Social Work Practice Knowledge

An enquiry into the nature of the knowledge generated and applied in the practice of social work

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Ian Hyslop

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the development of social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand and in similar jurisdictions. It is argued that in order to envisage social work's future it is necessary to develop a clearer understanding of its nature and function. The findings of this thesis are informed by interviews with twenty one experienced social workers currently practising in Auckland, New Zealand. The focus is on the knowledge which social workers learn and apply in practice. The fieldwork research design and subsequent analysis is informed by a process of engaged theoretical enquiry. This enquiry is influenced by critical social theory and by the scholarship of Foucault concerning the relationship between knowledge and power. The configuration of knowledge in and for social work is critically examined in relation to wider discourses of modernity, contested postmodernity and nascent neoliberalism.

The research methodology is informed by a critical realist theoretical lens which posits that underlying generative influences underpin the form of social work practice knowledge. There are also elements of grounded theory within the fieldwork design. It is argued that the research approach mirrors the process of situated contextual understanding which is native to social work. The view of social work practice knowledge which emerges is illustrated by practitioner accounts of social work experience. Analysis of the research data suggests that the process of relational engagement which structures knowledge production in social work practice is inherently different from the rational-technical understandings of knowledge which influence much of the design and measurement of contemporary practice. The knowledge form commensurate with social work practice can be related to the discourse of social humanism and an associated commitment to equality and social justice. The findings of this thesis indicate that this knowledge form is resilient and is reproduced in the practice of social work. In this sense links between the daily practice of social work and the emancipatory intent of the critical enlightenment are suggested. The thesis concludes with discussion of the implications of these findings for the practice of social work and for the role of the social work voice in challenging times.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: Intent, Concepts and Method

This introductory chapter lays the conceptual ground upon which this doctoral thesis rests. The interrelated processes of formative intent, theoretical exploration and methodological refinement which have fuelled the enquiry are set out.

1.1 Practice, Knowledge and Location

It has been variously suggested that social work is a more complicated activity than may first meet the eye (Dominelli, 2004; Gilgun, 2010; Gray & McDonald, 2006). In her historical study of social work in Ireland, Skehill (1999), for example, observes that "social work, past and present, is a complex and contradictory practice" (p. 175). This thesis focusses on a key aspect of this apparent complexity - the perennial challenge which social work faces in reconciling its theoretical base with the nature of its practical activities. Parton (2003) highlights this challenge as follows:

> While social work, compared to other areas of professional practice, has never been completely dominated by scientised, and narrowly positivistic approaches to knowledge, rarely has it been able to articulate an approach to its theory and practice which adequately reflects the nature of its operations. (pp. 1–2)

The ideas discussed and developed in this thesis are intended to contribute to the critical task which Parton identifies: connecting 'the knowing' with 'the doing' of social work.

This thesis provides an analysis of the body of knowledge which social workers develop and apply in practice: social work practice knowledge. As explained in the following introductory paragraphs, I have set out to develop an understanding of social work practice knowledge by applying an original frame of reference. The research findings are informed by an empirical enquiry into the views held by experienced social workers regarding the knowledge that is applied in and generated through, the practice of social work. A theorised relationship between this knowledge and the socio-political location of social work is explored and developed. The agenda of the research process is comprised of three related elements: a focus on the inner world of case-work practice, attention to accounts of this world provided by experienced practitioners, and consideration of how the knowledge which characterises this world may be related to its socio-political location. I believe that a deeper and broader understanding of the nature of social work practice knowledge may enhance our awareness of what the

social work profession is capable of contributing to policy and practice development.[1] The implications of the emerging analysis for the future of social work practice are considered in the final chapter of this thesis.

The thesis is concerned with knowledge generated and applied in practice and specifically with how this knowledge is articulated by social workers. It is also motivated by the intent to explore and identify how this knowledge and the description of this knowledge, is influenced by the wider socio-political milieu within which it is located. This formative intent has been guided and developed by a critical engagement with literature relevant to the limits and possibilities of social work as a field of practice in which knowledge is applied and produced. In keeping with this orientation the fieldwork component of the research exercise is constructed as follows:

An enquiry into the knowledge generated and applied in social work practice and the relationship, if any, between this knowledge and the socio-political location of social work practice:

1. **How do a group of experienced social workers describe the knowledge generated and applied in the practice of social work?**
2. **Do a group of experienced social workers perceive this knowledge to be related to the socio-political location of social work and if so, how do they understand and describe this relationship?**

The rationale for the assembly of these questions essentially provides the subject matter for the first three chapters of this thesis.

