

**School of Social Work and Social Policy**

**Enacting the Interpretive Turn: Narrative Means Toward  
Transformational Practice in Child Protection Social Work**

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**THIS THESIS IS PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
Curtin University of Technology**

**December 2006**

## **Declaration**

**This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.**

**To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.**

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**Andrew Turnell, Ph.D. Candidate**

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**Date**

## **Acknowledgements**

The inquiry work presented in this exegesis and the related publications and DVD's is built around the work of many child protection social workers from many locations who I have worked with over many years. These include, Rob Sawyer, Sue Lohrbach, Cindy Finch, Linda Billman, Donna Smyrk, Kari Hohn and Scott Curran from Olmsted County, Minnesota. Viv Hogg, Kath O'Leary, Sharon Elliot, Gloria English and Marjorie James from Gateshead Social Services, England, Ann Gardestrom, Anna Svensonn and Christine Witt from Stockholm, Ann Manzi and Janet Flood, from Barnardos Dundee in Scotland, Jim Laffer from Perth and Craig Smith, from Wellington, New Zealand. All of these professionals have willingly shared their practice experiences and knowledges and then worked with me on creating the written accounts and DVD's. They have given me the opportunity to continually learn more about the child protection task. I especially want to acknowledge Susie Essex from Bristol, it has been one the greatest privileges of my career to learn from, work and write with Susie.

Without my supervisor Associate Professor Fran Crawford this project would not have began let alone been completed. Thank you Fran for your support and help over the past five years.

Finally, I want to thank my partner Sonja Parker and my sons Jeremy and Keayn de Vries-Turnell for all their love and support throughout the life of this project. Sonja and Jeremy thank you also for all the technical, editing and subtitling work on the DVDs.

## **Abstract**

This PhD project is undertaken by publication and thus this exegesis offers an explication and linking interpretation of the publications and DVD's listed in section two. The exegesis 'frames-up' what has been an ongoing interpretive inquiry exploring constructive frontline child protection social work undertaken by the author in collaboration with practitioners in Europe, North America and Australasia that has given rise to the publications and DVDs.

Taking the lead from Geertz's ideas of interpretive anthropology the aim of this inquiry and publication work is to develop descriptions and theories of practice drawing upon insiders' local knowledges and sense-making of what constitutes good child protection social work. 'The natives' or insiders toward which this interpretive project directs its attention are first and foremost, frontline child protection social workers and wherever possible the child protection service recipients who have experienced the practice of those workers. The publication component of this project is a vital and integrated part of the research process since it is through the writing and production work that the usually overlooked, often deemed 'tacit' knowledges of service delivers and recipients are brought into the formal domain and made accessible to others.

This project is undertaken with transformative intent. The first intent being to distil the wisdom of insiders' knowledges into richly detailed formal accounts of good practice that speaks directly to the practitioner's condition thereby enhancing their professional reflexivity, hope and capacity. The second intent is to provide constructive on-the-ground 'news of difference' for a child protection field that is over-organised by anxiety, worst-case outcomes and an obsession with managers' measures.

The exegesis is formulated around the research question, *What potential does interpretive social theory have for transforming child protection social work?* My conclusion is that while interpretive social theory offers significant epistemological and methodological resources for transforming the practices and orientation of child protection social work, this potential will not be realised until the social work displays renewed ontological commitment and faith in the knowledges and everyday experience of frontline practitioners.

## **Statement of Contribution of Others**

All of the written materials submitted as part of this PhD by Publication were conceived and co-ordinated by Andrew Turnell. All of the writing for each publication was undertaken by Andrew Turnell excepting for two sections in the book chapter Teoh, A.H., Laffer, J., Parton, N. and Turnell, A. (2003). Trafficking in meaning: Constructive social work in child protection practice. In C. Hall, K. Juhila, N. Parton, & T. Pösö (Eds.), *Client as practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Signed detailed statements from each co-author relating to each publication are provided as appendices at the back of this volume.

Signed:

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**Andrew Turnell, Ph.D. Candidate**

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**Associate Professor Frances Crawford, Supervisor**

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**Date**

## **Publications and DVD's Submitted as Part of Thesis**

The following publications and DVD's were submitted for examination as part of this PhD by publication. The publications are not provided with this thesis due to publishers' stipulations regarding their use but are all readily available in their published form.

### **Publications**

- Teoh, A.H., Laffer, J., Parton, N. and Turnell, A. (2003). Trafficking in meaning: Constructive social work in child protection practice. In C. Hall, K. Juhila, N. Parton, & T. Pösö (Eds.), *Client as practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Turnell, A. (2004). Relationship-grounded, safety-organised child protection practice: Dreamtime or real-time option for child welfare? *Protecting Children*, 19(2): 14-25.
- Turnell, A. (2006). Constructive Child Protection Practice: An Oxymoron or News of Difference? *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 25(2): 3-12.

- Turnell, A., Elliott, S. and Hogg, V. (2007). Compassionate, safe and rigorous child protection practice with parents of adopted children. *Child Abuse Review*, 16(2): 108-119.
- Turnell A., Lohrbach, S. and Curran, S. (in press). Working with the 'involuntary client' in child protection: lessons from successful practice. In M. Calder (Ed.) *The carrot or the stick? Towards effective practice with involuntary clients*, London: Russell House Publishing.
- Turnell A. and Essex S. (2006). *Working with situations of 'denied' child abuse: the Resolutions approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

#### DVD's

- *'Ladybird, ladybird'*.

This DVD presents interviews with Gateshead social services worker (Sharon Elliott) and parents (Paul and Wendy) in a case where the social work practice resulted in the parents of 7 adopted children being able to successfully take custody of the eighth. The papers Turnell, Elliott and Hogg, Forthcoming; Turnell, 2006, draw upon this practice example.

- *'Investigating domestic violence'*

This DVD presents an interview with Kath O'Leary social services worker from Gateshead, UK regarding an investigation she undertook in circumstances where an eighteen-month child is caught up in a situation of severe domestic violence. This example is utilised in Turnell and Essex 2006.

- *'A mother's experience of good CPS practice'*

This DVD presents a Minnesotan, Ethiopian mother's view of constructive child protection practice that enabled her to be reunited with her two children who had been removed on grounds of physical abuse. This example is drawn upon in Turnell, 2004.

- *'On the receiving end'*

This DVD presents an interview of Ah Hin Teoh, a Chinese, Malaysian man who relates his 5 year struggle to get his children back from the Western Australian child protection department. Ah Hin's case is well known in Australia since his circumstances lead to federal government proposing the 'Teoh legislation' that was to undo Australian commitments as a signatory to the UN Rights of the Child.

This interview forms the backbone of the chapter Teoh, Laffer, Parton, and Turnell, 2003.

- *'Investigating a dispute regarding an injured infant'*

This DVD presents interviews with Olmsted County investigative child protection worker (Donna Smurk) and parents (Destiny and Chris) in a case where doctors alleged the parents had injured their baby. The parents disputed this allegation. This example is utilised in Turnell and Essex 2006.

### **Additional Publications by Candidate Relevant to the Thesis**

- Turnell, A. (1993). *Moving faster with less effort: Myself as poet, weaving a passionate life*. Unpublished Masters Thesis, Oakland: Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality, Holy Names College.
- Turnell, A. (2001). Humour in therapy: reflections from practice, *Context*. Winter, 18-22.
- Turnell, A. (2006b). Tecken på säkerhet - Signs of Safety på svenska. In M. Söderquist & A. Suskin-Holmqvist, A. (Eds.), *Delaktighet -*

*Lösningfokuserat förhållningssätt i utredningsarbete.* Stockholm: Mareld.

- Turnell A. (in press a). Solution-focused brief therapy: thinking and practicing beyond the therapy room. In F. Thomas and T. Nelson (Eds.), *Clinical Applications of Solution-focused Brief Therapy*, Birmingham: Haworth Press USA.
- Turnell A. (in press b). *Building safety in child protection practice: working from a strengths perspective.* London: Palgrave.
- Turnell A. and Edwards S. (1997). Aspiring to partnership: The signs of safety approach to child protection casework, *Child Abuse Review*, 6, 179 - 190.
- Turnell A. & Edwards S. (1999). *Signs of safety: a solution and safety oriented approach to child protection casework.* New York: Norton.
- Turnell A. & Hopwood L. (1994a). Solution-focused brief therapy: A first session outline, *Case Studies in Brief and Family Therapy*, 8(2), 39-51.

- Turnell A. & Hopwood L. (1994b). 'Solution-focused brief therapy: An outline for second and subsequent sessions' *Case Studies in Brief and Family Therapy*, 8(2), 52-64.
- Turnell A. & Hopwood L. (1994c). " Solution-focused brief therapy: Case closure and ideas for the 'stuck' cases" *Case Studies in Brief and Family Therapy*, 8(2), 65-75.

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**DVD's**

*'Ladybird, ladybird revisited'*

*'Investigating domestic violence'*

*'A mother's experience of good CPS practice'*

*'On the receiving end'*

*'Investigating a dispute regarding an injured infant'*

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### **1 Child Protection Social Work As If The Practitioner Matters**

*this is a song from under the floorboards*

*this is a song from where the wall it is cracked*

*by force of habit I am an insect*

*I must confess I'm proud as hell about that . . . (Howard Devoto, 1979)*

From the front door of the family home on which the investigative social worker must knock, to the floor of parliament where child welfare legislation is debated, perspectives about child protection practice are multiple and contested. Every position regarding child abuse whether professional, lay, journalistic, bureaucratic or political, every theory, policy and practice designed to address the problem usually holds merit as well as iatrogenic potential. Focused on the increasingly iconic entity of the 'vulnerable child' (Parton, 2006), child protection practice attracts scrutiny, opinion and attention like no other area of social work practice. For most people, just the

idea of child maltreatment, let alone direct experience of it engenders anxiety followed almost immediately by a demand for answers to the problem.

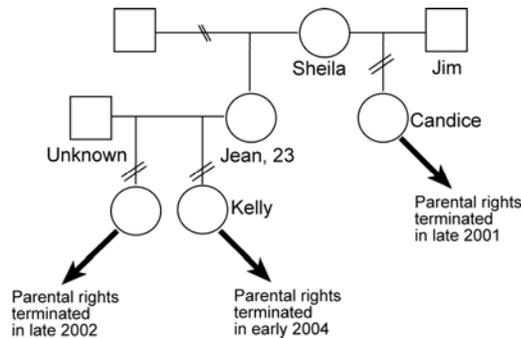
This is the context in which the social work profession engages with and continually negotiates its relationship to child protection practice. The relationship between social work and the child protection enterprise has a long and mutually defining history. At every level, the child protection endeavour is alive with contradictions, tensions and ambiguities while perversely being increasingly propelled by the late modern idea that every risk is identifiable and controllable and every error can be charged to someone's account (Parton, 1998b). Working in statutory child protection in the 2000's therefore has become a quintessential Giddenesque 'riding the juggernaut' experience of late-modernity (Ferguson, 2004). Being simultaneously such an institutionalised and public activity, child protection work also tends to function as a deeply convex mirror in which the social work profession sees some of its most unsettling challenges and self- and other-perceptions confronting it in disconcertingly enlarged shape.

Front-line child protection practitioners function in the midst of this maelstrom on a daily basis and while facing all of these demands they are meant to improve the lives of vulnerable children. While so much is expected of the statutory social worker, their lived experiences, their knowledges and their practice wisdom is almost entirely overlooked by researchers,

academics and the institutions they work with. More than this, when attention is directed toward the front-line practitioners they are typically framed as part of the problem of the child protection enterprise. This project turns on the idea that the taken-for-granted knowledges of the practitioner can have a significant transformative influence on the child protection endeavour. To ground this exegesis in the insiders' territory I aspire to negotiate and to help me explain the way I have approached this inquiry and writing work I want to offer three typical stories of social workers' lived experience of practicing and making sense of child protection work.

## 1.1 Child protection social work: three insiders' stories

### *Kath's Story*



In August 2005, Kath O'Leary, an access and assessment worker at Gateshead Social Services asked me to meet with a 23-year old woman we will call 'Jean' who had lost her parental rights to both of her two children in two separate statutory interventions. Jean's first child was removed from her care at birth when she was 18. Jean, a woman with severe learning difficulties lived with her mother, 'Sheila' and the mother's partner 'Jim'. Sheila and Jim had themselves lost their parental rights to their four year-old daughter, 'Candice' one year prior to the birth of Jean's first child when Candice disclosed that she had been repeatedly sexually abused in incidents initiated by Jim but often also including Sheila and Jean.

Jean was unaware of both pregnancies even as labour began and it seemed likely that Jim was the father of both of Jean's children, however Jim refused to take a DNA test regarding this possibility. Kath became involved with Jean in late 2003 as the child protection worker responsible for the

assessment leading to the adoption of Jean's second child, 'Kelly'. The work Kath undertook with Jean is some of the most remarkable investigative and assessment child protection work I have ever encountered. Kath's efforts to engage Jean, a woman she could very easily have written off as a hopeless case, went beyond anything I have ever heard an investigative child protection worker do in a similar case.

In the first three meetings between Jean and Kath, Jean was extremely hostile and verbally aggressive toward Kath. Kath was very mindful that she would very likely be recommending termination of Jean's parental rights, but given the high stakes of the situation, Kath was determined to do everything she could to involve Jean in the assessment and decision making process. To this end Kath supervised several contacts between Jean and Kelly and at the end of one such contact Kath almost without thinking began to speak to Jean in an infant's voice 'as if' she was Kelly. To Kath's surprise Jean immediately responded when she asked in a high-pitched shaky voice, 'will I be safe if I come to live with you mummy?' Following this, Kath spent two sessions with Jean undertaking a child protection risk assessment as if she was Kelly. Although Kath's subsequent court report recommended adoption, most particularly because of the risk posed by Jim and the people he associated with, Kath had been able to engage Jean in the decision making process. In this way, Jean fully understood and accepted Kath's decision.

I first heard about this piece of work in April 2004 while leading a collaborative, appreciative group inquiry process involving Kath and thirty of her Gateshead child protection colleagues looking at practice they felt proud of. From the videotaped interview I undertook with Kath from that occasion I prepared a first written draft of the practice. Following this Kath worked with me in a successive editing and refining process that brought the description into a final form. Thus a fuller description of Kath's work with Jean can be found in Turnell and Essex, (2006, pp. 164-166). This collaborative inquiry process of exploring and writing up the casework in which Kath and I were together staking a claim for this work as 'good practice', led Kath to voice a major struggle she was having regarding her involvement with Jean. (I had previously documented another example of Kath's practice which is presented in the DVD *Investigating Domestic Violence* accompanying this exegesis and will also be described in Turnell, in press b)

In the eighteen months following the hearings that lead to the termination of Jean's parental rights Jean continued to come to Kath's office at least once a week and would often tell Kath: 'You are my best friend'. Kath commented to me that this statement by Jean would almost break her heart and would leave her wondering, 'How can Jean feel this when I was the professional at the centre of her losing her parental rights to Kelly?' By making herself vulnerable, working creatively and doing everything she could think of to engage Jean, Kath found herself having to deal with the fact that she had

come to care deeply for Jean. Jean's visits led Kath to wonder where does care and concern fit in with her role as a professional social worker? Kath at times felt judged by others around her for continuing to have contact with Jean. More crucially, Kath herself was worried that she was being unprofessional by maintaining a connection with Jean.

Because of her uncertainty about how she was acting and feeling towards Jean, Kath asked me to interview Jean about Jean's experience of Kath's intervention in her life. At one point I asked Jean to rate Kath on a zero to ten scale as a professional involved with her to determine whether she could keep her child. Zero would mean Jean saw Kath as the worst she could imagine a professional could be (at this point Jean described several professionals she identified as 'zero's) and ten was the best she could hope such a professional could be. Where would she rate Kath? Jean immediately and unhesitatingly said: 'Ten!' Kath was embarrassed and said to Jean 'You don't have to say that because I'm here, you can say whatever you think'. Jean shook her head and made it clear she was stating exactly what she felt. Silence in the room was followed by Kath observing, 'The problem is I care for her - I know that is unprofessional but I do, I really care for Jean'.

I found myself responding: 'Did your care for Jean mean you didn't think carefully about safety for Jean's baby? Did your care for Jean mean you didn't take the action you thought was necessary to provide for the baby's

wellbeing? So, where is the unprofessional part of you caring for Jean, when you are working in what is supposed to be a caring profession?

### *Craig's Story*

In January 2006, a close colleague, mentor and friend, Craig Smith drew to a close a 30-year career in statutory child protection in New Zealand. For the final part of his career Craig was the acting or substantive chief social worker for Child Youth and Family Services New Zealand. In that position he was responsible for the practice of all statutory child protection social workers in the country, which frequently saw him answering to the media regarding the practice of statutory practitioners in critical cases and situations of child deaths. In late 2004, following a major restructure of the department, Craig lost his position as chief social worker. After this, to take a break and give him time to consider his options Craig with his wife Di holidayed in India where Craig experienced what he described as an epiphany about his career. Coming to India started to make Craig think differently about the child protection task and he mused - 'Where would I start if I had responsibility for protecting children in this country?' Following this Craig and Di were on a small boat on the Ganges when the boatman pointed out a small bundle, a dead baby, floating past them in the river. The boatman indicated that this was not an uncommon sight for him. Craig's attention was riveted on the small corpse thinking that if this had occurred in New Zealand that baby

would be viewed by others but more importantly by himself as his responsibility. Following that thought came the epiphany, with Craig asking himself, 'What was I thinking, to believe every dead baby was somehow my responsibility and that I could keep every child in the country safe?'

### *Sarah's Story*

The final story involves a close friend we will call Sarah who works in an early intervention programme for high-risk children in one of the poorest areas of Perth. In late 2005 Sarah contacted me and asked for a case consultation regarding a particular case. As she and I were working through the case details I was left wondering what it was that was worrying Sarah so much, as I had known her to work with much more difficult cases than the one we were discussing. After some reflection I pointed this out to Sarah and in response she suddenly broke down, crying and sobbing for a long time. After she calmed herself, Sarah told me it was not actually the case that we were talking about that worried her rather it was the legacy of a previous case that left her feeling anxious and distressed.

