"Sometimes We Are Everything and Nothing in the Same Breath"

Beginning Social Work Practitioners' Constructions
of Professional Identity

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Abstract

This research takes a social constructionist approach to examine how beginning social work practitioners use discursive practices to make meaning of their experiences and construct their professional identities in the social and political environment of Aotearoa New Zealand.

A qualitative inquiry, it utilises the methods of individual interviews and a focus group to gather information from ten beginning social work practitioners who have degree-level or post-graduate social work qualifications and are within their first three years of practice in child protection, health and community settings. A discursive analytic approach is employed to determine how these practitioners use interpretive repertoires drawn from wider social discourses to construct identities in relation to professional social work practice.

The research found that these practitioners utilised five interpretive repertoires, which included 'social work as social change', 'social work as helping', 'constraints', 'being professional' and 'self-care' to construct a number of corresponding identities by which they could account for themselves as competent social workers, albeit not always able to achieve their notions of best practice. These identities included 'change agent', 'helper', 'capable but constrained', 'professional' and 'person(s) first'. The research suggests that these identities are shaped by wider social discourses of social work that have formed over time within the historical, cultural and social milieu of Aotearoa New Zealand, and which often operate in contradiction to each other in education, practice and social settings.

The research recommends that to ease the transition from education to practice, new social workers be taught to understand the social work environment as one in which competing discourses interact to influence their constitution of professional identities, and that adequate material supports such as supervision be put in place by employing organisations to provide new social workers with emotional support and opportunities to critically consider their selves in the work environment. Recommendations for future research are also made and the thesis ends with a reflection on the research process.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This was definitely not what I expected from my role as a social worker and definitely not why I took up social work training. Perhaps once again this was due to my naivety and idealism, even unrealistic views of what I believed social work to be (Hibbs, 2005, p. 41).

The professionalisation of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand, whilst contested, is being increasingly emphasised (O'Brien, 2005). From its beginnings, embedded in indigenous practices (Ruwhiu, 2001), social work has been continually modified by exposure to western discourses. This commenced with the introduction of a model of welfare by British immigrants in the 1800s (Nash, 2001a; Tennant, 1989), and was continued by the development of government policies, professional education and the formation of a national professional association in the 1900s, all of which has contributed to 'the emergence of social work as a self-defining profession' that incorporates Maori and tauiwi[1] perspectives (Nash, 2001a, p. 34). This trend continues with the recent introduction of the Social Workers Registration Act in 2003, which purposes, amongst other things, 'to enhance the professionalism of social workers' in this country (New Zealand Government, 2003, p. 5).

Meanwhile, social work has been described as a site of uncertainty (Ife, 1997), contradictions (Davies & Leonard, 2004a), complexity (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000), and in crisis (Lymbery, 2001), as its traditional value base of human rights, social justice and emancipation are increasingly challenged by theories of postmodernism and poststructuralism which emphasise uncertainty and the deconstruction of 'Truth' (Davies & Leonard, 2004b; Ife, 1999; Pease & Fook, 1999); the restructuring of the welfare state under a neo conservative political agenda (Healy, 2000; McDonald, 2001); and even the move toward increasing professionalisation itself (O'Brien, 2005).

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[1] See definition of terms on page six of this thesis

How do beginning social work practitioners make sense of their practice experiences and their selves in such contexts? As indicated by the beginning quote, this is not necessarily straightforward. The transition between education and work environments can be one for which new graduates are un(der)prepared and which can result in the experience of 'reality shock' when their ideals for practice are not achieved (Smith, 1983, p. 19), with the potential for them to become easily disillusioned (Fook et al., 2000; Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Healy, 2005; Ife, 1997; Smith, 1983).

As a new social worker, it was in grappling with such issues that I became interested in the processes of meaning making and professional identity formation undertaken by beginning social workers. This research is concerned with addressing the question of how beginning social work practitioners use discursive practices to make sense of their work experiences and to construct professional identities in the current social and political environment of Aotearoa New Zealand.

In this chapter I firstly locate myself in relation to social work and this research. I then consider how the local context of Aotearoa New Zealand has influenced the formation of professional social work identities. I go on to explain the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the research and provide definitions of terms and lastly, I present an overview of the thesis.

Locating Myself in Terms of Social Work and the Research

My interest in issues of identity and social work lies primarily (and probably unsurprisingly) in some of my own experiences. I was raised along with three siblings in a 'traditional' Christian home by a police-officer father and a 'stay-at-home' mother. My childhood memories are of a warm and loving environment in which anyone was welcome and in which many 'extras' were often at the dinner table. My father's ancestors emigrated from England in 1842 to Nelson. My mother and her parents emigrated from Fiji to Tasman after World War II. Growing up, I would ask 'What am I?' and mum would answer 'A fruit salad'. Both my parents identify as New Zealand Europeans. I identify as (and look) Pakeha[2] but I feel 'Pacific', a result of the influence of my mother's (and her parents') values in our family life. It was not until I attended

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[2] See definition of terms on page six of this thesis.

university that I understood the historical significance of my family's migration stories (see for example Dalziel, 1981; King, 2003; Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 1999) and their impact on my own sense of self. I continue to carry with me a slight sense of cultural 'dislocation'.

Another significant influence on my sense of identity was the experience of separation from my marriage partner in my late 20s and the transition to being a single parent or 'solo mother' as I was often labelled. This was uncomfortable in terms of my own expectations for myself as a woman and as a Christian. Receiving the domestic purposes benefit and living with the stigma of solo motherhood for a number of years was certainly challenging. It was during this time that I undertook social work education. One afternoon at my son's swimming lesson I sat reading a textbook when another parent, whom I had met and chatted to on a number of occasions prior, looked at me and said 'You don't seem like a solo mother'. What did that mean? Could I not be a student and a 'solo mother'? Why were these identities seemingly 'at odds' with one another? It was also during this time that I began to take an interest in the notion that our identities are discursively constructed through our social interactions and structures like the media and Government.

At the commencement of my social work practice in late 2003 I perhaps naively believed that building oneself a 'professional identity' in social work would be straightforward. After all, my life experiences had prepared me and I had spent four years at university learning how to 'be' a social worker. I had every intention of employing a critical theoretical approach (alongside a poststructural one) to undertake structural analysis and work alongside people (clients) to achieve change and social justice. I would be professional. I would care for people but from a 'healthy' distance. I would leave work at the door on my way home. However, it came about that my experiences contradicted these notions and I constructed the ensuing dissonance as arising from the difference between my ideals for practice and the 'reality' of it. Limitations existed. My own knowledge and skills seemed to 'fall short' and resources I perceived as necessary to best practice were not always readily available. I worried about clients and their situations after hours. I worried about myself! In short, I did not feel 'professional'. Conversations with colleagues led me to believe that this was not unusual and so, my interest into the construction of professional social work identity

was piqued. In undertaking a review of the literature I was (dis)heartened to see that my experiences were indeed common and I was curious as to how other new social workers made sense of their selves in light of their experiences.

Professional Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has a unique flavour that has developed out of an historical and cultural milieu that has been significantly influenced by colonialism and the subsequent relationships between tangata whenua[3] and tauiwi (Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1988). Ruwhiu (2001) emphasises the necessity for social workers to understand these relationships in terms of the precedent set by the Treaty of Waitangi[4] for a bicultural relationship, particularly in light of Aotearoa New Zealand becoming increasingly multicultural. These are complex issues that I will not address here. However, it is important to note that our nation's history affects our social work identity as demonstrated in the New Zealand Association of Social Workers' (NZASW)[5] (1993a) Objects, which include the aim '[t]o promote an indigenous identity for social work in New Zealand and to assist people to obtain services adequate to their needs' and '[t]o ensure that social work in New Zealand is conducted in accordance with the articles contained in the Treaty of Waitangi' (p. 9). The Association has developed a Bicultural Code of Practice (1993b) and there is an expectation that members will be competent in bicultural and cross-cultural practice. This expectation is also included in the Social Workers Registration Board's[6] (2005) Code of Conduct.

What I wish to emphasise here is that despite efforts like the production of such Objects and Codes by the Association and the Registration Board, social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has developed primarily from a western perspective that has traditionally discounted indigenous and other minority ethnic and cultural voices, although these are increasingly influencing the construction of theory and practice (Mafile'o, 2004; O'Donoghue, 2003; Ruwhiu, 2001). Included in this western perspective is an

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[3] See definition of terms on page six of this thesis

[4] The Treaty of Waitangi was an agreement signed in 1840 between Maori tribes (iwi) and representatives of the British Crown, which continues to shape social and political development in Aotearoa New Zealand.

[5] The Association is now known as the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW).

[6] The Social Workers Registration Board was established through the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 to oversee the professional registration of social workers.

emphasis on professionalism (O'Brien, 2005). O'Brien (2005) makes an interesting observation in discussing the tension that exists between notions of professionalism and social justice:

> The question of what it means to be 'professional' in the contemporary context remains particularly vexed everywhere, both within the social work literature and in social work practice. In a contemporary context, professionalism or 'being professional' can only have legitimacy if it reflects accurately the social and cultural context in which we are located. It must also reflect our historical roots. Our own work within the Association has contributed to rethinking about what we mean by 'professional' as we work through issues of competency, biculturalism (and more recently multiculturalism), the privileging of knowledges, and wider questions about the nature of relationships between expert knowledge and user knowledge generated from experiences... it is not an argument which says that we should abandon our efforts to develop competent, responsive and skilled practitioners. Rather, the argument is that only by attending to and actively working with the broader structural dimensions in our work with individuals, families, groups and communities can we actually claim to be professional and be meeting the ethical requirements to promote social justice (O'Brien, 2005, pp. 19-20)

These are often complex and challenging issues for beginning social work practitioners to come to grips with, particularly in the context of learning how to 'do' social work in specific employment environments. Understanding the implications of the interrelationships between all these factors for identity formation was a key motivation for this research.

The Epistemological and Theoretical Underpinnings of the Research

I use the frameworks of social constructionism and poststructuralism to explore how beginning practitioners discursively produce their identities in relation to their practice contexts and discourses about social work that exist in society. In taking a constructionist approach I am of the persuasion that *'all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in*

and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42, emphasis in original).

A poststructural theoretical approach sits within a social constructionist epistemology and emphasises talk as constitutive of meaning and identity (Burr, 2003; Weedon, 1997). Within poststructuralism, the notion of identity as a fixed and unified essence that exists within individuals is contested (Weedon, 1997). Rather, identity is construed as subjectivity, a linguistic construct produced within specific historical, social and cultural contexts, which is 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think and speak' (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). This approach enables one to think of people as 'speaking subject[s]' who discursively build reality for themselves in response to both their experiences and wider social discourses (Edley, 2001, p. 224). Riessman (1993) notes that in telling stories, people are invested in (re)presenting themselves in a positive light: 'like all social actors, I seek to persuade myself and others that I am a good person' (p. 11). This is an observation pertinent to social workers who have often spent three or four years in tertiary education learning the skills of a helping profession and aspiring to achieve social change and social justice, particularly when previous research shows that their work experience does not always meet these ideals (for example Fook et al., 2000; Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; van Heugten & Rathgen, 2003). I was interested in the implications of this for identity formation. Would participants be invested in being 'good' social workers?

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this thesis there are a few terms and phrases that require clarification.

Agency: I use the term 'agency' to refer to people's ability to act of their own volition. Agency is tied to notions of freedom of choice and power. The extent to which one has agency within poststructural theory is debated. In this thesis agency does **not** refer to institutions/organisations, as in 'social service agency', as can be the case in social work literature.

Beginning social work practitioner: I use this phrase to refer to those social workers who have a degree-level or post-graduate social work qualification and are within their first three years of post-qualifying practice. I also use the terms *new social worker* or *new graduate* to refer to beginning social work practitioners.

Client: I use the term client to refer to any person or family/whanau that has involvement with a social worker. When referring to clients within a health context I sometimes use the term *patients* as is common. I also occasionally use the term *service user.* I acknowledge that such terms are contested as they can imply the categorisation and objectification of people, a deficit perspective and a power differential between workers and clients. I have chosen to use 'client' as it is the term I have found to be most prevalent in the literature and one that Payne (2005) notes is 'generally understandable... [to a] wide range of readers' (p. xviii).

Identity: I use the term 'identity' to refer to people's sense of themselves. In acknowledgement that 'identity' is a concept that is contested within poststructuralism I also use the terms *subjectivities* or *subject positions* or *self/selves.* These ideas are discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

Local practice context: I use this phrase to refer to participants' specific employment settings, which have a unique impact on their experiences and constitution of identity.

Maori: means the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand whom I also refer to by using the indigenous term *tangata whenua* (people of the land).

Pakeha: is used to describe non-Maori of European descent.

Professional: is a concept that is contested within social work and it is certainly not simple to define. I use it here to denote 'any practitioner who is required to operate from an identifiable body of knowledge to provide a service or product in a particular context' (Fook et al., 2000, p. 3). Issues to do with professional/ism are further discussed in Chapter Two.

Tauiwi: is used to describe non-Maori, and includes both Pakeha and people of other ethnic and cultural groups.

I have indicated that some of these terms and concepts are contested and I suggest that they should be read in that way throughout the thesis. Whilst it is possible to place terms within quotation marks to indicate that they are contested, I have refrained from this practice.

Thesis Overview

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature. It begins with a discussion of the research's epistemological underpinnings of social constructionism and focuses particularly on poststructural theory and the concepts of discourse, subject positions or identity and interpretive repertoires. The contributions of social constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives to social work are then considered. I address the existing debates within social work about the usefulness of these approaches as well as the concerns about the relativist nature of poststructuralism in relation to the traditional value and theoretical base of social work. I then discuss the development of social work theories and values over time, taking the view that they constitute a range of competing discourses of social work that influence the construction of identities or subjectivities of social workers. I offer a cultural critique of these discourses. The last section of the chapter reviews previous research into the experiences of beginning social work practitioners and looks at how professional identity in social work has been conceptualised.

Chapter Three discusses the research methodology. The epistemological and theoretical connections to the methodology are made and the rationale for choosing the particular methods of individual interviews and a focus group for data collection and a discursive approach to analysis is given. I discuss matters of rigour in qualitative research and how my own position influences the 'flavour' of this particular project. I then discuss issues of participant selection and ethics, processes of data collection and analysis, and the writing up of the research.

Chapter Four presents the research findings. I consider how participants' gender, age and ethnicity affected their sense of selves in social work. I then demonstrate how participants used particular interpretive repertoires, society's shared ways of understanding and talking about social work, to construct a number of identities for themselves as social workers.

Chapter Five discusses the research findings in relation to the literature. Participants' use of interpretive repertoires and the subject positions they constitute are located in relation to wider social discourses of social work and previous research into beginning practitioners' experiences. The formation of professional social work identities by participants is considered in relation to their education and practice experiences, and I make some suggestions as to how to improve these.

Chapter Six concludes the thesis. It provides a review of the research purpose and processes, summarises the findings and discusses the research limitations and makes some recommendations for social work education, practice and further research. The chapter ends with my reflections on undertaking this project.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This research is primarily concerned with the construction of professional identities by beginning social work practitioners and this chapter provides an examination of concepts pertinent to the research question. The first part of the chapter provides a discussion of the social constructionist underpinnings of this research and considers poststructuralism and the concepts of discourse and subject positions or identity. It takes into account the debate within social constructionism regarding people's agency in the discursive constitution of the self and looks at the concept of interpretive repertoires as a means to understand how people construct their identities in relation to wider social discourses. In the second part of the chapter I consider the influence of social constructionist approaches on social work research and practice and discuss the implications of the relative stance implied in this perspective in relation to social work's historic concern with the 'real' and material disadvantage. I then outline the development of social work ideas and practices over time taking the view that they constitute discourses of social work which overlap and compete to define social workers' professional identities. The final section of the chapter examines previous research into the experiences of beginning social work practitioners and looks at ways in which professional identity has been conceptualised in social work.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism developed during the twentieth Century and emphasises social interaction and the constitutive nature of language in making sense of the world (Burr, 2003). It includes a number of perspectives that challenge the assumptions of theories that arose out of the Enlightenment period and which emphasise human rationality and the existence of a concrete reality and universal truth outside of human experience that can be discovered through objective and systematic scientific inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002; Weedon, 1997). Social constructionist approaches, whilst varied, are characterised by some shared assumptions. There is scepticism toward taken-for-granted knowledge and the notion that the world can be perceived and

explained accurately through objective observations and the grand narratives of modernism and structuralism (Burr, 2003; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Smith & White, 1997). It is assumed that knowledge is created through language and social processes that are embedded within specific historical and cultural contexts, which vary over time and place so that 'truth' becomes 'our current accepted ways of understanding the world' (Burr, 2003, p. 5). Human ways of knowing, then, become situated, partial, diverse and contestable.

Social constructionism can be thought of as taking either a macro or micro perspective (Burr, 2003). Macro social constructionism is concerned with 'the constructive power of language... as derived from, or at least related to, material or social structures, social relations and institutionalised practices' whilst micro social constructionism is more concerned with the everyday use of language by people in social interaction (Burr, 2003, p. 22). Macro social constructionism is most concerned with power and is associated with a Foucauldian approach in which people are perceived to be subject to discourses which have ideological and power implications (Gordon, 1980). These can be understood by taking a deconstructionist approach in which discourses are critically analysed in order to show how they shape our experiences, with the view that once understood they can be resisted (Burr, 2003). In contrast, micro social constructionism emphasises the way in which people construct multiple versions of 'reality' in their daily conversations (Burr, 2003). Macro and micro versions of social constructionism imply different views of personal agency. Macro social constructionism assumes that people are constituted entirely through over-arching social discourses and structures whereas a micro view assumes that people have agency in that they actively use language to construct accounts to suit their own agenda (Burr, 2003). This can only be done, however, by drawing on language and categories which are historically, culturally or ideologically available (Billig, 2001; Davies & Harre, 1990). Burr (2003) points out that these approaches can be combined because 'we need to take account of both the situated nature of accounts as well as the institutional practices and social structures within which they are constructed' (p. 22).

There is concern that approaches that emphasise the constitutive nature of language in building social 'reality' are relativist and therefore 'anti-real' (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000, p. 172). Burr (2003) points out that the relativist stance implied by a constructionist

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approach can be problematic when considering moral and political action. For this reason, the social constructionist stance has been melded by some with a critical approach that considers the existence of a 'real' world apart from our representations of it. Parton and O'Byrne (2000) demonstrate this notion when they express that while they would 'want to encourage an approach that *problematises* reality, this is not the same as being anti-real and thus cannot be accused of nihilism and moral relativism... while we construct the world we are not arguing that *any* construction is as good as any other, and the reason for this is that there is a world 'out there' which influences and constrains' (p. 172, emphasis in original). This issue, as it relates to social work, will be considered later in this chapter.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism can be included within social constructionism. Historically, poststructuralism arose after and developed ideas proposed by de Saussure in his study of structural linguistics (Burr, 2003). De Saussure emphasised that the make-up of language shapes our human experience (Burr, 2003). He proposed that language is an abstract system of signs which consists of 'signifiers' (spoken sounds) that are used to refer to the 'signified' (concepts), the combination of which forms a linguistic sign (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Weedon, 1997). De Saussure proposed that the relationship between spoken sounds and concepts as well as the categorisation of concepts is arbitrary and locally contingent. For example, different cultures will not only use different signifiers but will also conceptualise objects and experiences (the signified) differently. The meaning we ascribe to a concept then, relies not on any qualities intrinsic to that concept but on how we describe it in relation to other concepts. In this way language builds our 'reality' rather than just describing entities that already exist outside of us (Burr, 2003). De Saussure assumed though, that once formed, the relationship between the signifier and signified was fixed. Structuralism then cannot 'account for change and discontinuity' in language use and meaning making (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000, p. 8). It is these areas that poststructuralism has developed. Again, poststructuralist thought contains a variety of strands that share common assumptions. It is assumed that the meanings contained in language are flexible, contestable and able to change and that social organisation and the self is constituted through language (Burr, 2003; Weedon, 1997).

Discourse

Crucial to poststructuralist thought is the notion of discourse. Discourses are 'the language practices through which knowledge, truth, our sense of ourselves, and social relations are constructed... Discourses have 'real' or material effects in that they construct our understandings of key entities' (Healy, 2005, p.199). The concept of discourse is commonly associated with the French theorist, Michel Foucault (Danaher et al., 2000). His genealogical studies of discourse examined how historical knowledge is discursively formed to shape 'regimes of truth' which sanction certain social actions and restrict others (Hall, 2001, p. 76). Foucault proposed that knowledge and power are inseparable in that some discourses are given a truth status in society which influences the configuration and functioning of institutions and how we come to 'know' our selves (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1980; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Power then is not possessed by any person but rather is exercised in relation to the 'types of discourse which [society] accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).

Hall (2001) notes that in this regard the operation of discourse in society could be considered similar to the operation of ideology. He points out however, that the key difference between these approaches is that the concept of ideology often reduces the exercise of knowledge and power to one key interest over another, for example class relations, whereas the concept of discourse conveys the notion that '*all* political and social forms of thought...[are] inevitably caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power' (Hall, 2001, p. 76, emphasis in original). This view of discourse enables one to think of it as being able to be used ideologically, 'that is in the service of power and in the interests of the relatively powerful groups in society' (Burr, 2003, p. 87).

Foucault's approach to discourse has been critiqued for lacking explanatory power as to how discourses develop and change over time and so 'Foucault's own histories become as a consequence of his stance stories of "strategies without strategists"' (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 81). Potter (1996) takes a pragmatic view of discourse when he

identifies his interest as being 'more focused on the specifics of people's practices than the Foucauldian notion of a discourse as a set of statements that formulate objects and subjects' (p. 105). Within poststructuralism there are different perspectives as to whether people have the capacity to strategically use discourse to construct their selves or whether they are merely puppets of discourse (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 93).

Subject positions or identity

Within poststructuralism, identity is thought of as one's subjectivity or subject position in relation to discourse. The idea of people as autonomous and rational individuals who possess a unified and coherent identity and who are capable of agentic action is contested (Davies, 1991). It is considered that:

> Particular regimes of power inform the discursive fields that define and shape both the materiality and meaning of bodies. Discursive fields are themselves made up of competing discourses that produce different subject positions and forms of identity. In this poststructuralist theoretical approach to subjectivity and identity, language constitutes rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of experience and identity. This approach opens up subjectivities and identities to processes of cultural struggle and resistance. Subjectivity (consisting of an individual's conscious and unconscious sense of self, emotions and desires) is also constituted in language, and rational consciousness is only one dimension of subjectivity. It is in the process of using language - whether as thought or speech - that we take up positions as speaking and thinking subjects and the identities that go with them (Weedon, 2004, p. 17-18).

People's subjectivities are constituted simultaneously by a number of (often) contradictory discourses and so identity positions are experienced as multiple rather than singular, and as fragmented and contradictory. Agency, within this perspective, is perceived as constrained in that choices are limited to the options constituted as being available within the discourses to which people are subject so that 'our subjective experience is provided by the discourses in which we are embedded' (Burr, 2003, p. 119; Davies, 1991). The notion of positioning (Davies & Harre, 2001) acknowledges that through discursive practices people constitute multiple subject positions and the

taking up of a particular position will in turn influence the way in which the world is conceived and talked about. The commitment to a position will entail a 'conceptual repertoire' (Davies & Harre, 2001, p. 262) of metaphors, images and ways of speaking that can be utilised discursively in the construction of self (Burr, 2003). People use discursive practices to continually re-constitute their selves in interaction with others and also in response to wider social discourses. This perspective implies of course that people have some degree of agency in the formation of 'identity' and allows for 'the possibility of personal and social change through our capacity to identify, understand and resist the discourses we are also subject to' (Burr, 1995, p. 153).

Interpretive repertoires

The idea proposed by Davies and Harre (2001) that people use a conceptual repertoire to discursively produce their selves is akin to the concept of interpretive repertoires. The use of interpretive repertoires as a means of thinking about how people construct their identity has developed from discursive psychology (Burr, 2003). Emphasis is on the examination of people's use of 'culturally available linguistic resources' (Burr, 2003, p. 167) to construct stories. Wetherell and Potter (1992) describe interpretive repertoires as 'broadly discernable clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images... Interpretive repertoires are pre-eminently a way of understanding the *content* of discourse and how that content is organized' (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 90, emphasis in original). Burr (2003) likens interpretive repertoires to the repertoire of steps available to a ballet dancer. They are limited in number but can be put together in different ways in order to produce a number of dances that can be used on different occasions. In the same way, interpretive repertoires are resources that can be used flexibly by speakers to attain certain effects (Burr, 2003). Whilst the concepts of discourse and interpretive repertoires are similar, interpretive repertoires are 'viewed as much smaller and more fragmented [than discourses], offering speakers a whole range of different rhetorical opportunities' for the construction of self (Edley, 2001, p. 202).

The utilisation of interpretive repertoires as a discursive analytic method is useful as it provides a flexible and practical view of discourse (Wetherell & Potter, 1992), which is why I have employed it in this research. During analysis both variability and repetition

of interpretive repertoires is examined. Variability will occur within a conversation as people use different interpretive repertoires to suit their needs in the formation of accounts and their selves. Repetition occurs across different conversations because interpretive repertoires are part of shared cultural knowledge that is drawn on to constitute accounts (Burr, 2003).

This section has discussed social constructionism and the poststructural theoretical perspective that underpins this research and the concepts of discourse, subject positions and interpretive repertoires as means of understanding the notion of identity. The next section will discuss the application of constructionist perspectives to social work research and practice as well as the development of discourses of social work and their influence on social workers' identities over time.

Constructionist or 'Post' Perspectives in Social Work

Authors taking a constructionist approach to social work use varying theories including narrative, postmodern and poststructural. Whilst each of these perspectives provides a slightly different contribution to the field, they share the assumptions previously mentioned with regard to social constructionism and are discussed here as part of the development of interest in language as a meaning-making process in social work. I use the terms 'post' or 'constructionist/ism' to include all these approaches.

Social work is a social activity. It involves people using language in relationships to build and also interpret social 'reality' (Jokinen, Juhila & Poso, 1999; Rojek, Peacock & Collins, 1988). It is also a site of uncertainty and ambiguity and theoretical approaches to examining practice need to account for this (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). For this reason constructionism offers a useful framework for the study of social work (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Whilst 'post' perspectives are 'hotly contested discourse[s]... not yet widely accepted' within social work, they offer the benefit of destabilising taken-for-granted beliefs to enable a rethinking of what social work is and what social workers do (Healy, 2005, p. 194). The examination of 'talk, text and interaction' can help improve understanding of social work practice and the influence of organisational and professional cultures at both conversational and institutional levels (Hall & White, 2005, p. 385). Such an approach to social work provides for the

acknowledgement of a multiplicity of truths at individual, group and societal levels and the opening up of human interactions to a variety of interpretations (Jokinen et al., 1999). It enables a focus on the unspoken as well as spoken aspects of interactions (that is, examining the implications of what is not said) and provides a forum for stories that may otherwise not be heard (Fraser, 2004). It also curbs the temptation to position social workers as expert, which is often a feature of modern approaches to social work in which workers, as the possessors of specific theoretical knowledge and skills, are perceived to know more than the clients they work with (Fraser, 2004; Nash, O'Donoghue & Munford, 2005). These issues are particularly pertinent to Aotearoa New Zealand where alternative knowledge bases and ways of practising social work, for example those belonging to indigenous communities, are disrupting traditional (western) approaches that have dominated the formation of social work knowledge and practice.

While these advantages of constructionist perspectives are acknowledged, interest in the 'narrative moment' has been slow to grow in social work and it is speculated that this has been because of an historic reluctance to depart from more conventional and 'scientific' research approaches (Fraser, 2004, p. 181). Constructionist approaches have been perceived to lack the methodological credibility required to be taken seriously by research bodies and governments in policy development (Hall & White, 2005), and the social work profession because of its 'preoccupation with status and legitimacy' has been wary of engaging with such approaches and instead leaned toward quantitative and evidence-based research (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 405). However, others (for example Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2006; Seymour, 2006) suggest that social workers/researchers already generate qualitative research from a range of epistemologies and ontologies including 'post' perspectives, which eschew the temptation to secure legitimation within a hierarchy of knowledge. They argue that this should continue so that practitioners are provided with a wide range of information useful to furthering the conceptualisation and practice of social work.

Aside from the epistemological and ontological debates within social work regarding what constitutes legitimate knowledge, some of the reluctance to embrace constructionist approaches in social work has to do with the concern at the implications of perspectives that emphasise uncertainty and relativism. There is worry that a

relativist approach will obscure material disadvantage and erode the traditional value and theoretical base of social work (Ife, 1999; Smith & White, 1997). Smith and White (1997) comment that a 'postmodern analysis of social work is more than analytically flawed, it is ethically problematic' (p. 293) because it potentially discounts people's lived experiences of oppression by constituting them as social constructions so that possible emancipatory practice in the form of concrete activities becomes difficult to conceptualise and action. They note that any analysis of social phenomena that underplays the influence of political and economic structures clouds the existence of 'the continuing *facts* of unemployment, social deprivation, unequal opportunities, two tier health care, educational underprivilege and the rest' (Norris, 1993 cited in Smith & White, 1997, p. 284, emphasis in original). This challenge to 'post' perspectives is usually made by those who adhere to the argument that social work's focus should be 'ameliorating the social conditions of the disadvantaged through social reform' (Bogo, Raphael & Roberts, 1993, p. 280). Social workers who critique 'post' perspectives also acknowledge that they can be useful to illuminate certain aspects of social work practice and identity through the processes of deconstruction and resistance (Davies & Leonard, 2004a; Dominelli, 2004a; Ife, 1999). For example, examining how language has been used to construct traditional notions of 'client' and 'social worker', and the subsequent power relations, can enable one to refuse these positions in favour of alternative constructions or 'truths'.

In response to the concerns that 'post' perspectives are relativist and risk reducing 'real' experiences to simply discursive practice whilst at the same time stripping human actors of agency, some authors (Healy, 2000 & 2005; Pease & Fook, 1999) have articulated a melding of critical and 'post' theoretical approaches to social work in order to account for both the discursive construction of truths in a local and historical context as well as 'meta' concepts such as human rights, oppression, social change and social justice. Healy (2000) echoes the concerns of others that 'the poststructural emphasis on language and on the symbolic can elide the material realities of disadvantage' so that whilst it can highlight complexities at the local practice level it can cloud focus for political change at a wider level as it tends to ignore 'fixed and dominatory' forms of power (p. 140). She notes as well that an ethical framework for managing the 'politics of difference' (p. 142) is difficult to clarify and articulate within this framework. In light of these limitations Healy (2000) recommends that critical and poststructural

theories be used together to 'provide insights useful to understanding and responding to the interplay between the structural and the symbolic in the genesis of social disadvantage' (p. 140). This stance ensures against an 'uncritical embrace of post theories' which could otherwise endanger 'our capacity to develop coherent moral and political frameworks for practice' (Healy, 2005, p. 214).