1.1.1 Definitions and Explanations

In the interests of clarity, it is important to be explicit about the knowledge claims which this thesis makes. The following explanation of some key constructs is provided with this aim in mind. The terms 'social work', 'social work knowledge' and 'social work practice knowledge' are employed within the text. For the purposes of this thesis 'social work' is confined to what might be called the 'casework tradition' - the delivery of social work services to individuals and families by professional practitioners designated as social workers. This degree of specificity is of central importance. The boundaries of social work are routinely extended beyond this relatively narrow description. The collective ethos of community development practice and the concept of social pedagogy within the European tradition (Lorenz, 2008) can, for instance, legitimately

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[1] This view is endorsed by Tony Morrison in an essay pursuant to his PHD by publication in 2010: "If public and political confidence in statutory children's social work is to be restored, this will rest in part on an understanding of the practice knowledge base upon which the profession relies" (Morrison, 2010, p. 7). Morrison (2010) conceived of practice knowledge as an amalgam of external 'codified' knowledge and "internal knowledge that is generated in and from practice" (p. 6).

be placed under a broad social work umbrella that is concerned with social justice and human rights. I am not suggesting that such definitions are inaccurate or inappropriate in a general sense. Nor am I suggesting that concern with social rights and justice is inapplicable to contemporary practice within the case-work tradition. Rather I am, in part, setting out to explore what a specific examination of social work practice knowledge might reveal about the purported relationship between contemporary practice and the wider social justice aspirations often associated with social work (Lundy, 2011).

I am concerned, among other things, with the role which elements of critical or emancipatory practice (Jordan, 2004; Pease, 2010) may play in contemporary casework. Rather than imposing such connections, I am interested in building awareness through attention to practice experience. It is considered that expansive definitions of social work often do little to bridge the gap between academic research and the heavily monitored, emotionally demanding, often cash-strapped environments that are typical of 'every-day' practice. In fact, such positioning risks estrangement between practice experience and academic understandings of social work. In my opinion, the distancing of academic social work discourse from the lived reality of casework practice experience has two potential consequences, both of which pose a threat to the interests of social work.[2] First, practitioners may become disengaged from the wider aspirations of a critical social work project which seemingly has little relevance to their experience. Secondly, professional social work may seek credibility by defining its identity in a conservative form commensurate with the narrow evidence-based rationality which is coming to dominate the workplace in neoliberal times (Rogowski, 2012). This thesis sets out to pre-empt and / or disrupt such developments by exploring an alternative understanding of knowledge in and for social work within the confines of agency based 'casework' practice.

In contrast to social work, the term 'social work knowledge' is widely defined. It encompasses academic and practical knowledge for social work in the sense of theories, models, or approaches which social workers may utilise in their practice. It also includes elements of embodied or intuitive knowledge that are closer to the active and engaged 'doing' of social work: the interactive 'how' of social work practice (Ferguson, 2004; Weld & Appleton, 2008). Finally, as applied in this thesis, the concept of social work knowledge includes the idea that social work practice may promote a

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[2] Maidment and Egan (2009, pp. 7-8) describe the relationship between social work theory and practice as 'symbiotic'. The research and analysis undertaken in this thesis potentially enriches our appreciation of knowledge generated through practice experience and of how understandings of that knowledge can be fruitfully informed by critical social theory.

particular form of knowing that is moral, practical and political in character (Gray & McDonald, 2006; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Pease, 2010). The potential value of the work reported here lies in the promise of deepening our collective understanding of social work knowledge. Finally, the more specific term 'social work practice knowledge' is employed when the intent is to emphasise knowledge learned and applied in the act of practice. This central construct is further explored and developed in the body of the thesis.

A focus on the concept of social work practice knowledge provides a vehicle for an examination of the fit between theoretical representations of knowledge for practice and the experience of embedded social work practice. By 'embedded' I mean practice immersed in a socio-political context, bound by an agency mandate, and characterised by interactive communication between social workers and their clients. My intent is to examine the nature of knowledge in, of and for social work from the perspective of those who are engaged in the delivery of social work services. In my experience, this viewpoint is inadequately understood and insufficiently regarded and in my opinion a practitioner-informed basis for the exploration of this 'site of knowing' is appropriate and credible. In this sense, the description of social work practice knowledge which emerges is 'named' by practitioners and can be usefully contrasted with the more mechanistic picture of procedural models and practice skills that are commonly named in dominant managerial or governmental representations of social work knowledge. However, it is important to make it clear that practitioner accounts of social work knowledge are understood and interpreted with reference to theoretical formulations that are developed in the first three chapters of this thesis. I do not claim to come to the research as an empty vessel. The orientation of this study has been guided by theory, analysis and experience traversed in some depth in these chapters. Academically informed understandings of social work knowledge are then critiqued, developed and refined through a process of engagement with the voice of practice experience.

