
Twenty years in an open-necked shirt* – A retrospective personal narrative

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Abstract

This article reflects upon two decades of statutory social work. It is both a personal history and an analytical account. The contested, paradoxical nature of practice is explored and exemplified. The intention of the narrative is to illustrate the experience of child protection work in this contradictory environment. The use of anecdote and opinion is designed to communicate something of what it is to act in such a multi-faceted, continually moving system. Statutory practice is an ambiguous experience of personal agency and political constraint. This account is both 'inside' and 'outside' of its subject and by this device some 'real', tangible approximation of the practice experience is attempted: the manner of telling is intended to mirror the nature of the subject. Some observations are made concerning developmental shifts and trends in statutory practice over the last 20 years. Some tentative conclusions are offered regarding the nature of this work, those who do it and what is required to do it well.

Introduction – practice in context

I left the employ of the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services in February 2004 after close to 20 years of social work practice. I have delayed committing words to paper in relation to my career in State social work, partly in the fanciful belief that the passage of time promotes objectivity and clarity. On reflection I suspect that, although distance does influence perspective, it does not alter the validity of the images captured. Looking back in narrative is a murky business at the best of times. Like a diver who gropes for the worn building blocks of an ancient city strewn across the ocean floor, the structure recreated is inevitably a blend of myth, anecdote and selective memory. Goldstein (1992: 117) characterises the 'real world' of social work practice as '...a rich mosaic inlaid with a fugitive assortment of recollected values, moral questions, myths and faiths'. Ferguson (2004: 1) describes contemporary child protection practice as follows:

There is a vitally important mode of modern work experience we know as child protection. It is to be part of a vast division of labour in a welfare state. It is an experience of time and space, of working simultaneously in public and private realms, of hourly home visits, office interviews, medical consultations, the working day and weekends. Of being part of large faceless bureaucracies that have the power to enter people's lives, their homes, communities and

* Title adapted from a 1978 recording of performance poet John Cooper Clarke – Ten years in an open-necked shirt.

to tear them apart by taking children into care, but only at the same time as it is to embody resources, initiatives and sources of strength which can also enable people, families and communities to pull together, to prevent them falling apart, to live to fight bureaucracy another day. It is thus an experience of power and control, but equally of caring and compassion: of helping and tending for others, of relieving the suffering of children and often their parents and other carers, many of whom no one else wants to know; of talking, listening, group meetings and often boring bureaucratic routine; of being blamed for the deaths of children or in other ways getting it wrong, and being made accountable and subject to managerial guidance and control. It is pervasively an experience of mobility, of acting at speed to reach children, of the emotions and senses and intimate engagement with the sights, sounds and smells of others' lives and homes, their tragedy and pain, which threatens to become the worker's own; of pervasive anxiety, risk, danger and despair, but some joy and laughs too. Of being part of the pathos and courage of people's ordinary everyday heroic struggle to get through the day, at the same time as workers may feel somehow courageous and heroic while making the chaos pay, acting at the interface between modern life's perils and possibilities. It is in total an experience of ambiguity and paradox in every action taken and decision made.

I have included this long quotation because it resonates deeply with my experience and, I suspect, with the experience of most social workers who have worked in child protection for any length of time. Child protection social work can be interrogated from numerous perspectives, but it is seldom explained as immediate and reflective lived experience – as a whole, 'acted in', experiential reality, which includes the continuous critical analysis of actions, interactions and associated beliefs.

