces should not be forgotten. Covid-19 has shown that women's isolation can be tempered by the use of blue spaces, which can strengthen overall wellbeing and improve their sense of belonging. Beyond Covid-19 the blue space functions as a rich and layered metaphor, representing emotional landscapes, social connections, personal growth, and a sanctuary for self-discovery and acceptance. Contributing to physical, social and emotional wellbeing, blue space encapsulates the transformative power of shared experiences in nature and the significance of community bonds in shaping individuals. Social workers have an opportunity to recognise that blue spaces provide a new and novel frontier for the formation of women-only reciprocal support groups. Aligned with their commitment to the principles of women's solidarity and support, to amplifying the voices of marginalised women and to addressing the disadvantages of intersectionality, social workers can use the findings of this study as a model to create other sisterhoods focused on wellbeing. Insights from this study can help social workers to build sisterhoods of strong connections that increase women's social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

Received: 12 September 2023

Accepted: 12 February 2024

Published: 16 April 2024

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Application of the Critical Intersections Model to Social Work with Young Parents in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article examines some of the challenges faced by social workers working with young parents and explores appropriate responses to those challenges. Beddoe and Maidment's (2009) critical intersections model is utilised to integrate academic curriculum learning with contemporary social work areas. Aspects of working with young parents are discussed in relation to cultural imperatives and critical social theory, intersecting with the therapeutic relationship, which is an essential professional practice skill. The intersection between cultural imperatives and the therapeutic relationship explores social work with young parents who identify as Māori, while the intersection between critical social theory and the therapeutic relationship explores the impact of stigma and discrimination on establishing engagement with young parents.

METHOD: The critical intersections model is applied to the anecdotal practice experience of a social work student on placement at an agency that supports young parents. A composite case study based on practice experience is used to illustrate the critical intersections.

FINDINGS: Demonstrating elements of the therapeutic relationship before receiving consent to engage with a young parent can aid in overcoming the mistrust of helping professionals caused by stigma and discrimination. Establishing a therapeutic relationship with young parents who identify as Māori requires a social worker to have a willingness to learn and respond with cultural humility.

CONCLUSION: The critical intersections model was valuable in exploring the integration of academic curriculum and contemporary social work areas in relation to social work with young parents.

Keywords: Young mothers; critical intersections; integration; social work

Young parents are often in need of social work support for a variety of reasons, but there are frequent challenges for social workers in engaging and working with young parents (McArthur & Winkworth, 2018). These challenges will be explored from the perspective of a female, Pākehā, social work student on a fieldwork placement through the application of the critical intersections model to practice experience in the form of a composite case study (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). The integration of academic curriculum areas and contemporary practice debates to social work with young mothers will explore the challenges faced by social workers and possible responses to those challenges.

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 127–136.

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Tynjälä et al. (2016) described integrative learning as combining the four knowledge components required for professional expertise, being theoretical, practical, self-regulative and sociocultural knowledge. To develop expertise there need to be connections between theory, practice, and self-regulation within the context of sociocultural knowledge that is learned by participating in social communities while participating in fieldwork (Tynjälä et al., 2016). Social workers use theories to make sense of the increasingly complicated situations and environments they work within (Harms & Connolly, 2019). A theoretical framework can account for the logic of why a social worker utilises a particular practice approach in their mahi (work) which, in turn, informs which specific techniques that social worker might use. Critically reflecting on practice is how social workers analyse practice related to their theoretical framework (Maidment & Egan, 2016). The process of critical reflection develops the self-regulative skills required for building expertise (Tynjälä et al., 2016). Students on practice placements are required to participate in regular supervision, allowing them to critically reflect on their practice experience and sociocultural learning, and how that integrates with their theoretical framework, building self-regulatory skills in the process.

The critical intersections model (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009) offers a model for integrative learning that facilitates the examination of eight core curriculum areas related to four contemporary debates within social work. The curriculum areas are theory for practice, practice skills, social policy, social work research, working in organisations, ethics, community development and the life course. The contemporary debates are engagement with critical social theory, the integration of service user perspectives, the analysis of cultural imperatives, and the role of the profession itself. Critical intersections are locations where curriculum areas meet contemporary practice components and can be applied to practice scenarios experienced by students on fieldwork placements. Critically reflective practice encourages social workers to evaluate how their work fits into broader concepts, such as social, economic, and ethical issues (Maidment & Egan, 2016). The inclusion of contemporary practice components in Beddoe and Maidment's (2009) critical intersections model allows for examining macro-level social and economic concerns that can impact social work service users. Higher-level social work involves looking beyond working with people as individuals and engaging in research, advocacy, education, programme development and policy to address social challenges.

In this instance, the practice scenario applies the critical intersections model to social work engagement with young parents. The curriculum area applied to this scenario is the development of practice skills, specifically in establishing the therapeutic relationship. The contemporary practice components explored include analysis of cultural imperatives by looking at how Māori young parents are impacted differently than non-Māori as well as by engaging with critical social theory through exploring how young parents are affected by stigma and discrimination with stigma, being the perceived shame associated with being a young parent, and discrimination being unfair treatment received on account of being a young parent (Flett et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2016).

There is a range of risk processes that contribute to adolescent pregnancy, including socioeconomic deprivation, a lack of education or educational expectations, a lack of employment or employment opportunities, drug and alcohol use, exposure to sexual content in the media, barriers to contraception and traumatic experiences during childhood (Allen et al., 2007; L'Engle et al., 2006; Smith, 1996; World Health Organisation, 2021). Barriers

to accessing contraception include fear of discrimination by family, peers and community, health worker bias and lack of willingness to assist a teenager with sexual health, as well as physical access issues such as transportation and finance (World Health Organisation, 2020). Young women with childhood traumatic experiences are more likely to become pregnant during adolescence, the impact of which is more pronounced with a range of negative experiences, or complex trauma (Shreffler et al., 2020; Smith, 1996). Young Māori women are more likely to become pregnant before the age of 20 than non-Māori women; this is discussed later in relation to cultural imperatives (Statistics New Zealand, 2019).

The statistical measure for adolescent births in New Aotearoa Zealand covers ages 15-19, capturing most instances in this country (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Aotearoa New Zealand used to have one of the highest rates of adolescent births for a Minority World nation, peaking at 69.07 per 1000 women in 1972 (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). However, after holding steady at around 30 adolescent births per 1000 women for decades, the rates of young parenthood in New Zealand have dropped to 13.45 per 1000 women in 2018, the majority of whom identify as Māori (Ministry of Health, 2019; Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Despite instances of adolescent pregnancy decreasing in Aotearoa New Zealand, there are still higher risks for this group, during pregnancy, childbirth and continuing into infancy. Women who become pregnant during adolescence are at higher risk of complications during pregnancy and birth than their older counterparts. There is a much higher occurrence of anaemia, pre-term delivery, low birth weight and neonatal admission, predominantly linked to reduced accessing of antenatal care and education, which indicates more support is needed for these young women to access high-quality medical care (Loto et al., 2009; World Health Organisation, 2020). There are continuing risks for young women after the birth of their baby, including poorer health, delayed educational and vocational achievement, poverty, psychosocial issues such as depression and social isolation, rejection or violence by their partner, parents and peers, and discrimination (Mills et al., 2013; World Health Organisation, 2020). An umbrella study of meta-analyses by SmithBattle et al. (2017) showed positive outcomes for teenage parents who engaged in interventions, including reduced low birth weight, reduced repeat pregnancies, improved quality of maternal education and employment, as well as more positive parenting behaviour and parent–child relationships.

Engaging with critical social theory regarding stigma and discrimination

Social workers are taught to draw from critical theory to explain the structural causes of poverty, social marginalisation, and oppression (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). A common form of marginalisation experienced by young parents is stigma and discrimination related to having a child at a young age. Stigma is about a perceived mark of shame, a negative view of another person or group, where discrimination is the act of unfair treatment because of a stigma attached to that person or group (Flett et al., 2020). The majority of young parents will experience stigma, self-stigma and discrimination at some point (Gordon et al., 2016). The experience of stigma can have a deleterious effect on the mental health and wellbeing of a young parent (Conn et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2016). Stigma against young parents can take the form of lowered standards in terms of expectations of achievement and their contribution to society, seeing them as a burden on society, as having limited parenting capability and the view of young parents as irresponsible (Conn et al., 2018; Greyson et al., 2019). A focus on the negative outcomes associated with teenage parenthood contributes to stigma, leading it to be interpreted as a social or moral crisis involving irresponsible teenagers (Gordon et al., 2016; Ware, 2014). It is a difficult situation for a pregnant teenager, with choosing to keep

her baby leading to her being seen as irresponsible and immature; however, choosing not to have her baby through abortion is construed by many as being immoral (Fonda et al., 2013). Being self-aware of the stigma around young parenting can lead to the development of self-stigma, a sense of failing by becoming a stereotype, causing lowered expectations. The overwhelming negative portrayal of young parents in the media, particularly reality shows, contributes to maintaining stigma and self-stigma around young parenting (Greyson et al., 2019). The discrimination experienced because of the stigma against young parents is diverse, coming from many sources. It can range from stares and whispers from strangers on the street to being actively chastised by professionals who are supposed to be helping (Conn et al., 2018). It seems the most harmful discrimination comes from family, partner, and peers, as it isolates a young mother from social support networks (Conn et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2016). The experiences of stigma and discrimination as a young parent compound with stigma and discrimination from other sources, including socioeconomic status, gender, religion, and ethnicity (Conn et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2016; Ware et al., 2014). Ware et al. (2014) called for a re-contextualising of young parenting for Māori as part of positive Māori identity and culture, essentially decolonising the Western perspective of young parenting as a problem, to reduce the stigma and discrimination related to young Māori parents. Experiencing stigma and discrimination can cause young parents to become socially isolated and mistrust helping professionals, which poses a challenge for social workers trying to establish a working relationship.

Considering Māori cultural imperatives

Analysing cultural imperatives requires social workers to consider a situation within a cultural context, which acts as a lens for the way the service user sees the world (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). Culture incorporates interwoven aspects of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and class, and is relevant at personal, cultural and structural levels (Thompson, 2012, p. 36). The focus here is on the cultural level, looking towards different ways of thinking and behaving linked to Māori ethnic identity. Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand operates within a bicultural framework, meaning social workers need to consider Māori cultural imperatives in their practice. This is particularly relevant in the field of working with young parents, with 62% of adolescent pregnancies being to Māori mothers (Scanlen & Hooper, 2019). Some of the proposed explanations for higher rates of Māori teenage pregnancies reflect the socioeconomic positioning of Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, a reflection of Māori having greater exposure to negative childhood experiences or trauma than non-Māori and differing cultural values around the ideal timing of becoming a parent (Fanslow et al., 2007; Marie et al., 2011). Research out of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (Marie et al., 2011) found that women who identified Māori as their sole cultural identity were seven times more likely to have had an adolescent pregnancy than non-Māori, even when controlling for socioeconomic and family functioning factors. Women who identified as Māori and another cultural identity were three times more likely than non-Māori to have had an adolescent pregnancy (Marie et al., 2011). This research suggests a link between Māori cultural values and becoming a young parent.

This is a small exploration of some specific cultural aspects of parenting in Māori culture, as researched by a Pakeha student, approaching with cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Pēpi (babies) are seen as a contribution to whakapapa (lineage), inheriting mana (spiritual power) and tapu (sacred restrictions) from their tupuna (ancestors) (Jenkins & Harte, 2011; Ware, 2014). Children are the responsibility of the community as

well as the parents, who all have a role to play in protecting their tapu and nurturing their mana (Ware, 2014). There is no age associated with whakapapa, whānau (family), whanaungatanga (relationship building) or aroha (love) in Māori culture, so becoming a parent at a young age is not problematised. There is no specific word or term for teenage pregnancy in te reo Māori (Māori language) (Pihama, 2010; Ware et al., 2018). If Māori cultural values are a large factor in becoming a young parent, social workers must value and understand the cultural identity and needs of young Māori parents (Kerslake Hendricks & Stevens, 2012).

Many Māori experience an increased desire to connect with traditional language and culture after becoming hapū (pregnant), particularly establishing cultural identity, whakapapa, connection to whenua (land) and turangawaewae (a place to belong), wairua (spirituality) and tikanga (protocols) (Ware et al., 2018). Tikanga can include not cutting hair while hapū, using tupuna names for their pēpi, using karakia (ritual chant) during the birth and returning the whenua (placenta) to the earth it shares its name with (Ware et al., 2018). There is a greater focus on the role of whānau in raising families. Research by consultants Scanlen and Hooper (2009) on behalf of Oranga Tamariki showed a high need for tikanga Māori models and interventions for young Māori parents because of the reduced amount of traditional support structures, typically lost to colonisation. Māori parenting knowledge and practice are often minimised, with Māori parents feeling pressure to prove good parenting by achieving Western markers of good parenting (Ware et al., 2018). Western approaches to working with young Māori parents may not reflect Māori realities, traditions and tikanga (Scanlen & Hooper, 2009). These are all significant elements that should be considered in relation to academic learning and practice experience of working with young Māori parents.