As suggested, this thesis is also concerned with developing an understanding of connections between knowledge generated and applied in practice and the wider socio-political climate in which social work services are designed and delivered. I am curious about the relationship between social work practice and the contemporary political ascendancy of neoliberalism.[3] The theoretical stance of this thesis is guided by the materialist perception that social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand, and in

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[3] The generic term 'neoliberalism' as it is applied in this thesis refers to a body of ideas in economic and political theory that are associated with market deregulation, reduced public spending /privatisation of state services and with associated notions of individuated responsibility. For a concise and incisive exploration / critique of the neoliberal turn in the context of contemporary Aotearoa / New Zealand see Peel (2012).

comparable western Anglophile jurisdictions, has been shaped within the context of 'modernity'. Modernity is understood as the confluence of capitalist relations of production, distribution, exchange and consumption, and the liberal political tradition which underpins this model of social and economic life. As global capitalist development has accelerated over the last three or four decades the rubric of liberal governance has shifted from the embedded liberalism of the active welfare state to a dominant neoliberal political configuration (Garrett, 2009, 2013). I am interested in the relationship between social work, specifically the knowledge associated with practice, and this wider socio-political trajectory. Morrison (2010) highlights related academic concern that the "very nature of social work is changing from a practical-moral activity to a rational-technical one (Parton, 2000; Taylor & White, 2006) in which rule-bound responses over-ride knowledge-based responses (Munro, 2009)" (p. 17). The following observation is offered by Garrett (2009) in relation to technocratic 'market-driven' practice design in the United Kingdom:

> Within the emerging 'lean' work organizations the work in Children's Services is increasingly being ordered, devised and structured by academics, policy makers and e-technicians far removed from the day to day encounters with users of services. (p. 84)

These developments have been identified with an increasing "proletarianization" of professional labour (Dominelli, 2004, p. 13). Butler and Drakeford (2005) suggest that the "personal and human elements" of social work practice have been diminished by "a double discursive alliance of scientism and managerialism" (p. 643). I am interested in whether these perceptions are consistent with practice experience in the Aotearoa / New Zealand context.[4]

In my experience, social work practice is a dynamic and 'applied' activity. It is a process that involves joining with the uncertainties and ambiguities which are the life blood of the social world. Parton and Kirk (2010, p. 25) contend that practical engagement with such tensions "take us to the heart" of what is distinctive about social work. The notion of social work as socially 'embedded', and interactively 'embodied', social practice - comprising related elements of conflict, tension, and balance - is explored within this thesis as a means to further our understanding of social work as a professional modality with a specific body of practice knowledge. Particular areas of interest are identified through my own practice experience and by means of a broad

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[4] The term 'Aotearoa / New Zealand' is used within this thesis in preference to simply 'New Zealand'. Aotearoa is the indigenous Māori term for New Zealand. The usage signifies cognisance of and respect for, the bicultural identity of New Zealand as a nation state.

engagement with relevant literature. These experiential and theoretical understandings guide the development of the fieldwork research process and the subsequent 'engaged' analysis of the empirical data.

This thesis does consider the relationship between social work and social justice, but I do not necessarily look to reveal links between social work and broader notions of social activism. Rather I am concerned with developing an understanding of this relationship by looking inward through the eyes of experienced practitioners. I am concerned with the concept of social justice to the degree that social work operates in what I consider to be a fundamentally unjust capitalist society in relation to the distribution of wealth and opportunity. As I have said, I am interested in exploring the place of what might be called the critical tradition of social work (Pease, 2010) within the tense confines of agency-mandated casework practice with individuals and families. The experiential knowing of twenty one social workers is interrogated and analysed as the research process unfolds. Participants in this study are drawn from ANZASW[5] social workers with over three years of practice experience. When the interviews were undertaken all the research participants were employed a social workers in Auckland,[6] New Zealand by Child, Youth and Family,[7] District Health Boards, or within the NGO sector.[8] Enquiry into the emancipatory elements of everyday practice in this context may provide a view of practice knowledge that is applicable to social work in similar jurisdictions and which helps to reveal where "the green shoots of a more engaged practice" (Garrett, 2008, p. 237) may be found, or perhaps 'reclaimed'. My intent is to contribute to this task.

1.1.2 Conceptual Positioning

The following discussion places further stakes in the ground in terms of how the knowledge claims which this thesis espouses are positioned. The scope and structure of the thesis is outlined. As the development of the research process is explained, the theoretical and methodological foundations are broadly set out. This thesis is primarily influenced by a materialist epistemology: the notion that a knowledge specific to social work is moulded by the circumstances of its production. As famously expressed in

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[5] Research Participants were recruited from the Auckland membership of the New Zealand professional social work association: the Aotearoa-New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). This body should be distinguished from the registration, regulation and professional development functions associated with the Social Work Registration Board pursuant to the Social Workers Registration Act 2003.
[6] Located in the North Island of New Zealand, Auckland is Aotearoa / New Zealand's largest city with a socially and ethnically diverse population of approximately 1.5 million.
[7] Child Youth and Family (CYF) is the title of the statutory social work service in Aotearoa / New Zealand. It is currently structured as an arm of the Ministry of Social Development. The core functions are largely set out within the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989 (CYP&F Act).
[8] Explanation of the research participant recruitment process is provided in chapter 3.