In recent years though, there has been increasing interest in 'post' approaches to social work to examine the influence of discursive practice in constructing social work practices and identities (see for example Beckett, 2003; Camilleri, 1996; Christie, 2006; Hall, 1997; Hall, Slembrouck & Sarangi, 2006; Healy, 2000 & 2005; Jokinen et al., 1999; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Reynolds, 2007; Rojek et al., 1988). Healy (2000) points out that 'post' theories have 'gained momentum' (p. 61) as a means to account for social work within an historical and local milieu and to 'deconstruct claims to a "core" or "essence" of social work and to move instead towards practice theories that engage with the complexity and contextual diversity of social work practices' (p. 61). It is in this complexity and contextual diversity that 'post' theories emphasise the process and performative aspects of social workers' constructions of their own and others' identities through the use of language and interaction in their daily activities (Hall et al., 2006). Such a critique opens up social work to be considered as not merely a rational or neutral activity but as one shaped by discursive practice (Hall, 1997). Constructionist research in social work has treated interview or meeting transcripts, case notes and/or court reports and even email, as text (for example Camilleri, 1996; Hall, 1997; Hall et al., 2006; Jokinen et al., 1999; Reynolds, 2007) in order to examine how they are put together to constitute certain positions for social workers, other professionals and clients. Urek (2005) proposes that what social workers produce are moral constructions that have ongoing implications for how they and clients are perceived as well as how interventions are formulated. Miehls and Moffatt (2000) and Dominelli (2004b) suggest that clients are often positioned as problematic 'others' and workers as objective and neutral 'professional helper[s]' (Moffatt & Miehls, 1999, p. 66), a process that reinforces a hierarchical and oppressive relationship between them.

As well as a focus on the linguistic practices of individuals in the constitution of practice and identities in social work, there is also increasing acknowledgement of the existence of over-arching discourses that influence how social work is perceived and

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talked about (Healy, 2000 & 2005; Ife, 1997; Rojek et al., 1988; Taylor & White, 2000). Ife (1997) likens these to Foucault's 'regimes of truth' and suggests that they 'construct the boundaries of practice, suggest what is to count as good practice, and, most importantly, define and legitimise relationships of power between various actors' (p. 40). They can be thought of as 'the truth claims that have become an unspoken and unquestioned orthodoxy' of what social work is or should be (Healy, 2000, p. 62) so that language used by social workers cannot be conceived as neutral but rather as embedded in historically specific 'received ideas' which shape professional knowledge and practice (Rojek et al., 1988, p. 7).

This entails the notion that particular social work values and theories can themselves be viewed as discourses that, amongst others, influence definitions of social work practice and practitioner identities. Jokinen et al. (1999) note that a range of stakeholders including social workers and clients, employers, educators, the government by way of policy, the media and the public, all act to define social work. It can be argued that within and across each of these arenas exist contradictory and competing discourses of social work, which contribute to how it is understood and practised and also to how social workers' professional identities are formed. When social workers understand how discourses shape their work by making certain subject positions available to them and those they work with, they can more effectively use or resist the discourses in order to achieve their aims in working toward change (Fook, 2004; Healy, 2005; Hough, 1999; Ife, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999). This is of particular importance for beginning social work practitioners who may initially be challenged by exposure to organisational discourses that differ from those prevalent in education environments so that 'what they have learnt about sound social work practice on their courses is challenged by agency protocol, cultures and practices' (Nash et al., 2005, p. 20), which has implications for the formation of their professional identities.

Taking this view, the task becomes to identify what discourses constitute social work and the subject positions of social workers and others. 'Social work' itself has been named a discourse (Stevenson, 1993 cited in Pease & Fook, 1999, p. 14). Whilst I think this is too broad a reading of social work to be useful, it is in keeping with how social work has come to be understood over time: as something that exists as a concrete set of activities underpinned by a specific value base rather than as a constructed set of

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practices determined by the language that operates within particular contexts (Healy, 2005). A more useful stance to take is to consider how social practices, ideas and language have contributed to our perception of what social work 'is' over time. In this way specific epochs can be seen to have influenced the theoretical and practice perspectives that constitute the range of truth claims that make up 'core concepts such as client needs and service responses, including social work practices' (Healy, 2005, p. 12). Understanding social work as a site where social actors produce, and are products of, multiple contradicting discourses that exist alongside each other, overlap, and compete as 'regimes of truth', makes it possible to discern key discourses that have influenced social workers' subjectivities over time. These include social work as philanthropic; vocational; gendered; religiously-based; social work as professional; traditional and humanist approaches to social work; critical social work; economic rationalism; managerialism; biomedicine; and the law (Christie, 2006; Dominelli, 2004b; Hawkins, Fook & Ryan, 2001; Healy, 2005; Ife, 1997; Lewis, 2004; Payne, 2006; Rojek et al., 1988).

This section considers the influence of these discourses on social work and the subjectivities constructed by beginning practitioners. In acknowledgement that social work practices are culturally embedded, I also provide a critique of the western influences these discourses reflect.

Social work as philanthropic: A caring vocation (for women)

LeCroy (2002) demonstrates the notion of social work as a deeply caring vocation when he observes that when his first year social work students 'sit down in those hard, small desk chairs to begin their first class, they are responding to a calling deep within themselves, a desire to leave behind the banal day-to-day struggle and enter a world with greater meaning, develop an expanded social consciousness, and strengthen connections to fellow humankind' (pp. 1-2). His language evokes the sense that choosing to start social work education is commensurate to commencing a religious mission. This view of social work may well have its roots in its nineteenth Century philanthropic beginnings where, under the auspices of the United Kingdom's Poor Laws, volunteer women usually with affiliations to the Christian church, engaged in charitable work with those deemed needy of aid. The aim was to provide the poor with

residual welfare but also to change their behaviour and character for the 'better' (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). In Aotearoa New Zealand this type of 'social work' developed with the arrival of British immigrants (Nash, 2001a).

Two key movements are affiliated with the development of social work during this period, the Charitable Organisation Society (COS) and the Settlement Movement. Each was principally organised by women and embodied what has come to be seen as the dual focus of social work; the person and the environment (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Haynes and White, 1999). The COS was formed in the United Kingdom and is associated with the delivery of charity through 'friendly visiting', an emphasis on personal responsibility, and the eventual development of a scientific approach to individual casework whereas the Settlement Movement, developed in the United States of America, is associated with the development of community programmes where the emphasis was on social responsibility and social justice (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Haynes & White, 1999).

As mentioned in Chapter One, in Aotearoa New Zealand prior to colonisation Maori had established ways of ensuring wellbeing through whanau, hapu and iwi structures[7] (O'Donoghue, 2003; Ruwhiu, 2001). During colonial times assistance to the poor was provided by a mix of voluntary, government and family measures (Tennant, 1989). A charitable aid system influenced by both British and Australian welfare structures was developed by the government so that by the 1870s 'relieving officers', usually women, visited with the poor to determine their eligibility for assistance. There were also voluntary services established by the Anglican and Catholic churches and the Ladies Benevolent Society. The government responded to Maori welfare needs by establishing the Native Department, which regrettably took a 'paternalistic' and 'obstructive' role toward the provision of need and Maori did not receive support to the level of Pakeha even when entitled (Tennant, 1989, p.100).

Depending on the reading one makes of this history, the discourses, or truth claims, that are associated with this epoch include social work as women's work, social work as philanthropic or altruistic, social work as social (in)justice, social work as rational and

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[7] Whanau, hapu and iwi are indigenous terms that can be translated as meaning extended family, sub-tribe and tribe respectively.

scientific; social work as vocational and religiously-based. Dominelli (2004b) provides an example of how just *one* of these discourses shapes current social work delivery:

> Social work practice is complicated by its traditional association with residual provisions that target socially excluded needy individuals, families, groups and communities. Accessing publicly funded personal social services has been cast in charitable, alms-giving terms and adjudicated by knowledgeable experts who reinforce a sense of disentitlement or residuality. I term this the *'philanthropic gaze'*. Under it, recipients of assistance are defined as a homogeneous group that can be segregated into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' members... The grouping and regrouping of clients into deserving and undeserving categories for the purposes of resource allocation forms part of the processes of regulation that Foucault (1991) called the 'technologies of governmentality', which are rooted in regimes of control (Dominelli, 2004b, p. 6, my emphasis).

In making this comment, Dominelli is using what I term a 'critical social work' discourse to challenge a discourse whose truth claims oppose her notions of what social work should be. This is an example of how 'truths' about social work exist simultaneously in contradiction and competition, and change over time as those within social work act as agents to resist certain discourses in order to re-present social work in their own terms.

It is also possible here to observe the religious underpinnings of early social work which, although weakened since the alignment of social work with science in the early twentieth Century (Bowpitt, 1998), are still discernable in social service delivery, particularly in the non-government sector (Healy, 2005). Healy (2005) notes that discourses associated with spirituality (defined as the individual search for meaning) and religion (defined as organised practices and institutions which express faith) (p. 83) have influenced social work practice because the historical connection with religious charities has led to the existence of a shared value base between it and mainstream (for example, Christian or Catholic) religions, and because a range of religious organisations continue to provide community social services. Healy (2005) strongly cautions social workers to remember the oppressive and discriminatory nature of these discourses and their potential to marginalise clients when their experiences are outside of those

condoned by mainstream religious organisations. However, she points out that the advantages of these discourses lie in the opportunity they provide for holistic and faith-based community support.

Since colonial times in Aotearoa New Zealand official responses to those in need have been largely determined by Pakeha. This has led to the development of services that have been deemed institutionally racist and inappropriate to meeting the needs of Maori and other ethnic groups (Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1988). Increasingly, the dominant (western) cultural discourses that constitute social work are being critiqued by those offering alternative frameworks for practice (see for example Autagavaia, 2001; Bradley, 1995; Crummer, Samuel, Papai-Vao & George, 1998; Mafile'o, 2004; Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1988; Ruwhiu, 2001; Selby, 1994; Walsh-Tapiata, 2004). This issue will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

Social work as professional

The development of discourses of 'social work as a profession' can be observed as early as 1903 with the establishment in the United Kingdom of the COS School of Sociology to provide social work training (Rojek et al., 1988). Bowpitt (1998) describes the development of this School as arising from the COS members' separation of charity from its Christian roots and their pursuit of scientific knowledge in order to undertake their work and the requirement that they then train others in this knowledge, so that a 'secular approach to charity produced a *professional* approach to social work' (p. 683, my emphasis).

The acknowledgement of the importance of education to the development of professional social work led to the establishment of social work schools in a number of countries in the early twentieth Century. Formal, professional social work education commenced in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1949 with the Victoria University School of Social Science (Nash, 2001b) and while it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss social work education in detail, it is sufficient to say that there has been a proliferation of courses offered by a variety of institutions since this time.

In Aotearoa New Zealand the 1960s onwards saw increased recognition by practitioners in different fields that although they did not share the label of 'social worker' they did share a similar knowledge and skill base. As indicated in Chapter One, collective social work professional identity was strengthened through the organisation of local associations, conferences, legislation and the formation in 1964 of the national professional association, the New Zealand Association of Social Workers (Hancock, 2004; Nash, 2001a). Kendrick (2004) points out that at the time of its inception the Association's emphasis was on the development of education, which was bound up with the notion of professionalism, the motivation of which was 'the wish to serve and protect clients, rather than... the notion of status with its implications for salary and conditions of work' (p. 8). The Association aligned itself with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and developed codes of practice and ethics and competency assessments with the view to support, amongst other things, the 'development of professional standards' of social work (NZASW, 1993a, p. 9). In acknowledgement of the unique status of Maori as the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand and the necessity to conduct social work in accordance with The Treaty of Waitangi, the Association established a tangata whenua caucus in 1986 to ensure a 'bicultural identity' for social work in this country (NZASW, 1993a, p. 5). The Association also developed a bicultural code of practice and a tangata whenua competency assessment process separate to that for tauiwi for those tangata whenua who wish to use it (NZASW, 1993b; ANZASW, 2007). Those interested in Pacific peoples' social work issues are able to join the Pasifika Interest Group (ANZASW, 2007).

The passing of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 established a legislative framework for the development of social work practice with an emphasis on professionalism and accountability by providing for the voluntary registration of social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand Government, 2003, p. 5). The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), established by the Act, has set standards for social worker registration including minimum qualification and competency measures, a code of conduct and complaints and disciplinary procedures.

Whilst the commitment to a discourse of professionalism has grown within social work at all levels of education and practice, there is little articulation of what

'professionalism' entails. It is a term often used without definition which implies an assumption of a shared understanding amongst social workers as to its meaning. Hancock (2004) articulated some aspects of professionalism in his inaugural address to the New Zealand Association of Social Workers in 1964 when he pointed out that '[n]o association of social workers is worth its salt unless its members train themselves in more adequate practice and methods, and constantly scrutinise their activities... [and] each one is responsible for the other, as social workers, in the maintenance of standards and discipline' (p. 3). The IFSW has defined professional social workers as being:

... dedicated to service for the welfare and self-fulfilment of human beings; to the development and disciplined use of scientific knowledge regarding human behaviour and society; to the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations; to the enhancement and improvement of the quality of life of people; and to the achievement of social justice (IFSW, 2007).

Fook et al. (2000) describe social work professionalism as constituting the application of a specific body of knowledge to achieve effective practice in complex environments along with 'the commitment to and enactment of, particular social values' (p. 3). Woodcock and Dixon (2005) note that debate about what constitutes suitable professional values is ongoing so that social workers continue to wrestle 'with what constitutes and characterises the social work profession in terms of its goals, tasks, desired methods of intervention, major client groups and predominant sectors of employment' (p. 955). The notion of professionalism does not go uncontested and there have been questions raised as to who benefits from it (Hibbs, 2005; Woodcock & Dixon, 2005). Healy and Meagher (2004) discuss the issue of professionalism in the current political environment of managerialism, fiscal constraints and the diminished value of caring work and challenge what they term 'abolitionist' opposition to professional recognition because of concerns that it is 'elitist and antithetical to the genuine needs of... clients' (p. 96). They argue that:

Calls to abandon the project of professionalization ignore the extent to which these workers' knowledge claims are already marginalized through gender, class and race based discrimination...We contend that a poorly trained and

inadequately supported human services labor force is not well placed to enact social work as a thoughtful, analytic and creative activity. Moreover, a deprofessionalized and de-skilled workforce is not in a good position to defend the interest of service users, especially when these interests deviate from prevailing organisational and policy dictates (Healy & Meagher, 2004, p. 97).

Although contested, the professional discourse has become a powerful truth claim within social work and has a major influence on the construction of beginning practitioners' identities.

Traditional and humanist approaches to social work

Alongside these discourses, during the twentieth Century social work was strongly influenced by traditional and humanist approaches based in psychology and sociology which, although critiqued more extensively since the 1960s, continue to shape much of the thinking about and delivery of social work services (Healy, 2005).

Traditional approaches to social work are influenced by psychological theories that emphasise personal pathology rather than environmental issues as the cause of social problems and interventions are subsequently targeted in this direction (Rojek et al., 1988). The emphasis of these 'individualist-reformist' approaches is on working with individuals, families and groups to improve their 'fit' with the existing social environment rather than focussing on achieving wider social change (Payne, 2005, p. 73). Included are psychodynamic perspectives, crisis intervention and task-centred models, cognitive behavioural theories, and systems and ecological approaches which often involve methods such as psychosocial casework or counselling (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Payne, 2005; Rojek et al., 1988). Dietz (2000) notes that the focus on the diagnosis and treatment of clients' 'problems' within traditional approaches positions the social worker as expert while causing the client to 'internalize pathology' which 'reinforces rather than challenges oppression' (p. 503). This echoes the critique made of traditional approaches by critical (radical) social workers who maintain that a focus on micro issues only acts to perpetuate existing inequalities in society (Rojek et al., 1988). Rojek et al. (1988) have identified the particular influence of psychoanalytic thinking on the values usually associated with traditional social work, which include

'respect, individualisation, confidentiality and self-determination' (p. 31). They note also the relatively recent expansion of these to include equality, human rights and justice.

Humanism has been another influential approach within social work, so much so that it has been described as 'seminal' (Rojek et al., 1988, p. 114). 'Social work professes to be a quintessentially humanist profession concerned with promoting dignity' (Powell (1998, p. 325), equality and self-determination (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). Humanism focuses on person-centred practice to achieve 'human potential and growth, rather than social change' (Payne, 2005, p. 181). Epitomised in the work of Carl Rogers, humanism has clearly shaped the expectations of the worker-client relationship within social work. Emphasis is on the social worker being able to demonstrate such qualities as unconditional positive regard, empathy, authenticity, respect, and a non-judgmental and non-directive attitude in order to develop an effective therapeutic relationship with clients (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Payne, 2005). Humanist values are such an assumed part of social work that Dominelli (2002), in describing anti-oppressive practice, states that it fits 'within the longstanding tradition of humanism with which social workers are familiar' (p. 7) and makes no further attempt to explain what this might be. The impact of humanist values in social work is on the principles rather than techniques for practice and a similar critique is made of them as of traditional social work, that is, they are vague and do not specify what action social workers are to take in particular situations (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005).

Traditional and humanist discourses have an ongoing influence on social work particularly with regard to its value base and the emphasis in some areas on person-centred work rather than macro (structural) issues. More recently, strengths approaches have also emerged and reflect a focus on the client as central to the change process.

Critical social work

Critical social work principles derive from critical social science and Marxist and Radical critiques of capitalism and traditional approaches to social work arising during the 1960s and 1970s (Healy, 2005; Payne, 2005; Rojek et al., 1988). This broad discourse includes Marxist, Radical, structural, feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppressive and

anti-discriminatory perspectives and focuses on the influence of macro structures on social relations, the division between privileged and marginalised groups, the complicity of the oppressed in their own oppression (through a lack of conscientisation), and the benefit of collective action to address areas of social injustice so that 'in its broadest sense... critical social work is concerned with the analysis and transformation of power relations at every level of social work practice' (Healy, 2005, p. 172). In this regard, critical social work is emancipatory in that its primary focus is the freedom of people from 'the restrictions imposed by the existing social order' (Payne, 2005, p. 227). Critical social work advocates structural analysis with the view to change oppressive power relations to achieve equality and social justice. It frames social worker action as a moral and political activity and requires social workers to be engaged in critical reflection about their own status and the impact of their behaviour on clients (Healy, 2005). Within this discourse the positioning of social workers as professionals is problematic as it involves alignment with the state and the accrual of power that serves social workers' own interests. This in turn leads to the marginalisation and oppression of clients (Payne, 2005; Rojek et al., 1988). Healy (2000) notes that:

> Critical approaches have emphasised the political nature of social work and represented social workers and service users as opposites in terms of experience, interests and access to power. For activists there is a fundamental contradiction between the broad intention of social work, to help and empower, and the power wielded by professional social workers (Healy, 2000, p. 71).

Critical social work's stance with regard to power relations, structural oppression and the empowerment of clients to identify and meet their own goals through collective action to achieve social change, has influenced community development education and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand (Chile, 2004; Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2001). Community development can be thought of as both 'hands-on' work with (usually marginalised) geographical, cultural or interest groups to meet their aspirations as well as a way of thinking that entails the application of community development principles to work with individual clients to analyse situations and contribute to improved outcomes (Chile, 2004; Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2005). Within this construct the social worker is perceived as an 'enabler', facilitating community action rather than

engaging in service provision, and being accountable primarily to the community via community-based structures (Ife, 1997, p. 53). Community development incorporates an ecological perspective to examine the influence of macro political structures on micro level issues that affect the wellbeing of communities, families and individuals and has been particularly useful to indigenous and ethnic minority groups as a means to affirm the importance of the collective and to account for historical forms of oppression (Chile, 2004; Mafile'o, 2005a; Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2001; Selby, 2005).

Whilst critical social work provides a way to theorise social relations and the use of power within them, it does simplify some concepts. For example, the construction of 'oppositional representations' (Healy, 2000, p. 124) within critical social work such as structural/local, theory/practice, and care/control amongst others, implies the privileging of one element over another and the reduction of social work practice to choices of 'either/or'. The assumption that power can be possessed by groups that are in opposition to each other relies on the categorisation of people into groups with an emphasis on the sameness of group members. This can mask the differences that exist between group members; for example, the binary 'social worker/client' assumes that in this relationship power is accrued on the side of the worker. This fails to account for the influence of gender, age, sexuality, disability or ethnicity and other factors signified in 'the body of the worker [which] is not incidental to the kinds of knowledge they bring to practice and the forms of power they can exercise' (Healy, 2000, p. 90). Likewise, the notion that social workers should always aspire to achieve the equal participation of clients in a working partnership does not take into account organisational constraints, for example within statutory social work, that act to limit what type of interventions can occur (Healy, 2000). The recent emergence of strength approaches has assisted social workers when considering such issues.

Healy (2005) notes the influence of critical social science theories and the development of new social movements in the 1970s and 1980s as contributing to what she terms a consumer rights discourse. Whilst she distinguishes this discourse from that of critical social work, she notes that similarities exist. These include the critique of structural and cultural barriers to clients and the emphasis on the participation and decision making power of clients along with a holistic approach to 'need'. A consumer rights discourse emphasises the social inclusion of 'communities' of people with shared experiences

such as 'the disabled' but, as within a critical social work discourse, the critique can be made that in making its claims it relies on group members retaining fixed identities such as gender, class or (dis)ability, which in turn suppresses difference and overlooks the notion of identity as multiple and fluid (Healy, 2005).

Despite its limitations, a critical perspective is considered by many to be highly relevant because it has the 'capacity to offer a meta-theory to guide our analysis of a number of core social concerns and processes occupying clients, social work practitioners, managers, policy makers and politicians seeking to redefine social democracy' (Houston, 2001, p. 857). As previously discussed, a number of authors advocate the melding of a critical stance with 'post' perspectives to ensure a robust approach to social work practice that considers both the discursive construction of meaning and people's various experiences of 'truth' and the material effects of social, economic and political structures.

Economic rationalism and managerialism

The 1980s and 1990s saw a number of economic and social policy changes under the influence of a neo-conservative political agenda in which economic rationalism and managerialism gained influence over human service delivery including social work (Healy, 2005; Hough, 1999; Leonard, 2004), so much so that Davies and Leonard (2004b) titled their recent publication 'Social Work in a *Corporate Era*' (my emphasis). These discourses are most pervasive in employment contexts and constitute social workers and clients not as subjects but as 'the objects of bureaucratic organisation' (Davies & Leonard, 2004a, p. xiv).

Economic rationalism has been described as the 'most overpowering theme of [Aotearoa New Zealand's] contemporary history since 1984' (McDonald, 2001, p. 139). It involved the application of a business model to social service delivery, in which the market was prioritised as the determinant of resource allocation (Ife, 1997). The welfare state was reduced as the Government decreased benefit levels and devolved its services to the private sector, purchasing those it desired through contract arrangements (Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 2001). The impact has been to commodify social work services so that the social worker role becomes one of broker (Ife, 1997). Whilst couched in

rhetoric of consumer choice and coinciding with the desire of 'grassroots determination to gain more autonomy' (Nash, 2001a, p. 40), the effect of this discourse, like that of managerialism, has been to undermine values associated with traditional and critical social work (Ife, 1997).

Managerialism has been described by Adams (2002) as tending to:

> Emphasise a sequence or cycle of activity, as conceptualised and laid down by line managers rather than professionals working within their own knowledge base... In the contract culture, products may be the focus at the expense of production processes; financial and outcome-based performance indicators may predominate over qualitative evaluation (Adams, 2002, p. 256).

This discourse has become firmly entrenched in the social services in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kane, 2001). It locates 'professionals and service users, as consumers, in a commercial relationship controlled by managers' (Adams, 2002, p. 250) and contests the notion that social workers are capable of exercising professional autonomy and judgement (Schofield, 2001). A key assumption of managerialism is that of 'top-down control and authority' and an emphasis on organisational efficacy and efficiency, concrete technical-rational skills and staff accountability to management rather than clients (Ife, 1997, p. 17).

The managerialist discourse contrasts sharply with other social work truth claims particularly those that emphasise social justice, client self-determination, empowerment and a 'bottom-up' approach to change (Ife, 1997). It has 'reinforced bureaucratic regimes of control' by ensuring that social workers adhere to procedural requirements and produce quantifiable outcomes, and by masking the opportunity for examination of structural issues in relation to client need (Dominelli, 2004b, p. 28). The result for social workers has been a lessening of both morale and professional skills as they are prevented from engaging in reflection and dialogue about practice as prominence is given to accountability measures (Kane, 2001; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000).

There is concern that the reorganisation of social work practice in light of these public policy changes is causing it to become fragmented and routinised to the point where it

can be considered to be undergoing de-professionalisation (Healy & Meagher, 2004). Ife (1997) suggests that social workers have not adapted well to the influences of market and managerialist discourses as historically they have been 'preoccupied with a debate between the professional and community discourses' (p. 74). These are interesting considerations when thinking about beginning practitioners' formation of professional identities. The social work education system acts to socialise students into certain 'ideal' notions of social work (Smith, 1983, p. 19) which are then challenged by entry to a work environment that may or may not espouse these values or practices and which may also impose other values and practices, such as those associated with economic rationalism and managerialism, that are seemingly opposed to what beginning social work practitioners have come to understand as truth with regards to social work values and professionalism (Healy, 2005).

Biomedicine and law

In addition to the existence of the discourses discussed above, Healy (2005) has also examined the influence on social work of the discourses of biomedicine and law, which she perceives to be dominant in health and welfare contexts. Healy (2005) notes that the discourses of biomedicine and law are often aligned with principles of 'rationality, individualism and linear notions of progress (p. 19) and social workers, while not considered to be experts in them, are subject to these knowledge bases in practice because they significantly shape how clients' needs are assessed and responded to.

The biomedical discourse privileges the notion that the cause of health 'problems' reside within the physical body, and that medicine is a 'scientifically neutral enterprise' that will remedy biological ailments (Healy, 2005, p. 21). Two key influences of this discourse on social service delivery are that those with biological or medical knowledge are perceived to be 'expert', and complex issues are reduced of issues to aetiology (Healy, 2005). Social workers practising in health fields will usually engage with this body of knowledge daily and so it is of particular significance to them.

Healy (2005) notes that like biomedicine, legal discourses have assumed a truth status that impacts social work by delineating key tasks and responsibilities for social workers, and by providing rules that strongly influence the lives of clients. She argues that while

the law can be used to protect and advocate for clients in some instances, it has limitations. These include it being value-laden, and requiring the categorisation of complex identities into binaries such as perpetrator/victim or defendant/plaintiff. It can be used to perpetuate social inequalities by limiting participation in legal processes to legal experts and by not accounting for people's economic or social contexts in making judgements. Hence, it is necessary that it is critically analysed and questioned.

Cultural discourses

When considering what constitutes professional social work identities, it must be remembered that western culture has been dominant in formulating understandings of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. These understandings are being increasingly critiqued by social workers from indigenous, Pacific and other ethnic and cultural communities who propose alternative ways to comprehend and practise social work based on their own perceptions and experiences (Autagavaia, 2001; Bradley, 1995; Foliaki, 1994; Mafile'o, 2004; Masoe-Tulele, 1994; Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1988; Mulitalo-Lauta, 2000; Ruwhiu, 2001; Passells, 2006; Selby, 1994; Walsh-Tapiata, 2004). These paradigms offer alternative realities that contest dominant western discourses of social work practice, which have developed on the presumption of the sameness of human need without regard for the influence of culture (Lorenz, 2004). Historically, these normative practices have been imposed on clients without taking account of indigenous or ethnic minority ways of understanding and providing for wellbeing so that their position has been one of 'continuous subordination' (Foliaki, 1994, p. 153; Mafile'o, 2004; Ruwhiu, 2001). Mafile'o (2004) argues that describing such practice as 'professional' positions what is actually a cultural discourse as the preferred way of doing social work so that alternative cultural discourses become 'othered' with the implication that they are not professional. However, indigenous and other ethnic and cultural communities based in Aotearoa New Zealand have long used traditional methods, often based on the principles of responsibility and reciprocity within extended family, church and community, to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of their peoples (Durie, 1995; Mafile'o, 2005b; Masoe-Tulele, 1994; Metge, 1995; Mulitalo-Lauta, 2000; Ruwhiu, 2001) and social workers from these groups are increasingly articulating and successfully incorporating these methods into conventional practice as well as offering alternative practice frameworks to ensure effective

relationships and outcomes (Mafile'o, 2004; Mila-Schaaf, 2006; Mulitalo-Lauta, 2000; Passells, 2006; Ruwhiu, 2001). Eketone (2006) argues for the necessity that indigenous peoples construct realities based on their own knowledge and values so that advancement and development can occur on their own terms (p. 468). This requires social and community workers to understand these constructions in order to effectively engage in practice. As Mafile'o (2004) states when discussing Tongan social work concepts, such an approach 'does not infer a lack of ethical or safe practice; rather it represents a reconstruction of practice using principles and skills... in order to practice competently within a Tongan paradigm' (p. 253). This reconstruction of practice is necessary to ensure that social workers can maintain the 'delicate positioning' as mediators between their own and other ethnic and cultural communities, client needs, professional responsibilities and organisational requirements (Talaimanu, 2006, p. 42).

In this section I have discussed the usefulness of social constructionist approaches to social work and have looked at the development of particular theories and values as the formation of discourses or truth claims of social work that constitute 'social work' itself as well as the subjectivities of social workers, clients and other professionals, and such concepts as 'need' and 'intervention'. It can be seen that these discourses have significantly contributed to the multiple constructions of social work practice and identities and therefore to the shaping of stakeholders' expectations as to what type of work social workers should do.

The next section will discuss previous research into the experiences of beginning social work practitioners and the ways in which professional identity has been conceptualised in social work.

Previous Research into the Experiences of Beginning Social Workers

Studies of social work students and beginning practitioners have been undertaken in a number of countries and include examination of the transition from education to employment (Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Pockett, 1987; Smith, 1983; van Heugten & Rathgen, 2003), development of professional expertise (Fook et al., 2000), commitment to social justice (Hawkins et al., 2001; Gray, 2004), identity formation (Clare, 2006; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000), preparedness for practice (Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; Vere-

Jones, 2005), professional ideologies and work preferences (Bogo, Raphael & Roberts, 1993; Weiss, Gal & Dixon, 2003; Woodcock & Dixon, 2005), and continuing professional education (McMichael, 2000). The consensus appears to be that beginning social work practitioners are entering a site of contradictions and uncertainty in which they experience a disparity between their work 'reality' and their expectations of 'good' social work (Clare, 2006; Fook et al., 2000; Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000; Pockett, 1987; Smith, 1983; van Heugten & Rathgen, 2003). New social workers have to grapple with a range of issues and for this reason Fook et al. (2000) and Smith (1983) propose that it can take up to five years for practitioners to develop professional expertise, with the first one to two years spent struggling to attain some sense of professional identity. In this section I examine the findings of these studies under the themes of: tension between the ideal and the real; values, theory and practice; and competent and robust professionals.