The previous year Sarah had been involved with a family in which a man had forced his paraplegic wife to watch for several hours as he dug a brick-lined grave in their backyard. Having completed the digging, the man had told his wife he would be putting her in that grave soon. All of this happened

in the presence of their small children. After the man had done all this he left the house and the mother immediately rang Sarah telling her that she was the only person she could turn to. (Sarah had previously worked with the mother helping her to set up workable care routines for her children after a car accident that had left her paralysed.) Sarah spent five hours at the woman's house calming her and helping with the children and facing the husband with the mother when he returned to the home. Sarah subsequently contacted the statutory child protection authorities but was unable to get them to take up the case. Other professionals Sarah talked to expressed their concern about the situation but also offered no assistance. Sarah felt isolated in dealing with this case with no support and also felt that the problems the mother faced were somehow her fault; in her mind she concluded that if she had been more professional, things would have been better for this woman.

## **1.2 Staking a claim for the practice wisdom of frontline child protection social workers**

This exegesis and the inquiry that informs it turns on the idea of staking a claim for the lived experience and practice wisdom of child protection social workers as a transforming influence upon the predominantly rational-technical culture of the child protection field. The sort of practitioners' lived experience captured in the stories we have just considered are largely left out of the theory, research, practice frameworks, legislation, protocols and guidance which make up the formal accounts of child protection social work. Paradoxically, most of these formal texts are targeted at shaping the practitioners' work. It is my contention that child protection endeavour has in the main therefore been defined by outsiders' accounts of the task. The formal texts rarely 'speak to the practitioners' condition' (to coopt a Quaker term), to the sorts of insiders' anxieties and dilemmas reflected in these stories that regularly cause practitioners to lose sleep and constantly be questioning themselves, 'Did I get it right?' Though child protection social workers do not in my experience use the terms 'insiders' and 'outsiders' accounts they very commonly speak of the formal texts as missing their experience of the work they have to do. In this sense practitioners often view the texts as outside their day-to-day experience of the work.

This thesis proceeds on my 'whitefella's' view that child protection work is organised and practiced through and from an embedded and dominating culture of paternalism and colonisation. In Australia we know this story well - our history of child protection has seen us create a stolen generation of aboriginal children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). These people are now adults and this history effects every current Australian statutory child protection department and directly impacts on every piece of practice child protection workers undertaken in this country whether with black or white families. While this embedded paternalism has most certainly been questioned and critiqued, paternalism has a hydra-like capacity to reinvent itself within the culture of professional child protection organizations and social structures that inform them.

To define my terms here when I write of paternalism I mean simply a culture that fosters the assumption 'I' the professional come to 'you', the person with problems, as the objective expert in what is wrong with your situation and what needs to be done to solve it. This is a perspective that easily allows the professional-as-expert to colonise the experience of the service recipient. This assumption of objective professional expertise and of paternalism can be seen as a, if not the, dominating discourse within the helping professions and by implication locates the professional in a position of assumed authority. In child protection this presumed position of professional authority is further reinforced by the social, legislative, political and organisational legitimation

the practitioner is assigned to intervene in people's lives where children are deemed at risk or vulnerable. This is a charged undertaking, rife with late modern challenges, contradictions and social imperatives that cascade in upon the frontline practitioner.

Not the least of these contradictions for the child protection social worker is that most of their training and professional proclivity is defined by a social work profession that is loath to see itself as coercive but instead prefers to frame itself as acting in solidarity with the poor or at least as a profession that empowers clients rather than acts upon them. Most social work discourse reads as if practitioners are either activists or therapists but these are a disingenuous couplet of social work framings since neither role comes to terms with the on-the-ground imperatives that face statutory and probably most social workers (Healy, 1998; 2000; de Montigny, 1995; Clark, 2000).

It is perhaps closer to the mark to observe that most social workers and certainly statutory child protection social workers are enacting professional roles that are socially negotiated, constructed and mandated within a shifting and evolving sea of meanings about what it is to be 'in need', 'vulnerable', 'at risk', 'a helper', 'caregiver', 'child protection worker', 'abused', 'neglected', 'a child'. As Ferguson (2004) observes at any given moment these meanings are framed within the child protection milieu as if they are solid and substantial but they have a habit of dissolving into air at a moment's notice under the

gaze of death inquiries, administrative reviews, state audits or media scrutiny, not to mention the impact of meeting the next family.

Child protection social work is undertaken in organizations that constantly seek to manage the fear and anxieties of the endeavour by seeking to 'deodorise, decontextualise, and sanitise' the work (Ferguson 2004, p. 213). The idea that every risk and every human trouble can be managed and that the professional can 'get it right' is the rampant myth that drives the child protection endeavour in a late modern society (Ferguson, 2004; Munro, 1999b; 2004; Parton, 1998b). All this in a context in which the idea of the vulnerable child is becoming an increasingly iconic entity (Parton, 2006). These are the sorts of 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts where every practitioner has direct experience of the whole child protection endeavour constantly speeding up.

Within these contexts child protection workers face or can expect to face some very ugly, cold, hard day-to-day human actualities such as dead babies, children abused by adults meant to be caring for them and parents whose own lives have been damaged by their own histories of abuse, poverty, deprivation and oppression. While many in the social work profession strive to constantly question and challenge paternalism as it is embedded in our lives and society, at the very same time that social workers do this we are also constantly invited and in fact called upon by our child

protection role and the organisations and authorities we represent to act out the role of coloniser.

The child protection field in my view constantly manifests a yearning for the professional to be able to adopt an objective 'god's eye view' (Putnam, 1981, p. 56) about the problems they work with. This hope can be seen as the embedded assumption that is manufactured, duplicated, and generated in almost every new child protection procedure, policy, assessment framework and practice manual. I write about this in many of my writings particularly in Turnell and Essex, 2006. The dominating view of the professional as the agent of objective expertise drives an anxious child protection field but it is an outsiders' view. The vulnerable, uncertain lived experience of the frontline practitioner and anyone who has much dealing with frontline practice is much better reflected and distilled in the three stories presented above. These however are hidden stories, largely untold and they simply don't fit within the deodorised, decontextualised, ordered and idealised visions of what child protection social work is meant to be about within the dominant, dominating discourses of the bureaucracy and the academy.

This PhD project and my work over 13 years is an attempt at constructing an insiders' account of constructive child protection social work within the escalating madness that is the day-to-day organisational and social reality of child protection social work. I have attempted to do this not by starting my

inquiry in the 'idealizations of the texts and the high aspirations of the academy' (de Montigny, 1995, p. 109) but rather with the on-the-ground experience and knowledges of frontline practitioners and wherever possible the knowledges of services recipients about what good practice looks, feels and lives like to them.

I have made the best attempt I have been able to, to write and account for child protection as if the practitioner and service recipient matter. I have attempted an insiders's view. This is a constantly evolving journey undertaken in relationship with service recipients, practitioners, team leaders, managers and organizations that I am involved with as a consultant in Europe, North America and Australasia. Every time I write up an account or create a DVD, I and those I am researching, writing and in production with learn more. When I then use these resources to teach and consult with practitioners in the locations I work, the insiders' stories in these texts and DVD's evolve further as they resonate with the practitioners in that place.

Seeking to elicit and privilege insiders' stories of constructive child protection practice is no neutral endeavour, the undertaking feels (certainly to me) both risky and uncertain. While the child protection system favours certainty I am never certain of the exact merit of any of my written or videoed accounts of practice and the interpretations I bring to them. Most

particularly because I am seeking to identify and stake a claim for particular practice as constructive in an arena where social work practice is often intensely scrutinised and highly contested. Although I do not believe it is possible to get a 'right' account of practice never-the-less I am routinely question myself did I get it right, by which I probably mean is this a fair interpretation of what happened? In seeking to privilege the understandings of those closest to the action I may be overlooking alternative critical interpretations and other experiences of that same practice. For this reason I endeavour wherever possible to involve service recipients in the creation of the stories of practice since professional accounts can easily overlook and/or silence the perspectives of children and parents. Increasingly I am also seeking to integrate others' perspectives, particularly supervisors and managers. For all this I cannot claim to have created definitive accounts of practice and it is undoubtedly the case in the contested domain of child protection that others will have alternative views about the practice stories themselves and the methodology I use to elicit and create them.

The inquiry work presented here is therefore offered as a tentative not definitive research journey - the accounts emerge phenomenologically from local experiences but at the same time they often make sense and resonate far more universally. The knowledges and accounts are generalisable and recognisable between contexts, I know this from working in many different jurisdictions across the world. Often I present a DVD to practitioners in one

location - say in an Aboriginal agency in rural Chilliwack Canada - and the workers there will be enchanted, moved and affirmed to recognise their experience and their work in the story of a practitioner of another country, say a practitioner from Gateshead, working in a poor housing estate in urban England. The learning process becomes amplified and more powerful when I am able to facilitate connections and discussions between practitioners in different countries and contexts. I will describe more about the feedback processes I have been involved with in this regard later in the methodology section.

My research and writing work can also be read as an exploration of the longstanding social work 'theory-practice' dilemma and I want to give some consideration to this in the next chapter before coming to methodological considerations.

## 2 Locating This Inquiry Within Social Work's Journey With Theory And Practice

Social work is a strange beast; so much about being a social worker feels precarious wherever one is located in the profession. On the one hand, social work was created and is in large measure sustained and energised by people of passion and compassion who are sensitised to everyday human experience and seek to make a difference for folk who are disadvantaged or in difficulty. On the other hand, social work is not simply about individual caring, philanthropy or activism, it is as Howe (1994, p. 513) identified 'a child of modernity'<sup>1</sup>. Social work came into being and was formalised as western societies sought structured and institutionalised ways of softening the human damage of industrialisation and urbanisation. Social workers while they are individually concerned with human troubles are inescapably institutional beings. As a close colleague, Teeside University social work lecturer Terry Murphy commented to me when offering a critique of the 'heroic lone practitioner' motif he saw in my signs of safety book (Turnell and Edwards, 1999), 'never forget that social workers are disciplined practitioners in disciplined organisations'.

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<sup>1</sup> The themes of modernity, post and late-modernity recur throughout this exegesis. In the final chapter I offer a fuller exploration of these terms. Drawing on Howe's paper and for our purposes here modernity can be described as the tradition and era of western thought which privileges objective rationality and systemic inquiry as the mechanisms by which to discover the universal truths that are seen to make for right ordering of human affairs.

Social work has always been marked and populated by people who want to take action, and thus the predominant reason a person becomes a social worker is that they want to 'help', and thereby make a difference in others' lives. Part of the precariousness of the social work role lies in the fact that usually the more experience a social worker gains, the more complex, contested and uncertain the idea of 'helping' becomes. The seemingly simple actions of helping and caring, particularly when burdened by being a professional endeavour within institutional contexts are not nearly so simple the more one reflects and tries to wrap ideas around those acts. Kath's story in the previous chapter is just one example of trying to make sense of what it means to care within statutory social work.

Social work is a relatively young profession, fashioned within rapidly changing modernist societies and allocated the task of developing ameliorative responses to some of the darkest social spaces in those societies. As the profession has evolved, social workers have sought to elevate both the social status of the caring work they do and also their identity as a profession. In this process social workers have made many and varied attempts to describe the help we provide and to stake a claim for the uniqueness and importance of social work. A large element of the precariousness of being a social worker has been the ongoing difficulty the profession has faced in meaningfully articulating what we do in ways that

convinces ourselves as well as outside stakeholders. Trying to wrap ideas around the effectiveness and importance of social work within the institutional and social contexts in which we operate has always been a precarious business particularly because caring work is so often socially devalued.

Throughout its history the social work profession has struggled with how to stake knowledge claims for its expertise and practice. Since its emergence, the profession has been engaged in an evolving dialogue about whether social work can even claim to have the unique knowledge base that is traditionally seen as requisite for professional status. In a defining moment of the profession's evolution, Abraham Flexner (1915) was invited to pass comment on social work's claim to professional status at the 1915, US National Social Work Conference. He argued that social work was not a profession at all because its practice was solely an application of the knowledges of other professions, such as psychiatry and psychology and that professional status could only be conferred if social work possessed its own foundational knowledge base and methods of application.

Boehm (1958) expressed similar concerns and framed social work knowledge in the following taxonomy:

The scientific base of social work consists of three types of knowledge: (a) tested knowledge, (b) hypothetical knowledge that requires transformation into tested knowledge and (c) assumptive knowledge (or 'practice wisdom') that requires transformation into hypothetical and thence into tested knowledge. (p. 11)

Boehm's articulation is useful because it clearly articulates the usually taken-for-granted empirical scientific worldview that remains embedded in the social work psyche. Boehm's presumed hierarchy of knowledges clearly marks out practice wisdom as a lesser form of knowledge. From this perspective practice knowledge and experience is not to be trusted until and unless it is carefully tested and proven through rational and systematic scientific inquiry. It can be easily argued that the modernist quest for security through the discovery of rational principles on which to build ideal social relations and the work of the professions continues as the dominating discourse for all professional endeavour. Although this modernist framing of social work knowledge has been critiqued by postmodernists, feminists and progressive thinkers of many stripes, the enchantment of the modernist ethos shows little sign of abating. There is a clear and continuing tradition of writing and theorising in the social work literature that endorses the empirical method as the means by which social work can achieve a unique knowledge base (Sheldon, 2001; Zeira and Rosen, 2000; Klein and Bloom, 1995; Thyer, 2001). Many of those who promote the ideas of evidence-based

practice can also be seen to be following this tradition (Bilson, 2006; Roberts and Yeager, 2006; Smith, 2004; Thyer and Wodarski, 2004).

Goldstein (1990, p. 37) writing a history of how social work has theorised its casework practice, describes the profession as a 'serial importer of ideas' where 'the euphemism 'eclectic' serves to justify fragmentation and incoherence'. In pursuing professional status, social workers adopting a traditional casework orientation and disposed toward the authoritative strength of empiricism led the profession on a journey that 'twisted its searching way through vastly different theoretical territories - for example Freudian psychology, behavioural psychology, and the objectivity of the scientific methods of the social sciences' (Goldstein, 1990, p. 33). Radical or progressive social workers have however been more interested to theorise social work practice in terms of agendas of social change and social activism locating their thinking within the likes of Marxism, feminism or the educational praxis of Paolo Freire (Healy, 2000).

While Flexner's ghost has continued to haunt social work there have always been thinkers who have tried to anchor the social work's identity not in the scientific method or in radical grand theory but in the humanistic aspirations and commitments that gave birth to the profession. Within the humanistic tradition, social work is seen as a common-sense endeavour grounded first and foremost in humanitarian values that evolve into practice wisdom

through practitioners engaging in cycles of action and reflection as they work within their social, organisational and cultural contexts. Jane Addams is often described as a pioneering exemplar of this tradition (Crawford, 1994; Goldstein, 1990; Rodwell, 1998). The strengths-based thinking and approaches of Denis Saleebey, Ann Weick, Charles Rapp and William Madsen (Madsen, 1999; Rapp, 1998; Saleebey, 2005; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989) can be read as more recent manifestations of the humanist tradition as can my own writing in child protection social work (Turnell and Edwards, 1997; 1999).

This tradition has also given rise to various attempts to unify social work thinking around its commitments to humanitarian values. However while most would endorse that an ethical foundation lies at the heart of the social work endeavour the theorising that has negotiated this terrain has by and large had only limited success in distilling the profession's collective imagination (Clark, 2000).

Thinkers within the humanitarian tradition have frequently sought to honour the endeavours and wisdom of practitioners through drawing upon the work of Michael Polanyi and Donald Schön (Epstein, 1995; Gowdy, 1994; DeRoos, 1990; Imre, 1984; Saleeby, 1989; Scott 1990). Polanyi (1967) coined the phrase 'tacit knowledge' to talk about the sort of personal knowing that energises exploratory and breakthrough thinking and can lead to new

discoveries. Schön (1983) developed and adapted this sort of thinking suggesting that the on-the-ground work of professional practitioners does not conform to the discrete framings of rational-technical knowledge because 'high ground' rationality does not fit the 'swampy lowlands' of the problems that practitioners must deal with everyday. The knowing of the practitioner is framed by Schön as being embedded in their actions as an intuitive or tacit 'knowing-in-action' that accrues as the professional engages in 'reflection-in-action' which is particularly stimulated when the practitioner encounters novel situations and problems.

As these sorts of framings have been utilised to give credence to the idea of social workers' practice wisdom there have been increasing calls within the profession to research the insights and knowledges of the practitioner. At the beginning of their edited book entitled 'Practitioner-research partnerships: building knowledge from, in and for practice' McCartt Hess and Mullen (1995 p. ix) comment that 'for at least three decades, social workers of all types - practitioners, administrators, researchers and educators - have urged that more-effective partnerships be forged between the worlds of research and practice. Yet their actions and accomplishments have lagged far behind their expectations and hopes'. The irony of this book is that while it starts with this sentiment and incorporates 12 different sets of contributors of which Donald Schön's chapter is the 'star turn' (Schön, 1995), this volume is marked by the same problem. Most of the material in this work is focused on

theorising the notion of practice wisdom and asserting the importance of practitioner-research partnerships. The research projects and findings that are described are to me constituted as outsider accounts of practitioner knowing that privilege the priorities, interests and sensibilities of the academic inquirer rather than those of the practitioner.

## **2.1 Postmodern contributions toward valuing local knowledges of the practitioner**

A further complication in the territory of social work theory and practice is that researchers looking at this issue have consistently found that practitioners make little use of formalised theory in their practice (Carew, 1979; Corby 1982; Howe, 1987; Osmond and O'Connor, 2004; Sheldon, 1978; Sheppard, 1995). This finding has been so consistent over many years that Fook (2002) describes it as 'old news' for the social work profession. While this research has been used to argue for the existence of a social work theory-practice gap, I would suggest that the research demonstrates the primacy researchers (at least these researchers) give to locating theory within written texts. While it is clear that practitioners are unlikely to make in-depth sense of their practice by framing it in terms of formal written theories and certainly not in a way that academics habitually demonstrate in writing social work textbooks, this does not mean that practitioners do not engage in making sense of their practice. My interest in pursuing an insiders' account

of child protection social work is to start my inquiry with the sense making of the practitioners rather than that of the texts.

Healy (2005) points out that the notion of a theory-practice gap is informed by an objectivist world-view that creates a disjunction between thinking and doing that has not served social work well. A framing that separates theory and practice can for example easily lead academics and researchers to try and hound practitioners with formal theory (as communicated in a comment I have heard a number of academic social work use 'you can lead a social worker to theory but you can't make them think') and practitioners to say 'I'm not interested in theory'. Most crucially this framing erases the reality that practitioners are always seeking to make sense of or theorise what they do.