Marx's *Critique of Political Economy,*"It is not the consciousness of men (*sic*) that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Kedourie, Kedourie, & Kedourie, 1995, p.129). However, the research is also influenced by constuctivist understandings of knowledge in the social world. It is accepted that all social knowledge is necessarily provisional and perspectival. I am mindful of the following cautionary note sounded by Gray and McDonald (2006):

> Social work is an incredibly complex series of activities undertaken in diverse, unstable, constantly changing 'social spaces'. Empirically derived attempts to understand these spaces will always be partial and incomplete, and will only be able to attend to those processes amenable to the lens applied. (pp. 14-15)

No claim to reveal and present knowledge in a final or definitive sense is made. This is not to go so far as to say that all explanatory constructions of social reality are regarded as equally valid, or that knowledge can never have an existence outside of an ideological context. For instance the fact that capitalist societies such as Aotearoa / New Zealand are characterised by social inequality can be objectively known (Perry, 2012). This state of affairs can be clearly evidenced by a variety of statistics concerning income, health and educational disparities. It is the nature and meaning of such disparities that is subjectively interpreted, ideologically moulded and politically contested.

As will be canvassed in chapter 3, the conflict which is inevitably generated by the juxtaposition of materialist and constructivist positions is held in productive tension by the adoption of theoretical insights (in relation to social perception and social causation) derived from critical realism (Bhaskar, 1997, 2010). It is considered that understandings of social phenomena in the social world are inevitably shaped by wider political and ideological configurations and that these structures are themselves subject to change. I also believe that dominant perceptions of social truth tend to privilege the interests of the powerful in an unequal society such as Aotearoa / New Zealand. The significance of Foucault's ideas about the relationship between power, knowledge, discourse and resistance are discussed in chapter 2. The key point that I wish to emphasise in this introductory discussion is that although dominant regimes of truth are persuasive, they are not regarded as totally hegemonic. Power and truth in the social world are perceived to be contested phenomena. The related issue of how to arbitrate between disputed truth claims must be addressed unless we are to slide into what has been described as the "abyss of relativism" (Pease, 2010, p. 103). In terms of the validity of this thesis, the following criteria are relied upon. I have considerable personal experience of social work practice. The questions which generated this research

project are grounded in this experience. Experience-based understanding of a field can arguably induce 'bias' and 'error' in a research paradigm that is bound by science-centred notions of rigorously dispassionate analysis. However, this research exercise is influenced by a regard for the value of situated insider knowledge and a process of engaged and reflective theory building, testing and renovation. The nature of this process is careful and disciplined in its own terms. It is explained in this introduction and the theoretical and methodological detail is elaborated in chapter 3.

1.2 The Subject at Hand

This thesis is concerned with social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand and more specifically, with the knowledge claims which may shape the future direction of practice. In Aotearoa / New Zealand, and Australasia more broadly, there is a significant recent history of academic interest in identifying and describing knowledge for social work (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009; Connolly & Harms, 2012; Maidment & Egan, 2009; Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue, 2005; Weld & Appleton, 2008). Maidment and Egan, for example, identify a range of skills necessary for competent practice. Beddoe and Maidment delineate a set of micro-skills which underpin a broader skill base that is said to be comprised of critical reasoning, emotional intelligence, and articulation (both verbal and written). This thesis can be located within the context of this wider endeavour in that many of the key components of practice knowledge identified in this literature are consistent with the findings which emerge from this study. The issues identified in the following brief summative discussion are all taken up as the thesis unfolds, and I will revisit some of the connections to this body of literature in subsequent discussion.

Much of this contemporary scholarship has been developed in the form of explanatory teaching texts which aim to support the preparation of students for practice. Such texts generally give some attention to the historical difficulties which social work has encountered in establishing a credible status within the hierarchy of professions. These difficulties tend to be related to, and perhaps exacerbated by, the broad and sometimes disputed identity of social work. Social work is routinely portrayed as an ambivalent undertaking in that it requires individuated practice which is informed by an understanding of the way in which socio-economic forces may impinge upon the social relations of power and possibility (Lundy, 2011). These philosophical and practical tensions have historically translated into divergent practice paradigms which emphasise either personal or structural approaches to problem resolution, or which

attempt to reconcile these imperatives in various ways (Staniforth, Fouché, & O'Brien, 2011). Connolly and Harms (2012, p. xi) acknowledge the eclectic theoretical base which social workers draw from and contrast "inner" (psychological) and "outer world" (socio-structural) theories of causation and resolution. It is argued that a common interpretive lens allows for disparate theoretical threads to be drawn into a unified professional framework. Four constitutive "lenses', corresponding to deeply held values and strengths, are said to contribute to this disciplinary identity: a relational lens, a social justice lens, a reflective lens, and the lens of change (pp. 1-11). Similarly Maidment and Egan (2009, p. 3) identify an "integrated framework" which is perceived to consist of theories applied within a practice process that is influenced by organisational context and supported by a unifying commitment to anti-oppressive practice.