The therapeutic relationship

A key element of professional practice skills for social workers is their ability to utilise the therapeutic relationship. If utilised effectively, the relationship that a worker develops with the service user can create a safe environment for them to learn, grow and heal within, which can be critical to therapeutic outcomes for the service user (Ferguson et al., 2020; Ungar et al., 2018). Bower (2005, p. 11) said that "a thoughtful and emotionally receptive stance with clients can have therapeutic value without anything fancy being done." Relationship-based practice in social work (Ruch et al., 2018) requires the avoidance of 'psychologising' service users, failing to consider the wider mezzo and macro contexts impacting the relationship, such as family, work or societal dynamics like race, gender, or economics (Ferguson et al., 2020; Sudbery, 2002). Social workers need to be aware of the presence of and their use of power, particularly when working with a population like adolescent parents who often have backgrounds of trauma, or who have engagement with statutory services (Ferguson et al., 2020; Sudbery, 2002). This power imbalance is especially noticeable during the perinatal period, when there is potential for the infant to be removed by child protective services (Keddell et al., 2022). Ungar et al. (2018) explored the ways that young people engaged in a therapeutic relationship with social workers and found there was a difference in the preferred engagement style depending on the risk level of the young person. Adolescents with higher levels of risk tended to prefer workers who had looser boundaries and higher levels of transparency (Ungar et al., 2018). This meant measured self-disclosure of personal information or past struggles, showing genuine empathy for the young person, and sharing the contents of the case file. Perhaps this is because it is counter to the expected authoritarian experience of a statutory setting. This style of engagement is congruent with a trauma-informed approach. There is not always an opportunity for social workers to engage

with young people in this way however, with the relationship being impacted by the demands of bureaucracy through the prioritising of cases and consistency of care not being prioritised by organisations (Ferguson et al., 2020; Harms & Connolly, 2019).

Intersection between therapeutic relationship and stigma

Young parents are a demographic that can be difficult to establish a therapeutic relationship with, largely because of the experience and anticipation of stigma and discrimination (McArthur & Winkworth, 2018). The social worker may have to demonstrate their side of the relationship for some time before a young parent feels comfortable to engage with their service. To encourage engagement, the social worker could make regular phone check-ins, offer practical assistance in the form of food parcels or baby gear and showing their genuine empathy for the client. By showing some of the elements of the therapeutic relationship: reliability, caring about the mundane, day-to-day needs of a young family, and showing genuine use of self, the social worker can build enough trust with the young mother to get them to engage with the service (Ferguson et al., 2020). By the time a young mother is referred to a social worker, they have often experienced stigma and discrimination from many sources, including medical, legal, housing, and education professionals. Social workers must acknowledge the experiences of the young mother, to be able to build an effective therapeutic relationship and overcome the barriers caused by stigma and discrimination (Ferguson et al., 2020; Ungar et al., 2018). A secure therapeutic relationship can help a young mother to process their experience of stigma and discrimination, develop adaptive ways of coping and find the lessons in the challenges she has faced (Conn et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2020). By engaging with a growth mindset and seeing parenthood as a catalyst for change and an opportunity for growth, a young mother can become more resilient to challenges she faces in the future (Conn et al., 2018; Taylor, 2017).

Intersection between therapeutic relationship and Māori cultural imperatives

A social worker engaging in a therapeutic relationship with a young Māori mother should have cultural humility, awareness of tikanga relating to pregnancy, birth and pēpi, and awareness of what it means to be a young mother within Māori culture. Non-Māori social workers need to have a genuine willingness to learn and respond to tikanga and cultural differences, knowing when it is more appropriate to refer a client to a Kaupapa Māori (Māori approach) service if it is available. Tikanga around relationships and social work values align if the social worker has the awareness to utilise them. Ware et al. (2018) explained how tikanga applies to building a therapeutic relationship with young Māori parents. Aroha facilitates a relationship based on empathy and acknowledgement of the love between parent and child, regardless of age while mana acknowledges the right to be a parent accessing support and care for the betterment of their child's future as well as their own and tapu ensures confidentiality and respect around sensitive issues (Ware et al., 2018). Pihama (2010) argued that a Kaupapa Māori approach is less a step-by-step theoretical framework and more a philosophy that ensures cultural integrity when looking at issues that affect Māori. It would be ideal for social workers to decolonise their working process and incorporate Kaupapa Māori philosophies to work with young Māori mothers in a culturally responsive way. A social worker can help a young parent navigate their identity at the challenging intersection of adolescence, young parenthood, and Māori identity (Ware et al., 2018). Reconnecting young Māori parents with their cultural heritage can positively impact their wellbeing and parenting identity (Ware et al., 2018). Social workers

have an opportunity to normalise Kaupapa Māori services and methods, by engaging non-Māori parents with these opportunities as well.

Application to a composite case study

This case study is developed as a composite of three young parents with whom I had the opportunity to work with myself or observe another social worker working with while on fieldwork placement at a non-government organisation supporting young parents with individual social work support and a range of parenting programmes. These parents verbally consented to my experience with them being written about in a non-identifying manner, as did the social worker who was observed working with two of the cases. All three parents were receiving individual social work support, and one was also attending a parenting programme through the agency.

Whina was a 19-year-old mother, who lived with her 21-year-old boyfriend Jaime, the baby's father, in a rental property. Whina was connected with her Māori heritage and involved in a Kaupapa Māori parenting course at the time of referral. Jaime was non-Māori but supported Whina's connection to her whakapapa. Jaime had some challenges with anxiety and preferred to stay home with the curtains closed at all times. Baby Tane was born at 35 weeks and spent several weeks in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). At the time of social work contact, Tane was 3 months old and underweight. Whina and Jaime were reluctant to engage with a social worker. There were many healthcare professionals involved with Tane already, and the family had experienced discrimination and judgement because of their age, their premature baby, and their dark, untidy home with covered windows. They were starting to believe that there were no helping professionals who would treat them well. At the initial meeting, the social worker asked questions around Whina's connection to her culture to get a sense of what is culturally appropriate in terms of tikanga and future services for referral. Whina was using a blend of common te reo words and English during the meeting and the social worker reflected that language back to her. Whina showed the social worker the wahakura (woven flax bassinet) she had made for Tane with the help of her aunt.

The social worker was concerned about how underweight Tane was, believing this was due to Whina's determination to exclusively breastfeed, and was reluctant to leave the situation. The social worker was careful to respect the aroha Whina had for Tane and acknowledge that Whina was doing what she believed to be best for Tane. There were some challenges in communicating with the health professionals involved with the whānau, perhaps because of their own case priorities and wondered about whether a report of concern was necessary for the safety of Tane. The social worker regularly checked in via text message and addressed the practical needs of the whānau by delivering a food parcel and a warm winter jacket to meet with Whina face-to-face. Jaime was reluctant to accept a food parcel, which the social worker discovered was because of the complex stigma and feeling of shame connected to being a young parent, needing support, and being low-income. Jaime was pleasantly surprised at the higher quality of goods than he expected in the food parcel and believed he would access that service again. The mana of the whānau was enhanced by reconnecting them with their ability to access support that is their right. By taking interest in the mundane elements of life rather than focussing on Tane's health like the other professionals and demonstrating what the therapeutic relationship could entail, the social worker was able to get Whina and Jaime engaged with the service. This resulted in better coordination between health professionals, with the social worker acting as a point of contact for a professionals meeting. Whina began to see her own wellbeing improve, and Tane began putting on weight within a few weeks. Whina disclosed to the social worker that she had been sexually

abused in the past and would like counselling to process her experience. It was important for the social worker to be respectful of the tapu of sexual abuse. The social worker offered a few options for counselling service, including a Kaupapa Māori service, which Whina chose.

One of the secondary concerns for the whānau was their housing situation. Their rental property was a small, dark and prone to mould, with a landlord who would not do maintenance on the property. When the social worker mentioned the possibility of moving to another house, Whina and Jaime believed it would be too hard as no decent landlord would want young parents living in their house. They were reluctant to even apply for better housing, because of the anticipation of rejection due to the stigma of being young parents. The social worker acknowledged that it can be difficult, but not to be discouraged from trying. Whina contacted her existing property manager with support from her social worker and was able to secure a more appropriate property within a few weeks. Once in a new sunny home, Whina wanted to have curtains open and be more socially engaged with other young mothers. This had to be negotiated with Jaime, who still wanted windows to be covered, and did not want to leave the house or have people over. Whina excitedly called her social worker to tell her about the baby massage class she had signed up for. The nature of social work engagement had to adapt at this point, as the level-4 Covid-19 lockdown was triggered locally. The social worker utilised text messaging, video calling and continued to offer practical support such as food parcels throughout the lockdown period. A true example of the quality of the therapeutic relationship, in this case, is the difference between beginning and present. Previously the social worker utilised food and clothing as practical tools to effectively engage with the client. Towards the end, Whina would call the social worker to share wellbeing updates about Tane and what plans she was beginning to make for study in the following year.

Conclusion

Many other intersections of the critical intersections model (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009) could be applied to practice experience at an agency that supports young parents. Having quality support and resources builds resilience and helps a young parent cope with experiences of stigma and discrimination or helps to ground their connection with Māori culture on many levels. Social policies can have a significant impact on the experience of stigma and discrimination, and in addressing institutional racism that acts as a barrier to young Māori parents, a social worker can work towards influencing policy change for the empowerment of marginalised communities. The critical intersections model (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009) has proved to be a useful tool in examining the experience of a social work fieldwork placement in relation to academic curriculum areas and contemporary social work areas. Not only has it helped to solidify my own understanding of theory and practice in this field but it has sparked many discussions with other social workers about how they manage integrative learning in their practice.

Received 5 November 2021

Accepted: 28 February 2024

Published: 16 April 2024

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Ongoing benefits of a knowledge-exchange project codesigned with students

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ABSTRACT

While the innovative practicum project described in this paper was an emergency measure, it continues to enhance our pedagogy for preparing social work students for placement. The project was designed collaboratively with postgraduate students when their imminent placements in statutory agencies were indefinitely delayed by Aotearoa New Zealand's first Covid-19 lockdown, beginning late March 2020 and extending for 7 weeks. The prevailing uncertainty was stressful for our students, who needed to complete placement for degree completion and professional registration. As the staff team responsible for their practicum, we needed to quickly devise a robust alternative learning experience. This endeavour evolved into a codesigned, collegial knowledge-exchange project combining academic knowledge and practice wisdom gathered through students' consultation with academic and practice experts. The project's key components were focussed analysis of practice research, interviews with experienced social workers, production of a succinct "practice briefing", application of knowledge gained to a "real life" practice story, and sharing accumulated knowledge. From a pedagogical perspective, we highlight our learning about promoting professional communication to underpin collaborative work, and the usefulness of intensive orientation to practice context before students begin placement.

Keywords: Social work education; field education; knowledge exchange; Covid-19

Fieldwork placements have been held to be the "signature pedagogy" for social work education (Wayne et al., 2010). A well-managed placement provides experiential learning through opportunities to weave academic learning into relational practice so that students can demonstrate that they are developing the knowledge and expertise they will need to be competent social workers. Commonly, practicum staff teams assess students' progress in placements and are responsible for ensuring that students can apply knowledge in practice, engage in critical thinking to uphold social work's commitment to social justice, and engage in reflective practice to deal with the emotional and ethical challenges inherent in social work. This article describes a preparatory-phase placement project that emerged out of crisis, when Aotearoa New Zealand was plunged into its first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 and our final-year postgraduate social work students' imminent placements in statutory agencies were indefinitely delayed. Looking back on our teaching since that first Covid-19 "tsunami", as the experience has been characterised (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020), we see that working with our students in that context of uncertainty has reinforced our pedagogy and practice. Two

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benefits stand out: insight into the power of modelling clear, respectful communication for collaborative practice, and the usefulness of orienting students to the practice context of placements before they embark on their agency-based experience.

Navigating disruption

Aotearoa New Zealand's first Covid-19 lockdown was both sudden and restrictive. People were required to work and study from home, spending time only with those in their "bubble", a term used to denote a form of shielding from Covid-19 as a family or small group. As in other countries, this necessitated a sudden shift to online learning (O'Keeffe et al., 2022), disrupted well-established systems for preparing students for professional social work (Morley & Clarke, 2020), and severely curtailed placements in social work agencies (Davis & Mirick, 2021).

The timing of that first lockdown could hardly have been worse for the postgraduate students in their final year of our Master of Social Work (Professional) programme MSW(Prof). The previous year, these students had completed placements in nongovernment agencies. Their forthcoming final placements, in statutory agencies, were expected to function both as consolidation of learning and as a pathway into professional practice. Halfway through their second year of intensive postgraduate study, they were keen to hone their learning in a real-life setting relevant to their envisaged career, but we did not know when, or indeed whether, they would be able to do so. Planning for placements was complete. Each student had met with a practicum team member to discuss their professional interests, learning needs, and preferred career trajectory, and this discussion informed the practicum team's subsequent negotiation of a placement located in child protection, youth justice, forensic social work, probation, or physical or mental health services. Placements were scheduled for 3 days a week over most of the rest of the year. There was little scope for delay as successful placement completion was a requirement for graduation and provisional professional registration with the Social Workers Registration Board New Zealand (SWRB).

As the implications of lockdown became clearer, we needed to steer a way through uncertainty, and to manage pressure and stress. As the four-member practicum team and the director of the MSW(Prof), we held responsibility for upholding academic standards and ensuring graduates' readiness for practice. We needed to produce a viable solution to a pressing problem in an unpredictable context, while using communication techniques, notably forms of virtual interaction that, at the time, were relatively new to us. At first, we hoped that the Covid-19 situation would improve, and our students would soon be settled in the placements they were so anxious to begin. But, as time went by, we realised that we were facing multifaceted external and internal forces that compromised the viability of placements going ahead as planned. The spectre of prolonged placement postponement loomed over students, who worried that they would be unable to complete their degree in time to graduate. This caused enormous stress, especially for those under financial strain. Responding to students' numerous anxious inquiries required much time and care. Meanwhile, we heard that social work agencies were struggling to adapt to profound change in familiar work processes, including working remotely (Bennett et al., 2021). We were unsure whether students' designated field supervisors would have capacity to support them in some kind of alternative project.