There is growing awareness often informed by social constructionist sensibilities that theory is not just something that is written in professional literature and discovered through academic research which has added further impetus for calls within the social work profession to build its capacity to theorise from, through and for practice (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins, 2000; Healy, 2005; Scott, 1990; Shaw, 2005). To the extent that the social sciences and social work have taken the postmodern turn, the move can be read as a journey from prioritising the quest for universal knowledge

toward the recognition of knowledges from many domains including, practitioners' 'many ways of knowing' (Hartman, 1990).

In journeying with and developing a postmodern position toward social work inquiry, I am not arguing that large-scale, top-down research and theorising is not useful or should be taboo. My concern is that the predominant quest for generalisable theories has served to mute and erase the knowledges of front-line practitioners. Postmodern social theory offers conceptual and methodological resources to relocate the front-line social worker in the middle of the knowledge-base picture. This allows greater scope and sensitivity for their humanity, experience and practice wisdom to be affirmed and amplified. Fook (2002, p. 93) writes

I think this is the gift of postmodernism to social work – that we value and include the voice of the practitioners and their own contribution in theorizing from their own practice experience. It is our responsibility to the profession that we enable and create culture and environments in which this can happen.

Perhaps postmodernism goes even further. It may also give social workers the opportunity to lighten up about theory. Theorising at its simplest is about making sense of experience. While theory remains in the hand of the modernists it is framed as the pursuit of timeless, normative, universal truth.

In this way, knowledge becomes uncritically entwined with power, and theorising becomes a controlling, totalising and pretty deadening activity. Postmodernism provides a chance to re-energise social work theorising as an imaginative process, so that social workers might feel more able to play with their representations of practice experience. Potentially, this creates greater scope for theorising as imagination, as 'art', rather than being seen solely as a 'science'.

To play with an avian metaphor, if practice is a bird in flight, theory is so often a dead parrot in the bottom of a cage. The difficulty is that while modernism kills the parrot by demanding it speak timeless truth, postmodernism so often seems to want to send it to its maker by demanding the poor bird can only speak in words that are unintelligible to most. Geertz undoubtedly a grandfather of interpretive inquiry within the social sciences expresses a similar concern about postmodern thinking when he says:

While all this fiddling around with the properties of composition, inquiry and explanation represents, of course, a radical alteration of the sociological imagination, propelling it in directions both difficult and unfamiliar. And like all such changes in fashions of the mind, it is about as likely to lead to obscurity and illusion as it is to precision and truth. (Geertz, 1983, p. 23)

While postmodernism has deconstructed and challenged the hegemony of the grand narrative and of rationality, it has also elevated an intellectual style of high-powered theorising and discourse that readily feeds the separation of the worlds of the academic and the practitioner. To my reading much postmodern social work theorising sounds more like 'elaborate chatter or higher nonsense' than 'critical consciousness' (Geertz, 1983, p. 23) that has on-the-ground value. While postmodernism brings the potential gift of being able to privilege the voice of the practitioner, the social work profession in my view has yet to realise anything like the full potential of this gift.

It seems evident to me as Fook suggests that postmodernism offers social work the epistemological space and resources to more fully embrace the lived experience and practice wisdom of practitioners. However in my view, few academics or researchers influenced by the interpretive turn display the ontological conviction to address the long embedded, largely unquestioned social work ambivalence toward the practitioner and their knowledges. To undertake the sort of inquiry that accesses the knowledges of practitioners requires that the researcher has a underlying trust in and respect for the wisdoms of the practitioner. This respect then needs to be communicated in an ongoing relationship with practitioners and demonstrated in a willingness on the part of the researcher to make themselves vulnerable to the lived experiences and insecurities, the insights and uncertainties of those at the front line. My experience is that most researchers of whatever hue, modern

or postmodern are not willing to take this extended journey alongside practitioners.

Drawing upon Kenneth Pike's (1967) distinction between 'etic' inquiry that pursues a more universal outside perspective and 'emic' inquiry that seeks the insider's view, Crawford (1997) observes:

Remarkably few public comments have been written from the emic perspective of social work practitioners. In social work there is a strange silence from those who actually do social work while there seems a taken-for-granted freedom to impute incompetence, bad faith, and inefficiency to social work practitioners by academic researchers both within and outside of the discipline. (1997, p. 23).

This is not to say that practitioner inquiry and research is necessarily a rare beast. Shaw (2005) for example describes a mapping process which found 42 separate practitioner inquiries undertaken solely in south east Wales during a two and a half year period from mid 1999 to late 2002. Shaw observes however that this work rarely reaches publication and seems to be seen in the wider social work and academic circles as 'fringe operation - a "street market" version of mainstream research' (2005, p. 1231).

While the idea of theorising from and through practice has become something of a clarion call in social work in recent times, most of the research that supports this endeavour is in its infancy. Much of the available research displays what could be termed an 'academic remove', in that the inquiry and writing seems primarily to privilege the perspectives and priorities of the academic. To my reading the data analysis and sense making in the work of academics like Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (2000), McCarrt Hess and Mullen, (1995), Taylor and White (2000) all claiming to be undertaking research for practice are elegant, nuanced and compelling but their work often reads like 'knowledge development from 27 000 feet' (to use the words of a New Zealand colleague Russell Martin). The style of the analysis, the findings and conclusions seem to have more to do with academic sensibilities than the priorities of the practitioners who provide the raw material for their inquiry. While such authors talk of researching *with* the practitioner to my eyes this work reads as if the inquiry is *done to* the practitioner since the analysis of the data and the writing-up remains primarily the remit of the academic.

To my reading Taylor and White (2000) demonstrate this same sensibility in their well-known text *Practicing Reflexivity in Health and Welfare*. While much of what Taylor and White write is important the flaw in the work is that the practitioners' voice is completely absent as they impose their reflexivity on numerous case examples, file notes and interview extracts. This sort of approach to theorising practice seems to reflect a covert assumption that

while the practitioner does the work on the ground it is the academic who does the best thinking.

Karen Healy (2005) also demonstrates this sensibility in her most recent book *Social Work Theories in Context; Creating Frameworks for Practice*, though I suspect Healy would be horrified by my reading of this. In a section entitled 'Why theory matters' Healy expresses concern about the fact that social work practitioners don't use formal theory. Healy then asserts 'there are a number of reasons why we should develop our capacity to identify, use and develop formal social work theory in our practice' (2005, p. 95) and articulates three reasons for this. Healy's three reasons are accountability to service users, improving service quality and building the formal theoretical base. My difficulty with Healy's argument is she communicates her position with an air that social work practitioners are at fault for this absence of formal theory - thus she says 'the non-participation of practitioners in the debate about and development of formal theory means the profession is denied insights from a broad range of practice perspectives' (2005, p. 96). Healy observes that practitioners' knowledges remain in their heads and in the supervisory context.

## **2.2 Making sense of practice**

Theorising at its simplest is about sense-making and my work proceeds based upon this parsimonious definition. For the most part practitioners do not overly worry whether their practice conforms to or is making contributions to formal theory, however, the dilemmas expressed in the three practitioners' stories articulated in chapter one are precisely the sorts of sense-making issues that social workers regularly lose sleep over. While these sorts of dilemmas are at the heart of how social work practitioners make sense of the work they do and their own practice identity, as I suggested earlier issues of this ilk are almost entirely overlooked in formal social work contexts. There seems to be a deep and sustained reticence, even a shame or embarrassment within the social work profession to give sustained attention to these sorts of struggles and primary experiences of the practitioner. A more formal way to express this would be to say that social work seems to manifest a chronic ontological insecurity about practitioners' experience and sense-making of their everyday-everynight relating, caring and helping work. This professional insecurity is only made worse when the social work involves a coercive statutory role such as child protection and this in turn only adds to the diffidence child protection practitioners tend to feel about their work.

Weick (2002) suggests that the social work profession has two voices – the second, usual voice is the 'big' voice, the solid, expert, acceptable voice. This is the voice social workers are most called on to use – it is the voice of

professional discourse, of assessments, reports, treatment plans, the voice that is seen to be most acceptable professionally, institutionally and academically. The first voice by contrast is quiet and mostly hidden; it expresses the human, lived and primary experience of social work practice. Weick (2002, p. 396) asserts that 'social work has been unable to give voice to its work' and that a 'chasm of silence' surrounds what social workers do and experience on a daily basis. Weick likens this to the 'centuries of public silence' that have accrued around womens' knowledges and womens' caregiving and writes that 'women in general and social workers in particular have difficulty believing what they do is important'.

To the extent that social work has been captured by rendering what we do in second voice terms, in the big, justifying, abstract terms of clever theory, these formal descriptions by and large distance social workers from what is directly and experientially human and most engaging about practice. While the three stories just considered in the previous chapter express the struggles and anxieties of the practitioners they also speak of practitioners that are deeply engaged with what they are doing and experiencing. Second voice descriptions of what we do as social workers might seem to boost professional status but for the most part they are not that engaging, nor rarely speak to the aspirations and motivations that call social workers to the work that we do. Clever theorising rarely keeps practitioners awake at nights

and in the words of one social worker, most social work theory has all the pleasure of 'chewing on cardboard' (Marsh, 2003, p. 293).

As Ferguson suggests most social work theorising erases the smell of practice, the direct human experiences of practice, of entering other people's worlds, of the possibilities of being able to make a difference in their lives and in our societies. Gilgun (1994a), observes that we neither foster a tradition of practice nor case study research. A consequence of this is that we remain a profession with very little grounded, common understanding of what our best on-the-ground work might look like. Social workers are by and large on their own with their visions about what constitutes good practice and what they might achieve as a social worker. The cherished aspirations of the social worker to be able to make a difference can lead to Craig's epiphany on one of the world's most sacred rivers but can also turn rancid in a vat of solitary best hopes as the practitioner picks themselves apart for their perceived failings as evidenced in Sarah and Kath's stories.

These three stories demonstrate a privatising of the practice experience and also display an endemic and habitual social work tendency to analyse practice focused on what is deemed to be worrying, inadequate, inappropriate or wrong. Ferguson (2001; 2003) describes this as a 'deficit focus', a logic that is iconically and ritually reenacted within the profession and broader society in almost every child protection critical case review and

child death inquiry. As well as being an automatic default setting for supervision and practitioners thinking about their own practice, this negative orientation is very common in practice-focused research (see for example, Hough, 1996; Juhila, 2003; Munro, 1996 and 1999a; Taylor and White, 2000; White, 2003).

Ferguson (2003) observes that the radical or critical tradition of social work thought has also made its own contribution to framing social work under a negative sign. While critical theorists have facilitated the profession's sensitivity and responsiveness to diversity, oppression and disadvantage they have also 'helped to create a culture in which the dominant view is that there is always something inherently wrong in social work, that practice is never (quite) good enough' (2003, p. 1007). Put simply, when the social work does look at front-line practice the profession is almost always picking itself apart like raptors on a carcass. Not surprisingly then that the social work profession as a whole, as well as many of its practitioners can be described as having become 'hollowed out' (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000, p. 30).

Enacting the postmodern turn in social work, from doing research to the natives (as Geertz, 1983, might put it), to researching *with* the natives on terms that are significant to them, requires considerable sensitivity to practitioners' lived experience and priorities, grounded in a good working relationship between researcher and practitioners. To research *with*

practitioners I would also suggest requires that researchers disengage themselves from the 'deficit focus' of much social work thinking about practice and the sort of thinking articulated even by progressive thinkers such as Healy when she frames practitioners as 'non-participants' in building theory.

The priority of my work as a social work child protection consultant, practitioner, researcher and author has been to articulate descriptions of practice that are directly relevant to the worker that is knocking on doors, attending court, interviewing children and trying to make a fist of social work in the highly constrained environment of child welfare bureaucracy. The central thesis of my publications and this exegesis is that for the social work profession to (re)stake a claim for transformational child protection practice within an increasingly managerially-defined working world, knowledge making needs to be undertaken on terms that speak directly to the every-day, every-night experience of the practitioner. Returning to the avian metaphor I used earlier in my practice research I am seeking to utilise the resources of postmodernism to allow social work theorising to fly with the bird of practice - this remains my best hope for the work I am undertaking.

My trajectory through the supposed 'theory-practice' dilemma can be read as a journey toward insiders' accounts of practice. In this I can be seen to be following in Clifford Geertz's steps.

### **2.3 Following Geertz: pursuing an insiders' perspective**

Clifford Geertz (2000, p. xi) in his book *Available Light*, written it would seem as a 'finale' to his influential career as an interpretive anthropologist, writes: 'the answer to our most general questions - why? how? what? whither? - to the degree that they have answers, are to be found in the fine detail of lived life'. Geertz is writing here about the shift in philosophy and social theory often characterised as the postmodern or interpretive turn, which challenges the modernist notion that answers to the human condition are to be found in the proven and generalized knowledges of empirical science. Geertz (1983 p. 34) had previously described this turn as inquiry and explanation 'connecting action to its sense rather than behaviour to its determinants'.

In *Available Light* Geertz (2000, p. 16) writes that the interpretive approach 'involves discovering who they (the studied persons) are, what they think they are doing and to what end they are doing it' and to this end 'it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives'. In *Local Knowledge* Geertz (1983, p. 58) puts it in a slightly more vernacular turn of phrase writing 'the trick is to figure out

what the devil they think they are up to'. I have aspired and endeavoured to bring this sort of interpretive sensibility to writing and producing DVD accounts of constructive child protection social work but as Geertz suggests it is no small trick and I carry numerous questions and uncertainties about this work – I am learning as I go.

In 2004 I was discussing my practice research endeavours with a social work professor. I was talking about my attempts to follow Geertz's lead, trying to get at what practitioners do and think they are doing and the attendant difficulties of this task and the professor offered the following startlingly bald comment 'the problem is you just can't get at what the buggers (*meaning the practitioners*) do'. There are many problems in attempting an ethnography of child protection social work and the sorts of inhibiting dynamics described above certainly capture some of the difficulties of the task. My colleague's comment however also suggests the problems academic researchers have in building relationships alongside practitioners such that it is possible to gain access not just to what 'the buggers do' but also what such researchers think about what they do. I have been endeavouring to inquire, distil and write insiders' accounts of my own and other workers' direct child protection practice for about 13 years. In this time I have experienced and tried to make some sense of these and many other dynamics that seem to inhibit the rendering of insider accounts of practice and I will explore this territory further in the next chapter.

There is no definitive insider's account any more than there is a definitive outsider's account. Recognising that every account is rhetorical and an interpretation raises many questions for me in this work. When does an interpretation reflect well the insider's experience? In trying to access and distill local knowledges and practice wisdom how do you know you have? Does the final account reflect more of my own sensibilities than those of the practitioner and service recipient? When and how does an insider's account become a useful account? When does local knowledge become more generalisable and speak to the condition and experience of others doing similar work and others involved in the task whether as a teacher, manager, policy maker, researcher or frontline practitioner? Geertz draws upon the concepts experience-near and experience-far to explore this territory. Explaining the concepts Geertz (1983, p. 57) writes "fear" is experience-nearer than "phobia", and "phobia" experience-nearer than "ego-dyssyntonic". Geertz then goes on to make the crucial point 'confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon' (1983, p. 57). This reflects a long-standing debate in anthropology regarding the relative merits of inquiry pursuing emic or etic perspectives. This debate has in large measure been resolved in the realisation that both insider and outsider

perspectives are necessary but there remains for any inquiry the issue of how to manage the tension between the two perspectives (Patton, 2002).

In pursuing an insiders' perspective I undertake the inquiry collaboratively with practitioners, most often in group settings. In this way the practice accounts into which I am inquiring, are most often being described by practitioners in front of their colleagues. This contributes to authenticity in that colleagues won't for very long tolerate abstractions and ego driven stories. It also becomes apparent in these contexts which stories hold the interest of other practitioners. In the main, the practitioners and myself are most interested by the more difficult cases and by a high level of detail within the practice story.

Undoubtedly I have a significant interpretive impact on the inquiry and this begins with a 'meaning-loaded' inquiry question directed toward good practice. My inquiry work always starts with a question such as, 'Tell me about practice with a difficult case that you feel proud of or that you feel you made progress with'. I do this very deliberately to avoid and as an antidote to the typically problem-saturated descriptions of practice that bedevil child protection social work. Most practitioners are hungry for stories of good practice and are exhausted by the usual approach to casework that involves focusing on the most worrying cases and what has gone wrong or what is feared will go wrong.

In writing the stories of practice I draw upon processes that I first encountered in grounded theory research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), involving the interviewee in the process of successive editing, refining and drafting of the practice story. Likewise with the creation of the DVD's the worker retains full editorial control over the final version, usually we work first with a transcript and then with rough-cuts of audio-video footage till we arrive at a product that worker and I are happy with. During this process the stories and DVD's are always vetted by the relevant teamleader, managers and Director within the agency. Finally wherever possible I endeavour to involve service recipients in validating and enriching the process and the accounts of the practice. These are some of the ways in which I attempt to create accounts that are meaningful to the insider and I will explore this methodology in more detail in the next chapter.

In seeking to describe practice that captures the sensibilities and perspectives of those that have lived the experience it is worth observing that I do not believe there is a unitary, homogenous practitioners' experience and view about practice. At the same time I regularly see that the stories of practice that I create are often very powerful for other frontline social workers and that there are common themes and principals that speak through these stories of practice. Almost all of the writing I have undertaken seeks to identify these more universal themes and in this way I can be seen to be

pursuing a more etic orientation in my publications drawing upon the emic inquiry and practice accounts. In several recent publications I have sought to actively engage the practitioner and supervisor in both creating the practice stories but also in distilling these more general themes (Turnell, Elliott and Hogg, 2007; Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran, in press).

I would contend that as far as the formal literature goes the voice and lived experience of the frontline practitioner is the most marginalised voice in the whole institutional child protection enterprise. Certainly the voice of parents and children are frequently marginal in the delivery of child protection services but the field has made a significant effort to research the views of service recipients. (for example see Andersson, 1999; Aubrey and Dahl, 2006; Bell, 2002; Butler and Williamson, 1994; Cashmore, 2002; Cashmore and Paxman, 2006; Christianson and Maloney, 2006; Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Dale, 2004; Dumbrill, 2006; Family Rights Group, 1991; Farmer & Owen, 1995; Farmer and Pollock, 1998; Ferguson and O'Reilly, 2001; Gibbons et al., 1995; Gilligan, 2000; Graber et al., 1996; Hill, 1995; Magura and Moses, 1984; McCallum, 1995; MacKinnon, 1998; Monck and New, 1995; Munro, 2001; Prior, 1999; Sharland et al., 1995; Söderquist and Suskin-Holmqvist, 2006; Thoburn et al., 1995; Thomas and O'Kane, 1999; Westcott, 1995; Westcott & Davies, 1996).