In the Aotearoa / New Zealand context there has also been an identifiable interest in exploring the knowledge held and exercised by practising social workers. Weld and Appleton (2008) harness their own practice-based experience to illustrate the integration of personal and professional 'self' in the practice of social work. A perceived requirement for social workers to suspend judgement of their clients is linked with practice-driven insight into the essential solidarity born of common humanity. The need to break down 'them' and 'us' divisions is associated with an inherent recognition of human potential and the capacity for change. This insight is also connected with the need for engagement with the complex realities of client experience and with an acute appreciation of how power influences human behaviour. Maidment and Egan (2009) also stress an elevated awareness of power disparities and draw heavily on real practice examples which connect such understandings with the lived experience of practice. Effective client engagement is depicted as a process that is characterised by respect, empathy, and authenticity (Egan, 2009, pp. 89-91).

Changes in the practice environment wrought by the increasing ascendancy of neoliberal political practices and beliefs over the past thirty years have posed challenges to the identity of social work, particularly in terms of the values which might be said to underpin practice. Arguably there is a palpable tension between the relatively expansive form of knowledge for social work taught in tertiary educational settings and the narrow rational-technical design and measurement of practice efficiency as currently administered by government ministries in Aotearoa / New Zealand. Beddoe and Maidment (2009) refer to the destabilising effect which the confluence of postmodernism and neoliberal ideology is perceived to have had upon

the emancipatory / anti-oppressive intent of social work. This connection is explored in chapter 2 of this thesis. At this point it is sufficient to assert the belief that efforts to define skills and knowledge in social work are often motivated by a desire to defend the profession from perceived threat or incursion. In order to defend a territory it is necessary to map its contours.

In this vein two recent research studies in the Aotearoa / New Zealand setting explore differing dimensions of professional identity in relation to the construction of practice knowledge. First, O'Brien's (2011) survey of social workers' beliefs concerning the way in which considerations of social justice influence their practice produces some surprising results given popular perceptions of an increasingly conservative environment. Significant correlations between practice activity and the intent to address issues of fairness and justice at differing levels of intervention are suggested in the analysis of the research data. O'Brien takes account of the way that social work is often perceived to operate in the margins between social exclusion and inclusion, arguably operating as a bridge between these two states. Within this frame, practice motivated by a concern with social justice is connected with the maintenance and development of citizenship rights for the socially disadvantaged. The postmodern privileging of difference is regarded as "insufficient unless it is linked with and built on a base of equality" (p. 155). This insight, and the related concept of social work as a discourse of inclusion, is explored within this thesis.

Secondly, Beddoe's (2013) analysis of health sector social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand locates health based practice within an on-going Bourdieusian struggle to demarcate a distinctive professional space, or voice, within a contested and medically dominated environment. Her data, taken from a larger study which involved both health and statutory child protection practitioners, suggests that for "social workers in multi-disciplinary settings there is considerable support for strengthening their knowledge claims in order to have a place at the table" (p. 29). Differing strategies for the strengthening of professional capital are identified, including assertion of the insider view of client need which social work practice generates. This positioning potentially affords unique understandings of challenges to, and of potential mechanisms for, the promotion of equality of access to community health and well-being (p. 38). This thesis considers what the social work voice has to contribute to the development of contemporary policy and practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand.

The practice knowledge revealed through the process of engaged enquiry which is undertaken in this thesis is not necessarily 'new' knowledge. As illustrated in the

foregoing paragraphs, much of this knowledge can be named and variously categorised by social work practitioners and/or academic educators. However, in this thesis, experienced social workers contribute to a new articulation of how interpersonally engaged, and contextually situated, practice experience is combined with academic learning to produce - and arguably reproduce - a particular form (or forms) of knowledge in and for practice.[9] Significantly, a distinction emerges between the socio-politically situated view of the circumstances and needs of individuals and families which is afforded through engaged practice on the one hand, and the perceived horizon of possibility for applied intervention within the current configuration of social and economic power relations on the other. In practice social workers balance perceptions of 'what is needed' with an awareness of the constraints which limit 'what can be done'. Interestingly the process of relational engagement which emerges in this thesis is a necessary means for each of these processes. The broader contribution which this thesis makes lies in an exploration of possible linkages between the knowledge which this praxis generates and the politically situated determinants of social work practice knowledge: linking meta-theoretical constructions with the voice of practice experience.