Believing that it would be helpful to hear about strategies being considered by colleagues across the country, we consulted with the Council for Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand (CSWEANZ) Field Education Sub-Committee, which includes representatives of all 17 schools of social work. We found that all were in a similar state of uncertainty: waiting and hoping

that Covid-19 case numbers would reduce and social work education could "return to normal". To our surprise, our professional regulatory authority, the SWRB, offered no guidance, nor did it suggest any course of action. Unlike similar authorities in other jurisdictions (Zuchowski et al., 2022), the SWRB did not condone reducing placement hours required for eligibility for professional registration. Rather, the SWRB (2020, Section 3a) stated that "it remains the responsibility of institutes to assure the SWRB that students have developed sufficient skills and are competent to practice as a beginning social worker".

This hands-off approach exacerbated educators' stress and bewilderment. We abandoned the forlorn hope that someone would tell us what to do. Meanwhile, Covid-19 case numbers escalated, and lockdown seemed endless. Like educators elsewhere (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020), we were under pressure to quickly craft a proactive strategy. To safeguard our students' eligibility for graduation and professional registration the following year, whatever placement alternative we created had to correspond to the MSW(Prof) graduate profile, and equip students to meet "core competencies" (SWRB, 2015), requiring that social workers can demonstrate bicultural practice, work with Māori and diverse cultural groups, enact inclusive practice, promote human rights and social justice, promote social change, comprehend social work theory and practice methods and models, engage in critical thinking, practise within legal and ethical boundaries, and represent the profession with integrity. The question was: How could we engage students with these professional imperatives?

On reflection, the pressure we were under sparked innovation with potential to enhance students' placement experiences in less troubled times. While eventually the SWRB allowed some flexibility around placement, this came too late for our students given the imminence of their placement and the tight timeframe for completing their degree. Looking on the bright side, the urgency of the problem of creating a replacement placement was what fuelled the hard work we all did to create a Knowledge Exchange Project (KEP) and make it successful. That work is now paying off in unexpected ways in that we are finding uses for aspects of the project that we did not envisage at the time. KEP is an example of how a creative approach to placement can engage students in learning and enable them to demonstrate core competence standards. It is important that the SWRB not only recognises that learning and achievement of the core competence standards can occur outside traditional placement models, but also develops ways to support and endorse innovative approaches to placement.

Envisaging a knowledge-exchange project

It would be possible to present the evolution of our solution as more orderly than it really was. In fact, it was a rocky road. We had to push through our own bewilderment, self-doubt and anxiety and search deeply into our own expertise, while juggling disparate tasks to keep other courses viable, and supporting students dealing with emotional and practical issues. We were "catapulted" (McLaughlin et al., 2020) into using virtual technologies that were unfamiliar to most of us and felt unsuited to education intended to foster relational practice. But we were determined to make it possible for our students to learn what they needed to learn. We struggled with difficult questions: How long can we delay placement? If we must use alternative learning strategies for at least part of the placement time, what will be useful and meaningful? What alternative learning will meet regulations for degree completion and registration?

In early online meetings, we heard how anxious students were about missing placement, which they saw as authentic and safe orientation to professional

practice. To allay anxiety, we regularly sent out information updates while considering next steps in the absence of guidance from the SWRB, or our employer. While students were initially supportive of delaying placement, this "wait-it-out" approach became untenable as lockdown continued—we were running out of time. We considered extending placements into the following academic year, but university regulations precluded that. Moreover, we suspected that delayed placements, finishing later than planned, would be unworkable for placement providers, who commonly take leave over the long summer break. Students fretted about losing a common benefit of a successful placement, that is, a job offer. They recognised that we faced a "nightmare situation," as one student expressed our plight, but agitation was building.

At our own somewhat dumbfounded meetings at this time (involving all four members of the practicum team and the MSW(Prof) programme leader), it was clear that we were committed and determined to look after the students' interests and to supporting one another to do so. Work on the project was made tolerable, and quickly constructive, by working together closely. We resolved to set a positive trajectory by modelling professional communication and collaborative work. We deliberately demonstrated keen listening; focussed information gathering; calm consideration of options; respectful communication; relational practice; a reflective and critical orientation; and, referencing the strengths perspective that students had studied, an attitude of upholding hope. We experienced the value of "mahi tahi" a Māori concept denoting working together in a spirit of mutual support (Roguski et al., 2022). This collective orientation was a hallmark of the project.

In early staff meetings, we envisaged a KEP designed to help students learn about realities of good practice with students working in small teams, aligned to their placement field, to gather and share academic and practical knowledge and then present that knowledge, demonstrating how SWRB competencies apply in real life. To "give back" in a spirit of reciprocity, students would produce resources to share, including a video exemplar.

The staff team undertook to engage "expert practitioners" and "academic experts" who would reinforce the project. By expert practitioners, we meant social workers with the expertise needed to participate in a conversational interview and respond to questions prepared by students. Our practicum team's extensive networks enabled us to identify social workers who might be interested in this role contributing to the project. Academic colleagues understood our situation and willingly agreed to act as academic experts to guide students' selection of literature to inform understanding of good practice. We set careful parameters around the time students could ask of both sets of supporters, and made a list of student team tasks:

- Consult your academic expert to discuss key literature that underpins good practice.
- Based on recommended literature, collaboratively write a short "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper.
- Consult your expert practitioner about current practice, focussing on typical situations experienced by people who need social work support, the impact of legislation and organisational and public policy, and practice wisdom and tacit knowledge.
- Present your "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper at a symposium for placement supervisors and others interested.
- Reflect on knowledge gathered against the core competencies and produce a video exemplar applying that knowledge to a typical scenario relevant to your team's planned placements. Potentially, these videos would enhance future students' learning.

However, all did not go smoothly when we presented our plan to our students. A concurrent course required them to produce a significant research paper to be written during the two non-placement days of the week and they expressed concern about KEP requiring what they perceived as "more research" when they desperately wanted practice experience. They resisted the idea of producing an exemplar video, partly because of recent engagement in multiple role-plays focussed on learning and demonstrating practice skills, partly because of discomfort about creating a video that would be viewed as an exemplar when, as one said, they had "no expertise in acting or videography". Perhaps because of unprecedented uncertainty at that time, they wanted a sense of being in control so they could "get it right". While rejection of the first KEP outline felt like a setback, it was the catalyst for the project expanding into co-construction, collective endeavour, and an experience of mahi tahi involving experiential learning about negotiation and teamwork.

"Flying the plane while building it"

We entered a phase that we experienced as "flying the plane while building it." Veering into codesign, we held a series of online discussions with students. We brainstormed possibilities and consciously fostered a climate of respectful open-mindedness where everyone could express ideas and differences of opinion openly and assertively. Nonetheless, these meetings were occasionally fraught. Students were under intense stress. Many experienced financial strain. Some had left well-paid work to embark on the MSW(Prof). Others had started straight after undergraduate study and needed to start earning. Some were wrangling childcare as daycare centres and schools were closed. We got used to online guest appearances by toddlers, children and pets. While there has been discussion of how digital technology opens students' private worlds to view, and may encourage them to present themselves in ways that might be considered unprofessional (Wallengren-Lynch et al., 2022), we saw our students' caring for children or animals as a component of their personal story and a strand of their resilience. We reflected that responding to personal stories aligns with relational practice, an approach we were committed to promoting. Despite lockdown, some of our students caught Covid-19, or needed to look after afflicted family members. We encouraged them to demonstrate professionalism by letting us know when life got particularly tough, and by participating in KEP as much as they could. Commitment to the development of a viable project was evident in students' consistent engagement in online meetings.

Establishing clear, respectful communication for collaborative work

Our main concern at this development stage was to keep students informed while recognising their anxiety, and to create opportunities for them to communicate—with us and each other. We invited students to send us their thoughts individually, promptly responded to such communications with thanks, and encouraged them to share their views in forthcoming meetings. We deliberately led by example, modelling teamwork, and recognising each other's contributions. This process cultivated trust and collegiality amongst the staff team. Our commitment to whakawhanaungatanga, the process of establishing good relations, which is foregrounded in the Aotearoa New Zealand Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics*, (ANZASW, 2019) cemented connectedness between ourselves, our students, and eventually, project partners.

Rewards accrued. In meetings, students expressed their views clearly and listened courteously, even when they disagreed. This considerate communication was something that we were initially unsure would eventuate, given students' stress

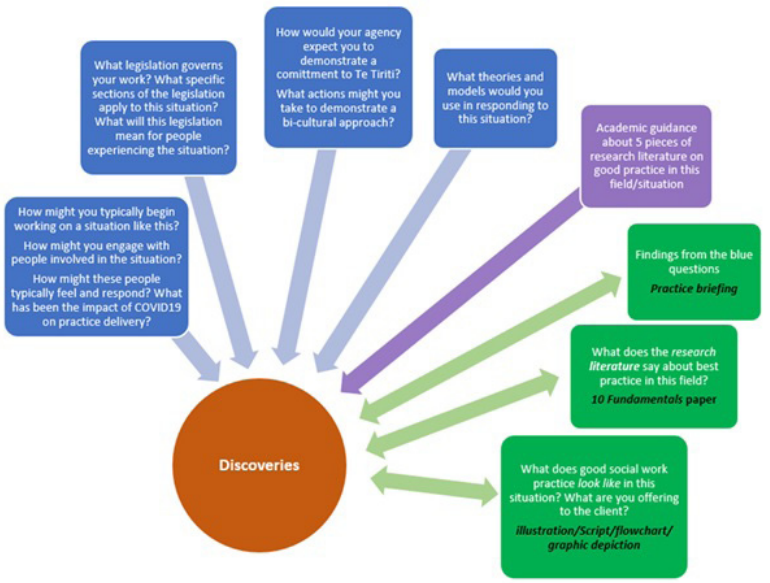

Figure 1 Knowledge Exchange Project Diagram Presented to Students

levels and differing circumstances. However, a sense of collective care seemed to snowball. We discovered that students were finding ways to support one another to cope with lockdown. Some sent us supportive messages recognising the pressure that we were under. We had evidently developed a collective culture underpinned by authentic, thoughtful communication.

As we leaned into co-design, the project morphed into shape. Commonality was evident in students' comments and suggestions. The eventual result of much online discussion and messaging was a project resembling the original version of KEP but with heightened emphasis on orientation for placement and overt recognition of relational practice. The video exemplar was removed. Instead, drawing on learning derived from the focussed literature review and interview phases of the project, as well as on learning in previous courses including previous placements in NGO agencies, students were to create a practice briefing based on interviews with practice experts. Our co-designed KEP had taken shape, and was ratified by the dean of our faculty. We were ready to get started.

Students were allocated to teams (child protection, physical health, mental health, and youth justice) according to the field of practice in which their placement had been arranged. Teams were tasked with the following work. First, they were to arrange online meetings with their academic expert and expert practitioner, whose participation had been invited and secured by the staff team. Having consulted their academic expert on a short list of relevant literature, they would review this literature to produce a two-page, field-specific "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper. In a conversational interview with their assigned expert practitioner, teams would explore typical practice scenarios and inquire into work with Māori, the impact of policy on people's lives, and the realities of working under pertinent legislation and policy, and then record their learning as a "practice briefing". Their final task was to create a strategy for relaying what social workers need to know, and do, to demonstrate competence in a particular context. Key questions were: What kind of practice do we need to engage in if we are to work responsively and preventively?; How can we as social workers enact social justice in our practice?; and How is commitment to Te Tiriti demonstrated? In an online project meeting, we presented students with the diagram in Figure 1 and talked through the work it represents. From left to right, the first four arrows relate to conversational interviews with expert practitioners, the fifth, purple, arrow relates to consultation with academic experts, and the last three arrows relate to project outputs.

Rewriting a representative practice story

When we prepared our task diagram, we had not yet developed what proved to be a powerful strategy for illuminating social work's social justice role and for highlighting the importance of engaging in relational practice to "hear the whole story". While the students were consulting academic experts about key literature, the staff team created a complex, composite narrative

called "Sara's Story" which was designed to link students' learning to practice. Based in the MSW(Prof) programme leader's work on family violence mortality reviews, and spanning several years in the life of a young mother of Māori/Samoan heritage, this story included anonymised lived experience highlighting typical experiences of women entrapped in intimate partner violence and featured interaction with social work agencies in the fields of practice in which students' planned placements were located. It was intended to both orient students to their placement's field of practice and to alert them to how social justice, well-being and safety are all compromised by practitioner bias and systemic failure to provide relevant help. Students used the story and their "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper to compile critical questions for the expert practitioners they interviewed.

Next, students rewrote Sara's story, taking a critical and holistic stance and considering how the field of practice in which their placement was situated could have supported Sara and people close to her over time, with a focus on how timely help might not only have averted her eventual murder but also reoriented her story towards wellbeing for her and her family. Exploration of culture and impacts of colonisation were crucial (McNabb, 2019). The key question underlying this piece of work was: What could social workers in each field of practice have done to help shift the trajectory towards beneficial change?