The readily available body of literature researching child protection social workers' experiences, views and knowledges about their work such as Crawford, 1997; de Boer and Coady, 2007; de Montigny, 1999; Ferguson and O'Reilly, 2001; Hough, 1996 makes slim reading by comparison. Additionally I am aware of autoethnographies undertaken by practitioners as PhD projects such as Crawford 1994 and McMahon 1993 but the de Montigny text listed above is the only text of its type to make it into wider publication. To my knowledge there are no large-scale studies exploring the experiences and knowledges of frontline child protection practitioners. Ferguson and O'Reilly's research (2001) is the closest work of this type that I am aware of.

I have talked to many social work and child welfare researchers, academics and administrators about the dearth of research exploring the practitioner's world. In my experience administrators and researchers attached to child protection institutions seem bemused at the idea of inquiry directed at practitioners' experiences unless it is for the purposes of personnel management. This seems to reflect the institutional view that workers are viewed as problems to be managed, and even more pessimistically that the more you know of the practitioners' world the more problems there are to manage. While for academic colleagues even those influenced by qualitative and ethnographic ideas this area of research seems to hold little interest.

In the next chapter I will describe in more detail and exemplify the methodology I have evolved to generate insiders accounts of child protection social work.

### **3 Methodology**

This section of the exegesis will describe the evolving methodology that I utilise to privilege the local knowledges and priorities of the frontline child protection worker, by asking practitioners to stake a claim for their own good practice, within their organisational context. Two examples will be offered to ground both the description of the method and identify the challenges facing its application. This methodology can be seen as a process of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1995; Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999; Watkins and Mohr, 2001) though it evolved from the influence of solution-focused brief therapy (the influence and confluence of these two framings of the inquiry are described more fully in Turnell in press b). I have been using and refining this methodology over fourteen years, in collaboration with child protection organizations and social workers from many countries. Before exploring the methodology further however, I want to explain a little of my professional journey that has led to the creation of this appreciative inquiry process.

#### **3.1 Two epiphanies in evolving an inquiry process into constructive practice**

The methodology for theorizing practice that I utilize has evolved from many influences and has also crystallized through a number of 'epiphanies', two of

which I want to describe here. The first epiphany came about through a 1994 conversation with Australian feminist family therapist, Laurie MacKinnon. At that time, Laurie had not long completed an in-depth qualitative study focusing on the experiences of 44 families who had been on the receiving end of statutory child protection services (MacKinnon, 1998; MacKinnon and James, 1992). Laurie described to me that many parents she interviewed, not surprisingly, related negative stories of being caught up in the child protection system. What really stood out for Laurie however, were the stories from parents who had been involved with a worker who had acted in ways the parents experienced as positive, honest and respectful. These cases often involved other professionals who had given up on the family and the 'constructive' worker may even have removed children from the parents or taken other strong statutory action. However, the parents' experience of the child protection system was notably different as a result of the positive relationship the front-line worker had built with them and the constructive manner in which the worker had undertaken their work.

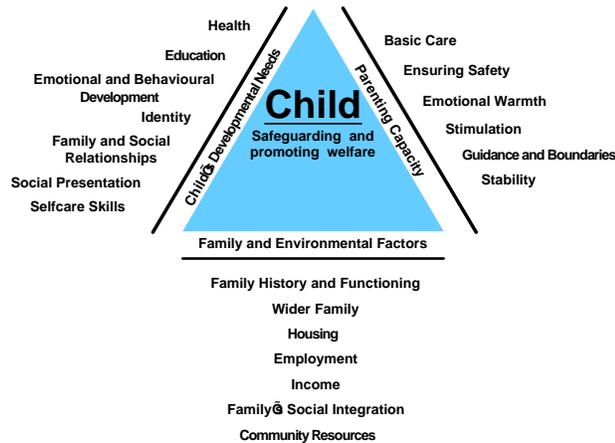
Laurie's stories were important in my thinking and development of this methodology because they crystallized for me the possibility that service recipients could identify practice they saw as constructive, even when their family had been subject to highly intrusive interventions. At the time, I was in the midst of developing a partnership-based, safety-organised approach to child protection work through a collaborative inquiry process with West

Australian statutory child protection workers (Turnell and Edwards, 1997; 1999). Like Laurie, I was hearing stories of constructive child protection practice in difficult situations but the stories I was hearing were from the workers' perspective. These descriptions contrasted with the usual storying and theorizing surrounding 'hard end' child maltreatment cases that suggests collaborative practice is really only applicable at the shallow end of the child protection swimming pool. In writing the signs of safety book I made the cross-over to bringing together the two 'insiders' accounts by first utilising the worker's account and then the parents and teenage children's accounts to render a story of constructive child protection practice in a case deemed to be 'sibling sexual abuse' (see Turnell and Edwards, 1999, pp. 148-152).

Another ephiphany occurred in March 2000, when I was working with Nigel Parton and we were invited to consult with a now defunct child protection team at Kirklees Social Services, in the north of England near Nigel's University in Huddersfield. At this time in England, the Department for Health (the national body that oversees child protection services) had just released the *Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*, often known as the 'needs framework' (Department of Health, 2000a). While the needs framework had been fully articulated as a conceptual model, at the time of the consultation, the social workers were uncertain how the framework should be utilised in practice. The Kirklees team knew the

framework would soon be their mandatory, core assessment tool, and had asked Nigel and myself to offer our thoughts about its application to their practice. For Nigel and I this request posed a significant dilemma since neither of us had any experience of using the framework.

## *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families*



We began the consultation by asking questions of the workers to understand more about their interests. It emerged that the team's main concern was how they could undertake the needs assessment collaboratively with service recipients, while simultaneously using the emerging framework to focus on building safety related to the presenting problem. As the discussion progressed, it came to light that the Kirklees' practitioners seemed to have already made attempts to use the needs framework. Putting together this information with the teams' goal for the using the framework, I asked whether there were times when the team had already used the needs framework in partnership with family members and it had helped them make progress in the case? In answer Deborah Glover, a Kirklees team leader, described a process her team had created, and was already using. The Kirklees process operated in the following way:

- At the first meeting, the worker would provide the parents with a

succinct explanation of the needs framework. They would do this using the triangular diagram that pictorially represents the 20 assessment items, which form the basis of the framework.

- The worker would then ask the parent(s) to choose two or three of the 20 items from the assessment triangle which they thought most needed attention to improve their child's life. (The parents may, for example, have chosen items such as 'guidance and boundaries', 'housing' or 'child's emotional development'.) The worker would then invite the parents to rate the situation in their family on a 0 - 10 scale relative to their chosen items.
- The parents' answers to the scaling questions would then be used as the basis for developing a detailed plan of action with the parents relative to each chosen item.
- Prior to meeting the family, the worker would undertake a similar selection process and in this way began to shape their own thoughts about the priority areas for meeting the child's needs. If, during the meeting, the worker felt it was necessary or useful, they would introduce the ideas they had formed earlier. Using these ideas to compare and contrast with the parents' ideas, the worker would then endeavour to reach agreement about how to proceed.

To Nigel and myself this process was already a substantial practice development for implementing the needs framework. Following the consultation, Nigel and I reflected on the meeting. What stood out was the fact that experienced practitioners, who had already created a unique process for collaboratively using the needs framework, were looking to supposed outside 'experts' to tell them how to undertake that exact task. Both of us felt we had been involved in uncovering expertise that would have otherwise been largely overlooked, even by the workers themselves and for us this was reflective of the more generalised tendency in the social work profession to devalue practitioners' knowledges and experience.

We were also struck by the fact that the Kirklees team had developed a locally grounded answer to the exact issues many Department of Health policy makers and academic advisors were grappling with at a more theoretical level. We speculated whether other teams around England might have created their own local implementation strategies. This sparked questions in our minds about what would be required for policy makers to be open to build practice guidance based on processes practitioners had found worked for them. Later in 2000, the practice guidance associated with needs framework was published (Department of Health, 2000b). There was no evidence in this document that front-line practitioners had been

meaningfully involved as consultants in creating the guidance they were expected to operationalise.

### **3.2 Seeking the practice wisdom of front-line workers**

Anne Weick (2000) suggests that the primary reason social work has been unable to give voice to its good practice is due to the 'profession's desire to validate our actions through scientific claims' (2000, p. 396). In this way, social work has adopted an official second voice as its public face and 'let slip through its fingers the language that fills its veins with the fullest expression of human experiences and that most essentially gives social work its distinctive character as a profession' (2000, p. 400). Weick continues:

Social work is built on more than a century of conscious, rigorous, effort to collect, refine and test wisdom about the process of helping. From that storehouse have come deep channels of practice knowledge that have created the distinctive skills that social work can claim. The key to unlocking the power of this knowledge is to lay claim directly and unselfconsciously to its centrality in social work. To do so we must use the language of our first voice, which will require us to move away from our naïve enchantment with theories that emanate from the more distant voice of the scientific and social science disciplines. (2000, p. 401).

In 1989, I began to collaborate with Steve Edwards who at that time had worked as a child protection worker for 13 years. Steve felt that there was little overlap between formal social work theory and the day-to-day work he experienced. At the same time, Steve had worked alongside many practitioners who, as he saw it, were very skilled in their work.

For example, Steve would talk about going on an investigative home visit with a colleague who he also regarded as a mentor. Arriving at the front door of the house Steve and his colleague were confronted by a father screaming at them to f\*\*\*-off! Steve's colleague calmly dealt with the man and before long both he and Steve were sitting with the man in his kitchen discussing the allegations. Steve also admired the work of another colleague, a woman who was well known for being able to engage young children who had been abused. She was often able to do this in situations where other professionals had been unable to make any progress with these same children. When Steve would ask these two colleagues to explain how they accomplished the work he was impressed by, their answers always left him unsatisfied. It seemed to Steve that while those who usually write the theory, largely miss what its like to do the work, those who can do the work, usually are unable to meaningfully describe, or theorise what they do.

Steve's sustained interest in trying to find better descriptions of child protection work as he knew it, lead to the collaboration between he and I. Between 1993 and 2000, Steve and I evolved the signs of safety approach to child protection casework through a collaborative inquiry process with more than 140 West Australian child protection practitioners in successive 6-month joint work projects. In developing this approach, Steve and I were guided by solution-focused brief therapy, a model that asks the professional to undertake a rigorous inquiry with clients, into what they are doing that is already working for them (de Shazer, 1985, 1988, 1991; de Shazer and Berg, 1995). Drawing on Steve's firsthand experience of constructive child protection practice, Steve and I used this same solution-building logic as a fundamental practice to elicit workers' self-defined examples of good practice with 'difficult' cases. This became the core knowledge building strategy in developing the signs of safety approach. I have continued to use this same strategy in my ongoing consultation work with child protection practitioners in various parts of the world and it is through this process of appreciative inquiry that all of the case examples in the publications and DVD's presented with this exegesis have been generated.

### **3.3 An example of eliciting and amplifying worker-defined constructive practice**

The following transcript describes the work of a child protection practitioner named Gloria English. At the time of this interview, Gloria worked in the adoptions team at Gateshead Social Services. Gloria began working with a 16-year-old young woman when she was 12 weeks pregnant. The young woman had herself been adopted, but relationships with her adopted family had deteriorated and thus social services had responsibility for her care. Stabilising the young woman in a permanent placement had not proved possible and she was moving on a regular basis. Gloria's task was to work with the mother-to-be to establish whether she wanted to keep the baby and to also decide whether she had the capacity to raise the child.

The structure I use to interview Gloria is informed by the 'EARS' process for eliciting and amplifying descriptions of success that is commonly utilised in second and subsequent sessions in solution-focused brief therapy (De Jong and Berg, 2001; Turnell and Hopwood, 1994b). The EARS acronym stands for elicit, amplify, reflect and start-over. The primary purpose of this process is to generate a rich, detailed and concrete description, a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the worker's story of success.

## ***EARS Process for Amplifying Success: Examples of Useful Questions***

### **Eliciting Questions (to begin and [re]establish the focus of the conversation)**

- *Can you tell me about a piece of work with a difficult case that you feel really good about?*
- *Can you tell me about a piece of work you've done in the last month that you feel really proud of?*
- *Can you give me an example of a case you worked with where you were stuck and you made progress?*
- *Can you tell me an example of your practice where you have used \_\_\_\_\_ (a particular approach or model that the work group is being trained in or meant to make use of – such as strengths-based practice, needs framework etc) and this has made a difference in the case/helped you with your work in that case?*

### **Amplifying Questions (to draw out the small details of the events)**

- *Where did this happen?*
- *When did this happen?*
- *Who else was involved?*
- *How did you make this happen?*
- *What else did you do? What else? and What else?*

- *How did you get the idea to do it this way? (start out this way?)*
- *Was this hard for you to do?*
- *What was the hardest part of doing this piece of work for you?*
- *So even though that part of it was hard, how did you keep it going?*
- *How did \_\_\_\_ (other person involved) help to build this success?*
- *What would \_\_\_\_\_ (supervisor, mother, father, child, judge or anyone else who was involved) say you did to contribute to achieving these outcomes?*
- *When do you first begin to think what you were doing was making a difference?  
What were you seeing that made you think that?*
- *How did you know what you were doing was working?*
- *What was \_\_\_\_\_ (mother, father, child, colleague) doing that told you what you were doing was making a difference?*
- *What differences did you see in \_\_\_\_\_ (supervisor, mother, father, child, judge or anyone else who was involved) that told you what you were doing was working?*

'Why' questions are usually not used in the EARS process as they can easily make a practitioner feel defensive about their practice and feel as if they have to provide a rationale for how they acted. For this reason, 'why' questions will often distract the worker from focusing on the detail of the events.

**Reflection Questions (to draw out the meaning of the events for the practitioner)**

- *When you think about this piece of work what was the most important thing you learned?*
- *What is the thing that you feel proudest of about in this situation?*
- *When you reflect on this piece of work with that mother/family/child, in a situation where you felt stuck (uncertain/confused) what stands out for you as the most significant thing you have learned about your practice?*
- *If one of your colleagues was to work with this case in the future - what suggestions would you offer them about how they might best work with this family?*
- *On a scale of 0 – 10 where would you rate this practice? Where 0 is it was my worst effort ever and 10 means it's as good as I can do.*

**Start-over**

- *When a particular line of questioning runs out of energy, or a particular question doesn't make sense to the practitioner, or the practitioner seems to go off the subject, start-over by re-asking the eliciting question.*

The first question in the EARS process – the eliciting question – is crucial. This question sets the tone for the conversation and for a purposive, positive conversation to unfold the intent and focus of the question needs to be continually revisited. Like authors describing solution-focused interviewing (De Jong and Berg, 2001; de Shazer, 1991 and 1995; Turnell and Hopwood, 1994a, b and c) the appreciative inquiry writers emphasize the importance of

the first question saying: 'it all begins with the unconditional positive question' (Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, 2006, p. 155). This question sets the tone for the conversation and is loaded with meaning, it is not simply asking 'can tell me about your practice?' but rather 'can you tell me about work you have done that you see as positive and constructive?'

Using the EARS process I endeavour to ask questions that help the practitioner describe in increasing detail what they have done, how they came to do it and what challenges they had to overcome. Following this, I seek to ask questions that invite the practitioner to reflect on what they have learnt and to stake claims for the meaning and significance they ascribe to their work. Finally, Gloria's colleagues are invited to actively join the appreciative inquiry process and are asked to offer their insights and describe what they have learnt from Gloria's story. (A video-recording of this same process but with a different case can be seen on the DVD *'Investigating domestic violence'*, included with this exegesis).

The transcript that follows arose from a day where I was consulting with Gateshead Social Services' practitioners focusing on constructive practice. Gloria's description of her practice followed my invitation to the group (an eliciting question) to describe practice that they felt good about and where they felt they had made progress in a difficult case.

*Gloria – I worked with this case when I worked in the district adoption team, the new mum had been in care herself and strongly wanted to keep her baby, but then she didn't, then did, then didn't, before the actual birth. We wanted to support her. Following the birth, it was the same - she did, she didn't, she did, she didn't, but there's only so many times that we could run with that on the basis that we were in court (to decide what would happen about custody). So we worked with parallel paths; supervision to look at possible full care by the mother or (alternatively) putting the girl up for adoption - so parallel plans. In the end, she wasn't able to proceed towards keeping the child, she strongly wished to but recognised herself that it was the right thing for her (to relinquish the child). But she managed to stay in touch, which I thought was quite unusual. When the child was adopted out, we notified her. She participated all the way through to the best she could, she came along – had contact where she could. It wasn't all of the time. She was keen to meet the potential parents.*

*Andrew – I'll just get you to slow down because what I'm struck by is you've got a mum who is relinquishing a baby and she's participated as best she could, been involved in the whole process through that. What have you done to get her involved in the process in that way?*

*G – Basically, she was moving around. She was in a children's home, then we got her in a mum and baby place and she couldn't stay with that. Then she went to a temporary arrangement where it was an older lady providing*

*support and she could come and go as she pleased. Then she went back to her adoptive parents and then back to this lady. So I just found out wherever she was on the day that we'd arranged (to meet) and try to find her and I just kept doing that. I mean there were times when she'd lose contact with me for a few weeks but somebody in that network would let me know where she was and if they'd seen her, what she was like and what she needed. There was always someone reporting to me how they perceived she was. And basically, I listened to her.*

*A – You were putting in a lot of work there, just to keep in touch.*

*G – Yeah.*

*A – I mean building relationships, getting to know people around her, getting them to talk to you.*

*G – I wanted to make sure that if I was going to have to make a decision that I thought it was the right thing for this child, before I took that responsibility away from her (the mother). So not only did I do that but I talked to other people in the team who had very similar cases or cases where there'd been a history of removal.*

*A – Who were the people you were talking to who helped you keep track of where she was?*

*G – It was the adoptive parents, whatever people she was involved with at the placement where she was supposed to be staying in at that time, the probation officer of the father of the child. If I couldn't get to her, I tried seeing what he was doing, keeping up with his service. And there was a support worker (from the youth offending team) that she'd developed quite a good relationship with.*

*A – If the mum was here, what would she say about you keeping track of her like that? Would she regard that as positive, or like 'big brother's coming after her'?*

*G- Well I don't know, because (a few weeks ago) she went in to a midwife to see if she was pregnant and the circumstances around that I don't quite know but she found out she was pregnant again and the first thing she said (to the midwife) when she found out was 'Would you ring Gloria and let her know?' She knows I'm working in the adoption team.*

*A – So the first thing she says to the midwife is 'Will you ring Gloria in the adoption team?' So what do you think that says about how she views you?*

My intention in asking this question was to invite Gloria to reflect on the quality of her relationship with the young woman and what it might mean that this young woman immediately wanted to talk to her when she

discovered she was pregnant again. However, Gloria focused instead on the concern that was upper most in her mind regarding what the young woman's intentions were in contacting her.

