Inspiring books for practice
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As another year draws to an end and we bring our Christmas special edition together, we thought we would do something a little different. Rather than bringing together a set of articles, we asked key social work writers, thinkers and practitioners to tell us about the books that have most influenced them in their career. We gave them plenty of scope to think laterally about books – fiction and non-fiction – that have changed their thinking and practice, that have captured their imagination and meant something to them. Our colleagues responded enthusiastically to the challenge. The insights that collectively fill this special edition traverse both the personal and professional. Their reflections explore the ways in which their lives have been touched by stories of strength, hope, resilience, wisdom and intelligence. It has been one of the most enjoyable special editions I have been involved with, and so I hope that you will find the results engaging, rewarding and professionally inspiring.

We begin with two cultural reflections from the University of Canterbury social work academics, Jim Anglem and Yvonne Crichton-Hill. Jim takes us on a personal journey about what it means for him to be Māori in New Zealand, and the ways in which the work of Witi Ihimaera has blended with Pūao-te-Ata-tū to shape both his life and work over time. In an equally fascinating exploration of culture, Yvonne then takes us to the rain forests of Samoa. Drawing upon the writings of ethnobiologist Paul Cox, Yvonne uses his work to expand our thinking with respect to developing cultural responsiveness and competency.

We then have two social work reflections: Sharon Berlin, Emeritus Professor at the University of Chicago, and Barry Trute, Emeritus Professor at the universities of Manitoba and Calgary, share with us the books that have influenced them over their long and important careers. Sharon tells us what it was like being a young social work professional on a sharp learning curve of social work teaching and practice in her home state of Washington. A lifesaver for Sharon was Reid and Epstein's (1974) Task-Centred Casework, a text she has returned to throughout her career as a senior academic and writer. Barry then takes us into the area of family practice and a rich exploration of a range of books that have helped him work with complex families. The books he has chosen reflect contemporary concerns relating to family violence, disability, and the importance of strengthening family resilience.

Dorothy Scott, Professor at the University of South Australia, Nigel Parton, Professor at the University of Huddersfield, and Robbie Gilligan, Professor at Trinity College Dublin, then focus our attention upon child welfare. All of these senior academics have demonstrated leadership in the area of child and family
welfare, and have also impacted on child welfare thinking in New Zealand. In this collection, Dorothy explores a range of books – old and new – that illustrate well the resilience of the human spirit and the ways in which passionate and committed social workers can make a difference. Nigel then takes us into the realm of social constructivism, and the impact it has had on early studies, and his current writings. Finally, in the last of the substantive papers, Robbie tells of the extraordinary study of a large group of delinquent young people from their early offending in the 1940s through to their experiences as older men in their 70s. This provides some rare insights, and cautions us against the assumption that there are boundaries to potential.

The special edition is then brought to a close with Practice Matters where our key practitioners at Child, Youth and Family share the things that have most influenced their statutory practice. They talk about the people who have supported them and the literature that has clarified their thinking and strengthened their work with children, young people and their families. It is fitting that Lael Sharland’s words about the impact of Pūao-te-Ata-tū brings our special edition to a close. The Ministerial report has shaped the way in which New Zealand’s statutory system has responded to children at risk and, of course, has critically influenced the development of the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989. Family group conferencing was introduced into law in November 1989, and we now celebrate 20 years of family decision-making. Every day, in every family group conference we bring together, we are giving effect to Pūao-te-Ata-tū and its challenge to understand the place of the child within whānau, hapū and iwi.

I hope you get the chance to spend some good quality time with your friends and whānau this Christmas.

Ngā mihi o te wā Kirihimete!

Dr. Marie Connolly is the Chief Social Worker at the Ministry of Social Development.
Reflections on a journey of being a Ngāi Tahu Māori

Jim Anglem

When I was a young teacher, well, not yet thirty, a fifth form student who had just completed her School Certificate examinations arrived at school to return the various books used during the year. As I ticked them off, John Steinbeck’s iconic *Of Mice and Men*, Willis Hall’s poignant play *The Long and the Short and the Tall*, and an anthology of poetry, *Poets Quair*, edited by Rentoul and Skinner, we discussed the examination and how she felt she might have achieved, and how the year had flown past. We argued about the fact that she was, as usual, extremely pessimistic about her chances of passing, whereas I thought she would pass comfortably.

I was extremely admiring of this student. I was aware of a somewhat difficult home life in a working class part of town, but her tenacity and willingness to understand the concepts and vagaries of lives in different eras in different counties made me warm to her.

On this day she seemed different, and I failed to understand that there were some messages that I could not quite comprehend. In my defence, I had acknowledged something, fleetingly, puzzlingly different. Just when my mind was awkwardly trying to make sense of it, and to break the silence created by my searching for the right question to ask, she suddenly produced from her bag a book, which she shyly proffered as a gift for being "such a good English teacher". Startled, I could only embarrassedly stutter a few awkward "No need to. This is extremely thoughtful of you … Oh, how kind." The sorts of platitudes that people sometimes repeat when caught off-guard and which later we might regret.

I took off the brown paper covering and discovered a book entitled *Whānau*, by Witi Ihimaera. *Whānau* was a revelation, as was the writer. Witi was the same age as me. Later, I learned from his books, including the short stories in *Pounamu Pounamu*, that his progress through school was tortuous, as was my own. His life as an educated Māori was so similar to my own I felt scared because I had thought it was a secret and now Ihimaera was sharing it with everyone.

Soon after, I discovered Witi Ihimaera. *Whānau* was a revelation, as was the writer. Witi was the same age as me. Later, I learned from his books, including the short stories in *Pounamu Pounamu*, that his progress through school was tortuous, as was my own. His life as an educated Māori was so similar to my own I felt scared because I had thought it was a secret and now Ihimaera was sharing it with everyone.

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After returning to New Zealand, I met up with a former teacher of mine and asked him for advice about getting a job. He later said to me, “I rang a principal friend and recommended you, but I did tell him you were a Māori”. I wondered whether he contacted other friends and said, “I have someone who I recommend, only I have to tell you he is a Pākehā”. Such was the understanding of a bicultural New Zealand in 1974.

When the new teaching year arrived, my student connection with Witi Ihimaera came to see me, sad in appearance and almost tearful. “I am not coming back to the sixth form,” she said. At that moment I knew what it was that I had spotted in November. The sparkle in the eye, the slight colouring of the cheeks, that inimitable look of health, they were the things that I saw that I allowed myself to interpret as shyness regarding the giving of a gift.

Soon after, I discovered Witi Ihimaera. Whānau was a revelation, as was the writer. Witi was the same age as me. Later, I learned from his books, including the short stories in Pounamu Pounamu, that his progress through school was tortuous, as was my own. His life as an educated Māori was so similar to my own I felt scared because I had thought it was a secret and now Ihimaera was sharing it with everyone. At the same time I was astonished that someone Māori was able to share their thoughts and feelings in such a way that I began to feel, for the first time, some pride in being Māori in New Zealand.

This was strange because I had felt proud to be a New Zealander in England, where no one saw me as Māori. Here, as a youth, I had always battled perceptions that I was an outsider and struggled to deal with comments designed to be encouraging but were in fact deeply offensive, such as the comment made to my wife, “Well, of course Jim is a very nice fellow, but what about if you have children, they will be half-castes.”

Over the years, as I have worked in and around child welfare systems including my time teaching social work at the University of Canterbury, Witi Ihimaera’s stories of Whānau and living and growing up as a young Māori have influenced the way I think and feel about my own life and my work.

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“How do you feel about returning to school the following year?” I asked her. Awkwardly, I placed my arm on her shoulders and wished her well.

Over the years, as I have worked in and around child welfare systems including my time teaching social work at the University of Canterbury, Witi Ihimaera’s stories of Whānau and living and growing up as a young Māori have influenced the way I think and feel about my own life and my work. His writings have resonated with
other significant writings that capture the
essence of Māori aspirations and disadvantage.
In particular, it causes me to think about Pūao-
te-Ata-tū. This seminal report by the Ministerial
Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective
for the Department of Social Welfare placed
biculturalism and institutional racism at the
forefront of national debate within the social
services in New Zealand during the period 1984
to 1990. It was to have significant impact on the
Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act
1989, and remains a seminal publication revered
by lecturers in schools of social work across
New Zealand, and fiercely supported by Māori
throughout the country.

Ihimaera’s contribution to New Zealand
literature, along with that of Patricia Grace and
Bruce Stewart, lent a personal and emotional
connection with the writers of Pūao-te-Ata-
tū. Wherever the advisory committee went in
New Zealand to investigate the operations of
the Department of Social Welfare from a Māori
perspective, they heard the same angry lament
referred to as “Ngeri – a litany of sound ... a
tempest” (Pūao-te-Ata-tū, 1988, p. 21). They
heard from Māori people similar stories of
discrimination from a public service that was
there to give them support. Ihimaera, sometimes
criticised by Māori for exposing matters that
were thought to be family things (and thus
private), provided a lens for people to look
beyond the stereotypical image of Māori. He
poignantly described the struggle of maintaining
cultural identity while trying to succeed in an
alien Pākehā world and how his elders, like my
own, sadly acknowledged this unequal battle.
In the Appendices to Pūao-te-Ata-tū readers
are given an opportunity to understand some of
the “roots of dependency” that have plagued
much of Māori society. Those realities are stark
and brutally clear. Ihimaera, on the other hand,
shows family life as less dark, more supportive
and certainly filled with aroha (affection) and
manaakitanga (hospitality, generosity).