The potential value of the understandings of social work practice knowledge which emerge from this research process are discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, with particular reference to the competing knowledge claims which characterise the changing socio-political landscape of social work practice in the 21st century. As will become apparent, part of the analysis in this thesis entails critique of orthodox divisions between practice skills and theoretical conceptions, or between 'doing' and 'knowing'. A theoretically informed engagement with accounts of practice knowledge provided by experienced social workers questions the validity and utility of the conceptual separation of practice skills from practice theory and practice purpose. Understandings of the nature and form of knowledge in and for social work which arise from this thesis stand in stark contrast to the hierarchical and ostensibly apolitical rational-technical knowledge form which has arguably come to dominate practice and policy design in Aotearoa / New Zealand in neo-liberal times. Accordingly this thesis provides an analysis which has the potential to contribute to a reinvigoration of emancipatory social work practice in contemporary Aotearoa / New Zealand.

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[9] It is recognised that the values and practices which contribute to social workers' knowledge for practice are influenced by a variety of factors from 'life' experience to agency mandate. It is also acknowledged that social work education is likely to be particularly influential in determining practice orientation. However the focus of this thesis involves an exploration of how the broader social determinants of power and knowledge in and for social work may be reflected and understood, within the inner world of 'everyday' practice.

The findings of this thesis may also be applicable to social work in Western nations with comparable traditions and practice environments. Similar experiences of recession, restructuring, and rationalisation have been encountered globally.[10] The following distinction is pivotal, however. This thesis is not a straight-forward assertion of how social work services could or should be developed. The question of development is regarded as an essentially political and ideological problem. Although I have opinions about the direction which social work should take, this exercise sets out first and foremost to investigate a more fundamental question: what does social work knowledge consists of, and, accordingly, what possibilities does this knowledge engender? It is proposed that a greater awareness of social work practice knowledge can be informed by consideration of the 'knowldeges' drawn on, applied, and articulated by the participants in this study. It is further considered that the findings of this enquiry can provide deeper insight into practice competence and practice quality, and that such understandings may have public policy implications.[11] The rationale is that if social work practice knowledge can be identified more explicitly, political and ideological decisions about the production and application of this knowledge - the professional development of social work - can be better informed. Relevant policy design is rendered more transparent by a clearer perception of what is at stake when political decisions impact upon the shape and form of social work practice. The concluding chapter of this thesis considers what may potentially be gained from the understandings identified and developed in this process of focussed research and analysis.

Stated colloquially, I am suggesting that the development of social work can be more effectively planned if we have a better understanding of the nature of social work: what social work currently 'is' - at least to the degree that such a task is feasible. Accordingly, this thesis sets out to explore whether or not there is a particular knowledge or 'truth' claim which social work can legitimately make. The implicit assumption is that part of the identity of social work is forged in 'the doing' of practice. This approach is subversive in the sense that it de-centres the more familiar

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[10] The relationship between economic policy and social work practice knowledge is relevant to this thesis. In Aotearoa / New Zealand a move away from economic protectionism dates from the 1980s. Policy prescriptions such as reductions in tariffs and trade union power, are, in turn, connected with the global ascendancy of free market economics. In relation to social work the key imperative is a diminution of state services - privatisation and/or the application of business model management practices which focus on productivity and financial accountability mechanisms in the form of output and outcome measurement. More generally, the view of the relationship between individuals, families and the state which underpins neoliberal economics may also have implications for social work practice.

[11] As will be made clear in subsequent discussion, it is contended that a deeper understanding of the nature and form of social work practice knowledge requires consideration of the socio-political milieu within which it is generated and applied.

instrumental questions about what we might like social work to do and how we might tell if these functions are effective. The focus of the research process is shifted to the wider question of what social work might be able to achieve if its functions and potential capacities are better understood. Stated in academic parlance, my working proposition is that the ontology and epistemology of social work are connected: the identity of social work can be linked with the knowledge which social work produces and applies in practice. Houston (2001) reinforces the somewhat chilling caution attributed to Aldridge:

> …Aldridge (1996) reminds us that social workers in a postmodern world need to abandon their equivocating stance over their expertise and develop a more confident set of intellectual skills. To do otherwise is to atrophy into a forgotten profession. (Houston, 2001, p. 224)

My concern is not so much the disappearance of social work as a professional form per se but with the nature of this form: the intellectual skills which sustain it, and how these skills are currently determined. We may have social work but is it what it should and could be? The beginning point is to investigate how it is currently configured. My argument is that this can be identified as a function of what it 'knows', which is, in turn, a product of 'how' it knows.