Tensions between the ideal and the real

Healy (2005) and Ife (1997) suggest that the mismatch between expectations and experience is in part to do with social workers being subject to competing discourses of what social work should entail. Others (Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Smith, 1983) argue that the mismatch occurs because new graduates have idealised notions of what they can achieve and these are challenged by the ideologies and resource constraints that exist within work settings. Harre Hindmarsh (1992) argues that the 'tensions and dichotomies' (p. 3) experienced by beginning practitioners have traditionally been conceptualised as either role conflict in which they struggle to reconcile the professional values and theories taught to them during social work education with the bureaucratic values and theories existing in their employing organisation, or as difficulties with transfer of learning in which theory is not adequately related to practice.

Harre Hindmarsh (1992) has proposed a grounded theory of oppositions to account for the gap between the ideals and realities of beginning social workers, the resulting tensions, and attempts by practitioners to alleviate these. She notes that social workers experience 'various levels of opposition between their systems of ideas about, and prescriptions for, 'good' social work (their ideologies and principles) and those

expressed by their agency and colleagues' (p. 169), and that in response to these experiences they tend to adopt one of five positions: a battle or niche position, a position of indifference or compromise, or one of detached strength (p. 195), each of which entails certain strategies aimed at reducing or eliminating the oppositional experience. Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) also describe the disparity experienced by beginning social work practitioners between their expectations for work and their actual experiences, which contributes to feelings of uncertainty, fear and anxiety. In their study, new social workers expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to manage the job, particularly in light of high caseloads and the sense that clients and the public had unrealistic expectations that they 'fix it' or 'wave a magic wand' when they themselves felt a lack of autonomy and control arising from bureaucratic and resource constraints (p. 128). Clare (2006) has also found that some beginning practitioners feel uncertain about their professional purpose and lack a sense of connectedness to a collective professional body to help them negotiate the demands of their practice environments. Van Heugten and Rathgen (2003) echo these findings. They have identified that beginning practitioners find social work to be both rewarding and stressful, with some experiencing disappointment when the work does not meet their expectations. At the time of their study, a number of participants (within their first year of practice) had either changed employment positions or were considering it because of stress or the need for new challenges.

Another tension for beginning practitioners arises when their individual professional self-image, which is connected to the opinions of other professionals and the public with regard to the social work profession as a whole, is negative (McMichael, 2000). McMichael (2000) looked specifically at health social workers' professional identities and notes that within hospital settings social work is usually perceived as peripheral to 'core' business and is valued primarily for the achievement of practical activities related to discharge planning. She found that while individual social workers are often valued for their work this does not always extend to the wider professional group. This is likely the reason that whilst participants in her study generally felt positive about themselves in terms of professional identity they expended a lot of energy 'proving [their] worth' to other professionals within the hospital setting (McMichael, 2000, p. 178). This situation appears to reflect the dominance of a biomedical discourse and the potential for social workers to experience conflicted subjectivities in a hospital

environment. A negative professional self-image may occur in other fields of practice, for example, statutory child protection, where the tension is not so much the result of interdisciplinary relations as the role of the social worker to intervene in the private/domestic sphere.

The relationship between the personal and professional has been noted by some researchers (Fook et al., 2000; Zubrzycki, 2006) as also being a point of tension for beginning practitioners. Zubrzycki (2006) suggests that the maintenance of boundaries has historically been perceived as 'a cornerstone of ethical and professional social work practice' (p. 4). This is in keeping with the observation by Fook et al. (2000) that social work students are initially preoccupied with the relationship between the personal and the professional and the use of self, and often feel out of one's depth when commencing employment. Zubrzycki (2006) points out that the notion of professionalism often emphasises the separation of the personal and professional selves of social workers and does not always adequately account for the influence of factors such as culture, gender and class as well as practice context on the formation of boundaries. She emphasises that these boundaries are actually social constructs that vary in their permeability depending on social workers' experiences and expectations. Zubrzycki (2006) notes that in Australia (where her research was conducted) the formation of professional social work identity for indigenous people, and relationships between indigenous clients and social workers, have 'been severely disrupted by colonial policies' (p. 7), and require the manifestation of the convergence of personal and professional selves to be meaningfully and appropriately negotiated. This observation is pertinent also to the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and is in keeping with indigenous and minority ethnic and cultural social work perspectives (Autagavaia, 2006; Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1988; Ruwhiu & Ruwhiu, 2005).

Values, theory and practice

Most studies into the experiences of new graduates account for the influence of values and theories on practice. Some researchers (Bogo et al., 1993; Hawkins et al., 2001; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Weiss et al., 2003) have noted a gap between what social work students and beginning practitioners say and do. They have found that students and new graduates often articulate a commitment to working with disadvantaged

populations, locate social issues such as poverty as arising from structural issues, and identify increased state welfare provision as a preferred intervention strategy but most-often utilise micro-level interventions (using psychotherapeutic techniques) to target individual change rather than macro-level interventions (using social policy or community development). Weiss et al. (2003) point out that this might be because social work students and beginning practitioners feel more competent to engage in micro-level practice, a situation they link to trends in international social work which emphasise these approaches rather than a focus on structural issues. Vere-Jones (2005), in an examination of preparedness for practice of graduates from a competency-based course, has also noted the difficulty of melding values, theory and practice. He points out that whilst graduates felt confident about their abilities, some of them demonstrated limited integration of theory with practice and little commitment to social justice principles. He speculates that this arises from a lack of emphasis on critical thinking in competency-based courses, which instead emphasise student attainment of technical knowledge and skills in preparation for the work environment.

A key value that continues to be emphasised by beginning practitioners is that of social justice (Gray, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2001). However, there are questions as to whether social justice principles are actually being worked out in practice (Hawkins et al., 2001), with O'Brien (2005) suggesting that social work professionalism might be being achieved at the expense of social justice, as observed in Chapter One. Hawkins et al. (2001), noting the links between language and professional identities, took a constructionist perspective to explore whether language used by both beginning and experienced social workers reflected principles of social justice. They concluded that social justice terminology was used very little, with the dominant discourse being that of an individual-oriented clinical practice approach. In contrast, Gray (2004) found that beginning practitioners who had completed a course that included a social justice paper in its final year were committed to ensuring their practice adhered to principles of social justice.

Competent and robust professionals

Fook et al. (2000) posit that beginning social workers consolidate professional identity and competence within two or three years of practice, which occurs as they move from

an initial sense of disillusionment with social work arising from a sense of their own and the profession's powerlessness in light of the sorts of situations with which they were expected to deal, to a consolidated sense of self as a professional social worker. Van Heugten and Rathgen (2003) suggest that factors which affect the development of competence include knowledge and skill levels, the quality of team relationships, networking opportunities, practice limitations, stress and safety issues, induction programmes and supervision (p. 13). These influences will obviously vary between practice settings so that the development of social workers' professional identities will be locally contingent. Positive contributions to the development of new practitioners' sense of competency include supervision and collegial (peer) support (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; van Heugten & Rathgen, 2003), appropriate induction programmes, and job variety and autonomy (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). Marsh and Triseliotis (1996), referring to social work in the United Kingdom, note that whilst more experienced social workers perceive beginning practitioners as somewhat naïve, they are generally perceived to be fairly well prepared for practice. However, it is recognised that new practitioners do face challenges when transitioning to employment. Recommendations to improve this process include the development of supportive educational and employment systems, particularly with regard to supervision (van Heugten & Rathgen, 2003), and the clear articulation of mutual expectations with regard to the social work role, level of practice experience, professional development, team membership and supervision (Pockett, 1987). Pockett (1987) suggests that this will enable a better match between beginning social workers' hopes and their work reality so that they achieve increased confidence and a clearer sense of social work identity.

Clare (2006) included beginning practitioners in her examination of social workers' professional identities from which she developed a model of professional robustness. Clare argues that her conception of professional robustness challenges an often used 'ideal type' representation of social work professionalism in which social workers are either 'collectivised and "fixed" within different paradigms and idealised visions of purpose and place' or their personal attributes commodified so that they are 'largely invisible as embodied beings, and the inherent interdependence between personalised constructions of the professional self and broader occupational discourses is ignored' (p. 38). She posits that robust social work professionals are able to articulate a personal

practice philosophy accompanied by a sense of belonging to a professional community; have an ability to maintain an empowered approach to practice which entails understanding the breadth and limitations of professional authority and power whilst being clear about the social worker role; can maintain a stance of marginality in order to counter organisational processes opposed to social work purposes; and possess an attitude of provisional certainty which enables them to form dialogical relationships and make appropriate decisions in their practice contexts. Her findings that beginning practitioners sometimes find it difficult to achieve this echoes those of Fook et al. (2000) that after three years of practice practitioners generally belong in either of two groups: those who appear 'overwhelmed by the bureaucratic constraints of their work, and [who tend] to respond in programmed, less spontaneous and less critical ways to problem situations' (p. 99) and those who take a more critical approach to practice and problems and who make 'conscious choices about whether or not to conform to bureaucratic guidelines' (p. 99).

Although these projects focussed on different issues, a common finding was that new social workers generally find it difficult to work out their aspirations within their practice environments and may subsequently experience anxiety, disappointment and uncertainty as a result of the mismatch between their expectations and the realities of their work. Features of the work environment that new social workers found helpful include supervisory and peer support, work autonomy and variety and the clear articulation of expectations between workers and employers. Also helpful was belonging to a professional community, having clarity regarding professional role and authority and the ability to challenge organisational values that were opposed to those of social work. All these issues have implications for the formation of beginning social workers' professional selves.

I now present ways in which professional identity has been conceptualised within social work looking specifically at notions of competency, reflective and reflexive practice and supervision, which have traditionally been used as measures of professional practice and accountability (Kane, 2001; Lynch, 2006; NZASW, 1993a; Payne, 2006; SWRB, 2005; Taylor & White, 2000; Zubrzycki, 2006). The experiences of beginning practitioners with regard to these issues will therefore contribute to their construction of professional selves.

Professional Identity in Social Work

Calhoun (1995) has noted that concern with identity is 'ubiquitous' (p. 193) and certainly in social work there is ongoing focus on the collective and individual identities of practitioners (Gibelman, 1999). These identities take shape within a socio-political context that influences how social work is constructed at any particular juncture, and are intrinsically tied to notions of professionalism (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Gibelman, 1999; Lorenz, 2004; Nash, 2001a). Traditionally, social work professionalism has been conceptualised in terms of traits or status (Fook et al., 2000). Trait theories conceive social work as being characterised by particular features such as its commitment to a 'mission of service', possession of a specific body of knowledge and regulation by a professional body (Fook et al., 2000, p. 2), while concern with status has focussed on social work in comparison with other occupations in which it has been positioned as a semi-profession, most likely because it is feminised with its workers welding relatively less power when compared to professions such as law or medicine, in which men predominate (Dominelli, 1996; Eraut, 1994; Fook et al., 2000). Eraut (1994) likens the position of social workers to that of teachers, pointing out that the development of professionalism has been constrained by a lack of numbers, remuneration and social status, and a limited articulation of a unique body of knowledge relative to other groups.

It has long been accepted that social work straddles the space between the personal and public (Munford & Nash, 1994; O'Donoghue & Maidment, 2005). To help conceptualise this and explain the tensions present in contemporary social work professional identity, Lorenz (2004) locates social work in relation to Habermas's modern concepts of '"the lifeworld" (the realm of society in which people take care of their own affairs, individually and collectively) and "the system" (where organised control and steering mechanisms operate)' (p. 146). He points out that social work operates between these two spheres and necessarily acts to mediate them and thus, its professional identity is threatened by its location between a 'bewildering plurality of demands' (p. 159) within and between lifeworld and system.

Whilst grappling with this plurality of demands and its impact on their professional selves, social workers are also subject to the historical positioning of social work as a 'lesser' profession, which has challenged its legitimacy. Some would argue that social work has struggled to attain credibility as a discipline in its own right as it has traditionally drawn knowledge from other disciplines and its value and skill base has been perceived to be duplicated in other professions (James, 2004; Lyons & Taylor, 2004). Lyons and Taylor (2004) consider that the gendered nature of social work has contributed to its professional status being contested as traditionally women's ways of knowing and the 'care' aspect of social work (which is presumed to be women's work) have been devalued.

Competent and reflective social work

While debate exists as to what constitutes competent social work (Dominelli, 1996; Fook et al., 2000; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996) it is assumed that professional practitioners will practice competently. In Aotearoa New Zealand, to be either a full member of the professional association or a registered social worker, practitioners must demonstrate they have the capacity to practice safely and ethically by undertaking a competency assessment and attaining the required standards of the ANZASW and the SWRB (NZASW, 1993a; New Zealand Government, 2003). Fook et al. (2000) advocate that social workers define practice in our own terms, and competency standards set by the ANZASW and social worker registration certainly go a significant way toward achieving this. External validation through the endorsement of one's practice by a professional body such as the ANZASW, or registration, is likely to enhance professional robustness and identity by strengthening practitioners' sense of connection to other social work professionals (Clare, 2006), and this is inferred in the vision statement of the ANZASW that 'all social workers claim their professional identity' (ANZASW, 2007, p. 11).

Some competency approaches to training and assessment have been critiqued as being grounded in behaviourist or positivist terms and emphasising qualities primarily useful to employers rather than clients, which in turn leads to the reduction of professionalism to the manifestation of observable and routinised skills and the potential deprofessionalisation of social work (Dominelli, 1996; Fook et al., 2000). The idea that

competency can be demonstrated through theoretical knowledge and skills only is simplistic and dilemmatic for beginning social workers in that it does not necessarily account for their subjectivities in relation to social discourses and the complexities and contradictions of different practice contexts which they need to negotiate and which may arouse in them anxiety and uncertainty (Fook et al., 2000; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Nash et al., 2005). Neither does it necessarily account for the use of unarticulated knowledge that is inevitably a part of social work practice (Clare, 2006; Fook et al., 2000; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Taylor, 2006; Parton, 2000). Fook et al. (2000) recommend that competency standards recognise the complex and uncertain context of social work practice and the innovation required to respond to unpredictable situations and include consideration of social workers' abilities to undertake critical analysis and anticipate the impact of values and decision making on practice.

In response to such observations it has been argued that reflection is necessary to professional practice in order that practitioners retrospectively consider practice encounters to make plain their sometimes-implicit motivations for action (Taylor, 2006). For this reason it is expected that social workers will participate in supervision in which they regularly meet one-to-one with a more experienced practitioner (who may also be a team leader and line manager) to discuss their work and ideally receive emotional and intellectual support with the view to increase practice efficacy (Kane, 2001). The structure of supervision, its methods and purpose will vary according to organisational context (O'Donoghue, 2003) but it is assumed that it is an integral part of the professional socialisation and development of beginning social work practitioners (Kane, 2001), and thus an important process with regard to the formation of new social workers' professional identities.

It is within supervision that reflection ideally occurs. Taylor and White (2000) describe reflective practice as a process which 'accept[s] the client/worker relationship and concerns itself with how to improve it. It also takes propositional and process knowledge at face value' (p. 198). Taylor (2006) points out that reflective practice is not necessarily a neutral re-telling of events but a re-presentation constructed to emphasise the professional self of the social worker. She does not argue against the use of reflective practice but rather for a more 'self-conscious' approach to the way in

which it contributes to identity construction. This would involve examination of the 'stylistics and rhetorical properties of communicative practices in social work' (p. 204).

For this reason some authors (Miehls & Moffatt, 2000; Taylor & White, 2000) advocate for reflexive practice in the form of problematising the taken-for-granted assumptions of reflective practice in order to analyse the truth claims and practices of social work. The purpose of this is to assist social workers to understand the constitution of their professional selves as occurring within intersubjective and dialogical relationships with others which involves the 'disassembly of the self' in order to be 'rearticulated with the influence of contextualized meanings of the other [which] opens space for respect for difference' (Miehls & Moffatt, 2000, pp. 344-345). This frees practitioners to accept the notion of identity as entailing multiple, complex and fluid subject positions, and can assist them to resist taking up the position of expert in relation to others.

To support the construction of practitioners' professional selves through this process in Aotearoa New Zealand, the historic composition of social work and supervision as predominantly informed by western discourses needs to be taken into account and deconstructed so that appropriate and culturally safe supervision can be provided to ensure that indigenous and minority ethnic and cultural social workers' stories and ways of working can be heard and affirmed, and dominant (potentially colonising) views challenged (Eruera cited in Ward, 2006; O'Donoghue, 2003; Thomas & Davis, 2005).

This last section of the literature review has discussed social work professionalism and identity with regard to its historic positioning as a 'lesser' profession and as a profession that mediates of the conflicting demands that exist within and between the personal and public spheres of society. Also discussed have been the notions of competency and reflective practice, and supervision, which have traditionally been used to measure and/or enhance professional practice. Examining how these and other social work discourses, discussed earlier in this chapter, influence the constitution of beginning social workers' identities is the central theme of this research.

The next chapter will discuss the methodology of this research project.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Research Methods

Identity... can never be assumed by a researcher to be standing still, ready for its close-up (Gamson, 2000, p. 356).

In telling about an experience, I am also creating a self – how I want to be known (Riessman, 1993, p. 11).

This chapter discusses the methodology used to explore the research question about beginning social work practitioners' constructions of professional identities. The epistemological and theoretical connections to the research methodology and method are made and the rationale for choosing this particular methodology is described. I also describe the criteria for participant selection, ethical issues and data collection and analysis.

Crotty (1998) emphasises the researcher's responsibility to articulate the connections between epistemology, theory, methodology and method in order to give clarity to the research process. The supposition that people are both the 'site and subject' (Richardson, 2000, p. 929) of knowledge construction informed my decision to undertake a small-scale qualitative study which involved face-to-face interviews and a focus group with participants, and a discursive approach to data analysis in order to explore the formation of the professional identities of beginning social work practitioners. This research was primarily concerned with the question of how beginning social work practitioners use language to make sense of their work experiences and to construct professional identities in the current social and political environment of Aotearoa New Zealand. It aimed to understand the notion of identity in terms of new social workers' subjectivities in relation to wider social discourses and to also account for their agency in the discursive constitution of the self. I believed that interviews and a focus group would enable me to gather conversational data in which participants would be able to articulate the meaning they ascribed to their experiences

whilst actively constructing their selves through these accounts, and a discursive analytic approach would facilitate a focus on *how* this construction was achieved.

Qualitative Research and Methodological Rigour

Qualitative research can be described as an approach in which 'researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Qualitative research occurs across a range of fields and includes a variety of methodological approaches but inherent in these is the notion that the topic of research is considered in a holistic manner. It is acknowledged that research is never value-free and that the biography of the researcher and the local context will colour the process and findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Whilst some would consider this to be a limitation to qualitative inquiry, there is great value in the gathering of 'rich descriptions of the social world' from the perspective of the research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 10). A qualitative approach was appropriate to this research as the question focussed on how participants discursively made sense of their experiences to construct identities in social encounters (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Reliability and validity

Within the positivist research tradition, which emphasises objectivity (Patton, 2002), reliability and validity 'are the cornerstones of legitimate research' (Burr, 2003, p. 158) and these concepts have been applied to qualitative approaches. Reliability refers to the ease with which research results can be repeated and validity refers to the ability of a research project to measure what is 'really' there (Burr, 2003). There are arguments, however, that these concepts are not necessarily helpful to a qualitative approach. Crotty (1998) unequivocally states that while interpretations of data may be more or less useful they cannot be true or valid. Within a constructionist approach 'all knowledge is considered to be situated, contingent and partial. Truth is unattainable because reality itself is not single or static, and reality is also inevitably influenced and altered by any processes through which a researcher attempts to investigate and represent it' (Taylor, 2001, p. 319). For this reason conventional notions of reliability and validity cannot be used to ascertain the worth of social constructionist research (Burr, 2003). There is still a commitment, however, to demonstrate that studies are

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systematic and rigorous so that their credibility is ensured (Burr, 2003; Lietz, Langer & Furman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Proponents of discursive approaches to research dispute the notion that they are 'less rigorous' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 172) than other analytical methods. However, because researchers often find it difficult to articulate the actual processes they undertake to generate their findings (Burr, 1995), these may be perceived to be intuitive (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Whilst there is acknowledgement that analysis can involve 'following hunches' (Wetherell & Potter, 1988 cited in Edley, 2001, p. 198) in order to develop interpretations of data, Potter and Wetherell (1987) suggest that discursive studies can be valid. They note that validity is achieved when research findings are coherent; demonstrate participants' orientation to contradictions within their conversations; reference new problems; and are fruitful, that is they produce useful understandings in the field of study. Taylor (2001) observes that discourse analytic research can be evaluated according to both academic and discourse analysis criteria. She suggests that academic research should be located in relation to previously published work, involve orderly examination and employ a coherent argument rather than an emotional appeal while discourse analytic research should provide full detail in the presentation of both data and analysis and make clear the analytical process while also attending to inconsistencies and variety within the data.

Lietz, Langer and Furman (2006) agree with other authors that whilst notions of reliability and validity are commonly used to establish methodological rigour in quantitative research, these standards are not applicable to qualitative perspectives. They emphasise that there is a particular need for qualitative researchers within social work to ensure the trustworthiness of their findings because social work as a profession is committed to notions of 'giving voice' to others (p. 442). Their view is that researchers need to employ strategies that will help them to 'manage reactivity and bias' so that participants' meanings can be authentically represented and the research findings legitimised (p. 443). In this research I have utilised two of the strategies that they suggest, triangulation and reflexivity.

Triangulation

Qualitative studies are sometimes criticised for their use of a small number of participants and lack of generalisability. Patton (2002) suggests that the 'validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size' (p. 245). He goes on to note, though, the value of triangulation as a means of strengthening the research process. Triangulation involves the combination of methodological approaches in order to elucidate the research question. It does not mean, as commonly assumed, that these approaches need to generate consistent findings for the research to be credible but that the presence of inconsistencies can be used to further understand the connection between the research design and topic of study (Patton, 2002). Triangulation is a means by which a more comprehensive, but not necessarily certain, view of the subject matter is obtained (Ritchie, 2003). This research employs the use of individual interviews, a focus group and a literature review as means of triangulation. I also consider my recent degree experience and position as a beginning practitioner to be part of the process of triangulation, which is discussed below.

Reflexivity

Lietz et al. (2006) recommend reflexivity as one of a number of means by which qualitative researchers can improve the trustworthiness of their findings. Reflexivity can be thought of as 'active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation' (Horsburgh, 2003 cited in Lietz et al., 2006, p. 447) and:

> involves deconstructing who we are and the ways in which our beliefs, experiences and identity intersect with that of the participant (MacBeth, 2001). This reflection occurs both in individual thought and through dialog with others that acknowledges the researcher's own experience and perspectives... [so that] qualitative researchers can ponder the ways in which who they are may both assist and hinder the process of co-constructing meanings (Lietz et al., 2006, p. 447).

Reflexivity in this project involved locating myself as transparently as possible in relation to social work (and my own sense of being subject to certain discourses and my attempts to attain a coherent sense of professional self), the research process and relationships with participants. This occurred throughout the project using formal and informal discussions with my research supervisors, postgraduate and social work colleagues. I also spent much time thinking about how my own position and experiences as a beginning social work practitioner influenced my interpretation of data and the subsequent presentation of findings.

My Position as a Researcher

As already noted, the position of the researcher and the epistemological stance of a research project will influence its truth claims (Crotty, 1998). In taking a social constructionist approach I am making no claim at having arrived at the 'truth' of what constitutes the professional self of beginning social work practitioners. I am making but one of a number of possible interpretations of the data. In offering this interpretation I acknowledge that it is a partial understanding influenced by my own position as a beginning social work practitioner who embodies certain subjectivities including those of gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality and spirituality amongst others (Weedon, 2004). As discussed in Chapter Two, I also take the standpoint that social work is constituted through multiple contradictory discourses that influence how beginning practitioners, as agentic social actors, discursively constitute their selves. I consider myself to be, like the participants, a new social worker (at the commencement of this research I had two-and-a-half years experience in social work in the fields of child protection and health, in which I am currently employed) who is subject to, and also resisting, competing discourses about social work. Like them, I also occupy multiple and sometimes-contradictory subject positions in relation to social work practice and notions of professionalism. Each of these positions has influenced how I have engaged with social work practice, the research participants and research process and how I have chosen to construct the findings.

This research seeks to propose but one 'answer' to the question of how beginning social work practitioners construct a sense of professional identity. The first section of this

chapter has discussed the methodological stance taken in the research. I now discuss the methods employed during the research process.

The Participants

Criteria for participation

The research question was focussed on how beginning social work practitioners construct a sense of professional identity and so it was initially decided to limit the sample to social workers who held a degree and who were within their first two years of practice. The rationale for these decisions was based on the eligibility requirement of a degree-level qualification for social worker registration in Aotearoa New Zealand under the Social Workers Registration Act 2003, and the findings of Fook et al. (2000) that it can take up to five years in practice for social workers to develop professional expertise, with the first one to two years spent struggling to attain some sense of professional identity. It did, however, prove difficult to secure enough participants with this level of experience within appropriate timeframes and my concerns about this coincided with the expression of interest in the project by a number of social workers in their third year of practice. These events, alongside the acknowledgement by Fook et al. (2000) that the third year of practice is important for developing a more cohesive sense of professional self, led to the decision to expand the definition of 'beginning social work practitioner' to those with a maximum of three years experience. The sample was geographically limited to those from within my home region because budget and time constraints did not permit me to travel further afield. My home region covers a significant geographical area, has a large and diverse population and hosts an extensive range of both government and non-government social service organisations. For this reason I did not feel that limiting the sample geographically would constrain the research process. The sample was not limited in any other way.

Seeking participants

Information about the project was included free of charge in the research section of the ANZASW 'Social Work Noticeboard' (the Association's monthly newsletter) in June and July 2006. It was intended that it appear in June only but typesetter errors in this issue lead to the ANZASW offering to reprint it in the July issue. Publication in the 'Social Work Noticeboard' yielded two responses. I also utilised informal networks to

provide information to potential participants. This involved asking social work colleagues to pass on information sheets (see Appendix I) to anyone they knew who fitted the criteria and who they thought might be interested in participating. These potential participants, some of whom did decide to partake in the research, in turn passed the information on to other potential participants. Known as purposeful and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), this approach yielded eight responses.

Participant details

In total, ten people consented to participate in the research (see Appendix II for the consent form). Nine of the ten were women and one was a man. All identified as being European New Zealanders or Pakeha and ranged in age from their early twenties to their sixties. Participants each had a degree-level or post-graduate social work qualification from either Massey University, the University of Otago or Whitireia Polytechnic. Participants were employed in child protection, health and the community. Two of the participants employed in health also had post-qualifying experience in community work. The length of work experience of participants ranged from five months to two years and eleven months at the time of the interviews. Four participants were full members of the ANZASW and one was a provisional member. Of these, one participant was also a registered social worker and two were undertaking the application process to become registered. Of the other five participants, two were actively planning to join the ANZASW and become registered and three were considering it.

Ethics

Ethics approval was sought and gained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) in May 2006 (see Appendices III and IV). It transpired that I already knew six of the ten participants through university and work experiences. This heightened my awareness of the small social work community within my home region as well as the importance of networks that exist within this community. To preserve confidentiality participants chose pseudonyms by which to be known in the research. These included Anna, Catherine and Kylie in child protection; Amy, Carolyn, James, Kate, Liz and Nancy in health; and Wha in the community. To further preserve confidentiality, I have chosen to identify only the employment settings of the participants rather than the locations and names of employing organisations, or any

other potential identifying characteristics. Where participants' quotes have been utilised in Chapter Four I have removed pseudonyms if I thought that participants could potentially be identified.

Data Collection

Because this research was premised on the belief that language is a mechanism for developing shared understandings of social work in both historical and local contexts as well as being used to construct one's sense of self, the methods chosen for data collection were semi-structured face-to-face interviews and a focus group.

Individual interviews

The purpose of face-to-face interviews was to provide participants with an opportunity to tell their own social work stories in a way that was meaningful for them. Within qualitative research the notion that people's stories correspond truthfully to an objective reality has become increasingly untenable (Maclure, 1993) and the research interview is now considered to be a site for the construction of meaning to which both the researcher and participant contribute (Bleakley, 2005; Telles, 2000). Oakley (1981) refers to the requirement of the researcher to put one's self into the interview in acknowledgement that it is an intimate process requiring relationship and reciprocity. In bringing her or his own biography to the interaction, the researcher cannot be an objective observer. Moreover, the perception of the researcher held by the participant will influence the research relationship, and what and how information is construed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). When considering the interview as a site of meaning construction and the production of self (Riessman, 1993) it needs to be remembered that people's stories are drawn from wider social discourses and so people's meaning-making and sense of identity will be influenced, and potentially limited, by the 'institutionalised use of language… [and] the categories available to them in discourse' (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 45).

I believe that the similarity of my social work experience to participants, in that I too had less than three years experience and had worked in both child protection and health, and my already existing relationship with a number of them, meant that participants perceived me as an 'insider' with regard to the research topic. This, alongside the

purposeful sampling technique, led to the collection of rich in-depth material with regard to the research question (Patton, 2002).

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held between July and October 2006. Participants were given a choice of venue and meetings subsequently occurred where they each felt most comfortable; either at their own homes or at mine, at Massey University or at their workplace. It was made clear to participants that their involvement in the project was to be independent of their employment as I did not wish to access participants via social service organisations but in some instances participants sought, and were granted, permission from their employers to undertake interviews during work hours as part of their professional development.

During the interviews participants were encouraged to talk about anything they felt was of interest with regard to the research question and I asked questions that followed up on what they had identified as topics of interest. I also had an interview guide which included: influences into/motivation for working in social work; social work education and work experiences; professional issues, for example, participants' views on the ANZASW and social worker registration; gender and ethnic issues; and self care (see Appendix V). I used this if it seemed that the research conversation required a new direction. All interviews lasted between one and two hours and were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were returned to participants for checking and alteration/editing as they thought necessary. Audio recordings were also supplied to those who had requested them. On two occasions I included questions with the transcripts seeking clarification of information provided. Participants were under no obligation to provide answers to these questions but they chose to do so and these written responses were treated as part of the transcript for the purposes of analysis. All participants checked and returned their transcripts although not all of them made alterations. All confirmed their consent to the use of material contained in the transcripts for the purposes of this research.