Reflecting on an interesting professional career
that spans four decades, I realise that I owe
that young fifth former much. Not only did she
introduce me to an author whom I admire and
enjoy, and whose acquaintance I have since
made, she allowed me to begin a journey of
being a Ngāi Tahu Māori, comfortable with te ao
Māori and te ao Pākehā, something that was not
the case in 1974. And the Anglem children we
have brought into the world? Well, in a previous
era they may have been considered “half-
castes”, but they’re pretty fine Ngāi Tahu New
Zealanders, I reckon!

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Jim Anglem is a Ngāi Tahu Māori from Awarua and
Rakiura (Bluff and Stewart Island) and has had a long
involvement in education, firstly as a teacher, then as
a liaison officer with the Ministry of Education, and a
director of a school for troubled high school students.
Before taking up a position as a senior lecturer in
the School of Social Work and Human Services at the
University of Canterbury in 2000, Jim had been a manager
of staff training and development with Child, Youth and
Family. His main areas of interest and research are racism
and biculturalism.
Paul Cox is an ethnobotanist. Now, at first glance he may not seem to have much to do with child welfare work, but this author and winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize nevertheless broadened my thinking about social work practice with children and families in cross-cultural settings.

It was early in my university career (in fact, that’s not so many years ago) that I met a visiting American academic who, on hearing of my Samoan heritage, asked if I had read a book by Paul Alan Cox called *Nafanua: Saving the Samoan rainforest*. Even though I liked to think that I had read everything to do with Samoa, I had to admit that I’d not read this book, and then I wondered how I could possibly be interested in a book about saving a rainforest. The visiting academic was very animated about the book and gave me a copy, extolling its virtues and enthusiastically recalling how fascinating it was.

The book centres on the experiences of Paul Cox, an American professor of botany, who has an interest in rainforest biology and ethnobotany: the study of how indigenous peoples use plants. Shortly after his mother’s death from breast cancer, Cox wins the National Science Foundation Presidential Young Investigator Award and returns to Samoa with his family to explore the potential of native plants as anti-cancer remedies (he had been to Samoa as a Mormon missionary and as part of his doctoral studies). Cox travels to the village of Falealupo, Savai’i, intending to interview traditional healers about their use of local plants as medicines, and finds himself caught up in the battle to save the local rainforest. “I hoped I wasn’t too late: relentless logging of the Samoan forest and unavoidable Westernisation of the culture meant that the potentially healing plants and the knowledge of how to use them could not survive for long,” (Cox, 1997, p. 3).

The government had determined that the current school at Falealupo was not acceptable and a new one needed to be built. If the new school was not constructed within the next year, the children from Falealupo would not be granted access to the Samoan education system. The...
Cost of construction amounted to approximately $US65,000, and was an impossible amount for the village to raise. A local logging company offered to pay $65,000 to log approximately 30,000 acres of rainforest; an offer that is declined by the village, until the government gives them an ultimatum to either construct the school within nine months or the school will be closed and the teachers removed. Logging of the rainforest begins. Cox, however, through his own efforts, is able to raise the funds for the school and thereby stops the logging of the forest.

Using the precious medicinal plants in Samoa, Paul Cox and Samoan healers identified an enzyme found in the bark of the mamala tree used by the healers in the treatment of hepatitis. The enzyme prostratin is now being identified as a potential treatment for HIV (Wender, Kee & Warrington, 2008). As a result of his service to the village of Falealupo, Cox was bestowed with the chiefly title ‘Nafanua’, referring to a mythical Samoan goddess who fought against the oppression of the people of Falealupo and also saved the rainforest.

Nafanua is a compelling book, filled with information about the history and current culture of Samoa. What was intriguing to me in reading the book is the attention Cox gives to the relationships he has with the Samoan people. He is thoughtful and considerate in his work with them; he expresses a deep and genuine interest in the Samoan people; and he appears acutely aware of the differences between his worldview and theirs, and of the potential impact non-indigenous researchers can have on indigenous populations.

Although relatively resilient, traditional Samoan culture is still vulnerable to incipient Westernisation. Even my ethnobotanical research might accelerate the decay of Samoan culture, through a perverse anthropological variant of the Heisenberg uncertainty; the study of an object often changes its nature. I sought to reduce this likelihood by adapting our lives as much as possible to the Samoan way and by limiting my own impact on the culture. (1997, p. 16)

Nafanua provided me with the impetus to examine further this idea of adapting one’s life to the culture under examination. This may be appropriate to ethnographers or ethnobotanists but could it be applied to social work practice? My role as an academic, my work with a Pacific non-government organisation, and my membership of the Social Workers Registration Board had increased my interest in how social workers might practice with cultures different to their own – that is, my interest in cultural competence. Weaver (1999) suggests that the fact that we have to strive for cultural competence is an indication of the ethnocentric foundation of the social work profession. Well, I wanted to know more.

Essentially cultural competence refers to one’s ability to transform cultural knowledge into interventions that support the client within their cultural context. Cultural competence can apply to individuals and organisations. McPhatter (1997) carefully considers cultural competence in relation to work in the care and protection field. Her work is based on two assumptions: firstly, that achieving competence is developmental; and secondly, that learning takes place in a
number of areas including the “thinking, feeling, sensing, and behaving dimensions” (p. 261).

McPhatter’s model is made up of three parts: enlightened consciousness; grounded knowledge base; and cumulative skill proficiency. Each part is important to cultural competence, but no one part on its own is sufficient to achieve cultural competence.

**Enlightened consciousness**

This is where one has to adjust one’s worldview by recognising that the belief system we hold is firmly entrenched and narrow. This requires an openness and genuine interest in the views of others. McPhatter (1997) also suggests that becoming enlightened requires sustained effort – one marae experience does not make a person culturally competent in working with Māori. Rather, suggests McPhatter, willing immersion in the world of others for a sustained period of time is likely to be more useful.

**Grounded knowledge base**

This part of the model relates to social work knowledge and the idea that theoretical and practice ideas central to social work require critique. McPhatter states that “the selection content to which we are introduced has so thoroughly excluded perspectives that both challenge and broaden the Eurocentric worldview” (1997, p. 265). For example, human development theories examined in social work schools around the world include those of Freud, Kohlberg and Erikson. Each of these theories has been developed in a particular time and place, and therefore cultural context. These theories may or may not be relevant to social work practice today. The point is they need to be critiqued and other cultural ideas about human development need to be included. McPhatter’s knowledge list for child welfare workers includes:

- familiarity with social problems and their impact on cultural groups
- knowledge of the local community, that is, a community profile including detail about local resources and needs
- knowledge of the dynamics of oppression, prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping
- an understanding of the development of the child welfare system (in New Zealand) and the contributions made by various cultural groups
- knowledge of family systems and diverse family forms
- knowledge of a range of (culturally relevant) child abuse interventions
- knowledge of how cultural context can form the basis of intervention choices – some intervention choices may sit at odds with cultural beliefs and practices
- knowledge of how to incorporate a strengths and resilience perspective in child protection work (McPhatter, 1997).

**Cumulative skill proficiency**

Social workers must be able to translate enlightened consciousness and grounded knowledge into skills. In culturally competent practice, social workers demonstrate a genuine and accepting interest in the individuals and families they are working with. Diggins (2004) suggests that social workers who are good communicators are courteous and polite; do what they say they are going to do; have an
understanding of how hard it is for clients to be involved with a social service; recognise the importance of privacy, peace and quiet; and focus on building trust, empathy and warmth. They must be natural and personable (Cournoyer, 2005). Furthermore, as social workers we should question our assumptions about the ‘right way’ to communicate, recognising that the way we interpret communication has much to do with the culture we have learnt. This means that we may interpret others’ meanings incorrectly. McPhatter suggests that culturally competent social workers are able to “intervene skilfully at every level – organisational, community, social, economic, and political” (1997, p. 273).

In Nafanua, Cox engages in social and political action in a way that offers important insights for social workers. His work has impact at a number of levels – individual, social and cultural. The book describes many of the aspects that McPhatter (1997) suggests are necessary for cultural competence: he is self-reflective; he has local community knowledge and is a well-studied and experienced botanist; and he interacts with the local population in a way that expresses a genuine and accepting interest in them. The most significant aspect from my point of view, however, is that Paul Cox does not consider himself the expert. Rather his task seems to be to learn how the Samoan people live their everyday lives. This resonates with a branch of social work literature that is critical of cultural competence frameworks, stating that they treat culture as something that is static rather than being complex and dynamic (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2007). Contemporary frameworks for working with culture propose that rather than becoming the expert in our work with others, we should place ourselves in the position of learning from the client about how they define their cultural world.