Taking flight

After the dramas and intensity of creating KEP, its implementation was relatively straightforward. When staff team members approached academic colleagues and expert practitioners, we were activating long-established networks that function in a spirit of reciprocity, and they willingly agreed to help, expressing interest in collaborating on the project. Students set to work on arranging meetings with their experts, distributing work amongst team members, doing the reading, and then working collaboratively on their "Fundamentals of Good Practice" paper. Clearly, this helped them prepare for their interviews with expert practitioners, who let us know that they found these interviews engrossing, and that the students' knowledge and conduct sparked optimism about the future of the profession. Despite the time limits we had set, some expert practitioners were so engaged that their meetings with student teams lasted considerably longer than scheduled because the practitioner wanted to continue the conversation.

The information-processing phase lasted until lockdown was lifted and students were able to start their agency-based placements. KEP work continued as coursework for placement, and, during the last week of face-to-face placement, each group delivered a presentation in person at a session to which students' field supervisors were invited, as were the expert practitioners and academic experts who had supported the project. While there was scope for alternative strategies for sharing their learning, all teams chose to make a PowerPoint presentation. These were assessed and recorded, and students were encouraged to further share their presentations, within their placement agencies and elsewhere.

KEP produced results that went far beyond a stopgap. Gratifyingly, we received several unsolicited notes of thanks from students, for example, "I found this project very worthwhile and look forward to taking this knowledge into placement." We heard from colleagues who contributed to the project that the students who consulted them were organised and engaged. Academic experts were impressed by the robust work completed by students. In an email to the team for whom he was academic expert, one said, "The conceptual thinking that has gone into the project is superb." In communicating with expert practitioners, students developed expertise in courteous, collegial, professional interaction. At the end of the

project, practitioners were impressed by the quality of the information that students had collated and by the depth and scope of their questioning about the realities of practice, and they admired students' capacity to apply their learning to Sara's story. As a conglomerate story based on real events experienced by several different women, Sara's story brought students close to real-life practice, and proved to be a powerful learning tool, evoking engagement with Sara and provoking outrage at systemic failures to support her and people close to her.

When lockdown was lifted, students had completed around 150 hours of placement time on KEP and had just finished rewriting Sara's story. All successfully embarked on placement and no further lockdowns interrupted the remaining 50 days. Students' feedback at the end of practicum emphasised their learning about relational practice and the importance of clear communication. One student mentioned using his team's work on KEP to make sense of family violence situations encountered during placement. According to fieldwork supervisors, when students finally got to placement they were perceived as confident, knowledgeable, proactive, and able and willing to ask critical questions. In the words of a fieldwork supervisor, the students "hit the ground running."

We observed that KEP built student expertise in the following areas:

- protocols, conventions, and facilitation skills for online meetings; communication; presentation;
- co-design;
- teamwork and collaboration; for some students, leadership skills;
- attuned response to self-care and accountability;
- interview skills;
- knowledge of practice context and constraints, and of systemic failures;
- reciprocity, through knowledge exchange with agencies, peers, and advisors;
- practice in applying a strengths-based approach;
- deepened understanding of prevention, through identifying opportunities for beneficial change in Sara's story.

Our experienced practicum assessors found that this cohort's coursework demonstrated development of all SWRB core competencies to the standard we would normally expect, if not more so. Additionally, students demonstrated courteous, professional communication and engaged in collaborative work with a broad spectrum of people. They experienced reciprocity through recognition of the contribution of experts and gave back through sharing their own work. They learned that reciprocity, a key feature of KEP, is rooted in relationship-building within professions and communities. In facilitating dialogue about good practice and the importance of relationships, KEP was a persuasive example of integrated learning (Domakin & Curry, 2018).

Discussion

KEP evolved from a glimmer of an idea into a robust learning experience that drew on relational and networking skills at the heart of social work. It provided hands-on learning about collaborative project planning and implementation. Taylor and White (2006) argued that social work educators must prepare students for ethically managing uncertainty, long recognised as a prevailing condition of the professional context (Fook, 2013), and the process of developing KEP was a form of educating for uncertainty (Arouz, 2021). Students developed strategies for functioning constructively despite uncertainty, and staff learned how to help them do so. KEP gave us strategies for orienting students to placement contexts and alerted us to the importance of preparing students to deal with uncertainty and crises.

The collaborative and reflective practice that characterises KEP began with us, the staff team. We continue this collaboration by

working together to write this article and by including the perspectives of others involved in the project—our students, our academic colleagues, placement supervisors, and social workers who acted as practice experts for students exploring the practice realities of their placement field. We agree with Archer-Kuhn and colleagues (2022, p. 1013) who noted that "collaboration is understood to support social workers to join resources, rethink practices, become innovative, and respond to changing social problems." Like them, we see the value of sustaining the collaborative practices we developed when challenged by Covid-19. For us, this extends to deeper collaborative relationships between us as a group of educators, and strengthened links to the academic colleagues and experienced practitioners who helped us by supporting our students. The three of us who collaborated on this article gratefully recognise the contribution of two further members of the staff team, both of whom retired last year.

Discussing the process of learning teamwork, Clark (2009) recommended the use of realistic scenarios based in real-world situations. The culmination of students' work on KEP was to apply their learning to "Sara's story". As a representative narrative drawn from real-life cases, Sara's story confronted students with the complexity that characterises social work and demonstrated that when service provision is misaligned with needs, people stop seeking help and problems accumulate. Through empathising with Sara as the main actor in the story, they realised the importance of taking the time needed to understand a situation from the perspective of the person experiencing it, and comprehended that social work support must be timely, relevant, and responsive to need, rather than, as in Sara's story, routine referral to programmes with a waitlist, or to available programmes designed to resolve a different problem. Interviews with practice experts revealed that this type of transactional practice, which might be called "convenient", is unfortunately common.

Engagement with Sara's story helped maintain the broad perspective needed for social work that avoids simplistic judgments and bias, instead recognising and tackling systemic origins of adversity experienced by many of the people whom social workers aim to help, and thus reinforcing students' professional commitment to social justice. Rewriting Sara's story required students to adopt a broad, ecological lens to show how cultural, systemic, and sociolegal factors affected Sara's life. This lens deepened students' understanding of kotahitanga, a Māori concept integral to our *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019) which expresses the fundamental importance of challenging oppression and injustice and promoting collective action for social change.

While working on KEP, students developed skills that are vital for successful teamwork and collaborative work, yet often obscured by the urgency of the problem at hand. To make this experiential learning overt, we used online project meetings to recognise, and to name, such skills, including delegation, collating and reporting information succinctly, making practical arrangements, and interviewing. Clark (2009) reflected that "learning teamwork is dependent on the experience of working together, in which knowledge is created by the team itself through a social process" (p. 587) and recommended using group processing time for "promoting reflection on what is happening at the level of the team itself" (p. 586). Although we did not deliberately programme these ideas into KEP, they nonetheless were evident in KEP's evolution. We observed how experiential learning strengthens students' confidence and competence in working collaboratively.

Reflecting on KEP, we recognise the unexpected benefits of strategies developed under duress. An important benefit was that KEP kept students connected—to each other, to university staff, and to their sense of themselves as beginning social workers. When offered the opportunity

to codesign the preparatory phase of their delayed placement, they applied themselves to the tasks involved in KEP, thus acquiring experiential knowledge of how to plan and run a project. They responded to our modelling of consistent, professional communication and initiated such communication in their own ways, using digital tools to stay in touch among themselves, with staff, with experts they consulted, and eventually, with placement field supervisors. They engaged in targeted networking and experienced reciprocity and its rewards. Students' work on the project demonstrates skills development by osmosis rather than instruction.

Students' final summaries of their entire placement experience indicated that KEP established a solid foundation for beginning their agency-based placement. One such summary noted that KEP helped the writer develop key ideas that they "carried into their placement". KEP built contextual knowledge, exemplifying the "benefit of focussing on one area, or topic, allowing the student to become well versed in the theory, practice and work with a specific sector" (Zuchowski et al., 2022, p. 2884).

The following year, a second cohort of students, this time first-year, participated in a second iteration of KEP during an even worse situation, when prolonged lockdown prevented them from going on their 50-day placement at all. Halfway through this second KEP, these students completed a written exercise reflecting on their experience of the project, and their comments indicate that as they developed nuanced knowledge of practice, they became more engaged with the kaupapa, or purpose and values, of the organisation and field of practice in which their planned placement was based. Now, with lockdowns hopefully a thing of the past, we continue to adapt and use strategies we developed during the first Covid-19 lockdown to enhance student learning. Future students will benefit from changes that we were forced to make during the crises created by Covid-19, and from our learning about using a practice-based story. For example, writing the story in the first person would resonate with the idea of *telling* a story. We plan to build on KEP, first developing further first-person narratives developed in partnership with expert practitioners, then engaging actors to record the stories, so that students can practise listening.

Looking back to when we were struggling to devise an alternative emergency placement for a cohort of anxious students, we see that the development of KEP paralleled the urgency and uncertainty often experienced in social work practice (Taylor & White, 2006). Social work operates in a context of complexity and ambiguity and social workers must be prepared to deal with the uncertainty that is inherent in this context. Perhaps reflecting a tendency for social workers to resist uncertainty (Fook, 2013), our students expressed initial discomfort about our expectation that they would manage their own team process, share learning, and produce resources collaboratively. Building on Fook's argument that uncertainty is a defining characteristic of social work, Arouz (2021, p. 562) maintained that "social work education should play a pivotal part in articulating and developing knowledge to respond to uncertain circumstances". KEP helped our students learn to respond to uncertain circumstances by working well together. This bodes well for their capacity to cope with the uncertainty and crises that they will inevitably encounter during their social work careers.

Conclusion

KEP was a co-constructed, collaborative knowledge-exchange project created and implemented under pressure when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world and government-ordered lockdown and industry regulations barred our MSW(Prof) students from beginning imminent placements in statutory agencies.

The KEP experience had five phases. First, waiting to see if lockdown would be lifted quickly, or if the profession's regulatory body would provide us with solutions. Second, realising we had to come up with a solution ourselves, which we did, only to find that students were reluctant to engage with it. Third, co-designing a reimagined project collaboratively with students. Fourth, a relatively straightforward operational phase. Fifth, a reflective phase, consolidating the staff team's learning about the value of sharing responsibility for students' learning with the students themselves, and from students participating in a creative process that enhanced readiness for placement.

The uncertainty and urgency that permeated the context at the time forced us to focus on clear communication and collegial support. Our own deliberate demonstration of teamwork influenced our students' collaborative engagement in the project, which reinforced their individual and collective learning about context-specific practice and contributed to an overview of statutory social work practice. KEP demonstrated the value of thoroughly orienting students to their placement context before they venture out into the field. Establishing and maintaining a collaborative orientation and professional communication clearly has value for preparing students to function as confident, contributing social workers. Practicum coursework showed that students' learning not only met, but surpassed, our expectations. The use of a composite narrative drawn from practice experience anchored their learning, highlighted social justice as a social work imperative, and alerted students to the need for timely, relevant responses.

Like many projects that retrospectively look straightforward, KEP's development was complex. In a context of unprecedented uncertainty, KEP had to be flexible in its function as a reimagined early phase of placement. Its outcomes are nuanced and multilayered. It helped keep students connected, grounded, and focussed, and was successful in ways we did not foresee. Not only did it serve as a foundation for learning that we would normally expect students to acquire during final placement, but it was also valuable in engendering other types of learning in unexpected ways. It has since informed our pedagogy to enhance the learning of succeeding cohorts of students. Its success resulted from mahi tahi, working together on a collective endeavour, in a way that is illuminated by the Māori whakataukī (proverb) "Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa ta kitini" (Success is not the work of an individual, but the work of many).

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The Oranga Tamariki Practice Framework—Setting out, explaining, and reinforcing our practice approach

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ABSTRACT

Practice frameworks are a well-established mechanism for practice reform and a growing body of literature attests to this promise. Surprisingly then, little is known about how they are intended to, or indeed, work on the ground. This practice note introduces Oranga Tamariki's new practice framework and explains how this sets out and explains our new practice approach—driving a needed paradigm shift away from risk saturation toward ecological understandings of oranga (wellbeing), promoting te ao Māori principles and supported by the social work discipline, to benefit all tamariki, children, whānau and families we work with. We are proudly (re)positioning and promoting social work in, and for, Aotearoa New Zealand's child welfare statutory offer. This is just and right for families, whānau and their tamariki. This practice note highlights how the practice framework promotes the ANZASW codes of *ethics* and SWRB practice competencies while enabling and driving sound and ethical professional practice. Consequently, social work practice is then delivered, experienced, led and quality assured based on the discipline of social work and not on risk-aversive reactions to practice tragedies or the volumes of technocratic policies and procedures that too quickly become outdated.

Keywords: Practice frameworks; child welfare; social work

> "Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, he toa takitini".
> My strength is not as an individual, but as a collective.

Practice innovation for child welfare services is a complex yet compelling enterprise for every welfare system. Aotearoa New Zealand is not immune—indeed the spotlight is on. It always has been, but in the last few years the light is brighter, it is quite harsh—and requires attending to. Sound lessons in the practice reform literature tell us not to take quick fixes or patch jobs in statutory social work. To this end, this practice note introduces the new Practice Framework for Oranga Tamariki[1]. We explain why we have designed the new framework to support and guide our frontline kaimahi, leadership and the whole organisation. Finan et al. (2018) argued for separate frameworks to drive leadership and practice; this paper offers an alternative—one underpinning organisational practice framework.

Practice organisations need an unequivocal and relentless focus on practice, yet, too often, dissonance between the frontline and senior leadership limits the potential of practice reform. When leadership is engaged in practice and with the right system conditions, the organisation can focus on and coalesce around reform success.