The focus group

The rationale for utilising a focus group was based on the opportunity it provided for participants to engage in a focussed discussion on social work professional identity with

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others similar to themselves (Krueger & Casey, 2000). As a method of triangulation, it also served the purpose of providing an opportunity for me to give participants feedback from my initial analysis of the interview material, to get their responses to this analysis and to further explore issues arising.

One criticism often made of focus groups is that the 'group exerts a pressure on its participants to conform to a socially acceptable viewpoint and not to talk about divergent views or experiences' (Finch & Lewis, 2003, p. 188). Whilst bearing this in mind, I considered it useful to utilise a group process to further explore issues arising from the individual interviews as people are often more willing to self-disclose when they perceive they have something in common with others and when the environment is 'permissive and non-judgemental' (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 9). I also hoped that participants would benefit from meeting other beginning practitioners in the region and seeing that the experiences they were grappling with in the work environment in terms of forming a sense of professional identity were not unusual.

The focus group was held in November 2006 outside of work hours and five of the ten participants attended. I provided feedback as to what I had found to be the key themes contained within individual interviews, which included motivation for working in social work; social work education and experience; practice frameworks; definitions of social work; professionalism; and the self in social work. I also included quotes that exemplified the varying opinions participants had with regard to these themes (see Appendix VI). Participants were then asked to discuss their responses to what I had presented. They agreed that the themes I had described reflected their experiences and went on to talk about them more fully. The focus group lasted one and a half hours and was also digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcript was not returned to participants for checking.

Data Analysis

In undertaking data analysis I was concerned to honour participants' accounts whilst also having the confidence to take responsibility for making my own interpretation of the data (Chase, 1996; Riessman, 1993). As previously discussed, I utilised a reflexive process to continually locate myself in relation to the research and I am aware that as

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important as it is to ensure that research accurately reflects participants' meanings, I have interpreted the processes of construction of professional identities from a particular standpoint and subsequently the things I have noted as significant within the data may not have the same meaning for participants (Borland, 2004).

During the months of data collection and analysis it became clearer to me that my analytical interest was not so much in seeking to describe or explain themes of experience amongst participants but rather to examine their sense of identity in relation to wider social discourses about social work.

One of the assumptions I held during the research process was that 'the individual is not an autonomous, essentialized agent capable of independently inventing him- or herself. Individual lives are constant constructs embedded in societal and cultural forces that seek to constrain some and enable others' (Tierney, 2000, p. 541). Taking a 'post' perspective, described in Chapter Two, I was interested to see how participants used language to build a sense of professional identity as beginning social work practitioners and this evolved into an examination of how they drew from wider social discourses to employ certain ways of speaking about social work and themselves to discursively constitute their professional selves.

During transcription I was interested in the broad ideas being communicated by participants rather than the semantics of the research conversation and so transcripts did not contain repetition of words or phrases, details about the length of pauses, and only limited reference to non-verbal communication (gestures and facial expressions). In choosing to construct the transcripts in this way I was aware that I was privileging the spoken word over any other communication that occurred during the interviews. However, as my interest was primarily in the use of spoken language to construct meaning this seemed appropriate. My emphasis was to approach the interview transcript as text. In this way language could be viewed as a topic for investigation in its own right rather than as merely a resource used to describe the topic of interest (Taylor, 2001).

Analysis was initially undertaken using Framework, a 'matrix-based analytic method' developed during the 1980s at the National Centre for Social Research in Britain to

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organise data (Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003, p. 220). This involved the development of an index and thematic charts to arrange data in a way that was manageable and enabled full examination of the material.

Firstly, I familiarised myself with the data from the individual interviews and focus group by undertaking a number of readings of the full transcripts. I was able to identify common (recurring) themes and sub-themes that together were used to construct a numerical index that was then applied consistently to all transcripts. The index was organised temporally so that data could be arranged into stories of the past, present and future. The purpose of this was to enable the examination of information within and across participants in order to see whether patterns or changes occurred within professional identity formation over time. At this stage the analysis was focussed on the descriptions of 'real' experiences of participants and their responses to these. The index contained six key themes: motivation; education; practice; the profession; the self; and other (which was eventually changed to definitions of social work). Often these index categories could be seen to overlap when applied to the transcripts, which is 'usually a sign of some interconnection between themes or issues that should be noted for later associative analyses' (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 225).

Once the index had been applied to all transcripts I created three thematic charts for each participant to account for past, present and future stories. Each chart had eight columns. Participant details were recorded in the left-hand column with the next six columns allocated to a main theme and the remaining right-hand column reserved for notes arising during analysis. Keeping as close to the original language of the participants as possible, I recorded within the thematic charts summaries of the key points of each piece of data. Also recorded was the index number of the relevant sub-theme along with the transcript page number so that access to the raw data could be maintained easily. Information that I thought could be used in the research write-up to clarify my argument was marked with an asterisk. Data were able to be compared within and between participants by laying the thematic charts next to one another and reading either across or down the charts to further understand similarities and differences in participants' experiences and stories. I did indeed find this process beneficial in terms of facilitating familiarity with the material but it was also 'very time-consuming and... tedious' (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 237).

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It is recommended by Ritchie et al. (2003) that when a researcher gets to this point of analysis, that Framework be used for a descriptive analysis with the possibility of developing typologies and explanatory accounts. I did not feel able to 'get to grips' with the data in the way that I wished to using this method and so became 'stuck' for some days. This was because Framework assumed a more realist approach to analysis than I wished to take; the difference between approaching language as a resource which describes events of interest or as a topic for investigation in itself as described earlier in this chapter. It was at this time that a post-graduate colleague recommended reading Edley's (2001) discussion of his study into masculinity in which he applied the discursive analytic concepts of interpretive repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions to individual and group interview data after initially undertaking transcription and a thematic analysis. As noted in Chapter Two, interpretive repertoires provide a means by which to examine how people discursively constitute their selves (via subject positions) in response to discourses that exist in wider society. Taking this approach means that the focus in data analysis is on identifying interpretive repertoires and also considering what subject positions they make available to participants so the emphasis is on '*who* is implied by a particular discourse or interpretive repertoire' (Edley, 2001, p. 210, emphasis in original).

This approach to analysis fitted with my interest in a poststructural perspective on identity, in which it is perceived to arise from the performativity of multiple, fragmented and contradictory subject positions, which are constituted through language. I again reviewed the data with the specific purpose of determining what interpretive repertoires participants were employing and what subject positions they occupied during the interviews with regard to social work practice and professionalism. I continued to utilise the thematic charts as they contained a lot of detailed information and I also continued to re-read the full transcripts to ensure that I did not lose connection with the raw data.

The outcome of this process was that I was able to determine a number of overarching discourses that seemed to strongly influence participants' discussion of the social work profession and their sense of self, and within these discourses, interpretive repertoires

which were employed by participants to take up varied subject positions in relation to these.

Writing Up

I spent a number of weeks analysing the data before I commenced writing up the research. Richardson (2000) refers to the writing up stage as not just 'a mode of "telling" about the social world' (p. 923) but as a method of inquiry during which researchers can come to know more about themselves and their topic of interest. Certainly, writing up has been a reflexive and inductive process in which I have moved between analysis and writing and back again in a bid to deepen my understanding of the topic and to produce a robust piece of research. Mishler (1999) raises the idea that 'authors often rely on the rhetoric of authority, offering definitive summaries of what was done to suggest the work is finished and complete' (p.145). This observation resonated with me in that during the writing phase the temptation was to present this project as a straightforward and linear progression of steps toward reaching the goal of answering the research question. Actually, it often felt like a circular process, complex and fragmented, in which I had but brief moments of clarity. Writing up provided an opportunity for me to continually reconsider and modify my approach to the topic as well as to reflect on the research process itself. Mishler (1999) observes that even when a piece of work is completed, the research conversation continues as others consider its implications. It is my hope that this work will offer something of interest to those in the social work and research communities who read it in the future.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the methodology and methods used in this research. The rationale for undertaking a qualitative approach and using face-to-face individual interviews and a focus group to collect data along with a discursive approach to analysis has been presented, and the processes undergone have been articulated. The next chapter presents the research findings.

Chapter Four

Findings

An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives (Davies and Harre, 2001, p. 263).

Sometimes we are everything and nothing in the same breath (Kate).

This research was prompted by my interest in the processes undertaken by beginning social work practitioners to construct a sense of professional identity in response to their practice experiences. A poststructural perspective would suggest that new social workers become subject to multiple and competing discourses about social work through their education, work and more general life experiences, and it is these that they draw upon when discussing issues of professional identity. These discussions, in turn, can be construed as the means by which new social workers make sense of their experiences and also construct themselves as professionals. In this chapter I take such a perspective to present the research findings. These findings will be further analysed and discussed in Chapter Five with final conclusions and recommendations made in Chapter Six.

I begin this chapter with a description of how participants' characteristics including gender, age and ethnicity have influenced their sense of self and engagement with clients in the work environment. I then present the findings into how participants have constructed their professional social work identities using the concepts of interpretive repertoires and subject positions. As discussed in Chapter Three, in undertaking data analysis I used a discursive approach to examine how interpretive repertoires, the shared ways of understanding and talking about social work that exist within society, were

utilised by participants to construct subjectivities in relation to practice and the notion of professionalism. In analysing the interview and focus group discussions about the 'concrete' themes of motivation, education, practice, professionalism and the self in social work I discerned five predominant interpretive repertoires, or ways of talking about social work, employed by participants to construct multiple subject positions. These interpretive repertoires were formed around descriptions of social work as change, social work as helping, constraints to social work practice, being professional and self-care.

The interpretive repertoires of change and helping emphasised each of these concepts as intrinsic to social work and were used to position participants as 'change agents' and 'helpers' committed to making a difference at both structural and individual levels. The interpretive repertoire of constraints inferred restrictions to practice, usually arising from organisational issues, and was used by participants to position themselves as capable but limited in efficacy by matters beyond their control in their work environments. The interpretive repertoire of being professional included notions of participants' commitment to ethical and competent practice and was used to position them as professional particularly in relation to other professionals. The interpretive repertoire of self-care emphasised social work as emotional labour and was used by participants to position themselves as people as well as professionals, with their own needs, which had to be balanced with work demands.

This chapter further describes each of these interpretive repertoires and explains how they were used by participants to make possible differing subject positions in relation to wider discourses about professional social work practice. Interview and focus group data are presented alongside each other because the use of interpretive repertoires occurred similarly across all data sets, although the focus group discussion emphasised the interpretive repertoires of being professional and self-care. Where phrases used in the text have been drawn verbatim from the data, they are italicised and placed in quotation marks.

Embodied Subjectivities

A poststructuralist approach requires that corporeality be taken into account when considering subjectivities as people's embodied experiences will influence their positioning within, and perceptions of, the world (Weedon, 1997; 2004). For example, Weedon (1997), in discussing feminist-poststructuralism, makes the point that '[l]anguage, in the form of a historically specific range of ways of giving meaning to social reality, offers us various discursive positions, including modes of femininity and masculinity, through which we can consciously live our lives' (p. 25). In terms of this research it means that participants' experiences of, and discussion about, gender, age and ethnicity be considered as influences on their selves and engagement with clients and other professionals. I acknowledge that other qualities such as disability, sexuality or spirituality may also be considered part of an individual's embodied experience but these were not discussed by participants in this study.

Gender

There were nine female participants and one male participant in the study. This constitution could be considered to reflect the feminisation of social work itself. Some of the women uncritically took up 'traditional' gender roles with regard to the caring aspects of social work, emphasising their 'natural' caring abilities (Weedon, 1997). They noted that as women they could more easily understand the position of other women as mothers and carers, and were sometimes perceived by clients to be *'less of a threat'* than male social workers and more able to listen and empathise. Two participants differentiated social work from psychology, which they perceived to be *'male'* in orientation and therefore less relationship-oriented. Others acknowledged that while women are often perceived to be nurturers or carers they did not feel that this was significant to their sense of self in social work, citing age as more pertinent to practice as it influenced clients' perceptions of their life experience and social work skill level, and the subsequent ability to form a rapport. The one male participant did not think his gender particularly affected his ability to interact with clients also citing age as the more pertinent issue because it affected clients' perception of his ability to empathise with their situation and his potential practice effectiveness. He did note, however, that his gender may influence what 'cases' would be appropriate for him to be involved in. In resisting the notion that gender influenced their practice, some participants positioned

themselves as having intrinsic helping qualities, related to their personality and upbringing, which meant they were capable social workers. This is discussed further in a later section.

Age

As mentioned above, participants felt that age was a more significant factor than other attributes in their interactions with clients. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to their sixties. The key issue with regard to age and social work practice seemed to be the measure of 'life experience'. Older participants acknowledged their newness to social work and the limits to their knowledge of organisational processes, geographical or service-associated networks and some social work skills and knowledge but generally felt that they brought a wealth of lived experiences which informed their practice such as being parents and having held a range of jobs. Younger participants felt that despite limited life experience they had a lot to offer clients and could still effectively build rapport with them, particularly those who were younger. One young participant strongly resisted the notion that effective social work practice required significant amounts of life experience and should therefore not be an education option for school-leavers as was suggested by more mature classmates when undertaking the degree. A few of the younger women participants noted that should they eventually have children they may choose to change the field of practice they were working in as they perceived child-bearing would alter their constructs of 'family' which would make some social work practice more or less desirable. This was particularly in relation to child protection where there were varied opinions expressed as to participants' comfort levels with regard to engaging with families who were likely to be in crisis or conflict. Participants anticipated that their own experiences of parenting would either aid or hinder their ability to work in this setting.

Ethnicity

Participants, in discussing ethnicity, referred to their location as part of a line of descent from European immigrants and identified themselves as 'New Zealand European', 'Pakeha', 'a New Zealander', 'Caucasian' or 'White'. They generally felt that while they did not have a 'lived experience' of indigenous or other cultures they did have enough understanding of the history of Aotearoa New Zealand and their own position as

part of the hegemonic group and the implications of this for clients, through their social work education, to be able to manage cross-cultural interactions:

James: It [ethnicity] doesn't get in the way of what I do but it's always a consideration that's there, that I have a different way of doing things.

However, some expressed a degree of anxiety about this aspect of social work practice. Participants articulated an awareness of their limited encounters with different cultural and ethnic groups, the lack of knowledge of other languages and the way in which clients from indigenous and minority ethnic and cultural groups might perceive them and the consequences of this for practice:

Catherine: You're just this white girl who [goes] out there with a non-Pakeha family; Maori, Somali, whoever they may be, and you're looking at their eyes looking at your eyes and taking in that "We're from different places and we're from different ethnicities and now we have to try to work together as best we can".

One participant believed that Maori clients would usually be well-versed enough with Pakeha culture and existing social structures for adequate interactions to occur whereas this might be more difficult to achieve with recent immigrants who did not have this exposure to, or understanding of, New Zealand society. Another participant pointed out that assumptions made about a person's sense of connection to their culture based on their physical appearance were not necessarily useful or accurate and for this reason she preferred to treat people as individuals and with respect because that is something everyone is entitled to. Another participant felt that her initial 'meet and greet' was similar for all clients and any ongoing relationship would be tailored to fit cultural needs as necessary. Still another felt that in some ways cross-cultural interactions could be simpler than those with clients from Pakeha culture as it would be assumed that she had limited cultural knowledge which would ensure that all parties would endeavour to ensure clarity around processes and meanings whereas when working within the same ethnic group she may make inaccurate assumptions that her understandings and values were shared by clients.

Gender, ethnicity and age were acknowledged by participants as influencing social work practice to greater or lesser degrees, particularly in relation to clients' perceptions of them. Participants did not feel that these subjectivities would negatively impact on the professional relationship as long as they were conscious of their influence on how the meanings of experiences for others could be construed and acted to circumvent them.

Participants' Use of Interpretive Repertoires, and Subject Positions

Whilst all participants utilised each of the interpretive repertoires of social work as change, social work as helping, constraints to social work practice, being professional and self-care, to construct multiple and contradictory subject positions for themselves within both the individual interviews and the focus group, it became obvious that their local practice contexts influenced their sense of identity as social workers and what they deemed as important with regard to practice. Participants from the health field (Amy, Carolyn, James, Kate, Liz and Nancy) generally emphasised the establishment of a therapeutic relationship with clients and resisted the notion that the primary usefulness of social work was in the fulfilment of practical tasks particularly in relation to discharge planning in inpatient areas. Child protection social work participants (Anna, Catherine and Kylie) emphasised client safety and the necessity for social workers to have clarity about their statutory role with children and families and the role of the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services in relation to other social service providers and statutory structures including the law, the judiciary and the Police. Participants with experience in community work (James, Nancy and Wha) emphasised client self-determination and 'grassroots' action.

'I Wanted To Get My Hands Dirty': The Interpretive Repertoire of Change

The interpretive repertoire of change draws on the notion that change is intrinsic to social work and necessary to bring about social justice or a *'better world'* at both macro and micro levels of practice. Within this interpretive repertoire social workers are construed as critical thinkers capable of undertaking structural analysis, with the personal agency to effect the change they and/or clients identify as essential to the achievement of their goals. This repertoire contains ideas of social work as a *'grassroots'* enterprise involving client self-determination and empowerment.

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Participants employed this repertoire to position themselves as effective 'change agents' and to emphasise their motivation for social work. Difficulties in making change were accounted for using the interpretive repertoire of constraints, which I discuss in a later section.

"I can make a difference"

Participants drew on this change repertoire when discussing their motivation for entering and remaining in social work. Notions of change and social justice were entwined and participants positioned themselves as active in the change process, working to analyse why particular situations existed with the aim to do something practical about improving them, which this quote exemplifies:

Liz: I've always had a strong sense of social justice... My idea of social work is about giving people opportunity and recognising barriers, where people don't have an opportunity, and trying to figure ways around that.

Participants generally used an ecological perspective[8] within the change repertoire to locate clients' 'problems' within a macro context and to account for the influence on them of social structures such as government policy, income support levels and the configuration of social service delivery organisations. A number of participants positioned themselves as 'why people', those who were not content to accept the status quo and who needed to ask questions as to why things were the way they were with regard to individuals' situations but also with regard to wider societal structures, and to use this process of questioning and finding answers as a means to make a difference to these situations or structures. These participants linked their motivation for change to a critical approach, citing for example, radical and feminist theories:

Amy: For me it's not just accepting that this is the way things are... It's saying, "Well, why are things like this?"... I've always been a why person. So, to me that's what social work is, it's asking "Why?" and then "What can we do about it?"

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[8] For further discussion on an ecological perspective see Part I of Nash, M., Munford, R. & O'Donoghue, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Social work theories in action*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Catherine: [I] need to know why, "Why is this like this?" I need to make sense of it myself before I can go in there and make some change. Supporting people to make change.

"People should choose what happens to them"

All participants located themselves as supportive of clients' self-determination but to differing degrees, the extent of which seemed to be strongly influenced by the local practice context as previously mentioned and also by constraints to practice which will be discussed below. Those in child protection were particularly aware that whilst their social work ideals involved notions of client empowerment and self-determination this was not always possible to achieve within legislative requirements. However, the change repertoire was still employed by these participants to position them as desirous for clients to be involved as equal participants as much as possible in the social work process. Some of these participants linked their practice to strengths-based and empowerment approaches:

Anna: You [as a statutory social worker] do have a huge amount of power in the situation but trying to find the strengths and trying to empower the family to do as much as they can for themselves and not try to be there with the big stick in the background going "If you don't, I'm going to take your children away" or whatever the case may be.

Kylie: I always let people know "This is what an investigation is, these are the things that I'm likely to do" and getting their consent to that. And if they don't consent then letting them know "Well, I'm going to [have to] do it anyway with or without your consent"... At least I've let them know what's going to be going on and I think they have a right to that information.

Other participants recognised that whilst they might consider social work to be about change and perceive some things as needing to be changed it was up to clients to determine what changes, if any, should occur.

Kate: We can't change people's lives and [social workers] shouldn't choose to do that unless safety is of concern... how people choose to go about their business is how they choose to go about their business... But most of us [social workers] are really keen to make change and help.

Liz: There are some clients where I've had to say "Okay, that's the best I can do" and at the end of the day it was their decision to be in a position that I thought perhaps could have been improved.

Most participants positioned clients as fully capable of participating as equal partners in decision making. To ensure this outcome in practice they positioned themselves as advocates on behalf of clients within existing systems that were sometimes prone to 'dismissing' their voices in favour of those of 'professional experts'. This was particularly noticeable amongst participants from health and the community who emphasised a social model of assessment and service delivery and resisted the notion that biomedical experts, such as doctors, had more rights to determine outcomes for clients than the clients themselves. One participant in particular consistently took the position of actively engaging as an advocate for clients to achieve the goals that they determined as appropriate:

James: That can be hard for other professionals in the medical system because we go back to them and say "This is the choice this person has made" and they say "They shouldn't do that, they need to do this" [to which the social worker emphasises] "This is the choice that this person has made". That can be really hard, advocating for them to make that choice but I think that is part of our role as well.

When taking up the position indicated by the above quotation, participants from health resisted the privileging of a biomedical discourse which focussed on clients' limitations, and demonstrated themselves to be committed to strengths-based practice in which their underlying questions were 'what are clients capable of?' and 'what would clients like to achieve?' the answers to which focussed on identifying and removing barriers to the realisation of these goals rather than framing them up as unrealistic because of the client's physical condition or (dis)ability. In an example given by one participant, this involved ensuring access to specialised equipment so that a client was able to

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participate in a leisure activity, which he had not previously been able to undertake. This was a clear example of how people's situations, when considered from a critical perspective, can be changed by challenging the status quo (which in this case was that this person's disability was such that he could not do certain tasks) and providing appropriate resources.

The utilisation of the change repertoire, influenced primarily by a critical social work discourse, which entails understanding the interface between societal structures and individual lives, made possible the subject position of *'change agent'* but the degree of personal agency utilised by participants with regard to making change in social work varied. Those with community work experience, previous or current, seemed more committed to the notion that they could effectively work alongside clients to identify goals and then activate appropriate change in that they used the change repertoire more consistently than other participants within their interviews. Those working within health, when discussing change, tended to locate themselves within a therapeutic relationship with clients in which they were more focussed on the achievement of individual change rather than the examination of wider social issues. Those in child protection were very aware that the priority of change was ensuring child safety and felt that their own and others' agency in terms of addressing macro issues was limited. That is, they could link families' experiences of crisis and conflict to causes such as limited income or social isolation but felt that because of their own workloads, organisational priorities, or constraints to clients' access to assistance from other Government departments such as Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ)[9], they could not effectively contribute to structural change.

The desire to make change was a key motivation for participants to enter and remain in social work, as was the desire to help, which is discussed in the next section.

'It's About Being There': The Interpretive Repertoire of Helping

The interpretive repertoire of helping emphasises social work as a helping profession in which social workers use therapeutic approaches to establish and maintain effective

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[9] WINZ is the Government department responsible for providing income support to those who are eligible, and assistance to those seeking employment.

relationships with clients. It includes the idea that people have intrinsic qualities that lend themselves to the practice of social work such as a caring and supportive attitude or being a *'people person'*. Participants utilised the interpretive repertoire of helping to locate themselves as part of a history of caring as family members, as women or as volunteer workers apart from their social work experience, and within their social work experience to position themselves as 'helpers', committed to therapeutic worker-client relationships and to account for the achievement of change which does not necessarily have measurable outcomes.

"I knew I had to be doing something where I was giving to other people"

Participants overall expressed the desire to help as a motivation for undertaking social work and located themselves as giving and supportive people. Yet, some of them also problemitised the concept of 'help', pointing out that it does not adequately convey the complexity of social work or the idea of partnership between workers and clients because it implies the 'superiority' of social workers' knowledge and abilities, and the 'neediness' of clients. The desire to help was attributed to participants' own experiences of having received help (not necessarily social work) or their experiences of giving it or observing extended family participating in charitable work and/or community service in which case they had incorporated these values into their approach to social work. These included being caring and being a 'people person', which the following quote typifies:

Kylie: I consider myself to be quite a caring person, quite concerned about other people and wanting to help. I'm a helper... I've got good patience and tolerance for people.

During the focus group participants discussed the notion that they possessed intrinsic 'social work' qualities, especially when compared with non-social worker friends or other professionals:

Amy: [comparing herself to her non-social worker friends] *They care about the world but they don't care enough to do what we do.*

Anna: As much as you turn off work there is still something innately social work about the way that you see the world.

This second comment was made during the participant's relating of a story about being out with a friend and noticing a child alone on the street and questioning the situation and what response should be made when her friend commented 'what child?' The theme of social workers 'seeing the child' in or out of work was picked up by other participants as a way to express their innate sense of 'care', but was qualified by the understanding that interactions with clients were informed by the deliberate use of particular skills compared to non-professional relationships with family or friends.

"A remarkable intervention could be just being with someone"

A number of participants, particularly those in the health field, drew on the helping repertoire to emphasise their location as listeners interested in clients' stories, the telling of which could be of great benefit in that whilst it may not change the physical surroundings or the level or nature of practical support, it could assist in changing people's perceptions which in turn could help improve their ability to manage their circumstances. Participants who took this approach labelled it as narrative although there was acknowledgement that they did not engage specifically in narrative therapy (see Epston, 1998; White, 2000). This approach was usually discussed in the context of needing to establish rapport and trusting relationships with clients and to take the time necessary to listen to stories, time that was not always available:

Carolyn: Just being there listening to their [stories]... I think is very rewarding for patients... but we are restricted by time unfortunately.

It seemed that participants who particularly valued *'just being there'* felt that the ability to listen was intrinsic to them, honed by social work education perhaps, but not created by it:

James: For me personally I just sit with people and listen to their stories and ask them a question like "How does that affect this?"... in terms of getting that information from them it's really about being there. I think that's something I've learned over a long

time. It's not something that is necessarily from my social work training. It's been strengthened by [it] ... but it's something that I've always had.

Other participants also noted that intrinsic qualities such as intuition and observation were important to social work. An example of this was given by one participant who described being able to gauge, in an inpatient environment, who was likely to require social work assistance and what it would entail by walking around and observing patients' behaviour and interactions with others. Indeed, she would often receive referrals for these patients. This participant also referred to intuition as providing a sense as to what boundaries to maintain with clients, particularly in terms of giving reassurance in the form of physical touch *('in the safe zone')* should clients become 'emotional'.

One participant, in positioning herself as a therapeutic listener, questioned whether this position was unique to social work. She noted that she herself had experienced meaningful encounters with her hairdresser and had also observed the positive impact on social work clients of being listened to by untrained 'others' and suggested that experiences for them would be generally improved if other professionals worked with increased empathy and compassion. In a similar example, another participant pointed out the importance of being able to support clients' own belief systems and perceptions of their situation. She gave the example of working with a person for whom religious beliefs and practices such as prayer were very important. Although she identified herself as non-religious she felt a key aspect to successful work with this client was her ability to be present while the client prayed, something she doubted other staff would be comfortable with. In contrast, another participant noted that while she valued the notion of *'being there'* she was not sure whether it could be considered part of her social work role as it did not involve the implementation of practical tasks, which were visible and therefore easier to account for in regards to her use of time.

The influence of humanist and traditional discourses of social work, which emphasise the value of a helping relationship in which individual change is highlighted, was evident in the participants' use of the interpretive repertoire of helping. Also evident was the notion of social work as a somewhat altruistic activity. As with change, the

activity of helping was perceived by participants to be constrained by structural issues, which are discussed in the next section.

'It Can't Go Anywhere From The Bottom': The Interpretive Repertoire of Constraints

The interpretive repertoire of constraints infers the limits to effective practice experienced by social workers. These limits are categorised as structural, deriving primarily from the configuration of employing organisations in which beginning social workers are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy, and also from the lack of available time and resources perceived as necessary to effectively address practice demands. This repertoire was used by participants to locate themselves as capable and willing workers who were constrained in their ability to achieve change, or help, by things beyond their control:

Anna: [Social workers are] working really hard. And they do know what they're doing but they don't always have the resources or they don't have the power to do what should be done or could be done.

This quote typifies the use of the constraints repertoire by participants to create the subject position of a committed worker who does the best work possible given the restrictions experienced in terms of resourcing and occupational power.

"I'm too new…"

When using the constraints repertoire participants described employing organisations using terms such as *'hierarchy'*, *'factory'*, *'machine'* and *'company'* in which they perceived a 'top-down' organisational culture was entrenched, and management and policy makers were 'out of touch' with the experiences of social workers. Participants described the lack of power and 'voice' they felt was inherent in their position as *new* social workers at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy so that while they were aware of issues that could be improved they did not feel able to articulate their observations or feelings about these. Participants' perceptions of organisational structures are discussed further below:

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Nancy: There's a lot of politics that goes on within [the organisation]... so when they're talking about feedback as regards how this is affecting clients... I don't feel as if I've been there long enough to make a comment. In terms of the organisational stuff I'm too new to really make a comment.

Wha [referring to her observations of the organisation's monoculturalism]: *I guess that could be a thing I could possibly look into [changing] later on but being fairly new in this position I can't do everything at the moment.*

The position of newness was one that influenced all participants' sense of agency within employing organisations and perhaps surprisingly, participants who had had work experience in the social services prior to their social work education, although expressing confidence in their skills and ways of being with others, also took up the position of newness to account for their reluctance to comment on or alter issues within the organisation that they perceived to be problematic.

"It can't go anywhere from the bottom"

The use of the constraints repertoire was also evident in the focus group discussion in which participants continued to position themselves as lacking agency with regard to organisational change because of the length of their experience and location at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy:

Anna: It can be quite a hierarchy where you have [management structure] and if you go "Wait a minute, I disagree" it can get a bit "Well, who are you to be [disagreeing], you've only been here for however many months or years, I've been here for 20 years so I know what I'm talking about".

And later on in the discussion:

Anna: I see some things and I think "shit" but what do you actually do about it?

Kylie: You know what you do. You get a few years behind you and you come and join me when I'm [in management] because that's what I've decided needs to happen. We need to change it from the top because we can't push it up so we need to bring it down.

Catherine: It definitely can't go anywhere from the bottom.

Interviewer: Is that everybody's feeling – that bottom up change is not achievable?

Catherine: Yeah.

Kate: You need buy-in from the top...

Amy: [verbal agreement]

Kate: ... If the people at the top don't ferry it down then it's uphill all the way.