Approaching clients with an “I know your culture” mind-set does not allow us to engage in ways that free people to explain their cultural world. Nor does it allow the social worker to be open-minded enough to really hear about this world. As social workers we cannot adapt our lives to a culture in quite the same way as Paul Cox did, but it is important to realise that in working with others we need to adapt and place ourselves in the role of learner. As Chu, Tsui and Yan (2009, p. 292) have said:

Social workers must embody the humanistic values of their profession. They cannot be racist or prejudiced. They should be tolerant of diversity, open to new experiences, humble enough to accept their own ignorance and willing to learn from those they serve.

I am thankful to the visiting academic who gave me the gift of Nafanua. She could not possibly have had any idea how much I would treasure this book about someone else’s experience in a place to which I feel so strongly connected. I had no idea that a book about saving a rainforest could be so interesting!
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Crucial new knowledge in the pages of a book

Sharon Berlin

In the autumn of 1971, I began my first academic position as a lecturer in the School of Social Work, at the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle, Washington. I had just finished a year of post-master’s study focused on community mental health at University of California, Berkeley. This was on the heels of a very intense first social work job at a residential treatment center for children in New Haven, Connecticut. In this new faculty position, my main responsibility was to supervise and provide seminars for graduate students who were assigned practicum placements in day care and childhood education centres. As time went on, I was asked to teach other courses as well.

I stepped into this teaching role with a great deal of excitement and anxiety. It’s amazing how seamlessly these two emotions seem to flow into one another — excitement, then anxious excitement, then abject fear, etc. We are often encouraged to operate at the outside edges of our comfort zones; this time I felt as if I were hanging way out there. In both this and my previous social work position, I was conscientious about doing a good job as I tried to scrape together every tidbit of experience and knowledge I had gained in my lifetime and relatively short professional career. But this corpus of know-how didn’t seem to add up to much.

I had received a solid master’s degree education at the University of Washington. I’m sure seeds of knowledge were planted that I wasn’t able to fully articulate at the time or even now. But what I did realise was that I didn’t have a very clear sense of what it meant to be a competent social worker. The emphasis of the direct practice courses at UW in those days was vaguely psychodynamic — and in my case, I have to put the emphasis on vague. Perhaps I was too young, or too concrete in my thinking to fully grasp the concepts, or maybe there was something ambiguous about the concepts themselves. In any case, during the intervening five or six years, even my very fragile sense of the fundamentals of practice had been battered about and upended by the streams of radical thought that were swirling through the ether. Not only social work, but the whole of society was challenged by civil rights, anti-war, black power, feminist, and counter culture activists who were sick and tired of the status quo and were determined to lay bare its inadequacies and break us out of it...
its inadequacies and break us out of it. These radical ideas were swirling around in my own head, as well, mixing in with and unsettling the memory residues of my earlier experiences, but still not affording me with a defensible, coherent, comprehensible approach to social work practice.

Coming back to the University of Washington as a faculty member, I still felt as if I didn't really know what I was doing, while I was in a position of teaching people how to do it.

It took me quite a few years and an accumulation of a little bit more crucial know-how to accept that this kind of situation of teaching from a base of not fully knowing is common, expectable, and if one doesn't go overboard, even desirable.

Lucky for me, I came across this crucial new knowledge in the pages of William Reid and Laura Epstein's new text, *Task-Centered Casework*, published by Columbia University Press in 1974. This book, which I discovered shortly after it was published, gave me solid ground to stand on at this early stage of my professional development and a foundation of knowledge that I could build on for the rest of my career. The ideas that Reid and Epstein presented in this slim book struck me at once as refreshingly clear and sensible. The essential notions were to work with clients on a limited number of problems that they identified as ones that they wanted to resolve, collaborate with them on setting up a series of problem-solving actions or tasks that they could accomplish, with careful planning, coaching, and practice, or that the social worker could carry out on their behalf, and to conduct this client-centered, action-oriented collaboration within a specified and relatively short period of time. The authors explored the rationale for each of these ideas to lay bare their theoretical, empirical, and practical bases. And they provided the 'nuts and bolts' of how to implement them in straightforward and unambiguous terms.

I tend to have reservations about 'manualised' practice, but on the day that I discovered Reid and Epstein's practice steps, e.g., “identify and explore problems, settle on a small set of target problems”, I felt like a starving person who had just been offered a fresh loaf of crusty bread (whole-grain!). It was not a banquet, but it was just what I needed.

Even as the authors offered a set of clear practice steps, they included the critical proviso that foisting a rigid framework on a client is counter to social work values and purposes, often activates resistance, and simply does not help. The idea is to have some preconceptions about how problems change and goals are attained, but to be prepared to meld, adapt, or discard them according to the clients' sensibilities and their situations.

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The idea is to have some preconceptions about how problems change and goals are attained, but to be prepared to meld, adapt, or discard them according to the clients' sensibilities and their situations. Of course, some of this revision relies on worker creativity and sensitivity; the kind that is born of experimentation, experience and additional background knowledge. But the authors also provide useful examples of when and how one might disregard certain of their guidelines. In the early pages of chapter one, they write:

*We do not subscribe to the notion that a given treatment design must be carried out in a unified way in order to make a useful contribution. Most experienced casework...*
practitioners, we think, build their own models of practice in a rather eclectic manner, and we see no point in contesting this fact. While we come prepared to argue the case for the application of our approach in its entirety, we are also willing to concede that its greatest contribution may lie in selective use of its components. (p. 5)

There were hints of various other theoretical perspectives within the task-centered system. But the beauty here was that one did not have to follow the current trend of lining up with one perspective or another in the behavioural vs. psychodynamic theory wars, but rather could look to the set of ideas that shed most light on the issue at hand.

I liked all of this about the task-centered system. I liked its clarity; its stripped down quality; its openness to a variety of theoretical explanations and practice approaches; its focus on what the client wanted and on actions the client could be helped to take. I also liked the forthright, jargon-free quality of the writing. Rather than providing another flowery exposition of social work values, the authors laid out the value choices that social work practitioners are all faced with in a way that made me think hard about what I valued most – my desire to be in control and to be the expert, my supervisor’s approval, carrying out the agency’s policies, or protecting the client’s rights and needs?

It is not that this book taught me everything that I needed to know about working with clients, but it gave me a framework that I could add to, deviate from, and mercifully retreat back to, when it seemed like my client and I were losing our way. It also brought me back to what seems to me to be the core of social work practice when my own intellectual explorations were taking me too far into the ephemera of psychological processes. When I went on to use this model in my teaching, students sometimes complained that it was too simplistic. Although I would never use the term ‘simple’ to describe the task-centered practice, at this early point in my career with all the vague theoretical fragments, newly formulated ideas, ideological possibilities, and fresh experiences twittering in my head, I was ready for a clear, straightforward, organising framework that helped pull all of these bits and pieces together into a kind of home-base practice perspective … one that I’ve ventured from and returned to over and over again.

By 1975, the funding for my faculty position had run out, and I was accepted into the doctoral programme in social welfare at the University of Washington. In trying to figure out a focus for my doctoral studies, I began to look more broadly at the burgeoning literature on cognition and personal change. If task-centered practice provided me with a pragmatic and secure home base, Michael Mahoney’s book, Cognitive Behavior Modification, brought me into contact with a kaleidoscope of vibrant new ideas and set me on a course of thinking more deeply about the cognitive/emotional and environmental factors that can make it hard for clients to commit to and carry out problem-reduction tasks.
During this time, I read several books and articles from the cognitive social psychology, cognitive therapy, and cognitive behaviour modification literatures, but Michael Mahoney’s analysis of the research on cognitive processes involved in human change was singular in sparking my excitement about the potential of cognitive ideas for informing social work. Mahoney, a brilliant young theorist, clinician, and researcher, started out as a student of B. F. Skinner, but went on to marshal evidence that disputed Skinner’s model of operant conditioning, and to investigate the underpinnings of human meaning-making processes and the ways they contributed to personal change. There is so much to admire about Mahoney’s contributions, but I’ve particularly appreciated the richness and breadth of his understanding, his relentless curiosity, and his ability to weave together multiple disciplinary perspectives, including psychology, neurology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cognitive science, to provide an analysis of change. One of the concepts that I’ve borrowed from Mahoney (who borrowed it from Bowlby) and used countless times over the years — including in the paragraphs above — is the need for a ‘secure home base.’ As Mahoney explained it, we are more likely to explore the possibility of change when we have a secure base to return to.

As Mahoney and other cognitive therapy theorists moved ever more deeply into considerations of how individuals construct their own realities, my social work sensibilities pulled me in a different direction. Although it is hard to deny that humans do rely on memories of past experiences to construct current meanings, I was influenced by the work of Reid and Epstein and other persuasive social work mentors to also be concerned with understanding how the events of daily life also bear heavily on our memory-based sense of meaning. In the practice framework that I eventually developed, “A Cognitive-Integrative Perspective for Social Work Practice” (Berlin, 1996), I argued that the meanings we construct are a function of memory representations of prior experiences and current information that is generated by ongoing experience. Especially in the case of social work clients, whose mental health problems are intertwined with numerous environmental stressors and barriers, it is not enough to change constructions of situations, we also have to make sure that the situations that clients encounter actually afford positive meanings.

