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**ADVANCES**

IN SOCIAL WORK

& WELFARE EDUCATION

Volume 11, No. 1



# ADVANCES

IN SOCIAL WORK

& WELFARE EDUCATION

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# 1. Editorial

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Welcome to the new look *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education Journal*. I have taken over editorship as Martin Ryan, longstanding editor of the journal, resigned from the post in January 2009. We thank Martin for his outstanding and sustained contribution as editor and for his willingness to be available as I find my feet as the new editor. We also thank Peter Camilleri for his contributions as co-editor to the journal. I also offer my deep appreciation and thanks to Dr Joan Mulholland for her expert assistance with copyediting this edition of *Advances*. I thank the following people, many of whom I called on more than once for assistance with reviews: Dr Sue Gair; Dr Gai Harrison; Deborah Hart; Mark Hughes; Dr Jane Maidment; Dr Christine Morley; David Nilsson; Dr Ruth Phillips; Dr Martin Ryan; Debbie Smith; Dr Deborah Walsh; Professor Jill Wilson.

This edition incorporates some new features. In addition to refereed publications, *Advances* also now has a special section titled *Practice Reflections*. In this section, we publish short opinion pieces on topical issues or reflections on recent events of interest to our audience of educators and students in social work, welfare or community development. The *Practice Reflection* pieces should incorporate scholarly literature but, in contrast to the refereed articles, these pieces are subject to review by the editorial team only and are considerably shorter than a fully refereed article. If you have a burning issue that you would like to raise, please consider contributing to our *Practice Reflections* section. *Advances* will also include a book review section and we thank Jill Wilson for contributing to this section.

From 2010, *Advances* will be produced twice yearly and we already have two themed editions planned. The themed editions will feature papers on the special issue theme as well as general papers of interest to social work, welfare and community work educators. The June/ July edition of *Advances* will focus on working with children. We invite papers on any aspect of engaging with children, promoting children's well-being through to education for child protection practice. We also seek papers outlining how social work and human service educators are incorporating the new minimum standards in child protection practice. The deadline for papers to be considered for the special edition on working with children is 2nd of April 2010. The second issue, to be published in 2010, will be focused on critical reflection method and practice. The deadline for papers to be considered for that edition is July 30, 2010.

This edition (Volume 11, 2009) includes a wide variety of interesting articles. In their article "Making Children Visible" Carole Zufferey, Dorothy Scott, and Christine Gibson offer a critical examination of the absence of children's voices in social welfare and human service curriculum and argue for enhanced incorporation of children's perspectives in education. Clare Tilbury, Jennifer Osmond and Teresa Scott review literature on critical thinking and outline educational strategies that can be used to promote critical thinking in educating social and human service professionals. Sue Gair draws on the theoretical work of Edith Stein to argue for a fuller approach to empathy than is available within mainstream social work and human services literature. Margot Rawsthorne contributes an analysis of the Census data on same sex couples to argue for greater recognition of the diversity of the lives of those marginalised by the cultural dominance of heterosexuality. Carolyn Noble and Justine O'Sullivan report on their research into social work student and practitioners' perceptions of whether social work is recognised today as a distinctive profession. They argue that the profession needs to adopt a more proactive stance towards the achievement of professional recognition in many contemporary practice contexts. Carol Zufferey discusses the role of social work educators in teaching students about homelessness, particularly focusing on children

and families. In the Practice Reflections section, Mark Furlong and Fiona McColl offer their views arising from the recent Critical Reflection Forum conducted by AASWWE in October, 2009.

Finally, Jill Wilson contributes a book review on a new social policy text.

I hope you enjoy this edition of Advances and I hope you will consider contributing to the journal in 2010.

**Karen Healy**

Editor



## 2. Making children visible in social work education

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### **ABSTRACT**

A review of the literature on child wellbeing and child protection in social work education, and a recent survey of Australian social work courses have both found that children and their needs are not prominent. This paper summarises these findings and outlines recent and current Australian initiatives to enhance social work curricula in relation to children.

### **BACKGROUND**

A broad range of professions has the potential and obligation to enhance the well-being of children. Social work in particular has played a leading role in the history of child welfare, as well as having a much broader role in promoting the wellbeing of children across all levels of intervention and fields of service. The contribution of social workers to the well-being of children is self-evident in those settings in which the child is the primary

client. However, within all services where adult clients are parents, especially in fields such as homelessness, mental health, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and family violence, social workers have untapped opportunities to enhance the wellbeing of vulnerable children (Scott, 2009).

The degree to which this potential of social work is fulfilled depends to a significant extent on whether social work graduates have the values, knowledge and skills to respond to the needs of vulnerable children and their families. For this reason the content within qualifying social work courses in Australia is a major focus of the Australian Association of Social Workers and the Australian Centre for Child Protection.

Public concern has also been raised at a national level about the preparation of social workers and other professionals in relation to children who are at risk, for example in the Senate Committee report, *Protecting Vulnerable Children: A National Challenge* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). Workforce development across different professions and service sectors has been recently highlighted as a major priority in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) policy document, *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business, National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*. Drawing on a public health approach to child protection (Scott 2006; O'Donnell, Scott and Stanley, 2008), the National Framework has a strong preventive thrust and gives emphasis to issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children is underpinned by a commitment to children's rights to be safe, valued and cared for; to participate in decisions affecting them; and for children's rights to be upheld by systems and institutions in accord with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Conceptualising children within a human rights framework, in which children are seen as citizens, is seen as appropriate given the strength of rights-based values within social work education and practice.

For example, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that, in accordance with age and maturity, the views of children should be sought in matters affecting them. In keeping

with this, there are growing calls to give voice to children in social work practice, research, policy and professional education (Roche, 1999; Jans, 2004; Grover, 2005; Hill, 2006; Warming, 2006; Cousins and Milner, 2007; Bagshaw, 2007).

Young people can feel frustrated if they are encouraged to contribute and 'their voices' are not taken seriously (Kjorholt, 2002). A number of authors have considered the practical and ethical ambiguities inherent in 'listening to the voice of the child' (Komulainen, 2007). For example, in relation to research, the concern of Human Research Ethics Committees to protect children can constrain researchers' attempts to involve children and so limit their influence on practice and legislation (Balen et al, 2006). Contradictory policy initiatives can also arise from children being seen as both objects of protection and as competent social actors (Wyness, 1996). Debates about such matters have been largely absent from social work education in Australia.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite the significance of child wellbeing and protection to so many areas of social work practice, there is relatively little content about children in the generic social work texts used in Australia such as Sheafor and Horejsi (2005) and DuBois and Miley (2005). While they include indicators for abuse and neglect, and offer guidelines for working with children, attention is not paid to children's perspectives and children are not viewed as citizens with the right to participate in and be informed about decisions that affect them.

The core texts reflect the 'trade off' between breadth and depth in social work education which has traditionally been focused on preparation for generic social work. What exactly should be included in the core training of social workers in relation to children's needs, and what should be included in specialist post-qualifying courses and in-service training are major issues yet to be satisfactorily resolved.

For a long time children have been largely invisible in Australian social work education literature. Ryan and Martyn (1996) and Spencer and

MacDonald (1998) systematically reviewed the content of Australian journals on social work education and field education. Neither of these reviews identified content in relation to social work practice with children. To assess whether this may have changed in the past decade one of the authors of this paper (Zufferey), conducted a comprehensive search for articles relating to children, in Australian journals such as *Australian Social Work* (1997-2007) and *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* (2000-2006), and in international journals such as the *Journal of Social Work Education* (1990-2007) and *Social Work Education* (1999-2007).

A few articles were identified which covered the following topics: working with the children of parents with a mental illness or children's mental health (Tanner, 2000; LeCroy and Ryan, 1993; Cowling et al, 2006); the effects of family violence on children (Voisin, 2007; Cooley and Frazer, 2006; Baldry, Bratel and Breckenridge, 2006); teaching law for child-centred practice (Duncan, Piper and Warren-Adamson, 2003); the marginalisation of children in the legal process (Sheehan, 2003); children's rights and representations in social work research (Cousins and Milner, 2007); and the voices and perspectives of children about their parent's separation (Bagshaw, 2007). There were only three articles which were focused specifically on children and social work education: one on teaching skills for direct practice with children (Goodyer, 2007); another on social work student experiences of direct work with children (Hafford-Letchfield and Spatcher, 2007); and the third on the use of child abuse enquiries in education (Corby and Cox, 2000).

The lack of attention to children in social work education has been observed in Australia and internationally. Healy and Meagher (2007) administered a telephone survey to 208 child welfare practitioners and senior workers in child and family welfare agencies working in two Australian States, as part of a three year international comparative study of child welfare workforces in Australia, England and Sweden. Two main barriers to the education of social workers for this field of practice were identified: that the social work profession has been ambivalent about the social control aspects of child welfare practice; and the tensions between

generic social work approaches and the specialist knowledge required for child welfare work.

In their study of Australian and Norwegian social work education Clare and Mevik (2008) also found that children are rarely the focus, and recommended that children be seen in their own right as complex and competent citizens within the professional education of social workers.

In the United States, deficits in professional education in relation to child protection have been identified across several disciplines, as in Australia. Smith (2006) examined the knowledge and understanding of child maltreatment in a sample of 332 graduate and undergraduate students from a range of major disciplines, including 23 social workers. She concluded that, as a result of the lack of consensus on definitions of maltreatment, university curricula should focus on helping students to distinguish their personal beliefs from legal definitions of child maltreatment. Mullin and Canning (2006) also identified a serious lack of attention within US social work education to children or a consideration of their perspectives.

In the United Kingdom, Luckock et al (2006, 2007) and LeFevre et al (2008) examined how communication skills for working with children and young people are taught and assessed in social work education. They found that social work students could complete their training without ever having learned about working with children or having worked with children. Similarly, it is quite possible in Australia for a social work student to complete their course without learning how to speak to children, or ever having spoken to a child during their fieldwork placements.

In the UK Munro (1998) examined 'social work errors' in 45 public child protection inquiries (1973-1994) and more recently Balen and Masson (2008) wrote about the Victoria Climbe Inquiry. These authors argue that because there is a wide gap between the knowledge required to 'safeguard' children and that provided via social work training, child abuse inquiry reports could be useful educational tools.

## **PROMISING INNOVATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

There have been several encouraging initiatives to address the deficits mentioned. Multidisciplinary learning partnerships between universities and community child welfare services feature strongly in the limited literature on initiatives aimed at improving social work education in relation to the needs of children.

In the US, Whipple et al (2006) describe an evaluation of the Child Welfare Learning Collaborative in Michigan, which involved Catholic Social Services/St Vincent Homes, University Outreach Partnerships and the School of Social Work. They found that the biggest factor contributing to the successful implementation of the program was that it was agency rather than university driven. The evaluation suggested that best practice approaches to the education of social work students incorporate the practice wisdom of practitioners as well as academic expertise (Whipple et al, 2006).

In Canada, the University of North British Columbia and the Ministry of Children and Family Development entered into a partnership to develop and deliver an online Bachelor of Social Work subject with a child welfare specialisation (Bellefeuille and Schmidt, 2006). This initiative developed as a response to a recommendation of the *Report of the Gove Inquiry into Child Protection* (1995) that social work programs should increase their child protection content (Bellefeuille and Schmidt, 2006).

## **SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK CURRICULA**

In 2007 the Australian Centre for Child Protection and the Australian Association of Social Workers undertook a national survey of Australian social work courses in relation to child protection content (Arnold, Maio-Taddeo, Scott and Zufferey, 2008). The survey was part of a major three-phase initiative involving the professions of teaching; social work; nursing and midwifery; psychology; and medicine. In partnership with the relevant national professional bodies, the Australian Centre for Child Protection maps the child protection-related content in

current qualifying courses across Australia during the first phase of the initiative. The second phase involves supporting the relevant professional bodies and educator groups to develop and promote profession-specific standards or guidelines for child protection-related content in qualifying courses. The third phase supports the development of additional curricula materials to assist educators to meet such standards or guidelines.

The survey of social work courses found that child protection received some coverage in most Australian social work courses but that this was very limited, sometimes restricted to electives, and that it varied greatly between universities.

Among the key findings were:

- The survey of Australian social work courses received responses from 21 of the 24 universities offering an undergraduate qualifying social work program in 2007 (currently there are 26 accredited Schools of Social Work).
- Of the 29 social work education programs about which these 21 participating universities provided information, the vast majority (93%) offered some form of child protection-related content, either as a 'discrete' stand-alone course/unit or 'integrated' within a course. Even though there was exposure to child protection-related content this did not necessarily mean that child well being or talking to children was focused on.
- While most programs did offer some child protection-related content, the time devoted to it was limited. The majority of students were taught discrete child protection-related content for as little as 8 hours up to a maximum of the equivalent of 1 week.
- Twenty social work education programs (69% of the sample) reported at least one discrete child protection course and 19 programs (66%) reported integrated child protection-related course content. Twelve social work programs (41%) offered both discrete and integrated child protection-related content. More programs reported offering discrete

child protection content at the graduate and postgraduate levels than at the undergraduate level.

- Discrete courses/units at undergraduate level were more likely to be offered only as electives. Discrete courses/units at graduate and postgraduate levels were more likely to be offered as part of the core curriculum. Nearly all integrated child protection-related content was offered within undergraduate programs, and the majority of the integrated courses were part of the core curriculum.
- Incidental teaching about risk factors linked to child protection (not considered to be integrated or discrete) refers to risk factors and proactive strategies associated with child abuse and neglect that may be addressed incidentally throughout a program but not documented in course curriculum guidelines.
- The risk factors and proactive strategies that were more likely to be linked to child protection related to ‘family/environmental issues’ i.e. domestic/family violence; family/community factors such as mental health, substance abuse, and poverty; and parental neglect. Child protection was also most likely to be taught within course content in relation to ‘professional leadership roles and responsibilities’.
- In contrast, the risk factors and proactive strategies least likely to be taught in social work programs related to ‘child-centred issues’ such as child development and child emotional/behavioural problems.

The survey was unable to gain a clear picture of the opportunities that fieldwork placements provided for students to have direct contact with children or be exposed to child-related issues.

Following the survey, a roundtable forum was held at the University of Melbourne in early 2008 to brief social work educators and other key national stakeholders about the findings and to explore their implications. Representatives from 21 Schools of Social Work, the Australian Association of Social Workers and child welfare practitioners and policy makers participated. An additional consultation was held with the Australian Council of Heads of School of Social Work.

Discussion at the roundtable forum identified facilitators of and barriers to enhancing content on child protection and wellbeing in social work courses (Arnold, Maio-Taddeo, Scott and Zufferey, 2008).

## **BARRIERS**

- An overcrowded generic curriculum.
- A lack of consistency in delivery and approach to child protection across Australia and differences in State/Territory child welfare policies, legislation, context and service delivery
- Narrow perceptions of ‘child protection’ to the detriment of focusing on ‘child wellbeing’ and children’s participation.
- Negative media perceptions of social workers and child protection.
- Limited evidence-based research in the area.
- Poor communication between stakeholders across Australia.
- Academic workplace constraints such as high workloads.

## **FACILITATORS**

- The coming together of social work schools, the Australian Association of Social Workers and employing bodies through the roundtable and speaking with a collective voice.
- The potential of field placements and workplace learning.
- A growing recognition of the need to re-professionalise the sector.
- Ongoing professional development opportunities.
- An increase in evidence-based research to inform practice and policy.
- The development of networked and accessible resources.
- A shared commitment to exploring and improving current approaches.

## **DEVELOPING CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR CHILD WELLBEING AND PROTECTION**

The Australian Association of Social Workers has taken a number of steps to address the issues explored in this paper. In 2006 the

Association established a National Child Protection Working Party to support: a more balanced and reflective public debate on issues of child protection; improved services and practice standards; an increased focus on prevention; the promotion of professional social work within child protection work; the promotion of a national agenda regarding child protection; and the provision of continuing professional education opportunities for social workers regarding child protection to be offered in conjunction with schools of social work and statutory agencies where possible (AASW National Bulletin, 2007).

The AASW also decided to include child protection curriculum content as one of four prescribed requirements in the revised AASW Education and Accreditation Standards (March 2008) alongside mental health, indigenous and cross cultural content. The AASW Board has recently established the National Committee for Child Protection Practice to further promote child protection and child wellbeing issues for social workers.

In 2008 a project to develop social work curriculum standards was co-funded by the AASW and the Australian Centre for Child Protection, and undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University. The resulting document, *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards, Statement of Specific Child Wellbeing and Protection Curriculum Content for Social Work Qualifying Courses*, outlines the core social work values, knowledge and skills for entry level social workers in relation to child wellbeing and child protection regardless of agency setting. This document was modelled on the structure of the recently developed mental health standards for social work courses. The AASW ratified and released the child wellbeing and child protection standards document in December 2008 (see Appendix) along with the related Educational Resources Package ([www.aasw.asn.au](http://www.aasw.asn.au)).

Currently the Australian Centre for Child Protection, the AASW and the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy of the University of South Australia are working together to promote the implementation of these standards, to provide opportunities for social work educators to

exchange ideas on the inclusion of children's voices in social work education, and to identify and develop promising innovations in curricula materials to support this. A national 'Towards a Child Inclusive Curricula in Social Work Education' Forum was held at Monash University on the 30th September 2009 was well attended by over 30 social work educators and practitioners Australia wide. A number of collaborative initiatives for strengthening the child wellbeing and child protection content in social work education were planned.

## **CONCLUSION**

The social work profession is taking significant steps towards the development of a more child-inclusive curriculum for social work education. This is happening at the same time as attempts are being made to increase content relating to mental health, Indigenous and cross cultural issues in social work courses. To increase content relating to these areas without sacrificing other important material, and to do so especially within the emerging two year qualifying MSW programs, will require commitment and care.

How best to engage social work students with a more child-inclusive curricula remains an important question to be addressed, as does the question 'under what conditions can student learning in relation to children be transferred to practice?'

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We wish to thank Professor Bob Lonne, Kandie Allen-Kelly and Donnie Martin from the AASW, and Associate Professor Morag McArthur, Dr Gail Winkworth and Lorraine Thomson from the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University for their collaboration on the projects outlined in this paper. We are also grateful to our colleagues at the Australian Centre for Child Protection; Dr Lynette Arnold, Carmel Maio-Taddeo, Dr Fiona Arney, Kerry Lewig, Dr Angela Crettenden, Elizabeth Oram and Janet Kent who collaborated on the social work curriculum mapping survey. Last but not least we thank the Australian Council of Heads of School of Social Work for

their willingness to engage with the challenges of making social work education more child-inclusive.

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## **AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND ACCREDITATION STANDARDS**

Statement of specific child wellbeing and protection curriculum content for social work qualifying courses (AASW, December 2008), p.4-7.

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### **Specific Child Wellbeing And Protection Curriculum Content**

The curriculum content described here encompasses the basic attitudes and values, knowledge and practice skills needed by an entry-level social worker in any practice setting to promote the wellbeing of children, young people, families, caregivers and to prevent or respond to child abuse and neglect.

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## **ATTITUDES, VALUES AND PRINCIPLES**

### **Human dignity and worth**

- 1.1** Respect for the rights of children and young people as citizens, including the right to be informed about and to participate in decisions affecting them, and the right to protection from harm.
- 1.2** Respect for the rights and responsibilities of mothers, fathers, family and community members to make informed decisions and to participate in decision-making processes about their own lives and those of children and young people in their care.
- 1.3** Respect for families as the foundation of the social, cultural, and emotional wellbeing for children and for the needs of children and families for supportive and stable relationships with each other and with informal and formal supports in their communities.
- 1.4** Commitment to ensure the maximum autonomy possible for children, mothers, fathers and families, to provide information to children, mothers, fathers and families and to ensure that principles of natural justice apply, including where there is a concern for a child's safety.

**1.5** Respect for the knowledge of all involved in partnerships that provide care to children, including foster carers, residential carers, birth and extended family members and statutory workers.

**1.6** Respect for the cultural and spiritual needs of children.

## **Social justice**

**2.1** Respect for cultural diversity, including respect for Indigenous kinship and family values and child-rearing practices, and those of other cultural groups.

**2.2** Commitment to empowering children, mothers, fathers, families, individuals, groups and communities to access resources, choices and opportunities and to participate in the development of relevant policies and programs.

**2.3** Awareness of power imbalances where issues of child abuse and neglect are raised, including an awareness of the social worker's own power practices.