The nature of the beast

As others have done (Buckley, 2000; Lloyd and Taylor, 1995; Lowenberg and Dolgoff, 1992), Ferguson articulates the ambiguity and conflict surrounding child protection work. More importantly, he provides a glimpse of the peculiar alchemy of embedded engagement and constant praxis which tends to envelop statutory social workers. This article sets out to convey some sense of this experience of working within a constantly moving, constantly challenging, and constantly paradoxical environment (Webb, 2001). The personal, slightly informal, register employed is intended to communicate this sense of lived story as opposed to generalised truth. I sometimes tell people that I stayed for 20 years because I made a list on 'Day One' and never reached the end of it. In all honesty I stayed for 20 years because no two days were the same and because I lived continuously 'in' the possibility of working with children and families to resource and facilitate positive change; brokering solutions, creating safety. Amid the sham, drudgery and broken dreams, this invigorating aspect of the work does happen, despite the challenging odds. I still believe social work to be a beautiful profession – an art for the most part, as opposed to a science of hypothesis and probability (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). As in Lipsky's (1980) conception of street-level bureaucracy, it is necessary to embrace contradiction and tolerate ambiguity. To practise in this field is to breathe a frustrating and tantalising mix of constraint and possibility in the here and now; to grapple with the immediacy of practice agency in a context of uncertainty. Heady stuff: potentially life changing, potentially lethal – use strictly under supervision!

An initiation commences

I started at the Otara office of the Social Work Division of the 'Department' (of Social Welfare) in 1984. I was 'not without issues' but I was keen. I was a socialist – of sorts; still am, sort

of. I had a family, a flax kete, a Morris 1100 and \$150 in the bank. I smoked roll-your-own cigarettes. I had travelled and seen a lot. Was I ready for Pearl Baker Drive, East Tamaki? Not really. The bare-floored, bare-walled poverty of South Auckland differs from the bare-earth, open-sky poverty of Africa. It is better hidden but no less stark, and it still disturbs me more. Social work inhabits the ideologically contested terrain between the 'big picture' and the circumstances of individual lives – public issues and private troubles; between capitalist economics and the human consequences of structural disadvantage (Fox-Harding, 1997; O'Brien, 2001). Within this space the practice gaze is generally directed towards the specific situations and behaviours of individual 'clients' and/or 'client families'. The crowded state house clusters of Otara and Mangere in the 1980s were built to accommodate the 'brown proletariat' of Maori and Pacific labour demanded by the economic growth of the post-war decades (Schwimmer, 1968). The explicit structural relationship between poverty and wealth in our society is implicitly obscured in orthodox socioeconomic discourse (Heilbroner and Milberg, 1995). Many families were pushed from the gentrifying suburbs of central Auckland by rising housing costs, and in some cases their social work file notes followed them. Property development and speculation as a means to accumulate private wealth is historically engrained in the middle New Zealand psyche and comes with this paradox attached.

Generic description can mislead and it is important to mention that the circumstances of most families encountered in this practice setting were far from sterile, and were often warm, culturally rich, funny, generous, chaotic, volatile and sometimes tragic. It is in the limited and often bleak choices and opportunities open to individuals, particularly children, that the fruits of urban poverty in Auckland are found (St. John, 2004). Partially in contrast and partially as a mirror image, it is the noise, clutter and continuous activity of the old Otara office that surfaces in hindsight. Teetering towers of manila files contained painstakingly assembled case records (to be read backwards from page one); selective histories of abusive and troubled client lives and of troubled institutional responses to those lives. It is the minutiae that adheres in memory – the unconsciously judgemental, time-bound, case notes, the dull-normal score on the Burt reading scale, the photograph of the jug flex welts on a Samoan child that trapped her in limbo at the 'palagi' family home. The telephones rang constantly, lingering cigarette smoke drifted through the office, the raucous imperatives of the Benefits Clerk engaged with a DPB applicant would rise above the collective hum – 'What d'ya mean ya dunno who the faaather is?' The paper forms for Special Needs Grants and for Place of Safety Warrants (to uplift children) occupied adjacent cubbyholes. At every Friday meeting the names of the young people appearing in Court were read out. Every Monday we tried to locate the runaways from Owairaka Boys Home or Bollard Girls.