Decades of well-intentioned child protection reform in Aotearoa New Zealand have failed to produce a practice system where

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social work and Indigenous knowledge flourish and inform an ecological and critical thinking enterprise. This in no way reflects all the reform endeavours, but we are aware that we have not tackled dominant discourses (like the 'at risk' monster!) and thus help kaimahi and leaders work differently *with* risk and harm. Risk discourses dominate every child protection system (Featherstone et al., 2018) and calls to move beyond it are compelling (Connolly, 2017). Oranga Tamariki's practice framework is designed to help us work very differently with risk.

Aotearoa New Zealand's 'child at-risk' focus is our present state for contacting Oranga Tamariki: the child is seen as being at risk because harm has happened or could occur, and the social worker is pitted against the whānau or family (who are easily viewed as the source of harm and therefore posing the risk). This tends to encourage adversarial practice and reinforces ideas that our practice stays child-centric. Parents and the wider family are easily distrusted, and the work tends to be transactional and driven by ideas of risk management and risk elimination. This practice will feel authoritarian. It is not aligned with te ao Māori principles of whakapapa or whanaungatanga. Moreover, this promotes individuated ideas of the 'child is client' and is best illustrated by swift and peremptory actions like child removal (Parton, 2016). This is a set of problems we must overcome.

We are not suggesting that we do not respond to worries about children at risk, quite the contrary. In responding we have tended to reinforce the dominant risk discourses as the *only way* to see children and this is a problem. Tamariki and all children seen in the context of their whakapapa and whānaungatanga relationships is where we want our practice to be. To support this, we designed a new practice framework.

Practice frameworks

A practice framework should provide a logical, coherent, and reinforcing way in which the organisational imperatives support excellent practice because it illuminates the core practice purpose in relation to professional values and ethics, theories, and methods, rather than through managerial edict (Gillingham, 2017; Stanley, 2016). A practice framework then needs to be the practice scaffold and house a range of practice resources, idea, theories, and change models. An underpinning practice framework clarifies how practice models work and how to measure success: "Judge practice by the quality of decision-making, not by the outcome" (Munro, 2019, p. 127).

Practice frameworks should offer a unified vision for practice, grounded in the realities of practice, supported by a strong evidence base, access to research and be embedded in a set of principles and values that are essentially informed by social work (Connolly, 2007). Operationally practice frameworks need to support the professional association and registration requirements for social work. The practice literature supports practice frameworks offering a conceptual professional underpinning, thus being a significant organisational driver to strengthen professional reasoning and build confident practice (Baginsky et al., 2021, Connolly, 2007; Connolly & Smith, 2010; Healy, 2005; Stanley, 2017). Baron et al. (2019) delivered this through a strengths-based practice framework for adult social care in England.

Social workers can draw on the framework to help them marshal rights-based and principle-based arguments for doing the right thing. Moreover, they are supported in their professional obligations because these can be housed and called out within the framework.

The social models of mental health and disability are being drawn on in many child protection systems to offer new frames for

understanding and working with child abuse and neglect (Featherstone et al., 2014, 2018). The argument here is simple—practice analysis needs to be ecological not narrow or diagnostically dominated.

A clear goal of an underpinning practice framework is how it enables and facilitates reflective and reflexive engagement with practice knowledge, theories and epistemologies, our decisions, and judgments. It needs to be flexible so it keeps current with new knowledge, skills, and tools. Decision making is therefore more rigorous, ethical and analytic; the practice system then supports decision making to be analytic, evidence-informed, provisional and, where needed, reviewed, and changed. Practitioners are therefore accountable for *how* they have reached decisions and judgments. Helping social workers and practitioners to be competent and confident in decision making, while being clear and ethical is an ongoing and necessary investment for every practice system.

Stanley et al. (2021) argued that practice frameworks need to offer and reinforce five interrelated areas of practice:

1. Promote an espoused *values base, core principles and an ethical basis* for the work drawing on professional, indigenous, local and international codes, legislation, agreed international conventions, rights-based ideals and professional obligations.

2. Provide an *evidenced-informed knowledge and research base*, where Indigenous, professional and practice knowledge and research is supported by co-creation principles that ensure narratives and the lived experiences of tamariki, children, whānau and families are to the fore.

3. Guide kaimahi in how to use an agreed range of *practice models* that can be engaged with in supervision, in legal and practice consultations, and when explaining how we have reached decisions and practice judgments.

4. Develop an agreed range of practice and interpersonal *skills* that are supported by the learning offer.

5. Reinforce a growing practitioner and leadership self-awareness, with *experiential learning* and reflexive practice promoted, and supported through an active attention to our emotions, bias and patterns of practice.

In summary:

A practice framework integrates systems, practice, indigenous and professional knowledge with empirical research, practice theories, and ethical principles, with the practice skills needed, and engages practitioners and leaders from an experiential base. Presented in a compact and convenient format, practitioners and leaders can then understand and influence the systems conditions, while drawing on practice knowledge and core principles to inform everyday work.

The Oranga Tamariki practice framework

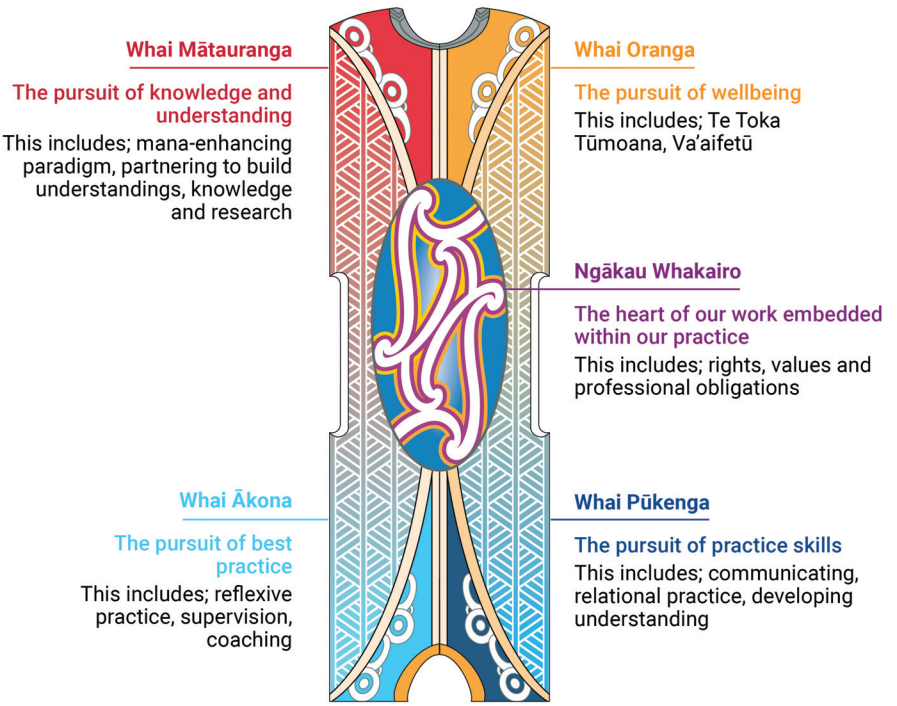
Our practice framework is underpinned by several assumptions.

- Te Ao Māori knowledge is valuable and needs to be to the fore in our mahi and practice system.

- Social work is our underpinning discipline—ethical and regulatory competencies need to be at the heart of our mahi.

- We have a unique cultural context where Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and responsibilities need enshrining and promoting.

- Dominant deficit discourses of risk-elimination need shifting toward working *with* risk differently. Working proactively *with* risky and uncertain situations.



- Our practice framework needed to be grounded in the realities of practice, be accessible and enabling of a practice shift from risk saturation toward an ecological understanding of oranga (wellbeing) and drive a restorative practice approach.

A design feature was that the practice framework needed to offer leadership and quality assurance functions, thus an aligned approach to the organisation would be possible through one practice framework.

Ka whiria ngā muka tangata, ā, ka whiria ngā muka wairua—weave/plait the fine fibres of mankind and we will then weave/plait the fine fibres of our cultural wellbeing.

How the practice framework works

Starting our work from the central Ngakau Whakairo domain our practice framework promotes a rights and values base to the work. The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) competencies and our international obligations (United Nations conventions for the child, indigeneity and disability) shine brightly from the heart of the framework. This ensures the social work discipline, ethics, rights and advocacy are enacted. This is a significant departure from procedural drivers or managerial demands yet promotes professional practice and case recording in line with organisational expectations.

Social workers are guided to understand the situation via the knowledge domains, Whai Mātauranga and Whai Oranga, guiding them to build then deepen their understanding and offer a clear rationale for change via practice models. Skills and tools are promoted (the Whai Pukenga domain) with supervision and coaching connected through the Whai Akona domain. A focus on reflexive learning is called out. Moreover, when kaimahi feel overwhelmed or anxious the framework offers a place to pause, to review where we are, and to ask, "what's my purpose here?"

The practice framework has four functions, it:

- sets out and explains our practice approach;
- guides us as we apply practice models and tools;
- supports our professional reasoning; and
- reinforces good and improving practice.

The practice framework is a guidance map that orientates and provides an intervention logic. Questions emerge early on, like "What is the right thing to do?" "What does my professional knowledge tell me?" "What hypothesis is forming as I start my work?" "Who am I working with?" and "How am I building my understanding of the situation?" "Who is helping me to understand things?" This promotes Indigenous and cultural forms of knowledge, with whānau and family voices and views considered alongside professional perspectives, our ethical codes, theories and competencies. Practice slows down. Staying curious, hypothesising and being exploratory are encouraged. For example, "How might poverty and stress be affecting this family's day-to-day life?" "What ethical debates may need clarifying?" "Am I being empathic or possibly biased?" "How will I know?"

The framework helps social workers to articulate the purpose of their work and, when asked for, help them to explain *how* they do it—that is being clear on the models, tools and approaches in use, and the theories of change they draw on. This encourages a relational focus and differentiates the practice of "understanding the situation" (*assessing*) to the task of recording and producing a codified report (*assessment*). To illustrate, the Whai Mātauranga domain asks me to include everybody around the child and consider whānau and family's views and hopes equally with codified reports and professional views. The social work task is to "sense make" a variety of views and not just hear the loudest voice.

Risk and harm are kept in sight while we understand more ecologically about what is going on, and what is contributing to risk or harm, and what and who can offer interruption, support and tiaki (protection). This negates the need for a separate assessment system. The practice framework takes care of this. Practice models help us to deepen our understanding and logically guide actions needed in the pursuit of an improved situation. Thus, working with risky and less certain situations is supported, and risk-aversive responses better tackled.

The practice framework encourages kaimahi, supervisors and leaders to be proactive in their learning and in growing their practice (through the Whai Akona domain). Reflexivity happens when kaimahi check in with how they, themselves, may be affecting the mahi. For example, through questions like "What do I bring?; how do my values shape my practice?; why am I attracted to certain practice models?"

Importantly, social workers are encouraged to argue for *the right thing* for tamariki and children (practice that is ethically and professionally driven—called out in the Ngakau Whakairo domain) rather than "doing things right" (that is, narrowly following bureaucratic processes). The former is toward greater ethical and just practice; the latter indicates risk aversion in action. The ANZASW codes of ethics and SWRB competencies (along with our international convention obligations) are highlighted in this domain as legitimate mandates and benchmarks, promoting our profession and calling out our nation's international responsibilities.

What is new and different

Our practice framework is a significant departure from previous versions. Since 2005 these have mainly been knowledge and values-based frameworks, organised for practitioners (Connolly, 2007). Well-intended, previous practice frameworks failed to disrupt or adjust the managerialist systems around practice that reinforced and maintained a discursive *child at risk* emphasis.

By preferencing te ao Māori principles and understandings of whakapapa and oranga, the new framework illuminates a new paradigm (the mana-enhancing paradigm), a counter to an individualised child at risk focus toward one where tamariki and all children are seen relationally, connected and belonging to whānau and families. This is a strong social work set of ideals and principles that guide an understanding of harm and risk of harm through a wider social and ecological framing.

The framework tidies up a messy and confused practice offering. Models and tools are located within the domains, helping to guide our social work mahi in consistent yet creative ways. Supervisors can use the framework to explore social work practice methodologically and theoretically; thus conversations about practice have a structure for reflective supervision and case advice. Feedback and complaints have a clear methodology to follow in determining want is good or poor practice. Quality systems the same, and leadership can articulate and lead a coherent practice approach, while adjustments to recording and technology updates can be aligned to support the practice framework.

A significant contribution is in the unmuting of the social work voice by guiding our kaimahi to articulate *how* they have reached their understanding, view or decision. This is a needed move from description to analysis. And when we are unsure or feeling overloaded, the framework offers clarity and support in next steps.

Further contributions include:

- Understanding and then responding to harm and risk of harm situations is ecological and holistic, relational and partnered
- Professional reasoning is rendered visible and explainable. Accountability in terms of what we think and "how we know what we know" is hard-wired in.
- Social work as our underpinning discipline is promoted and SWRB competencies benchmarked and alive in practice and supervision
- Advocacy skills and professional reasoning skills are promoted and encouraged
- Relational practice is hard-wired in, leading to more inclusive and restorative practice
- A coaching culture is legitimised (e.g., supervisors leaving the office to observe and offer real-time feedback)
- A leadership and quality assurance focus can be explained and guided by the practice framework; this being the benchmark for expected and improving mahi.

Building practitioner and supervisor confidence and skill in practice discussions, analysis and reflections is another gain from having the practice framework. This helps us to reflect on how bias and emotional responses can play out, inviting us to review the knowledge we draw on, the skills used, and fundamentally ask "Did I do the right thing here?" (Turnell, 2004). Supervision conversations can then focus on why we have selected particular models or tools and explore how we have employed them.