**2.4** Commitment to oppose discriminatory practices with children and families.

**2.5** Commitment to child-sensitive practice, recognising that unless there is sensitivity to children's needs, children and parenting responsibilities can be invisible in adult services.

**2.6** Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principles.

## **Service to humanity**

**3.1** Promotion of the wellbeing of children and families takes precedence over the social worker's personal positions about family life or child rearing.

## **Integrity, honesty, reliability and impartiality**

**4.1** When recording information about children, mothers, fathers, families and other significant adults, demonstrate impartiality, accuracy,

inclusivity, cultural sensitivity and show a capacity to distinguish what is observed and described from opinion.

### **Competence**

**5.1** A commitment to practitioner's life-long learning in the areas of child wellbeing and cultural knowledge, regardless of field of practice.

**5.2** A commitment to practitioner's active participation in reflective supervision and reflective practice.

### **Ethical decision making**

**6.1** Application of AASW Code of Ethics (1999) guidelines for ethical decision making in situations involving children. This encompasses principled decision making and actions that are transparent, research- and evidence-informed and which place the needs and wellbeing of children at the centre in the light of their developmental level and capacity for decision making.

**6.2** Ability to articulate a decision-making process that takes account of the tensions between ethical principles when the interests of children, young people, their families and the broader community may conflict.

**6.3** Reflective and reflexive practice that allows heightened awareness of personal and professional values and assumptions that influence assessment and intervention in the lives of children and families.

## **KNOWLEDGE FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

### **Children in the context of their families and communities**

Beginning knowledge of:

**1.1** Child development, including ecological models of human development, children's developmental needs, transitional milestones and life cycle phases, definitions and indicators of the wellbeing of children and young people within a sociological framework that encompasses the social construction of childhood and family life and ethnocentric understandings.

**1.2** Parent–child attachment and significant other attachments, the protective effects of secure attachment relationships and the effects of disruptions to primary carer–child attachment and of multiple changes of primary carers.

**1.3** The diversity of family structures, dynamics, systems and community networks with particular attention to cultural variations in family and community relationships and child care practices, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices.

**1.4** Different types of child neglect and abuse, the way in which definitions of child neglect and abuse are shaped by culture and history, their interactions, manifestations, prevalence, incidence, causality, and effects including the effects on children’s brain development of long-term neglect or traumatic injury, and the signs of maltreatment which may present in a range of practice settings.

**1.5** Current evidence about protective and risk factors relating to child wellbeing and child maltreatment at individual, family and community levels. This includes the impact of parental alcohol and other drugs misuse and parental mental health problems on children’s wellbeing, a critical understanding of domestic and family violence, and the protective factors associated with children’s resilience including enduring relationships and positive community connections.

**1.6** The process of colonisation and intergenerational trauma experienced by families, children and young people due to colonisation and/or past child welfare practices, in particular, the Stolen Generations, adults who grew up in alternative care, and children who have experienced detention.

### **Legislative, policy and service contexts of social work practice with children and families**

Beginning knowledge of:

**2.1** The history and contemporary debates in social philosophy and policy relating to the wellbeing of children and families, including the history of child protection policy in Australia, with particular mention

of the history of child protection interventions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and social work's role in the implementation of these policies.

**2.2** Structural and multiple disadvantages in Australia, including poverty and its impacts on children, families and communities.

**2.3** Contemporary service frameworks for children and families such as the continuum of services from promotion of wellbeing to prevention of abuse and neglect to treatment services and the ways in which services along this continuum match the multiple needs of children and families.

**2.4** The range of services and organisations which are relevant to the wellbeing of children and families (e.g. health, education, including schools, housing, alcohol and other drug, income support, refugee), Commonwealth and State responsibilities, the role of statutory child protection services and the Family Court, the relationships between services, the likely existence of protocols between services, and the local services and networks available to support mothers, fathers and families.

**2.5** The legal context for social work practice in child protection in Australia, and the legal and ethical responsibilities of a social worker under the legislative frameworks that protect children, including the reporting responsibilities of social workers under the relevant legislation in the State or Territory in which the social work educational program is located or in the case of distance education programs, in the State or Territory in which the student is located.

**2.6** Contemporary frameworks that enshrine the rights of children including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### **Social work practice with children and families**

Beginning knowledge of:

**3.1** Critical practice frameworks that enable the application of a range of theories of social work practice to situations where the social worker encounters children, regardless of agency context, and which may include child-centred and family-focused practice, strengths-based and solution-

focused approaches, anti-oppressive practice, group work, community development, research and policy responses.

**3.2** Assessment frameworks for assessing the psychosocial needs of children and families, including contemporary evidence about the use and relevance of risk and protective factors in assessment frameworks.

**3.3** Practice with involuntary clients, including power imbalances and strategies to respectfully promote engagement with children, young people and adults who do not wish to be clients.

**3.4** Culturally appropriate and respectful ways of working with children and families from diverse cultures, including Indigenous families and the application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principles.

**3.5** Strategies that reduce risk factors to children at a family level and strategies that support mothers, fathers and families within the context of the promotion of wellbeing, prevention and tertiary continuum of services.

**3.6** The role of social workers in building and disseminating evidence about what works in practice and policy to promote the wellbeing of children and families and strategies to access specific information about children, families and communities as required, for example, cultural knowledge.

## **SKILLS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Newly graduated social workers in all practice contexts need beginning skills to:

**1.** Appropriately transfer generic social work skills and apply social work practice theory when encountering children within their families and communities.

**2.** Identify the roles of the specific organisations in which they work and the relationships of those organisations to other parts of the service

system that encounter children, young people and families, including protocols and referral pathways.

- 3.** Engage with, listen to and build respectful trusting relationships with mothers and fathers, maintaining awareness that English may be a second language for many Australians, including some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- 4.** Conduct a purposeful conversation with a child or young person, respecting their rights as a citizen and using developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies in order to understand the child or young person's perspective on their life.
- 5.** Work ethically with professional authority while acknowledging and mediating the inevitable power disparity between worker and clients.
- 6.** Undertake a holistic family assessment, in collaboration with the family, child and kinship networks where possible, which includes attention to the wellbeing of children and which builds on a critical understanding of the family's ecological and socio-economic contexts.
- 7.** Develop a respectful working partnership with children, young people, mothers, fathers, families, caregivers and other significant adults, to form a shared plan to address identified issues.
- 8.** Undertake advocacy, conflict resolution, problem solving, planning, meeting facilitation and crisis intervention as required to promote the wellbeing and safety of children.
- 9.** Collaborate effectively and respectfully with other professions and services/organisations, recognising that families may have multiple needs requiring the involvement of multiple organisations.
- 10.** Make effective referrals/connections of families and children and caregivers with other services and community resources.
- 11.** Write clearly and keep accurate records that distinguish what is observed and described from opinion.

**12.** Seek and utilise current evidence about good practice with children and families, and collect and use practice data to inform policy that promotes the wellbeing of children.

**13.** Work in a culturally safe way with children, families and communities and seek training to enable culturally safe practices. This will include implementing knowledge of culturally respectful ways of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and adhering to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principles.

**14.** Think critically and critically reflect on practice, identifying the knowledge used, the worker's own feelings and values about child wellbeing and families, and utilising supervision to explore how these may influence practice.

**15.** Practise self protection and self care. This involves being sufficiently self aware to manage one's own wellbeing in the work context and to make appropriate use of supervision and other available supports.

### 3. Teaching critical thinking in social work education: a literature review

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**ABSTRACT**

While there has been considerable discussion about reflective practice and evidence-based practice in social work education over the last decade, less specific attention has been paid to critical thinking. There are generic critical thinking skills and attitudes, however the research suggests critical thinking should be taught in both explicit and disciplinary-specific ways. This article reviews the literature on teaching critical thinking in social work and human services education. In doing so, it outlines educational strategies that have been used to promote critical thinking in social work, and argues that understanding the client or consumer perspective is a vital part of the critical thinking process.

**INTRODUCTION**

Critical thinking is on the agenda for professionals and higher education institutions as a means to equip students and practitioners to grapple

is foundational to a university education, and is a prerequisite for both reflective and evidence-based practice. While critical thinking is seen as a valuable generic skill in higher education, with an expectation that it is transferable between disciplines and beyond university into the workforce, it has been argued that elements of critical thinking should be taught in a disciplinary-specific way (Moore 2004).

This article reviews the literature on critical thinking in social work education and aims to assist social work and human services educators with curriculum planning and review. It was undertaken as the first phase of an ongoing project to examine two inter-related areas of policy and pedagogical concern in social work education: the application of critical thinking skills and the incorporation of client or consumer perspectives in the generation and utilisation of knowledge. It was motivated by the desire to improve our own curricula and teaching practice, particularly in enhancing the capacity of students to critically analyse and use different forms of knowledge. The present paper defines critical thinking and examines models and strategies for promoting critical thinking in social work education. It reviews how critical thinking is taught generically and in other professional disciplines and considers how this might be useful in social work and human services. Particular attention is given to the importance of recognising and valuing the client perspective when thinking through issues and making decisions. The challenges of measuring the critical thinking capacities of students are also examined.

## **SEARCH STRATEGY FOR LITERATURE REVIEW**

The first step in undertaking the literature review was to locate relevant articles from computerised databases relevant to social work, education, nursing and social sciences, including ProQuest, Informit, Sage Journals Online, ERIC, Wiley Interscience and OVID. The search used the key words 'critical thinking' in combination with 'social work', 'teach\*', 'skills' and 'curricul\*'. Tables of contents and abstract searches for the key words 'critical thinking' were conducted in relevant journals such as *Social Work Education*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *Learning in Health and Social Care*, *British Journal of Social Work*,

*Australian Social Work, Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education and Higher Education Research and Development.* Text books by key researchers were accessed. Internet sites, such as those linked to higher education (for example. [www.swap.ac.uk](http://www.swap.ac.uk) and <http://rationale.austhink.com/>) were searched. We also accessed general critical thinking websites (for example, [www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org) and [www.insightassessment.com](http://www.insightassessment.com)) that contain links to standardised tests intended to measure critical thinking.

## **WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?**

Critical thinking has its roots in critical theory and the concept of scepticism - the questioning of the source of truthfulness and the reliability of knowledge (Brechin, Brown and Eby 2000). Although the focus on critical thinking has intensified in the past decade, researchers as far back as Dewey in 1933 (cited in Walker 2004) argued that possession of knowledge was no guarantee for the ability to think well. Open-mindedness, wholeheartedness and responsibility were seen as important traits for developing the habit of thinking critically. Critical theory 'looks beneath the surface of knowledge and reason ... in order to see how that knowledge and reason is distorted in an unequal and exploitative society, and in doing so, to point the way to less distorted forms of knowledge and reason' (Porter 1998 cited in Brechin et al. 2000, p.56). Drawing on critical theory for social work practice implies a focus on the structural causes of individual 'problems', promoting client rights, challenging inequality, and recognising patterned disadvantages related to, for example, gender, race, sexuality and class. As 'social problems' are conceptualised as socially constructed rather than as fixed realities, the capacity to interrogate underlying political ideologies and discourses is essential to the critical thinking endeavour for social work.

Critical thinking is thinking with a purpose (Facione 2006). Ennis (2002, no page number) defines it as 'reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do' (our emphasis). Gambrill (2006) describes it as thinking in a purposeful way using an array of standards such as clarity, fairness, precision, accuracy, logic and relevancy.

Some see critical thinking as a natural attribute, like intelligence, others see it as a set of skills that can be learned and followed. The more contemporary view is that critical thinking is a process that includes both cognitive and affective domains of reasoning (Facione 2006; McPeck 1981; Gambrell 2006; Ennis 1996). Accordingly, critical thinking is a combination of attributes and skills, which can be enhanced through an improved understanding of its centrality to ethically and intellectually rigorous practice, whether in medicine, nursing, social work, sports coaching or teaching history (Ennis 1996; Facione 2006). This adds a moral and ethical dimension to critical thinking; the purpose or reasoning behind critical thinking is seen as the development of a better world, one that is humane and just. Thus, critical thinking is not just an intellectual exercise in problem solving but has a value base that aims to improve human functioning, safety, health and emotional well-being (Gambrell 2005; Mason 2007). It is about sense-making as much as it is about problem-solving.

Conceptualising critical thinking as a composite of knowledge, skills and attitudes means that knowing our own limitations, the stereotypes we hold, our cultural biases and our own personal style of thinking is essential. Emotion - your own feelings, beliefs and values - is an important influence on the critical thinking process (Brookfield 1987; Gambrell 2005, 2006). For social workers, this means being aware of one's own values, beliefs and prejudices and also being able to empathise with, listen to, and incorporate the views and voices of the people with whom one works. According to Facione (2006), the personal dispositions or characteristics of open-mindedness, respect, tolerance and empathy are as important for critical thinking as the cognitive skills of intellectual curiosity, integrity and discipline. Critical thinking needs to include knowledge of oneself, as well as the ability to understand the bigger picture by learning from people from different cultures, backgrounds and worldviews (Mason 2007). Self-knowledge is positioned as one of the three forms of knowledge central to critical thinking, the others being content knowledge and performance knowledge (Nickerson 1986, cited in Gambrell 2006, p.105).

There is general agreement about a range of personal characteristics and skills that critical thinkers should have at their disposal. These include being guided by intellectual standards; supportive of intellectual integrity, perseverance, reason and self-discipline; and able to identify logical connections between elements of thought and the problem. Critical thinkers also need to be able to self-assess and self-improve, to accept multiple legitimate points of view and to seek weaknesses and limitations within their own position. They also need to be aware of how thinking can be distorted and prejudiced, which can lead to injustice and unfairness (Paul, cited in Gambrell 2006, p.102). These are skills that university students are expected to have gained through previous study, and to further develop in tertiary studies. They clearly have particular relevance for social work education, given the centrality of social justice values to the profession. There is also consensus about the higher-order cognitive skills required for critical thinking, such as:

- Interpretation: comprehending, expressing meaning and significance
- Analysis: identifying inferential relationships between concepts, examining ideas and detecting and analysing arguments
- Evaluation: assessing claims and arguments for credibility
- Inference: identifying and securing information needed to draw conclusions; querying evidence, imagining alternatives and drawing conclusions
- Explanation: stating and justifying the results of one's reasoning, including contextual considerations
- Self-regulation: monitoring and reflecting on one's reasoning and correcting one's reasoning when necessary

(Fonteyn, cited in Brechin et al. 2000, p.59)

From this literature, a definition of critical thinking relevant to social work has been developed (Table 1). This definition conceptualises critical thinking as a combination of skills and attitudes for social work practice.

**Table 1: (below and opposite) Critical thinking skills and attitudes for social workers - a summary from the literature**

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## Skills

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### **Analyse**

- Examine information in detail
- Prioritise important information
- Identify underpinning political ideologies, assumptions, values and biases (eg. role of state, position of client, professional authority, gender roles, cultural and racial stereotypes, tropes of deserving and undeserving)

### **Think Creatively**

- Problematised 'taken for granted' issues
- Consider different, 'non-standard' possibilities and approaches

### **Problem Solve**

- Dismantle problems and goals into constituent parts
- Formulate plausible hypotheses and predictions
- Articulate rationale for decisions (make defensible decisions)

### **Reason**

- Reduce errors in thinking or logical flaws
- Make decisions precise, clear, balanced (not vague)
- Integrate information to identify necessary conclusions
- Make judgments deliberate and purposeful

### **Evaluate**

- Recognise micro and macro contextual factors that impact upon issues – will it work in this situation? Will it work for this individual, family or community?
  - Assess whether information is relevant to purpose
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# Attitudes

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## **Open Minded**

- Be willing to revise judgements
- Recognise multiple perspectives – all may be correct
- Recognise client or consumer perspectives

## **Flexible**

- Accept provisional status of knowledge, tolerate ambiguity, value criticism, be non-defensive
- Make thinking sceptical (neither cynical or gullible) – exercise caution in accepting new truths or generalisations

## **Persistent**

- Seek necessary information and try to be well-informed
- Actively seek evidence to support and negate your own view and explore alternatives

## **Interpersonal Sensitivity**

- Respect opinions of others
- Respect inter-disciplinary knowledge
- Understand own biases

## **Cultural Sensitivity**

- Be non-discriminatory
- Respect differences of class, culture, sexuality and gender

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(Brechin, Brown and Eby 2000; Ennis 1996; Facione 2006; Gambrill 2006)

## TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING

In the past there have been two distinct approaches to teaching critical thinking: discipline-specific and generic. The generalist view is that critical thinking skills can be applied across subject domains and that such skills can be learned independently of a specific discipline. Paul (2004) argues that the skills approach to critical thinking will not lead to a deep understanding of critical thinking. Substantive learning means comprehension and insight, and encouraging students to discover as well as process information. In this approach, students should be asking questions like *'How do I know this? What is this based upon? What does this imply and presuppose? What explains this, connects to it, leads from it? How am I viewing it?'* (Paul 2004). Counter-posed with the generic skills approach is the position that critical thinking is not simply a matter of applying a set of skills, but requires a thorough knowledge and familiarity with the subject matter (Davies 2006; Moore 2004). Jones (2007) argues that evidence for the transferability of critical thinking capability appears limited and that conceptualising critical thinking as a set of practical cognitive skills fails to acknowledge the culturally-established structures of meaning that are discipline-specific. She examined the epistemic cultures of economics and history and found that the different perceptions of these disciplines influenced the way critical thinking was conceptualised. History as a discipline embraces debate and different views, whereas economics looks for stability and likens itself to a science. Critical thinking is embedded in the study of history, is modelled in lectures, practised in tutorials and assessed in essay tasks. However, in economics critical thinking is more an application of logic, and the teaching of critical thinking is based around understanding of economic theory, models and tools (Jones 2007, p.92). This subject-specific versus subject-neutral debate has lessened in recent years with an acceptance that it is a combination of both subject knowledge and thinking skills, which makes a critical thinker. Mason (2007, p.334) offers an integrated conception of critical thinking, listing five components as crucial: the skills of critical reasoning; a critical attitude; a moral orientation; knowledge of the concepts of critical reasoning; and knowledge of a particular discipline.

Strategies for teaching critical thinking have been classified as general, infusion, immersion and mixed (Abrami et al. 2008; Ennis 1989). The general approach is where critical thinking is taught in a specific educational unit, with the idea that the skills are transferable across field and contexts. In infusion and immersion approaches, disciplinary content is more important. The infusion approach is where critical thinking objectives are made specific and embedded in all teaching. The immersion approach encourages students to think critically but does not make the principles explicit. The mixed approach involves critical thinking taught as an independent track within a specific content unit. According to a meta-analysis of the efficacy of different methods of teaching critical thinking skills, mixed instructional approaches that combine both content knowledge and explicit critical thinking instruction significantly outperform all other types of instruction (Abrami et al. 2008). Immersion methods significantly underperform. Moderate effects were found for the general and infusion approaches. They also found that pedagogy matters and recommended that teachers receive training for teaching critical thinking skills. They conclude that critical thinking requirements should be a clear and important part of course design and that 'developing critical thinking skills separately and then applying them to course content explicitly work best' (Abrami et al. 2008, p.1121).

### **CLIENT PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL 'SENSE MAKING'**

Applying professional social work knowledge is never simply technical: practitioners must engage with the viewpoint of the person or community they are working with and undertake purposeful analysis before taking action to effect positive change. Yet despite social work's social justice aspirations there is evidence of poor relationships between professionals and clients, with clients in many studies reporting negatively upon their contact with social workers (Beresford 2005). Social movements and client advocacy organisations have challenged social work and social welfare arrangements about narrow conceptions of need, fragmentation of services, and an emphasis on charity rather than rights to service provision. Following a major government review of social

work education in the UK, all university social work programs must now include mechanisms for client and consumer input in a range of areas including admission, curriculum and assessment. These initiatives have not yet been taken up in social work education in Australia. Nevertheless, access to tertiary education has widened and programs to promote equity in tertiary education have impacted upon the student population. Social work students come from diverse backgrounds, often with personal experiences of being a 'client' or consumer of welfare services. Teaching that includes client and carer perspectives helps to break down the construction of clients as 'other', and also assists students to be able to critically reflect upon their own situations, so they do not project their own experiences and feelings onto others in similar circumstances.