I have to admit that in those early days in the mid-1970s, I had images in my mind of what Reid, Epstein, and Mahoney looked like. These people were my intellectual heroes and I couldn’t help but idealise them a bit, unfortunately, according to stereotypes of what brilliance looks like. When I met them in person, of course the stereotypes didn’t hold true. They weren’t the trim, blond, tall, ruggedly handsome individuals that I’d imagined. Luckily, in real life, they were so much more.

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Reflections on ‘special books’ in family practice

Barry Trute

When I first attempted to identify books of fiction or non-fiction that ‘most influenced my thinking’, it quickly became apparent that this was not a straightforward task, but a process that resulted in a long and diverse listing. When I thought of outstanding novels that were written as fiction, but offered me powerful lessons about life and living, I was startled by the number. It seemed that the best course to follow would be to focus on books that influenced me through their contribution to my professional development. Trimming down as best I could, I ended with four practice books that have been of key conceptual importance in my growth as a human service professional. Each of these books relates to practice areas that have been of highest interest to me over the past 25 years: family therapy, family violence, family implications of childhood disability, and positive psychology.

Although contemporary family therapy has been strongly influenced by post-modern theory, which has been part of my thinking for some time, the theoretical model that has remained as the one that has offered the most depth and richness for family therapy is based on the writings of Murray Bowen. The book that consolidates and best explains this theory is: Kerr and Bowen’s (1988) Family Evaluation. Contemporary approaches to family practice are largely based on theories of ‘expeditious change’ with little attention given to the questions of why family members do the things they do, or how transactions within family settings can be best understood and explained. Bowenian practice sees the family as an ‘emotional unit’ and offers concepts that have endured over time, such as: triangulation in human systems; emotional cutoff between persons; and the tension between maintaining loyalty to the family while being your own person.

My practice with families has largely involved persons with deep emotional wounds (such as a history of child sexual abuse or physical violence), people who are coming to terms with unexpected and engulfing life challenges (such as having a child with serious and pervasive developmental or cognitive disability), and people with inter-generational histories of abuse and cultural oppression (such as First Nations families breaking cycles of violence and
addictions). Bowenian theory has resonated most strongly in my assisting such families to better understand and meet their priority needs. My experience has taught me that there are no quick-fixes for people with deep emotional wounds and long histories of family distress. The challenge is to be there for such people in a way that can calm their anxiety, and to help them safely shift from reactive to reflective responses in their family settings. Bowenian theory helps practitioners understand why people behave in certain ways, and explains complex patterns of interpersonal relations. It does not preclude the auxiliary use of more contemporary family therapy approaches, such as solution-focused techniques, once family members feel ready to move forward to address the patterns of family relations that have kept them stuck in painful and destructive situations.

I have read *Family Evaluation* a number of times over the years and found that on each reading it offers me new and additional ways of thinking about the complex and powerful nature of family relations.

A second book, ‘special’ for me, is Maddock and Larson’s (1995) *Incestuous Families: An Ecological Approach to Understanding and Treatment*. The family violence field has been fixated over the years on individual and group treatment of victims and perpetrators. I was involved in the implementation of one of Canada’s first government-funded programmes of ‘couple treatment’ in conjugal violence; I understand that this approach is still illegal in some states in the USA. I have always sought to better understand the psychosocial context of acts of family violence, and to better appreciate the inter-generational, cultural, personality, gender, political and economic implications of violence against women and children. The Maddock and Larson book was a ground-breaking integration of practice knowledge that went beyond the focus on victims and perpetrators to consider patterns of interaction between family members, and the importance of influences that came from outside the family boundary such as community and cultural influences.

In this book, Maddock and Larson present an early typology of incest-supporting environments. Their typology assists the reader to appreciate how specific ‘incest ecologies’ can explain differences in the motivation of perpetrators, help identify social-psychological circumstances that support sexual assault of children, and explain the range of victim responses to sexual abuse. They identify four basic types of family ecologies involving incest, and each type suggests alternative approaches in the treatment of victims, perpetrators, non-offending parents and siblings. The typology identifies rage- and anger-based assaults, as well as highly sexualised (or pan-sexual) environments and pseudo-affection-based sexual violations of children. The ecological perspective of the book resonated with my own experience and beliefs. It assisted me in widening my assessment and treatment focus, not only when intervening with children suffering sexual violations, but also in other circumstances of family violence such as wife abuse (when, for example, there can be profound treatment differences in situations of ‘patriarchal terrorism’ as compared to ‘reciprocal conjugal violence’). This book was one that marked a monumental shift in thinking in the family violence field about root causes and alternative treatments of child sexual abuse.
When I first began doing research and family practice in the childhood disability field in the mid-1980s, the professional literature could be described as marked by negativity and fixated on pathology. There was widespread confusion about the linkage between parent stress and family pathology. There was an assumption that families with children with serious disabilities were de facto pathological because of the often onerous challenges and unrelenting demands that parents faced in the family and in the community. Research at that time did suggest that families with children with developmental and cognitive disabilities were more highly stressed than were other families. However there was only weak and anecdotal evidence available to confirm that parents of children with special needs had marked psychological disturbances such as clinical depression, had ongoing and debilitating ‘chronic sorrow’, or that these families commonly suffered maladjustment and pathology. My scepticism of the negative professional attitudes that prevailed in this service area led me to initiate one of the first studies in North America that focused on patterns of family resiliency and strength in situations of childhood disability. In my many years of family practice, I have never seen a strong family that did not have times of distress, nor have I ever seen a troubled family that was devoid of any strengths. What I was seeking was a practice model based on positive psychology and patterns of resiliency.

In my many years of family practice, I have never seen a strong family that did not have times of distress, nor have I ever seen a troubled family that was devoid of any strengths. What I was seeking was a practice model based on positive psychology and patterns of resiliency. Two books have been markers for me of the shift in the mental health field from being narrowly pathology oriented, to having a greater appreciation of the importance of recognising and building personal and family strengths. These are: Walsh's (2006) *Strengthening Family Resilience* and Fredrickson’s (2009) *Positivity*.

Walsh's text on family resiliency outlines key elements in the assessment of family strengths across family beliefs, organisation and communication. Central to family belief patterns is:

- the emotional meaning that families make of challenges and adversity
- their capability to develop and maintain a positive outlook
- their ability to find coherence in life in times of disruption and change
- and their capacity for spirituality.

Walsh considers the family structural elements in positive adaptation, and explicates how family organisational ability and communication skills are vital aspects in understanding family strengths. Her assessment framework leads directly to practice options and guidelines through recognition of the most salient elements in family wellbeing, and further, offers strategies to foster and reinforce core aspects of family resilience. In my mind this book is an essential reading for professionals who aspire to engage with and assist families.

Over the past decade there has been exciting advancements in theory development in positive psychology. Barbara Fredrickson has been a pioneer in this field and has made an outstanding contribution to research in positive psychology, and to the role of ‘positivity’.
as a way of building strength in personal adjustment and coping. She and her colleagues have suggested intervention strategies, albeit practice alternatives in their early evolution. These interventions seek to cultivate positive emotions as an antidote to problems rooted in negative emotions, and to diminish toxic cognitions such as occur in anxiety, depression and stress-related personal crises. Their work has demonstrated how positivity can be nurtured and strengthened as a cognitive resource. That is, to diminish the hold that negative emotions have on a person’s mind and body, and over time, ‘broaden-and-build’ a person’s coping abilities. In effect, interventions based on this theory assist people to accentuate the positive elements in their life, to reduce the power of the negative circumstances which confront them.

Fredrickson’s book *Positivity* is written in language that is accessible to the non-professional reader. In this book, Fredrickson thoughtfully outlines extensive outcome research that supports the relevance and power of this practice concept. Further, she carefully explicates how to cultivate positive emotions, not only to counteract negative emotions, but also to broaden thinking to optimise heath and wellbeing. My family practice over the past two decades has been based on building on people’s strengths to combat the vexing life circumstances that cause them anguish, and challenge their sense of personal competency. The recent literature in positive psychology has served to reinforce my commitment to activating resiliency in families, and further, has offered me new ways of working as a partner in families’ efforts to cope and adjust to adversity and life challenges.

The sum impact of these books has been deeper understanding of the need to build trust as a first step when working with families; of the importance of understanding the social ecology in which a family is nested; of the fundamental importance of helping individuals secure and move forward with a sense of hope; and of the wisdom of seeing optimism and positivity as a process of thinking about and making meaning of life events. The practice objective then is to gently challenge, expand and strengthen habitual modes of thinking, and to enhance family coping resources, rather than being centred on ‘fixing’ family pathology.

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What my ‘old friends’ have taught me

Dorothy Scott

How can I possibly choose from all the books that have influenced my thinking about children and child welfare? What a wonderful opportunity this is to reflect upon and pay homage to my ‘old friends’ sitting silently on my library shelf. Almost every good biography and novel gives rich insights into the journey of childhood, and how an individual’s life course is influenced by the events, time and place of their early years. So I thought if I restricted myself to Australian books that might make the task a little easier, but alas it didn’t.