Whai Akona domain reinforces the offer of reflexive practice so that we grow our practice. When practitioners are asked how they, themselves, may be affecting the work, and asking "What do I bring?; how do my values shape my practice?; and why am I attracted to certain practice models?"—an invitation to deepen our practice is made. Practice is invited to slow down, to be considered, and the social worker enabled to articulate what they know, how they know it, and what it means. Further, performance conversations can be founded on an agreed basis of practice. It is important for us to ensure the ethical and regulatory competencies of social work are to the fore, something the new framework explicitly promotes.

The opportunity here is a more risk-sophisticated approach to child protection, adoptions and youth justice mahi. Further, this provides system leadership a cogent explanation of our practice approach in those rare but high-profile cases of child death or injury, tempering but helping the harsh media and public condemnation that swiftly follows.

Implementation planning and challenges

Implementation will require a whole-of-system focus and confident leadership who demand improved social work practice while driving systems alignment. Over the past year, six Oranga Tamariki sites have been trialling the practice framework. A relentless investment in learning and coaching has been key. Leadership is a significant enabler of practice to support the move from risk aversion to relational practice where we work in partnerships to understand and respond to harm and risk. This will be emotionally and intellectually demanding for our kaimahi, supervisors and leaders, indeed the whole organisation, and the practice framework is on hand to support and guide. Moreover, it is now available for whānau families and partners to understand how we work, and this offers further accountability for our practice.

Practice reform is a long game. We need to stay the course and keep the waka heading forward. Child protection systems are rocked around in times of high-profile tragedy (Hyslop, 2021). Therefore, a coherent and clear practice framework allows us to show where practice falls short and indeed promotes sound and ethical practice going forward. We think this offers an antidote to quick-fix reform solutions or swift risk-aversive responses, so common in child protection systems, while driving the very best social work Oranga Tamaki can offer.

The Oranga Tamariki Practice Framework can be found at

https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/practice-approach/practice-framework/

Notes

[1] Acknowledging the contribution by Oranga Tamariki strategic leads Dr Leland Ruwhiu and Fiona Matchitt.

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LOVE—A tool for making ethical decisions

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ABSTRACT

Social workers regularly engage in astoundingly complex ethical dilemmas. Castro-Atwater and Hohnbaum (2015) even advocated that understanding a professional body's code of ethics is just a necessary first step and is not enough, by itself, to equip practitioners to make ethical decisions. The key outcome of this practice note is to share a practical supervision tool, LOVE, that arose from working (as a supervisor, trainer, and professional body ethics panel member) alongside practitioners to respond to ethical dilemmas and complaints. The LOVE tool will help safeguard social workers while they navigate ethical dilemmas by assisting them to systematically consider different lenses (legal requirements, organisational requirements, values, and ethical codes) which will help mitigate the risk of them overlooking something of significance.

Keywords: Ethics; dilemma; supervision; decision framework; model

Having worked alongside practitioners to respond to complaints or explore ethical dilemmas in a variety of roles (supervisor, trainer, manager, and professional body ethics committee member), I am in awe of the complexities that social workers encounter. Hosmer (1996) capsulates these complexities in his statement: "Ethics is normally used in the plural form since most people have a system of interrelated beliefs rather than a single opinion" (p. 87). As a practitioner myself, I felt empathy for colleagues who had been caught up in a complaint because, in this system of interrelated beliefs, they had not considered the tensions between the social worker's professional advocacy, societal and personal values, legal requirements, funding pressures, and organisational policy. This practice note will introduce and demonstrate how to apply a practical supervision tool, LOVE, that I created to help safeguard social workers, by prompting them to assess ethical dilemmas from different perspectives: legal requirements, organisational requirements, values, and ethical codes.

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *36(1)*, 156–162.

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The deliberate naming of the acronym LOVE reminds supervisors that when they assist social workers to navigate ethical situations or respond to complaints; they should do so in a compassionate and supportive manner that challenges hindsight bias or scapegoating. Supervisors and managers should endorse a learning culture which assesses what could have been done to prevent the situation, including analysing workplace culture and systems that drive practice (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020).

The need to critique what we perceive

I have deliberately worked in a variety of sector settings (statutory government, small and large not-for-profit organisations, faith-based, kaupapa Māori, and private practice). All these lenses have challenged how I perceive situations. This is important, as a theme that arose from responding to complaints was that, while practitioners were almost always acting with good intent and drawing upon a particular body of knowledge or values, they often would have

benefited from also reflecting on the situation from a different perspective. For example, rather than react on what they deemed to be fair, to first consider their scope of practice, organisation policy and how their actions would reflect on the reputation of the organisation and profession.

As I progress on a bi-cultural journey, I often wonder as Tauiwi (non-Māori), what subtleties I might not see or value. A whakataukī (proverb) that has helped enhance my practice is the caution, "He maha nga kaupapa kai roto I tēnei āhuatanga hai whakaarotanga." A cultural advisor explained this whakataukī to me as: In this situation there are many elements to consider—some of which may not be apparent at a first glance. Hendrick and Young (2017) vulnerably shared their personal journeys of becoming aware of how their context growing up had influenced them, and even years into their social work they still had to intentionally examine things that they had unconsciously assimilated. "It's difficult for me to say that I myself am not racist as my whiteness often renders me blind to, and perpetuating, systems that continually privilege my everyday being" (p. 18). As a supervisor, I, too, must be deliberate about assessing what has prejudiced my practice, affecting what I see and what I espouse to others.

The LOVE tool

I wanted social workers to easily remember the LOVE model and so, as Karpman (2019) championed, have presented it in a simple diagram. Practitioners have shared that the diagram not only aided their memory it also had the benefit of allowing them to externalise their situation which was particularly helpful when they had interpreted differing views of colleagues or line managers as a personal affront. Practitioners also reflected that the structure of the tool gave them a broader context in which to consider the dilemma and possible ramifications.

The LOVE tool has four quadrants covering personal values and the requirements of the: law, organisations, and ethical codes. The lines between the quadrants are visually broken to acknowledge there are links between areas.

Understanding the LOVE tool quadrant of legal requirements

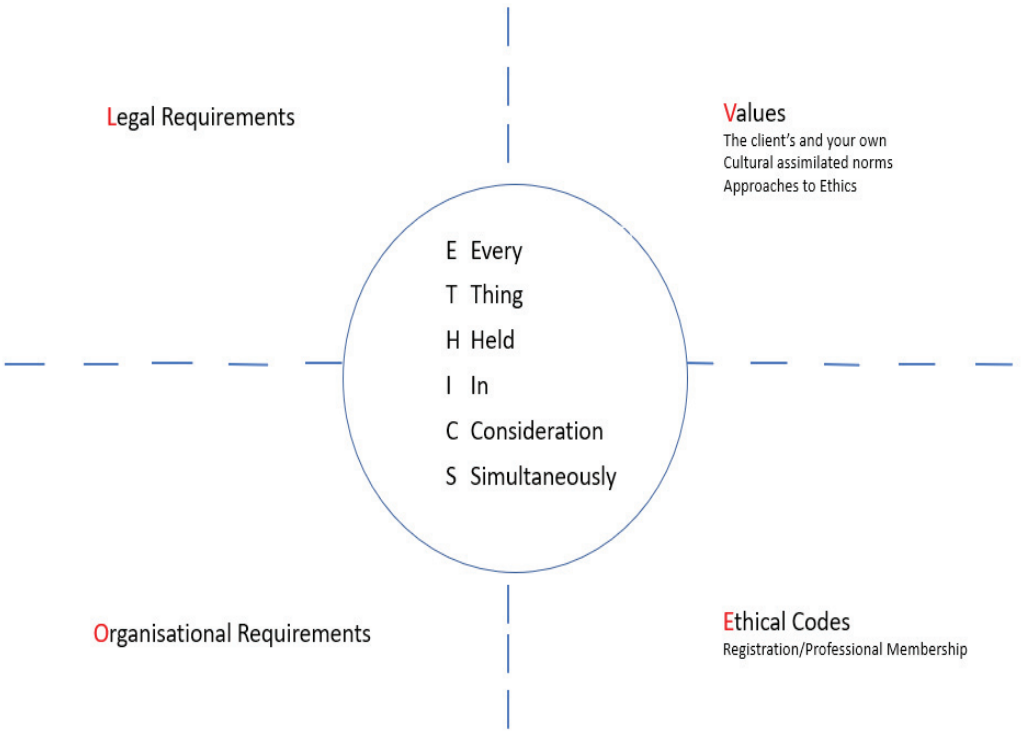
Many professional bodies state that practitioners should practise within the law, for example, Social Workers Registration Board (2021) 1.2: "You are expected to comply with all legal obligations" and 4.2 "work in accordance with the law". Likewise, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW, 2019) mandated: "We are law-abiding citizens of Aotearoa" (p. 12).

In the public arena, and even professional circles, there can be misunderstanding of what laws stipulate though. Practitioners must do their own diligence to be aware of how legal requirements apply to their situation. This includes the broader component of their work, for example: registration, scope of practice, retention of records, employment law, taxation, and The Privacy Act.

Just because something is enshrined in law, however, does not always make it fair or just. Enriquez (2020) asked "what if what is permissible and acceptable today is anathema tomorrow? Slavery, segregation, misogyny, the Holocaust … all were 'legal'" (p. 212). While Enriquez's example is a teaching hyperbole, within New Zealand's short history laws have been repealed to right 'legal' inequities. The ANZASW *Code of Ethics* (2007) stated, "Members engage in constructive action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate injustice. They respect the law, whilst working towards change in any laws that disadvantage clients or other members of the community" (p. 9). Their new version (2019) stated, "we advocate fair and equitable treatment for all persons under the law and challenge injustice, especially injustice which affects the vulnerable and disadvantaged" (p. 12).

Figure 1: LOVE—A Tool for Making Ethical Decisions

My ethical dilemma (what are the conflicting quadrants and elements)	
Quadrant …	*Quadrant…*
Element(s) …	*Element(s) …*



Options include:	*Option 1*	*Option 2*	*Option 3*
Possible consequences			

Understanding the LOVE tool quadrant of organisational requirements

As practitioners can be held accountable to organisation's policies; they need to know what their organisation requires of them. Banks (2016) advocated, however, that professional integrity is more than just good conduct and following the rules, professional integrity means being able to use moral reasoning to advocate and challenge shortcomings in policy. Martin (2016) explored how students may see a divergence between the ideal of what they are taught in academia and what

they observe in placements due to time and fiscal restraints. This is concerning as Weinberg (2009) highlighted, it takes courage for an individual to challenge their manager or peers; especially, when there are real issues such as 'battle fatigue', job security or alienation. This peer pressure has a compounding effect for as Banks (2008) reflected, what practitioners and organisations condone has a circular effect:

> Matters of conduct, ethical judgement and decision making of individual professionals cannot be abstracted from the political and policy contexts in which they take place. Individual professionals are both influenced by and help create the ethical discourses of the organizations where they work and the policy frameworks within which they practise. (p. 1244)

During my career, I have noticed that in Aotearoa New Zealand there has been a push for inter-agency collaboration. A by-product of this, though, is that practitioners sometimes straddle conflicting procedures and work-cultures. Practitioners in private practice may be relieved to escape organisational oversight, yet Parkin and Crocket (2011) asked "how many private practitioners have pro-actively determined their own procedures?"

Understanding the LOVE tool quadrant of values

In my experience, the Quadrant of Values, is the most intrinsically influential and is likely to be evoking the ethical dilemma. The quadrant is not only about exploring the social worker's values but also how they align/conflict with those of colleagues, the organisation, and clients. Narayanan and Bharadwaj (2019), for example, ask when working with stigmatised communities, like sex workers, just whose values are being valued? Likewise, at the centre of Porotaka Kōrero (a culturally responsive framework; Tsuruda & Shepherd, 2016) sits 'Two-Eyed Seeing', which validates the importance of seeking both Western and Indigenous values and knowledge. In genuinely listening to people's experiences, we gain appreciation about diversity, clarity about their needs and what they consider important, and the impact that policies and decisions might have.

This understanding is important, as Gasker and Fischer (2014) revealed, within social work there are inconsistent presumptions about social justice and how to remedy injustices. If this is true for a core tenet of social justice, then it also applies to other fundamentals for example, interpretations of: risk, neglect, best practice, strengths-based, client-centred, or kaupapa Māori. This variance is further expounded when working in multi-disciplinary or cross-cultural settings. Watson (2019) discussed how Aotearoa indigenous workers in a 'Te Ao Pākehā' (Eurocentric agency) can feel that their cultural norms conflict with the organisation's and this needs to be proactively addressed. Values or actions that might be paramount to one practitioner may be deemed negotiable or irrelevant to another. The Australian Association of Social Workers (2020) 4.1 states that "social workers have a responsibility to acknowledge the significance of culture in their practice, recognising the impact their own social locations, views and biases can have on their practice and on culturally different service users and colleagues" (p. 12). To further complicate matters, practitioners must consider how the context dynamics affect the hierarchy of co-existing values and, therefore, also the consequential decisions (Edwards & Mamadou, 2018).