One aspect of critical thinking that is especially relevant to social work is the capacity to weigh up competing knowledge claims and predict likely effectiveness in the context of an individual's life circumstances. Practitioners must ask more than 'what works', the question is what will work for this particular client or community at this time. In doing so, social workers take into account client ideas or theories about the nature of their problem or situation. Therefore, an educational structure is required within the social work curriculum that facilitates and elaborates the client voice. As Gould (2006, p.112) argues, the 'expertise of those who have lived experience ... contributes a crucial dimension to the knowledge base'. It follows that efforts to improve the critical thinking skills of social work students need to be based on participatory practices that reflect the knowledge, values, beliefs and experiences of service consumers, as well as the formal knowledge base.

## **TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

The capacity to apply critical thinking skills would appear to be both essential and logical for social workers. Social work students are taught from their first year at university to look at the 'person in the environment' or the 'issue in context'; in other words to look at problems with a broad and open lens, one that is able to connect private problems to the wider social context. Additionally they are taught to examine their

own assumptions and prejudices, and begin to apply non-judgmental standards to their assessments and evaluations. This requires the 'higher order thinking' and 'deep learning' encouraged in university education. However, research suggests that when making decisions in the hurly-burly of practice, social workers have difficulty with critical thinking processes. Rosen et al. (1995), Osmond and O'Connor (2004) and Drury-Hudson (1999) found that social workers had difficulty articulating the basis of their practice and did not appear to be critically reflecting on practice. Kee and Bickle (2004, p. 609) argued, 'our thinking processes are often either: (i) hasty, with insufficient investment in deep processing or examination of alternatives; (ii) narrow, with a failure to challenge assumptions or consider other points of view; (iii) fuzzy or imprecise and prone to conflation; or (iv) sprawling or disorganized with a failure to conclude'. In examining child abuse enquiry reports, Munro (1996, p.793) found that social workers were slow to revise their judgments, needed more acceptance of their fallibility, and willingness to consider that their judgments and decisions may be wrong. These are problems common to all human reasoning and cannot be attributed solely to individual intellectual deficiencies: organisational factors such as workload, supervision and resourcing impact on the capacity to make good decisions (Munro 2002). Nevertheless, individuals can learn to think more critically and systematically, and this is imperative for social workers making decisions that profoundly affect the lives of others.

The capacity to clearly articulate the basis for decision-making is at the heart of critical thinking. In the social work literature, critical thinking is most often discussed as an element of evidence-based practice. Evidence-based practice is related critical thinking, but is distinct. Gambrill (2006, p.121) states 'critical thinking encourages us to reflect on how we think and why we hold certain beliefs', and may require us to accept conclusions that may not fit with our beliefs or preferences or usual practice methods. Whereas evidence-based practice tends to focus on deciding upon interventions, critical thinking is present at every stage of the social work process: assessment, planning, intervening and reflecting. Moreover, critical thinking is an essential ingredient of many

different social work practice frameworks, regardless of one's stance on evidence-based practice. Critical thinking, critical reflection and critical action have been conceptualised as distinct but inter-related components of a 'critical practice' model (Barnett 1997; Brechin et al. 2000). Critical thinking involves the evaluation and development of different types of knowledge. Critical reflection is the self awareness requirement, comprising the capacity to identify one's own values, effective use of self, and the ability to question personal assumptions and values. Critical action is the taking action part, including effective use of skills, working with difference, effectively negotiating institutional realities, and engaging with service users and others to provide access to resources (Brechin et al. 2000, Fook, 1996).

There would appear to be an expectation that when students reach tertiary level, they already have an understanding of what critical thinking entails. But students need to be exposed to a range of teaching methods in order to nurture the critical thinking process (Walker 2004). There are models and techniques for teaching social work students critical thinking skills described in the literature. For example, an intensive critical thinking unit introduced at the beginning of the final year of the social work undergraduate program was found to be effective at the University of Newcastle, Australia (Plath, English, Connors and Beveridge 1999). During the 32-hour (4 week) unit, students worked through a range of class exercises designed to enhance critical thinking, argument and debating skills. The evaluation of the unit concluded that explicit and concentrated instruction on critical thinking assisted students to improve their critical thinking abilities and to identify the principles of critical thinking. The authors stressed the importance of the timing of the critical thinking intensive, suggesting that the improvement in measured reasoning ability 'may have been built on the previous three years of 'immersion' in a curriculum which encouraged and valued critical reasoning without providing explicit instruction' (Plath et al. 1999, p.216).

Another example of explicit instruction for final year Australian social work students is given by Clare (2007) whose students were given two

clear assertions prior to undertaking a subject unit: first, that social workers need to be expert *learners*, able to respond to the immediacy of situations with which they deal; and secondly, that the capacity for reflective practice and critical thinking are central requirements for safe practice. Introducing dialogical components (as opposed to didactic teaching methods) such as small group exercises and seminars using case studies and the requirement to produce four written 'learning summaries', Clare (2007, p.439) found that students developed an improved capacity to go beyond description to 'deep learning', a more 'synthetic and creative level, continuously integrating ... new and old knowledge ... and sufficiently 'in control' of the material to merge their own sense-making with that of others, using texts as a basis for reviewing and expanding their 'owned' knowledge and understanding'. This is consistent with the finding that the instructional techniques of class discussions and certain types of writing assignments are associated with student gains in critical thinking skills (Tsui 2002).

Mumm and Kersting (1997) discuss methods for teaching critical thinking at both undergraduate and graduate level. At the undergraduate level they suggest introducing critical thinking as part of content on social work values. Providing examples of value dilemmas (for example, 'when is it acceptable to break client confidentiality?') exposes students to the idea that there is often no prescribed answer to a problem and that a critical process is necessary to develop a desirable course of action. The process requires students to articulate their rationale to their classmates for the decisions they choose. Munro (2002) argues that reasoning skills are on a continuum - from intuitive and empathetic to analytic and critical - and that both types of decision-making skills can be developed for effective social work practice. Gibbs and Gambrill (1996) provide a wide range of class exercises to promote critical thinking and evidence-based practice. These include exercises to identify 'common errors of reasoning' such as vagueness, reliance on testimonials or a few case examples, and recognising fads. Other strategies included role plays, video recordings, journalling while on practice placement, using case assessments to link theory with the rationale for decision-making

and the application of different theories to different client groups. Gambrell (2006) also points out how the social, economic, political and organisational context influences critical thinking. Consistent with this, understanding the politics of concepts such as ‘consumer’ and ‘case management’ and major theories (such as liberalism, feminism and post-modernism) is considered necessary for guiding students towards unpacking assumptions and asking pertinent questions (Jones-Devitt and Smith 2007). Brown and Rutter (2006) also provide a range of tools such as a checklist for appraising theories and a guide to developing a critical style of essay-writing, practical resources that would be useful across the curriculum.

## **OTHER DISCIPLINES**

Critical thinking is also on the agenda in other disciplines. For example, in medicine, the term ‘critical thinking’ was first used in the General Medical Council’s 1993 edition of ‘Tomorrow’s Doctors’ (Kee and Bickle 2004). Since then, evidence-based practice, problem-based learning and critical thinking have featured in nursing and medical training, with evaluations of problem-based learning being generally positive in developing higher-order, independent thinking (Simpson and Courtney 2002). According to Kee and Bickle (2004, p.610) medical students and practitioners need to be guided to avoid perceptual biases, to reframe problems, to seek descriptions from multiple reference points, and to search for neglected information – particularly information that is contrary to the proposition. This negates ‘confirmation bias’ whereby people tend to seek information that confirms rather than refutes hypotheses or assessments.

Evidence points to the importance of teaching clinicians to ‘chunk’ knowledge into meaningful parts; thereby encouraging students to recognise that life is complex and non-linear, and that small changes in initial conditions may lead to large and unpredictable effects (Kee and Bickle 2004). Visual tools and diagrammatic techniques were found to be useful for teaching medical students critical thinking. Examples include tree diagrams, thinking maps, concept maps, casual flow diagrams and

using the 'theory of constraints' (distinguishing between necessary and sufficient) (Kee and Bickle 2004, p. 612). They argue that while check lists are helpful, they should not be used slavishly and that critical thinking involves asking questions, many that maybe unique to the particular situation.

Balen and White (2007) report on their success in teaching critical thinking skills to students in health and social care courses in the UK. They developed and piloted a range of teaching strategies and materials, aimed at developing the capacity to explore and question information, as well as one's own actions and preconceptions. They use a layering approach (or series of levels) that increases student skills over a period of years. First-year students start with workshops and activities such as lateral thinking puzzles and working with traditional narratives or stories. Level two involves dialogic engagement whereby students are encouraged to engage in more complex public policy debates which requires researching a topic, forming opinions, discussion in small groups and development of action plans. Level three workshops involve working on scenarios or discipline specific cases (problem-based learning). Through this process, the teaching team aims to achieve the 'critical' level, that is, where students incorporate ethical considerations into their practice (Balen and White 2007, p.204).

### **HOW IS CRITICAL THINKING MEASURED?**

If we aim to graduate students with critical thinking skills, how do we know if students have them, and that they are improving? Over the years, standardised measures of critical thinking have been developed (Bernard et al. 2008). They have been used in a variety of settings, including nursing, educational programs, and teaching clinical skills. The most well-known and commonly used measures are the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (1980), the California Critical Thinking Skills Tests (1990), and the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test (1985). These standardised tests, usually devised around a set of subscales or skills (such as the ability to recognise assumptions, make deductions, interpret and evaluate), generally aim to assess the cognitive dimensions

of critical thinking. The tests endeavour to cover the main components of critical thinking through the use of multi-choice questions on everyday situations and then offer a short answer or essay section of a more subject-specific nature through the reading of a selected piece of text. They all test generic critical thinking skills or dispositions. Bernard et al (2008, p.20) identifies some reliability problems with critical thinking skills testing, and posits that while it is desirable to teach students to think critically, because the dimensions of critical thinking overlap (for example, creativity, problem-solving, intelligence, meta-cognition and self-regulation), specificity in measurement is problematic.

It may also be difficult to sustain the interest of social work students in these reasonably lengthy tests that have little apparent relevance to the human services. In contrast, Gibbs and Gambrill (1996) provide a teaching evaluation form specifically for social work students to assess how well critical thinking is taught, but the validity and reliability of the instrument is untested. There is debate in relation to critical thinking testing about whether critical thinking should be measured by generic, de-contextualised tests or by having the test questions related to the subject matter of the course. This contextual viewpoint assumes that a person cannot 'think critically' about an issue without some relevant knowledge base. It seems that university students do improve their critical thinking skills over the duration of their studies. A review of studies of critical thinking gains by college students concluded that when controlling for incoming ability and maturational effect, most studies found a significant gain in critical thinking from first to final year (Renaud and Murray 2008). However, pinpointing exactly how this is achieved remains unclear. The majority of studies that report gains in students' critical thinking due to teaching and instructional variables measure their critical thinking with subject-specific questions rather than general or de-contextualised questions (Renaud and Murray 2008).

There is also debate regarding whether critical thinking is best measured in an open-ended essay format compared to a closed multiple choice answer format (Renaud and Murray 2008). The drawbacks to essay tests include the time it takes to score, and that the scoring is less reliable

compared to objective testing via multi-choice questions. This brings the discussion back to the challenge posed by the 'generic skills' versus 'contextual knowledge' debate mentioned earlier. The challenge for researchers and developers of critical thinking skills testing appears to be finding a way of testing that is not too complex or time consuming yet can measure both the cognitive skills and the attitudinal components of critical thinking.

## **CONCLUSION**

Educators use a variety of techniques to promote critical thinking and problem solving, yet the capacity, disposition or interest to think critically is not developed in all students. This article aims to assist social work and human services educators to develop and evaluate strategies for teaching students to critically think and act. Improving critical thinking provides the foundation for improved processes of reflection and action. We suggest that social work students must have a clear understanding of what critical thinking means, the general skills of critical thinking, plus their centrality to the social work process. As indicated, mixed instructional approaches that combine specific instruction about critical thinking, with application to course or unit content, appear to be the most effective. Students need guidance to apply generic and transferable critical thinking skills to social work practice scenarios. Tasks that require students to 'critically analyse' or 'critically discuss' issues should be accompanied by explicit and detailed guidance about the meaning of these terms. Students can learn how to develop both organisational supports and individual cognitive routines to guard against making mistakes. They can be introduced to tools and techniques for logical decision-making in various fields of human service practice. Students should routinely be asked to consider alternative assessment and intervention decisions, and in particular to identify client theories, perspectives or expectations. Breaking down the elements of critical thinking challenges us to consider how we can teach critical thinking more plainly and precisely: how we can help students develop the full complement of skills and attitudes required.

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## 4. More on empathy: Considering students' responses and Edith Stein's framework for a fuller, transformative empathy

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### **ABSTRACT**

Empathy is a very familiar term in the helping and counselling literature. Commonly it is understood to mean perceiving accurately the emotions of another person, or 'walking a mile in another person's shoes'. It is considered to be crucial to any successful therapeutic engagement. How to teach and learn empathy seems much less clear in the literature. In the project described here the concept of empathy was explored through a comprehensive literature review (previously published in *Advances*), and subsequently, through a phenomenological inquiry with second year social work and welfare students at a regional Australian University. In separate skills workshops for internal and distance education students, participants were guided to define, engage with, and reflect upon the concept of empathy. Overall, the findings suggest that students' empathy predominantly included the language of *seeing, understanding,*

the therapeutic engagement itself, it is suggested here that embracing a fuller empathy may have significant, transformative potential. However, teaching and learning empathy may take more time, and students may need more comprehensive instruction than currently may be undertaken, particularly for positive engagement between non-Indigenous practitioners and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

## INTRODUCTION

*Empathy fosters critical and creative thinking and its enhancement should be adopted as an important educational goal* (Gallo 1994 ,p. 44).

Empathy generally is understood as accurately perceiving the experiences and emotions of another person. Rogers (1956/1992), the often cited American psychologist and passionate proponent of a client-centred approach, describes empathy as sensing the client's private world 'as if' it were your own but without ever losing the 'as if' quality (1956/1992, p.832). Titchener (1924) is attributed with coining the term 'empathy' in 1909, defining it as a process of humanising objects and 'of reading or feeling ourselves into them' (Duan and Hill 1996 p.261; Hankammer et al 2006). Other early, significant contributors to theorising about empathy in the last century include Lipps (cited in Duan and Hill 1996), and Stein (Stein 1917, translated 1989) who offered a complex theory of empathy as a three-stage process of deep engagement. Kohut (1959, cited in Arnold 2005 p.32) also contributed to the development of the concept, calling for understanding of 'a person's reality and their interpretation of that reality' as part of an empathic engagement. Empathy is considered to be a core skill in social work and welfare education and practice, although how to teach and learn empathy is not readily apparent in the literature, particularly in a cross-cultural Australian context. In this paper I describe my action to contribute to the teaching and learning of empathy, including contemplating implications for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY

Western concepts of 'empathy' and 'sympathy' do not appear to be uniformly defined in the literature. Trevithick (2005, p.156) and Boulton (1987, p.271), in social work literature, define empathy as *feeling with* the client, rather than *feeling for* the client (sympathy). The opposite appears to be declared by Hojat et al (2002, p.1563) in medical literature, where 'empathic' practitioners share their *understanding*, while sympathetic practitioners share their *emotions (feeling with)*. Elsewhere in the health/medical literature, Haslam (2007, p.381) notes that it is not only a compassionate 'appreciation of the patient's emotions' but an 'expression of that awareness to the patient' that constitutes empathy (Stepien and Baernstein, cited in Haslam 2007). Trevithick (citing Kadushin 1997) confirms that empathy 'goes beyond sympathy (passive understanding) to convey a willingness 'to enter imaginatively into the inner life of someone else' (2005, p. 154).

Trevithick (2005, p.154) also cites the work of Dominelli (2002) who claims 'empathy goes beyond placing oneself in another's shoes by daring to put them on and wear them for a while'. Trevithick asks 'whether it is actually possible to experience another's reality in this way', and concludes 'it clearly is not' (p.154). Brazier (1993) identifies drawing explicit differences between empathy and sympathy as a contemporary notion, and recalls that in the past a definition of empathy included sympathy. Offering further support for more symbiotic and less mutually exclusive notions of empathy and sympathy, Davis (2003) appears to suggest that sympathy may be a linked emotional response that is expressed, in a linear sense, after empathy not instead of it.

Much of the literature associates empathy with positive therapeutic outcomes, while we are warned that a loss of empathy or conversely too close an identification with another's experiences can lead to self-protective disengagement, cynicism, perceived therapy failure, burnout and compassion fatigue (Figley 2002). Eckermann, Dowd, Chong, Nixon, Gray, and Johnson, (2006 p.113) state that empathy and sympathy are closely related and 'usages in most cultures overlap'. Sympathy 'basically means sharing another's feeling' while empathy,

they state, 'is often portrayed as walking a mile in another person's shoes', referring to the familiar adage with its origins in the experiences of African American slaves (Boulton 1987 p.269, Davis 2003, Eckermann et al 2006, p.113). Other terms used in relation to empathy in the literature include imagination, intuition, compassion, and intimacy (Dowling 2007; Gallo 1994; Hugman 2005).

## RESEARCH

While there has been considerable research on the topic of empathy, our understanding of empathy still seems limited, and recent research on teaching and learning empathy at a tertiary level is not evident in the literature (Duan and Hill 1996; Hankammer et al 2006). Batson et al (cited in Brewer & Crano 2000) undertook extensive research in the area of empathy and motivation, and concluded that people feel empathy and want to help for many reasons including when they are similar to the person needing help, when they see severe distress in the facial expression of the other person, if they actually feel distress at the person's circumstances, if the person in need is in an identified 'needy' group or, if the helper thinks they will see the results of their help. Research by Batson et al (cited in Brewer and Crano 2000 p.298) also found that people will be more motivated to empathise if they are asked to imagine how they might feel if it was them. They concluded also that empathy is a skill and that helpers can *learn* empathy.

However, Davis' (2003) research suggests that empathy is more than a skill. Indeed, Davis resists the '1970's flavour of empathy' in counselling literature, identifying *that* empathy as a misinterpretation of Carl Rogers' work that 'turned empathy into a skill that one could master and be graded on for levels of accuracy in repeating back what was just said' (p. 269). Davis (2003 p. 271) calls for a 'fuller' form of empathy to be taught, as outlined by Stein (1917, translated 1989), with Davis seeing it as a unique, powerful and complex process, and an immediate 'grasping of what is here and now in the other' in a way that facilitates healing.

A range of factors have been identified in research that may influence perception of a successful empathic engagement, these include whether

more or less self disclosure was used by the counsellor, the counselling style used, the timing of the empathy expressed, the context of the empathy expressed, and whether valuing of differences between the client and the counsellor was evident (Duan and Hill 1996).

Recent research focusing on empathy in an Australian context appears to be minimal, with work by Pedersen, Beven, Walker, and Griffiths (2004) being one exception. Their research predominantly examined negative attitudes towards Indigenous Australians, but they also looked at collective guilt and empathy. They conclude 'that interventions that manage to induce empathy will likely also produce reductions in prejudice... (and) racism' (p.235/247).

### **CRITIQUES OF EMPATHY**

A critique of empathy includes that 'empathy' may mirror the social norms and the dominant ideology of the community (only certain groups *deserve* empathy), and it may ignore social, historical, cultural, gender, spiritual and political positioning. Whether empathy is 'given' may be determined by, or undermined by, helpers' past experiences, and empathy may not be elicited at all if the experience seems outside what the helper can imagine (Stein 1917, translated 1989; Gair 2008; Haslam 2007, Pearson 2008; Rogers 1952/1992).

Thinking beyond a humanist approach, Fook (1993), Allan (2003), Mullally (2007) and Jessup and Rogerson (1999) all seek to extend personal empathy from our current conceptualisation. For these authors a critical approach would embrace a more 'structural empathy' that could promote a collective analysis, and be used as an analytic tool to uncover overlooked political inequalities. Equally, a 'post-structural empathy' would identify the importance of hearing each unique, individual story within the constructed landscape. For Stein (1917, translated 1989) and Davis (2003) there is a necessary spiritual component to empathy. Lather (2009) questions whether the commonly understood act of empathy is legitimate if the listener must be able to understand and relate to the circumstances before giving empathy, rather than just expressing empathy based on the story heard.