*G – Well, one of my first thoughts was: Is she thinking that she's going to keep the child or is she thinking that I'm a back up if she doesn't want to keep the child? The last time I had contact with her was about two or three months ago because I'm sorting out the contact arrangements for her (with the adopted child) and I thought well, why's she doing this? What's it all about? She's coming in to see me on Monday, so we'll talk a little bit more about what is happening.*

Not wanting to get involved in a discussion about the young woman's motivations at this point, I sought to redirect (to 'start-over' in the EARS framing) the conversation to the work she has already done. Child protection workers will inevitably want to focus on their current concerns but to create space to meaningfully explore constructive practice this impulse usually needs to be set aside.

*A – So let's go slightly sideways - if she was here and I was to say to this young woman 'What have you liked about what Gloria's done for you?' what do you think she would she say?*

*G – That I was open with her. I told her all the options, what would happen if she did this, what would happen if she did that, what I could do to help her, what help was there for her. And I asked her what she thought about it and I also shared some experiences from my life and from myself, basically. So I was just myself with her as well as telling her that I had a job to do. When she came to meetings, I always prepared her before hand, telling her what I was going to be presenting in that meeting. I was honest with her.*

*A – So before you're going into child protection meetings, into Court contexts, so you're always preparing her ahead of those meetings?*

*G – Yeah.*

*A – And how did that help when you're preparing her ahead of those meetings?*

*G – She would listen. Sometimes she'd make comments or I would say 'Do you understand what I'm saying?' Sometimes she'd come out of the meetings and I'd say 'do you want to check out anything?' So she knew I was available, but I also needed her aware, because obviously I had so many other cases at the time, and I said 'if you need to talk to me, leave a message and I'll get to you.' And sometimes she did leave a message and sometimes I went through all the avenues that I could find to contact her and didn't (get hold of*

*her). I was also trying to do some practical things with her in preparing her through this for having the child, looking at what she knew about babies.*

*A – So what were you doing that was enabling her to be engaged and keep coming back? Because it would be quite easy to shame this sort of woman, to get her very defensive. What were you doing to keep her engaged and involved?*

*G – Not judging her and letting her know that she still had a chance, that it wasn't just all dried and cut and the baby's gone.*

*A – So giving her a sense that she still had a chance. It sounds to me like you've helped her to think it through, enormously for herself.*

*G – Well I did do a lot of research about her past, I went to the adoptive parents and saw her adoption papers and I actually found out about her adoption and met her adopted parents and saw what their influence was on her because they were very negative about her in general. I asked (the parents) how much were they going to support her and they were very rigid, they said she could come back home as long as she would abide by the rules of their house. I also had to look at other options about the adoptive family (whether they might want to adopt the baby) and what her (the mother's) thoughts were on that. I knew it was a clear "No!" but I didn't know whether*

*they (her parents) thought it was a clear “no” or whether they would come back into the court to exert their rights.*

*A - What were the moments through that process where you felt like ‘this 16-year-old young woman is really engaged and she’s really thinking it through for herself?’*

*G - When she told me about how she was feeling.*

*A - What sort of things was she saying?*

*G - ‘I’m frightened and I don’t know whether I want this or not - I do want it but there’s times when I don’t think that I do, but what’s going to happen if I make a different choice?’*

*A - So she’d say ‘I’m frightened! I don’t know what’s going to happen. I do want this baby but I don’t know what’s going to happen if I do have the baby.’*

*G - And ‘how am I going to cope? I want this baby to have a better experience than I have had because I haven’t had a good experience with my adoption. I’m hoping that my baby is going to have a different experience with a different adoption.’ I made a commitment to see that through.*

*A – What do you mean by ‘I made a commitment to see that through?’*

*G- To see she was involved in the child’s placement and I was able to do that, surprisingly enough.*

*A – So just coming back to the mum, when she’s saying to you ‘I’m frightened, I want the baby but I’m scared. I don’t know whether I can cope with it. I don’t want her to have the experience I had in adoption. I don’t know what’s best.’ All of that, did that surprise you, that she was able to get that out and express that?*

*G – Yes, because she hadn’t shared it with anybody else. She’d tried to with a youth worker but she hadn’t got very far because I’d checked with that worker about how far she’d got.*

*A – Do you think the young mother would have a sense of your commitment to her and to seeing this through?*

*G – I don’t know. I’d like to think that she did.*

*A – What do you think she might have noticed about your commitment to her and the unborn baby?*

*G – Because sometimes I couldn't be there, I had arrangements in my life so I couldn't be there, and I made sure that somebody else was there – someone she'd recognise would be there for me and I'd introduced her to this person so she knew that there was somebody there.*

*A – So this was a difficult role, you're standing alongside this young woman, you'd committed to seeing it through with her, but you're also having to figure out what you think is the right thing to do?*

*G – I was really influenced by other people and what they'd said and what their views were. Some people were straight down the line – child removed, whatever – and other people weren't.*

*A – So some people around you were saying, straight down the line, 'remove the child' because of all the problems and there's other people saying, (pause) what were they saying?*

*G – They were talking about their experience saying 'This is what's worked for me and this is how I got to this point in my thinking'. My manager was just listening and saying 'well, what do you think?' I suppose I realised I'm actually making this decision.*

*A – What was that like for you, as you came to the realisation that 'I've got to make a decision. I'm the key player here?'*

*G – Empowering! Frightening! Am I doing the right thing? I really didn't make my mind up on 'am I doing the right thing?' until the baby was here and after the mum had three chances to change her mind. Then I thought this baby can't wait any longer. I was happy with where the baby was, the foster care was excellent. I tried to involve the mother and invited her into the home and she was given every chance to participate in the baby's care five days a week.*

*A – So this mum had the opportunity to participate with the baby five days a week and given every chance and then you've come to a decision and you're saying you had a sense that it was the right decision?*

*G – Yes.*

*A – How did you know?*

*G – Because I received some information about her behaviour and she hadn't been honest with me about that, where before there'd been more honesty about what she was doing and instinctively it just didn't sit right.*

*A – Just tell us a little bit about what the behaviour was.*

*G – It was in a sort of board and lodgings place she was staying. It wasn't the right place for her to be, but it was a place that she'd chosen. She'd got out of control, using alcohol for a few weeks. The week before she'd said 'I can't do this, I don't want to do it anymore' and there'd been an incident where she'd threatened a member of staff with a knife. I talked over (with her) what happened and she totally denied to me that she had a knife. I said to her 'look, if you had a knife, just tell me you had a knife because I'll be honest with you, I'm going to talk to such-and-such' - the two or three people who had reported to me who were managing the place. And then (when I got their story) I came back and confronted her with that.*

*A - How did you confront her?*

*G – Basically she came in and I'd said that I needed to go do some things to find out what had happened for myself and then I'd come back and tell her what I thought and what I was going to do next.*

*A – So you came straight back to her?*

*G – The next day. She came in and the fact that she'd come in, obviously I was happy she'd come in because it showed her commitment, because before she'd probably have run off and hid underground for a week or two. So the fact that she'd come in I thought that she really wanted to keep going but then she said 'I really want to (keep the baby) but I can't do it and I don't*

want the baby to be held up any more'. So after that we went in to a conference (to arrange the adoption).

A – So hold on, she comes in to see you, after you've been there the day before, checking out this whole business about a knife incident, obviously some sort of violent incident where she's staying. She denies she had a knife, you say you're going to go and check it out with the other people who'd seen the incident. The next day she comes in to your office to talk to you and is saying 'I've realised I can't do it; I can't hold up the baby.' Doesn't that strike you as extraordinary, that a 16-year-old's got to that point with you?

G – Yeah?!? (Tentatively.)

A – On scale of 0 to 10, how extraordinary do you think that is?

G – About a 9.

A – About a 9! A 16 year-old girl, who's been adopted herself, who's doing alcohol, obviously hanging out in the dirty end of town and lots more, I suspect. Her parents are rigid, she obviously feels isolated and on her own, and you've got her to a point three months after she's had a baby of saying 'I can't do it. I can't hold the baby up.' Nine out of 10 - I think absolutely! That is, I don't think it gets better than that, for a person doing your work with that sort of young woman.

At this point Gloria was still thinking about other aspects of what she did that worked in building her relationship with the young woman.

*G – Sometimes she wouldn't talk, and I spent a lot of time with her in contact, sometimes there wasn't anything to say because obviously I was supervising contact between them. I'd just sit with her and not have to say anything – it was just comfortable. And I'd been with her to the family's house and seen their interactions with her and sat there with her and listened to that. I think she liked, wanted me to be there too, to see what she was feeling and thinking because I was able to put it into words about how she felt.*

*A – So through all that you're listening to her, you're sitting with her sometimes, you're constantly keeping track of her moving in and out of lots of different contexts, and you then said that she felt comfortable.*

*G - I think what it was, through every sort of placement she had, I went and I would always talk to whoever was there. I sort of got a grasp of what I thought of the placement and I wanted to check out how she was feeling and what it was like for her every day.*

*A – So when you think about the process of making this assessment and this decision, where 10 is you feel like it was really comprehensive and the best*

*you could do, and 0 is it was a whole mess of a process and the decision was just made up, where would you rate the process you went through?*

In this part of the conversation I was attempting get Gloria to stake a claim for the quality of the decision making process she had undertaken, however the way which I constructed the scale did not fit very well with Gloria's thinking and my expression 'the decision was just made up' seemed to make her a little defensive.

*G – Well it was the first one (adoption assessment) I'd done. I tried to follow all the guidance involved and look at what other people thought and said and how they managed, and my own experience – all that came into it. And it wasn't made up, I had to evidence everything that I'd done and there wasn't a lot of time to do all that paperwork, because I really wanted to work with her . . .*

Gloria went on to describe looking at another practitioner's assessment process in a somewhat similar situation, and I followed her lead. In this way, I was hoping to find ideas for a scale that fitted Gloria's experience more closely and on which she could more readily reflect on and assess her own practice.

*A – How did that help you, looking at that other assessment? How did that help you in what you were doing?*

*G – Well I quickly recognized that I was somewhere totally different. But talking about what was happening there helped.*

*A – Talking about what was happening in that other process?*

*G – Yes, talking about it helped me.*

*A – So what did you learn from that other process as well as the fact that it was completely different?*

*G – That this person was coming from the same thinking that I was. That they wanted to give that mother the opportunity in light that this is all about her children.*

To my mind Gloria had just articulated her own goal and criteria for undertaking a constructive assessment and I sought to create a scale around this criteria.

*A – So you wanted to come from that basis of giving her the opportunity? (Gloria nods.) So all right so that's the meaningful scale, because that was your goal in doing this work. So rate your own work with that mum, from 10 – I gave her as much opportunity as I possibly could to be involved in the*

*decision and 0 is I made the decision myself and gave her no opportunity.*

*Rate your own practice.*

*G - 10!*

*A - 10! You gave her as much as you possibly could.*

At this point Gloria returned to thinking again about the young woman's most recent contact with her.

*G - When I got that call from the midwife, my first thoughts were 'Oh my God!' You know I was glad that she'd call me and when I found out that I was the first person she'd called I was thinking well what's that about?*

*A - So given what we've just talked about and reflecting back on all of the work you've done with her, what's your intuition about what's motivating her?*

*G - I'm not quite sure but she's in a different place now - she's in her own flat. Maybe she wants to out check with me how safe she is and what she needs to do.*

*A - That's your instinct?*

G – Yeah!

A – *And what does it tell you that a sixteen year old girl – seventeen now, or sixteen?*

G – *Seventeen.*

A – *What does it tell you after you've been through that process with her with the first baby and now when she's with the midwife, she's saying 'ring Gloria' - she's asking for you.*

G – *I suppose she can trust me to help her think it out, what she really wants to do.*

A – *I suspect so, I suspect so!*

G – *And if it doesn't work, she wants me help her to sort it out with the baby*

A – *I can't think of anything more you're supposed to be doing in the job than that you were doing.*

### **3.4 Appreciative inquiry as a form of action research**

This approach to building knowledge from and for child protection practice can be seen as a form of action research. Seeking to meet the challenge of 'how to inquire in the midst of action', Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 1 and 2) describe action research as 'grass roots postmodernism' that 'starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge'.

To utilise the postmodern insight that knowledge is formed relationally, or through 'mutual sense making', action researchers seek 'to create communities of inquiry, within communities of social practice' (Reason and Torbet, 2001, p. 6). This is particularly important in the child protection context, since the sense workers make of their practice, is significantly influenced by their colleagues in exactly the sorts of ways Gloria describes (see also White, 2003). The process of exploring workers' stories of constructive practice is useful when done individually but is most powerful when the process has organisational endorsement and involves a collegial group, actively engaged in the meaning building process.

Rather than an appreciative focus, practice talk among child protection practitioners habitually defaults to problem-focused discussion of the most worrying cases. In these discussions, colleagues and supervisors usually offer commentary or direction about what the caseworker overlooked, didn't do or should do. The methodology I am describing, invites very different

talk. To build a culture of appreciative inquiry around practice within a work group, requires that the practitioners make an active decision to set time aside for this process. During this time it is also important the group give careful attention to how they will restrain the inevitable urge to default into problem-focused habits of discussion and the facilitator/researcher will inevitably need to take an active role in restraining a focus on deficits or what should have/could have been done.

Within the Gateshead group, this was not difficult as the practitioners there are familiar with and have a commitment to the process. To retain the constructive momentum, as the discussion moves from the individual practitioner to the wider group, it is usually important to initiate this shift in conversation through an eliciting question that has a clear appreciative focus. To this end, I asked Gloria's colleagues: *'What stood out for you, what have you learnt from Gloria's practice?'*

Unfortunately, the video recording of this session was not of sufficient quality to fully transcribe the comments of Gloria's colleagues. Of what could be identified, six of her colleagues commented on the importance of Gloria:

*'Showing consistency toward the young woman'.*

*'Maintaining the relationship through many changes of place and attitude'.*

*'Continuing to give the young woman the opportunity to come to her own decision'.*

*'Going with her to the adoptive parents, and sharing the young woman's experience of her own family and drawing this experience and the different perspectives into the assessment'.*

This led to another colleague observing to Gloria:

*'You knew your role very clearly and I admire that in a person, but you also walked with the client, and that's the best way to do the work - to walk with the client.'*

All of these comments drew feedback and further reflection from Gloria, and the last comment led Gloria to respond:

*'I think that in a way I was in conflict with what I thought I should be doing and what I knew that I wanted to be doing and I was thinking am I right to do this (relating so closely to the young woman) am I wrong to do this? At the end I just thought, 'sod it, it feels right, I'm doing it! It's helping, it's working'.*

### **3.5 Building a culture of appreciative inquiry around child protection practice**

The process just described explicitly seeks to build the practitioner's sense of agency in their work. The aim of the exercise is to help the worker to reflect upon and articulate their own sense of judgement, responsibility and authority within the uncertainties of day-to-day child protection casework. This process is undertaken within the worker's community of practice to help that group collectively build their own reflexive capacity to stake meaningful and grounded claims for work that is useful and makes a difference.

Endeavouring to create what Heron (1996) calls 'practical knowledge embodied in action', this process potentially deconstructs and collapses some of the typical social work theory/practice disjunctions identified in the previous chapter. More than this, by bringing inquiry closer to the scene of the action, I am hoping to empower communities of front-line social workers to stake a strong claim for their own capacity to theorise child protection practice. By focusing on instances of success this potentially raises practitioners' morale, creates energy around the inquiry process and destabilises the pessimism and defensiveness that is so often a part of child protection culture.

For this sort of appreciative inquiry to work well, and to enact its participative ideals, a relationship of mutuality, trust and shared purpose between the inquirer and the practitioners is essential. This is particularly so for child protection practitioners since they have an almost inbuilt instinct, that any exploration of their practice will necessarily be a process of exploring their failings and deficits. Focusing on what is most important to practitioners - the hope that they can be helpful and make a constructive difference in their clients' lives - is a powerful and energising mechanism to build participative action research.

### **3.6 Writing and DVD production as collaborative inquiry**

To advance from the initial inquiry interview and to bring the story into a final written or DVD form I work together with the worker and their organisation in a process that is informed by the successive interpretive writing processes of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Gilgun, 1994b; McCallum, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The process of transcribing, writing, editing and video production together with the practitioner, her colleagues, supervisors and managers takes all of us into a learning journey regarding what constructive child protection social work looks like in their context. This is a process of writing and production as research, a process of knowledge creation and sense making in action. In facilitating this process I am using my teaching, leadership, consultancy and

research skills not to showcase my expertise but rather to foster and honour local wisdom regarding the constructive practice.

The following list summarises the steps involved in the collaborative and participatory process of eliciting the initial description through to working that description into a DVD or written account:

*Preparing a written story*

- 1 Gain permission from organisation for the appreciative inquiry and writing as research process.
- 2 Conduct appreciative inquiry group sessions.
- 3 Identify an example to work up and check worker is happy to be involved with this.
- 4 Transcribe out the inquiry interview.
- 5 Make transcript available to worker and check whether they have additions or changes they would like to make.
- 6 Draft case story based upon the transcript and send draft to worker for feedback and changes.
- 7 Edit and redraft the story as many times as necessary to evolve an account that the worker is comfortable with.
- 8 Check the story with worker's colleagues, supervisors and relevant managers.