Shaw (2010), alternatively, is sceptical about the existence of a discipline-specific knowledge and questions our capacity to define the practice of social work in more than a superficial manner:

> Many disciplines embrace a person-in-environment perspective, and many fields are active in the areas of social justice, relieving oppression, and combatting discrimination in its myriad forms. All the professions have intricate codes of ethics, so none of these oft-touted distinctive features are truly unique to our field. There is no particular area of practice - child welfare, probation, domestic violence, human rights, mental health, social policy - whose practitioners are predominantly social workers. And there are no specific interventions - case management, counselling, ombudsmanship, linkage and referral, psychotherapy, behavioural analysis and therapy, agency administration – that are unique domains of social work. (p. 254)

Notwithstanding such misgivings, this thesis explores whether knowledge (or knowledges) particular to social work practice can be revealed and articulated in a way that is accessible and comprehensible. There are two primary motivations for this task. The first is pragmatic and politically situated. I am concerned that if social work and social workers are unable to explain and validate the knowledge claims of their profession, acceptable knowledge claims will be named and regulated by others. It is

feared that such imposed knowledge claims are likely to be shaped within the prevailing ethos of neoliberal-informed technical rationalism and are unlikely to promote critical social work practice (Pease, 2010, pp. 99, 102). In Aotearoa / New Zealand the professional status of social work is regulated by a statutory Registration Board charged with instrumental policing of the parameters of practice competence and conduct - as opposed to promoting politicised or structurally subversive notions of practice.[12] While the Board and the professional association (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW)) are a significant part of the practice context and are influential in shaping social work knowledge, the role of these bodies is not focussed upon in this study. The interest here is practitioner knowledge. The professional determinants and oversight of this knowledge is of interest to the degree that conflicts emerge between practice knowledge and its regulation. I fear that the emancipatory potential of social work is in serious jeopardy both here and internationally. I am concerned about whether social work has any contemporary currency as a political or "social project" (Butler & Drakeford, 2005, p. 640).

Secondly, my practice experience suggests to me that there are knowledge claims specific to social work which should be explored and, if possible, made visible in order for the voice of social work to be more clearly recognised. My sense is that skills and values common to social work are likely to intersect with those of a range of other professional activities but that a particular constellation of factors may also foster a specific knowledge in and for social work practice. Shaw (2010) associates such contentions with "an old heresy which for many years was prevalent - the belief that social work has a basic value position that has greater merit / human authenticity and is more whole-person orientated, etc. than other professions" (p. 254). This thesis considers the relationship between heresy and truth in this contentious and contested area.

Social work practice is, as Shaw (2010) observes, "slippery", and "more so the nearer one tries to come to pinning it down" (p. 217). I have suggested elsewhere (Hyslop, 2009) that policy prescription routinely fails to recognise the situated understandings which are both applied and generated by social workers in the context of practice:

> It is little wonder that contemporary child protection policy, and the practice derived from that policy, fails to take account of social work as social practice. At the core of the problem lies a clash of paradigms. Social work is innately

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[12] It is considered that the process of Registration is nested within a wider context of state-mandated regulation which is, in turn, tied to developments in the socio-political realm. Although the drivers and implications of Registration are of interest this topic is not of central concern to this thesis,

avoidant of reductionism. It defines itself in nebulous and slippery terms that do not fit easily with evidence-based rationalism. Conversely, instrumental rationality recoils from that which refuses to be de-contextualised, reduced, sanitised, and measured. It is unsurprising that such puckish insolence tries the patience of policy analysts, motivating them to take their ball and go home, and to regard the social work ethos as altogether too precious. The resultant policy prescription typically takes little cognisance of social work knowledge. (p. 69)

Given this alleged paradigmatic clash - the apparent mismatch of 'knowledge forms' which this analysis suggests - it is tempting to relegate social work practice knowledge to the realm of the intangible. By contrast, efficiency-focussed organisations have been increasingly attracted by the promise of output and outcome measures associated with scientised 'evidence-based' approaches to social work practice. The notion of 'evidence' is often conflated with the managerial imperative to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery in terms of the relationship between investment and outcomes. Gray and McDonald (2006) suggest that "the emergence of evidence-based practice must be appreciated within the context of neoliberalism, manifest in the various administrative strategies of New Public Management" (p. 8). The evidential orientation is routinely supported by foundational 'common sense' rhetoric. The argument is that you cannot measure the success of practice if you cannot determine a cause and effect relationship between expenditure / practice inputs and client outcomes. The seemingly apolitical appeal of the evidence-based turn is deceptive. This linear 'means - ends' reasoning is rooted in wider discourses of agency and public choice theory (Schwartz, 1994). It limits the parameters of knowledge to that which is measurable in simply empirical terms and obscures deeper questions such as how practice goals and policy outcomes are identified. It also conceals ideological dimensions in relation to "what constitutes evidence and who chooses it?" (Pease, 2010, p. 100)