When working across cultures, and in particular, when non-Indigenous workers are working with Indigenous peoples, Clark (2000) argues it is extremely presumptuous to believe we can spontaneously empathise with a person who has experienced a totally different history and culture. Similarly, Bryant and Clark (2006), and Pearson (2008), argue that what is needed is 'historical empathy', that goes beyond emotive empathy to cognitively acknowledge history in its own context for Indigenous peoples.

While educators may be encouraged to facilitate empathy in students at all levels of schooling - primary, secondary and tertiary- to advance a broader ethical and social empathy, it is not clear from the literature how empathy actually is taught or learned (see further Gair 2008). The research described here represents a small contribution to the teaching and learning of empathy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This inquiry into 'empathy' was approached in an innovative, focused, theoretical and practical way. In particular the project was informed by a blend of reflective, critical and phenomenological thinking (Pease 2009, Creswell 2007, Davis 2003, Fook 1993, Fook 1999, Schutz 1973). Davis (2003 p.269) identifies that phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that assumes human beings have 'the capacity to reflect on experience in great detail' and analyse and describe their experiences so that deeper elements of the experience can be 'exposed'. The research question for this project was: How do students define and perceive of their empathic responses in the learning of empathy? The aims of the project were: to explore with social work and welfare students their conceptual understanding and definitions of empathy; to provide students with information/exercises to further reflect on empathy; and to use the findings to inform curriculum development in social welfare education.

In seeking to answer the research question and operationalise the aims, in separate skills workshops, one for internal students and one for distance education students, participants were asked to ponder, define, engage with, and reflect on the concept of empathy. Students also were asked,

in a summary way, to evaluate their learning. A final sample of thirty-eight second-year social work and welfare students participated in the study. No identifying information was requested from the participants. On this occasion I was a guest lecturer to both groups, however I have been involved in teaching this skills subject for more than 10 years.

Beginning the process, I explained to students that in addition to engaging in a familiar class session, I sought to use our class exercises as data for curriculum research and development, having received ethics approval as part of an envisaged larger, cross-disciplinary research project on empathy. Students were given information sheets that explained that they could 'opt into' the research at the completion of the class. After previously receiving standard materials on skills development including information on empathy, at the beginning of this workshop students were asked to write a definition of empathy as a part of the workshop exercises. Students then were given comprehensive information about empathy and the state of play regarding historical and contemporary empathy research. Next they were given four written scenarios. The scenarios were chosen for the range of sensitive topics, the gender and cultural background of main characters, and their easy availability. The scenarios previously had been used in a successful workshop with practitioners by this author. The four scenarios were: a published statement from Aboriginal leader Charles Perkins about his grief over past atrocities and, consequently, the meaning of Australia Day for him; a published mother/daughter scenario highlighting the daughter's conversation with the mother over her role in the forced placement of the daughter's baby for adoption; a segment of qualitative data from a published suicide study illuminating a mother's story surrounding her part in the suicide of her son; and a segment of a transcribed ABC radio interview with a police whistleblower who feared for his life and the safety of his family. Students were asked to read and reflect on whether they felt empathy for characters in the scenarios and what was their explanation, or their meaning-making, of their responses.

Finally, students were asked to communicate in writing their reflections on their learning about empathy at the end of this workshop. They were invited to share their written definitions, empathic responses to scenarios,

and their critical learning reflections with their peers in the larger group throughout the workshop. Of the larger classes, only students willing to participate in the research submitted their tutorial exercises at the end of the workshops (n=38). The submitted tutorial exercises were analysed using a grounded approach to theme identification applied to students' written comments (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). While it may be considered a limitation that students were learning 'empathy' by reading a scenario rather than being able to listen to the voices of scenario characters, the use of vignettes and scenarios is an accepted and very common teaching tool in social welfare education.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Defining empathy**

Empathy, as noted earlier is often portrayed as walking a mile in another person's shoes (Boulton 1987, Davis 2003, Eckermann 2006). Twenty participants (20), or over 50% (n=38), made specific reference to this familiar adage. Quotes below exemplify many of the definitions offered by students at the beginning of the workshop:

*'Empathy is being able to understand something that people are going through - to walk in someone else's shoes'* (external student #3)

*'It is to step into one's shoes and walk their life, feel their feel, think their think- walk beside them'* (internal student #5).

*'It's about being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes'*  
(external student #10).

Other students defined empathy with quite similar sentiments, even if they did not use the exact phrase, for example:

*'The helpee trying to put themselves in the situation of the victim'*  
(external student #20).

All of these responses appear to echo the words of Geldard and Geldard (2005), who identify empathy as 'having a togetherness with the client ...going on a journey with clients, listening with sensitivity, matching their every move...walking beside the client' (p.18).

## **The language of seeing, understanding, imagining and feeling**

Brazier (1993) writes that empathy involves the use of the following faculties: cognitive (*I understand*), perceptual (*I can see*), feeling (*I can feel*), imaginative (*I use my imagination*) and creative (*I can engage with you in the composition of the story*). These elements are evident to varying degrees in the students' definitions, although the 'creative' is less evident. The use of the words *understanding* or *relating to* were the words most commonly used by students (approx 40%) somewhere in their definitions or comments to explain empathy:

*Having an understanding of someone's experience* (internal student #5).

*Being able to relate to someone else's situation* (internal student #8).

*A feeling of understanding the feelings and emotions of another person* (external #16).

Approximately one third (33%) of students used the terms *imagine* or *imagining* when defining empathy or explaining their use of it:

*To put aside our own beliefs, values, to imagine what it must be like for them* (external student #18).

*Imagining yourself in another person's shoes* (internal student #11).

Fewer students drew on the language of *seeing* or *insight*:

*Empathy is the ability to see through another one's eyes* (external student #2).

*Being able to look at some else's situation...to see the world as someone else sees it, to see why someone has behaved in a particular way* (external student #1).

However, students were much less likely to use the language of *feeling*, with only a minority of students using this term in their definitions:

*Empathy is being able to feel what another person is experiencing* (external student #6).

*Understanding their situations in life and their problems, feeling their emotions at the time* (internal student #6).

This student perceived that empathy excluded feeling:

*'Empathy is emotionally identifying/connecting with another without actually feeling the emotion or becoming emotional'* (internal student #9).

### **Students who could empathise - ...' I could understand'**

The language of seeing, understanding, imagining, feeling and knowing is again evident in responses to scenarios. Many students nominated that they could empathise with the key players in the four scenarios, offering explanations like:

#### **Scenario one** (Charles Perkins):

*'I imagine myself in his position and I get angry at how many beliefs have been shattered'* (external student #18).

*'I can see a different perspective of Australia Day'* (external student #9).

#### **Scenario two** (baby removed for adoption):

*'I can empathise with Christine because I know personally how it feels to be forced to give up a child'* (external student #1).

*'I can empathise with this issue because no child should be taken away from their family'* (internal student #2).

#### **Scenario three** (mother /son suicide):

*'I understand guilt, not on the same scale but know what it feels like to have guilt'* (external student t#18).

*'I can imagine it would be extremely difficult'* (internal student #11).

#### **Scenario four** (whistleblower):

*'Fear and vulnerability is definitely something I can empathise with'* (internal student #12).

*'I found it difficult to get into, however on the surface I can imagine the horror of your family being threatened'* (external student #19).

Interestingly, the comment above appears to identify a ‘surface empathy’ also alluded to by Stein (1917, translated 1989) and Davis (2003), and discussed later in this paper.

### **Students who could not empathise - ‘... I have never been in that situation’**

Students mostly were able to offer explanations concerning why they could not empathise, or not *fully* empathise, for example:

#### **Scenario one** (Charles Perkins):

*I cannot empathise in a way that I know what he is going through although I do know about pain and loss* (external student #7).

*I personally have not experienced feeling the way Charles Perkins feels about Australia Day so I won't be able to empathise with him* (external student #5)

#### **Scenario two** (baby removed for adoption):

*Because I have never been in that situation* (internal student #5).

A second student made this comment:

*I would like to try to understand but I have no prior experience with this-in fact the opposite* (internal student #12).

#### **Scenario three** (mother /son suicide):

*I mostly reacted with shock at the mother's response to her son-this reaction detracts from my ability to truly empathise* (internal student #10).

A second student appear to suggest a ‘divided’ empathy:

*Yes professionally and no personally; very difficult to have empathy for her* (external student #11).

#### **Scenario four** (whistleblower):

*I don't know- where does empathy fit?* (external student #24).

Another student identified a specific lack of experience as a barrier to empathy for this scenario:

*'I cannot empathise because I have never been in a situation where I feared for my safety'* (internal student # 3).

In total, twenty-three students (60 % of the total number of students participating) indicated or identified that they could not empathise with at least one of the scenarios, and five students could not empathise with more than one. Of the 23, several students explained they could not empathise easily with a written scenario, they needed more information, or they needed the stimulus of facial expressions to feel empathy, the latter reminiscent of Batson et al's research noted above (cited in Brewer and Crano 2000). However, the majority of students attributed their inability to empathise to having no experience of the situation. Specifically, ten students could not empathise with scenario one, seven students could not empathise with scenario two, nor six with scenario three, or four with scenario four. At least five students, across the scenarios, identified that they could partially empathise with a scenario, somewhat reminiscent of the words of O'Connor, Wilson and Setterlund (1997 p.95) who identify a concept of 'partial empathy', although these authors go on to define it as an 'excitement which comes from total identification with another's experiences' while 'true empathy', they continue, is ... 'sharing the pain and confusion of another person's emotional... conflicts' (1997 p.95).

Finally, students were asked at the close of the workshop to document if their thinking about empathy had changed? Twenty-nine students, or over 75% (n=38) responded that their understanding of empathy had expanded or transformed, seven students did not answer the question, and two students wrote that their view of empathy 'had not changed'. The comments below illustrate the range of students' responses regarding changed thinking about empathy:

*'Empathy class has changed the simplistic initial belief I had about empathy, opened my eyes to the diversity and complexity of the term empathy. Empathy can be circumstantial, can be in various forms... something to be done according to the client, a two way street'* (internal student #12).

*'I have found a deeper insight into cultural empathy, stirred some thought. Empathy interests me in the interests of Indigenous helping'* (internal student #7)

*'...I understood empathy before but this lecture has broadened my views and challenges me to look beyond the problem'* (external student #17).

*'...the learner in the helping process. That resonated well with me and gave me a new perspective to the helping process...'* (external student #23)

*'Has my understanding changed? Yes... it isn't something that you can have when you go in, it is something that evolves over time, taking its cues from the others involved'* (internal student #8).

*'The lecture on empathy has changed the way I used to think about empathy. I feel like I now understand what it actually is'* (internal student #3).

*'Yes, I think empathy is confusing because when I really start to feel what someone else is feeling it can elicit strong emotions'* (external student #12).

Mezirow (2003, p.58-60) defines transformative learning as learning that transforms assumptions, expectations, meanings, reasoning or perspectives to make them more inclusive, open and reflective. Mezirow identifies that it includes learning skills, sensitivities, and insights, having an open mind, and learning to listen empathetically, through communicative learning.

## **DISCUSSION – PONDERING THE FINDINGS AND STEIN'S THEORY OF EMPATHY**

On a very positive note, empathy was not a foreign concept to any students in the workshops and all students were able to give an acceptable definition of empathy with very little prompting. Perhaps to be expected, but also needing to be addressed, no student noted structural, political, radical or spiritual notions or elements of empathy, rather all were reminiscent of individualistic, humanist notions of empathy as identified in the above literature review. Students were very familiar with the adage 'walk a mile in some else's shoes'.

Equally positive, students appeared to be very familiar with critically reflecting on their own emotional reactions, and they appeared to be well able to document, reflect on and share their feelings. Additionally, they were willing and able to critically reflect on their learning from this workshop. It was rewarding to see that after giving students information about empathy, space to reflect broadly on the concept, and the opportunity to share their reflections, students were keen to participate. Notwithstanding this result, the findings suggest there is still a lot of learning about empathy to be achieved.

Surprisingly, fewer students used *feeling* words when describing their empathy, and much more common were words of understanding, relating to, seeing, and perceiving. Such findings appear to provide evidence of a *thinking* or *intellectual* empathy, rather than a *feeling* empathy. Harris and Foreman-Peck (2004) identify that to inform our empathy we normally draw on our understandings of what people generally do and feel in such circumstances combined with our own personal life experiences of events. Yet, as noted above, many students admitted to being unable to feel empathy, reasoning that it was because they had not had the experience.

Of particular concern, of all the scenarios, the one with which the students had most difficulty empathising was scenario one (Charles Perkins). A curious finding, and one needing further exploration, is that more distance education students seemingly were unable to empathise with scenario one, although more internal students nominated that they were unable to empathise with other scenarios. One reasonable explanation could be that distance education students, being less familiar with teaching staff and classroom learning on campus, on this occasion thought 'the right answer' was that they could not know, understand or imagine how it feels to be an Aboriginal Australian man.

Nevertheless, that students considered they could not respond empathically across the scenarios because they had not experienced the same situations seems most concerning. In particular, it is very worrying when high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are using health and welfare services, while often it is non-Indigenous

graduates, who have not shared the same history or experiences, who are providing services. This finding may be somewhat reminiscent of the problems that have been identified with cultural awareness training where non-Indigenous participants gain information in a one-off way and 'are happy to do the training provided they do not have to change their practice... or their reflection on their ideas within their normal modes of operation' (Farrelly and Lumby 2009 p. 16). Perhaps pertinent here also, Wong (2004 p.2) suggests that a 'preponderance of multiple voices and discourses in critical social work ... may have drawn our attention away from ... *the significance of listening*' (*emphasis added*).

Regarding non-Indigenous helpers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the words of Carl Rogers appear to be relevant. Rogers (1978) when discussing power across groups of black and white peoples appears to call for more responsibility and awareness from non-Indigenous people regarding deeper listening:

*Rage needs to be heard. This does not mean that it just needs to be listened to. It needs to be accepted, taken in and understood empathically. While diatribe and accusations appear to be deliberate attempts to hurt whites - an act of catharsis to dissolve centuries of abuse, oppression, and injustice - the truth about rage is that it only dissolves when it is really heard and understood, without reservation* (Rogers 1978 p.133).

German philosopher Edith Stein (1917, translated in 1989) discusses 'the problem of empathy' as a concept with great, unrealised potential when stories are only engaged with at one (surface) level. Stein recommended an empathy encompassing comprehensive relatedness through a three-level, overlapping process. Stein explains this as (1) the emergence of the experience, (2) the fulfilling explication, and (3) the comprehensive objectification of the experience, where 'On the first and the third levels the representation exhibits the non-primordial parallel *to perception* and on the second level it exhibits the non-primordial parallel *to the having of the experience*' (p.10 *emphasis added*). That is, what Stein's work appears to identify is careful, objective listening, or tuning-in to the experience by the helper in stage one, using understanding and imagination *at the time, not having it before the time*, then progressing to where the listener

takes the story down deeper into their *subjective feeling state* briefly, before re-emerging in level 3 (*not withdrawing back to level one*) in the objective stance again, with insight informed by the subjective inner submergence. Stein appears to be speaking about actively finding the feeling, spirit and humanity in ourselves in level 2, not finding a similar experience from which to relate, which the students in the above quotations appeared to be looking for. Sympathy is considered to be a part of empathy in this model (Davis 2004, Dowling 2007). Davis (2003), building on Stein's work in a contemporary context identifies this kind of empathy as including a deep understanding and compassion for others, and for ourselves, that has a powerful potential to link individuals at spiritual and healing levels when taken to its full, unified, transcendent capacity. Davis (2003) and Stein (1917, translated in 1989) point to the potential transformative change, for helpers and clients, from this deeper, fuller, more spiritual empathy. The words of Brazier seem to provide a befitting final note: 'Empathy is more than a therapeutic skill. It is a central element in providing the essential basis for a truly human way of seeing the world and relating to others' (1993, p.9). Finding better ways to facilitate students' learning of this fuller, truly human empathy seems an imperative for social welfare educators preparing these students for working in an Australian context. The project described above, including the use of scenarios and the consideration of Stein's model, may offer some direction for how to enhance this process.

## **CONCLUSION**

In facilitating the learning of a fuller empathy there is very real potential to enhance our practice with individuals, families and communities. Equally, a reading of Edith Stein's three-level philosophical model suggests that further developing our 'empathy' has significant, broad-ranging transformative and healing potential. However, teaching and learning empathy may take more time and students may need more comprehensive, theoretical, philosophical and practical engagement with empathy than has been available to this point, at least to the student groups participating in this project. It seems most beneficial to use Stein's model, and relevant scenarios, to identify where students are struggling

with empathy, and to facilitate students' capacity to imagine, and to empathise with the plight of Australia's most disadvantaged groups. In particular, this deeper empathy may contribute to the development of more meaningful cross-cultural therapeutic engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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## 5. Same-sex couples in the 2006 Census: countering symbolic exclusion

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite three decades of social and policy changes gay, lesbian and other people with non-mainstream sexualities continue to experience social exclusion due to cultural discourses that construct them as 'abnormal' and 'inferior'. Inclusion in the national household and population census only commenced in 1996 and very little data has been publicly released to date. Inclusion in the Census has powerful symbolic meaning, destabilising definitions and creating the potential to counter non-recognition. This paper releases data from customised tables purchased from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. In a small way it seeks to contribute to activism for greater recognition of the lives of those marginalised by the cultural dominance of heterosexuality. It also seeks to increase practitioner, educator and student knowledge of same sex-couples. It is hoped that the expansion of information on the demographics of individuals, couples and families with marginalised

sexual identities will enable the development of more appropriate practice, policy and program responses.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite three decades of social and policy changes gay, lesbian and other people with non-mainstream sexualities continue to experience social exclusion due to cultural discourses that construct them as 'abnormal' and 'inferior'. Official forms that define relationships as 'male/female' or 'husband/wife' are profoundly 'othering' (West, 2007). Through cultural discursive practices such as these, non-heterosexual people experience stigma, non-recognition and disrespect (Ward 2009). In a small way this paper seeks to contribute to 'a politics of recognition' (Fraser 1997) through transformative remedies aimed at the 'revaluing of devalued identities so that they are accorded the recognition they need' (Ward 2009 p. 248).

In Australia the collection and release of data on same-sex couples commenced in 1996. Inclusion in the Census has powerful symbolic meaning, destabilising definitions and creating the potential to counter non-recognition. Countering the cultural dominance of heterosexuality has been an important theme in activism since the gay rights movement of the 1970's. The political and symbolic importance of inclusion in the Census was not lost on activist groups such as the Australian Coalition for Equality, whose campaign to increase 'naming' of same-sex relationships no doubt contributed to the large inter-Census increases.

This paper explores relevant literature and provides details of the research before providing 2006 Census data. It concludes with a discussion of the practice and policy implications that flow from the Census data.

## **LITERATURE**

Research suggests that the social marginalization and exclusion of non-heterosexual people is shaped by the interrelated processes of *heteronormativity* (the uncritical adoption of heterosexuality as an established norm or standard); *heterosexism* (the assumption that

heterosexuality is the only acceptable, viable, life option and hence superior, 'natural' and dominant); and *homophobia* (fear and loathing of those identifying as gay or lesbian) (Perlesz and McNair 2004, p. 130; Foreman and Quinlan 2007 p. 152-153).

The right to non-discrimination and the right to equality before the law are fundamental principles of international human rights law (HREOC 2006). Legislative reform which honours Australian's international human rights obligations has been slow in coming, with the previous Howard Government actively resisting calls for change (Kentlyn 2008). Recent law reforms at State and Commonwealth level are welcome as legislative discrimination reinforces wider societal discrimination which

*.. manifests through higher levels of homophobic violence, harassment and exclusion in all aspects of society for GLBT [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender] people ... While removing legislative discrimination will not result in the elimination of homophobia in Australian society, it will be influential in challenging the stigmatization that exists against GLBT people and same-sex relationships* (Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2006)

This exclusion and stigma appears widespread. The International Social Science Survey/Australia found in 1999 that 48% of Australian respondents believed homosexual behaviour was 'always wrong' (Kelley, 2001, p. 15). Remarkably this represented a decline of negative attitudes from the mid-1980's where the figure was 64%, or nearly two-thirds of respondents (Kelley 2001, p. 15). Australian attitudes to homosexuality were in 'sharp contrast' to other social issues with evidence of two 'peaks' or dichotomized views (Kelley 2001, p. 16).