The tone of this discussion was one of cynicism with regard to management's responsiveness to addressing practice limitations caused by a lack of adequate resources. Participants expressed frustration that within their organisations overall, social work staff were not able to effectively meet the needs of clients and subsequently became complacent about the quality of social work service delivery. This was especially so within child protection. Participants drew on the interpretive repertoire of change to locate themselves as effective practitioners with regard to interactions with clients but then used the constraints repertoire to express frustration and resignation at the 'fact' that new social workers were powerless to make change within employing organisations. They felt that the only hope for change was for them to gain experience and knowledge and then relocate themselves to more powerful positions within the organisational hierarchy in order to bring about improvements. To this end, some of the discussion emphasised the importance of not forgetting what it was like to be a new social worker once these positions were gained.

"That's a sad thing for me, to look at what you could have done if you had the time or resources"

The other predominant theme contained within the constraints repertoire was that of a lack of time and resources (in terms of staffing levels and funding), which meant that participants were restricted in the types of interventions they could employ. They located themselves as occupying the uncomfortable position of being *'caught between'* the expectations of the employing organisation and clients and of not being able to achieve their own notions of effective and quality social work:

James: It would be nice to spend more time with people but we just don't have the resourcing to be able to do that... You don't have enough resourcing to do the job you want to be doing but you have enough resources to do the job you have to do and so we do, I guess, miss a lot of those things.

Interviewer: How does that sit with you?

James: It can be very uneasy at times. You wonder sometimes "What have I missed?"

Participants felt that time constraints meant that they often got only a *'snapshot'* of clients' lives, and were obliged to prioritise clients' urgent and/or practical requirements over relationship-building, something they were not necessarily comfortable with. Participants involved in child protection noted that statutory requirements caused relationships formed with clients to be often involuntary which, as discussed, was a restriction in relation to making change. Other constraints identified within child protection were staff shortages and a lack of available funding. Staff shortages meant higher workloads and subsequently less available time to spend on individual cases. Funding constraints meant participants could not always implement their ideal plans or specific interventions such as counselling. Some participants noted the dilemma of negotiating their organisational system's lack of *'client-friendliness'* in relation to these issues with one pointing out that that the best way of managing this when face-to-face with clients was to acknowledge the deficits but to note that they were systemic and that both the social worker and client needed to find a way to work together in spite of them.

One participant also pointed out that clients were usually aware of resource constraints affecting social work:

Carolyn: They know there's only so much that you can do, particularly working within the system that's really ruling what you can and can't do.

Another participant in health pointed out the resource constraints affecting community organisations and her reluctance to refer on to these organisations knowing that their ability to respond to client needs would also be constrained.

By locating challenges to practice as arising from sources primarily within organisational structures and outside themselves, participants were able to maintain a fairly cohesive sense of self as a generally well-intentioned and able social worker with regard to relationships with clients and who were not to blame when social work practice was felt to be lacking. In employing the interpretive repertoire of constraints, participants seemed to be drawing from discourses of managerialism and economic rationalism in which social work practice is largely determined by a business model and management decisions that emphasise quantifiable outcome measures so that social workers' professional autonomy is undermined (Ife, 1997). Participants were frustrated by employing organisations' emphases on procedures and the subsequent lack of opportunity for autonomous and innovative practice. One of the ways they resisted this pressure was to employ the interpretive repertoire of being professional, discussed in the next section.

'I Didn't Get My Qualification From A Weetbix Box': The Interpretive Repertoire of Being Professional

The interpretive repertoire of being professional entails thoughts of social workers as qualified, boundaried, competent and reflective. It includes references to social worker registration and membership of the ANZASW as a means by which to improve professional status and accountability. It also incorporates notions of expertise. The interpretive repertoire of being professional was employed by participants to position themselves as committed to safe, ethical and quality practice and professional

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development, and to emphasise the importance of supervision as a means to ensure the achievement of these outcomes. Some participants used this repertoire to position themselves as distinct from non-qualified social workers or those perceived to be incompetent. This repertoire was also used by participants to situate themselves as professional practitioners who had value in a complex work arena, and to resist the positioning by other professionals, the public and the media of social workers as stereotyped 'lesser' professionals and 'do-gooders'.

"I know I'm a social worker because I've trained to be a social worker"

Whilst all participants located themselves as qualified professionals they also located themselves as learners, sometimes uncertain and lacking in confidence and needing supervision and peer support for guidance and reassurance that they were 'on the right track'. Most participants felt fairly well prepared for practice by their education although there was the sense that any education could not make any new graduate fully ready for the work environment in terms of emotional responses or context-specific requirements:

Liz: Do I need to go back and do my degree? Was there something I missed?

Kate: They [education providers] can't prepare you for how it's going to feel.

Participants also referred to the feeling that they should be able to integrate theory learned in social work education with practice but this was something some of them either did not do or struggled to do:

Anna: It does kind of go out the window when you're there [doing] the daily grind stuff.

Participants felt that they were sometimes expected to know more than they did given their level of experience and expressed a desire for supervisors and managers to recognise their newness so that the expectations placed on them would be more realistic in terms of what beginning social workers could comfortably and confidently achieve. Participants did acknowledge, however, that issues such as staff shortages and a high

proportion of inexperienced staff were problematic for management and contributed to this situation.

The simultaneous positioning of participants as both qualified professionals and learners meant that the interpretive repertoire of being professional was used by them to constitute themselves as both expert, and non-expert and subject to their own or others' expectations to be expert because professionals 'should' be able to provide solutions to problems.

"It's hard for me to think I'm an expert but I recognise it"

Participants took up the position of expert in two main ways. They used the concept of expertise to discuss their unique knowledge and ability to work in a range of contexts by applying critical thinking and skills learned during their education, something that differentiated them from other professionals. Notions of expertise were also present in the references to teaching clients strategies and skills helpful to their lives. Some participants referred also to learning from clients and positioned themselves and clients as equals in relationships in which mutual learning occurred.

"You have to think a lot about not trying to fix everything"

When participants positioned themselves as non-expert they discussed the pressure they experienced to *'fix'* or *'make better'* clients' situations:

Amy: In the real world you introduce yourself to a client "Hi, I'm the social worker". For them that means you know what you're doing.

Carolyn: I think before working I thought as a social worker I should have all the answers, which I don't... but when I first started, not having the answers freaked me out... It's really important to know that even though you are a social worker you can't fix the world... coming to grips with that was one of the biggest learning curves as a social worker for me.

These sentiments were expressed by a number of participants who, while subject to the pressure of having to be a 'professional expert', recognised that social work

relationships with clients were ideally constructed in a way to enable power-sharing and client self-determination. Participants used the interpretive repertoires of change and helping to articulate this point of view, as discussed earlier. Some participants referred to the importance of knowing where to go to find answers rather than feeling like they needed to be able to immediately provide all answers to clients' issues and/or questions.

"We have specialist knowledge"

Participants drew on the interpretive repertoire of being professional to position themselves as having value and to resist the notion that they were 'less than' other professionals. The positioning of social workers as having to *'battle'* for professional respect was evident throughout all individual interviews and the focus group but it seemed to be more apparent amongst the participants who worked in health where they were in constant contact with medical staff and other allied health professionals. These participants felt the value and complexities of social work were often subsumed by a biomedical approach in which it was assumed that those with more knowledge about aetiology and bodily functioning were considered to have the 'better' knowledge, which this quote typifies:

Amy: Social workers have this feeling [of] constantly justifying why they need a social worker... My experience so far is that doctors don't really even register social workers on their radars and the nurses... have a narrow understanding based on their limited experience.

Participants from health and community settings also all noted the influence of a biomedical discourse with regard to assessment and intervention in which differences between social and medical models were sharply delineated and where a medical diagnosis often determined the preferred 'treatment' plans. One participant noted it was important for social workers in health to understand medical terminology in order to grasp the implications of a diagnosis in terms of interventions available to clients, and also to ensure that clear communication with medical staff could occur, which was an aspect noted by other participants also. The biomedical discourse seemed to influence participants' perceptions of the strength of 'voice' they and their colleagues had within

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the health system where the unspoken assumptions of both staff and clients was that doctors had the most power to determine how or what interventions should occur.

Some health social work participants felt generally supported by the medical teams but indicated that there was a limited understanding as to the role of social workers, which was primarily perceived to be the implementation of practical tasks related to discharge planning. It seemed to be generally agreed though, that once an individual social worker had established relationships with other professionals and had completed work which was perceived as effective, the team was more likely to accept that social work was more than merely achieving concrete tasks, and were also more likely to make referrals. Participants from health found much value in being a part of a wider social work team as access to peer support, supervision and professional development strengthened their sense of self as a social worker.

Child protection social work participants acknowledged that because they were employed in a social work organisation they did not 'rub up' against such role or value conflicts as often but that in comparison with other professionals they were often perceived as having less status and knowing less, even when they had had more involvement and therefore more 'hands-on' knowledge about clients' situations. This comment made during the focus group demonstrates such a position:

Anna: I get the sense from the judges and lawyers that I work with in my area "So, I know much more than a social worker would know" and it's like "Why?" "Because I'm a lawyer and lawyers know stuff" and it's so frustrating. You see a family once a week or once a fortnight for a year and they swan in on their yearly visit... and they write into the judge and then the judge says "The lawyer's saying this and the social worker's saying this" and it becomes this "Lawyers are better than social workers and we'll listen to the lawyers".

Participants within child protection noted the specialist knowledge required for the frequent engagement with the judicial system by way of making applications for legal orders, supplying accompanying affidavits and writing court reports, and the time necessary to learn and undertake this paperwork, which sometimes felt daunting. Participants did not always feel they possessed adequate knowledge as new social

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workers and their need to acquire formal legal advice meant they were sometimes positioned as 'non-expert' in relation to other professionals.

Two participants with community work experience felt that their social work qualifications were irrelevant to their employers, who were primarily concerned with hiring workers with relevant experience and a value base that fitted with the organisation:

Wha: They [employer] were looking for people to fill these positions and you didn't need to be a qualified social worker. It was based on your experience and what sort of person you are and it is reflected in the salary too.

These participants commented that one consequence of this was the lack of financial support from their employer to either join the ANZASW or become registered. This was perceived to be a significant constraint to their professional development and an indication of the lack of value placed on social work qualifications. The position of employers in these instances implies the adherence to notions that anyone can undertake social work as long as they have the 'right' attitude and life experience.

"The sooner social workers get registered the better. It gives you some professional status"

In response to the positioning of social work as a 'lesser' profession, all participants located themselves as supportive of social worker registration as it was perceived to be the means by which social work would gain legitimacy particularly in the eyes of other professionals but also eventually in the eyes of the public. The notion of registration as improving social worker accountability to clients and ensuring safe, ethical practice was of secondary concern. Whilst all participants were aware of the ANZASW it was perceived by some as not being a particularly effective body although when discussing questions of professionalism, a number of participants referred to achievement of the competency standards developed by the Association as being a clear indicator of a social worker's professional ability. Other participants appreciated membership of the ANZASW as providing links to the wider social work community, which gave them a

sense of being aligned with other social workers and contributed to a clearer sense of professional identity.

There was some concern expressed, particularly during the focus group, that because the ANZASW and SWRB are both invested in increasing the numbers of competent and registered social workers in order to boost the profession's profile and status, they may approve participants' social work colleagues whom participants perceived to be incompetent, the sentiments of which this quote exemplifies:

You get assessed to be a competent social worker but we all know we work with colleagues, above and below us, that are not competent... but they're assessed as competent and they're out there and they're practising and so what does that say for registered social workers?

It was hoped that over time social worker competency and registration assessments would prove to be robust, something that would be demonstrated by both the Association and the Board declining 'unsuitable' applicants. Participants directly compared social work to nursing, which has also struggled to attain professional legitimacy, and teaching where it was perceived that in the years since the introduction of registration, processes have become more stringent with regard to the approval of applicants.

It was in this context that a lengthy discussion occurred about participants' concerns at what they perceived to be others' incompetent social work practice in terms of behaviour toward clients and colleagues and the development of inappropriate social work plans, and whose responsibility it was to articulate these concerns in the workplace. One participant noted that having the discussion was important because it demonstrated that participants had a sense of identity as social workers, and the place of their own morals in practice. She pointed out the difficulty of raising such issues in the workplace where there was a need to maintain civil relationships and where articulating such concerns could disrupt these. There were differences of opinion amongst participants as to whether raising concerns was necessary and/or effective. These were connected to notions of not being able to make a difference from the 'bottom-up'. Also connected to this was self-care. If participants deemed that speaking out would

jeopardise their position within the organisation and/or ability to work effectively they preferred not to articulate their concerns, stating that their need to look after themselves was most important. For some participants this position was based on previous experiences of attempting to raise issues to no avail.

"We have to move away from the tie-dye"

The interpretive repertoire of being professional was also used by participants to resist the subjectivities constructed by stereotypes of social work. Participants took up positions of resistance in relation to discourses of social work as populated by incompetent and/or uncaring workers or as a job that anybody can do because it appears practical and ad hoc. At the same time participants also contested the notion that social workers are always altruistic and helpful. The perpetuation of such discourses were linked to the media and to the general public's lack of awareness or understanding as to what social work entails:

Catherine: ... the history of social work... it's benevolent. It's a bunch of lovely old women in twin-sets who help out and give food parcels and stuff. It's totally not that.

Kate: Social workers are certain types of people... we have a certain type of lens on the world and not in a tree-hugger kind of way... That's what my friends used to say when I went into study; "Are you going to go and sit around the corner and sing kumbayah?"... There's that touchy-feely profile I have as a social worker.

Sometimes tongue-in-cheek and sometimes not, the notion of *'saving the world'* was also expressed by a few participants. It was acknowledged as a stereotype as to why people would undertake social work. Other stereotypes expressed were those of social work always being rewarding, social workers wearing tie-dyed clothes, *'namby pamby social workers saying let's band together and be strong'* or as untrained *'kamikaze'* workers, ineffectual and potentially dangerous.

Participants resisted such subjectivities by positioning themselves as educated, qualified, thoughtful and competent social workers capable of professional detachment and analysis and forming appropriate boundaries.

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"I can't articulate where the boundary line is but it's in me"

Most participants identified the maintenance of boundaries with both clients and management as an important aspect of professional practice. Boundaries were conceptualised as lines existing between workers and clients or management, which were diffuse and variable depending on the nature or quality of the relationship. Some participants noted that a key difference between qualified and non-qualified social workers was the ability of qualified workers to maintain a more detached and analytical approach to practice in which they could build an effective rapport with clients without it leading to emotional intimacy and friendship. The notion of boundaries was, for some, synonymous with role clarity, the maintenance of which was necessary to ensure competent decision making:

Liz: So, it's all about boundaries I suppose, which is still something that I'm always questioning and trying to be aware of, you know, where are my boundaries and when do I overstep them or when am I not quite meeting them... I don't think I've got a definitive line. Certainly for me it would change with each client probably.

Anna: Part of it is knowing what your role is and what your role isn't... At the end of the day you're not there to be their best friend. If you can have a nice working relationship with them that's lovely but that's all it can be... You've got to be really clear that you are there as the social worker, not there as their support or as their friend... It is about keeping that professional distance, if you can't keep your professional distance it impacts on your ability to make those critical decisions that need to be made.

Other participants acknowledged the importance of injecting their professional relationships with personal elements like touch as long as the work remained purposeful. For them, it was primarily important to establish a human connection with others rather than a worker-client connection only:

Kate: Some people might say 'You shouldn't be covering your personal stories with your practice' ... but I don't think that's true. I think that you've got to put a piece of yourself into the work or what's the point?

The separation of professional and personal lives was another issue that participants discussed within the context of boundary and relationship construction. This will be considered within the discussion of the interpretive repertoire of self-care.

Participants noted that the way they maintained accountability for their behaviour in relationships with clients was to engage in reflective practice with colleagues primarily during formal and informal supervision.

"The important thing for me is learning from each situation"

Participants all pointed out the importance of reflection in relation to improving professional practice. Reflection provided them with an opportunity to think about how they used theory and engaged with clients in previous practice experiences and to consider what could have been done differently. Participants all emphasised the necessity of adequate supervision to facilitate this:

Catherine: You can't practice safely without good supervision and if you're not getting it you need to get it.

Most participants had had satisfactory experiences with supervision but some expressed frustration and disappointment that supervision was either irregular, focussed on caseloads and outcome measures or that the supervisor did not have the skills perceived as necessary to build the type of relationship in which participants felt they could safely engage in reflective practice:

Nancy: There was never any recognition that you needed to be able to sit down and reflect...I could see myself going down in practice because there was never the opportunity to reflect... when it did happen I didn't feel very safe doing any reflective stuff anyway.

"You start to feel more like a professional"

During the focus group discussion participants used the interpretive repertoire of being professional to emphasise their position as increasingly confident in their professional roles and identities over time. As they gained in knowledge and skills they were more able to form their own beliefs about issues, using previous experiences as benchmarks, without relying on more experienced workers or other professionals to tell them what to think or do:

Catherine: When you start social work you're a mini. You have the professional qualification but you're not really a professional. The longer you work the more professional you become.

Amy: The more you're able to gather your own information and make your own analysis and assessments and form your own beliefs that's when you start to feel more like a professional.

Participants used the interpretive repertoire of being professional to consistently position themselves as professional but with varying levels of confidence about their abilities. Participants did not feel that they could articulate a coherent sense of professional identity, with a few participants referring to it as still developing and fluid; changing in response to personal life experiences and also interactions with others so it could never be a *'static one size fits all'* entity. Existing alongside the interpretive repertoire of being professional was the notion that participants' personal selves needed to be taken into account within their social work practice. This is discussed below.

'You Can't Fight Every Single Battle': The Interpretive Repertoire of Self-Care

The interpretive repertoire of self-care contains notions of social work as emotional labour and social workers as having personal selves separate to their professional selves, with their own physical and psychological needs, which must be balanced with work demands. This repertoire was employed by participants to account for their responses to 'real world' social work practice and their development of coping strategies, and was particularly prevalent during the focus group.

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Participants used the self-care repertoire to constitute the subject position of 'person first' which enabled them to act as a self-advocate, able to say 'no' to management's expectations if they felt they were beyond their capacity, or, when faced with difficulties in the organisational system or clients' situations, to take a self-protective stance of 'that's just how it is' or a 'can't fight every single battle' approach (imagine an accompanying shrug of the shoulders). Other participants used the 'person first' position to explain both their behaviour in social work and also their need to separate themselves from their work so that they could ideally be social workers only between the hours of '8.00am to 4.30pm'. Some likened the integration of self and work to putting on a professional 'cloak' or 'hat' in which they, as people, were able to take on a 'professional identity' while still keeping a piece of themselves for themselves. However, all participants talked about the difficulty of separating their personal and work lives in that they put their own beliefs and ways of being into their practice but also took work home with them, psychologically, but also sometimes practically in terms of reading or written work. The notion of being a 'person first' also contributed to people taking up subversive positions with regard to organisational policies if they felt there was a clash of values and they wanted to stay true to their personal beliefs about what best practice should entail. In this context best practice was considered to be that which prioritised clients' needs over the needs of the organisation.

"It never is an 8.00 to 4.30 job"

Participants all recognised that because social work required an emotional engagement there was a need for them to develop strategies to manage their responses and one way to do this was to be able to step psychologically as well as physically outside of the employment environment at the end of the working day. Some participants felt that they managed to make this separation fairly well by filling up their personal lives with recreational and family activities and volunteer work. For others this separation felt harder to achieve with interview discussions including details about experiences of overwhelmed-ness and depression. These were episodic and manifested in sleeplessness and feelings of anxiousness with participants managing symptoms by taking brief periods of leave, using medication or changing employment.

There was the strong sense expressed during the focus group that some of the difficulty with this aspect of social work was that in both education and work environments it is construed as possible to separate personal and professional lives when in 'fact' there exists a complex interweaving of these worlds. It was felt that social work education does not adequately prepare students for how social work will *feel* and while it is recommended that people develop self-care strategies they are not told *how* to actually do this. Overall, participants felt that some of the best preparation for social work came from their student placements but some felt that being a paid employee meant increased expectations and responsibilities that no placement could ever truly capture, and learning to manage this change in role from student to beginning practitioner was challenging. The focus group participants agreed that it took each of them a significant period of time to develop ways of managing the emotional demands of social work, a skill that they felt was a part of becoming more professional.

Social work's emotional *'spillover'* was often more stressful than had been anticipated. Some participants reported comparing themselves to colleagues who appeared to be coping with the same work environment and workload and for this reason felt that they too should be coping and should not talk about their experiences of stress. At the time of the interviews seven of the ten participants were already in employment in their second social work job either in the same or a different field of practice. Five participants had moved out of their initial positions because of stress related to workload pressures or difficulties with management:

[Management] don't think about the emotional toll this job has on you... They don't think about you as a person and how you deal with things and how you may be or won't be coping.

It was easier to walk away.

A number of participants referred to social work as being *'exhausting'*, *'draining'*, *'tiring'* and *'stressful'* with some indicating that they were not sure that it was a sustainable career:

I look at my older colleagues and go "How have you been doing this for so long?" because it does take a lot of yourself to do this.

Participants who had changed positions as a means to look after themselves expressed feeling happier because the work environment was improved. Workloads were manageable and staff were supportive but participants had also developed improved methods of coping, for example by booking annual leave in advance and taking 'mental health' days or by having office days where they limited their face-to-face work with clients, instead doing paperwork. Other participants had learned that in order for social work to be sustainable they needed to advocate for themselves with management and refuse work if they felt they were already working to capacity. This was not always an easy stance to take, particularly in light of unspoken pressure that one needed to be coping and engaging in the same amount of work as other staff. One participant pointed out that '*it took a few tears*' to be heard when she articulated her boundaries with regard to her workload.

In balance, some participants also talked about '*loving*' and '*really enjoying*' their work, particularly in regard to having a feeling of achievement in terms of helping others and also in terms of collegial relationships, which they found to be supportive. Most participants expressed the notion that social work required '*passion*' but they each had different views as to whether they possessed the 'necessary' passion. A number of participants had already considered eventually moving out of social work that involved direct contact with clients, and into management, private practice, policy, further study or overseas travel.

"I have rebelled slightly"

Some participants used the self-care repertoire to take up a subversive position with regard to their employing organisations' policies. This stance was taken when it was perceived that there was a mismatch between personal and organisational values and in order to maintain a sense of integrity participants chose to work around the rules of the organisation:

Potentially we have to fly under the radar a little bit because we don't tell certain people what we're doing because it just creates a conversation that is not going to be productive.

The mismatch of values often entailed the social work system being perceived by participants as not 'client-friendly' so that adhering strictly to its rules would negatively impact the worker-client relationship. Subversion took the form of participants sometimes modifying the level or nature of contact with clients so that it better fit with their sense of best practice, for example by making home visits in situations when policy recommended telephone contact or by doing work, usually over the telephone, with people who made contact from the community but who were not officially clients. One participant who perceived a potential mismatch of values between herself and the employing organisation said she would find another job if it was not reconcilable.

"Maybe you make a difference, maybe you don't"

Some participants, in recognising the constraints to social work practice and the lack of achievement of outcomes they had expected, took up a position of accepting that they *'could not be all things to all people'*. They concentrated on doing the best they could in 'micro-moments' and on taking care of themselves so they could continue in the work. This involved realigning their expectations with what was achievable within their organisations in order to lessen the dissonance experienced as a result of hoping for more than what could practicably be done. This stance involved participants accepting problematic systemic issues and working within them because they did not feel they had the time or emotional capacity to attempt to make any changes. Thus, as discussed, they sometimes took a *'that's just how it is'* approach to practice. Some participants spoke of their need to redefine success and be content with 'small' gains, and to also accept that they could not be privy to the full impact of their interventions in the lives of clients because much of what they did could not be quantified. Participants remained fully committed to meeting the needs of clients as best they could in the work context and also to prioritising their own needs over that of the organisation in terms of self-care.

The interpretive repertoire of self-care was used by participants to position themselves as both people and social workers, and to enable them to fit these worlds together in such a way as to accommodate the demands of each. It was used alongside the interpretive repertoire of constraints to account for the mismatch of expectations between the 'ideal' and the 'real' in a way that meant participants could feel their selves were 'intact' as sensitive or caring and yet professional.

Summary

This chapter commenced with a description of how participants' embodied subjectivities of gender, age and ethnicity affect their sense of selves and engagement with clients. It then described the research findings in which I used the analytic tool of interpretive repertoires to determine five ways of talking about social work that enabled participants to constitute a number of (sometimes) contradictory subject positions in relation to practice and professional identities. These interpretive repertoires consisted of clusters of terms, figures of speech and descriptions centred around the images of getting one's hands dirty (social work as change); just being there (social work as helping); not being able to make bottom-up change (constraints to social work practice); not a 'weetbix box' qualification (being professional); and not fighting every single battle (self-care). I found that across all interviews and the focus group, participants' discussion covered the themes of motivation for social work, education, practice, professionalism and the self, in which they each consistently used the five interpretive repertoires to account for their selves as social workers. These made possible multiple subjectivities. These subjectivities included social workers as (simultaneously) professionals and persons engaged in emotional labour, and 'change agents' and 'helpers' committed to effective practice but often constrained by organisational issues. I found that the local practice context had some bearing on how participants perceived the relationship between themselves and clients.

In the next chapter I provide an analysis of these findings in the context of current literature.

Chapter Five

The Construction of Identity and Social Work Practice

The very availability of these positions, as routine ways of describing... tells us something about the broader ideological context in which such talk is done (Edley, 2001, p. 217).

In this research I have taken a social constructionist perspective to examine how new social workers use language to make meaning of their practice experiences and to construct a sense of professional identity. Using a poststructural theoretical approach, I have taken the view that discursive practices constitute rather than merely reflect the meanings of experience and identity within a sphere of wider social discourses (Weedon, 2004). This enables an examination of both the utilisation of language by participants in the construction of the self and the broader socio-political context in which it occurs. The analytic tool of interpretive repertoires was employed to identify how participants positioned themselves in relation to notions of professional social work practice during interview and focus group conversations. In Chapter Four I identified and described five interpretive repertoires utilised by participants, and the subject positions they made possible. In this chapter I interrogate the use of these repertoires and the resulting subjectivities alongside the literature to determine commonalities and differences, and I discuss the implications for social work in Aotearoa New Zealand in light of these.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of participants' embodied subjectivities, specifically gender, age and ethnicity. I then examine each of the interpretive repertoires of social work as change, social work as helping, constraints to practice, being professional and self-care, and the subjectivities made possible through their deployment, in light of the literature, and consider the implications for professional social work identity construction and practice.

Embodied Subjectivities

Gender

There was no gender bias inherent in the selection criteria for research participants and the gendered make-up of the group could be considered to be reflective of the gendered nature of the social work occupation. In that regard, questions need to be asked about how gendered subjectivities influence the formation of participants' professional identities. Feminist analyses of social work have been occurring since the 1970s (Orme, 2002) and one of the powerful truth claims[10] identified regarding gender and social work is that women are 'natural' carers and therefore most suited to the occupation (Camilleri, 1996). This position was taken up uncritically by some participants who said that their gender enabled them to identify with women clients as carers of their families. Other participants resisted this positioning but only one discussed actively utilising feminist theories in practice. The male participant felt that his gender might influence the type of work he could be involved with but not the way he would go about his work. The observation by participants that clients perceived women social workers to be more empathetic and nurturing is in keeping with suggestions that social discourses of women as biologically suited to caring have created social work as a women's profession (Lyons & Taylor, 2004). The observation by two participants of social work knowledge as feminine compared with psychology, which they identified as male, is in keeping with opinions expressed by some feminists that knowledge is gendered, with 'women's knowledge' understood to be 'holistic and contextual' compared to men's knowledge which is concerned with rationality, evidence and quantifiable measurement (Lyons & Taylor, 2004, p. 79). As noted by Lyons and Taylor (2004), such gendered discourses have acted to hinder social workers' assertion of 'professional and academic credibility' (p. 72). However, participants did not discuss being undervalued as social workers in terms of gender. Rather, they referred to the general lack of recognition of social work as a profession. I posit that one reason for this is the historical location of social work as women's work and hence a 'lesser' profession. In this regard, gendered discourses overlap with

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[10] From a poststructuralist perspective, knowledge does not exist as a single 'Truth' but as a range of understandings or contestable 'truths' made possible by different discourses. These are linked to the exercise of power, which determines what claims are accepted as 'Truth' within society. Poststructuralists are concerned to deconstruct these dominant discourses so that diverse perspectives, or other truth claims, are represented (Healy, 2000).

discourses of professionalism and managerialism, which privilege 'male' knowledge (Lyons and Taylor, 2004). These issues are further discussed later in this chapter.

Age

One finding from this research that provides some contrast to the literature is the emphasis placed by participants on age. Social work research seems to explicitly theorise practice and identity issues with a focus on practitioners' class, gender and ethnicity, or theoretical, values or ideological stances rather than age (for example Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996), although Lyons and Taylor (2004) mention the interaction of age with gender as a factor in the recruitment of social workers in the United Kingdom and Camilleri (1996) discusses the influence of practitioners' previous occupations and length of social work experience on their constructions of social work, inferring their perceptions were age-related.

Age was identified by participants in this study as more significant to their work than gender or ethnicity particularly with regard to clients' perceptions of their ability to undertake practice effectively. All participants related age to 'life experience' and expressed more confidence in their abilities to relate to similarly aged clients. Older participants referred to their life experiences as significant contributors to their choice to change career direction and train as social workers and their ability to integrate theoretical learning with 'real life'. What is interesting here is the sense that participants found age to be a constraint to practice when working with clients from different generations because of the degree to which shared experiences (such as parenting or health diagnoses) were construed by clients as necessary to an effective working relationship. As discussed in Chapter Four the local context did impact professional subjectivities to some extent and age-related issues may explain to some degree the lack of fit with the environment experienced by some new graduates with regard to their ability to form relationships with clients and their sense of efficacy in practice.

The finding that participants found age to be significant, particularly with regard to client perceptions, indicates that they have a sense of identity construction as reflexive and dialogical, in which they are formed through encounters with the 'other' (Dominelli, 2004b; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000). This is interesting given the emphasis by

a number of authors that such a stance is necessary for professional social workers (Fook et al, 2000; Taylor & White, 2000), and also because this sense was not consistently demonstrated by participants. That is, in some instances they took a more rigid view of themselves and others, which will be discussed below.

Ethnicity

Mafile'o's (2005a; 2005b) critique that western notions of professional social work marginalise alternative cultural viewpoints could be applied to participants' non-problematic positioning of themselves as professional. Whilst they located themselves as limited in 'lived experience' with regard to indigenous or minority ethnic and cultural groups they felt that they had developed adequate skills during their education to account for, and work with, difference. The expression from some participants that clients could be adequately engaged as individuals as long as respect was demonstrated shows an implicit cultural assumption (Moffatt & Miehls, 1999) that the individual has primacy in the worker-client relationship rather than being embedded in extended family or community relationships that need to be accounted for (Durie, 1995; Autagavaia, 2001). Another belief articulated during the interviews was that Maori would understand societal structures well enough to enable engagement with social workers. This calls to mind concerns expressed by the Ministerial Advisory Committee (1988) that social services are institutionally racist. Such a stance provides potential for social workers to abdicate responsibility for working out biculturalism whilst placing that responsibility on tangata whenua. Such positions are of concern, particularly when practice standards set by the ANZASW (NZASW, 1993a) and the SWRB (2005) require the demonstration of cultural competence by social workers.