Understanding the LOVE tool quadrant of ethical codes

Ling and Hauck (2016) noted that ethical models should not be confined to just one

specific code of ethics (this is particularly evident in multi-disciplinary teams). Shevellar and Barringham (2017) explore the complication of role identification with some people working as part of a 'regulated' workforce and others 'under the guise of another title'. Indeed, I have noticed that with the Social Workers Registration Act 2003, and 'social worker' becoming a captured term there has been an increase in 'support worker' or 'navigator' roles. It is important that practitioners are clear with the public and multi-disciplinary teams about what professional body they are part of and how their work is governed.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (2020) warned, in 1.5, "Members … understand that the Standards of Ethical Conduct … are not exhaustive" (p. 8). Likewise, Castro-Atwater and Hohnbaum (2015) asserted, "Learning to rely on and use the published ethical guidelines of their profession is a necessary first step, but not enough to equip students with the means to make valid and useful ethical decisions" (p. 278). There might, for example, be principles within a code that both apply and yet paradoxically conflict.

While being referred to as guidelines, a code of ethics should never be diminished as merely being suggestive; for not only have they been collectively ratified by the professional membership, they also are the standard which complaints are judged against.

Applying the LOVE tool

Hays (2015) surmised that supervision is to develop supervisee's self-awareness; enabling them to have 'super-vision' or a greater meta-perspective. Supervisors can use the LOVE tool to extend supervisee's meta-perspective and protect them from complaints by compassionately drawing the social worker's attention to areas they had discounted or not perceived.

The following are examples of practice reflection questions that supervisors could ask to discuss the various quadrants of the LOVE Tool.

Quadrant of legal requirements:

- What does the law *stipulate* (rather than hearsay)?
- What, should I do when something is legal but contradicts my values or supports inequity?
- If working with youth, then how does the law apply to minors?
- If I now work in a different state/country, what legal differences do I need to be aware of?

Quadrant of organisational requirements:

- What do the organisation's policies say and what was the reason this became the policy?
- When working across agencies, is there a clear shared understanding of role expectations and the procedures that will govern actions?
- How can I challenge a divergence between organisational stated values and day-to-day practices?

Quadrant of values:

- When working cross-culturally, how can I enhance my understanding of the client's values or culture?
- What societal norms or biases are influencing me?
- How do I proceed when the values of a client, organisation, or another practitioner conflict with my own values and spiritual beliefs?
- Are my values impeding on the mana motuhake (autonomy) of the client/supervisee?
- To what degree have we discussed with colleagues/clients our interpretations of … or have we assumed that we share the same understanding?

Quadrant of ethical codes:

- Am I familiar enough with my own professional body's ethical code that I can recall it in everyday practice?
- How does my code of ethics differ from others who I work with?
- If I were on an ethics panel investigating a complaint, how would I have to rule and what would the consequences be?

Analysis and consultations over ethical situations clarify the issue, options for proceeding and possible consequences. Even when some required courses of actions seem initially clear-cut (for example mandated by the law), there will still be options relating to how they are conducted as well as the timing and sequencing of those actions.

Forester-Miller and Davis (1996) said:

> … different professionals may implement different courses of action in the same situation. There is rarely one right answer to a complex ethical dilemma. However, if you follow a systematic model, you can be assured that you will be able to give a professional explanation for the course of action you chose. (p. 5)

Conclusion

As a supervisor, trainer, and professional body investigator of complaints, I have observed how practitioners can struggle to articulate the factors involved in ethical dilemmas. Practitioners who have used the LOVE tool have shared that seeing the situation from different perspectives and understanding options and the ramifications has given them assurance and confidence. I would be interested in further researching supervisors' experiences of using this tool, particularly about how an externalised method assists them to avoid being authoritarian and instead allows them to come alongside the supervisee to collaboratively explore the situation. This tool, LOVE, will provide a coherent and practical method for supervisors and social workers to constructively work together to identify factors (legal, organisational requirements, values, and ethical codes) involved in ethical dilemmas. This will assist them to avoid potential complaints and help them determine how they might confidently proceed.

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The strengths approach in practice: How it changes lives

Avril Bellinger & Deidre Ford
Policy Press, Bristol, 2022
ISBN 9781447359715, pp.242, Paperback, $NZD75

If you are beginning to tire or lose hope after almost 40 years of the neoliberal agenda dominating the political landscape and commissioning of social services in Aotearoa, then it may be timely to read *The Strengths Approach in Practice: How it Changes Lives*. This book encourages us to reconsider the strengths approach as a stance against the New Public Management positivist approaches to social work intervention, which often focus on cause-and-effect responses to problems.

This book is pragmatic in reminding us that micro-level activism won't necessarily change society, but that every action matters and can ultimately bring hope. However, the main point of difference about this book is that it asks us to actively seek out possibilities in systems, structures, policies, and laws, as an alternative to retreating to the common positions of cynicism and blame.

The book does this by presenting a collection of stories that illustrate the strengths approach in action. These stories and examples are told through the lens of a small NGO, Students and Refugees Together (START), which is based in the South West of England. The book is structured by discussing how the strengths approach can be applied across multiple levels of society, from individuals through to law, policy, and organisations, and then concretised by providing real life examples from START. The overarching message of the book is to provide an alternative to feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy, in the hope that readers will transfer this into positive action for social justice.

An example of how it does this occurs early in the book whereby readers are encouraged to view law as a resource, as opposed to an obstacle and "to look for the spaces for creativity and opportunity in its application" (p. 49). It then discusses how applying the strengths approach to structuring organisations, can help avoid the some of the pitfalls of contract compliance and commissioning which often beset the NGO sector.

Instead of structuring organisations as separate enterprises which compete against each other for contracts, it encourages like-minded professionals to shape collective responses, which can "create potential in difficult circumstances" (p. 68). It encourages collaboration and consistency amongst organisations, and an awareness of the neoliberal myth that growing organisations who are often winning funding contracts, are a sign of health. The application of the strengths approach is also encouraged in the content of these funding proposals whereby organisations are invited to present as "capable collaborators" alongside the people they help, and that they seek funding for the right thing, for the right reasons, at the right time (p. 105).

The book also discusses something which many of us would benefit from, which is to encourage organisations to have a governance structure that is strengths based. It proposes organisational structures which

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include solidarity instead of hierarchical structures of management, mutuality whereby people and the planet are cared for, and a sense of shared responsibility to care and act.

As I currently work in education, one of the sections which particularly resonated with me was the strengths approach to learning and student knowledge. The tone of this section was beautifully reflected in the opening statement and use of Socrates' quote, "Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel" (p. 148).

My current mahi at the University of Auckland involves connecting and supporting social work students with their placements. The book highlighted a number of parallels between the English and Aotearoa contexts of this space—the most significant being that we both exist within an environment of statutory regulation. Within this model, students are viewed as inferior to employed staff and a number of tasks are viewed as too complex for students to carry out.

Instead, the book suggests a model for student placements which views students as potentially high contributors who can make a difference in the agency in which they are placed, as opposed to being a burden and additional to social workers' already high workloads. It also suggests that providing student support is regarded as a core activity for all staff, and this is supported by a focus on critical reflection and supervision.

This book openly states that it offers a "stimulus rather than a recipe" for action, and for some readers, it may at lack some of the detail they require (p. 169). However, maybe this is indeed the strengths approach in action, whereby we as readers are encouraged to be aspirational and look between and beyond the current structures of the systems and contexts which surround us.

Overall, this book is well written and very accessible. I would recommend it to anyone who is being impacted by the frustration of navigating systems and organisations which are often siloed and at times hostile. By focusing on strengths within and across systems, we create space and possibility for stories of empowerment, diversity, hope, creativity, and reciprocity to flourish.

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Creative writing for social research: A practical guide

R. Phillips & H. Kara
Bristol, Policy Press, 2021
ISBN: 978-1-4473-5598, pp.211
Paperback $NZD91

"We say of a story that it 'rings true' (or doesn't). This metaphor, of a sound or a cracked bell, is a sensory metaphor of experience. Through stories we experience, vicariously, the experiences of others" (p. 126). In my dog-eared copy of *Creative Writing for Social Research: A Practical Guide,* these words float above a purple sticky note with the words "start review with this point?" For me, these words capture and convey much of the essence, if not the whole point, of an engaging exploration into the intersection of creative writing and social research.

This book has its genesis in 2018 during a two-day workshop in Sheffield, England, led by the authors Richard Phillips (University of Sheffield) and Helen Kara, a leading independent researcher, author and teacher (Kara, 2014). Each workshop presenter did a performative presentation, drawing on their areas of expertise. Collaborations with the presenters during and after the workshop contributed to the text, with a self-described and unapologetically "messy quality" expressing the "polygraphical" voices and styles of the two authors and 15 other contributors (p. xi). The collaborators are thanked for the creativity and fun they brought to the workshop. I wish I had been there! Fortunately, the insights and learnings about creative writing in social research from the workshop are made available through this book.

As a budding Artist✻Academic (University of Auckland, 2023), I jumped at the opportunity to review this book. For example, my interest in arts-based research methods is informed by researchers such as Leavy (2015), who wrote that "the arts can be highly engaging in part because they tap into emotions and may jar us into seeing or thinking differently" (p. 12). I found myself intrigued by the authors' promise to introduce the idea of *queer writing*: "Queer, in this sense, means to trouble, to unsettle, to destabilise, to see afresh" (p. xi).

Chapter 1, "Introduction", begins by questioning the compatibility of poetry and other forms of creative writing in social research. The authors take a balanced approach, advocating for the potential of creative writing in social research while cautioning that it should be used "where appropriate, rather than everywhere" (p. 3). The book is positioned as an introduction and a practical creative writing guide for social researchers. I personally experienced it as less of a "how to" manual and more as a creative inquiry, a challenge to reflect on how we might integrate the ideas and methods from the text into our writing practice. Moreover, the authors explicitly welcome amateurs like me to play in this space, citing DeLyser and Sui (2014, p. 297), who identify creative writing methods as a "work-in-progress, with plenty of space for innovation and contribution" (p. 3).

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This invitation to play is built upon throughout the book. Each chapter consists of a narrative from the authors, augmented by creative writing exercises and practice sections from the other contributors. Each contributor piece is decorated with a delightful, and at times unsettling "inspiration doll" drawn by Alke Gröppel-Wegener (p. 11). Described as an "unruly pack of genre-bending figures", we are told they are not only there to decorate the text but also to "trouble and inspire us as writers" (p. 11). Mission accomplished, if you let them.

In Chapter 2, "Doing creative writing", the authors encourage readers to roll up their sleeves and try some of the techniques. The authors remind us that, by necessity, social researchers are also writers. Thus, one method for improving creative writing is simply to be more conscious of the act of writing. Easier said than done. One of my first forays into the world of arts-based methods in social research involved reading Faulkner (2009), who suggested that researchers using poetic methods demonstrate "some effort to understand poetry, even if one is not innately a great poet" (p. 71). The authors recognise this conundrum, ultimately arguing that, while social research should not be judged "by the standards of fine art" (p. 18), researchers should develop a basic competence with art techniques used in their research.

A palette of alternatives is presented for creative writing in social research. Observation and description; story and storying; essays. Lists. While researchers are encouraged to play with these methods, the authors acknowledge several possible barriers deterring social researchers from applying them. The authors introduce suggestions for how researchers can step out of their comfort zones. One example emphasised the significance of reading as a starting point for creative writing. The authors highlight works from influential social researchers such as bell hooks and Doreen Massey to provide examples of creative writing in social research.

In Chapter 3, "Doing research, generating data, working with participants", the authors emphasise that creative writing is a powerful tool for participant engagement. Creative writing methods may afford privacy and safe spaces for the research participants. The authors note that participants may become more deeply engaged in the research, with participatory creative writing methods having the potential to "reach beneath the conscious to the subconscious and latent, sometimes reaching banal blind spots" (p. 74). I believe the following quote from Freud underlines the value of this approach: "Art is a conventionally accepted reality in which, thanks to artistic illusion, symbols and substitutes are able to provoke real emotions" (Neelands, 2010, p. 154).

For social researchers working in Aotearoa New Zealand, it may be helpful to consider the role storytelling already plays within Kaupapa Māori research. For example, Skerrett (2023) explores the significance of Matauranga Māori for social research in Aotearoa New Zealand, emphasising that "You can't tell the story of anything without knowing its history. It provides us with the wayfinding signposts into the future" (p. 162). Here, Skerrett signals for practitioners to be mindful of context. Creative writing opens a world of exciting research opportunities. Further, Kaupapa Māori research challenges our conceptions of legitimate forms of knowledge production. However, the authors echo Skerrett's caution to be mindful of context in our writing, reminding readers that "no method is intrinsically ethical" and that "participatory creative writing requires as much ethical reflexivity and vigilance as any other method" (p. 77).

The chapter also provides practical guidance on inviting and recruiting participants and emphasises the importance of building trust and relationships. The authors offer tips for

getting started and warming up, highlight the effectiveness of adopting a playful approach when engaging with community groups, and suggest avoiding settings that may cause some participants to be uncomfortable, such as schools.

The authors round out the chapter with a discussion on the balance between process and product in creative writing for social research. While some researchers focus on the practice itself, others emphasise tangible outcomes. However, as we consider outcomes, the debate inevitably leads to the question of the legitimacy of creative writing in social research in the first place. The authors argue that creative writing can match social scientific analysis by revealing truths, noting that "creative writing is illustrative rather than representative" (p. 119). Moreover, the authors state "This is the point: though unreliable on some levels, creative writing is truthful on others" (p. 120). In support of this view, the authors cite Leavy (2015) who contends that fiction-based research "is about truthfulness more than truth" (p. 58).