Should I choose a book with which many people are familiar, such as the classic Australian autobiography *A Fortunate Life*, written by Albert Facey at the end of his long life, which mirrored major landmarks in twentieth century history? The title itself says so much. Most of us would not see Albert Facey’s life as fortunate. The fact that he did so reflects the archetypal resilience of this man who suffered so much – as a child he experienced abandonment, extreme physical abuse and desperate poverty, as a young man the gore of Gallipoli, and as a husband and father the hardship of the Great Depression and the loss of a son in the Second World War.

Yet Albert Facey achieved what Freud regarded as the mark of a healthy individual – someone who could love and work, and who was successful and respected in both domains. When I first encountered the emerging research on childhood resilience in the 1980s and included it in my courses for social work students, I used *A Fortunate Life* to bring the concepts of resilience alive for my students. Its message does not date.

Or what about an autobiography of a member of the Stolen Generations, given that this is such a central and shameful chapter in the history of child welfare in Australia? *Alone on the Soaks, the Life and Times of Alec Kruger* is a powerful and painful account by an Aboriginal man born in 1924. Now in his 80s, he looks back and writes:

As a child I had no mother’s arms to hold me. No father to lead me into the world. Us taken away kids only had each other. All of us damaged and too young to know what to do. We had strangers standing over us ... Many of us grew up hard and tough. Others were explosive and angry. A lot grew up just struggling to cope at all. They found their
peace in other institutions or alcohol. Most of us learnt to occupy a small space and avoid anything that looked like trouble. We had few ideas about relationships. No one showed us how to be lovers or parents. How to feel safe loving someone when that risked them being taken away and leaving us alone again. – Alec Kruger

The book’s co-author is Aboriginal social worker Gerard Waterford, who was employed by the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress to support members of the Stolen Generations, and what they have written is the culmination of their work together. By chance, a couple of years ago I met both men, sitting and having a cup of coffee outside the kiosk at the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens in Alice Springs. This little desert paradise was once the home and garden of Olive Pink, a botanic artist and anthropologist of the early 20th century and a courageous advocate for Central Australian Aboriginal people. I had just bought the book from the kiosk attendant who told me that the authors were right there. They signed the book for me and after yarning a while, I left inspired by the power of the human spirit and the healing potential of authentic and creative social work in the face of historical State- and church-sponsored cruelty to Aboriginal children and their families.

I left inspired by the power of the human spirit and the healing potential of authentic and creative social work in the face of historical State- and church-sponsored cruelty to Aboriginal children and their families.

State Children of Australia was written by Catherine Helen Spence and published in 1907. Many years ago as a student of history I came across this South Australian matriarch and social reformer who was so far ahead of her times. She championed many causes, most notably education and electoral reform and lived to see women granted the vote in South Australia in 1894. Catherine Spence is less well-known for her endeavours in child welfare reform.

This slim volume was written in response to requests from around the world from people wanting to know more about the pioneering South Australian development of foster care in the 1870s. Prior to this, children in Adelaide had been housed in an ‘asylum’ (now the Migration Museum), where many died from infectious diseases. Originally called ‘boarding out’, the foster care scheme paid foster mothers an adequate allowance, was controlled by a government appointed board of leading citizens, and relied on volunteers who regularly visited the families to ensure the children were well cared for and that their health, education and employment needs were met. We would be doing well to meet such standards in many of our foster care programs today.

Or should I choose one of my favourite biographies – Romulus, My Father by Raimond Gaita, which has recently been made into a film? The book began as a eulogy to his father by the internationally renowned moral philosopher, Raimond Gaita. While it tells the story of the life and times of Romulus Gaita, it also tells the story of the childhood of his son. It is a painful
and poignant account of a boy growing up in central Victoria with his parents, who were post-war emigrants from Europe. It is also an account of resilience and hope. Raimond Gaita's mother suffered from a serious mental illness and tragically took her own life. Romulus Gaita also lived with mental health problems for which he was admitted to an old-style large psychiatric institution, and experienced all that this entailed in that era of mental health services.

What spoke to me so strongly, as a former mental health social worker concerned about children of parents with a mental illness, is that Romulus is so much more than his psychiatric condition. Through the eyes of his son, we see a loving father and a deeply compassionate and highly ethical human being. I used to prescribe this book for my students to read, as I wanted them to carry with them an understanding of a child's perspective on the deep bonds and enormous strengths that can exist in the parent-child relationship, despite a parent's mental illness.

The first is the need to be loved. The second is less commonly recognised, but is perhaps even more vital, especially for many of Mirabel's children. It is the need to love one's parents without shame.

From reading Romulus, My Father, one knows that Raimond Gaita is speaking from the heart when he talks of the importance of loving one's parent without shame. It brought home to me how in the child welfare field we often still do and say small, subtle things that can add to children feeling such a sense of shame.

But perhaps all of these books will be too serious for readers working at the coalface of child welfare practice, witnessing pain and experiencing anguish on a daily basis, I thought. Perhaps they need some 'light relief' in their reading. If so, then a new novel by Christos Tsiolkas, The Slap, might be the riveting read they need.

The Slap brilliantly charts the destructive forces that reverberate through a kith and kinship network after an incident at a suburban backyard barbecue when Hugo, a young boy who is behaving badly, is slapped by a man to whom he is not related and only distantly connected socially. While the novel is set in the rich cross cultural context of Melbourne, I can imagine similar dynamics occurring within ethnically homogenous kith and kinship networks characterised by the normal generational, class, personality and values differences which can easily divide us in the face of such an incident.

Christos Tsiolkas is masterly in how he reveals, through the lens of the eight characters who
form the basis of the book’s eight chapters, the inner struggles of each in relation to identity and intimacy. From an elderly Greek grandfather to a young Anglo-Saxon adolescent girl, his characters are never caricatures. Yet paradoxically, there is one voice that is absent in this novel. That is Hugo’s. As a child he is marginalised as ‘other’, being the object for adult dramas but not being seen or heard as the adult characters are seen and heard. We do not get an insight into his inner struggles – his fears and his yearnings. Perhaps it is too difficult for most adults, even novelists with the emotional intelligence and brilliance of Christos Tsiolkas, to make the empathic leap of imagination and see the world through the lens of the child. That, of course, is also the greatest challenge for us in our work.

The novel is grist for the mill for those interested in the controversies surrounding the physical discipline of children. But the question of who chastises Hugo and how disturbs me less than the question of who cherishes Hugo and how. For this little boy’s life is devoid of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins or siblings, and his behaviour already alienates other children. Hugo is the victim of laissez-faire permissive child-rearing by his mother and repressed resentment by his father, which feed the boy’s narcissism and unbridled aggression. We rarely consider this as a form of emotional abuse, but it is just that, for it robs children of the opportunity to belong, to love and to be loved.

Following the incident when Hugo is hit, his parents contact the police, calling upon the State to uphold his rights but the State is a cold breast and a dry nipple. We cannot legislate for love or lovability, and Hugo is low on both.

I found The Slap a very thought-provoking novel. The splintering of this fragile social network made me reflect on what might it take to rebuild the village, if it takes a village to raise a child? This is perhaps the most important question facing us in the field of child welfare today.

So what are the collective lessons of this diverse group of books? One, that those who have experienced childhood adversity firsthand are our greatest teachers. Two, that professional practice in the child welfare field is fundamentally about ethics and emotions and that we need to be equipped to deal with both. Three, that child welfare policies can inflict great harm that only a few at the time can see. And last but never least, that committed and passionate individuals can transcend the conventional practices of their times, and work together to achieve reform.

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Reflections on the social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge

Nigel Parton

I came across *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Berger & Luckman, 1967) at the end of my social work degree in 1973, when studying a course on ‘social work organisations’. One of the key course texts was by David Silverman (1970), and it provided a very demanding tour of different theoretical perspectives on organisations in which he outlined an “action frame of reference”, which drew heavily on *The social construction of reality*. I am not going to pretend we found any of this easy(!), but it opened up a way of seeing the world that has informed my thinking and practice ever since. In fact, as the years have gone by, I have found the insights provided by Berger and Luckman ever more helpful. In particular, the way it discusses the relationship between the individual and society and the thorny issue of ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ I have found extremely pertinent in both understanding the nature of social work and opening up creative ways of thinking about social work practice. I find the approach helpful in trying to analyse the changing contexts of social work and in opening up creative spaces for intervention.

 Berger and Luckman took issue with images of society that were dominant in social theory in the post-war period and that they saw as excessively rationalistic and functional, giving little room for individual agency. They were concerned that something had gone terribly wrong with the ‘enlightenment’ project, such that most social theories were overly concerned with explaining the impersonal laws of social order rather than how social order was an outcome of social action.

They set themselves two tasks. First, drawing on phenomenological philosophy, they used a range of concepts in order to frame everyday life as a fluid, multiple, precariously...
negotiated achievement in interaction. Second, they provided a general theory of the social origins and maintenance of social institutions. Their principal thesis was that individuals in interaction create social worlds through their linguistic, symbolic activity for the purpose of providing coherence and purpose to an essentially open-ended, unformed human existence. Society is neither a system, nor a mechanism, nor an organism; it is a symbolic construct composed of ideas, meanings and language, which is changing all the time through human action, while also imposing both constraints and possibilities on human actors. They saw the relationship between the individual and society as operating in two ways: human beings continually construct the world, which then becomes a reality to which they must respond. In acting in the world, we construct and externalise phenomena, which then take on an objective reality of their own and which then are internalised by us and thus play a key role in the processes of externalisation. In this way, the relationship between the individual and society is seen as a dialectic process. Thus, while we are always acting and thereby constructing and changing the world and ourselves, we do so in the context of the institutions and frameworks of meaning handed down by previous generations.