The subjectivities of some participants as uncertain and/or uncomfortable with regard to cross-cultural practice were obviously constituted in relation to Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history. Issues of the Treaty of Waitangi and biculturalism were acknowledged by participants to be thoroughly addressed in social work education but there was still reticence from some regarding their cross-cultural competence. Although participants did not specifically articulate feelings of guilt, I do wonder (based on the unspoken nuances of conversations) whether observations by Bell (2004), that Pakeha feelings of guilt regarding the historical oppression of Maori need to be named and dealt

with so that people can mature in cross-cultural relations, are applicable here. This is where the notion of reflexive practice as a means for practitioners to understand how their subjectivities influence their perceptions of, and actions towards, others becomes important (Taylor & White, 2000; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000; O'Donoghue, 2003).

Subjectivities of gender, age and ethnicity are culturally and historically embedded and did affect how participants positioned themselves and others, which has implications for practice. Not all these issues can be easily resolved but through ongoing dialogue and reflexive practice via processes such as supervision, opportunities exist for new social workers to deepen their understandings of their selves and their place in intersubjective practice relationships. The challenge here, in light of Taylor's (2006) observations that social work practitioners are invested in (re)presenting themselves as competent and effective, is to create environments of trust where new practitioners can feel safe to genuinely examine themselves in practice.

I now discuss each of the interpretive repertoires, the resulting subjectivities and implications for professional social work identity construction and practice.

Social Workers as 'Change Agents'

Participants used the interpretive repertoire of change to identify change as *'the social work thing'* and necessary for the achievement of social justice at individual and structural levels. These notions are very much in keeping with a critical social work discourse in which structural analysis is perceived as necessary to understand unequal and oppressive power relations with the view that they be altered to improve the material position of the marginalised (Healy, 2000; Payne, 2005). Healy (2000) argues that a critical social work discourse has become the little-contested 'orthodoxy' of current social work practice (p. 62), and social workers usually assume that the achievement of change is intrinsic to the profession (Harre Hindmarsh, 1992). The use of the change repertoire by participants made possible the position of 'social worker as change agent', working alongside clients to empower them to determine processes and outcomes. The occupation of this subject position enabled participants to construct themselves as capable of undertaking critical analysis to identify barriers to client participation in society with the view that they be removed. Within this repertoire,

asking 'why?' and a non-acceptance of the status quo were emphasised alongside an ecological approach that linked macro and micro issues.

Participants, as 'change agents', were influenced by what could be considered a community development stance (Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2001) in that their conception of, and behaviour in, practice was informed by certain principles. The concepts of 'locating ourselves', 'self-determination', 'power', 'social change', 'vision' and 'action-reflection' (Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2001, p. 13-18) were most observable in how participants framed the worker-client relationship and the achievement of goals. Clients were considered to be experts in their 'lived experiences' and capable of choosing what they wanted. In situations where there was a difference of opinion between participants and clients, participants referred to the necessity to respect clients' wishes, to provide full information so that they could make fully informed choices, and to step back from the temptation to *'save the situation'* or *'fix it'*. Participants all identified the necessity of engaging in reflection and, when utilising the change repertoire, signified its importance to understanding power implications in their relationships with clients. Participants resisted the position of 'expert' and were usually fairly comfortable when outcomes achieved were based on clients' decisions and not their own. However, this was not straightforward for all participants. A number of them referred to the significant learning it had been in beginning practice to put aside their own expectations to 'make room' for clients' views and ways of doing things. The only exception to this stance for most participants was when clients' safety was an issue.

Aspects of a consumer rights discourse were evident in some participants' use of the interpretive repertoire of change. This discourse constructs clients as rights-bearing citizens, rather than passive recipients of welfare, who are considered holistically with the aim that they be fully included in society in ways that they determine are appropriate (Healy, 2005). Participants, usually those with community work and health experience, emphasised clients' access to full information and participation in processes and decision making and positioned themselves as working alongside clients, often as advocates, in systems where other discourses such as biomedicine acted to limit clients' active involvement by positioning them as inexpert compared with other social actors such as medical professionals. Positioning oneself as 'advocate' often meant

participants had to work hard to negotiate 'common ground' with other professionals in the development of plans that would account for clients' views. This was a challenging position for participants to occupy, with one commenting that it required adequate reflection and preparation to ensure that the client and/or social worker position was clearly stated in terms that other professionals would understand and respect. For this reason, participants from health spoke of the necessity to comprehend and be able to use medical jargon: firstly, to understand the implications of diagnoses for clients and secondly, to be able to communicate effectively with other professionals. Their observations echo Healy's (2005) recommendation that social workers be able to understand and utilise dominant discourses to achieve clients', and their own, objectives. The ebb and flow of relationships between participants and other professionals was coloured by participants' position as 'change agent' within systems that often did not recognise their professional status or mandate.

The critique made within critical social work of the social control elements of social work and the dilemma this poses for social workers (Healy, 2000) was evident in participants' use of the change repertoire. Participants from child protection particularly noted the challenge of not being able to achieve their notions of collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, relationships with clients because of statutory obligations, which required them to prioritise child safety and the compliance of families and/or caregivers to achieve this. They, and participants from other fields of practice, acknowledged that social workers could accrue power by virtue of their professional position but resisted this stance and positioned themselves as committed to the creation of equal relationships wherever possible. Healy (2000) notes that a critical social work discourse theorises this dilemma as the 'immutable and oppressive' power differential between workers and clients (p. 34) and suggests that it can be approached in two ways. Firstly, workers can act to transfer skills and knowledge to clients as best as possible and exit the relationship so that clients can be self-determining, or secondly, they can seek to equalise the power differential. Participants described ways to improve power relations by using feminist or radical analyses and/or strengths and empowerment approaches, and by ensuring full information sharing, and including, as much as possible, clients and their families in decision making, along with the deliberate use of self-disclosure. However, these findings confirm Healy's (2000) observation that new social workers are not well prepared to negotiate the constraints

that exist in their workplaces that prevent their ideal of achievement of equal power relationships with clients, which is something that will be addressed more fully within discussion about the constraints repertoire.

Rojek et al. (1988) and Healy (2000) note the strong influence of critical perspectives in shaping social workers' identities and expectations for practice. The implications for participant subjectivities in relation to a critical social work discourse require a consideration of the traditional notions of social work as involving social change to ameliorate the conditions of the marginalised and oppressed (Bogo et al., 1993; IFSW, 2007). Participants, when constructing and occupying the subject position of 'change agent', adhered to values such as social justice and human rights to consider the impact of structural issues and their own positions as potential 'agents of social control' in the lives of clients. Participants referred to the necessity that they undertake critical reflection to better comprehend the implications of these issues and pointed out the difficulties of doing this within organisations that did not always actively support such approaches. The lack of opportunity and/or support for clinical supervision in some settings was one example of this. Participants also referred to the difficulty of achieving their expectations for change in light of organisational constraints. For example, these issues were particularly evident amongst participants involved in statutory child protection where legal requirements impacted on the way in which relationships with clients could be constructed and where support via supervision was perceived to be sometimes lacking. As Healy (2000) aptly argues, a critical perspective emphasises structural analysis and change at macro levels but cannot always adequately account for the effectiveness of social workers at a local practice level. This is an important point when considering the identity construction of new social workers. If new graduates have the expectation that they should be able to make 'big' changes, which they find are unable to be achieved in practice, there is potential for them to develop a lack of confidence in their abilities, and a sense of disillusionment. Healy (2000; 2005) and Ife (1999) note the potential to address this type of issue by melding a poststructural approach with a critical one so that local contexts can be considered in a way that accounts for change processes being undertaken by social workers. I agree with Healy's (2000) suggestion that this can occur by destabilising truth claims as to what constitutes ideal social work in order to 'extend and diversify what counts as

social change and hence what qualifies as critical social work practices' (Healy, 2000, p. 5).

Social Workers as 'Helpers'

Like the interpretive repertoire of change, the interpretive repertoire of helping exists within an historical milieu, which has constructed social work as a means by which assistance is rendered to the 'needy' (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Haynes & White, 1999; Healy, 2005). The interpretive repertoire of helping was utilised by participants to describe their motivation for social work. It entailed notions of social work as a profession in which participants could assist, and provide relief to, others. Participants used this repertoire to position themselves as helpers and carers, enabled by a mixture of intrinsic qualities and learned skills. The intrinsic qualities identified as being particularly important were the ability to be with people in a therapeutic capacity, in which empathy, listening, tolerance, patience and care, and the ability to use intuition were emphasised. As discussed in the literature review, these aspects of social work are informed by traditional and humanist discourses of social work (Rojek et al., 1988). A number of participants, whilst acknowledging social work education as honing these abilities, often through the amount of personal reflection required, felt that social work took a certain type of person, which they had proved to be. Clark (2006) likens this to the idea of social work as a vocation, in which practice 'becomes more than simply instrumental to the delivery of practical services and acquires the inescapably moral dimension' (p. 82). Camilleri (1996) notes how social work participants in his research had similar perceptions:

> The overriding voice that comes through these texts is the personal nature of social work. Getting to social work is incorporated within the nature of being somehow a 'helper'. The education and training provides for a reflexive reading of that personal persona being transformed into a social work practitioner. A practitioner is about connecting all those aspects of their personal experiences into the helping of others... The notion of 'calling' or 'vocation' strongly appears in the texts of these practitioners (Camilleri, 1996, p. 114-115).

Whilst some literature presents the helping aspects of social work as unproblematic (for example Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005), 'help' was problematised by some participants because it fails to capture the complexities of social work but particularly because it implies a sense of inequality in the relationships between social workers and clients, in which the 'expert' social worker helps the 'inexpert' client. This concern echoes the point made by Camilleri (1996) that notions of help and care have been associated with control, which he argues is problematic in social work because the idea that giving help and/or care is a benign activity can mask social work's potential for surveillance and coercion. Participants, in discussing these notions, contrasted the concepts of help and empowerment. This involved the utilisation of both the interpretive repertoires of help and change by which they moved between subject positions of 'helper' and 'change agent'. Taking on the identity of 'change agent' implied for participants a greater sense of efficacy in challenging social structures, facilitating clients' self-determination and achieving material change. The identity of 'helper' involved the participants in more therapeutic activities with individual clients. Whilst some participants contested the concept of help, generally it was assumed to be, like change, intrinsic to social work, and movement between these subject positions appeared to be comfortable. This movement indicates the observation by van Heugten (2001) that the emphasis on macro or micro approaches can change within one's practice over the course of an intervention. Again, it also indicates the multiple subjectivities constructed by numerous and competing discourses.

Despite the resistance by some participants to the dominant discourse that social workers are helpers, the non-problematic positioning by most participants of themselves as helpers indicates to me the prevalence of the truth claims of social work as a caring and giving profession entailed in the discourses of social work as philanthropic, a women's profession, and traditional and humanist social work discourses (Payne, 2005; Rojek et al., 1988). For some participants, notions of charity, in the context of a family history of altruism, were identified as important influences for entering social work, something that can be linked to the historical underpinnings of social work discussed in the literature review. As Healy (2005) notes, whilst contested, these discourses have been closely aligned to the historical development of social work and continue to influence education and practice. Camilleri (1996) points out that discourses that position the ability to give 'help' as a personal quality problematise 'professional' social

work, which relies on notions of specific skills and competencies. What is fascinating with regard to this stance is the proposal by Fook et al. (2000) that professional experts in social work conceptualise social work as a calling involving qualities such as intuition. These different discourses demonstrate the problem for new social workers of being caught between conflicting notions of what constitutes professional practice.

When using the helping repertoire participants referred to their awareness that social service organisations often required quantifiable outcome measures but resisted the notion that these could capture the complexities of social work, emphasising the value of social work even when it was unquantifiable. This is discussed below when considering issues of professional legitimacy.

Although the notions of help and change emphasise different aspects of social work, they are often taken for granted as essential components of practice. The key implication of participants identifying as 'helpers' and 'change agents' is that while these positions may be intellectually challenged during education and placement by the presentation of alternative discourses or positions, for example, the debate between the care and control aspects of social work, they are subjectivities that come to feel 'real'. When beginning employment and becoming subject to other discourses prevalent in the work environment, these subjectivities become disrupted with implications for the formation of professional identities, as discussed below in relation to constraints to practice.

Social Workers as Capable but Constrained

As already highlighted, the context in which social work occurs shapes beliefs about what it should entail. The political and economic emphasis in social service delivery in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1980s has been on fiscal accountability and individual responsibility, with a subsequent reduction in state welfare provision (McDonald, 2001). O'Brien (2001) notes that a key influence on current social service delivery in this country is the Public Finance Act 1989 which shapes the public funding of social service organisations in such a way that 'the definitions and priorities of the funding body rather than the needs of the client or the community determine social work services' (p. 49). This has implications for how social workers are able to practice

within organisations that have limited resources and which emphasise measurable outcomes. Ife (1997) notes that in this climate, welfare is considered to be a product designed by managers at the top of an organisational hierarchy and delivered through social workers to passive consumers. The emphasis here is on procedural correctness and social worker efficiency so that technical-rational abilities are valued over professional autonomy (Dominelli, 2004b; Ife, 1997).

It is in this context that participants employed the interpretive repertoire of constraints. This repertoire contained notions of restrictions to effective practice entailed in participants' newness and their subsequent occupation of positions at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, and a lack of available time and resources. In utilising the interpretive repertoire of constraints participants were able to locate restrictions to practice outside of themselves and maintain a position of competent worker, limited in efficacy by organisational issues. In discussing limitations to practice, participants also referred to instances when they experienced a difference of opinion with clients regarding the purpose of the social work relationship, which meant that they were not able to achieve the change they felt appropriate. Participants' perceptions of these limitations were quite different. Organisational constraints aroused feelings of frustration and disillusionment when participants perceived they were unable to achieve best practice whereas clients' determination of outcomes, whenever possible, was accepted as part of the social work process.

Harre Hindmarsh (1992) points out that a common finding of research into beginning social workers' experiences is one of a 'clash' between the ideal and the real (p. 188). It is likely that this clash arises in part from a lack of agency experienced by new social workers in achieving their aims for practice because of limitations that exist in their work environments. Like this study, previous research has found that a significant issue for new social workers is coming to terms with constraints to practice that arise from organisational issues. These include a lack of autonomy because of their positioning at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, the requirement for adherence to organisational rules, a lack of time and resources and difficulties with colleagues (Fook et al, 2000; Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). Of these issues, participants in this research emphasised their newness and time and resource constraints as being the most significant barriers to achieving best practice. Their concerns centred

around the need to look after themselves and the extra pressure that these constraints placed on them in terms of actual work, their emotional responses at not being able to meet their own expectations, and the impact of such constraints on clients whose needs were perceived as not being adequately met in terms of social work processes and material resources. There was the notion expressed by some participants that the need to adhere to organisational rules, coupled with a lack of resources, did lead them to feel caught between the expectations of employers and clients. Yet their positioning as new workers meant they felt it was neither possible nor appropriate to articulate their concerns or propose alternatives.

Being at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy

As previously discussed, participants positioned themselves as new to both their organisations and the role of social worker and for this reason expressed reluctance to articulate their concerns about organisational issues, which they perceived as problematic. Similarly, Fook et al. (2000) found that new practitioners were initially pre-occupied with conforming to the work environment and being 'good' social workers so that they did not articulate their own values. Fook et al. (2000) also found that new social workers felt disillusioned by the lack of power they had as individuals, and as a professional group, to achieve what they expected to. These findings echo those of Harre Hindmarsh (1992) that beginning practitioners are eager for professional autonomy but constrained by employing organisations' hierarchical structures where those in senior management make decisions, and where adherence to organisational rules is required. She notes that participants in her study felt that one way to contribute to organisational change was to act to influence the thinking of colleagues or managers. This attitude is similar to that shown by one participant in this study who sought to discuss and negotiate issues when there were differences of opinion with other team members but generally, participants felt the most effective way to achieve meaningful change within the organisation was to move into senior or management positions as it was perceived these offered more power and therefore more scope for contributing to decision making and change, a finding also noted by Harre Hindmarsh (1992). This position could have arisen from the experience of some participants who, on occasions where they had challenged organisational culture or proposed ideas for change, had

been resisted by colleagues and/or those in senior positions for the reason that they were new and therefore not experienced enough to comment.

Limited time and resources

Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) found that limited time and resources, in terms of both staff and funding, were a source of frustration, disappointment and disillusionment for new social workers because it meant the implementation of brief and pragmatic interventions and prevented therapeutic, long-term or preventive approaches to practice. Fook et al (2000) and Harre Hindmarsh (1992) also found that new social workers reported that a lack of resources prevented them from achieving their notions of good social work. Participants in this research noted that time and resource constraints affected the type of relationships they could achieve with clients, which were focussed on the achievement of practical tasks. They found this to be unsatisfactory, identifying the system as not client-friendly and expressing frustration and also resignation at their limited capacity to achieve what they wished to. Participants, like those in Harre Hindmarsh's (1992) research, felt that because of workload demands arising from resource constraints they did not have the time or emotional capacity to effect changes they perceived as necessary within their organisations. There was concern expressed that these issues contributed to reactive social work rather than proactive and preventive social work, which was disappointing for those participants who had entered social work with the intention of being able to make change at a structural level.

Healy (2005) notes that the experience of being constrained by the organisational context is usual for new social workers because of the limited power associated with their 'junior' position (p. xiii). She emphasises that to be effective, social workers need to understand the institutional context within which they work but points out that she herself, as a beginning practitioner, although able to critique her employing organisation, did not know how to use this critique to inform her actions in specific circumstances. The findings of this research would echo Healy's (2005) observations. Participants did have a sense of what they wanted to achieve in terms of professional practice and could recognise and critique the impact of managerialist and economic rationalist discourses in constraining practice by how they shaped organisational structures and accountability requirements. This could be noted in their references to

employing organisations as 'hierarchies', 'factories' or 'companies' where management and policy-makers were out of touch with social workers and clients, and their sense that the complexities of social work could not be captured by quantifiable measures. The use of mechanistic language suggests that participants did not see themselves as fully active or effective in these environments. However, their use of the constraints repertoire had the effect of enabling them to construct a position for themselves as new to the organisation and under-resourced by which they could account for their limited ability to make change and still retain a sense of self as inherently capable. In this way they could take responsibility for practice at a micro level where they generally felt more effective, albeit with limited resources, and place responsibility for problematic issues on an unresponsive management.

Fook et al. (2000) and Dixon, Weiss and Gal (2003) have noted the tendency of new social workers to focus on micro-level interventions targeted at individual change and express some concern at this. However, van Heugten (2001) suggests that while social work ideally should involve equal emphasis on macro and micro change goals, the political context and organisational constraints will often mean that a micro perspective is dominant. I suggest that new social workers' sense of a lack of power and autonomy with regard to these constraints means that they focus their efforts where they are most likely to achieve a sense of effectiveness, which in turn can contribute to their maintenance of a competent sense of self. However, I also found that some participants who emphasised a micro approach to practice felt that their work was not adequately planned or thorough because a lack of time and resources meant that they could not always ensure all aspects of practice were met.

There is potential that within the current environment the focus on micro practice will continue with a subsequent lessening emphasis on examining the impact on individuals of structural issues, which Dominelli (2004b) suggests is a direct result of a managerialist discourse. It is also possible that an emphasis on procedural knowledge and accountability measures will lead to social workers focussing on the development of technical-rational skills with a subsequent lessening of critical and reflexive practice as they a) perceive that there is no room for this approach within the corporate culture of service delivery and b) do not perceive it as necessarily their responsibility to attempt to engage with change processes from the 'bottom-up'. Davies and Leonard (2004a)

point out that this type of situation causes social work delivery to objectify and homogenise clients (p. xi), and recommend that as social workers we somehow become more aware of how these ideologies are embedded in our language and act to create space in our work environments to critically reflect and re-establish our sense of agency and resistance to discourses of managerialism and economic rationalism.

Social Workers as Professional

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, discourses of professionalism have increasingly influenced social work in Aotearoa New Zealand since the mid twentieth Century with the establishment of professional social work education, the formation of the ANZASW and more recently, the passing of the Social Workers Registration Act, 2003. All participants used the interpretive repertoire of being professional to position themselves as professional and to resist the positioning by others of social workers as 'lesser' professionals or worse, well-intentioned but untrained and ineffectual. They also all referred to the importance of social worker registration as a means to improve the status and legitimacy of social work in society. Whilst participants discussed a number of issues within the interpretive repertoire of being professional, for the purposes of this discussion I will focus particularly on professional legitimacy and expertise, competence, boundaries and reflective practice because they are the issues that appeared to be most significant to participants' identity construction.

Gaining professional legitimacy

Participants were unanimous in their belief that social worker registration would improve recognition of the profession over time but had varied opinions as to the value of membership of the ANZASW. There was little recognition of the role of the Association in developing standards of practice and a code of ethics or of their ongoing role in the social worker registration debate since it was first began in the 1970s. Participants were at various stages with regard to joining the ANZASW and applying to be registered. Participants who were not members of the ANZASW nor planning to be registered explained that this was either because they were settling into employment, application costs were too expensive and not fully covered by employers, or they had just not gotten around to it.

Two of the stated purposes of the 2003 Social Workers Registration Act are the commitment to protecting the safety of the public by ensuring social workers are competent and accountable, and the enhancement of social workers' professionalism (New Zealand Government, 2003). Interestingly, whilst participants referred to both these notions as important to their identity as social workers, their primary concern was that registration would improve their status, particularly in the eyes of other professionals. This focus is quite different to that noted by Kendrick (2004) of social workers in the 1960s who emphasised education and professionalism to ensure client safety and wellbeing. The emphasis placed by participants on professional legitimacy could be interpreted as reflecting the changes to social work education and identity since the 1960s and 1970s through which attention to issues such as client well being have become intrinsic to practice (Nash, 2001a). I speculate that there are two other key reasons for the emphasis by participants on professional legitimacy: the changing nature of social service delivery and social work's historical position in relation to other professions.

Firstly, the changing nature of social service delivery, which focuses on increased competition, output measures and the evaluation of individual and service performance (Healy, 2002), requires social workers to be able to demonstrate in quantifiable terms what they 'do' so that the emphasis is on technical-rational skills and the delivery of practical services. Participants working within health stressed that the invisibility of some social work activities such as *'being with'*, listening to and supporting clients through therapeutic means, meant that other professionals downplayed the significance of social workers' contributions to multi-disciplinary teams. One participant discussed the reference made by other team members to her *'just having a chat'* with people, the inference being that it was not of particular importance. Another referred to the team's expectation that social workers' primary role was to sort out the practical tasks such as 'home help' for patients requiring discharge. Participants strongly resisted this positioning by emphasising their possession of unique professional knowledge and skills necessary to their complex and uncertain employment environments, and the value of unseen and unquantifiable work. These findings confirm those of McMichael (2000) that social workers often feel undervalued by other professionals and expend a high level of energy proving themselves capable. They also reflect the competition that

exists between managerialist and professional discourses, which emphasise different performance measures.

Another interpretation of participants' emphasis on professional legitimacy arises from the history of social work as gendered and lacking in 'expert' knowledge, which has undermined its professional status (James, 2004; Lyons & Taylor, 2004; Orme, 2002). The interesting point in participants' discussions of professionalism was that whilst they articulated the value of social work and resisted notions of it as a 'lesser' profession, they likened the struggle of social work for professional legitimacy with that of nursing and teaching, also feminised professions, and on occasion positioned it as less powerful than professions such as law and medicine which they perceived to have greater prestige in society. These perceptions are in keeping with notions that biomedicine and law exist as dominant discourses that shape people's views of what constitutes an 'ideal' profession and 'the best' knowledge (Eraut, 1994; Healy, 2005), and that social work, because of its gendered nature (Lyons & Taylor, 2004), relative newness and diverse knowledge base, is undervalued.

What is of interest to note here with regard to the notion that social work is gendered is Fook et al.'s (2000) conceptualisation of social work expertise as comprising a holistic and contextual approach that emphasises process, intuition and creativity. Lyons and Taylor (2004) note that such a construction is linked to notions of knowledge where these attributes are designated as 'women's knowledge' (p. 74). This can be conceived as celebrating women's ways of knowing in social work and challenging discourses of professionalism and managerialism, which tend to privilege 'male knowledge'. However, it is a discourse that can potentially be deployed to dismiss social work professionalism as 'merely' women's knowledge and therefore 'less than' others, as has historically been the case. As discussed earlier in relation to helping, this is another example of the complex interrelationships between opposing discourses of social work that act to influence the make up of new social workers' identities.

Demonstrating professional expertise

The assumption that professionalism entails expertise was evident in participants' oscillation between positions of expert and non-expert, subject to their own and others'

expectations that they be 'expert'. To me, this indicates the broader positioning of social work in society where social workers, in a bid to counter the notion that social work is not a profession, have worked to develop professional identity, accountability and kudos through vehicles such as the ANZASW; a pursuit that is inevitably linked to notions of expertise. At the same time they have to account for clients' knowledge and honour them as experts in their own experience. These are notions that Camilleri (1996) also touches on when he observes the tension that exists between these positions.

Participants positioned themselves as having specialist knowledge and skill, which they were able to use for the benefit of clients yet resisted the notion that they could or should *fix it'*, which was something they themselves, other professionals and clients sometimes wanted. This dilemma is not new. Marsh & Triseliotis (1996) also note that being subject to the expectation that they fix things is problematic for new graduates. All participants in this research located themselves as new and therefore learners in the work environment yet the pressure to want to fix issues was stronger for participants with less experience. Some participants indicated that since commencing practice they felt less tempted to fix situations, partly because they preferred clients to determine outcomes and partly because they had reconciled themselves to the fact that organisational constraints meant that some issues could not be addressed in the way they would wish. For some participants the notion of social workers as expert was uncomfortable, given the traditional alignment of social work with the marginalised and their desire to achieve equality in the worker-client relationship.

The notion of professional expertise also needs to be considered in the context of social workers' positioning in relation to other professionals. Fook et al. (2000) do not shy away from the notion that social workers can achieve professional expertise. They conceptualise professional expertise as being 'holistic and contextual, rather than constituted of separate micro-struggles of competing interests' (p. 197). The notion that social work can be constructed as a series of 'micro-struggles' has connections, in my mind, with the tendency for social workers to focus on their professional position with regards to other professionals and management in terms of 'battling' for respect and resources, as already described, and to 'other' those they work with in order to retain a sense of self as valuable in the work environment, something that has also been noted by other authors (see Dominelli, 2004b; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000; Reynolds, 2007). I

speculate that this occurred for participants in this research when they experienced being subject to discourses that position social work as a 'lesser' profession and when the actions of others informed by these discourses, such as management or other professionals, acted to limit their professional power and autonomy. Whilst one participant tended to consistently locate herself as 'other' to clients, 'othering' was most evident in participants' talk about colleagues and other professionals. Participants, when positioning themselves as capable, discursively constructed binary relationships with others who were construed as less capable. They also emphasised the value of social work perspectives and interventions when compared to those of other professionals. Dominelli (2004b) notes that 'othering' occurs because identity has often been constructed within social work as 'fixed and immutable' (p. 77) so that social workers form rigid views of their own and others' identities and it becomes difficult to form effective dialogical relationships with those they are involved with. She proposes instead that identity is 'multi-faceted and fluid' (p. 77), a notion that Miehls and Moffatt (2000) agree with in their recommendation that social workers accept uncertainty within intersubjective and dialogical relationships as 'necessary for the development of an identity that is sensitive to the experience of the other' (p. 343). As discussed earlier in relation to gender, age and ethnicity, participants did also demonstrate the sense that their identities were constructed through such processes.

Fook et al. (2000) state that professional social workers, rather than being focussed on micro-struggles, should be able to perceive and work toward 'the bigger picture, and … broader levels of well-being' using such qualities as intuition and creativity and an emphasis on process, which are not necessarily connected to the length of time in practice but to confidence and the use of innovation in changing contexts (p. 197). Fook et al. (2000) note that the achievement of such a position relies on social workers' ability to 'assume both a *grounded, yet transcendent,* vision of their practice' (p. 196, emphasis in original) such as described by Harre Hindmarsh (1992) in her discussion about the position of 'detached strength'. This position entails the conceptualisation of social work as praxis, 'an intertwining of social theory and political action' (Harre Hindmarsh, 1992, p. 213). Within this position, it is accepted that social work is embedded in, and constrained by, an oppositional socio-political environment, which needs to be accounted for, and worked within, without losing one's own values or vision, ideally by the use of critical and political analysis. Interestingly, only one

participant in Harre Hindmarsh's (1992) research occupied this position. Similarly, Clare (2006) describes robust professional social workers as able to maintain 'provisional certainty' (p. 40) in which they 'feel required neither to colonise the thinking of others, nor to surrender their own knowledge and understanding' (p. 41). She notes that this is a difficult position to achieve so that most participants in her study 'enter[ed] into exchanges in the broader professional arena in a disempowered frame of mind or chose not to engage in them at all' (p. 41). Qualities of professional expertise and robustness as described here were demonstrated by some participants in this research sometimes, and by one consistently, which implies some measure of expertise and resilience on their part. However, the findings of this study echo those of Harre Hindmarsh (1992) that overall, participants remained concerned with the gaps between the ideal and the real.

Perhaps new graduates would be more comfortable in situations in which their identity feels fragmented if they had an understanding that identity is socially constructed in relationship with others and thus involves uncertainty and tension (Miehls & Moffatt, 2000). This being so, it might then be possible for them to focus beyond immediate encounters which are potentially conflictual to consider how to best address the ongoing processes of social work practice. Another aspect to this is for new graduates to be conscious of how different discourses operate to affect identity construction so that they can deconstruct and resist them. Social work education is one context in which this could be achieved so that new graduates are more fully prepared for the nuances of employment environments and thus more able to engage with them effectively, as suggested by Healy (2005). These observations have contributed to the recommendations made in Chapter Six.

Competent, reflective and boundaried practice

In positioning themselves as professional, some participants referred to the negative image portrayed of social workers by the media and/or the stereotypes that exist in society. These they resisted vehemently, citing their qualifications and ability to think critically and act competently. For participants, competent practice entailed the demonstration of concrete skills and knowledge but also the ability to critically analyse structural issues, practice contexts, and their selves in practice, ideas in keeping with

those who advocate for competency measures that emphasise critical and reflective practice (for example Dominelli, 1996; Fook et al., 2000).