Human service practitioners, of course, are not immune from these societal processes and cultural discursive practices. Whilst policies and ethical statements in the human services may be 'decidedly progressive and supportive,' research suggests that these 'policies are not effectively put into practice' (Tucker and Potocky-Tripodi 2006, p. 188). Social work and welfare education has a poor history in equipping students for future practice with gay and lesbian people. Camilleri and Ryan's (2006) study of social work students' attitudes towards homosexuality

also explored the inclusion of the topic within social work curriculum. Respondents in their study perceived the inclusion of homosexuality in course content was 'extremely minimal', with 72% of students stating that discussions on the topic of homosexuality had not taken place within the curriculum (2006, p. 299). Those that felt the topic was included noted this was mostly on an ad hoc basis and not part of core learning units. The experiences documented by Camilleri and Ryan (2006) are unlikely to be exceptional. Within the final 2-year professional program at the University of Sydney students receive only one specific lecture on gay and lesbian issues, within the Ageing unit

Research undertaken with social work students in Korea found class discussion of homosexuality was significantly associated with lower levels of homophobia (Lim & McNown Johnson 2001). The same study suggests that a variety of educational interventions, including individual guest speakers and speakers' panels, have been 'shown to have a positive influence on students' attitudes' (see also Cramer 1997; Foreman and Quinlan 2007). The value of one-off educational interventions, however, is challenged by Tucker & Potocky-Tripodi's (2006) review of educational programs in the United States which concluded

*It remains to be seen whether any short term interventions can create lasting shifts in attitudes that translate into behavioural changes toward LGB individuals. It seems likely that attitude shift is a cumulative process resulting from repeated exposure to consistent information that is deemed credible*  
(2006, p. 188)

An important goal of social work education must be to enable graduates to 'talk across lines' (Fraser and McMaster 2008, pp. 89-90), to genuinely understand people who may think, feel or act differently to oneself. Reflecting on experiences from the United Kingdom, Charnely and Langley argue 'this can only happen if such learning is actively promoted during social work training' (2007, p. 318).

Inclusive and supportive formal services play an important role in countering cultural and material exclusion, across the life cycle. Research highlights the difficulty many service systems have in responding

appropriately to those marginalised due to their sexuality, including in family services (Rawsthorne 2009), schools (Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus and Pitts 2006), health care (McNair et al. 2008) and aged care (Hughes 2007). This research indicates that for many people with marginalized sexual identities, interactions with institutions and systems are fraught with anxiety. Respectful professional practice has an important role to play in enabling access and appropriate services, providing ‘space for the exploration of alternative – not just dominant – constructions of gender and sexuality’ (Fraser and McMaster 2008, p. 90).

Practitioners, educators and students with an inadequate knowledge base of the real lives of gay men and lesbian women may be seen to be more ‘homo-ignorant’ than ‘homophobic’ (Mallon cited in Camilleri and Ryan 2006). This paper hopes to increase knowledge and, hence, recognition of the experiences of same-sex couples.

## **THE RESEARCH**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) undertakes a Census of Households & Population every five years. The aim of the Census is to accurately measure the number and key characteristics of people in Australia on Census night, and the dwellings in which they live. The Census also provides the characteristics of the Australian population and its housing within small geographic areas; and small population groups (ABS 2009).

Importantly, Census data is used to support the planning, administration, policy development and evaluation activities of governments and other users (ABS 2009). In the absence of population-based data, such as that collected through the Census, policy and programs are developed in a vacuum and may be informed by assumptions or stereotypes.

Since 1996 the ABS has released data gathered on same-sex de facto cohabiting couples. This information is identified by the sex and couple status of person 1 and person 2 in households. It is *not* data related to sexuality. It does not include single gay or lesbian individuals or same-sex couples who do not co-habit. There is no agreed estimate of the number

of all non-heterosexual people in Australia, although the Sex in Australia study (Grulich et al. 2003) found that 8.6% of women and 5.9% of men reported some homosexual sexual experience in their lives (2003, p. 155). In this way, the Census data is not inclusive of the larger non-heterosexual community although it does provide insight into the demographic profile of a subsection: same-sex co-habiting de facto couples.

The data presented in this paper was purchased as Customised Tables from the ABS in 2008 following considerable negotiations about the type and extent of data. Great care was taken by the ABS to ensure that no potentially identifying data was released, in accordance with their privacy and data management responsibilities.

For ease of language, this paper uses the terms 'same-sex couples' to mean those identified within the Census as co-habiting with a de facto of the same sex.

## **DATA FROM THE 2006 CENSUS**

### **Population estimates**

Over the past three Census periods there has been a significant increase in the number of same-sex couples identified. In the 1996 Census 10,214 same-sex couples were identified but by 2001 this had nearly doubled to 19,596 (Dale 2002). The 2006 Census saw a further increase to 25,606 same-sex couples. These large inter-Census increases suggests that the importance of cultural discursive practices (such as what constitutes 'a couple' or 'a family' in the Census) is not lost on same-sex couples or the broader non-heterosexual community.

Data from the 2006 Census identified slightly higher numbers of male same-sex couples (13,574 or 53%) than female same-sex couples (12,032 or 47%). The data below will be reported in relation to the total number of couples identified (25,606) or the total number of individuals within same-sex couples (51,212) in 2006, as appropriate. Given estimates derived from representative samples (Grulich et al. 2003) these figures are likely to be an under-estimate and likely to increase again in 2011.

## Where do same-sex couples live?

In excess of 80% of same-sex couples reside on the Eastern seaboard (Table 1). Smaller percentages of same-sex couples are spread across the other States and Territories. The small proportion of same-sex couples in Tasmania and the Northern Territory may result in these couples being quite vulnerable to prejudice and homophobia. Recent years in Tasmania has seen marked change (with decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1995 and the registration of the same-sex relationships with the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages in 2003). Accordingly, the number of same-sex couples identified by the Census more than trebled between 1996 (139) and 2006 (448).

**Table 1: Geographic distribution**

State/Territory	Same-sex couples (all)		Same-sex couples with dependent children (0-17 years)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Australian Capital Territory	629	2.5	70	3.1
New South Wales	10110	39.4	804	35.0
Northern Territory	225	0.9	25	1.1
Queensland	4298	16.8	434	18.9
South Australia	1494	5.8	156	6.8
Tasmania	448	1.7	56	2.4
Victoria	6552	25.6	547	23.8
Western Australia	1850	7.2	202	8.8
Total	25606	100	2294	100

Source: ABS Customised Tables

In those States with larger populations of same-sex couples on the Eastern seaboard, data is available on the geographic spread of same-sex couples. This indicates a strong focus on the major cities in these States, most notably in Victoria. This suggests human service workers on the Eastern seaboard capital cities are more likely to come into contact with same-sex couple clients. However, Table 1 also indicates that same-sex

couples with dependent children are spread more diversely than those without dependent children. Human service workers outside the capital cities need to be aware of the potential of having same-sex couples and families as clients, particularly given the prejudice and discrimination they may experience. Qualitative research (Rawsthorne 2008) highlights the vulnerability of same-sex female couples living outside locations with public same-sex communities:

Sue *[The community's response is] not so much condemning - it's just you've got to sort of keep away sort of - you've got to do your own thing.*

Kay *We don't go usually walking down the street hand in hand.*

Sue *That's something we never do.*

Kay *It's a country town.*

### **Same-sex couples with children**

Historically some gay and lesbian individuals have always parented. Over the past decade with increased access to artificial reproductive technologies and more pro-family attitudes within the non-heterosexual community, more and more same-sex couples are choosing to form families within same-sex relationships (McNair et al. 2002). Whilst there has been a growth in same-sex parented families they remain a minority within a minority. Census data indicates more lesbian couples had dependent children (16.7%) than gay couples (2%). Whilst parenthood renders lesbian women more 'intelligible' to others, they remain both marginal (due to their sexuality) and mainstream (due to their motherhood) (McNair et al. 2008, p. 93). Parenthood amongst male same-sex couples continues to create suspicion and discrimination (Lee 2008). Without widespread attitudinal change male same-sex couples who parent are likely to experience continued hostility. Educators have an important duty to challenge the linking of male homosexuality with paedophilia, which research suggests is deterring same-sex male couples from parenting (Lee 2008).

Table 2 indicates over half of same-sex couples with dependent children had only one child. It will be interesting to see in the next Census

whether the size of same-sex families follows the general population trend towards larger families.

The Census data indicates that same-sex male couples are more likely to have older children. It is possible that male same-sex families are formed with children from previous heterosexual relationships. Alternatively, it may be that the age difference reflects the slow and difficult process of fostering children (Lee 2008). Nearly 30% of lesbian couples had only young children, supporting anecdotal descriptions of a ‘gay baby boom’ within the lesbian community (Lindsay et al. 2006, p. 1060). In fact three quarters of children of lesbian couples were aged below 12 years of age. Qualitative research undertaken with lesbian parents with dependent children (Rawsthorne 2008) suggests that children’s ages may be an influential factor in experiences of discrimination and hostility. Those lesbian parents with high-school aged children identified adolescence as a very difficult time for their families with an increase in bullying and a greater reluctance to disclose their family form (Rawsthorne 2009, pp.53-54).

**Table 2: All same-sex couples with dependent children (0-17 years)**

<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
One child	1279	55.6
Two children	723	31.5
Three children	199	8.7
Four or more children	93	4.1

On the Eastern seaboard (where figures are available) same-sex couples with dependent children were more likely to live outside capital cities. In New South Wales, 36.8% of couples with dependent children lived outside Sydney compared to 20.5% of all same-sex couples. Likewise in Victoria, 20.8% of couples with dependent children lived outside Melbourne compared to 14.7% of all same-sex couples. A similar pattern was evident in Queensland although it is not as striking (41% compared to 39.4%).

### **Cultural diversity of individuals within same-sex couples**

1.5% of individual men and 1.8% of individual women within same-sex couples identified as being Indigenous. These proportions are slightly lower than the Indigenous population in the general community (2.5%). These figures may well be an under-estimate, reflecting a reluctance to identify as being in a same-sex couple. 'Coming out' for many Indigenous people remains difficult (Attorney General's Department 2003, p.3). Participants in focus groups held by the Attorney General's Department encountered homophobic abuse in the wider Indigenous community as well as racist attitudes and behaviours in non-Indigenous same-sex circles. One participant commented that *'you had to be very strong to survive as a gay man in country towns and communities'* (Attorney General's Department, 2003, p. 3).

Focusing on the individuals within couples, men were more likely to have been born in a non-English speaking country than females (15.5% compared to 9.1%). Just less than 15% of both the male and female individuals within same-sex couples were English-speaking migrants to Australia. In the general community, 14% of people were born in non-English speaking countries and 11% in English speaking countries (ABS 2006, 2070.0). This suggests that English-speaking migrants form a larger proportion of individuals within same-sex couples than the general community. It also suggests that there are fewer females within same-sex couples born in non-English speaking countries than in the general population.

Lesbian and gay men of Middle-Eastern background who participated in focus groups (Attorney General's Department 2003, p. 5) experienced strong levels of homophobia within their own families and communities. This could take forms such as exclusion, verbal abuse, assault, stalking, threats of violence and even death threats. In these communities, there was a stronger taboo against lesbianism than male homosexuality.

Practitioners, educators and students need to be aware of the 'multiplicity' of processes that can exclude individuals from full citizenship (Lister cited in Ward 2009, p. 239). Inclusive strategies

must address not only the social exclusion of non-heterosexuals but also those of non-dominant cultural identities.

### **Housing and income levels of same-sex couples**

The Census data indicates that male same-sex couples are more likely than female same-sex couples to own their homes outright and also more likely to be currently renting. Nearly half of all female same-sex couples were currently purchasing their own home. Both groups however had lower levels of home ownership or purchase than the general community (69.8%) and higher rates of renting (29.3%). It is possible that some couples resist the economic commitment of purchasing a home together and may actually own property separately.

**Table 3: Housing status of same-sex couples**

Housing status	Fully owned		Being purchased		Rented		Other tenure type		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Male	2322	17.1	5865	43.2	5233	38.5	154	1.1	13574	100
Female	1726	14.3	5960	49.5	4205	34.9	141	1.2	12032	100
Total	4048	15.7	11825	46.4	9438	36.7	295	1.1	25606	100

Household income levels are affected by life cycle, location and size (ABS 2006). Unfortunately, this level of detail is not available for same-sex couples, making interpretation of the income data in Table 4 difficult. The ABS (2006) defines 'higher income households' as those with weekly equivalised gross incomes of over \$1,077. Taking this definition, approximately two-thirds of same-sex couples are possibly 'higher income households'.

**Table 4: Weekly household income levels of same sex couples**

Weekly income	Less than \$800		\$801-1,199		\$1,200-\$1,699		\$1,700-\$2,499		\$2,500 or more		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Male	1067	7.9	1717	12.6	2207	16.2	3291	24.2	3907	28.8	13574	100
Female	1173	9.7	2010	16.7	2288	19.0	3035	25.2	2431	20.2	12032	100
Total	2240	8.8	3727	14.6	4495	17.6	6326	24.8	6338	24.5	25606	100

### Education and employment of individuals within same-sex couples

Lesbian women in same-sex couples had higher levels of education than their male counterparts, as the Table 5 below indicates. Over half of females in same-sex couples had a Bachelor degree or above. Males in same-sex couples were more likely to have completed only high school or obtained TAFE qualifications.

Additionally, individuals living in same-sex couple relationships in general have higher education levels than the general community. Nearly 70% of those within same-sex couples had non-school qualifications compared to 50% of the general community (ABS, 2006). Not only were same-sex couples more likely to have post-school qualifications they were also much more likely to have Bachelor and beyond education. Females in same-sex couples were nearly 3 times as likely to have a post-graduate degree and men more than twice as likely as the general community (5%). They were also more likely to have Bachelor degrees (19% in the general community).

**Table 5: Highest education levels of individuals within same-sex couples**

Sex	Year 12 or less		TAFE		Bachelor or diploma		Post-graduate		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Male	8822	32.5	3699	13.6	9156	33.7	3091	11.4	27154	100
Female	7283	30.3	2431	10.1	8889	36.9	3579	14.9	24058	100
Total	16105	31.4	6130	12	18045	35.2	6670	13.0	51212	100

Census data indicates very high levels of labour force participation among both male (89%) and female (89%) same-sex couples, which is significantly higher than the general community participation rate of 65% (although this fluctuates by age, location and gender) (ABS 2006). The high level of lesbian workforce participation reflects their experience of never assuming dependence on another income as well as high career and educational aspirations (Dunne 1998; Rawsthorne 2008). Workforce participation is not simply a necessity however but a psychological rejection of dependence, with lesbian parents readily integrating ‘professional’ and ‘parent’ identities (Rawsthorne and Costello 2009).

Same-sex couples follow the general community pattern with greater part-time work among females (Table 6). Unemployment rates among individuals within same-sex couples were two percentage points lower than the general community (3.2% compared to 5.2%) (Table 6 and ABS, 2006). Reflecting the higher education levels of same-sex couples, both males and females were more likely to list their occupation as ‘professionals’ than the general community (Table 7). Within the general community, professionals were also the largest occupation group, although at 20% less than individuals in same-sex couples (Table 7 and ABS 2006).

Table 8 below reveals the diversity of industry sectors in which individuals within same-sex couples were employed. Nearly one-fifth of both males and females provided information that was ‘not adequately described’, suggesting considerable flexibility in their employment arrangements.

**Table 6: Labour force status of individuals within same-sex couples**

Sex	Employed Full time		Employed Part time		Unemployed	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Male	17796	73.7	3544	14.7	772	3.2
Female	14077	66.0	4744	22.3	672	3.2
Total	31873	70	8288	18.5	1444	3.2

**Table 7: Occupations of individuals within same-sex couples**

Occupation	Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%
Managers	4506	16.6	3143	13.0
Professionals	7120	26.2	7122	29.6
Technicians and trades	2027	7.5	1246	5.2
Community & Personal Services	1958	7.2	2594	10.8
Clerical & Administration	3123	11.5	2995	12.4
Sales	1871	6.9	1183	4.9
Machine operators and drivers	499	1.8	499	2.1
Labourers	828	3.1	939	3.9

**Table 8: Industry sector of individuals within same-sex couples**

Industry sector	Males		Females	
	No.	%	No.	%
Agriculture/mining/electricity/ transport	1936	7.1	1291	5.4
Wholesale/retail/accommodation	4981	18.4	3181	13.2
Information media/financial/ rental	3930	14.5	2247	9.3
Professional, scientific and technical	1750	6.4	1210	5.0
Administrative and support services/public administration	3367	12.4	3650	15.2
Health care and social services	2505	9.2	4077	16.9
Manufacturing	1023	3.8	971	4.0
Education and Training/arts/ recreation	2425	8.9	3023	12.6
Not adequately described	5223	19.2	4409	18.3
Total	27140	100	24059	100

## DISCUSSION

Whilst most policy and program attention has been focused on material social exclusion, attention also needs to be paid to exclusion rooted in cultural/symbolic practices (Ward 2009, p. 239-240). The failure of the national census to capture and describe the experiences of people in same-sex relationships prior to 1996 led to 'inequitable social patterns of representation' (Ward 2009, p. 247), rendering 'other' lives outside dominant heterosexual patterns invisible. The inclusion and release of data that expands commonly understood definitions of what constitutes 'a couple' or 'a family' has the potential to significantly counter symbolic social exclusion.

This paper, through reporting details of customized tables purchased from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, reveals a diversity of experiences among same-sex couples which challenges homogenizing stereotypes. In all walks of life, human service workers are likely to engage with same-sex couples and individuals. In a small way the paper attempts to counter cultural discursive practices that render same-sex couples both inferior and invisible.

The majority of same-sex couples identified in the Census live on the Eastern seaboard, a similar settlement pattern to the general Australian community. Same-sex couples tend to be more likely to live in capital cities although this is not the case for those with dependent children. Same-sex couples live in all the States and Territories of Australia, with some of the smaller States experiencing very large increases in those identifying between the 1996 and the 2006 Censuses. Same-sex couples in these smaller States may experience greater discrimination and hostility due to their smaller numbers, which may be reflected in a reluctance to disclose. This suggests that policies and programs targeting same-sex people that are Sydney or Melbourne-centric are excluding a sizeable proportion of the community. Gay and lesbian programs need active outreach strategies to include those beyond the inner suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne. Non-metropolitan education providers need to ensure students graduate with an understanding of the significant challenges facing people in same-sex relationships within their communities.

Census data identified only small numbers of Indigenous and Culturally & Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people among same-sex couples. Previous research suggests Indigenous and CALD people with marginalised sexual identities experience discrimination from their cultural community as well as from the gay and lesbian community. The courage and resilience of Indigenous and CALD people with marginalised sexual identities needs to be acknowledged and supported by educators and practitioners. Policies and programs need to sensitively include the specific challenges they face.

The Census data suggests that many same-sex couples do not experience material exclusion, in terms of education, employment and income. Despite their discursive or symbolic exclusion from the mainstream of Australian society, many same-sex couples appear to be highly successful in mainstream terms. One interpretation of this 'mainstream success' is that it represents a protective strategy against the hostility and discrimination they experience. This success, drawing on postmodern understandings, can be conceptualised as a form of 'resistance' to cultural exclusion. Alternatively, it may be that without prescribed and limiting gender roles within relationships individuals are free to achieve their optimum. Clearly, ongoing qualitative research is required to explore how individuals within same-sex couples experience social exclusion.

In order to prevent graduates entering human services 'homo-ignorant,' the inclusion of the experiences of people with marginalised sexual identities in education curricula is a priority. This requires curricula to focus on lived experiences, to go beyond stereotypes enabling graduates to 'talk across the lines'. Educators need to provide opportunities for students and future practitioners to 'address the underlying cause of the exclusionary processes not just to ameliorate the impact' (Ward 2009, p. 248). This requires an understanding of material and cultural/symbolic social exclusion as well as the knowledge and skills to challenge social exclusion in all its guises.

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## 6. Is social work still a distinctive profession? Students, supervisors and educators reflect.