- 9 Where possible take the story to the service recipients involved in the case and interview them about their perspective on the practice and what was most significant to them.
- 10 Integrate the service recipients' account into the earlier story to create a more comprehensive local knowledge account of the constructive practice.
- 11 Bring the written account back to worker and service recipients for final editing. Obtain written permission from them to make the story public.
- 12 Remunerate service recipients for their time, expertise and participation.
- 13 Present the final written account to organisational stakeholders for any last changes and obtain authorisation to make public.
- 14 Provide the organisation with a final copy of the case story - this can then become an organisational and training resource for the agency of constructive practice in their context.
- 15 Publish the account and make public in other ways (e.g., in training, at conferences etc) to foster appreciation of what on-the-ground constructive practice looks like more broadly.

### *Preparing a DVD*

- 1 Gain permission from organisation for for the appreciative inquiry and video production as research process
- 2 Conduct and video tape the appreciative inquiry group sessions.
- 3 Identify example to work up and check worker is happy to be involved with this.
- 4 Transcribe out the inquiry interview.
- 5 Send the full and an edited version of the transcript to the worker.
- 6 Rework the edit of the transcript to evolve an on paper edited version of the story that the worker is comfortable with using in the DVD.
- 7 Prepare first edited video production of the interview and forward to worker for further modification and editing.
- 8 Check DVD account with colleagues, supervisors and relevant managers.
- 9 Where possible take the DVD to service recipients and interview them about their perspective on the practice and what was most important for them.
- 10 Integrate the service recipients' account into the earlier DVD to create a more comprehensive local knowledge account of the constructive practice.
- 11 Bring the DVD back to the worker and service recipients for final editing. Obtain their written permission to make public.
- 12 Remunerate service recipients for their time, expertise and participation.

- 13 Subtitle the DVD (this deals with problems of poor audio and the final product can then more easily be used in different locations where accents and expressions may be different. The subtitling also provides viewers with an additional means to take in and learn from the story when viewing the DVD).
- 14 Make a final edited version of the DVD available to organisational stakeholders for any last modifications and obtain authorisation to make public.
- 15 Provide organisation with a final DVD copy of the case story - this becomes an organisational and training resource for the agency of constructive practice in their context.
- 16 Make the DVD public in training, at conferences etc., to foster appreciation of what on-the-ground constructive practice looks like more broadly.

### **3.7 Challenges to creating practitioners' stories of good practice**

While this process of practice inquiry appears in many ways to be simple and straightforward the process involves facing many challenges. Reason and Torbet (2001, p. 7) observe:

The action turn in the social sciences is a turn toward a kind of research/practice open in principle to anyone willing to commit to integrating inquiry and practice in everyday personal and professional settings. In fact, we all inevitably integrate inquiry and practice implicitly in our everyday conduct. Nevertheless, the call to integrate inquiry and practice both explicitly and implicitly in our everyday conduct represents a demand that few persons in history have attempted to accept.

Within the child protection context, where practice wisdom is so commonly overlooked, there are many organizational, professional and individual issues that tend to arise in the process of involving workers in theorising their own day-to-day practice in this way. I want to turn now to explore two such issues.

#### ***Repopulating human services***

While front-line social work is a very human activity, bureaucracies such as child protection agencies tend to strip practice of its identities, humanity, uniqueness and individuality. Large organizations tend to erase the human touch, with an emphasis on files, reports, assessments, intervention strategies, case plans and proper procedure. Ferguson (2004) calls this the deodorisation and decontextualisation of social work and Billig (1998) describes this as a process of depopulation. Billig's concept is most commonly explored in terms of the depopulated manner in which professionals are trained to render professional research and practice whether written or verbal in a manner that erases their own identities (Witkin, 2000). This is a largely taken-for-granted aspect of being a professional within a large human services agency. The process of inviting practitioners to theorise from their own practice and to stake a claim for their work, challenges workers and their organizations to step into a professionally unusual process, of 'repopulation'.

Workers themselves typically feel at least some hesitation, embarrassment and uncertainty about locating themselves as actors in the middle of their practice. When practitioners do step into this process the usual organizational processes of depopulation are challenged. This often becomes particularly evident when the possibility of writing up practitioners' experiences and knowledges is explored. While there are obvious confidentiality issues that need to be attended to, often practice simply looks

too muddied by day-to-day life to sit comfortably within the image of professionalism that an organization wishes to project. A case example (published in Turnell in press a and Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran in press) illustrates the point:

An English social worker undertaking a home visit was greeted at the door by a man telling her to f\*\*\* off! This sort of occurrence is not that unusual for child protection workers but the worker's response was certainly unique. After thinking for a moment, the worker replied, 'that's okay, I can f\*\*\* off, but we have to talk, so when can I f\*\*\* back?' The man broke into a smile and responded 'alright love you'd better come in'. This was the first step in building a relationship where the two in short order would discuss and began to work together around the problem that had brought the investigative child protection worker to the man's door. The worker's response to being told to 'f\*\*\* off' was not a contrived strategy. It was simply her best response in the moment to engage an angry man, and her response created a way to move forward.

When I wrote up this story and sought organisational permission to publish this example with the social worker, managers in her agency did not want their organisation or the worker identified. One of the managers was adamant that the workers of that organization did not swear in their

professional role. In my experience, descriptions of good practice with difficult situations and cases, frequently involves a practitioner humanising organisational procedure and stretching supposed professional boundaries. The social work community is so used to practice rendered in 'clean', idealised, second voice ways, it is often confronting to hear practice described in ways that are closer to what happened between the people on the ground.

### *Dirty social work as constructive practice*

Child protection workers are often wary about staking any sort of claim for their practice because even when they feel they have made some progress they inevitably also have worries or feel ambivalent about the situation. For example, a worker may have returned a child to their family of origin and might feel this was a positive development but will inevitably also worry about whether the child is safe enough or whether the youngster might be maltreated again. Conversely, a worker may have permanently separated a child from their natural parents, and while the decision may be based on careful assessment and decision making the worker will inevitably worry or at least wonder if there was more they could have done to keep the child at home.

Gloria's descriptions of her case, clearly demonstrate this issue. Any practitioner who has worked with teenagers who are in the care system but refuse to be accommodated know of cases where their best realistic hope for the young person is simply to help the teenager to stay alive until they mature a little or age out of care. While this may be the worker's unstated goal, they will inevitably have to regularly prepare case reports that describe impossible but organisationally required accommodation and vocational plans for that teenager. Child protection work is a messy business and constructive practice is rarely perfect practice, and only occasionally equates to something that might be deemed a 'happy ending'.

To talk about constructive practice it is important to step back from the aspiration of perfect practice and ideal solutions. Theorizing about child protection practice is often written as if perfect assessments and interventions are possible and as if the problems faced in child protection cases can be somehow completely resolved. This is part of what de Montigny (1995, p. 131) means when he writes about the 'idealizations of the texts'. Helping professionals have a considerable appetite to believe, act, write and think as if it is possible to solve these sorts of problems perfectly. This is probably in part a legacy of enlightenment visions of the perfectibility of the human condition, which not only inform western culture but were also part of the underpinning logic that saw the emergence of the social work profession within western countries. In contrast to this, de Montigny

suggests that his experience tells him that his best practice was in fact 'dirty social work' he says 'real social workers get dirty week after week. Their lives and the lives of clients cannot be scrubbed clean' (1995, p. 223).

Many of the situations child protection workers are typically faced with, are 'ugly' problems. Since perfect solutions are not possible in the majority of cases, this means staking a claim for notions of constructive practice, is an uncertain business. Gloria's case example demonstrates this point perfectly. Throughout the conversation Gloria displays the sort of continual caution, that most child protection workers know well, about judging her efforts to be constructive. Each time I asked Gloria to stake a positive claim for her practice, she was hesitant since she was all too aware of the complexities of this young woman's situation.

There are many reasons that can be identified for why social work has failed to articulate what Weick calls the profession's 'first voice'. Weick identifies the profession's naïve enchantment with science, and the embedded devaluing of womans' work and caring work within western society as two primary inhibitors. Additionally practitioners will often say that if they do make public their successes the response that greets them is, 'Great! Now have 10 more cases because clearly you know what you are doing'.

These factors can also be seen to intertwine with the pressure that health and welfare organizations bring to bear on social workers to conform with institutionally mandated framings of how their practice should be constituted. This inevitably means that wisdom about how to manage organisational imperatives and politics is an embedded part of the practice wisdom of the skilled social work practitioner. This sort of institutional wisdom is in turn often difficult for the practitioner to speak about, except perhaps on an informal basis, without exposing themselves to sanction within their organisation. Whatever the worker might want to say about their work and experience, as the three stories we considered at the beginning of this exegesis demonstrate, child protection social workers, whether they are at the frontline or the chief social worker, almost always carry an unsettling sense of uncertainty about what they do.

To meaningfully talk about the possibility of constructive child protection practice, it is essential therefore that this sense of uncertainty and precariousness is integrated into the storied accounts. This inoculates the decontextualisation and deodorisation Ferguson speaks of and the idealisation that de Montigny identifies. Following de Montigny's lead, I have come to the view that 'best practice' in child protection work is most often a process of finding the least dirty solution, to an ugly problem. This is an almost scandalous viewpoint to articulate. However, I know from experience when I proffer this 'dirty social work' viewpoint to groups of

front-line practitioners, there is usually an audible and collective sigh of relief that passes through the room. The notion of dirty social work, mirrors something very meaningful about practitioners' day-to-day experience of their work life.

Challenging sanitised and idealised notions of social work in this way, allows practitioners to start to think that perhaps their practice might indeed be worth exploring. It creates greater space for social workers to think more broadly about what constructive practice might look like and consider that their endeavour might indeed be a site of meaningful inquiry. In developing my approach to theorising from practice, I share Gerald de Montigny's aspiration: 'We need a practice that celebrates the equivocal, the confusing, the chaos and the mystery of the everyday' (1995, p. 221).

### **3.8 Utilising a constructive practice focus to inform and energise supervision**

I concur with Ferguson (2003) that social work is conducted under a negative star and that a deficit culture tends to inform the way the social work profession looks at its practice. Workers themselves tend to focus on cases they are most worried about and supervision follows suit. More than this, academic work, inquiries and research likewise tend also to maintain this problem-saturated focus (White and Epston, 1990). In this section I want to

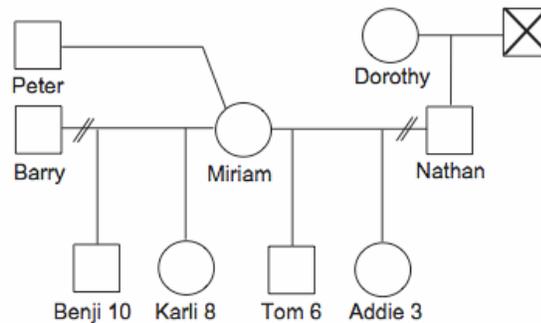
describe how I seek in my consultancy work to utilise a focus on constructive practice to broaden and energise supervisory work and to foster a culture of appreciative inquiry within the workplace.

Supervision in child protection organizations itself frequently becomes a problem-saturated undertaking, with the worker typically bringing cases they are most worried about to the supervisor. For myriad reasons, including an organisational culture that demands compliance to agency standards and procedure, supervisors and practice managers often find themselves stepping into a role of doing the thinking for the worker and directing practice by essentially telling the worker what to do. In its most intense form this becomes what Craig Smith, a former chief social worker in the New Zealand, Department for Child Youth and Family, describes as 'command and control social work'. Supervision that includes at least some time for exploring practice that the worker feels good about, can change the dynamics of the process. Whether that is done in the particular case that the worker feels worried about or in a separate case where the worker feels more confident, this can be a powerful process to help the worker feel stronger in their own professional identity and more able to tackle the challenges they are experiencing.

### *Case example*

This example of integrating a good practice focus into a supervisory process involves casework undertaken by Kari Hohn, a worker in the concurrent planning team from Olmsted County Child and Family and Services (OCCFS), Rochester, Minnesota. The description comes from work undertaken in a fortnightly phone case consultation/supervision forum that I led with OCCFS staff between 2001 and 2005. I wrote up the description from memory immediately following the consultation with later feedback from others (including Kari and her supervisor) involved in the group process.

This case involves the following people:



This family had a long history of involvement with OCCFS and many problems that the family have faced could be described. The issues of most relevance at the point of the consultation included:

- Nathan had a long history of severe repeated violence toward Miriam. He was in prison for assault against Miriam and due to be released within the subsequent six months. Miriam was afraid Nathan would kill her after release. Prior to going to prison, Nathan had stalked Miriam even when she had gone to the effort to move to several different cities including, one that was out of state.
- Miriam had a long history of alcohol abuse and drinks to excess every day. One example of the drinking severity and the subsequent risk to the children was demonstrated when Miriam was picked up by the police for driving with a blood alcohol reading of 0.285 with all four children in the car.
- All four children had been removed from Miriam's care following a long history of not being able to provide adequate care for them despite intensive work by OCCFS workers. Kari had been involved in this support process and had involved three family group decision-making meetings with a group of Miriam's friends and family involved in the safety planning. (The family group decision-making meeting [FGDM] is the US equivalent of a family group conference [FGC], the New Zealand created participatory conferencing process. FGDM/FGC's privilege the voice of the family and its naturally occurring network in case planning).

- Benji and Karli were living with their father Barry. Tom and Addie were in separate foster care arrangements but OCCFS were in the process of transferring the custody and care of Tom and Karli to Dorothy.
- One example of the prolonged inadequate care received by the children when in Miriam's care was demonstrated in the deterioration of Addie's health. Addie, who suffers from spina bifida and requires daily medications and catheterisation, had damaged bladder and kidneys because she was not getting the care she required to meet her medical condition while in Miriam's care. (Addie's bladder and kidneys returned to normal functioning while she was in foster care).
- Both Addie and Tom display behavioural difficulties for example, both are difficult to redirect when in child-care and Tom has been aggressive to his peers on a daily basis and has stated 'I could kill Addie if I wanted to!'

I asked Kari what she wanted from the consultation to which Kari answered she wanted to focus on how she should go about building a good working relationship with Dorothy to ensure good enough long-term care for Addie and Tom.

*The practice Kari is most proud of*

Before looking at the work to be done with Dorothy, I asked Kari what she felt good about in the work she has done in this case? Kari stated that she has felt she had done a good job of building a good working relationship with Miriam. I then asked Kari how she has done this. Kari described that with the support of her supervisors Linda Billman and Rich Hacker, Kari 'pushed herself' to go beyond a 'sobriety is the only way of achieving child safety' position. Kari stated that in the previous cases where parents used alcohol excessively and also with Miriam in the beginning she had become bogged down in an argument that Miriam had to stop drinking. Kari felt that if she had kept going on that tack she is certain the relationship would have stalled completely. Instead of this, drawing on Linda Billman's suggestions Kari focused with Miriam on what she wanted for the care of the children, asking Miriam about times when her care of the children was okay and things did work well for the children. This allowed Miriam to relax with Kari and they began to build a working relationship. Kari described this as 'putting Miriam in the driver's seat'.

Building from these initial goal and exception questions Kari also asked Miriam; *'are there times when you drink and your care of the kids is okay?'* Miriam could not describe any examples of doing this, which lead Kari to see there

was more danger for the children. This question however did lead Miriam to describe that she drank to deal with feeling stressed. So Kari asked another exception question, *'are there times when you feel stressed and don't drink?'* Kari remembers Miriam answered with a definitive; *'No!'* Again this gave Kari a more comprehensive worrying picture of the danger for the children. Through this conversation Miriam went on to explain that this was why she would get friends involved in the care of the kids, so they would be looked after when she got drunk. With Miriam's permission this led Kari to organise a meeting with the friends, including Roger, that Miriam had sought help from. Kari then involved these friends in making specific safety plans about how they would know there was a problem for the children and how they would help. Kari was also exploring with Miriam how she would know she needed to ask for assistance. After building the initial relationships much of this work was undertaken through the three FGDM's.

In the third FGDM, several of the friends actually asked what would happen if Mum was getting drunk and didn't involve them to help care for the kids? Kari said if this was the case OCCFS would most likely have to remove the children from Miriam's care. Sometime later, when Miriam had not let the friends into the house when she was drunk and they were worried about the children, several of the friends including Peter contacted Kari regarding their worries. This resulted in the four children being removed into care. However, because Kari had built up a relationship with Miriam focused

squarely around the children's safety, Kari was able to maintain a strong partnership with Miriam even through the removal and placement of the children.

### *Deciding how to go forward*

Since Kari's goal for the consultation was to think through how she could improve her working relationship with Dorothy, I asked Kari to rate her current working relationship with Dorothy on a zero to ten scale. Kari rated the present relationship at a four. Kari stated that what made the rating four points higher than zero included the fact that she had found ways of working with Dorothy over time. Dorothy tends to be very quiet and had been somewhat anti-OCCFS and therefore she had not engaged readily with Kari. I asked what Kari she had found that had worked? Kari stated that several things have worked in improving the relationship:

- Not directly challenging Dorothy, particularly about Nathan.
- Getting Dorothy to write things down and giving her time to do this. When Kari gets Dorothy to do this she has found Dorothy gets down to 'good detail'.
- Using scaling questions with Dorothy.

I asked for an example that Kari could think of where she had used scaling questions that she felt helped her made progress. Kari described being in a situation meeting with medical staff and Dorothy where the doctors were carefully detailing the medical attention and care that Addie needed daily. Kari was uncertain whether Dorothy was taking in the information. Kari said she had to think for a while about her concern and also had push herself to express her concern in the meeting. Having gathered her thoughts, Kari inquired if she could ask a question. Kari then asked Dorothy 'on a scale of 0 - 10 where 10 is you feel you understand everything you need to know to provide the medical care for Addie and 0 is you understand none of it, where would you rate yourself right now? Dorothy stated she felt she was at a 7 or 8. Kari asked what needed to happen for her to move upwards on the scale - Dorothy answered that she needed time to practice all the things she had to do - particularly the catheterisation - and that over time and with practice she would feel more confident. Dorothy also said she would ask for help if she wasn't being successful. Dorothy's answers made Kari feel more confident.