What such an approach does is emphasise the processes through which individuals define both themselves and their environments, and the processes whereby social institutions are themselves created. It encourages us to problematise the ‘obvious’ and the ‘taken for granted’ and challenges the view that conventional knowledge is neutral and unbiased and that the categories we use to make sense of and operate in the world are historically and culturally specific and therefore vary over time and space.

Some years ago, Malcolm Payne (1996) argued that both the social work profession and social work practice were socially constructed, so that debates about the nature of social work will always be ambiguous and contested and will vary according to time and place. I have very much drawn upon a social constructionist approach for my ongoing critical analysis of the changing nature of policy and practice in relation to child abuse (Parton, 1985, 1991, 2006). For example, The Politics of Child Abuse (Parton, 1985) was concerned with trying to explain why the problem of child abuse had emerged as such a crucial one for welfare practitioners in England from the early 1970s onwards, what the nature of the problem was, how this changed over time, and what had been the implications for policy and practice. The starting point was that we cannot begin to understand the nature of child abuse without analysing the nature of the category itself, how this had been constructed and then recognised as a social problem requiring state intervention. While there was no explicit reference to Berger and Luckman, the analysis drew upon a range of concepts and ideas informed by social constructionism (for example Blumer, 1971; Spector & Kitsuse, 1973, 1977).

At the time of publication, The Politics of Child Abuse was seen by many as a challenging but somewhat peripheral critique that had
little to offer mainstream policy and practice. However, within 10 years a number of its central arguments were almost accepted as received wisdom. The second half of the 1990s witnessed a major debate in the UK and other countries about what came to be called, the “refocusing of children’s services” (Parton, 1997). This was prompted, in particular, by the publication of *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (Department of Health, 1995), which summarised the findings from 20 recently completed research studies on child protection practice.

What is of particular interest here is the definition of child abuse, or child maltreatment, adopted in *Child Protection: Messages from Research*. Rather than fall back on more traditional approaches, it argued that child abuse was a socially constructed phenomenon. Quoting from one of the research studies, it stated that:

*Child maltreatment is not the same sort of phenomena as whooping cough; it cannot be diagnosed with scientific instruments. It is more like pornography, a socially constructed phenomenon which reflects the values and opinions of particular times.*

(Gibbons, Conroy & Bell, 1995, cited in Department of Health, 1995, p15.)

In fact, the study by Gibbons, Conroy and Bell (1995) referenced *The Politics of Child Abuse* to support and legitimate such a position, so that by the second half of the 1990s, social constructionist perspectives were being drawn upon in order to open up debates about the future direction of child protection policy and practice.

I have also drawn upon social constructionism in a rather different way to develop an approach to theory and practice in social work, and here the work of Berger and Luckman is quite explicitly and deliberately drawn upon. Along with Patrick O’Byrne I have developed an approach to practice called ‘Constructive Social Work’ (Parton & O’Byrne, 2000; Parton, 2009). While the approach does provide a theoretical analysis of social work, its primary purpose is to develop a theory for practice and which is of direct relevance to practitioners. We chose the term Constructive Social Work for two reasons. Firstly, because of the positive, literal meaning of construction, in terms of its association with building, of putting together and of having a useful purpose. Secondly, because it attempted to develop a theoretical approach to practice that was explicitly social constructionist in orientation. It emphasises process, the plurality of voice, possibility and the relational quality of knowledge. It is affirmative and reflexive and focuses on the centrality of dialogue, listening and talking with the other. It underlines both the shared building of identity and meaning that is the basis of effective practice, and the positive results for service users that stem from the approach and can be seen as making a contribution to the development of social constructionist thinking and practice in social work more generally (Saleebey & Witkin, 2007).

More generally, ‘social constructionism’ as a term has very much entered the mainstream of both the social sciences and humanities over the past 40 years. Some have now suggested...
that it has moved a long way from the approach
developed by Berger and Luckman (Velody &
Williams, 1998) and that it has lost much of its
original analytic and conceptual coherence.
Even so, I still find it very helpful in the way the
approach emphasises a critical, constructive and
creative approach to policy and practice and, in
particular, the way it helps emphasise the social
nature of social work and the centrality of the
relational dimensions of day-to-day professional
life. For me it continues to provide both critical
insights and opens up new possibilities for
thinking and action.

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Taking a long-term view in understanding life stories

Robbie Gilligan

The men had broadly similar starting points, yet had different adult pathways from adolescent delinquency into old age: some desisted, some persisted, and some did a little of both. Laub and Sampson identified human agency to be important in the life stories. The men’s own choices were influential. The researchers also found three key turning point experiences – marriage, military service, and employment – that seemed to account for some of the change by those moving out of crime.

Why is this study important, and why does it have relevance in my view in the area of child welfare?

Firstly, it reminds us of the importance of taking a long-term view in understanding how the life stories of young people in trouble may actually unfold. Too often, professional judgements about the needs or capacity of a given set of people are based on too limited a sample of evidence. They reflect a point-in-time snapshot of highly selective or partial evidence. Key decisions may be influenced by slivers of evidence that are accessible to the professional system, a crucial qualification since the system may be blissfully unaware of the extent, the reality or the implications of crucial missing

\[\text{shared beginnings, divergent lives – delinquent boys to age 70 (Laub & Sampson, 2006)}\] is a truly unique book that reports and reflects on a series of studies tracking a cohort of 500 delinquents remanded to reform school in the 1940s in the US. So far so ordinary. What makes the book distinctive is that it tracks these men (as they were) from their adolescence to age 70. This work was done by two high calibre research teams in different time periods. All these features combine to make this study remarkable. The study draws on the painstaking work of the first team led by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, and the later second team led by Laub and Sampson.

Laub and Sampson managed to complete interviews with 52 of the men at age 70, a considerable feat bearing in mind that over half of the original sample had died in the meantime. The study sought to explore the crucial question of why some men desisted from crime and others did not. This is a question that has commanded the attention of social scientists and lay people for a very long time. But this study is uniquely powerful among such attempts to date in its scope and depth. No other study has this ambitious life-span sweep.

What makes the book distinctive is that it tracks these men (as they were) from their adolescence to age 70

**Why is this study important, and why does it have relevance in my view in the area of child welfare?**

Firstly, it reminds us of the importance of taking a long-term view in understanding how the life stories of young people in trouble may actually unfold. Too often, professional judgements about the needs or capacity of a given set of people are based on too limited a sample of evidence. They reflect a point-in-time snapshot of highly selective or partial evidence. Key decisions may be influenced by slivers of evidence that are accessible to the professional system, a crucial qualification since the system may be blissfully unaware of the extent, the reality or the implications of crucial missing
evidence. The snapshot nature of the evidence may also mean that key decision-makers are deprived of important messages that can emerge from assessing crucial trends over time. How a care-leaver is doing at 18 may not be a very good indicator of how they will do at 26, when natural maturing and other factors are taken into account. The maturing happens but, for some more vulnerable and less supported youngsters, it may take place more slowly. It may be cliché, but may be no less true for that. In many cases, time may be a great healer. It is not that our service users may not get there. At least some of them may do so - in the end. So some may ‘get there’ but it may just take them longer. It is important that those involved remain open to possibilities of what the passage of time may uncover.

Secondly, the study reminds us of the importance of human agency in amongst all the other structural and contextual influences on people’s behaviour and life trajectories. Despite the power of other forces in their lives, people can still make their own choices. Thus, even in unlikely circumstances, people are not necessarily helpless in the face of circumstance. People, even in unpromising conditions, can exercise agency and help to shape their own lives, and their own destiny. The importance of human agency may still be obscured by assumptions in many social service systems. The language of ‘client’, ‘victim’ and the like may hide from our view the significance of human agency.

Thirdly, the study underlines that change is possible. Change is not certain, but it is possible. This is a key message for professionals and the people with whom they work. Pessimistic stereotypes or assumptions must be avoided. Barriers to change may reside in the heads of professionals who may assume that problems are intractable and beyond remedy. This may sometimes prove true, but not always, and crucially the study emphasises the uncertainty as to which cases will turn out in which way.

Fourthly, the study suggests that while change is possible, it also underlines that the precise path or pattern of change may not be easy to predict. Linear thinking has its limits. We cannot readily predict A leads to B leads to C, in some orderly and guaranteed fashion. Complexity theory reminds us that life is not that neat. We may be able to predict that there will be earthquakes in an earthquake-prone zone, or hurricanes in a hurricane-prone zone, but we cannot predict precisely where and when these events will occur. This is an important message with a clear implication. There is a need for humility in our claims, predictions, or assessments as to the occurrence or significance of events in children’s lives.