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**ABSTRACT**

Many social workers are finding themselves in practice settings where they are competing with an increasing number of allied professionals for recognition, service provision and funding. The rise in multi-functional approaches to the delivery of social and health care provisions as well as the gradual privatisation of welfare services is creating further challenges for social workers. This article reports on a research project undertaken with social work students, supervisors and educators in an Australian university which aimed to explore whether social work still had a distinctiveness in this climate and whether it was up to the challenges it was facing. While the sample is small and generalisations are limited, results from this study feed into concerns already identified

in the literature which suggest that social workers need to become more proactive in responding to the current challenges in order to keep their practice distinctive, as well as reflective, responsive and relevant.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since its early beginnings social work has marked its place in the social services industry where its practice theories and professional services have made important contributions to the quality of the welfare culture and the provision of social services in the many countries where it is practised (Hatton 2008; Parton 2004). A social worker's main role, over the years, has been primarily as an advocate and mediator between those individuals, groups and communities who are actually or potentially excluded from the mainstream of society (Parton 2004). However even as more and more courses open up across the developed and developing world and employment opportunities continue to rise, many scholars are also predicting social work's demise as a result of the pervasive influence of conservative politics, especially during the last several decades. Conservative politics in relation to welfare services believes that the individual rather than the collective and the market rather than the state are the most appropriate means for the provision of social services and for providing a safety net for community members, especially those members who are in distress or experiencing disadvantages in relation to the community as a whole. In fact conservative politics harbours real hostilities towards public-sector organisations and state-funded and state-supported social care provisions (Hatton 2008; Healy 2005; Lyons 1999), choosing instead to support and encourage their privatisation (Giacinto and Lankshear 1998). These changes are further complicated by the changing nature of the workplace such as the gradual introduction of short term contracts, high staff turnover and professional burnout as the stresses resulting from the changing climate have both a professional and personal impact (Noble 2004). These social and economic upheavals have resulted in a different social landscape where the nation state as the arbitrator and provider of welfare services has been severely diminished and hence the role and importance of social workers in the delivery and provision of these services has also changed in significance and importance.

In addition to the changes in service delivery and the reduced importance of social workers in the development and provision of welfare provisions, the frequent and at times vitriolic attack by the media on individual social workers' failings or their neglect or perceived mismanagement when children, the aged, youth, and people suffering from mental illness are abused, ignored, neglected or abandoned by their families or the community have resulted in further challenges to the professional integrity, standing and autonomy of social work (Doel and Best 2008; Dominelli 2002). The rise in the number of allied professions has also meant that social workers are working in new professional settings where other health practitioners are claiming similar knowledge and skills and sharing similar clients, all of which have subsequently resulted in the blurring of professional boundaries between these new professional groups.

In response, Doel and Best (2008) argue that in the current climate social work needs to reassert itself as a professional body and social workers need to celebrate their successes publically and to work together to build (rebuild?) broad public support for their activities and the civilizing force they offer to individuals.

So, after many years of welfare cutbacks and ideological attacks, social work finds itself at a cross-road and the question for social workers is whether their work and contribution is still regarded as a distinctive professional activity. In order to explore the question "is social work still a distinctive profession?", it is useful to take a deeper look at what factors have been influential in 'making' and what factors have been influential in 'unmaking' social work as a profession as well as explore with students, supervisors and educators their reflections about their concerns for social work, each of which may suggest ways for taking the debate forward.

## **THE MAKING OF A PROFESSION**

While the scholarly debate about what constitutes a profession and whether social work can classify itself as a profession continues without a definitive answer (see for example Malin 2000; Healy and Meagher 2004; Hugman 2005). To be recognised as a profession requires a strong educational and professional foundation, resourced by a rich tradition

in scholarship, research and pedagogy (Hugman 1996; Malin 2000). In the making of a profession the educational aspect provides intending social workers with the opportunity to explore the 'ought', the 'how', and the 'why' of the profession (Phelan 2001; Noble 2004), while the practice aspect demands engagement with philosophical and theoretical frameworks, clear notions of professional identity, values, ethics, intentions and history to inform its epistemology and its quest for ideas (Noble 2004; Dominelli 2002; 2005). Mostly embedded within a social justice and human rights framework social work's quest for ideas interlinks analyses of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and ability, power and privilege as theoretical underpinnings (Dominelli 2002, 2005; Allan, Pease and Briskman 2003; Briskman 2003; Mullaly 2007) resulting in social work having a rich scholarship from which to support the profession.

Professionally, Lyons (1999) suggests social work can also be distinguished by its practice methodology such as casework, group and family work, community development, community action, social policy and social research. These practice methods are used to mobilise mostly disadvantaged people's potential to empower themselves so as to reclaim and 'redefine whom they (themselves) are and how they want to act' (Parton 2002, p. 243) in the world from which they are mostly alienated, excluded and oppressed (Hatton 2008; Lyons 1999; Mullaly 2007). Many social workers are using critically informed and reflective practice methods to scrutinise their practice so that their work with clients relates to the new reality and demands of social work as well as to the increasing complexities of client's lives and the many issues they currently face (Napier & Fook 2005). A critically informed and reflective practice means that practitioners are more open to new ideas and are able to develop creative responses to them (Fook 2002). A critically informed and reflective practice also provides social workers with an informed social platform from which to respond to contemporary concerns and hopefully enable them to play an important role in setting future agendas about contemporary issues (Schön 1991; Napier and Fook 2005; Fook and Morley, 2005). Scholarly and practice-based research is also an important element of a profession and, along with the educational

project and practice domains, provides the legitimacy for its status as a profession (Hugman 1996; Malin 2000).

Not everyone in social work regards professional standing as important, arguing instead that association with the professional discourse aligns social work with concepts of exclusivity and elitism and these practices are at odds with social workers' commitment to social equity and participatory democracy (Bamford 1990; de Maria 1992; Mullaly 2007). This ambivalence has prevented any collective push for registration in Australia, creating yet more tensions and divisions about the present and future positioning of social workers in the professional debates and along with the decades of conservative influences across the welfare landscape has important repercussions for the possible unmaking of social work's professional activities.

### **THE (UN)MAKING OF THE PROFESSION**

While tensions and debates about social workers professional status and contribution continue unresolved, the landscape in which social work is practised has militated against any resolution. Organisational changes in the delivery of social services mentioned earlier such as the reduction in state spending and the increase in the privatisation of services including the contracting out of existing services have resulted in limited service provision and increased competition between service providers. Also, the gradual introduction of the purchaser-provider split has meant that the public/voluntary sector is now almost indistinguishable from the private sector (Leonard 1997; Jamrozik 2001; Mullaly 2007; Mendes 2008).

To these challenges can be added further impacts associated with the enthusiastic adoption of 'commercial principles' in the public sector as well as the new emphasis on risk management to inform the delivery of services. Indeed maximisation of profits, the focus on efficiency, accountability, quality control and risk management systems have become the new yardsticks for measuring performance rather than client need and satisfaction. Fournier (2000) argues that this market liberalism supports 'management knowledge' not 'professional knowledge' as the dominant way of knowing. Managers, who once supported professional

independence in the workplace, are now asking senior practitioners to assume the functions, roles and expectations of bureaucrats. Changing the focus from professional to managerial is deemed essential as more and more managers are themselves required to address perceived inadequacies in service provision and to introduce accountability structures in how they manage their work. As government funding is dramatically reduced many agency managers are, as one example, asking practitioners to reconstitute themselves as entrepreneurs as a means of filling the empty coffers. Efficient management, extensive documentation and the participation in, and exposure to, the market will, it is argued, produce increased productivity and quality services - practices assumed to be lacking or inadequate in the public sector. Professionals are no longer treated as experts: they are simply employees, doing a job where their specific expertise and identity as members of a specific profession is no longer an asset (Tsui and Cheung 2004; Healy & Meagher 2004; Parton 2004). This type of managerialism is questioning the continued authority, independence and mystery surrounding the professions. For some, this market-based organisational practice is seen to be inimical to the survival of the professions, including social work (Fournier 2000). Instead of focusing on the needs of the service users, the relationship between social workers and their clients has moved from focusing on 'care and concern' towards a new focus on 'cash and contracts', not only changing the organisational parameters but changing the nature of the relationships between the service users, the workers, the managers and the organisations alike (Tsui and Cheung, 2004). Social work has historically situated itself outside of the market, so this extension of the market into its professional domains makes its concerns and activities vulnerable, seriously challenging its way of knowing and being (Fergusson 2000; Fournier 2000). As a result many social workers are now finding themselves 'lost in familiar places' (Schön 1991) as they try to handle the social issues and individual problems of service users in this new undifferentiated professional landscape without a strong professional platform and knowledge claim.

## **INTER-PROFESSIONAL TENSIONS**

Traditionally social workers have worked autonomously but also alongside an array of professionals such as nurses, psychologists, medical practitioners and other allied health groups to provide a variety of services, policies and practices in the human services sector. Each of these discipline groups has its own ideological frameworks, ethical positions, knowledge, skills, and professional and historical traditions that mark their own territory and meaning-making systems (Phelan 2001). Their independent role and function in the sector brought complementary knowledges, skills and practices to help service the community's social, health and welfare needs. Each group also has laid claim to a strong professional discourse and has developed an independent practice and body of knowledge supported by independent research and ideological positions (Hugman 2001; 2005; Sheaff 2005). From these discipline positions, important policy, research agendas and practice debates have been developed to differentiate their particular expertise and enable these occupational groups to act and lobby independently for their specific interests or particular policy and practice outcomes within the human services sector.

Now, though, many social workers are finding themselves in practice settings where they are competing with these professional groups for recognition, service provision and funding as the competition grows and the professional boundaries overlap. So that nurses, counsellors, community workers, psychologists, occupational therapists and other allied health workers as well as the new professional players such as family, welfare and youth workers, case managers and other human service workers are staking claims to practices traditionally associated with social work. Hatton (2008) reports that many social workers in the UK are losing their professional position, complaining about the lack of credibility they receive from other professions and the difficulty 'in being heard in inter-professional debates' (p. 101). This challenge to professional boundaries has resulted in further concerns for the service users who are being required to interact with an increasingly diverse range of professionals as they navigate themselves through a seemingly endless

'suite' of services and professionals (Klein 1996). Further, the collapse of the barriers between occupational groups with the emergence of multi-functional teams (Fournier 2000) has compounded the challenges for social work.

We have now returned to our earlier claim that social workers are at a moment where a concerted response to these changes and challenges is needed if social work is to remain a viable player in helping people address the social issues and problems they are currently facing, and to retain a professional presence in the human service sector (Parton 2004; Mendes 2008). Individually and collectively social workers' responses need to be cognizant of the changing landscape and the current challenges as well as being able to develop appropriate and effective responses that these challenges require (Healy 2005).

So the following questions become important: Who am I as a professional? What has my university education and my practical experience prepared me to do? Who can I be? What must I know? What must I be able to do? Who are these others with whom I have to collaborate? What does social work stand for in this changing climate? Which knowledges, which identities and which practices are relevant to organising structures in teaching and learning? (Phelan 2001; Noble 2004). Phelan argues that the future of social workers practice and educational programs depend on how these questions 'are taken up and creatively resolved' (2001, p. 2).

As field educators in a large university in Sydney the authors were interested in exploring the answers to these questions with our social work students and field supervisors as well as our colleagues in other universities. We saw the answers as having relevance to the future employment of our graduates, especially as they will be entering practice in this uncertain and troubling environment. So with some funds from the University we undertook a research project to explore answers to the questions posed by Phelan (2001) about the present and future states of social work practice and education.

## THE RESEARCH PROJECT

### Method

This small, scoping study consisted of 3 focus groups. There were 2 groups of 3 students and 3 supervisors (practitioners) in each group from students and supervisors involved in the social work program at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) (N=12) and 1 focus group of 6 social work educators from three Australian universities based in Sydney, New South Wales (N=6). All participants self selected to participate in this study. To get participants for the student and supervisor groups, we sent an email request to all students in the final year UWS social work program and all supervisors who had recently supervised social work students in the last year (N=55). From this general email a total of 6 students and 6 supervisors volunteered. They were then allocated to 2 focus groups which were conducted at the university. The participants for the educators group were gathered via snowball technique after contacting academic departments via the local network of the Sydney-based social work educators involved in field education. Six educators responded positively and formed the third focus group engaged in this research. Each group discussion lasted between 1 \_ and 2 hours.

Focus groups were chosen for this study for convenience and to obtain speedier results than larger samples can deliver. They also allow for diversity in responses. Their success depends on getting together a small homogeneous group of people as size and composition will elicit depth of coverage (Krueger and Casey 2009). Their strength can also be their limitation in that homogeneity is more likely to elicit consensus where differences might be moderated by the facilitators or group members thus skewing the results (Krueger and Casey 2009).

There was no conflict of interest with the students and supervisors. Prompt questions were used for each focus group such as;

For the **students and supervisors** we asked:

1. What can I be as a social worker? What must I know and be able to do?
2. What has my university education prepared me to do?

3. What does social work stand for in the current climate
4. What voices are absent from the social work discourse? and
5. Who are these 'others' with whom I have to collaborate in my workplace?

And for **social work educators** we asked:

1. What does social work stand for in the changing climate?
2. Which knowledges, identities, practices are relevant to teaching and learning?
3. Does social work need to re-conceptualise the professional project? If not, why not? If yes what should or could it become? How would you address this in the curriculum? And,
4. What are the roles of government, public policy, and the welfare state in supporting social work activity?

Following the collection of the data, a thematic analysis was undertaken. The researchers looked for patterns of sameness and difference along with a descriptive analysis (Walter 2009) from the taped interviews to address the research question "is social work still a distinctive profession"? Even from this small study, it is possible to explore the threads of the responses to see what picture emerges and by connecting the results within the wider debates, a larger picture of analysis can emerge for a more general discussion (Elliott 2005). On this basis then, the themes as well as the descriptive analysis from the data have been compiled to inform the findings discussed in the next section.

## **Findings**

From this research we noted that there was unanimous agreement about the distinctiveness of social work but a variety of responses about the challenges and how to address them also emerged.

**Students and supervisors:** There was unanimous agreement from both the supervisors and students that social workers in practice (as well as

students on placement) needed to be able to define their role and at the same time *'defend and preserve social work practice as 'distinctive' and 'valuable' in the welfare sector'* (supervisor 3). For these participants their specific social work knowledge and skills, especially their concerns with the 'social' aspects of the clients' problems, was what differentiated their activities from other allied professionals. However, this distinctiveness was becoming harder to articulate, especially as nurses, OTs, case managers, counsellors and community workers were performing similar roles and developing similar attributes to themselves. As a result, social workers in the health sector especially, were often *'left to undertake basic tasks such as case assessments, discharge plans and other instrumental tasks, while, other allied health workers were assuming a more proactive role in the client's lives [sic]* (supervisor 2). Many participants felt that this situation was limiting their ability to provide *'more creative responses to issues concerning service users and their 'real' needs'* (supervisor 4). However, others stated that occasionally they were called upon when more options were needed or to deal with the emotional aspect of clients problems, such as *'homelessness, grief work, and the effects of violence, abuse and neglect'* (supervisor 1). That is to *'do the real work they felt they were trained for and capable of doing'* (student 1). However, this expertise was not always acknowledged or called upon.

The participants also talked about their workplace being dominated by conservative expectations and organisational constraints, restricting their role as advocates. For those working in the non-government sector, the issue of the conservative and restrictive climate raised ethical issues for the way they practiced. For example one participant said *'working with refugees (is difficult) when the climate is so politicized about refugees and asylum seekers (and as a result) real tensions between the instrumentality of government policies and the desire for social justice and social change on behalf of these and other marginalised clients can and does occur'* (supervisor 4).

Despite these professional setbacks, both supervisors and students felt that social work as a profession still has a lot to contribute to the sector and what was needed was a *'more proactive approach directed towards creating a more positive impact'* (student 3). To do this it was important

for social work to *'reclaim its philosophical and conceptual perspective and to be able to communicate this within the workplace and with their colleagues in the sector'* (supervisor 5). In particular, one participant said that it is social workers' link with policy and practice and the articulation of a clear theory for practice that she would identify as *'distinguishing characteristics not readily reproduced by other professional groups'* (student 6). That is, being able to articulate a strong theoretical understanding which is linked with practice, specifically as *'pursuing equality and social justice outcomes was important for social work's survival in the sector'* (student 4) and *'was where social workers can and do make a valuable contribution'* (supervisor 6).

To keep its activity relevant, all participants suggested that social work should undertake more practice-based research to keep the theory and practice link between current knowledge and skill development. Some identified the value of undertaking refresher and professional development courses so as to keep abreast with theory development, especially supervisors who recognised that these activities were crucial to ensure professional relevance. However it isn't surprising to note that several participants acknowledged that as important as professional development is, there *'was very little opportunity for, or time to, undertake these activities'* (supervisor 2) as *'undertaking professional development opportunities was difficult within their expanding workloads'* (supervisor 4).

Overall, while these participants felt that social workers are making a difference and have a relevant role to play in the welfare arena, however, any tangible results were difficult to articulate and, by implication, to demonstrate. On the one hand there were no doubts that social workers' identity could be clearly argued and defended in the sector, especially its focus on the 'social' and its commitment to social justice. However on the other hand some were uncertain how to express its distinctiveness and found it difficult especially in the current conservative climate, where managerialism, cost cutting and emphasis on accountability measures are given priority and when professional boundaries were also blurred. These restraints elicited a general concern that *'not being able to articulate what social work is about) was problematic for the profession now and for its future'* (supervisor 3).

**Social work educators:** Similar responses were elicited from the educators responsible for the field education program at their respective universities. In defining social work there was agreement that in the main social workers' purpose and function was, as these respondents said, for *'social workers to make a commitment to a social justice and human rights agenda'* (educator 1) by *'assisting the marginalised'* (educator 2) and that *'this perspective clearly distinguishes it from other helping professions in the welfare sector'* (educator 3). All participants agreed that social work is further differentiated (from other professions) by an *'integrated micro and macro analysis of individuals and communities as well as specific practice interventions/ strategies, such as community work'* (educator 2) which was signalled out as particularly pertinent to social workers effectiveness. Further, this particular participant said *'social work practitioners appear to seek different goals from their employment than other professions - typically seeking to address the needs of groups marginalised by society'* (educator 6)

Yet, each participant expressed concerns that social work is seriously being challenged by organisational and ideological constraints of the new economic rationalism which are *'undermining their professional skills, educational paradigms and core knowledge base'* (educator 6). In addition, all the participants argued that as social workers are increasingly required to work across a range of welfare areas and practice contexts, it is increasingly difficult, as this participant summed up, *'to maintain professional development that will equip them to be responsive and reflective in their practice settings and to the many related changes that are emerging in the welfare arena'* (educator 4). However an important challenge was for social work educators to assume responsibility to *'educate the social work professional for the realities of the struggle for economic and political resources'* (educator 1)

### **In summary**

While this was a small study, important concerns, ideas and suggestions emerged that link with the wider contemporary debates about the future of social work. The supervisors, students and educators in this study regarded social work values, practices and knowledges as a professional 'package' they wished to retain. In exploring the key question about

whether social work is still a distinctive profession? the answer from these participants was a resounding 'yes!' However, they also identified the difficulties in being able to articulate this effectively within the sector and that the current challenges resulting from the new economic landscape were having an unsettling impact on their probity and viability.

Despite the difficulties, all participants suggested ways to move forward - such as *'developing more collaborative practice research partnerships'* (supervisor 3) and *'using students on placement as valuable resourcing agents between practitioner and academic knowledges'* (educator 1). The most significant response to the issues identified, they suggested, was for social work educators to reinforce the capability of both students and graduates to engage in *'critical thinking and reflection'* (student 3) so as to reaffirm the focus and commitment to social justice, human rights and social activism. There was no suggestion to embrace inter-disciplinary identities but, on the contrary, to reaffirm social work's *'commitment to its comprehensive contextualised approach to understanding individual needs in conjunction with the social, cultural and political influences that mark its distinctiveness in the welfare services sector'* (educator 4), even in a time when the market forces dominate.

In wanting to keep social workers professional activities at the forefront of welfare practices and debates, these participants were also unanimous that what was needed was to *'find a language and a vision for practice that places social work's commitment to eradicating social disadvantage that results from structural arrangements firmly back on the agenda'* (educator 6). According to the respondents it is social work's ability to apply a 'social lens' within a social justice and human rights perspective to individual and community issues and concerns that is its *most* distinctive feature; and this is its distinctive contribution in all of its inter-professional interactions. Everyone said that skills in advocacy informed by social justice agenda *'continue to remain a distinguishing characteristic'* (student 4). As the participants in this study all agreed, social work is still the only professional group that has the moral and ethical responsibility to argue against and resist the structural arrangements that continue to have such negative impacts on people's lives as they have the knowledge as well as

the professional language and educational and practice foundation to make these concerns public (Dominelli 2005).