Analysis, risk and paradox

Social workers within the intact, yet crumbling, welfare state bureaucracy of the mid 1980s balanced child protection cases alongside youth offending services, some community funding functions, foster care/institutional placements, housing needs, even services to 'individual adults with personal problems'(!). Paradoxically, material resources for child-centred intervention were probably easier to access than in the more focused and accountable child protection ethos of the new millennium. Practice quality was variable; many social workers laboured tirelessly and many became emotionally spent, as is the case today, while others concentrated on their personal survival. Many families received intermittent attention while

others were under closer, if variably productive, surveillance in the guise of 'supportive service' or 'preventative supervision'. Such client families experienced stresses associated with factors like alcohol and drug abuse, violence, physical and mental ill-health, child neglect and developmental impoverishment, sexual and/or physical exploitation. Long-term client families were variously labelled in the state social work culture as multi-problem, severely dysfunctional, or, if applicable, as 'white trash' (in the covert lexicon of practice). This 'truth', and mistrust of 'the welfare' born of experience, can be woven in to the historical wisdom of some client families. Ironically it is such resource-scarce, impoverished and excluded families, with an associated unwillingness or inability to accept their alleged failings or to adjust their parenting practices, who are the most likely to be confronted with the power of the State in the form of adversarial care proceedings. The welfare dependant deviant under-class so demonised in the rhetoric of neo-liberal moral panic is not a new phenomenon (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992; Lessnoff, 1994). Social work arguably evolved as a disciplinary practice directed towards the morally deficient poor of Victorian times (Himmelfarb, 1991; Tennent, 1989). Concomitantly, however, it is vital to be aware that neglect and maltreatment in the context of intra-familial violence and isolation can result in child death (Reder et al., 1993): paradox again.

Shifting winds / turning tides

Contradictory political and socio-cultural developments influenced the genesis of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act, 1989. Otara office was part of a multi-disciplinary Child Protection Coordinating Team pilot initiative in the mid 1980s. This entailed interrupting your hopelessly overloaded work schedule, clutching a 'red-stripe' child protection file and rushing off to explain to a huddle of earnest health-care professionals why it was that you were not doing enough to protect children. It is little wonder that the associated draft legislation which proposed that executive power be vested in such teams was strongly resisted by practitioners. Further, and more significantly, the 1980s saw a decade of social ferment, and of what has come to be referred to as a 'Maori Renaissance' (King, 1985). The spectre of racist practice drove the eventual acceptance of a 'whanau', as opposed to a 'professional centred' model for the 1989 legislation (Hyslop, 1997). This was a time of great optimism within the ranks of statutory social workers. For a period at least, one key paradox was resolved; the micro framework of practice could be aligned with the big picture of colonial injustice in Aotearoa / New Zealand, or so it appeared. Suffice to say that, like a Prague Spring, the bicultural idealism of the 1980s was run over, and severely disabled, by a more powerful ideological freight-train: the economic rationalism of the 1990s (Cheyne et al., 1997; Gregory, 1995).

It may be that the impulse to practise social work is a zealous spirit by nature (Lymberg, 2001). Certainly the tendency to throw the baby out with the bath water haunts practice development when policy is politically motivated and centrally controlled. When child sexual abuse emerged from the fog of adult blindness in the 1980s any emergent act of genital exploration resulted in a child-centred interview. Some numbing memories of abuse come to mind, none more than the benign clear eyed smile of a paedophile who systematically manipulated and abused scores of foster children in his care. Subsequently the routine videoing of child sexual abuse disclosures has not removed the need for children to give evidence in Court, albeit with greater privacy, support and sensitivity, and the obstacles to effective prosecution have grown. Anecdotally it seems that the focus on child sexual

abuse has waned. Perhaps the sexual victimisation of children has been reduced. Perhaps the consequences of disclosure and the discomfort of adults mean that the mist has rolled back in: more paradox.