Certainly, participants emphasised the need to engage in reflective practice, usually through supervision, in order to better understand their motivations and actions with clients. For some, supervision proved to be unsatisfactory because it was either not regular, emphasised casework and outcome measures, or they did not feel safe to disclose issues of a personal nature which included how they were coping with the work. The importance of reflective practice through supervision for all social workers but particularly new graduates has been noted by a number of authors (see Kane, 2001; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; O'Donoghue, 2003; Pockett, 1987; van Heugten and Rathgen, 2003). That a number of participants did not find supervision useful is of concern given its contribution to the formation of professional identity. This study has reiterated the need for employing organisations to ensure that supervision is prioritised and supervisors given adequate training to ensure that the needs of social workers are met, so that supervision is not reduced to only meeting the organisation's need for task planning and/or the assessment of the achievement of quantifiable outcomes.

There were different opinions expressed about the maintenance of boundaries as part of professional practice, with most participants seeking to achieve a clear delineation between themselves and clients. Others felt more comfortable finding a 'human' rather than 'professional-client' connection with service users. Participants acknowledged that boundaries were diffuse and changing depending on the nature of the relationship with clients as influenced by such characteristics as gender, age and ethnicity. It needs to be remembered that the notion of 'professional' boundaries has been critiqued from feminist and cultural perspectives because it does not necessarily take into account the most appropriate ways of working with diverse groups of people (Oakley, 1981; Mafile'o, 2005b; Zubrzycki, 2006).

Overall, participants each expressed a sense of self as professional but the diffuse nature of social work posed difficulties for some in their attempts to define themselves and work. Others felt that while they had an individual sense of self, collective social work identity was limited. Again, social worker registration was perceived to be a way to enhance the collective identity of social workers. Some participants echoed the

sentiments of Dominelli (2004b) and Miehls and Moffatt (2000) when they acknowledged that professional social work identities were fluid and multi-faceted, formed in response to their contexts and relationships with clients.

Social Workers Looking After Themselves

'Self-care' was not an area that I had thought of as particularly significant when I commenced this research. I took it for granted as integral to social work practice and although I found it challenging to maintain for myself, I did not give thought to it being an area of importance to others. However, it was as aspect of social work practice that participants positioned as important and its inclusion in the interview guide arose after it was specifically mentioned by participants in the first few interviews. Participants employed an interpretive repertoire of self-care to construct their subjectivities in response to the notion that social work is emotional labour. These subjectivities emphasised participants as 'person(s) first' in which they attempted to separate their personal and professional selves, acted as self-advocates in terms of accepting or rejecting work allocated by management depending on their capacity to do it, or acted subversively if it was perceived organisational dictates conflicted with personal values as to what constituted best practice.

Camilleri (1996) describes emotional labour, in which workers give of their selves in interactions with others, as 'the *work* of social work' (p. 80, emphasis in original), work that is not always recognised. He challenges notions of social work as merely technical-rational, noting that it also involves the application of helping/caring skills 'brought to the work by the person as part of their own personal repertoire' (p. 81). This insight is crucial to observations made by participants in this study in two ways. Firstly, it makes overt the *feeling* aspects of social work, for which participants believed they were un(der)prepared. Secondly, it identifies the connection between social workers' personal and professional selves. It was this personal-professional connection that some participants were finding difficult to hold in balance, which is something other authors have also identified (see Fook et al., 2000; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). Some participants in Marsh's and Triseliotis's (1996) study also articulated high degrees of stress, arising from worries about clients' situations and tension between bureaucratic and professional decision making, which they found difficult to leave at

work. Participants in this research knew what they 'should' do to look after themselves but some did not always feel able to put these notions into action because of the magnitude of the emotion and stress involved in practice, although it was an aspect of practice that felt easier to achieve over time and was identified by them as part of becoming more professional.

Forsberg (1999) discusses the social construction of clients' emotions in regard to child protection work and her observations are applicable here. Forsberg (1999) notes that sites of social service delivery develop 'feeling rules' for dealing with emotions and these 'guide emotion work and set limits to the interpretative resources available to the workers' (p. 121). I suggest that in some work environments these 'feeling rules' discount the emotional experiences of new social workers to such a degree that they feel unable to speak about them. This happens in two ways. Firstly, as Camilleri (1996) suggests, emotional work is not always recognised and secondly, an opposite position suggests that all social work is emotional and workers should expect this and know how to manage it. This second stance potentially individualises and pathologises emotional responses so that those who find social work difficult are negatively constructed as 'emotional' and 'not coping'. As indicated by one participant, management were perceived to not understand or be empathic toward the emotional *'toll'* on workers. Others spoke of the need to be perceived as managing emotions in the same way as others even though they also recognised that the sameness of experience and identity implied by such a stance was problematic, that is, they also perceived themselves as unique in the environment with their own ways of making meaning and managing themselves. One strategy utilised by a number of participants to manage stress was to change employment positions from their original post-qualifying job. Most participants had also considered career options that involved a move away from direct client contact or from social work altogether. Van Heugten and Rathgen (2003) made a similar observation of new social workers. Harre Hindmarsh (1992) discusses the issue of social workers' 'withdrawal' (p. 228) from practice through techniques such as changing employment, taking either annual, stress or sick leave or by leaving social work altogether; findings which this study confirms. She notes also the indication from other researchers that new social workers may only work two years in direct practice with clients before moving to other areas. The motivation for this movement was found

to be a desire to improve personal job satisfaction rather than to effect change, which was the motivation for movement to management positions.

Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) note that one way to look after oneself in social work is to be assertive regarding emotional needs at work. This was a position taken by a few participants who talked about advocating for themselves at work by limiting their workload when they felt that they were already working to capacity. This took the form of saying 'no' to management when more work was allocated to them or by asking colleagues for help. As one participant acknowledged, this was not an easy stance to take and required the demonstration of emotional 'fragility' in the form of crying for her to be taken seriously. Other participants felt unable to take up such a position in light of unspoken organisational rules that they should be coping. This accommodation to organisational culture is one strategy identified by Harre Hindmarsh (1992) that social workers use to manage oppositional, and hence stressful, work experiences.

Some participants engaged in subversion of organisational policies as a means of self-care. Harre Hindmarsh (1992) notes that one participant in her study engaged in subversion by undermining organisational procedures in order to provide more resources and power to clients and to maintain a sense of personal integrity. She points out that other researchers have found the same thing. Healy (2005) refers to her observations of change work occurring 'surreptitiously', without management's awareness or approval, within social service organisations (p. xiii). One concern Harre Hindmarsh (1992) raises with regard to positions of subversion is that they are not sustainable and result in social workers leaving the profession. Such an example from within this study came from one participant who occupied a position of subversion who had already identified that differences in values between herself and the organisation might require her to look for other work in the long-term.

Pockett (1987) and van Heugten and Rathgen (2003) recommend the development of more supportive systems, particularly in the area of supervision, for new social workers and the development of mutual expectations between workers and employers to ease some of the transitional challenges they face. I agree that such actions could potentially improve retention. Some participants in this study were still not able to access regular supportive supervision in which they felt safe to disclose their personal selves and their

emotional responses to the work. Working from the premise that language use is constitutive of meaning and identity, a lack of opportunity for such conversations within the workplace has serious implications for how social workers can construct their professional subjectivities. In the focus group participants talked about not being easily 'heard' by management and of *bitching and moaning* with colleagues. They also talked about the value of coming together in the focus group to constructively discuss notions of professionalism in social work practice, because it was confirming of their subjectivities. The lack of opportunity, within some employing organisations, for social workers to address their self-care needs via processes of formal peer support or supervision, which acknowledge the *structural* pressures on workers and allow for the open discussion of feelings so that they can form a sense of self as 'okay', will continue to have implications for staff retention.

The interpretive repertoire of self-care was significantly used to enable participants to locate themselves in a way that could account for their personal and professional selves and for the sometimes ill fit between these identities. The observation by Potter and Wetherell (1987) that interpretive repertoires are 'used to perform different sorts of accounting tasks' (p. 156) which are dependent on context and that produce variability and not consistency within individual accounts is important here. In the telling of their stories, participants occupied a range of subject positions some of which were contradictory. Potter and Wetherell (1987) suggest that when participants are oriented to the inconsistencies within their accounts they may employ another interpretive device in an attempt to resolve the tensions that exist between different interpretive repertoires (and subsequent subject positions). These tensions were particularly noticeable between the interpretive repertoires of 'social work as change', 'social work as helping' and 'being professional', in which participants positioned themselves as competent, caring and effective, and that of 'constraints', in which they accounted for their limited efficacy. Participants appeared to attempt to resolve this tension by utilising the interpretive repertoire of 'self-care'. This repertoire enabled them to construct the position of 'person(s) first' which provided them with a rationale for 'escape' from the emotional rigours of social work, but also enabled them to reconcile themselves with constraints to practice by allowing the locations of *'that's just how it is'* or *'you can't fight every single battle'* in which participants modified their expectations for practice by aligning them to what was achievable within the organisation, and/or by referring to

their futures when they would either leave social work altogether or, with more experience, *'move up the ranks'* where they would have more power and scope to address what they perceived as problematic. This repertoire, used alongside the repertoire of constraints, enabled participants to account for the difference between their practice ideals and realities. As discussed, the positions participants created are similar to those identified by other authors who have looked into the experiences of new social workers.

Constructing Professional Identities: What Does It Mean?

My purpose for examining the construction of social workers' professional subjectivities can be explained by the observation of Miehls and Moffatt (2000) that social workers are interested in understanding notions of identity primarily because this understanding can 'create new strategic possibilities for relationships' (p. 343). Whilst these authors were referring to human relationships, I consider that looking at the construction of professional identity discursively enables an examination of the relationships between new social workers and their practice contexts because how new social workers conceive of their selves has implications for their engagement with the organisational environment, their clients, and social work more broadly. As Edley (2001) notes, a discursive approach 'aims to examine not only how identities are produced on and for particular occasions, but also how history or culture both impinge upon and are transformed by those performances' (p. 190).

This research demonstrates how multiple and competing discourses have interacted to influence the constitution of participants' subjectivities in relation to social work through their utilisation of interpretive repertoires. These include gendered and cultural discourses as well as those of philanthropy, humanism, traditional approaches, critical social work which includes community development and consumer rights discourses, professionalism, managerialism, economic rationalism, law and biomedicine. Drawing on these discourses, participants utilised the interpretive repertoires of change, helping, being professional, constraints and self-care to construct key subjectivities in response to wider social discourses: 'change agent', 'helper', 'professional', 'capable but constrained' and 'person(s) first'. Subjectivities of 'change agent', 'helper' and 'professional' were easily produced, I think because the discourses that they are drawn

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from have become such an assumed part of what social work 'is' that resulting subject positions are comfortable locations for participants to occupy. The observation that social work students are enculturated into certain dominant discourses of social work so that they come to internalise certain subjectivities has also been made by others who agree that this has implications for their transition to work where competing discourses dominate (see Healy, 2000; Lyons & Taylor, 2004; Rojek et al., 1988; Smith, 1983).

The construction of the subject position of 'capable but constrained social worker' is indicative of the conflict that exists between discourses that constitute social work and organisational environments, and the subsequent challenges to practice that this entails for new practitioners as indicated by Ife (1997) in his observation that social workers are not necessarily well prepared to negotiate discourses of managerialism and the market because of their historical pre-occupation with negotiating professional and community (critical) discourses. The 'person(s) first' subject position enabled participants to account for the sometimes ill fit between their selves in the work environment by enabling them to create space from the emotional rigours of social work, which were created by the tensions existing between different discourses and resulting subject positions.

Participants volunteered for this research understanding that the research question was focussed on their constructions of professional identities. If what Edley (2001) observes about people producing identities for particular occasions is 'true' then it could be expected that participants would endeavour to (re)present themselves as 'professional'. I found that the use of different interpretive repertoires served to create locations in the research conversations that the participants could occupy that fitted with their notions of what social work 'should' entail or that could account for the times when social work did not fit these notions. So, whilst the subject positions constituted by participants were different and were influenced by a range of different discourses, they all served to assist them to maintain a sense of their selves as 'good' social workers, which of course is essential if they are to sustain a commitment to the occupation. However, as discussed, some authors would critique the assumption that a cohesive or secure sense of identity is either desirable or achievable because of the potential of such a stance for 'othering'. As Miehls and Moffatt (2000) observe, 'the disassembly of the self is essential to engaging responsibly with the other' (p. 344).

The other challenge here is that the achievement of a cohesive identity is premised on a comfortable fit between the self and the environment. However, as discussed, participants were continually subject to competing discourses within social work, the result of which was the sense that their selves were fragmented and contradictory. The best potential for remaining in social work long term is for this state to be recognised so that experiencing the self as 'disassembled' becomes accepted. This could be managed by encouraging social workers to utilise social constructionist and poststructural approaches to understand how their local contexts influence their sense of selves, and to discern and deconstruct discourses that inhibit their vision for social work practice in order that they might be resisted and selves constructed which enable them to maintain efficacy in often-challenging environments.

Summary

This chapter has discussed how participants utilised five interpretive repertoires of social work to construct particular subjectivities in relation to their practice. It located participants' subjectivities in relation to wider social discourses in which social work is historically and culturally embedded so that certain truth claims as to what constitutes social work have come to predominate. This research suggests that participants were enculturated into certain discourses during their education so that they came to internalise certain subjectivities, some of which were disrupted and some reinforced, by their entry into employment where competing discourses predominate. The positions of 'change agent' and 'helper' appeared to be comfortable locations for participants to occupy because of their embedded-ness in the truth claims of social work as intrinsically being about social change to achieve social justice, and helping or care. However, these identities were challenged when participants became subject to competing discourses dominant in their employment contexts such as managerialism, economic rationalism, biomedicine and law, which they resisted by constituting themselves as 'capable but constrained' and 'professional'. The interpretive repertoire of self-care was utilised to enable participants to construct a position of 'escape' from the emotional labour of social work and to account for the contradictions they noticed within their stories.

The next chapter draws this research project to a conclusion and includes some recommendations for education, practice and further research.

The motivation for this research was to better understand how beginning social work practitioners use language to construct for themselves a sense of professional identity in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. As discussed in Chapter One, this project had its genesis in my own experience as a new social worker in which I struggled to make full sense of the world of practice, especially in light of what I had expected of social work service delivery and of myself in that context. After discussions with other beginning practitioners, in which I found my experiences were not unique, I formulated a question about the construction of professional identity in relation to the experiences of beginning social work practitioners. This formed the basis for the research in which I utilised a discursive approach to examine how language use contributed to the participants' constitution of both meaning and their selves in social work practice.

In this concluding chapter I review the research process and findings. I consider the limitations to the research and make some recommendations for social work education, practice and further research. I end with my reflections.

The Research Reviewed

Purpose and process

The purpose of this research was to explore how new social workers used language to formulate their professional identities. Using the epistemological framework of social constructionism I undertook a small-scale qualitative study in which I employed poststructural theory to examine how ten participants discursively generated meanings about their social work contexts in order to form their professional identities. The research methods included individual interviews and a focus group and a discursive approach to analysis. I identified five interpretive repertoires, or ways of understanding and speaking about social work, used by participants to construct a number of subject positions in relation to social work practice and professionalism.

As discussed in the literature review, Burr (2003) describes social constructionism as being concerned with language use at both macro and micro levels. Combining these perspectives enabled an examination of how the local language practices of participants constituted their identities within the context of wider social discourses.

Summary of findings

The findings of this research echo much of what has been found by previous research regarding new social workers (for example Fook et al., 2000; Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; van Heugten & Rathgen, 2003; Vere-Jones, 2005) albeit theorised in a slightly different way. The common thread across these projects seems to be that new social workers often experience gaps between their ideals for practice and its 'reality' and this affects their sense of efficacy and confidence as practitioners. I have proposed that this gap arises because social workers' experiences and discursive practices occur in environments in which competing discourses operate. The observation that social work discourses conflict with those that operate in employment organisations is not new (see Davies & Leonard, 2004b; Healy, 2000 & 2005; Ife, 1997). So, whilst new practitioners have the agency to actively construct their own selves, they are limited by what concepts are historically, culturally or ideologically available to them (Billig, 2001; Davies & Harre, 1990) and at times these are in conflict, which can lead to the construction of conflicting identities.

Beginning social work practitioners belong to a range of communities including those of social work education, employing organisations, professional bodies and wider society (which includes their families of origin), each of which understand social work in different ways. These understandings can be conceived of as being drawn from wider social discourses that have formed over time so that certain truths about social work have come to predominate in different settings. These truth claims overlap and compete with each other and the implication for new social workers is that we experience our selves as multiple, fragmented and contradictory. The research findings suggest that social work students are enculturated into a number of truth claims about social work during their education which strongly influence the formation of their professional selves, and they are not necessarily prepared for the disruption to those selves that occurs when they become subject to the competing truth claims prevalent in

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their employment contexts and this is what contributes to tension between subject positions, for which they somehow need to account.

I found that participants each employed five interpretive repertoires to construct their subjectivities in relation to social work practice, including 'social work as involving change', 'social work as involving helping', 'constraints to social work practice', 'being professional' and 'self-care'. These repertoires were influenced by a number of existing social discourses that have formed since social work's inception (as a western construct) in the late nineteenth Century. These include gendered and cultural discourses and those of philanthropy, humanism, traditional and critical social work, professionalism, managerialism, economic rationalism, law and biomedicine. Participants utilised the interpretive repertoires to produce key subjectivities of 'change agent', 'helper', 'capable but constrained', 'professional' and 'person(s) first'.

Each of these subject positions was either complimentary to participants' notions of 'good' social work or could be used account for experiences when they were not able to achieve what they wished to. Participants used the interpretive repertoires of change and help to occupy the complimentary positions of being active in change and helping/caring processes with clients, but used the interpretive repertoire of constraints to account for difficulties encountered in these processes (and the subsequent disruption to these subjectivities) by locating problems as arising from organisational issues such as a lack of time or resources or managerial unresponsiveness. It was in this context that the interpretive repertoire of self-care was utilised to position participants as 'person(s) first' by which they could account for their emotional responses to social work and their ways of managing these by creating positions of 'escape' in which the priority was to keep themselves safe from the emotional rigours of the work. The interpretive repertoire of being professional was utilised to construct participants as qualified and competent social workers and to resist the positioning of social work as a 'lesser' profession.

The findings of this study confirm the observations of Taylor (2006) and Moffatt and Miehls (1999) that social workers generally seek to (re)present themselves as credible and competent. The discursive strategy of interpretive repertoires enabled participants to occupy different locations during interview and focus group conversations and to

thus (re)present multiple but also congruent selves. Participants were actively engaged in constructing themselves as capable professionals and disruptions to these subjectivities were accounted for by locating the source of ineffectiveness outside of themselves so they could keep their aspirations alive. This is significant because it implies that participants, in order to remain in social work, needed to be able to (re)present their selves as caring and competent individuals within a sometimes-inhospitable practice environment. However, participants did sometimes express self-doubt and a lack of confidence. This connects to another of the research findings, in keeping with previous research, that participants required structural support to sustain their development from 'mini' professionals. They identified this as being best achieved through clinical supervision. The notion of being professional was problematic for participants as they continually needed to negotiate their expertise in relation to their desire to develop collaborative relationships with clients. Working through such issues can be done via supervision but this needs to be supported by employing organisations and remain an integral component of their work.

Another research finding that has implication for practice was the focus by participants on micro rather than macro interventions. Again, this echoes the findings of others that new social workers often feel more effective in achieving change at this level (Dixon et al, 2003; Dominelli, 2004b; Fook et al, 2000). It has been suggested that this could be because of the influence of discourses such as traditional social work and humanism (Rojek et al., 1988) and managerialism (Dominelli, 2004b). It may also be because social work education emphasises the development of skills aimed at individual encounters and/or because change at an individual level is easiest to perceive. Also, a focus on micro interventions often occurs in clinical settings and until new practitioners are comfortable within the organisation it can be difficult to engage with wider issues. Some express concern at the lack of focus on structural issues (Dixon et al, 2003; Dominelli, 2004b; Fook et al, 2000). For this reason Healy (2005) recommends a melding of poststructural and critical theories in order that practice be reconceptualised to account for the impact of local contexts and 'small' gains in practice. Some beginning practitioners do work in areas which emphasise macro interventions, such as community development, and a consideration of interpretive repertoires and resulting subjectivities in this setting could be explored to determine how this context influences

what social work practitioners consider as important to identity construction and practice.

Recommendations for education and practice arising from these findings are discussed in a later section. Next, I discuss the limitations to this research.

Limitations

This study was qualitative and whilst this approach facilitated access to 'rich descriptions' of participants' experiences and ways of making sense of the world, it means that findings cannot be generalised (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 10). Also, the collection of such rich descriptions was a 'double-edged sword' to some degree. I was able to collect a large amount of information that could have been interpreted in a myriad of ways. In order to answer the research question I put aside a lot of other interesting information that I was tempted to include but which would not have contributed to answering the question from the angle I had taken. This material could be further investigated in subsequent research.

Edley (2001) notes that history and culture 'impinge upon' but are also 'transformed by' people's discursive constitution of identities (p. 190). This research has focussed on participants' language use at a micro level and the influence of wider social discourses on this. How these local practices act to change discourses more broadly over time has not been examined. Whilst the link between discourse and power was acknowledged, it was not explored further. This could be something addressed in future research.

Participation in the research was deliberately limited to those who worked within my home region, had a degree-level or post-graduate social work qualification and were within their first three years of practice. Whilst no other restrictions were placed on participation, the sample was limited by ethnicity and gender (although the constitution of nine women and one man is reflective of the gendered make up of the profession).

In targeting new graduates employed in social work, this research excluded those who may have chosen not to practise social work and those who have already left practice

and so, potentially important information about the transition from education to employment and the construction of identities was missed.

In hindsight, the research would have been strengthened by holding the focus group later in the process to enable the reporting back to participants my interpretation of data in terms of the utilisation of interpretive repertoires and subject positions as a means of understanding identity rather than the 'concrete' themes of experience that were presented and discussed. This would have provided participants with an opportunity to respond to my interpretations and would have contributed to increased rigour as described in Chapter Three.

Recommendations for Education, Practice and Further Research

The combination of research findings and limitations leads to the recommendations made here for education, practice and further research.

Education

Social work educators could help ease the transition between education and employment by preparing students to experience their professional selves as multiple and fragmented rather than singular and cohesive. Using a poststructural approach to present social work truths as constituted by competing discourses would enable new social workers to conceive of their subjectivities as constructed in relation to overlapping and contradictory discourses. They could then act to deconstruct and resist, or utilise, these discourses in the making of their identities and practices, rather than perceiving challenges to practice and subsequent dissonance as the result of any inherent 'weakness' in themselves.

Social work education could also assist students to understand and mediate the multifaceted nature of change at micro and macro levels. As already discussed, social work takes place in complex and challenging environments and to be effective one needs to learn how to manage these. Students need to be equipped to effectively utilise supervision and strategies for self-care in order to strengthen their resilience in these environments.

Practice

In this research I have taken a stance by which I wish to problematise 'reality' (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000) and emphasise the constitutive power of language in identity formation. However, I continue to recognise the impact of material issues on new social workers' constructions of self. And so, I echo the recommendations made by others (Harre Hindmarsh, 1992; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Pockett, 1987; van Heugten & Rathgen, 2003) that employing organisations ensure supportive systems are in place for new graduates particularly with regard to supervision so that they can critically consider their selves in the work environment and receive emotional support. Induction programmes and the availability of mentors, especially in the first year, could assist with strengthening new workers' understandings of social work practice within particular organisational settings. Staff retention will continue to be problematic unless such basic issues are adequately addressed.

I also agree with the suggestion by Healy (2005), discussed earlier, that poststructural and critical theories be melded to enable a reconsideration of what counts as significant social work practice. Whilst structural analysis and change should not be discounted, it can be discouraging for new social workers to feel as if they are 'failing' should they not achieve large-scale change. There needs to be an appreciation for the change work that occurs at a local level amidst existing constraints so that new social workers can be affirmed in their social work practice rather than disillusioned by their seeming lack of effectiveness. This could be achieved in both education and practice by working through scenarios with students on how change occurs at a local level and how practitioners can be part of such change. Understanding direct practice with clients as valuable change work is crucial to this process. Comprehending issues at a macro level is an important analytical tool that contributes to understanding clients' situations but new practitioners need to accept that it is not always possible to effect change at this level in the short term (if at all). Analysing macro issues can assist practitioners to understand why and how organisational practices occur and to harness these to good effect.

Research

Further research into social workers' professional identities could look at a number of aspects from a social constructionist perspective.

Poststructural theory emphasises the situated and partial nature of knowledge. For this reason, constituting samples of participants from particular fields of practice or educational institutions, or by ethnic or cultural group, length of experience or age, or any other characteristic for that matter, would provide insight into whether particular truth claims exert more or less influence over particular groups.

The construction of social worker professionalism and/or identities could be considered from the perspectives of other professional or client groups.

Research could be undertaken with new graduates who chose not to practise social work or who left the occupation within two or three years in order to further understand issues pertinent to identity construction and staff retention.

A discursive approach could be used to undertake document analyses of media stories, or professional codes of practice or ethics, or even legislation, to discern how language employed constitutes social work professionalism and/or subjectivities.

An analysis of the relationship between discourses and power would be useful to further explain how new social workers constitute their relationships with(in) their employment environments and with clients. I have used a particular theoretical framework to interpret this data. Another approach could be to utilise Foucault's ideas about technologies of power, relations of power and the production of docile bodies (see Faubion, 2001; Gordon, 1980; Rabinow, 1991), which would be an interesting project.

My Final Reflections

In beginning this research I conceived of professional identity as singular, that is, one had or did not have a sense of professional self and the possession of this identity had to do with one's confidence and/or how well the employing organisation provided material support for the achievement of social workers' goals. My initial intention in posing the

research question was to examine *what* happened in the work environment to support or constrain *how* professional identity developed so that participants could be considered typologically. Somehow, through reading and thinking about the topic and through talking to participants, I came to understand identity construction to be about our subjective experiences in relation to multiple and competing discourses that have formed about social work over time and which we, as social actors, draw upon or resist to build our selves, which are also multiple and competing. Hence, the change from the title of 'I am a social worker (but what am I exactly?)', my own question formed at the commencement of the project, to the final title of 'sometimes we are everything and nothing in the same breath', a response given by Kate during the interview.

In considering identity formation to be the result of the influence of various discourses, I have found that my own subjectivities have acted to constrain my understanding. My belief in a material world and adherence to critical (as well as poststructural) theory has sometimes led me to drift (unintentionally) toward a focus on the *what* of practice contexts rather than *how* participants make sense of that context to build their selves. In this regard, I have not always managed to extend my thinking about 'post' ideas to the degree I had hoped to.

My understandings are just that, *my* understandings. They are but one of many possible interpretations of this topic and they are certainly situated and partial. I also wish to acknowledge that even as my thinking has evolved during this project, what I present of participants' stories is a 'snapshot'. Their thinking will inevitably have evolved too, and they may not hold the same perspectives as when they spoke to me a year or more ago.

In coming to the end of a research that has occupied much of my thinking over its two-year undertaking, I feel something akin to James' (2004) observations that 'in the course of writing... certain issues have been elided, others have not been addressed, and yet others have been insufficiently substantiated or perhaps glossed over' (p. 53). However, I hope I have captured some of the complexities entailed in social work practice and the formation of beginning practitioners' professional identities, and that this thesis makes a useful contribution to ongoing conversations about these issues.

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Appendix I: Information Sheet

'I am a social worker (but what am I, exactly?)' Beginning social work practitioners' constructions of professional identity

INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher: Carmen Payne
Email: carmen.payne@hotmail.com

Supervisors: Dr Carole Adamson
BSW co-ordinator and senior lecturer at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University, Wellington.
Email: c.e.adamson@massey.ac.nz
Telephone: (04) 801 2794 ext. 6481

Professor Robyn Munford
Head of the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University, Palmerston North.
Email: r.munford@massey.ac.nz
Telephone: (04) 8012794 ext. 2825

This research is being undertaken as part of a Master of Social Work degree at Massey University.

The purpose of the research is to explore how social work degree graduates within their first three years of practice achieve a sense of professional identity.

Who can participate?

I am interested in speaking to social work degree graduates who are currently within their first three years of employment and who work in the wider Wellington region.

Advertising in the ANZASW 'noticeboard' and word-of-mouth is being used to extend an invitation to potential research participants.

What will participation involve?

Participation will involve one individual in-depth interview and one focus group. These will be held between June and October 2006.

The individual in-depth interview will last between one and two hours. I am happy to arrange a venue that suits you.

The focus group is intended to include all participants and will last for approximately two hours.

The interview and focus group will be held outside usual working hours and every effort will be made to organise a time that is convenient to you.

The interview and the focus group will be audio taped. A transcript of your interview will be made available to you and you are welcome to make changes as you see fit.

How will the information be used?

A poststructural and critical theoretical perspective will be used to undertake a thematic analysis of information gathered.

Information gathered will be used to complete a written thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Master of Social Work degree.

A summary of the research findings will be made available to you if you indicate on the consent form that you would like it.

What about confidentiality?

Every effort will be made to protect your identity and to keep information confidential. You will be able to choose a pseudonym, which will be used in transcripts and any other written material arising from the research. Any other identifying features, such as place of employment (other than field of practice) will not be included in the thesis.

All information gathered will be stored securely for five years in accordance with the Massey University Policy on Research Practice and then destroyed. Audiotapes will be returned to you if you indicate your preference for this on the consent form.

Please note that an absolute guarantee of confidentiality *cannot* be made.

Rights of Participants

You are under no obligation to participate in this research project. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question.
- ask for the audiotape to be turned off at any time during the interview.
- withdraw from the research at any time
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher.
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Thank you for your interest in this research project. Please feel free to contact me, or my supervisors, if you have any questions. Please feel free to pass on my contact details to anyone else who may be interested in participating.

Kind regards

Carmen Payne
BSW (Hons)
MANZASW
Registered social worker

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 06/14. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x6929, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.

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'I am a social worker (but what am I, exactly?)' Beginning social work practitioners' constructions of professional identity

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audio taped.

I wish/do not wish to have my tapes returned to me.

I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the Focus Group

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

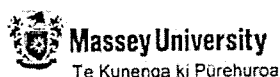I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of the research findings.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name - printed _____

Appendix III: Application to Massey University
Human Ethics Committee

Massey University
Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

Application No: ___ / ___
This number is assigned when your application is accepted.
Quote on all documentation to participants and the Committee.