I asked Kari what were the signs of safety that had led her to be willing to recommend to the court that custody be transferred to Dorothy. Kari described that:

- Dorothy has stated she wants the children and had stepped into the responsibility and the caring role over time.
- Dorothy had attended all medical appointments over the past 3 months.
- Dorothy had learnt to catheterise Addie.
- Dorothy had been asking questions of the doctors and Kari that demonstrate she has been reading the material the hospital have given her and doing her own research on Addie's problems.
- Dorothy had passed the homestudy assessment by the county to check her suitability to adopt – Kari described that there are lots of hoops in this process.
- The children are always excited to be with Dorothy and want to be with her. They get a lot of comfort out of being with her when she has them on access.
- Dorothy had created a routine for the children when they have access with her and Addie and Tom come back to the foster carers in 'good shape'.
- Dorothy has said she wanted to involve others (family and friends) to help her care for Tom and Addie. Members of the extended family say they will support Dorothy. Kari stated she wanted to see this intention demonstrated in action over time.

I asked whether Dorothy knew Kari saw all these positives and these were the reasons OCCFS was looking at the transfer of custody to Dorothy. Kari stated she'd said some of these things to Dorothy but not fully and carefully. Kari agreed this would be an important next step to improve the relationship. To set the scene for giving the feedback I suggested asking Dorothy was she interested in knowing what had lead Kari and OCCFS to be willing to recommend transfer of custody to Dorothy.

I then asked the group if they had any ideas that might help Kari further build her working relationship with Dorothy focused around the goal of successfully transitioning the children into her custody. Pat Worden suggested drawing a picture with Dorothy and the two children of a house on one end of a long sheet of paper with Dorothy, Addie and Tom in the house surrounded by all the people who would support them and a pathway leading to the house. The next step of Pat's idea was to work with all of them to describe where they were at present on that path and what they needed to do to get to the house. Kari commented this would work well for her as it would be a way of involving the children and looking more specifically at who else would be involved.

Rich suggested that it would be useful for Kari to ask Dorothy how she saw Kari's relationship with her and ask how we could be helpful? We also

discussed asking Dorothy a scaling question rating the working relationship between Kari and Dorothy.

Tom Olson suggested asking Dorothy about her goals for Tom and Addie's care, what would it look like when the care was going the way she wanted it and how she would know that she'd got to that point.

I concluded the discussion/consultation around this case by asking Kari did she have what she wanted from this consultation? Kari said the process had given her what she needed to move forward, particularly the ideas around involving Tom and Addie.

#### **A Process for Integrating a Good Practice Focus into Supervision**

- 1 Very early in the supervision or consultation look in detail at practice that the worker feels good about – if this relates directly to the case(s) the worker wants to discuss, so much the better
- 2 In relation to each case to be discussed, ask the worker what they want from supervision.
- 3 Explore this goal on a continuum such as a 0 – 10 scale, since it is rare that a worker has achieved nothing of their goal in the casework. Before

exploring the detail of what the worker wants to achieve, find out what they have done already that is working for them and what the clients would say they are doing that is useful.

- 4 Use any ideas that have emerged from 1 and 3 to assist the work of achieving the goal.
- 5 Ask the worker for their ideas for moving toward the goal.
- 6 Explore together with the worker any ideas the supervisor has or others in the supervisory group have, but ensure these ideas are related directly to the worker's goal.
- 7 Before ending the supervision or consultation, check whether the worker has got what they wanted from the process, if not explore what else needs to occur to achieve their goal.

### **3.9 Using stories of good practice to create broader influence.**

For me it is vital that the stories of constructive practice I am involved in eliciting and documenting both in groups directed solely at the appreciative inquiry task or in supervisory/case consultation contexts are utilised to have as wide an influence as possible. Following the consultation on Kari's case, I

made a point of circulating the write-up to the OCCFS director as well as Kari's supervisors, Kari herself and the consultation group. The first draft of this story was in fact written as a feedback process for Kari and the consultation group. For the practitioners and supervisors involved in an appreciative inquiry process, seeing a black and white description of the casework tends to make the work seem more significant and notable.

The appreciative inquiry consultation process at Olmsted County is also part of a long-term agenda within OCCFS to try and increase the organization's capacity to undertake constructive, safety-organised child protection practice. Despite the usual social work proclivity to see practice within an isolated client-practitioner bubble, constructive practice most frequently arises within supervisory, team and organisational contexts that support such work. To keep the managers that were instrumental in driving the organisational change at Olmsted County involved with Kari's success, I sent the following email to Rob Sawyer (OCCFS Director) & Sue Lohrbach (Supervisor responsible for managing the implementation of safety-organised practice at Olmsted County).

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**Subject:** Kari's Case

**Date:** Friday, 7 May 2004 9:39am

**From:** Andrew Turnell

**To:** Rob Sawyer, Sue Lohrbach

Hi Rob and Sue

Just finished writing up Kari's case (as attached), and wanted to say that I think this case is an enormous tribute and demonstration of the efforts both of you have put in to OCCFS over many years - to wit:

- The willingness of the OC system to give a chaotic and addicted woman a real opportunity, demonstrated through a worker that has learnt how to build a solid and safety-focused working relationship with a mum like that.
- The repeated use of FGDM's demonstrates the much broader vision that you have for that process. The multiple FGDM's created a context that really engaged the mum's friends in building safety around the kids, so that they were the ones who raised the alarm at the end of the day. (One FGDM would not have built the relationships to the network sufficiently I'd suggest). This also created a context where Kari was able to maintain her working relationship with Miriam through the removal and termination-of-rights process.
- The willingness of OC to look at grandmother Dorothy as a real option to adopt the children, is a tribute to your humanising the concurrent process. In my experience most jurisdictions would have minimised their dealings with the mum of such a violent man

(assuming probably that she was complicit in her son's violence) and been within their mandate to adopt out the children beyond the family, long before.

- From what I know, this is also an African-American case which again demonstrates your system's increasing capacity for very good cross-cultural practice.

I was also really excited to see the demonstration of focusing on safety rather than sobriety within this example – I have been wondering whether I was flogging a dead horse on that theme, but here it is in practice.

Andrew

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When I have completed the writing-up and collaborative editing of a case story or completed a DVD I always provide copies to all those involved and also make sure the organization has copies. These are very useful as a training resource and some of the organizations I have worked with have made an archive of the materials we have developed in this way.

Beyond the immediate organization within which the story arises I seek to extend the influence of the good practice stories and appreciative inquiry

processes by linking practitioners and organizations in different locations to support and affirm each other's practice. When I present completed DVDs or written accounts of good practice from one organisation in another location I will often ask workers in that location to write short letters to the practitioner whose work they have just heard about. These letters, which I forward to the original worker and supervisor, contain feedback from the practitioners of the second location about what they have learnt and what impressed them in the practice. In this way I am assisting and inviting the workers from the second location to think through for themselves a little more about what they consider constructive practice and step into the process of building a culture of appreciative inquiry. For both sets of practitioners this process strengthens their insights and thinking about good practice.

On numerous occasions as part of my international consultancy work I also connect up practitioners in different locations, usually through the internet to share casework they feel proud of. This has proved an effective and energising mechanism to assist practitioners to reflect on constructive practice and practitioners often seem to be able to learn more from practice that comes from outside their own jurisdiction and organization.

### **3.10 Consequences, limitations and futures**

The child protection field has made a habit of inquiring into failure and the child death inquiry is the epitome of this inclination. As Reder, Duncan and Grey (1993, p. 89) state however, 'little new ever comes out of inquiries into child abuse tragedies'. It is worth imagining then, how different child protection practice might be, if even a small proportion of the organisational and state resources that are usually directed toward failure were brought to bear to create a rigorous, ongoing inquiry process into, good practice with 'difficult' cases.

The child protection field has considerable information about the many problems practitioners must deal with, but has only limited, substantive information about practice that actually makes a difference in resolving these problems. Instead, child protection organisations tend to be over-organised by failure and anxiety. To redirect this culture of reactive managerialism, I believe child protection professionals need to take new bearings and build grounded visions of what is possible, from an appreciative understanding of the best of what already is.

Appreciative inquiry processes that privilege the perspective of service deliverers and recipients can generate grounded data and guidance into the full range of child protection casework. In the writings and DVD's submitted with this exegesis I have described effective child protection practice in situations where:

- Children had been removed from a family, but parents and workers describe that it was done fairly (the two examples described earlier in this chapter and *Investigating Domestic Violence DVD*, all three examples will be published in Turnell, in press b. Also Kath O'Leary's example from chapter one.)
- Meaningful safety plans were created and enacted with families of 'high risk infants' (Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran, in press).
- Child protection professionals worked with parents who had had multiple children adopted from their care because of long-term chronic neglect assisting them to successfully raise a subsequent child (Turnell, 2006; Turnell, Elliott and Hogg, 2007; Turnell, in press b; *Ladybird, Ladybird DVD*)
- Examples of cross-cultural practice in high risk cases where both the professionals and parents describe the practice as constructive (Teoh, Laffer, Turnell and Parton, 2003; Turnell, 2004; *On the Receiving End DVD; A Mother's Experience of Good CPS Practice DVD*).

- Constructive practice with situations of alleged child abuse and disputed explanations, more often called 'denial' cases (Turnell and Essex, 2006; *Investigating a dispute regarding an injured infant* DVD).
- Constructive practice with angry and aggressive clients (Turnell in press a; Turnell in press b; Turnell and Essex, pp. 114-117; *Investigating Domestic Violence* DVD).

While this sort of practice does happen, positive stories of this depth and detail are almost unheard of in the child protection context. These examples provide considerable on-the-ground guidance about how child protection practitioners might undertake the difficult tasks they face. An appreciative approach to inquiry and theorising in statutory social work might well offer more substantive, purposive and sustainable visions of constructive child protection practice than the idealised and sanitised visions of practice that frequent professional literature.

The two locations – Olmsted County Child and Family Service in Minnesota and Gateshead Social Services in England where I have been involved in using the appreciative inquiry processes most consistently are both locations which have been evaluated as top performing child protection organizations within their respective countries. I am not trying here to ascribe the use of the appreciative inquiry methods to the positive audit outcome data for these

locations since it would be impossible to demonstrate a causal link between the inquiry work and the performance data. However practitioners and managers in both locations are confident that the appreciative inquiry processes we have undertaken in these counties have made an important contribution to building the professional identity and sustaining the morale and permanence of practitioners at both sites.

### *Limitations*

One of the limitations of the sort of inquiry that I have undertaken concerns the issue of time. Every case example that I have been involved in writing up or producing into DVD form generally involves at least 100 hours of work. For the most part I do not see that most researchers are willing to spend this sort of time attending to the fine details of practitioner's experience.

The capacity to undertake the sort of research I describe here depends on a strong ongoing relationship between myself as researcher, and the practitioners in the context of a supportive organisation. These relationships must be continually nurtured. This sort of inquiry also requires that the researcher have a strong sensitivity to the nature, complexity and nuances of the child protection task. Without this sort of sensitivity the researcher will be limited in their capacity to appreciate and distil the subtleties and richness of the practice.

A further restraint and limitation of this sort of research is that in many child protection organizations it is hard to convince senior management and bureaucrats that the local knowledges of the practitioners are valuable. Most managers particularly in large organizations such as state or national based systems are focused on large-scale outcomes and system wide issues. From the perspective at the top of large child protection organizations frontline practitioners are more often seen as problems to be managed rather than as professionals who have important knowledges that can improve child protection practice.

I am fortunate to work within a number of smaller jurisdictions such as Olmsted County in Minnesota and Gateshead Borough in England where there is substantial management commitment to frontline practice and I am able to sustain relationships with senior managers and directors who are comfortable with publication. The fact that I have been able to build and sustain these sort of ongoing practice research conducive working relationships is a demonstration that it is possible.

Another limitation of this sort of inquiry arises from the fact child protection organizations are often large institutions, and the bigger the organization the harder it is to garner management approval to make the examples public. I have worked-up numerous example of practice with practitioners and

service recipients in West Australia and other jurisdictions that will never see the light of day because senior management will not allow release of these examples.

A significant weakness of my research work has been the tendency to focus on the practice of the individual worker with individual service recipients. Child protection work is always undertaken in organisational contexts and most often the best work occurs in constructive supervisory and organisational contexts. I would like to direct significantly more effort in my inquiry work to get at these contexts. In the two recent papers – Turnell, Elliot and Hogg (2007) and Turnell, Lohrbach and Curran (in press) I have endeavoured to direct more attention to the team and supervisory contexts that have facilitated and fostered the constructive practice. In these papers I have interviewed the supervisors to distil their wisdoms regarding the contexts they have created to foster the practice. In a forthcoming work I am intending to focus more broadly still and look at organisational structures that facilitate strengths-based, safety-organised practice (Turnell, in press b)

In the practice inquiry I have undertaken, apart from one example (Turnell and Edwards, pp. 148-152) I have not published examples of constructive practice that incorporate young people's perspectives. There has been considerable research in the past decade documenting child protection failings with children and young people (for example Butler and Williamson,

1994; Cashmore, 2002; Cashmore and Paxman, 2006; Farmer and Pollock, 1998; Gilligan, 2000; Munro, 2001; Prior et. al., 1999; Thoburn et al., 1995; Thomas and O’Kane, 1999; Westcott, 1995; Westcott and Davies, 1996) but no attention has been paid to constructive practice. I know from experience with five unpublished interviews I or colleagues have undertaken that the methodology I have described in this chapter works well with children and young people. It is an obvious and important area in which this sort of appreciative inquiry could and should be developed.

Overall I think the limitations of this sort of inquiry have barely been explored, primarily because this sort of research is so rare in the social work cannon. Most of the practice research I have read for this exegesis and during my journey with this style of inquiry has, as I have argued in chapter two, demonstrates an academic remove and is undertaken with the priorities of the academic to the fore. This then is the greatest limitation I see around this sort of practice inquiry I have been involved in, namely a lack of interest, commitment, acuity to and respect from the academy and bureaucracy toward the work of the frontline practitioner. For the sort of practice inquiry that I am advocating to be effective, those leading the research have to have a belief in the idea that there is gold within the practitioner’s lived experience and the determination and commitment to build relationships, structures and methodologies with practitioners to elicit, amplify and formalise these knowledges.

This sort of practice research is activist work in my view, work that stands against the dominant managerial visions of the audit culture and the dominating discourses of most academics toward practitioners that devalue, problematise or overlook practitioners' knowledges. It is as if Flexner's and Boehm's views still pervade the social work psyche. While postmodernism and the interpretive social theory offers epistemological space and methodological resources to undertake this sort of collaborative inquiry, I do not see that Geertz's assertion that the 'the answer to our most general questions are to be found in the fine detail of lived life' (Geertz, 2000 p. xi) has found a meaningful resonance within the social work discipline. I see little evidence and little reverence or honouring of the fine detail of the everyday experience of the practitioner within the social work cannon.

For the transformative potential of the practitioner's knowledge to be accessed, drawn upon and formalised I believe that the social work profession needs to re-orient ontologically. For social work to meet the challenges of late modernity and the actualities of a profession whose practitioners are more often to be found embedded within the belly of the latemodern organizational beast than manning the barricades or acting as therapists we need to find and display a more radical faith in the wisdom of those in these embedded locations and contexts. The greatest limitation within the social work profession to this sort of inquiry is the lack of

ontological commitment to the transformative potential of local knowledge. Geertz (2000, p. 11) suggests anthropologists as 'merchants of astonishment' when I read most social work practice research I encounter researchers acting far more like merchants of diminishment. I believe for the transformational potential of the practitioners' knowledges to be realized within the social work community a claim needs to be staked for the enchantment of practice and of frontline social work. I turn my attention to this assertion in the final chapter of this exegesis.

#### **4 A Spirited Conclusion: Journeying Hopefully With and Toward Insiders' Accounts of Constructive and Transformative Child Protection Social Work**

By way of concluding this exegesis I want to return to the question that informs this inquiry, *What potential does interpretive social theory have for transforming child protection social work?* In this final chapter I want now to interpret this question using the lens of spirituality. This research question turns on the issue of transformation and the question of what transformative resources exist within interpretive social theory for the practice of child protection social work. While interpretive social theory creates epistemological resources and space for valuing the knowledges of the frontline it is my contention that academic and bureaucratic social work has little ontological faith that within the experience of the frontline practitioner lies anything of transformative value. It seems to me that the profession continues to be enchanted by second voice framings of practice.

I want here to draw on the sensibilities of a mystical spirituality that locates the sacred within the everyday, which suggests that within the darkness (say situations of child abuse) there lies the resources for transformation and wisdom. This is a sensibility that promotes a deeper encounter with struggle and darkness rather than modernist and most postmodernist framings that often seek to, too quickly control, order and provide overly easy answers to

the dilemmas and challenges of local experience and overlook the quiet wisdom that can arise in these contexts. My own belief that the salvific and transformative is regularly to be found locally at the site of human struggle has always informed and underpinned my ontological perspective toward the inquiry work I have undertaken with practitioners. I believe this is a sensibility, an ontological viewpoint that is desperately needed within social work if it is to reinvigorate its approach to front-line practice.

I bring some resources to this endeavour since my faith journey has been a defining influence in my life. My spiritual journey started as the son of a passionate Church of Christ minister, evolved as I rejected my family's faith and progressed through to a master's degree in creation spirituality where I authored an auto-ethnography of my journey with the sacred (Turnell, 1993) under the direction of postmodern mystic and priest Matthew Fox and poet, painter, writer and educator, Mary Caroline (MC) Richards. Since then, the primary inspiration for my professional work has arisen from my spiritual experience and this journey is ongoing as I continue to interpret my social work first and foremost from a perspective of spirit and faith. Drawing on the lens of spirituality, it is possible to bring an additional perspective to the research question, the dilemmas of this inquiry and the metaphor of modernism. Alongside my personal journey with the sacred and its centrality to my professional endeavour, I want to explicitly open up spiritual territory within this inquiry because:

- I would suggest that the idea of god has been a defining motif within the narrative of modernism and is consequentially implicit in any notion of postmodernism.
- This inquiry explicitly sets out to interrogate postmodern social theory for its potential to be a transformational resource for child protection social work. I want to draw on the resources of a spirituality that fits with the postmodern impulse to stake a fuller claim for the transformational potential of postmodernism and this inquiry.

#### **4.1 Locating god**

To move into the territory of spirituality I want first to locate the idea of god within the notions of premodernism, modernism and postmodernism.

*Premodernism* - This era can be seen to be dominated by the maxim that 'God rules'. The universe was seen as a hierarchy with God (with a capital g) at the top. This theistic God was removed from the earth and the world of humans but defined the natural and correct order of the world. In this worldview fear and damnation resided in being outside God's right ordering for the world.