Managing absurdity (at pace)

I became a social work supervisor in 1989, and still consider this to be the most influential role in child protection practice; at least in terms of the capacity to directly affect outcomes for clients. The maintenance of small teams is crucial in that the right balance of challenge and support, solidarity and openness can provide an environment for sound practice judgement (Howarth and Morrison, 1999), despite the hostility of agency management and the demands of unrealistic 'case-loads' (Holland, 1999; Hyslop, 1998). Morrison (1997) has explored the phenomenon of defensiveness and closure to which demand-saturated practice units are prone. I joined the Waitakere office of the organisation then known as the New Zealand Children, Young Persons, and their Families Service in 1992, and found this workplace to be an archotypically constipated communication system. Team supervisors who were metres apart in physical space communicated through evasive electronic messages, playing elaborate games of responsibility avoidance with unallocated or difficult practice scenarios. As resources withered and demand grew this level of siege mentality, dysfunction and waste became a feature of the organisation nationally. Inter-office games with names like 'Fifty reasons why this case can't be transferred here' or 'One hundred reasons why this is a youth justice rather than a child protection matter' were assiduously played out at great cost to client welfare. Similarly, of course, capacity reduction and the associated 'core business' focus across the public service created resource-intensive and seemingly interminable squabbles over which categories of 'need' the Health, Education and Welfare sectors were not responsible for (Easton, 1997; Schick, 1996).

A farewell to arms

Locally the best antidote for this kind of malaise is repeated naming of the unnameable communication blockages which occur. At the risk of triteness, the maintenance of practice teams, like the delivery of quality practice, is all about balance. Humour helps. A large helping of irreverence should be included in every social worker's survival kit. Resilience is, in part, a mindset; almost an acquired methodology. I often describe effective practice as akin to the progress of an acrobat along a beam. Within this metaphor is the notion of nurturing the ability to remount the apparatus – falling off goes with the territory. I must have supervised scores, perhaps a hundred or so, practitioners over time, who in turn provided services to thousands of clients. I encountered social workers of all shapes and forms. I pondered over thousands of practice strategies, read tens of thousands of case notes, often in my own time – such is the consuming, perhaps compulsive and addictive, nature of statutory child protection. Please excuse any implied grandiosity but I would like to thank all of those workers for their tenacity and perseverance. It is the social workers with a passion for the task of empowering practice with children and families who make a difference. The interview selection criteria for prospective CYFS social workers warned against those with a 'cause to follow'. Oddly it is this inspired quality which distinguishes the extraordinary practitioners that I have met. Analysis can be learned. Empathetic communication probably can't be taught, but it can be developed if the ability is present. Passion and heart, however, are wholly intrinsic qualities. Without passion, social workers may function as very capable operatives within the statutory child protection

system but they will never generate inspired practice. Such client-driven, multi-tasking, committed workers are, of course, all the more likely to 'burn out' – to implode or explode in what can be a very unforgiving environment: paradox resurfaces.

In the mid to late 1990s particularly, when the farcical high tide of output-focused managerialism reached its peak, we had to slavishly account for the production of numerically categorised output sub-classes recorded within five minute intervals for every working day. I recall the experience of all those tension-filled allocation meetings when the white noise of practice anxiety filled the air; of workers breaking down at the threat of 'one more case' – and subsequently talking them in to taking it anyway. This vignette stays with me as much as the gut-wrenching memory of child deaths. Deaths, like the collapse of social workers, can come unexpectedly. The risky decisions that are agonised over generally progress well. It is the blind-spots, the lack of information, inattention to the detail of client context, the events you don't see coming that kosh you over the back of the head. Risk management and the situational flexibility required for quality child protection work fit poorly with a system that is obsessed with production efficiency (and the preoccupation with measurement, counting and compliance which accompany such a practice environment). I have seen the family group conference process of crisis, catharsis and resolution, generate a platform for whanau healing and change. I have also witnessed the travesty of processes that are inadequately planned, prepared, resourced and reviewed. Internal debate about the reality of policy application is minimised in compliance-driven management systems. The introduction of a Risk Estimation System developed, but paradoxically never adopted in Manitoba, Canada, is a good exemplar. Although a useful tool to augment the decision making process, the question in a centrally controlled and politicised environment became not 'Was it useful?', but 'Have you done it?'