Fifthly, the study highlights that any positive change observed in the lives of the men seem largely to have flowed from normative experiences rather than from specific targeted interventions. This has important implications for those who seek to ‘engineer’ solutions to social problems through specific targeted interventions. The following case example from Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives illustrates this point very powerfully. Serendipity plays a significant part in how change happens. Change does not flow only from our will, or efforts, or conscious effort. It comes flowing unexpectedly from chance moments, from chance encounters, from chance opportunities. The story lends powerful
weight to this argument. A man, now aged 70, was sent as a boy to reform school, and assigned to an electrical workshop where he met Jack who was in charge. He recalls very movingly that:

[Jack] loved amateur radio. And he got me interested in radio and electrical stuff and things of that nature ... He saw the potential in me. He saw I enjoyed electricity. I enjoyed radio and stuff like that. He took me under his wing. And I thought an awful lot of this guy in the short ten months I worked with him. He was a prince ... I prepared my whole life in ten months to do something. ... Think about it. Those ten months were crucial in my life. Because they turned me around. [Prison] turned me around. Jack turned me around. Jack was a humanitarian and cared for me as an individual. Let's get down to brass tacks. What if Jack wasn't there? What if I wasn't offered the opportunity? ... He treated me right. As a matter of fact, after I left [the prison] year after year on a yearly basis I would take my wife and kids, we'd drive all the way to [name of prison] to see Jack. ('Gilbert' in Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 141)

Sixthly, the study shows that there is no inevitable link between childhood adversity and later outcomes. The die is not cast by puberty or earlier. That is not to say that childhood does not have a major influence. What happens during childhood is clearly very powerful, but we should consider cautiously too deterministic a view of the influence of early experience. This Laub and Simpson study strongly emphasises that there is still a great deal to play for as an individual’s life story unfolds through adolescence and beyond. What happens in adolescence and adulthood also matters. It reminds us, in addition, to again avoid simplistic assumptions about outcomes based on limited evidence.

Last but not least, the study demonstrates strongly the value of listening to the direct voice of the people with the direct lived experience. These accounts carry poignant and powerful lessons.

The book demonstrates well the power of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in a longitudinal study. It also highlights the value of combining data gathered in different ways at different times, and by different teams. This is not the normal model of social science research. But this study is different. Its findings cry out to be heeded. But there is also a need to attend to the innovative approach it took to the re-working and enhancing of earlier studies. Its findings and its inclusive approach, I would suggest, have important implications for intervention as well as research techniques.

REFERENCES


Professor Robbie Gilligan is head of the School of Social Work and Social Policy and associate director of the Children’s Research Centre at Trinity College Dublin. The second edition of his book Promoting Resilience has recently been published by British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.
What’s influenced the practice of our key field practitioners

When we were putting together this special edition we wanted to ensure that we gave voice to some of Child, Youth and Family’s leading key practitioners. We asked the care and protection and youth justice regional practice advisors to share with us what had been the most significant influences on their practice. Below they give us a glimpse into what has helped shape their practice.

**Bronwyn Kay**

I have always had a passion for family-led responses and a belief that it is central to good social work practice. However, the idea that a strengths-based approach should underpin care and protection work initially seemed more challenging. It took a while for me to appreciate this concept and to incorporate it into my practice.

I have had several light-bulb moments over the years. The first happened at the 2002 Australasian Child Abuse and Neglect Conference in Sydney. Insoo Kim Berg ran a workshop focusing on solution-focused practice. She presented a simple scale diagram that showed how questions focusing solely on problems missed opportunities to find out how things differed when the behaviour wasn’t occurring.

Another revelation came when I attended a presentation by Andrew Turnell about signs of safety and safety-organised practice. He used a map to organise information, and identify danger and harm balanced against strengths and protective factors. Similarly, *Working with ‘Denied’ Child Abuse* by Turnell and Essex (2006) offered me an alternative viewpoint about building safety plans with families by encouraging discussion that focused on avoiding future allegations of abuse. Turnell and Essex illustrated how social workers and families could move from “I didn’t do it and I am not talking” to “how can we stop this allegation or behaviour from happening again?” Turnell’s workshop, and this book, helped me find a way to tangibly put strengths-based ideas into practice.

Since then, I have been able to build on these experiences and understand the importance of clearly articulating what care and protection concerns exist within a family, balancing them with safety and evidencing why decisions are made using a consistent set of tools. My involvement with implementing differential response in Child, Youth and Family in New Zealand has been an exciting opportunity to revisit practice fundamentals and reflect on what can really make a difference for families and enable them to look after their children well.

**Nova Salomen**

For me, a key influence on my social work practice is the group of people who nurtured me as a new recruit to Child, Youth and Family. Two of the essential components for good practice and longevity in statutory social work are positive role-modelling and quality supervision.
With a number of years already working for the service, and some with residential experience, this group of people provided me with knowledge on how to engage with families and understand their reality. Being a Pākehā, middle-class, childless young woman from Christchurch, I had some lessons to learn.

Prior to completing my social work qualification at Canterbury University, I had no understanding of how my values and ethics were formed. In fact, I had no idea what values were. Understanding this has been critical to my work with both families and staff. Without understanding our own perspectives it is difficult to not judge or make assumptions about others.

An early influence on my practice was a text entitled *Human Behavior in the Social Environment: An Ecological View* by the late Carel Germain (1991). This book opened my mind to systems and how our environment can shape our thinking and being. It enabled me to look broader than my own worldview.

More recently, my current theoretical influence has been further shaped through my work on differential response and strengths-based practice, and through exposure to the practices in Olmstead County, Minnesota, and writings by Rob Sawyer, Sue Lohrbach and Andrew Turnell on appreciative enquiry and narrative approaches to social work practice. The crux of all these approaches is ‘the relationship’ or ‘the alliance’, depending on which branch you draw from. For me, the main message is that building the relationship is the key to any change and after my many years with Child, Youth and Family, as well as the research and reading I have done, I am reminded I learnt this on day one with those wonderful grassroots social workers who trained me so well.

*Lo’i Volē*

From an early age, I can recall a nagging aspiration to want to fight injustice and help people. My involvement with Te Hou Ora, a community group that worked with at-risk youth, under the auspices of Youth for Christ, propelled me on my journey towards a ‘higher calling’. However, my Samoan parents had fathomed a ‘higher calling’ for me too … a calling that involved being a lawyer or a doctor. My fear of public speaking and my queasiness with blood did not exactly endear me to my parents’ expectations. At college I was determined to have a career in either policing or teaching, to emulate my favorite teacher at school. At that time a social work career had never entered my mind … or so I thought.

When I completed my law degree I stumbled into social work through the then Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service. I haven’t looked back since, and 10 years later I remain passionately involved in social work. My parents too have overcome their disappointment of not having a lawyer or a doctor in the family, especially since they have learned more about what I do!

*Modello: A Story of Hope for the Inner City and Beyond*, by Pransky (1998), is an inspiring book that stirs my social work practice enthusiasm. It’s an extraordinary story that taps into the reality of my human experience. The interweaving tones of prevailing hope, resiliency and triumph over hardship demonstrates that social change, for the families and communities involved, is indeed an inside-out process. Whenever I read *Modello*, its messages feed my wairua, constantly awaken my social work conscience, and provide me with timely reminders of why I work in this field!
Lorraine Hoult

A few months ago I visited a couple who had been notified to Child, Youth and Family several times for family violence. I listened to their story about unemployment, lack of family support and a history of violence in their own families. Dad needed another job to heal his feeling of low self-worth and Mum needed to be nearer her extended family as she was depressed and weighed down by the responsibilities of three young children. When we left, Dad shook our hand and thanked us for listening and not just “pointing the finger at us like the last social workers who visited”.

When I first read Turnell and Edwards (1999) Signs of Safety in 2000, I was struck by the key messages coming out of research on what child protection recipients want. Three key messages have stayed with me:

- Parents want to be cared about as individuals and have their story heard.
- When the worker is responsive and sensitive to the stress placed on the family by our intervention it makes a significant difference. The worker needs to be clear and honest about who they are, why they are there, what the concerns are and what their expectations of the family are, rather than just focusing on what the family have done wrong.
- The family’s ideas and wishes should be heard and given opportunities to influence decisions and planning.

Although in one sense the messages are simplistic, when we get it right they lend a richness to our social work practice that means the outcomes for our children and their families can be so much better. It is these experiences I have had with our clients, children and their parents that have most impacted me over the years. Their feedback continues to influence and shape my practice.

Dave Wood

I’ve always been fascinated by ‘what works’. Common Factors Theory (Hubble, Duncan & Millar, 1999) suggests that 40% of change is due to the client, 30% to the relationship, and 15% to each of the placebo and the model or technique. More recent estimations suggest 87% of change is attributable to the client and what happens in their environment. Eighty-seven percent! Intuitively it makes sense to me that engagement with the client and mobilisation of their motivation and environmental resources is crucial. Milton Erickson (1900–1980) believed every client was unique, and that people would change for their own reasons, not our reasons. Erickson told a story about a boy named Joe which nicely illustrates this (Gordon & Meyers-Anderson, 1981).