Finally, rather than merge within the inter-disciplinary discourse, all the participants in this study argued that it was necessary for the profession, individually and collectively, *'to be become more proactive and find ways to promote what social work is and stands for'* (student 1). It was urged that more collaboration with the professional associations such as the AASW and AASWWE was required to pressure these bodies on behalf of the profession.

### **DISCUSSION: THE RE-MAKING OF THE PROFESSION**

The rise of managerialism as an alternative to professional expertise can certainly be viewed as a threat to social work - both its professional standing and its concern for social justice, equity and democracy in both private and public life (Mullaly 2007). Privileging a 'management discourse' over a 'professional discourse' enables the government to move their responsibility and accountability for the effects of discriminatory policies to the workforce and specific individuals, groups and communities. To assume that social problems can be addressed by more effective managerial measures and more individual responsibility is to overlook the roots of social dislocation and their impact on these individual, groups and communities (Fook and Morley, 2005; Mullaly 2007). A distinctive feature of social work practice is its knowledge that social problems are not the fault of individuals and that focusing on setting up internal administrative accountability systems or putting resources into (almost constant) organisational restructuring will not address the social issues impacting on clients' lives (Mullaly 2007; Fergusson and Woodward 2009). The respondents in this study clearly identified this aspect of practice as important. Further they wanted social workers to be more proactive in promoting themselves and the contribution to the public good of their knowledge, experience and expertise. According to the participants, social workers need to be more proactive about strengthening their public identity and distinctiveness so that they can continue to play an active role in defining contemporary

welfare debates while at the same time they continue to provide assistance and advocacy for those sections of the community in most need.

This proactive stance could be done by highlighting their unique and distinctive contributions to society by calling on the professional associations such as AASW and APASWE to provide astute leadership and to use that leadership to pressure, to influence and ultimately to initiate change in the sector more along the ideological lines of social work's mission. Further the current move away from the previous conservative era might also open up some space for this to occur if the professional leadership is ready and resourced. Initiatives in this direction are evident.

## **RESPONSES FROM THE PROFESSION**

The AASW is rising to the challenge by facilitating social workers across the sector to work together to take charge of the 'social' agenda and reposition themselves so that their concerns become the focus of public debate and issues. For example, the AASW is now articulating specific practice standards especially in areas where social workers are already active, such as child protection and care of people with mental illness, indigenous knowledge and voices, and the integration of cross cultural practices. The revised Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (May 2008) is another positive response. A small but high profile social worker presence at the recent National Summit -2020 was also important as these educators and practitioners have much to contribute to the welfare debates and future planning. The continued pressure from feminists, and disability, human rights, environmental and gay activists will continue to keep social workers' activity informed of future developments.

Research is being conducted on profiling the workforce and national curricula in order to plan for the future needs of graduates and the workforce. Also the AASW is embarking on a joint venture with Head of Schools of Social Work and the community services sector that employs the graduates to raise the awareness of social work and its

contribution in the community by beginning to define what is distinctive about social work. These two projects have been undertaken to help recruit more social workers by promoting its distinctiveness within the community as well as to help raise its profile so as to ensure a sustainable work force for the future of the profession.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the study was small and generalisations are therefore limited, the respondents identified important concerns which are also found in the literature and in practice. Indeed the recent activities of the AASW as mentioned above suggest there are many practitioners who are concerned about the state of social work in the current welfare landscape and are interested in re-claiming an identity for social work in these troubled times even if there seems to be some lessening of these attacks from a new, more progressive Government.

The responses from the participants suggest that a good place to start is to re-affirm social workers commitment to social justice and their valuable work in fighting for clients rights in the welfare sector especially work that extends participatory democracy, equity and inclusiveness to the most vulnerable sections of society. This distinctive activity will enable social workers to begin to reclaim lost territory and begin to reset the welfare agenda in ways that continues to promote its own activity with service users and the human services organisations that work for, and with, the most vulnerable sections of society. This then will ensure its distinctiveness in the sector for some time to come.

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## 7. Teaching about homelessness, with a focus on children and families, as an emerging area of social work practice.

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**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the role of social work educators in teaching students about homelessness, particularly focusing on children and families. It reflects on the AASW *Statement of specific child wellbeing and protection curriculum content (December 2008)* document and applies it to a homelessness case scenario. It concludes that the principles, knowledge and skills required for working with children, young people and their families are useful for teaching social work students about homelessness as an emerging area of practice for social workers.

**INTRODUCTION**

This article emerges from my reflections after attending the 'Towards a Child-Inclusive Curricula in Social Work Education' Forum co-hosted by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the

Australian Centre for Child Protection (ACCP) in Melbourne on the 30th September 2009. The Australian Centre for Child Protection is continuing to work with the AASW to support social work educators to implement the *Statement of specific child wellbeing and protection curriculum content (December 2008)*. The aim of the forum was to bring together social work educators and other key stakeholders to:

- Share information about educators' experiences in enhancing curriculum content relating to child wellbeing and protection, and identify the challenges and opportunities the new standards present.
- Identify 'innovative' curriculum materials and teaching approaches currently being utilised in Australia, including in fieldwork
- Explore specific ways to continue national collaborative initiatives by social work educators.

## **TEACHING ABOUT HOMELESSNESS WITH A FOCUS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

In my current role as a social work educator, as a component of the research-teaching-practice nexus, I teach students about the complexities of working in the practice area of homelessness and discuss with students my research and practice experience in the field of homelessness. When teaching about homelessness, with the aim to focus on 'child inclusive curricula in social work education', the voices of accompanying children need to be heard.

In 2008, the Australian Commonwealth Government released the White paper called 'The Road Home' which sets out a national approach for reducing homelessness and targets to halve homelessness by 2020 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). The *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994, Section 4* defines homelessness as: 'a person is considered homeless if they have inadequate access to safe and secure housing, which includes being at risk of homelessness'. In 2006–2007, 1,539 non-government, community and local government organisations were funded nationally under SAAP (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], AIHW 2008a, p.1). The Supported Accommodation

Assistance Program (SAAP) was replaced in 2009 by the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) (Commonwealth of Australia 2008, p. 40). In the 2005-2006 funding period, agencies providing services to young people (36%) received the largest proportion of SAAP funding, seconded by services provided to women escaping domestic violence (23%) and agencies providing services to 'families' received the lowest average amount of funding per service (AIHW 2007, p. 8). Family groups including individual(s) with children, couples without children and couples with children find it hard to obtain SAAP accommodation (AIHW, 2008b, p. 9).

In 2000–2001, the Australian government began collecting statistics on the number of accompanying homeless children because of concerns about unmet needs and the effects of homelessness on children. It is estimated that 1 in every 110 Australians, or 187,900 adults or unaccompanied children (clients), received substantial SAAP support at some time during 2006–2007 and 69,100 were accompanying children (AIHW, 2008a, p.9 ). In 2005-2006 SAAP agencies supported an estimated 161,200 people, of whom 106,500 were adults or young people and 54,700 were accompanying children (AIHW, 2007, p. 2). Each year more women than men access homeless services in Australia. In 2006–07, 61% of clients were female and 39% were male clients (AIHW, 2008a, p. 17). Overall, the most common reasons that women gave for seeking assistance were domestic or family violence (in 22% of support periods) (AIHW, 2008b, p. 31). Women are the predominant group with accompanying children.

Research indicates that the media is central to setting the public policy agenda and to politicising 'social problems' such as homelessness (Mendes 2003; Zufferey and Chung 2006). Dominant understandings of homelessness in the print media inform political and policy debates about homelessness by reproducing deserving and undeserving dichotomies in various forms (such as victims-criminals or slackers-lackers as noted by Rosenthal 2000), debating responsibility issues for homelessness (such as 'who is to blame?'), examining the coalescence and conflict between business and charity discourses and advocating for the removal of visible

homeless people such as rough sleepers in 'cleaning the streets' discourses (Zufferey, 2008; Zufferey and Chung 2006, p. 36). As 'rough sleepers' are primarily men, these dominant media constructions tend to reinforce the myth that homelessness mainly affects single men who are drug and alcohol abusers and are sleeping rough. These dominant myths and stereotypes influence how social work students define and understand homelessness and stereotypical understandings of social problems need to be challenged by social work educators. Furthermore, the concerning issue of accompanying children affected by homelessness is an emerging and often invisible problem when reflecting on dominant understandings of homelessness.

Social work educators have a key role in educating social work students to develop the necessary skills, knowledge and values required for working with disadvantaged people and with complex and vulnerable population groups such as children affected by homelessness. Social workers work with the most disadvantaged population groups and trained social workers are increasingly working in the field of homelessness (Burke, 1998). In the words of one social worker participating in research conducted about social work responses to homelessness: *if you don't find social workers working in the area of homelessness...where would you find them?* (Zufferey, 2007, p. 268).

I now turn to an example of how social work and social welfare educators can introduce child protection and child wellbeing content in relation to homeless families to their classes. I start with a case study that can be used in teaching students about children and homelessness. I constructed the following case study from my practice experience in the field of homelessness. The complexity of issues that homeless women and children face is evident in the scenario.

*Marian is a traditional Aboriginal woman with four young children. She recently had to leave her remote community in the north of South Australia to escape her violent ex-partner. She was moved to a service in the inner city of Adelaide for safety reasons. She has been housed in an emergency homeless shelter in a suburb she is unfamiliar with. She has no family support in the city. She has no money and is unable to obtain an income from Centrelink for*

*a number of weeks. She needs food and nappies for the children. She is feeling very frightened, sad and confused and spends most of the day in bed. Her children are very 'active' and energetic and she is finding them hard to cope with. She wants her children to go to school but she does not know where the local school is and how to enrol them. She would like to settle somewhere 'safe' and find permanent housing.*

When reflecting on this scenario, what values, skills and knowledge would social work students need to develop when responding to the issues faced by Marian? To respond to this type of scenario, students are encouraged to research the effects of homelessness and domestic violence on the lives of women and their children and then construct a professional intervention plan. The *AASW Education and Accreditation Standards, Statement of specific child wellbeing and protection curriculum content* (December 2008) and AASW Code of Ethics (1999) provide essential frameworks for educators and students to draw upon in framing interventions. The values, skills and knowledge discussed in these documents and the basic key principles that relate to human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity, competence and ethical decision making are central to student learning (AASW, 2008, p.4).

Marian's scenario requires knowledge of power-related issues in social work practice, parent-child attachment, the diversity of family structures, dynamics and community networks, resource availability and the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous families, children and young people due to processes of colonisation and past welfare practices (AASW, 2008, p.4-5).

The skills students could learn from a consideration of this scenario are: how to engage with, listen to and build a respectful relationship with this mother and her children, how to undertake a holistic family assessment with a critical understanding of the family's ecological and socioeconomic context, how to develop a shared plan to address identified issues and how to undertake advocacy and appropriate referrals to promote the well being and safety of the children involved (AASW, 2008, p.7). The tensions involved in balancing the 'best interests' of the child with the needs of his or her family and community are often evident in the field

of homelessness when children are involved. For example, a social worker in my research stated: *Housing contexts present an issue of risk...often one of the biggest frustrations of our work...having to involve child protection for issues such as housing* (Zufferey, 2008b, p. 366).

In order to learn to work in culturally sensitive ways and to encourage reflexivity, students are taught to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds and values through critical self reflection exercises. Entry level social workers are required to have an understanding of culturally appropriate and respectful ways of working with children and families from diverse backgrounds. This is especially relevant to the practice area of homelessness given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in homelessness statistics when compared with the general Australian population (AIHW, 2007, 2008a).

When considering the scenario, social work students are taught the concepts of social justice and human rights and to value and respect the rights of women, children and young people as citizens. Throughout their education students begin to develop a commitment to empowering children and women and to oppose discriminatory practices within the community and the services they are employed in (AASW, 2008, p.4).

## **CONCLUSION**

Social workers work with children in various contexts including when children accompany adults into homelessness services. It is important for social work educators to facilitate students' learning and understanding of homelessness beyond that of dominant stereotypes for students to develop an informed approach to their professional practice. The *Statement of specific child wellbeing and protection curriculum content (December 2008)* is a useful guide for social work educators, particularly for new social work educators like myself. The document outlines and provides a framework for teaching students basic, generic content relevant to ways of working with disadvantaged children and their families. It can guide social work educators in the teaching of child-inclusive content, which is particularly applicable when working with children accompanying adults affected by homelessness. It is a document

that assists social work educators to develop the necessary course content to teach students the basic skills, knowledge and values required for working across all practice areas involving children. It is a beginning step towards developing child-inclusive curricula in social work education and is applicable to every practice situation involving children including homelessness.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thanks to Christine Gibson, Australian Centre for Child Protection, for her inspiration and comments that lead to the development of this article.

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## Practice Reflections

Practice reflections is a section for opinion pieces. These articles are reflections on recent events or current topics in social work, welfare, or community work education and practice.

# 8. Critical reflection observed

## Mark Furlong

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If it is easy to be critical of ideas that are going out of favour; it is especially sensible to interrogate practices which currently seem positive and progressive. That is, in so far as a practice has the status ‘this is a given’, even more ‘wow, this is a good one’, it follows that this practice is entitled to critique. This applies whether such practices form a discipline, such as social work or psychology; an approach, such as strengths-based or solutions applications; or a rubric, such as family therapy or case management. *Critical reflection* (CR) may be more a rubric, or a developing tradition, than it is an application or discipline, but as this body of practice is being enthusiastically explored and developed, so it should be questioned and reviewed.

For example, rather than allowing CR to be understood as a stand-alone innovation, in her plenary session to the recent AASWWE conference (September 2009) Jan Fook noted that CR should be seen to stand on the shoulders of particular philosophical traditions, not least of which is

Socratic dialogue. In this openness to self scrutiny, key figures in CR are alive to the importance of acknowledging the range of questions that CR raises. ‘What is our genealogy?’ is one of these important questions and ‘what are the key critical questions for CR?’ is another.

In this spirit, this brief paper attempts to introduce queries which might be usefully examined in an open and non-defensive exploration. This seems timely, given that CR presents within and beyond social work as an upbeat and increasingly popular phenomenon. Against this background, and albeit in a preliminary manner, the following brief paper outlines three classes of query. Each of these will be discussed in turn:

- (i) Are the linkages between critical reflection and its conceptual neighbours sufficiently articulated?
- (ii) The issue of power: who owns the game and writes the rules with respect to CR? and
- (iii) Is it masculinist to think of CR as ‘transformative’?

In presenting this material it is important to note that what follows is a summary of some preliminary thoughts, responses that were initially stimulated by attending the conference mentioned above. Energized by this participation, a number of queries arose and were then further developed. Hopefully, the articulation of these ideas might be of interest to other social work practitioners and teachers with a lively interest in CR.

The aim of this short piece is not directly academic. Rather, the paper represents an attempt at discussion rather than analysis or evaluation. I’d like to encourage discussion and to outline lines of enquiry – suggestive avenues that might prove to be the basis for scholarly investigation. Crucially, the current paper uses only one basic reference: Fook and Gardiner (2007). Therefore, the ideas raised might be a long way from being applicable to, and representative of, the large and rapidly expanding literature on CR that is now available.<sup>1</sup> Given the idea is to raise preliminary ideas, and not to offer anything in the way of conclusions, what follows can be seen as ‘serious play.’

## **(I) LINKAGES BETWEEN *CRITICAL REFLECTION* AND ITS NEIGHBOURS ARE NOT ALWAYS WELL ARTICULATED.**

Although not the focus of substantial examination in the text used as the reference point for the current review (Fook & Gardiner, 2007), there is a great deal in common between the theory and practice of CR and adjacent post-modern practice traditions. For example, initially prompted by Tom Anderson's work on the use of reflective teams in family therapy, Harlene Anderson (no relation) developed a range of practical ideas that seek to free-up supervisees and trainees who have become 'stuck.' This project clearly has obvious parallels with the goals and process of CR. (Interestingly, in common with writings on CR, Harlene Anderson also references Donald Schon's theories on the importance of professional reflection)

Of particular note, a clear protocol for group based discussions in training and supervision was set out over five stages (Anderson and Rambo, 1988; Anderson and Swim, 1993): the becalmed or 'stuck' presenter nominates what they seek from the process; the presenter outlines the crucial information; questions of clarification from the team are discussed; there is a reflective team exploration; the presenter summarizes what s/he has experienced and learned. Importantly, in Anderson's iteration what is distinctive is that the reflective team exploration stage can only be witnessed by the presenter who is not permitted an active role in the discussion at this point. This is proposed so the presenter is barred from contributing to this stage of the exchange process in order to pre-empt the kind of defensive dynamic that is often generated in such consultations. In so far as Anderson and Swim's version of the process has advantages, this innovation offers the iteration of CR I read about, and directly experienced, an additional option.

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1. At short notice Jan Fook and Fiona Gardiner generously read a close-to final draft of this paper. Each was happy that the current paper sought to critically discuss ideas evoked by the theory and practice of critical reflection. Of particular note, Jan was clear the current paper represented a very limited engagement with CR for two reasons: (i) it is referenced to only one text ( Fook and Gardiner, 2007) which means no generalizations to other CR iterations are warranted, and (ii) given this qualification, the present text should be seen as a kind of partial discussion document rather than as an analysis or evaluation. I thank Jan and Fiona for their feedback and have embedded this content into the final manuscript.

Similarly, the usual sequence in CR seems to resemble those ideas concerned with supervision, consultation and training associated with narrative practice. These developments can be dated to the late 1980s, e.g. a special edition of the Dulwich Centre Newsletter (summer 1989/1990) took the lead in discussing, and then putting into action, a rush of innovative ideas around reflective processes. For example, in narrative practice a number of consultative processes have been formulated, usually but not necessarily, constituted in based-team participation (see for example, White 1999; 2007). These formats seek to be conceptually and ideologically coherent as they also seek to be practically useful in opening space for the ‘stuck’ practitioner (‘witnessing circles’ are the most popular of these formats). In working-up these processes narrative practitioners have devoted significant effort to, and have evolved a considerable expertise with, structuring these consultations so that group processes are conducive to the imagining of new possibilities whilst also remaining sensitive to complex, and often problematic, themes around accountability and blame. (see for example, White, 1999).<sup>2</sup>

Another example of an absence of cross-citation can be seen in the manner positive outliers – ‘exceptions’ – are considered in and beyond CR. That is, in narrative there is a keen interest in ‘unique outcomes’; in solution-based work there is a focus on ‘when is the problem not the problem’; in strengths-based practice there is an interest in ‘exceptions’ – as there is in CR. Despite these apparent parallels, there seems little cross-referencing between these traditions in any direction: between CR and narrative, between narrative and strengths, and so forth.

A further example of conceptual relationships being under-articulated is that popular representations of CR do not seem to link themselves to the available literature on systems consultation. This is regrettable, as these linkages seem particularly relevant yet seem to be left more or less undeclared. Although the development of this point is beyond the scope of the present work to begin to outline in even a preliminary

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2. Christine Fagan and I discussed our responses to the CR workshop in October. Christine, a narrative enthusiast, was good enough to read the first draft of this paper.

form, suffice it to say there is a substantial literature that is available on systems consultation within and beyond family therapy as there is also a set of linkages with the emerging interest in (so-called) 'complex cases', complex systems and complexity theory.

In this instance, and presumably more generally, it seems likely the growth of CR might be stimulated by a close, and explicitly acknowledging, dialogue with its adjacent, and often very lively, colleagues. For example, Amies and Weir (2001) put forward a process for reflective group supervision. This formulation explicitly acknowledges, and then practically integrates, Jan Fook's substantive development of ideas from the reflective tradition; equally, Amies and Weir clearly acknowledge what they have taken from the narrative tradition. Likewise, Pizzi (2001) offers another contribution, one that is specifically tailored to a consideration of social work supervision, that publically affirms its conceptual embeddedness. Such collaborative conversations have the advantage of being mutually informing.

### **(II) THE ISSUE OF POWER: WHO OWNS THE GAME AND WRITES THE RULES?**

A key distinction in the theory and practice of CR is between 'learning' and 'therapy': the aim of the CR process is always said to be the former, not the latter. Whilst those in the movement, such as Jan Fook in her plenary comments, are alive to the fact that this is to construct a binary, there remains a potentially troubling issue that may be common to the two espousedly distinct projects of CR and therapy.