Practice futures – hope is perennial.

Child protection is, then, fraught with paradox and ambiguity. Children are often removed from dangerous familial situations, only to experience multiple placements and sometimes abuse in foster care. Foster parents and kin carers are chronically under-supported (Worrall, 2005). An adversarial system based on forensic investigation and identification of abuse and responsibility is unhorsed when no fault is admitted. Social workers find themselves faced with the dilemma of either over- or under-intervention. Further, a fault-based system is ethically challenged when parental failure is a result of inadequacy or incapacity, and neither the State nor prevailing social structures enable such families to function in supported environments (Hyslop, 2002). It is evident that strategies for dealing with resistance and denial, and the fostering of cooperative as opposed to oppositional and entrenched relationships are required (Hiles and Luger, 2006; Turnell and Edwards, 1999). Scott (2006) argues that the situation is critical and that Western anglophile child protection systems have become destructive, self defeating juggernauts. The jury is out as to whether the current development of the differential response concept and the associated movement to distinguish between situations of abuse and those of need (and to spread the load of child and family practice between the State and the NGO sector) will provide a way forward (MSD, 2005; Waldegrave, 2006). This is an area ripe for further critical analysis.

What is clear to me is that social workers in this context will always inhabit disputed territory; a turbulent vortex where political, professional, organisational and personal

conflicts intersect and interact (Cooper, 2001). Social workers must not only survive in this flux, they must think and act under pressure you can almost taste, and do so in real 'tick-ing' time. Social work is an ambiguous mixture of care and control but it is never passive. It is always a political act in the sense that influencing the circumstances of an individual or family inevitably involves a realignment of power and resources; even if the change is perceptual rather than purely material. Sometimes the key to effective engagement is simply to stop and think lucidly when the demand to take action is greatest (Morrison, 1997). There is a certain 'look' that can be seen in an experienced child protection practitioner – a 'stillness' – not avoidance of complexity or the frozen disablement that practice dilemmas can induce, but a calmness, a layered attentiveness that comes from occupying the eye of the storm. There is no room for complacency in this orientation and it is not about pure logic or detachment, except in the service of commitment to client need. What is surprising is how often social workers do 'get it right', and how often families find the strength to rise from the most traumatic and disabling experiences.

Conclusion – A word to the wise

So, what have I learned from 20 years of this exhausting, frustrating and immensely rewarding work? First, that social workers and their managers are no less gifted or flawed than the rest of humanity – no less free of idealism and hope or prejudice and self interest, and that these characteristics transcend all barriers of class, race, religion, gender and sexual identity. Secondly, that although some social change is revolutionary, it is more often contested, incremental and hard won. And finally, some powerful insight as to the best and worst of the human condition: people are vulnerable, especially small children. We are all capable of depravity in extremis and we also carry infinite possibility. Paradox and ambiguity: just a small question of balance. The balance required for high quality social work practice involves, among other things, the maintenance of honesty, integrity, humility and courage. The capacity to work in a conflicted milieu – to see both the wood and the trees and to respect the dignity of all people – is an ethical craft that must be nurtured. Theory, systems, procedures and frameworks that take cognisance of the emotional intelligence and creativity of practitioners are needed. These qualities are essential if the inherent tensions in this work are to be successfully mediated. I have found that initiatives which are developed and applied locally, and are informed by practice-based learning, are often the most effective. I am encouraged whenever practitioners take individual and collective ownership of practice. Structural / political arrangements in the form of legal and managerial systems are, by their nature, unlikely to consistently support this process. Accordingly, and as a vital fallback position, I have found the mantra of Alan Sillitoe's anti-hero from the 1958 novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, to be a priceless talisman: 'Never let the bastards grind you down!'

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