Joe was expelled from school at age 12 for beating up other kids, vandalism and misdemeanours. He was sent to a state industrial school after stabbing his father’s farm animals with a pitchfork and setting fire to the barn. At 15 he was arrested for burglary and returned to the state school and remained there until he was 21. As an adult his pattern of offending and incarceration continued. After serving his final term, he returned home. Local shopkeepers were quick to lay blame when they noticed items disappearing from their stores.

One day Susie walked by Joe in town. Now Susie was an attractive, accomplished and popular daughter of a local wealthy farmer, however she had a reputation for being too choosy and was fast becoming an old maid at 23! When Joe saw Susie he swung towards her and sized her up … and Susie sized Joe up in return. Finally, Joe said, “Can I take you to the dance this Friday?” Susie was very much in demand for the weekly dance, but she replied, “You can if you’re a gentleman”.
The next morning shopkeepers noted that their stolen goods had been returned and somebody saw Joe heading toward Susie's father's farm. That Friday, Joe and Susie went to the dance and danced exclusively together.

Word soon got around that Susie's dad had hired Joe as a farmhand. Joe turned out to be the best farmhand around. Every Friday, Joe and Susie went dancing. They started attending church together, and within a year they were married. Joe moved into the house, continued to be the best farmhand and became the best neighbour people had known. His convict days were soon forgotten, and he was even elected president of the local school board. Joe volunteered to work with young offenders and managed to rehabilitate a number of them on his farm.

One day Joe met Erickson and he said to him "There's an old record at the Industrial School that you ought to read sometime, Doc. About a guy named Joe." Erickson later commented that "All the psychotherapy Joe received, was, 'you can if you're a gentleman'."

This story continues to propel my practice by reminding me about our ongoing challenge to tap into that 87%.

Allison Pitts-Brown

Lake Okataina provides the perfect backdrop to reflect on those experiences and people who have influenced my social work journey. My early experiences and values were shaped primarily by my upbringing on a farm in rural New Zealand and my ‘true blue farming stock’ family. My father always taught me and my three siblings to have an opinion and to not be afraid to express it – he probably regrets it now, as lively political and social debates dominate our family gatherings. As a nurse, and our primary carer/helper, my mother instilled in me her more nurturing side. In my mind I had a fairly ‘normal’ upbringing, but as I have learnt ‘normal’ is very much a relative term.

The year 1989 marked a turning point in my life – I left home, discovered hostel food, formed some of my closest friendships, and began my Bachelor of Social Work at Massey University. Over the years many people have shaped my practice, but at university I began to learn what it meant to be a social worker, well at least the theory behind it. Lecturers like Robyn Munford, Mason Durie, Steve Maharey, Rajan Prasad and more recently Chris Thomas gave me a solid practice foundation. Since then, my 14 years with Child, Youth and Family have given me the opportunity to deepen my thinking. In particular, my time in Wellington (1996–2001) working with some amazing colleagues stands out. In terms of published works, Honey and Mumford (1982, 2006) have helped shaped my development as a supervisor and practice leader. Their self-administered learning style questionnaire has proven useful to me in better understanding the supervisee-supervisor relationship. Their analysis of different learning styles (derived from Kolb’s theory) has also been useful, particularly alongside Morrison’s (2001) more detailed discussions in Staff Supervision in Social Care. More recently, as my strengths-based practice has developed, Turnell and Edwards’ (1999) Signs of Safety has also significantly increased my understanding of safety-organised practice.

My colleagues in Waikato and in the other parts of the organisation continue to influence my thinking and enhance my practice and development. The friends I have made at Child, Youth and Family and Massey University, and my partner of 10 years, have been my inspiration. The experiences I have shared with them sometimes make me wonder what my life would be like without them!
Social work was never a profession I considered entering while growing up. In fact, until I enquired about a job, I did not know what a social worker did. I graduated university with a science degree and had decided this was my field of choice. However, needing a job after returning to New Zealand from overseas, my cousin alerted me to social work vacancies in my home town of New Plymouth. I interviewed for the job, was offered a position and was quickly propelled into a social work career.

That was 18 years ago! So why am I still here? There are a number of reasons, including my commitment to ensuring the wellbeing of children, young people and their whānau, but more fundamentally I feel privileged to work for an organisation that is backed by legislation which supports my belief that children and young people need to live with their families. For me a ‘family’ is much broader than just the immediate family. I do not support a stance which prioritises placing children with non-kin carers and I refuse to accept the excuse, “I don’t have time to search for whānau”. Māori children belong to a whānau/hapū/iwi and we have a responsibility to ensure we do everything we can to engage with whānau/hapū/iwi. Pūao-te-Ata-tū (1998), the document which sparked the formation of our legislative framework, was crucial in drawing people’s attention to the harm that had been done to the Māori people and culture, and highlighted for a much wider audience a better, more effective way to work. Pūao-te-Ata-tū continues to inspire me in my practice and is a reminder that as family-led and culturally responsive practitioners, we cannot ignore our responsibilities.

REFERENCES

Bronwyn Kay is the practice advisor (care and protection) in Southern Region.
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Dave Wood is the practice advisor youth justice in Northern Region.
Allison Pitts-Brown is the practice advisor (care and protection) in Midlands Region.
Lael Sharland is the practice advisor youth justice in Midlands Region.
Book reviews

Classroom to Prison Cell

Alison Sutherland
Published in 2008 by Stead and Daughters Ltd
Reviewed by Chris Polaschek

This book is about perceptions – primarily the perceptions of a group of serious (and generally violent) young offenders about educational experiences that resulted in their early disengagement with school, either voluntarily or otherwise.

Alison Sutherland presents 17 interviews with students who have dropped out of school. They are adolescent boys and girls, 14 to 16 years old, who have offended seriously enough, including while at school, to have been placed in a Child, Youth and Family Youth Justice residence.

Alison has considerable experience working as a teacher in a residential school and recently completed a PhD. She starts the book by telling us a little about her background, factors that might have had an influence on her experiences and perceptions as presented in the book.

Almost as an aside, given that it is not the main topic of this book, the reader is given a brief report on Alison’s experience of visiting each residence. These are not particularly complimentary in tone, and one suspects from these accounts that Alison is trying to say something, but how it links to the primary content is not clearly articulated.

The strength of the book is that it presents the perceptions of the young people in their own words. This enables the reader to get an insight into the thinking of the individuals. Most readers would find these perceptions of their school experiences, and the glimpses of the young people’s views of the world and their offending behaviour to be alarming.

This book also provides a perspective that is rarely reported on – the very small group of young people who spend time in the residential environment.

Alison concludes the book by providing recommendations. Most would agree with her principle conclusion that early identification and intervention is more likely to be effective for this group of young people. Her other recommendations are food for thought for those involved with trying to manage this small but challenging group of young people and will contribute to future discussion.

More controversially, Alison suggests that young people who have ‘potential’ to be high-risk offenders could benefit from placement in long-term special schools. Every indicator about behavioural change suggests that this is best undertaken in community settings, and it is hard to see there being much support for this.

There is also a missed opportunity in this book. It is hard to get interviews with young people in Child, Youth and Family residences. This was an opportunity to talk to them about what was
different about attending the Child, Youth and Family residential schools, which were generally positively viewed by the young people, and the education system that had failed to engage them.

In summary, this book is a short easy read and will stimulate discussion. It is about perceptions, Alison’s and those of the young people. With this in mind, it will contribute to yours as the reader.

Chris Polaschek is the manager, Youth Justice, Service Support. He has worked for 22 years in the juvenile and adult justice systems as a social worker, an administrator and a manager. He has been in his current role at Child, Youth and Family for 18 months.
Child, Youth and Family, a service of the Ministry of Social Development (MSD), produces three themed editions of *Social Work Now* each year. The themes relate to topics relevant to social work practitioners and social work which aim to promote professionalism and practice excellence. Submissions to *Social Work Now* are generally by request of the editor. *Social Work Now* is a publicly funded journal which is available free of charge and submissions published in the journal are made available on the Child, Youth and Family website (www.cyf.govt.nz/SocialWorkNow.htm) and through electronic library databases.

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- **practice articles**: Contributions for practice articles are welcomed from social workers, other Child, Youth and Family staff and professionals working within the wider field. Articles can include accounts of innovative workplace practice, case reports, research, education, review articles, conference and workshop reports, and should be around 1,000–2,000 words.

- **reviews**: We also welcome book reviews and these should be around 500 words.

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If you would like to submit an article or review to *Social Work Now*, or if you have any queries please contact Kelly Anderson, manager professional practice, office of the chief social worker.

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Aims

- To provide discussion of social work practice in Child, Youth and Family.
- To encourage reflective and innovative social work practice.
- To extend practice knowledge in any aspect of adoption, care and protection, residential care and youth justice practice.
- To extend knowledge in any child, family or related service, on any aspect of administration, supervision, casework, group work, community organisation, teaching, research, interpretation, interdisciplinary work, or social policy theory, as it relates to professional practice relevant to Child, Youth and Family and the wider social work sector.
A journey of being a Ngāi Tahu Māori
Social work practice in cross-cultural settings
Task-centred practice
Key conceptual influences in family practice
Biographical insights into the journey of childhood
Reflections on the social construction of reality
Taking a long-term view in understanding life stories