And there it is! As this book review proceeds toward its conclusion, I find myself face-to-face again with the aforementioned purple sticky note. Chapter 4, "Exploring and articulating findings", gets to the point, "all research involves exploring and articulating phenomena" (p. 125). The authors build upon the idea of truth to help us understand the value of creative writing in social research. Drawing on Pickering and Kara (2017), the authors write: "Fiction offers what we might call 'authentic' truth, that is, the truth of experience, as opposed to 'literal' truth, that is, the truth of evidence-based or empirical work" (p. 125). Put simply, narratives that ring true can potentially deepen our understanding of the research subject.

The following quote from the poem "Life In A Suburban Garage" (Carroll et al., 2011) provides a striking example of the potential for creative writing to connect readers with a research project. The poem draws from phrases and sentences that emerged from research into the experiences of people living in marginal housing in Aotearoa New Zealand:

> And your ten-year old begs you please
>
> to say "going home",
>
> not "back to the garage",
>
> in front of her friends. (p. 128)

Confronted with examples such as this poem, the authors' statement that "poetry can open windows that are otherwise closed" feels understated (p. 127). Chapter 4 considers several forms of creative writing for data analysis and dissemination, including screenplay writing, visual methods such as comics, graphic novels, and performance. Researchers can develop a more nuanced and engaging representation of their data through these creative approaches, fostering a deeper connection with readers and audiences.

In Chapter 5, "Searching and queer(ing) writing", the authors are honest and transparent in letting readers know that, in writing the book, they struggled with, and sometimes disagreed about, descriptions of creative writing. Moreover, the authors express an awareness that care should be taken to avoid creating barriers for researchers interested in exploring opportunities to use creative writing to enhance their work. The authors' approach opens an inquiry into the nature of creative writing, challenging readers to think beyond traditional academic writing conventions and consider the possibilities for new approaches to conducting and presenting research. This said, the authors view the idea of queer writing as an embrace of the messiness this approach can bring, while distinguishing it from merely sloppy writing (p. 177).

The authors quote Hillery Glasby to provocatively express the essence of queer

writing: "Mostly, I like to use my writing to fuck shit up" (Glasby, 2019, p. 24). This echoes the most memorable and impactful piece of advice on writing I ever received, which came from one of my Master's thesis supervisors who suggested that I needed to "fuck with my verbs". Queer writing is presented as an invitation to disrupt conventional aesthetics by unsettling "the seemingly immovable words on a page or a screen, words that can make phenomena seem permanent and knowable when they are nothing of the kind" (p. 178).

Would I recommend this book? Yes. My dog-eared and scribbled-upon copy of *Creative Writing for Social Research: A Practical Guide* sits within reach of my desk. I am beginning my creative writing adventure and fully anticipate its condition will worsen considerably as I progress through my research project. I think the authors would approve. I have attempted to be "more conscious" of my writing in this review, accepting the invitation to play and experimenting with what I have learnt from the text in subtle ways. More explicitly, here are my final thoughts on this superb book:

Words dance on pages

Stories woven, research blooms

A creative dawn

Reviewed by **Andrew Davidson**, University of Auckland

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Governing families: Problematising technologies in social welfare and criminal justice

Rosalind Edwards & Pamela Ugwudike
Routledge, 2023
ISBN 978-0-367-53072-3, pp.121, Hardback, $106, (through www.routledge.com)

At only just over 120 pages, this book is a relatively quick read; however, its brevity does not indicate a lack of depth. Instead, what Rosalind Edwards and Pamela Ugwudike do is explore how families are governed today through recent technological advances and carefully elucidate the social (in)justice ramifications. The ground covered here is vast, from biologisation to artificial intelligence; however, readers should not be put off, as the authors carefully explain how these issues link to work with, and policy about, families.

Edwards and Ugwukdike begin by discussing how families are governed in neoliberal states. While this material should be familiar to most social workers, the authors update this story with recent and worrying developments in neoliberalism and the turn to authoritarianism in many Western countries. They explain that they are concerned with how 'objects' (like families and the people in them) are constructed, and (drawing on Bacchi (2013), they ask what the 'problem' is presented to be? Each subsequent chapter then considers these questions and applies them to several critical case studies.

Given our recent change in government, the questions posed by Edwards and Ugwudike are critical. How does our new government define (construct) the notion of family (and therefore determine what counts and what is a 'good' or a 'bad' family), and what do they think the problems facing families might be? The latter question is critical as, for example, positioning 'ram raids' and 'truancy' as parental problems neatly avoids macro issues like poverty, racism, and colonisation, and determines what sort of interventions might follow. If parents are the problem, fines for parental failures and remedial parenting education are appropriate interventions.

The authors' framing questions provide a springboard to explore how family governance has, in the last few decades, seen an intensification in parental responsibilisation. Anyone who has read some of Rosalind Edwards' earlier work, particularly her co-authored book, *Challenging the Politics of Early Intervention: Who's Saving Children and Why* (Gillies et al., 2017), will be familiar with this content. In this second chapter, they follow the thread of family governance through four case studies, ranging from the 19th-century Charity Organisation Society to UNICEF programmes dominant in the Global South. Here, the authors show that, while parental, particularly maternal, responsibilisation, is the common thread, such discourses have ramped up in recent years.

In Chapter Three, the authors explain how recent advances in child development

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knowledge, particularly neuroscience, are used to justify increased governance of families. In making this argument, they are not saying that neuroscientific and biologically based knowledge is irrelevant; instead, they trouble *how* relevant it has become in parental and family governance. Here, the questions about objects and problems become critical. If parents are constructed as being able to alter the neuro-functioning of their child (and therefore future adult citizen) and thereby avoid 'adverse childhood experiences', then governments have a vested interest in ensuring that the *right* neuro-functioning is secured, thus optimising citizens and minimising government expenditure on (future) dysfunctionality. Early intervention in children's lives (and therefore parenting) becomes essential and a matter of government (and fiscal) importance.

Chapter Four extends ideas about biologisation and early intervention into discourses of risk and explores how families are being constructed as a risk *to* society (versus being at risk *from* society). Again, this neatly inverts responsibility. If families are a risk to society, they must be closely governed until they no longer pose a threat. This responsibility inversion stands in stark contrast to the notion that governments put families *at risk* through neoliberal and authoritarian policies designed to hide structural oppressions. This responsibilisation is akin to how Māori are positioned as costly (and thereby risky) to the state through the repeated presentation of negative statistics in various government reports while ignoring the cost of the state to Māori through colonisation (a tactic that is intensifying under the new government). This chapter is particularly relevant to anyone working closely with families, especially those in child protection and youth justice.

The final, analytic, chapter concerns how artificial intelligence is being deployed in the governance of families. Edwards and Ugwudike carefully explain the challenges of using such technology in this area, highlighting known problems with racist and classist outcomes of using artificial intelligence. Readers should be reassured that there is no in-depth complex discussion of computational and algorithmic logics. Instead, the authors carefully explain how these technologies may appear to be scientific and neutral but, instead, replicate and even intensify existing inequalities. The critical case studies used here—in child protection and youth justice—should be an alarming wake-up call for anyone involved in family work. Readers who have followed the development of such technology, especially algorithms, may have already heard of the Allegheny Family Screening tool, a tool that (infamously) was initially developed here in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ballantyne, 2023).

It is here that I think social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand should pause. While social workers are not known for their technical wizardry and computing skills, this is not an area we can afford to ignore. The ramifications of artificial intelligence in social work practice (and beyond) are worrying and are a crucial area for social justice advocacy and activism. The rush by many companies to demote human intelligence in favour of artificial intelligence must be resisted in an area as complex and multi-faceted as people's lives. Given, as the authors point out, that wealthy families are more able to hide their data from state surveillance (through private providers), data used to construct predictive programs tend to over-predict poorer families as a risk to the state. Racialised families, especially Māori and Pasifika in the Aotearoa context, are overrepresented in the ranks of the financially poor, so this means that the (white) gaze of the (colonising) state narrows its scope even further. In an environment where the new government is cutting costs, it is not too much of a leap to predict that they may look to artificial intelligence as a cheaper and more 'effective' way to govern problem families and 'deliver outcomes'.

In the face of such a gloomy, looming future/present, where do Edwards and Ugwudike leave us? They remind us that the governance of families is not new; it might have new tools, but the underlying idea of responsibilising families for societal conditions predates neuroscience and computers. Here is where I think social workers, and I think the authors would agree with me, need to focus their energies. We may not be mathematicians or neuroscientists, but we are experts in social justice (and injustice). Therefore, social workers should pay careful attention to the alternatives the authors discuss in their concluding comments. Here, they note the growing data-justice movement, especially those centring Indigenous data sovereignty. Perhaps it is here that social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand can explicitly link this work to their own *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019), which centres Te Tiriti as the foundation of our practice.

Holding to and upholding Te Tiriti can mean (and should mean) questioning how the government constructs objects and problems, questioning the construction of governance, the government itself, and the whole structure of our (colonising) government. What counts and is counted matters in the numeric *and* importance sense.

Reviewed by **Eileen Joy**, University of Auckland.

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The Politics of Children's Rights and Representation

Bengt Sandin, Jonathan Josefsson, Karl Hanson & Sarada Balagopalan (Eds.)
Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2023
SBN 978-3-031-04479-3, pp.337, Hardback, Open Access

Beginning in late 2023, the conflict in Gaza reminded us that recognition of children's rights is tenuous and probably best called out by stating, "where you live should not determine whether you live" (Collste, 2022, p. 44). Let me horrify the reader with just one example about the reality of children's rights when representation fails: there is a ward full of babies in the paediatric intensive care unit at the Al-Nasr Children's Hospital in Gaza City. Medical professionals are doing their best to care for a full ward of critically unwell babies in the middle of a conflict. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) required the hospital to evacuate the premises. Not being able to take some of those babies with them because of their critical medical conditions, the Palestinian medical workers gained assurances from the IDF that they would care for the babies once the hospital was evacuated. Several weeks later a journalist entered the abandoned hospital and found those babies, their bodies badly decomposed with insects crawling through their chests (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2023; Salam et al., 2023). The IDF, for whatever reason, did not honour their promise to care for those babies.

Other than a basic humanity to that, the destruction of Gazan schools and hospitals are grave violations of the rights of children affected by armed conflict. We are not just talking about protection here, the inability of the world to protect children's rights mean that we are talking about survival in its most simple form: the right to life. How more timely could this book be?

How does one digest collection of perspectives about children's rights and representations? Helpfully, the book is divided into three sections: (1) rights, participation, and representation; (2) representation and the international politics of children's rights; and (3) representation in time of inequalities and injustices. Within those sections are accounts (amongst others) of the Swedish ban on child corporal punishment, the court fight for education for children in Delhi, how children are represented in court hearings, the experience of Afghan migrants in Sweden, and Ghanaian street children. Each of the chapters are worthy of a review on their own. Succinctly put, each account is thoughtfully written by an expert in the field, supported by evidence, and concise enough to read without any real burden.

But to the question of how to digest this edited book. The truth is, that you might (as I usually do) flick through the contents to get a sense of the range of topics, then pick a chapter that has the strongest pull. In this case it was the last chapter of the volume, which gave a fascinating account of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and the representation of their political struggle in Australia. This chapter, using grave examples, also offers motivation and inspiration from the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (and the failure of the "Yes" campaign in 2023 for the constitutional reform should be remembered

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while reading this account), and the coloniality of being is all too familiar when the authors state, "Indigenous people have never been passive and agentless subjects of colonial power. Their histories are fuelled by resistance, political strategy, and sustained kinship systems…" (Nakata & Bray, 2023, p. 302). The reference to the concerning Don Dale Youth Detention Centre (while very different, our own residential centres come to mind) and a Queensland youth curfew proposal (for our context, read "ram raids") vividly emphasise the narrative. The colonial history and the coloniality of being (such as, not necessarily higher crime rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, but rather greater police contact) expressed in this chapter will be all too familiar for the reader here. However, this account balances the traumatic experiences of colonisation alongside the transformative potential that Indigenous youth have for society at large. While Australia could not get to "Yes" in 2023, perhaps local communities will realise the potential these young people can offer.

The other chapter that caught my initial perusal was the work by Jana Tabak who provides a thought-provoking (and my own weeks' long reflection) about the representation of child-soldiers in Western thinking. There are some challenges in there, with the most interesting being about child-soldiers and how they are framed in Western consciousness as needing rescuing. I must confess I am still unable to reconcile with the author's contention, notwithstanding the numerous nuances, that child-soldiers are not simply the "objects of exploitation or the objects of salvation" (p. 164) and have exceptional agency. While I agree that we often reduce the complicated into the binary, to me, the view that child-soldiers have exceptional agency means a choice, and the consequences of that sit uncomfortably with me (but perhaps that is the very point the author is making?). Of course, the author here is an expert, and with a fair degree of reflexivity I did consider the positioning of western liberal democratic ideals and whether these should be layered on hostilities throughout the world. The answer is, yes (which is contrary to the author's assertions). How we treat the most vulnerable in our society (okay, and to the author's point, many of these countries are not "our" society) is a reflection on our society, and I do not believe war crimes should be argued away as some discussion about agency or western societal handwringing.

Whether Tabak's perspective sits well with me is not the point here. What I'm emphasising is that I am not able to recall something I have read that has constantly pulled me back into an analysis of my own views for so long after reading the piece.

Every social worker should (and needs to) read this book. It is open access, so cost is not an issue here. Time could be an issue for many, but then consider that indifference is the start of the path which ends in grave violations of the right to life. At a time when the IDF is bombing thousands of children to their deaths in Gaza (Becker, 2023; Save the Children, 2024), when is a better time to read this book?

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