*Modernism* – Modernism proceeded on the idea of ‘God is dead’ (atheism). While god is seen to be irrelevant, human faith within modernism is placed in the transformational resources of reason, science and generalised truth to deliver human salvation through the successive perfecting of society. Fear resides outside of the right-ordering of objective knowledge. Within this framing, the idea of social work as a child of modernity is further confirmed by the 1960’s joke about modern society – ‘god is dead, but 6 million social workers have risen in his place’.

*Late-modernism* – God is still dead, but now humans must run faster and faster to find objective answers for all the diversity that has been unearthed by the influence and activism of the women’s, indigenous, social justice and environmental movements since the 1960’s. Late-modern society increasingly becomes defined by the motif of risk management as society becomes increasingly fearful of all this newly identified diversity and newly identified problems. Hope is increasingly located with managing every problem and threat. (Interestingly the peoples at the margins with whom social work engages – native peoples, women, migrants – often express that they live under the influence of spirit. Social work responds respectfully, but essentially the white men can’t jump. The social work profession as child of modernism has no spiritual resources to draw upon, so at best we are bystanders to the experience and expressions of spirituality that many of the people with whom we work locate as central in their lives).

*Postmodernism* – God is forgotten. The god project and spirituality is largely under erasure within the postmodern agenda, very probably because the distant, removed, theistic god was subsumed by the force of modernism (except of course unless you still believe in him anyway). The Quaker's question however remains, wherein lies our salvation? Or, put another way, what is it that will contribute to human transformation within postmodernism? This is the question of this inquiry but it is also a question of faith; namely what do we believe in? An individual's answer to this question, whether explicit or implicit is inevitably a significant life force and it is fair then to ask what is there to believe in within postmodernism?

#### **4.2 What hope in postmodernism?**

Rosenau (1992) is trafficking the territory of hope when she identifies two broad styles of postmodernism: the *sceptical* and the *affirmative*. Parton and O'Byrne (2000) follow Rosenau's lead in seeking to interpret postmodernism for social work through this framing. Rosenau and Parton and O'Byrne suggest that sceptical postmodernism is characterised by absolute relativity, meaninglessness, an absence of moral parameters and social chaos (this typically is also the view of many social workers who want to distance themselves from postmodernism e.g. Houston, 2001; Sheldon, 2001; Taylor-Gooby, 1994; Trainor, 2002).

Parton and O'Byrne (2000, p. 23) then continue:

Affirmative postmodernists agree with the sceptics' critique of modernity, particularly in terms of science and rationality, but they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the possibilities of the postmodern age and are positively oriented towards the importance of *process*. They are concerned not just with deconstruction but with reconstruction. There is a recognition that choice and negotiation is central and that trying to *build* practical and political solutions lies at the heart of everyday life. In recognising that subject(s) need to be understood in context(s), it recognises the importance of interdependence and the social and political cultures in which we live. It is not the death of the subject but a recognition of the diverse nature of subjectivities which becomes the focus, for it is argued there has been a widening in the constructibility of identities from ascriptive and natural (in the pre-modern), to socially acquired and quasi-natural (in the modern), to chosen and socially negotiated (in the postmodern).

Parton and O'Byrne go on to develop their ideas further about the hope for reconstruction they identify within postmodernism, but to my way of thinking this comes across as somewhat uninspiring, clinical and distant up

against the daily challenges of child protection social work and the everyday struggles of life more generally.

I am not sure that it is quite as easy to distinguish between sceptical and affirmative postmodernists as Rosenau's dualistic taxonomy might suggest. To my ears almost every postmodernist I am aware of is speaking a language of hope in some measure, for example postmodernists of whatever hue who invoke the notion of the 'turn' (whether postmodern, interpretive or poststructural) seem to be pointing toward some form of transformation. But again, like Parton and O'Byrne's ideas, to my reading most postmodernisms do not inspire in me great hope for generating on-the-ground conditions of transformation in situations like child protection social work. It seems to me that the modernist anxiety about diversity and the need to rise above and control the body, the earth, the native, the supposedly dysfunctional, and the like has crossed over into the postmodern. Postmodernisms seem in part to express their need to rise above and control uncertainty through their seemingly incessant need to become increasingly wordy, obtuse, differentiated and complex. I do not read quite enough courage, nor enough vulnerability in most postmodernists' framings to keep it simple enough to truly dive into everyday experience and to be able to find and honour the transformation and the wisdom that might be located therein.

Fully experiencing and entering the beauty and danger of everyday experience is a constant challenge whether a person seeks to place themselves in a pre, post or modern locale. It is my contention that a more direct engagement with notions and energies of spirituality (which after all arise from traditions based in thousands of years of human reflexivity) can significantly contribute to a more robustly hopeful, grounded and transformative and affirmative postmodernism.

### **4.3 A god relevant to postmodernism**

Drawing on the likes of Matthew Fox, (1983; 1995), Morris Berman (1981), Charles Birch, (1990; 1991), Bradford Keeney (1994), Thomas Berry (1999), Henryk Skolimowski (2002), Joanna Macy (1991), Starhawk (1997) and MC Richards (1963) it is possible to identify an understanding of the divine that matches a postmodern worldview. Rather than the usual framing of god as the expert out beyond the universe the spirituality articulated by all of these authors can be described as 'panentheism' the notion that 'god is in us and we are in god'. Panentheism is grounded in the idea and experience that there is that of the sacred, that of the transformative within everyday life and points toward the possibility of increased faith, spirit and fluidity in the face of struggle, chaos and diversity. This is the spiritual stance of the mystic that articulates an intertwining of spirit and matter and of the creation spiritualities of indigeous peoples (Fox, 2001; Lawlor, 1991). This sort of

theology, which locates god intimately by implication also brings the demonic equally close – i.e. there is that of the devil also within us. So while the everyday is potentially numinous and transformative it can also be terrifying and destructive.

This mystical view of the sacred and the demonic offers a belief (if one is hopeful), an ontological stance that in the face of our greatest challenges, and the worst human beings can do to each other there is in that exact location within and between us, the capacity and seeds to meet and transform those challenges. This perspective is affirmed in almost every significant change in social conditions of our times most of which have been birthed in small local action, as the lives of Rosa Parks, Vincent Linguarri, Eddie Mabo and Nelson Mandela attest.

Locating these ideas in an Australian context Veronica Brady, catholic sister, literature professor and social activist, regularly observed that the magic of Australian author Patrick White was that he saw and captured the ‘doubleness of things’ (Brady, 1993). To Brady, White’s books always told stories of the particularities of struggle within harsh everyday Australian landscapes, but at the same time the sacredness of White’s characters and their relationships would, steadily and without overt statement, become evident. It is very possible to argue, as does Matthew Fox, that this sort of both/and mystical aesthetic finds expression not just in the works of

religious mystics but also in the other domains and is very commonly found in great art (Richards, 1963). It is possible by this sort of theology therefore to also look for the resources of the sacred within the domain of social work.

While premodern thinking locates salvation in rising above the earth and the body into the arms of God, and modernism rises above these (supposed) problems into the heaven of carefully managed scientific rationalism the mystic does not see a problem but sees salvation in finding the courage to dive into the rich beauty and danger of everyday experience. Mystic spiritualities foster disciplines and spiritual practices that seek to awaken as much awareness, sensitivity and mindfulness to immediate daily experience as the follower can muster. To attend to the transformative potential within the everyday experience I would suggest social work researchers and theorists need to likewise promote inquiry methodologies that foster reverence for the 'natives', for those at the frontline and their experience. In this sense inquiry methodologies can be likened to a spiritual practice, they are a method of directing awareness that could potentially first expect and then elicit and honour practitioners' constructive and transformative work.

#### **4.4 A postmodern spirituality relevant to child protection social work**

Child protection social work is very probably the most demanding, pressurised and dirty work context in which a social worker can practice. It

has always fascinated me then that throughout my involvement in child protection social work both in Australia and abroad that I regularly meet practitioners who love this work. While many professionals approach child protection work as a burden and speak of the negatives of the work these practitioners even when critical of the task, communicate a deep engagement with the endeavour. Very often, these are people who don't say too much about themselves or their work. When they do begin to open up I find that one of the common attributes of these practitioners is that they sustain a wicked sense of humour (Turnell, 2001; In press). When I get to know their stories they are inevitably practitioners who have survived at least five years within a statutory child protection context during which time they have usually endured intense personal and professional challenges within the immediacies of the casework and the exigencies of the statutory bureaucracy. Through this initiation they have found their feet in both the work with families and in the organizational context and found (sometimes to their own surprise) that they are genuinely and passionately engaged with both.

### *Three more practitioners' stories*

Meeting and hearing the stories of these sorts of practitioners very often leads to epiphanies for me in my understandings of constructive child protection practice. I was teaching in Amsterdam in 2003 and a tall Dutch social worker came up to me very animated about what I was presenting. He

told me had been practicing as a child protection worker in the poorest areas of Amsterdam for over ten years but about three years previously he was ready to throw in the towel. He described an incident that brought him to the edge professionally and personally after he had investigated a situation of a mother who suffered a long-term addiction to cocaine. As a result of his investigation the man removed the mother's children into foster care and the day after this the mother committed suicide leaving a note that her life was no longer worth living. The mother's suicide came as a shock to the worker, it made him feel that all he was able to do as a child protection worker was, in his words, 'heap rocks on the shoulders of parents who were already struggling'.

The worker took stress leave and described the following weeks as a time of depression and introspection where he questioned himself intensely seeking an answer to the question, 'what did I think I was doing?' He told me he was ready to resign and find new work, but described a new spirit emerging within him as he prepared his resignation letter. He told me that he decided he would not 'run away' from the work but rather he would make a last attempt to do the work differently. This man said he had known nothing of strengths-based practice, signs of safety, narrative or solution-focused therapy, but he decided he would approach the work looking for the resources and strengths of the people he was working with.

Realising that to return to the work he needed a practice that would ground this aspiration he invented the following method for himself. He decided that at each new investigation he would introduce himself and the child maltreatment concerns that brought him to the door as honestly as he could. Then he would immediately seek to redirect the encounter by identifying the age of the parent's oldest child and asking whether they had anything in the house that would be evidence of good times in their family and in the parents' life with their child or children. The man described that sometimes people would show him things like children's drawings, school reports or christening gowns but inevitably people would show him pictures of good times as a family. This practitioner told me that this simple practice had turned around his work and he was more able to encounter his clients as people. Approaching his investigative task in this way did not, he said, mean he never again removed children from their parents but it enabled him to work far more collaboratively with the parents and families he had to investigate and renewed his commitment and faith that he could be useful.

It is because of regular encounters like this that I have observed repeatedly in my teaching and writing something like the following:

Child protection workers do in fact build constructive relationships, with some of the 'hardest' families, in the busiest child protection offices, in the poorest locations, everywhere in the world. This is not to

say that oppressive child protection practices do not happen, or that sometimes they are even the norm. However, worker-defined, good practice with 'difficult' cases is an invaluable and almost entirely overlooked resource for improving child protection services and building a grounded vision of constructive statutory practice. (Turnell, 2004, p. 15).

In 1996, I experienced the epiphany of observing Susie Essex (from behind a one-way glass viewing screen at the National Society for the Prevention for Cruelty of Children in Bristol) working rigourously and creatively with a particularly nasty situation of 'denied' sexual abuse. From this encounter I apprenticed myself to Susie over the next three years and this lead ultimately to me writing the Resolutions book with her (Turnell and Essex, 2006). One of the most remarkable things about Susie is that she would quite often reject cases because they weren't difficult enough. I remember being with her on one occasion in West Berkshire when a social services social worker wanted Susie to accept the referral of a case of baby twins who had both sustained severe 'unexplained' injuries. Susie rejected the referral because she saw it as too easy a case to work with. In the way I am relating this account perhaps I am communicating a sense of arrogance on her part, but there was none in Susie's response to this case. She assisted the socials services worker to find an appropriate service for this family and also offered to support that agency if necessary. For Susie she was looking for cases that would stretch her and

enable her to learn more personally and professionally. She did not see this case as one that would enable her to grow as an individual or professional.

Very occasionally, I meet groups of practitioners who together have recognised their mutual enthusiasm for child protection practice and have collectively harnessed that spirit in their work place. I have had the privilege of serving as consultant to a number of teams like this and these are the contexts that have most readily provided me with opportunities to inquire into the practice which has, in turn, generated most of the examples I have detailed in my writings.

Viv Hogg is the team leader in one such context, the Gateshead Social Services Access and Assessment team. In 2005, I interviewed Viv as part of the process of writing a paper with she and Sharon Elliott (Turnell, Elliott and Hogg, in press). In this interview Viv stated that she team leads and manages so that her workers 'can to be as big as they can be'. The question that immediately sprang to my mind when Viv said this was - 'whatever possesses you to dare to think and to hope that frontline practitioners in the highly disciplined, scrutinised and pressurised, child protection environment have any hope of being as big as they can be?' In the midst of the anxiety and intensity of the child protection system and amongst the dirt of the work Viv has created a team that is able to see and utilise the doubleness of things. They know that among the dirt and the danger there is also opportunity to

see how big they can be, first as human beings and then as social workers facing some of the worst challenges our profession can throw them into. This is demonstrated daily in this team in that they actually fight to get the worst cases because they know those are the cases they will learn most from.

The Dutch practitioner, the Gateshead team and Susie are passionately engaged with working with the worst cases of child abuse and seek to provide every assistance they can muster within their statutory role and at the same time they are motivated to work with these situations because they know they provide them unique opportunities to become bigger as human beings. This reflexive engagement with their own motivations and growth I believe make them more skilled, able and stronger in enacting their helping role. These are human service professionals who I interpret as displaying the aesthetic of the mystic, drawn to the transformative potential of the dark, the depraved and the disturbed. They don't seek to avoid the worst cases or rush to control them but rather reflect a spirit and a knowing that it is these cases that will enable to them to grow as practitioners and as human beings at the exact same time as they make a better fist of their complex statutory social work role.

#### **4.5 Dreaming the dark: a commitment to the wisdom of everyday experience**

The social work profession has been so determined through most of its history to stake a claim for itself within a modernist framing of professionalism that expressions and explorations of spirituality have been marginalised. In part this is undoubtedly about lacking a vision of spirituality that can transcend the many cultures and voices that social work seeks to engage with. My sense is that we social workers have also been afraid that if we identify ourselves with the god project in any formal way will erode our claims to professional status. A profession already insecure about its identity has not been too likely to move into a territory that seems to exude uncertainty and fundamentalism in equal measures.

Our profession has constantly struggled to find ways to capture the exhilaration and fear, the beauty and the danger that makes up the everyday experience of frontline practice. Social work theorising has so often not matched the complexity of the practice encounter and is very commonly experienced as not that relevant to practitioners once outside the academy. Often theorising and sense making is also about demonstrating a 'big' voice that shows we are in control and experts in the situations we deal with. This seems to speak more about fear and the need to constrain and contain than it does of assisting practitioners in tackling situations that are already fearful

enough without the insecurities of an uncertain profession playing out in the practice domain.

The grounded spirituality of panentheism escues fear, and in fact suggests that where fear resides there also is power (Starhawk, 1988). Mystics will inevitably want to step into the dark, into places of trouble and disturbance, which is probably also one of the natural proclivities of the social worker. The question is however what happens to the social worker once they have thrown themselves, with the best of intentions into some of the darkest human spaces within our societies. Having experienced the transformative, the numinous in the worst of circumstances, mystics have for thousands of years used spiritual resources to name the richness, beauty, depth, power, depravity, ugliness, magic, terror and transformative potential of human experience. They have been doing this for far longer than the short history of social work and for our profession to exclude the spiritual domain is to exclude rich human resources for naming the ineffable and the mystery of transformation, which mirrors social work's attempts to make sense of what we do and for interpreting the experiential human territory we travel in daily.

I concur with Jan Fook that postmodernism provides an important opportunity for social work to engage with the nuances and complexities of everyday social work and give the voice of the practitioner a central role in

theorising their own practice. In my view this goal will not simply be achieved by postmodern ideas and methodologies but needs to be underpinned by a belief, an ontological stance, a way of seeing that expects transformative action to be found in the everyday encounters of practitioners and clients. For me this orientation arises from a grounding in mystical spirituality that locates the sacred, the transformative within the everyday. Whether informed by spirituality or not Geertz is effectively saying the same thing when he suggests that the answers to our general questions are to be found in the fine detail of lived life. For social work to fully utilise the transformative potential in postmodernism's capacity to attend to the lived experience and grounded wisdom of child practitioners the profession needs to find greater faith in those voices.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This inquiry has been about trying to give voice and power to what we as child protection social workers experience daily within us and between us, with all the people with whom we work, colleagues and clients both. In the face of some of the worst that human beings can do to each other and drawing on the resources of postmodernism and longstanding traditions of mystic spiritualities I have been on a journey engaged with the ugliness and challenges of child protection social work under the chaotic conditions we describe as latemodernity. I have found time and again the transformational

in the belly of the child protection beast: workers and recipients together doing transformational work in the ugliest of family and institutional circumstances. Like a shaman perhaps I have been diving with increasing enthusiasm into the darkness of the demonised space of child protection (the social work profession seems always on the verge of questioning whether child protection work is true social work). Out of this inquiry I have come back with stories of hope and of transformation in the face of some of the worst things human beings can do to each other in their intimate and family relations and within the craziness of the institutional strictures and structures established to respond to these circumstances.

This inquiry and my professional work has been about developing and demonstrating social work resources that have sensitivity to the 'doubleness of things' so that our profession might be better able to pay attention to the everyday, sacred and spirited child protection practice that service delivers and recipients know to be transformational. In this project and specifically in the publications and DVD's, I believe I have demonstrated that postmodern social theory, when imbued with an ontological commitment to local wisdom, which for me arise from resources of mystical spirituality, does indeed have the potential to transform child protection social work.

Child protection social work is undertaken in the belly of the latemodern organisational beast and the remarkable thing is that there are many stories

to be told of transformative practice within this locale. These stories are everyday demonstrations of transformation in action. The issue that I believe is most pertinent is whether the social work profession has the ontological determination and commitment to find ears to hear and eyes to see. These stories are in my view everyday songs from under the floorboards that need to be listened to, documented, storied, theorised, and spoken of and offer a context in which the enchantment of child protection social work can be encountered and expressed. This is what my inquiry work of the past 13 years has been about.

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