Foucault (1973), Pentony (1981), Furlong and Lipp (1995), along with many others, have long argued that traditional accounts of the therapeutic project make the power relationship between the therapist and the client invisible. This glossed-over story renders the therapist as benign, neutral, possessing a privilege that is assumed to be pro-social, and so forth. Despite its demotion in critical texts, this naïve account still holds sway in many circles.

Similarly, it is possible to hold a vision of the action of CR that is grounded in a parallel understanding. This eliding version does not attend to the matter of power – to the crucial question of ‘who writes the rules and who owns the game?’ when it comes to CR. This root question can then be resolved into its component elements: who is the proper authority when it comes to defining adequate, sufficient, genuine, etc., qualities in the participant’s process of, or outcome from, critical reflection?; who is it that judges reflection, especially if the consultant (if that is the right term) has a sponsor, that is, has been brought in by management and/or has a clear position in the agency’s hierarchical structure?

There was an earlier version of CR: ‘consciousness raising.’ In structural social work texts, and in other emancipatory projects (such as those dedicated to second and third wave feminist and also Marxist political programs) there was, and there still is, an ambitious and high-toned purpose, as well as a troubling imperial tone, in the articulation of the process that is referred to as ‘consciousness raising.’ In this process the right-thinking expert, it is assumed, is able to discern instances of false consciousness from correct consciousness and to lead the less knowing to the form of knowing that is correct.

A powerful case can be made for the possibility that ‘correct thinking’ can, at least in some instances, be distinguished from ‘incorrect thinking’ mindful that this distinction has to remain an actively interrogated possibility. This noted, it appears that the usual discourse of *critical reflection* tends to beg the question of power that the issue of ‘consciousness raising’ introduces. At least in my limited experience of CR it is here that it is necessary to ask: is it the participant, the group or the leader (the more knowing expert) who determines how successful the outcome of the CR process is?; is there an ongoing dialogue about the criteria that should be used to judge the success of CR?; is the question ‘who knows best?’ up for dispute?.

In so far as these kinds of questions are not regularly debated there is a potentially troubling resonance between the traditional account of therapeutic neutrality and CR. In so far as this is so, there might

also be a conflict between the modernist project of ‘raising the client’s consciousness’ and that of ‘undertaking a process of critical reflection.’

### **(III) IS THE IDEA THAT CR IS ‘TRANSFORMATIVE’ A MASCULINIST CONCEIT?**

CR has been described by its enthusiasts as ‘transformative’ and as associated with ‘breakthroughs.’ That CR may, at certain times and within specific conditions, be experienced as a powerful change agent is not open to question. This acknowledged, CR is no silver bullet and it is important to underline this limit because it is tempting to ‘over-egg the pudding’ in the pragmatic, even craven, organizational and professional environments within which most of us currently work. This context invites grand claims to be read into the outcomes of the process of CR. Given that the organizational and cultural environment CR is positioned within favours determinate action and masculinist claims to utility, it follows there has to be a tug towards coupling with this ethos.

To hold against this temptation, to not allow itself to be ramped-up like the salespersons for products like cognitive-behavioural therapy are happy to do, CR needs to be clear about its project and its nature. Yes, CR can be understood as a form of strategic consultation within complex systems but it can also be understood as something more aesthetic, as a kind of Trojan horse – an action that might be productively smuggled into highly stressed settings and used as a prompt for group-based processes of mutual support and affirmation. That enhanced relationalities – supportive relationships and a firmed-up sense of collectivity – might be occasioned by the introduction of CR processes is an important, arguably the central, attribute associated with CR. This should not be under-valued as many of us are hungry for experiences of solidarity. Even as our employers – that set of human service, health, community and educational organizations we have to dance with – increasingly demand masculinist outcomes ‘delivered’ by muscular actors, it is a healthy counter-moment to be prompted to stand together.

That CR is not reducible to a masculinist technique contradicts the possibility CR might be mis-read as a psychologising trick, as a quick

and effective way of bumping individuals into assessing alternative subjectivities, even identities, so as to be empowered to identify (faux) personal solutions to structural issues. A 30 minute intervention, however well designed, is never likely to be an adequate response to problems of resourcing, work place design or the bullying culture that is sometimes present in organisations. To be allowed to be presented as a device that offers the dream of a transformative ‘ah-ha!’ experience would be to challenge the values of struggle and solidarity that are inherent to CR or, more precisely, to one more political reading of what is central to CR.

Of course, there are always multiple readings of what is at stake. For example, the conclusion reached by Fook and Askeland’s (2005) in their report on the effectiveness of CR emphasised that workers became, across a number of overlapping dimensions, more professionally autonomous. This sounds positive, yet this conclusion might also be read as problematic: might a preferred outcome that allows a capacity for power to be individualised discount the weight of empirical materiality and the importance of solidarity? Such a preference could be seen as an elision that is inconsistent with what some would contend is *the* crucial dimension to CR: the structural dimension.

There *must* be contesting positions with respect to what is inherent to CR. One version advocates an outcome where individual workers are able to perform a greater capacity for sense, self-determination and professional power as the preferred stand-alone effect. Another view contends that such an effect is not necessarily positive and that ‘good’ CR is essentially associated with the promotion of relationalities and group solidarity, as well as with more aesthetic outcomes including an enhanced capacity for personal accountability and mindfulness.

## **CONCLUSION**

The contest around the proper nature of CR is a lively concern and flows into more finite questions: Is CR about a ‘stuck-point’ to be negotiated, a critical incident to be un-picked or is it best used as a de-briefing process that is to take place after lesser experiences of trauma? Is it about an issue to be worked through, or a process that acts as a pep-talk to gee the

worker into more imaginative and empowered personal action? Perhaps, it is best understood as a practice that is about group functioning rather than it is about individuals: that staff groups, for example, might be aided to be better primed to hold against the depredations of anxiety or disorganization, self-blaming or me-firstism. These and other questions arise as soon as we step back and temper an enthusiasm for CR with a critical spirit. How deep do you go in the process of CR: does one have to proceed from situation to assumptions, and then into personal values?

At the level of radical review a further nest of questions also arise: is the process of CR worthwhile if it does not lead to a sense of enhanced agency?; might participation in the process of CR be less about individual 'empowerment' than it is associated with a greater understanding of accountability and/or a deeper capacity for contemplation and compassion. As explored by Fook and Askeland (2005) these are some of the questions practitioners and authors identified with CR are happy to consider.

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## 9. Where Have All The Social Workers Gone? Critical Reflection and Child Protection

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Critical reflection from the position of academics and educators may be viewed differently from the position of child protection field workers. What looks ‘possible’ and ‘positive’ from an academic perspective may feel considerably different for those who are ‘in the trenches’. Critical reflection leads to increased awareness of the tension between personal and professional integrity and ethics, and the tasks one is meant to undertake in the course of one’s work. Self-reflection, self-location and critical reflection are unquestionably necessary skills for child protection as the need to remain reflective is integral to anti-oppressive and emancipatory work with others. Whether such frameworks are the prerogative of social work, or social work alone, is not the subject of this article. However social work education unquestionably supports the development and integration of such frameworks into practice.

Whilst the tension of balancing safety with the benefits of critical reflection is certainly acknowledged in the literature (Fook and Gardner 2007) the academic discourse appears unable to encompass a practical solution to the challenges of working within hostile environments. Risk appears minimized or marginalized as is the very real personal and professional danger of undertaking critical reflection in environments, which are not only not organized to support critical reflection, but

overtly work to discourage, undermine and punish it. Sadly, many professionals who work within statutory child protection identify their work environment as hostile, and unfriendly to critical reflection. Those professionals who acknowledge these challenges are frequently deemed 'pessimistic', 'obstructive' and 'negative', when their lived experiences would be better used to fuel further critical reflection about systemic barriers.

In the words of Jan Fook and Fiona Gardner (2007, pp.102-103), critical reflection 'exposes choices and supports a sense of agency'. Could it be because child protection workers *do* undertake critical reflection, that the field has seen a mass exodus of well-educated and trained professionals from the sector? Retention difficulties have become notorious in tertiary child protection, but are now mirrored in other community services as they too become increasingly risk averse and proscriptive.

It is not enough to be critically aware, without some means to resolve arising tensions. Encouraging critical reflection in hostile environments may well lead to feelings of frustration, anger, exhaustion, depression and burnout. Undertaking critical reflection in isolation does not mitigate these risks or subsequent feelings. Ultimately those who critically reflect are likely to leave the child protection playing field altogether or find themselves becoming unconscious and 'reflection resistant' in an effort to manage the unmanageable tension of compromising personal and professional ethics in the course of routine employment.

Critical learning is missing. The professional exodus of social workers from child protection should be interpreted as a red flag. Child protection work has become untenable; that is, it has become incredibly difficult to practice in an ethical, anti-oppressive and emancipatory way, which is child and family focused. Professionals are criticized for their failure to persist in hostile climates rather than celebrated for the professional and personal integrity of choosing to leave. In the wake of recruitment and retention difficulties the sector questions education and training. Does child protection need to be undertaken in a different manner, by different professions with different skill sets? Are we

witnessing the end of critical reflection and anti-oppressive frameworks?  
Is there a place for social work in child protection?

If a child protection workforce evolves that is devoid of practice frameworks, that does not emphasize human rights and social justice, critical reflection and self-located practice, it will truly become a system of social control. Child protection workers will become little more than social police officers, enforcing socio-politically determined norms. This is not only an issue for social workers and other child protection professionals but even more so has the gravest of implications for vulnerable children and their families. We must have a critically reflective work force, if child protection is to be more than an ideal. In order to have a critically reflective work force, we must have organizations and practice systems which pragmatically encourage and support critical reflection. This critical reflection cannot be just an intellectual exercise but must also lead to improved practice and better outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. Perhaps when critical reflection becomes a systemically supported practice, social workers and other skilled child protection professionals are likely to make their way back into this incredibly challenging and complex area of practice.

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## Book Review

**Professor Jill Wilson**

The University of Queensland

.....  
 Fawcett, Barbara, Goodwin, Susan, Meagher, Gabrielle and Phillips,  
 Ruth (2010)

**Social policy for social change.** Palgrave Macmillan. 250 pp  
 ISBN 9871420256161 (pbk).  
 .....

This relatively brief, clearly written and well set out text is a welcome addition to local and international resources concerned with conceptualizing the nature of social policy. In defining their purpose, the authors write: “The central project of this book has been to establish a framework for thinking about social policy as a tool for or facilitator of social change” (Fawcett, Goodwin, Meagher and Phillips, 2009, pp.206). The topic areas are:

- Approaches to social policy , and to a less extent, social change. This chapter provides important conceptual outlines for the remaining chapters;
- The processes of social policy, exploring and critiquing a number of approaches to describing and critiquing policy process, particularly from the perspective of how policy processes are opened up or not linked to different approaches to governance;
- Politics which is conceptualized as conflicts over ideas and resources with a focus on health care and women’s policy;
- Values and their relationship with policy processes with the intersection of ethics, morality and policy processes as a starting point, and then

considering the impact of adding rights on this discussion;

- Economics. The authors raise the issues of who pays and who benefits, how governments reallocate resources to meet social needs and the role of private spending on economic growth;
- The social policy implications of the interaction of people in their different forms of organizations. This is analysed in terms of the impact of the policy context on the ability of these organizations to meet their goals. This leads to a consideration of how people who implement social policy are helped or hindered by organizational structures and procedures. Human service workers and volunteers are the particular focus here.
- An examination of the links between research, social policy and human service practice. The authors consider what constitutes evidence and the tensions between such evaluations and the politics of policy in deciding how to address social problems

The text then moves to consider some contemporary issues with which social policy is engaged. The first of these is social inclusion as a policy framework. The second issue considered by the authors are contemporary social policy interventions from those identified as reactionary entrenchment responses (Aboriginal policy in the Northern Territory in 2007) to others considered as advancements in social policy (children in care in England 1996-2002). In this context the reasons for these interventions, their consequences for the groups under consideration and the implications for human service workers are analysed. The third issue relates to the role of communities and community participation in a range of social policy areas. This area is proposed as representing a new relationship between government and civil society and the pros and cons of this movement are addressed.

The authors present a comprehensive range of views around each topic, comparing and contrasting opinions. The authors are primarily concerned with social policy in “rich democracies”, with strong links to Australia. For students, particularly those in the earlier years of the course, it is helpful to see complex ideas presented in an applied

fashion. However, it may also assist if the authors were to give a clearer indication of the patterns that emerge across the various elements of their framework when a particular approach is taken say to the economics of policy. To some extent this is done in relation to social inclusion and the contribution of the community, but the links between the analysis of these issues and the proposed framework.

The central focus of the text is on understanding the contemporary issues impacting on social policy and its relationship to social change. At times these points are illustrated with specific examples of the outcomes of policy driven change, but the text would benefit from more of these examples where the use of the ideas to critique policy outcomes is demonstrated.

The text is not designed to cover the 'how to do' social policy - this would be another topic. It represents an issue for courses which have just the one social policy course – how do you cover understanding social policy and practicing social policy? Perhaps one suggestion for the next edition might be to comment on how this material could be used across the curriculum, particularly in method courses.

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In 2010, ADVANCES will publish two themed issues. The first will be on working with children and the second on critical reflection method and practice. The themed issues will also include papers beyond the special theme. Submissions of any other topic related to the education in social work, welfare and community work continue to be welcomed for the 2010 editions of ADVANCES.

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- (d) Photographs and figures relevant to the article, on separate sheets. Only photographs with a high degree of definition will reproduce well, hence black and white photographs are preferred.
2. Copy of refereed papers should not normally exceed 6000 words, double-spaced and exclusive of references. Papers longer than 6000 words will be considered, though shorter publications are preferred. Papers to be considered for the Practice Reflections section should be no longer than 1500 words and should focus on reflections from a recent event or current issue or topic relevant to the audience of ADVANCES.
3. Contributors should use language that clearly includes both sexes when reference to both male and female is intended. Thus both gender words 'he or she', 'her or his' should be used, as well as neutral terms such as 'spokesperson' or 'representative', 'chairperson', 'staffed', 'you' and the plural forms of he/she. For further information refer to, Miller, D. and Swift, K. (1984) *The Handbook of Non-sexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers*, The Women's Press, London.
4. Notes should be kept to a minimum and combined with the text whenever possible. They should be numbered serially and placed at the end of the paper, as endnotes, before the references.
5. (a) The Journal uses the Author-Date (Harvard) System of referencing.  
The references should be included in the text.
- (b) References in the text give the author's surname and year of publication (with page number if necessary) in this style:

The major improvement concerns the structure of the interview (Ulrich and Trumbo 1965, p. 112)...Later reports (Carlson, Thayer, Mayfield and Peterson 1971) record greatly increased interviewer reliability for structured interviews...

Note that surnames only are used. Initials are only added to the surname when they are required to distinguish between authors of the same surname.

- (c) Where a reference contains the names of two or more authors, all names are given the first time the reference is cited; on subsequent occasions only the first name followed by 'et al.' is required except where this may cause ambiguity.
- (d) At the end of the article references are arranged in alphabetical order of authors' surnames and chronologically for each author. The author's surname is placed first, followed by the year of publication in parentheses.

For books, the layout is:

Smith, N. and Jones, M. (1979) *A Companion Guide to Good Authorship*, Social Work Press, Sydney.

For Journal articles the layout is:

Wright, O. (1969) 'Summary of research on the selection interview since 1964', *Personal Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 391-413.

For a chapter or article within a book compiled or edited by others, the layout is:

Morris, J. (1986) 'The art of the review' in Warren, E., *Innovations in Editing*, Bromley Press, Sydney, p. 8.

For electronic media (eg. internet websites), the layout is:

Collins, S. and Ryan, M. (2003) 'How to put a social work education journal together'. Retrieved November 5, 2003 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.socialworkjournals.com/doing-it/>

- (e) Where reference is made to more than one article or book by the same author published in the same year, use letters (a, b, etc.) to distinguish one from another eg. (Smith 1970a).
- (f) Papers with more than one author are listed after any sole publications by the first author, and in alphabetical order of second authors.

For further information refer to *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers* (1994), 5th edn, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

- 6. Spelling should conform to the usage of the Macquarie Dictionary and abbreviations should be kept to a minimum. Where appropriate spell all words with -ise, -isation, -ising (not -ize, etc.). The modern tendency to use single quotation marks rather than double is recommended. Frequent or lengthy quotations should be indented. No quotation marks are then necessary.
- 7. Paragraphs should be separated by double spacing, without indentation.

## **Editorial Policy**

**Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education** is the journal of the Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE), which is published twice yearly. The journal is managed by an editorial committee comprising national and international membership appointed by the Executive of AASWWE. There are two sections for publications: refereed publications and practice reflections. Refereed papers are anonymously reviewed by two readers of a panel of national and international reviewers. Reviewers are asked to offer constructive feedback to authors. Papers submitted to publication in the practice reflection section are reviewed by Editor and, in some instances, by a second member of the editorial committee.

The journal aims to showcase material which is of relevance to social work and welfare educators nationally, and where applicable, to link this with international

concerns. Papers which present innovative or challenging approaches to current educational philosophy and methodology are particularly encouraged. The material should be original and professionally presented. However a diversity of styles is welcomed, and reports on research from a variety of perspectives and research designs are particularly sought. Submissions from students and field educators are particularly encouraged, as are research or discussion papers that focus on field education and practice teaching.

**If Conference Papers are submitted then *only an Abstract* of the paper must appear in the published Conference Proceedings. All papers are published on the condition that they are the original work of the author and not published in any other form elsewhere.**

Articles may be accepted, returned for the revision, or rejected. The editorial committee may make minor alterations to articles on their own initiative. The decision of the editorial committee is final.

### **Subscription Costs**

Individuals: \$50.00

Institutions: \$60.00

International: \$70.00

All prices include GST.

### **Review And Publication Process**

The following is a summary of the review and publication process of the Journal.

1. Once a paper for consideration in the refereed publication section of the journal is received, the editorial committee decides on which reviewers the paper will be sent to - this is not just a random choice. Reviewers are selected because of their knowledge and interest in the topic to be reviewed. The name of the author is not disclosed to the reviewers. Papers submitted for consideration in the Practice Reflections will be initially reviewed by the editor who may then seek the advice of other members of the editorial committee in making a final determination about publication.
2. In the case of refereed articles, the article is returned to the editors with reviewers' comments attached. All reviewers review papers on a voluntary basis, as a service to their profession. Authors should allow three months from the time the article is received by **Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education** before expecting to receive reviewers' comments.
3. In a number of cases, both reviewers will recommend publication be considered after some revision or only minor changes. In others, both will recommend more major revision before publication could be considered. This may involve changing the length, clarifying expression, improving structure, changing some content or improving focus. This is quite a common occurrence and should not to be seen

as failure. In other cases, a paper will be rejected outright or major revisions recommended ie, a total rewrite. Reviewers all follow guidelines drawn up by the editorial committee.

4. Occasionally, reviewers will disagree on the outcome, for example, one will recommend publication, the other a rewrite or revision, or one may recommend rejection. In this case, a third opinion is sought, in conjunction with the editors or the editor may make a final determination based on an understanding of the paper and the requirements of the journal.
5. When an article is returned after revision, it is usually sent to one of the previous reviewers and one new reviewer for opinion. If only a small change in the article's length has been requested the revised version is usually sent to one previous reviewer and also considered by a member of the editorial committee. If only minor changes were needed, for example insertion of headings, correction of referencing, a member of the editorial committee will check to see if they have been carried out. The final decision on publication rests with the editorial committee.
6. When an article is being revised, editorial committee members are available for consultation with the author. In fact, at any stage of an article's production, editorial committee members may be consulted. They are listed on the first page of the Journal.
7. Once an article is accepted for publication, the editorial committee has the job of proofreading, editing and deciding the appropriate journal edition for publication, position, layout, etc. The editors are also interested in improving the clarity of unclear or woolly writing and may rewrite sentences and sections to improve clarity or expression.
8. Finally, the Journal is sent to the printer.
9. The time, from acceptance to publication, will vary according to the number of articles awaiting publication, length of article, topicality and publication of special theme issues.
10. The authors for the article receive one complimentary copy of the Journal in which their article appears.