Human Ethics Application

FOR APPROVAL OF PROPOSED RESEARCH/TEACHING/EVALUATION
INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS
(All applications are to be typed and presented using language that is free from jargon and comprehensible to lay people)

SECTION A

1. **Project Title** 'I am a social worker (but what am I, exactly?)'. Beginning social work practitioners' constructions of professional identity.

   Projected start date for data collection June/July 2006   **Projected end date** November/December 2006

   In no case will approval be given if recruitment and/or data collection has already begun.

2. **Applicant Details** *(Select the appropriate box and complete details)*

ACADEMIC STAFF APPLICATION (excluding staff who are also students)

Full Name of Staff Applicant/s

School/Department/Institute

Campus *(mark one only)*   Albany ☐   Palmerston North ☐   Wellington ☐

Telephone   **Email Address**

STUDENT APPLICATION

Full Name of Student Applicant   Carmen Larisa Payne

Employer (if applicable)

Telephone   **Email Address**   carmen.payne@hotmail.com

Postal Address

Full Name of Supervisor(s)   1) Dr Carole Adamson 2) Professor Robyn Munford

School/Department/Institute   School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work

Campus *(mark one only)*   Albany ☐   Palmerston North ☐   Wellington ☒

Telephone (04) 801 2794   **Email Address**   c.e.adamson@massey.ac.nz

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GENERAL STAFF APPLICATION

Full Name of Applicant

Section

Campus *(mark one only)*   Albany ☐   Palmerston North ☐   Wellington ☐

Telephone   **Email Address**

Full Name of Line Manager

Section

Telephone   **Email Address**

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3. Type of Project *(mark one only)*

Staff Research/Evaluation: Academic Staff General Staff	☐ ☐	Student Research: Qualification Points Value of Research	X MSW 100

If other, please specify:

4. Summary of Project

Please outline in no more than 200 words in lay language why you have chosen this project, what you intend to do and the methods you will use.

(Note: all the information provided in the application is potentially available if a request is made under the Official Information Act. In the event that a request is made, the University, in the first instance, would endeavour to satisfy that request by providing this summary. Please ensure that the language used is comprehensible to all)

Local and overseas research into the experiences of new social workers notes that the transition from education to employment is often fraught, as workers struggle to reconcile their aspirations for practice with their actual experiences. My personal experience echoes these findings. Beginning employment in 2003 as a new social work graduate, I struggled to form a sense of professional identity as I experienced a gap between my ideals for social work and the 'real world' of paid employment. This raised my interest into the experiences of other beginning social workers.

This research aims to ask a small number of beginning social workers about their sense of professional identity. Emphasis will be on how beginning social workers develop a narrative to make sense of their work and to build a professional identity.

The research method will involve holding individual in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion with these participants which will be audio tape-recorded and transcribed. Participants will be given a copy of their own transcript prior to the focus group and invited to make changes and/or offer their own interpretations of information provided. Common themes arising from participants' experiences/interpretations will be explored and the findings presented in the form of a masters level thesis.

5. List the Attachments to your Application, e.g. Completed "Screening Questionnaire to Determine the Approval Procedure" (compulsory), Information Sheet/s *(indicate how many)*, Translated copies of Information Sheet/s, Consent Form/s *(indicate of how many)*, Translated copies of Consent Form/s, Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement, Confidentiality Agreement *(for persons other than the researcher / participants who have access to project data)*, Authority for Release of Tape Transcripts, Advertisement, Health Checklist, Questionnaire, Interview Schedule, Evidence of Consultation, Letter requesting access to an institution, Letter requesting approval for use of database, Other *(please specify)*.

List of Attachments:

Completed screening questionnaire to determine the approval procedure
Participant information sheet
Participant consent form, which includes focus group confidentiality agreement
Authority for release of tape transcripts
Advertisement to appear in ANZASW 'noticeboard'
Interview and focus group guide
Letter to education providers informing of the project

SECTION B: PROJECT INFORMATION

General

6   I/we wish the protocol to be heard in a closed meeting (Part II).   Yes ☐ No ☒
(If yes, state the reason in a covering letter)

7   Does this project have any links to other approved Massey University   Yes ☐ No ☒
Human Ethics Committee application/s?

If yes, list HEC protocol number/s and relationship/s.

8   Is approval from other Ethics Committees being sought for the project?   Yes ☐ No ☒
If yes, list the other Ethics Committees.

9   For staff research, is the applicant the only researcher?   Yes ☐ No ☐
If no, list the names and addresses of all members of the research team.

Project Details

10   State concisely the aims of the project.

The primary aim of this project is to understand how beginning social workers construct a sense of professional identity.

11   Give a brief background to the project to place it in perspective and to allow the project's significance to be assessed. *(No more than 200 words in lay language)*

Local and overseas research into the experiences of new social workers notes that the transition from education to employment is often fraught, as workers struggle to reconcile their aspirations for practice with their actual experiences. The experience of the 'real' not meeting the 'ideal' can be construed as reality shock and has consequences for social workers' achievement of a professional identity and willingness/ability to remain in practice. The implications of this for social work affect both educational institutions and employing agencies. Limited research into this area has occurred within Aotearoa/New Zealand. This project aims to add to the existing body of knowledge by using a poststructural and critical theoretical approach to explore how participants develop a narrative to make sense of their experiences in order to form a sense of professional identity.

12   Outline the research procedures to be used, including approach/procedures for collecting data. Use a flow chart if necessary.

1. Making contact with participants:
Use of purposeful and snowball sampling procedures to locate social work degree graduates within their first two years of employment in the wider Wellington region including:
Advertising in the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) monthly newsletter.
Letter and copy of information sheet to education providers to request that they inform graduates of their social work degree programme.
Information made available to potential participants on behalf of the researcher by Massey University BSW staff.
Information provided to representatives of social work agencies at the Massey University Social Work Professional Advisory Group at Wellington to pass on to potential participants.

2. Data collection methods:
One individual in-depth interview of up to two hours with each participant.
One focus group with all interview participants of approximately two hours. This will be held after the completion of the individual interviews.
Interviews and focus group will be audio-taped and transcribed.

3. Data analysis:
Transcripts will be made available to participants for interpretation/editing/comment prior to the focus group.
A thematic analysis will be undertaken of transcripts within post structural and critical theoretical framework.

4. Presentation of findings:
A summary of findings will be made available to participants.
Findings will be written up as thesis for Master of Social Work degree.

13 **Where will the project be conducted? Include information about the physical location/setting.**

Interviews will be conducted in a location most suitable to the participants. This could include their home or a neutral venue that the researcher will take responsibility to secure as appropriate.

The focus group will be held in a neutral venue that is easy for all participants to access.

14 **If the study is based overseas, specify which countries are involved. Outline how local requirements (if any) have been complied with.**

15 **Describe the experience of the researcher and/or supervisor to undertake this type of project?**

The researcher, Carmen Payne, is a graduate of the Bachelor of Social Work Degree (first class honours) from the Wellington campus of Massey University and has had two and a half years working in paid employment as a social worker. She has completed a post-graduate paper in advanced research methods from Massey University School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work

Supervisor, Dr Carole Adamson, is a co-ordinator of the Bachelor of Social Work Degree at the Wellington campus of Massey University. Her research interests are the impact of trauma and critical incidents on social workers' practice.

Second supervisor, Professor Robyn Munford, is head of the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University and has undertaken a variety of research with different communities in Aotearoa/New Zealand, for example women with disabilities, families and children

16 **Describe the peer review process used in assessing the ethical issues present in this project.**

In addition to discussion with supervisors, discussion has occurred with post graduate colleagues in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at the Wellington campus.

Participants

17   Describe the intended participants.

The intended participants will be social workers who have a New Zealand degree qualification and less than two years' experience in paid social work employment. Participants will be drawn from the wider Wellington region only.

18   How many participants will be involved?

Between 10 and 12

What is the reason for selecting this number?
(Where relevant, attach a copy of the Statistical Justification to the application form)

This is a qualitative study, the focus of which is to obtain rich data from participants. The findings will not be statistically significant and will not be able to be generalised. To be able to complete the project within the specified time frame the number of participants needs to be limited.

19   Describe how potential participants will be identified and recruited?

An advertisement will be placed in the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers monthly 'noticeboard', which is posted out to all members.
A letter explaining the research project and an information sheet will be sent to education providers which run a Bachelor of Social Work programme, requesting that they inform new graduates of the research.
Academic staff at Massey University will provide information to graduates and the Social Work Advisory Group.
Other potential participants may be located by word-of-mouth via social work networks.

20   Does the project involve recruitment through advertising?   Yes X   No ☐
(If yes, attach a copy of the advertisement to the application form)

21   Does the project require permission of an organisation (e.g. an   Yes ☐   No X
educational institution, an academic unit of Massey University or a
business) to access participants or information?

If yes, list the organisation(s).

(Attach a copy of the request letter(s), e.g. letter to Board of Trustees,PVC,HoD/I/S,CEO etc to the application form. Include this in your list of attachments (Q5). Note that some educational institutions may require the researcher to submit a Police Security Clearance)

22   Who will make the initial approach to potential participants?

Potential participants will be approached via advertising in the ANZASW monthly newsletter and by a request to BSW educators to forward information to potential participants.
Potential participants will then be able to choose whether to make contact with the researcher or supervisors in order to receive more information about the project and/or to volunteer to participate.

23   Describe criteria (if used) to select participants from the pool of potential participants.

To keep the research project manageable, the group of participants will be drawn from the wider Wellington region and will not exceed 12.

In order to gather a range of information, potential participants will be selected with the view to including:
1. Equal numbers of graduates from degree programmes offered by different education providers.
2. Social workers from a range of fields of practice, for example; child protection, health, youth, elderly.

24   How much time will participants have to give to the project?

Approximately 6 hours over six to eight weeks:
One individual in-depth interview of up to two hours.
One focus group of up to two hours.
Time to read and reflect on transcripts.

Data Collection

25   Does the project include the use of participant questionnaire/s?   Yes [ ]   No [X]

(If yes, attach a copy of the Questionnaire/s to the application form and include this in your list of attachments (Q5))

If yes: i)   indicate whether the participants will be anonymous, (i.e.   Yes [ ]   No [ ]
their identity unknown to the researcher).

ii)   describe how the questionnaire will be distributed and collected.

(If distributing electronically through Massey IT, attach a copy of the request letter to the Director, Information Technology Services to the application form Include this in your list of attachments (Q5))

26   Does the project involve observation of participants? If yes, please describe.   Yes [ ]   No [X]

27   Does the project include the use of focus group/s?   Yes [X]   No [ ]

(If yes, attach a copy of the Confidentiality Agreement for the focus group to the application form)

28   Does the project include the use of participant interview/s?   Yes [X]   No [ ]

(If yes attach a copy of the Interview Questions/Schedule to the application form)

If yes, describe the location of the interview and time length, including whether it will be in work time.
(If the latter, ensure the researcher asks permission for this from the employer).

Interviews will occur at a location suitable to the participants, for example, their own home or a neutral venue, which the researcher will take responsibility for organising.
Length of interviews will be between one and two hours.
Interviews will be conducted outside of work hours.

29   Does the project involve audiotaping?   Yes [X]   No [ ]

30   Does the project involve videotaping?   Yes [ ]   No [X]

(If agreement for taping is optional for participation, ensure there is explicit consent on the Consent Form)

31   If taping is used, will the tape be transcribed?   Yes [X]   No [ ]

If yes, state who will do the transcribing.

(If not the researcher, a Transcriber's Confidentiality Agreement is required – attach a copy to the application form. Normally, transcripts of interviews should be provided to participants for editing, therefore an Authority For the Release of Tape Transcripts is required – attach a copy to the application form. However, if the researcher considers that the right of the participant to edit is inappropriate, a justification should be provided below)

The researcher.

32 **Does the project require permission to access databases?**   Yes ☐ No ☒

(If yes, attach a copy of the request letter/s to the application form. Include this in your list of attachments (Q5))

(Note: If you wish to access the Massey University student database, written permission from Director, National Student Relations should be attached)

33 **Who will carry out the data collection?**

The researcher.

SECTION C: BENEFITS / RISK OF HARM (Refer Code Section 3, Para 10)

34 **What are the possible benefits (if any) of the project to individual participants, groups, communities and institutions?**

Participants may benefit by having the chance to reflect on the process of becoming a social worker and having their experience put in context by being provided with an overview of previous research into this topic area, which shows that in general new practitioners have similar experiences. Participants may also benefit from having an opportunity to dialogue about their experiences with others via the focus group. Social work educators and employers may benefit by having access to information that casts light onto the effects on new social workers of transitioning from education to employment and to understand how this process can be improved for new practitioners.

35 **What discomfort (physical, psychological, social), incapacity or other risk of harm are individual participants likely to experience as a result of participation?**

Discussion of, and reflection on, experiences by participants may lead to psychological discomfort if they are unhappy with their work experience and are questioning the value of a social work qualification and of continuing work in this field. Previous research shows that new practitioners may experience some dissonance in the beginning years of social work.

36 **Describe the strategies you will use to deal with any of the situations identified in Q35.**

Social workers in practice have access to professional supervision as well as employee assistance programmes, which provide access to free and confidential counselling. Participants will be encouraged to use existing professional supervision arrangements or employee assistance programmes to address any issues raised. The researcher will have information available about accessing external supervision if required by participants.
Participants will be clearly informed of their rights, which include the right to withdraw from the research at any time prior to the focus group discussion.

37 **What is the risk of harm (if any) of the project to the researcher?**

It is possible that the researcher may feel a desire to psychologically 'rescue' participants who express disappointment/ambivalence with their work experience.
The researcher will attend individual interviews alone.

38 **Describe the strategies you will use to deal with any of the situations identified in Q37.**

Discussion of any emotional/psychological issues which arise will occur at thesis supervision. Supervision will be scheduled for every four to six weeks with agreement that email and face-to-face contact can occur in addition to scheduled meetings.
Supervisors will be aware of time and venue of each interview. The researcher will take a mobile phone.

39   What discomfort (physical, psychological, social) incapacity or other risk of harm are groups/communities and institutions likely to experience as a result of this research?
      None anticipated

40   Describe the strategies you will use to deal with any of the situations identified in Q39.

41   Is ethnicity data being collected as part of the project?   Yes [X] No [ ]

      If yes: i)   will the data be used as a basis for analysis?   Yes [ ] No [X]

               ii) justify this use in terms of the number of participants.
      (Note that harm can be done through an analysis based on insufficient numbers)

      If no: i)   justify this approach, given that in some research an analysis based on ethnicity may yield results of value to Maori and to other groups.

      The research will not be endeavouring to use ethnicity as a basis for analysis in its own right. However, participants may identify ethnicity as significant to their experience of forming a professional social work identity. This information will be included in the research findings in the context that ethnicity is one of many personal characteristics (for example age, gender, sexuality, disability, religion) that affect a person's life experience and worldview. This is particularly pertinent in social work as people can choose to enter the profession based on their experiences of discrimination in any of these areas, with the hope that they can bring about social justice and social change.

42   If participants are children/students in a pre-school/school/tertiary setting, describe the arrangements you will make for children/students who are present but not taking part in the research.
      (Note that no child/student should be disadvantaged through the research)

SECTION D: INFORMED & VOLUNTARY CONSENT (Refer Code Section 3, Para 11)

43   By whom and how, will information about the research be given to potential participants?
      Potential participants will receive an information sheet either through their response to advertising or by receiving it from the social work department of the educational institute they attended. Potential participants will be invited to contact the researcher or supervisors to receive any additional information they may require beyond what is contained in the information sheet.

44   Will consent to participate be given in writing?   Yes [X] No [ ]
      (Attach copies of Consent Form's to the application form)

      If no, justify the use of oral consent.

45   Will participants include persons under the age of 16?   Yes [ ] No [X]
      If yes: i)   indicate the age group and competency for giving consent.

               ii) indicate if the researcher will be obtaining the consent of   Yes [ ] No [ ]
                    parent(s)/caregiver(s).
      (Note that parental/caregiver consent for school-based research may be required by the school even when children are competent. Ensure Information Sheets and Consent Forms are in a style and language appropriate for the age group)

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46   Will participants include persons whose capacity to give informed   Yes ☐ No ☒
consent may be compromised?

If yes, describe the consent process you will use.

47   Will the participants be proficient in English?   Yes ☒ No ☐
If no, all documentation for participants (Information Sheets/Consent Forms/Questionnaire etc)
must be translated into the participants' first-language
(Attach copies of the translated Information Sheet/Consent Form etc to the application form)

SECTION E: PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY ISSUES (Refer Code Section 3, Para 12)

48   Will any information be obtained from any source other than the   Yes ☐ No ☒
participant?

If yes, describe how and from whom.

49   Will any information that identifies participants be given to any person   Yes ☐ No ☒
outside the research team?

If yes, indicate why and how.

50   Will the participants be anonymous (i.e. their identity unknown to the   Yes ☐ No ☒
researcher?)

If no, explain how confidentiality of the participants' identities will be maintained in the treatment
and use of the data.

Participants will choose a pseudonym that will be used in transcripts and any written material
arising from the research. Details about participants' employment, such as specific geographical
location and employing agency, will not be included in the research.
The researcher and supervisors only will have access to audio-tapes and transcripts.
Discussion will occur with participants prior to the inclusion of any details in written material that
may increase the risk of them being able to be identified.

51   Will an institution (e.g. school) to which participants belong be named   Yes ☐ No ☒
or be able to be identified?

If yes, explain how you have made the institution aware of this?

52   Outline how and where:

i) the data will be stored, and

(Pay particular attention to identifiable data, e.g. tapes, videos and images)

Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office at Massey University. The
researcher holds the only key.

Audio-tapes and transcripts will be identified using the pseudonym chosen by the participant.

ii) Consent Forms will be stored

Consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office at home. The researcher
holds the only key.

(Note that Consent Forms should be stored separately from data)

53   i)   Who will have access to the data/Consent Forms?

The researcher only.

ii)   How will the data/Consent Forms he protected from unauthorised access?

The data and consent forms will be stored in locked filing cabinets to which the researcher holds the only keys. The filing cabinets will be located in offices that will be locked when unoccupied.

54   Describe arrangements you have made for the disposal of the data/Consent Forms when the five-year storage period (ten years for health-related research) is up?

(For student research the Massey University HOD Institute/School/Section / Supervisor / or nominee should be responsible for the eventual disposal of data)

(Note that although destruction is the most common form of disposal, at times, transfer of data to an official archive may be appropriate)

Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding. The researcher will be responsible for this. Participants will be given copies of transcripts for comment and are able to receive their audio tapes back if they wish to.

SECTION F: DECEPTION (Refer Code Section 3, Para 13)

55   Is deception involved at any stage of the project?   Yes [ ] No [X]

If yes, justify its use and describe the debriefing procedures.

SECTION G: CONFLICT OF ROLE/INTEREST (Refer Code Section 3, Para 14)

56   Is the project to be funded in any way from sources external to Massey University?   Yes [ ] No [X]

If yes: i)   state the source.

    ii)   does the source of the funding present any conflict of interest with regard to the research topic?

57   Does the researcher/s have a financial interest in the outcome of the project?   Yes [ ] No [X]

If yes, explain how the conflict of interest situation will be dealt with.

58   Is there any professional or other relationship between the researcher and the participants? (e.g. employer/employee, lecturer/student, practitioner/patient, researcher/family member)   Yes [ ] No [X]

If yes: i)   describe the relationship, and;

    ii)   indicate how the resulting conflict of role will be dealt with.

SECTION H: COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS (Refer Code Section 4, Para 23)

59   Will any payments or other compensation be given to participants?   Yes [ ] No [X]

SECTION I: TREATY OF WAITANGI (Refer Code Section 2)

60 Are Maori the primary focus of the project?   Yes ☐   No ☒

If yes: Answer Q61 – 64

If no, outline: i) what Maori involvement there may be, and

          ii) how this will be managed.

  i)   Some participants may identify as Maori and this may be a factor they discuss as being of significance to them in relation to the research question, ie: the formation of professional social work identity (as discussed in Q.41)

  ii)   The researcher is aware of the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and will work with participants in accordance to these. Cultural supervision will be sought via Massey University School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work as appropriate. This is a standard process used for all such research in the School.

61 Is the researcher competent in te reo Maori and tikanga Maori?   Yes ☐   No ☐

If no, outline the processes in place for the provision of cultural advice.

62 Identify the group/s with whom consultation has taken place or is planned and describe the consultation process.

(Where consultation has already taken place, attach a copy of the supporting documentation to the application form, e.g. a letter from an iwi authority)

63 Describe any ongoing involvement of the group/s consulted in the project.

64 Describe how information resulting from the project will be shared with the group/s consulted?

SECTION J: CULTURAL ISSUES (Refer Code Section 3, Para 15)

65 Other than those issues covered in Section I, are there any aspects of the   Yes ☒   No ☐
project that might raise specific cultural issues?

If yes, explain. Otherwise, proceed to Section K.

The pool of participants may include individuals from a range of ethnic/cultural backgrounds

66 What ethnic or social group/s (other than Maori) does the project involve?

The project is reliant on the participation of beginning social workers. It is anticipated that participants may come from a range of ethnic/cultural/social groups. The specifics of this will not be known until participants have been confirmed.

67 Does the researcher speak the language of the target population?   Yes ☒   No ☐

If no, specify how communication with participants will be managed.

68 Describe the cultural competence of the researcher for carrying out the project.

(Note that where the researcher is not a member of the cultural group being researched, a cultural advisor may be necessary)

The researcher is a registered social worker and has had to demonstrate cultural competence to become registered.

The need for cultural advice and/or supervision will be determined once participants have been confirmed. If it is deemed necessary, an approach will be made to appropriate academic staff at the Massey University School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work.

69   Identify the group/s with whom consultation has taken place or is planned.

(Where consultation has already taken place, attach a copy of the supporting documentation to the application form)

Not applicable

70   Describe any ongoing involvement of the group/s consulted in the project.

Not applicable

71   Describe how information resulting from the project will be shared with the group/s consulted.

Not applicable

72   If the research is to be conducted overseas, describe the arrangements you will make for local participants to express concerns regarding the research.

Not applicable

SECTION K: SHARING RESEARCH FINDINGS (Refer Code Section 4, Para 26)

73   Describe how information resulting from the project will be shared with participants.

(Note that receipt of a summary is one of the participant rights)

A research summary will be provided to participants if they would like one.

SECTION L: INVASIVE PROCEDURES/PHYSIOLOGICAL TESTS (Refer Code Section 4, Para 21)

74   Does the project involve the collection of tissues, blood, other body fluids   Yes ☐   No ☒
      or physiological tests?

(If yes, complete Section L, otherwise proceed to Section M)

75   Describe the material to be taken and the method used to obtain it. Include information about the training of those taking the samples and the safety of all persons involved. If blood is taken, specify the volume and number of collections.

76   Will the material be stored?   Yes ☐   No ☐

      If yes, describe how, where and for how long.

77   Describe how the material will be disposed of (either after the research is completed or at the end of the storage period).

(Note that the wishes of relevant cultural groups must be taken into account)

78   Will material collected for another purpose (e.g. diagnostic use) be used?   Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, did the donors give permission for use of their samples in this   Yes ☐ No ☐
project? *(Attach evidence of this to the application form)*

If no, describe how consent will be obtained. Where the samples have been anonymised and consent
cannot be obtained, provide justification for the use of these samples.

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79   Will any samples be imported into New Zealand?   Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, provide evidence of permission of the donors for their material to be used in this research.

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80   Will any samples go out of New Zealand?   Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, state where.

(Note this information must be included in the Information Sheet)

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81   Describe any physiological tests/procedures that will be used.

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82   Will participants be given a health-screening test prior to participation?   Yes ☐ No ☐
(If yes, attach a copy of the health checklist)

Reminder: Attach the completed Screening Questionnaire and other attachments listed in Q5

SECTION M: DECLARATION *(Complete appropriate box)*

ACADEMIC STAFF RESEARCH
Declaration for Academic Staff Applicant
I have read the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants. I understand my obligations and the rights of the participants. I agree to undertake the research as set out in the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants. My Head of Department/School/Institute knows that I am undertaking this research. The information contained in this application is to the very best of my knowledge accurate and not misleading.

Staff Applicant's Signature .... Date: ....

STUDENT RESEARCH
Declaration for Student Applicant
I have read the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants and discussed the ethical analysis with my Supervisor. I understand my obligations and the rights of the participants. I agree to undertake the research as set out in the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants. The information contained in this application is to the very best of my knowledge accurate and not misleading.

Student Applicant's Signature _____*Wayne*_____ Date: 24/03/06

Declaration for Supervisor
I have assisted the student in the ethical analysis of this project. As supervisor of this research I will ensure that the research is carried out according to the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants.

Supervisor's Signature _____*C H Adamson*_____ Date: 24. 3. 06

Print Name _____CAROLE ELIZABETH ADAMSON_____

GENERAL STAFF RESEARCH/EVALUATIONS
Declaration for General Staff Applicant
I have read the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants and discussed the ethical analysis with my Line Manager. I understand my obligations and the rights of the participants. I agree to undertake the research as set out in the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants. The information contained in this application is to the very best of my knowledge accurate and not misleading.

General Staff Applicant's Signature .... Date: ....

Declaration for Line Manager
I declare that to the best of my knowledge, this application complies with the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants and that I have approved its content and agreed that it can be submitted.

Line Manager's Signature .... Date: ....

Print Name ....

TEACHING PROGRAMME
Declaration for Paper Controller
I have read the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants. I understand my obligations and the rights of the participants. I agree to undertake the teaching programme as set out in the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants. My Head of Department/School/Institute knows that I am undertaking this teaching programme. The information contained in this application is to the very best of my knowledge accurate and not misleading.

Paper Controller's Signature .... Date: ....

Declaration for Head of Department/School/Institute
I declare that to the best of my knowledge, this application complies with the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants and that I have approved its content and agreed that it can be submitted.

Head of Dept/School/Inst Signature .... Date: ....

Print Name ....

Massey University

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Date

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Massey University
PO Box 756
WELLINGTON

Programme Co-ordinator
[Bachelor of Social Work
Education Provider
PO Box
City]

Dear [Name of programme co-ordinator]

Re: Research Project:
       'I am a social worker (but what am I, exactly?)'
       **Beginning social work practitioners' constructions of professional
       identity**

This letter is to inform you of a research project that I am currently undertaking as
part of a Master of Social Work degree at Massey University.

I am interested in speaking with social work degree graduates in their first two
years of employment about their experiences and whether or not they feel as if
they are building a sense of professional identity.

I would very much appreciate it if you could forward information about the project
to graduates of your programme who may be interested in participating.

Please find enclosed an information sheet about the research project, which can
be supplied to potential participants.

I am happy to cover costs involved with photocopying and posting this
information to potential participants.

I welcome you contacting me to discuss this further. My contact details are:

Email: carmen.payne@hotmail.com

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Postal Address:
        C/- School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
        Massey University
        PO Box 756
        Wellington

Yours sincerely

Carmen Payne
BSW (Hons)
MANZASW
Registered Social Worker

Appendix IV: Approval from Massey University Human Ethics Committee

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Massey University

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT
TO THE VICE-CHANCELLOR
(ETHICS & EQUITY)
Private Bag 11 222
Palmerston North
New Zealand
T 64 6 350 5573
F 64 6 350 5622
humanethics@massey.ac.nz
www.massey.ac.nz

5 May 2006

Ms Carmen Payne
15 Waikato Street
Island Bay
WELLINGTON 6002

Dear Carmen

Re: HEC: Southern B Application – 06/14
      I am a social worker (but what am I, exactly?) – beginning social work practitioners'
      constructions of professional identity

Thank you for your letter dated 4 May 2006.

On behalf of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B I am pleased to advise
you that the ethics of your application are now approved. Approval is for three years. If this
project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be
requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change,
please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Karl Pajo, Chair
Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B

cc   Dr Carol Adamson   Prof Robyn Munford, HoS
     School of Sociology, Social Policy   School of Sociology, Social Policy
        & Social Work   & Social Work
     WELLINGTON   PN371

'I am a social worker (but what am I, exactly?)'
Beginning social work practitioners' constructions of professional identity

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

'Housekeeping'

i)   pick a pseudonym
ii)   qualification
iii)   educational institute attended
iv)   length of experience since qualifying
v)   current field of practice

Opening Question

How did you come to be here in social work?

Themes to Cover

i)   influences into social work (past and current)
ii)   education
iii)   employment
iv)   professionalism (ANZASW, SWR Act)
v)   self care
vi)   gender/ethnicity and social work
vii)   'ideal' social worker
viii) situations significant to development of social work practice and sense of self
ix)   sense of identity

'I am a social worker (but what am I, exactly?)'
Beginning social work practitioners' constructions of professional identity

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE
(16 November 2006 6pm-8pm)

Agenda:

Greet
Eat
Overview of focus group purpose and setting ground rules
Introductions
Feedback of emerging themes from individual interviews
Group discussion
Ending

Introductions:
Tell us who you are, where you practice and what you most enjoy doing when you're not doing social work.

Feedback of Themes:

All information gathered from the interviews can be broadly grouped under the following headings:

1. Motivation into social work
2. Social work education
3. Work experience
4. Practice frameworks
5. Definitions of social work
6. Professionalism
7. The self in social work

Key issues arising (with exemplary quotes):

1. Participants were generally motivated into social work by the desire to make a difference/change but don't always feel able to achieve this because of organisational constraints or because clients have different ideas about what should be happening in the social work relationship.
   'You can't fix it'

2. Participants have various opinions about the ability of social work education to prepare one for practice.
   'Do I need to go back and do my degree. Was there something I missed?'

'Yes. I do think [education prepared me] in the fact that I don't think any education can prepare you for the reality of it completely'

3. Participants generally felt that social workers need to be a particular type of person.
   'That [ability to be with people] has been strengthened by the [education] but it's something I've always had' .

4. Participants consider themselves to be learners in the work environment and that they are not always able to meet their own or others' expectations of them in terms of skill level or knowledge but feel increasingly confident over time and with experience. Participants want to be perceived as competent, compare themselves to more experienced colleagues and want reassurance, particularly from supervisors, that they are 'on the right track'.
   'I want to feel competent, I want to feel that I know what I'm doing'

5. Participants value social work but perceive it as undervalued by other professionals, the public and occasionally management with some suggesting that it is because most people (social workers included) are not clear about what it is.
   'People hear 'social worker' and think 'oh god' and I don't like being lumped in that group'

6. Participants are all committed to the principle of social work registration and see it as a way to validate social work as a profession but have mixed views on the role and efficacy of the ANZASW and the nature of social work identity at individual and collective levels.

Questions:

1. What are your thoughts on these issues?
2. In New Zealand, who defines social work identity?
3. What factors are involved?
4. How does that [definition/wider social discourse about social work] affect you?
5. [Reminder of research purpose/question] In light of this, have we covered everything?