As intimated, social work practice knowledge is often regarded as difficult to capture and measure in rational / instrumental terms. The assumption appears to be that if measures of efficiency or outcome productivity are difficult to apply, the phenomenon under consideration is insignificant. Interestingly, the compelling brand of reductive reasoning often associated with calls for greater reliance on evidence-based practice can also be used to justify the present enquiry. This thesis is concerned with a foundational question: rather than beginning from a concern with practice measurement, this enquiry asks: what it is that social work is intrinsically capable of

seeing and doing?[13] I am suggesting that a greater understanding of the nature of social work practice should prefigure or pre-structure decisions about practice development. We need to recognise more clearly what social work 'is / does / knows' before we can fully comprehend its current and future outcomes. Rather than ask how social work might be measured against a particular desired effect, this thesis queries what it is that social work currently 'does': what social function does social work practice perform, and how might this be related to the knowledge applied and generated in the performance of practice? Further, how might the knowledge generated in the context of practice engagement with those who are positioned on the social and economic margins within the field of capitalist social relations be connected with wider questions of human repression or emancipation?

Pease (2010, pp. 100-101) argues that in order to contribute to social justice and social change, social work research must question dominant conceptions of evidence. Such questioning necessitates engaging in debate about the foundations of social work knowledge, and consideration of the power interests which are served by differing theoretical / political positions regarding what counts as evidence. He (p. 102) identifies reliance on narrative and reflective methods in the analysis of practitioners' accounts of their practice as falling within an alternate tradition for the development of social work knowledge. This tradition is concerned with critically exploring and validating understandings derived from the engaged experience of practice. 'Evidence' for this thesis is garnered through the accounts of experienced social work practitioners and an interrogation of these accounts that is informed by relevant literature. Perceptions of this evidence are also informed by reflexive engagement with my own practice experience. As such, the focus of the data gathering process, and the subsequent analysis of data provided by practitioners, is influenced by a particular theoretical lens. A process of exploratory theory development has coloured this lens and shaped the trajectory of this thesis. In the interests of academic rigour the development of the research process is explained in chapter 2. The epistemological stance of the thesis is aligned with a critical realist understanding of complex social causation (Bhaskar, 1997; Houston, 2001, 2010). The methodological implications of this theoretical linkage are discussed in chapter 3.

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[13] This notion of a 'foundational' question can be usefully compared to the unsettling / deconstructive methodology developed by Foucault (1980) and also to the concept of transcendental questions in relation to the underlying structure of knowledge developed by Bhaskar (1997) - following Kant - as discussed in chapter 3.

1.2.1 Orientation of Research

It is important to state that I am not a stranger to the social work context of Aotearoa / New Zealand. The genesis of this research is inextricably linked to my experience of social work practice. I hold a range of views which are born of experience and are ideologically located. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to begin to reflect on these ideological constructs in an academic context prior to embarking upon this thesis. The intent is to explore and develop pre-existing interests born of experience and analysis. This research is a continuation rather than a departure. This is illustrated by the fact that I cite my own previously published work quite often in the ensuing discussion. Some of the material that I have written previously does set the stage for the current enquiry and many of the relevant ideas about practice location and experience in the Aotearoa / New Zealand context have not been written about elsewhere. These developing ideas, and tentatively held connections between them, have driven the research process. It is part of an on-going effort to make sense of / theorise my own experience. However, it is important to also make it clear that I have endeavoured to allow for formative notions to be further questioned, developed and changed. The analysis provided is continuously curious and speculative rather than certain. The aim has been to engage in a process of thoughtful enquiry that involves a mix of theory testing and theory development: both inductive and deductive processes are at work (Bryman, 2012). As a researcher, I have set out to make my own ideological and methodological position as explicit and rigorous as possible in order to promote the integrity of the process.

The literature reviewed for this thesis, which is primarily covered in chapter 2, is not an exercise in looking at the topic of social work practice knowledge as a blank slate and seeking to discover what is objectively known about it. There is a dialogical relationship between ideas born of experience and concepts derived from the literature. The important point is that a process of active and recursive enquiry has taken place. The process has been exploratory, reflexive and engaged. Describing the research project in this way is intended to promote transparency. Ideas gleaned from the literature are discussed in an 'applied' or narrative way, reflecting on what may be added to our understanding of the topic at hand. Further analysis has been fuelled by engagement with literature selected because of its potential usefulness in the development of emerging ideas. I have endeavoured to maintain balance by reading and consulting widely and by allowing for new or contradictory ideas to influence my thinking. By means of identifying tentative understandings formed through practice experience and analysis and further critiquing these understandings with reference to ideas influenced

by the literature, I distilled an emerging conceptual framework and developed a set of questions for exploration through interviews with experienced social workers. This framework and the related questions which emerge are set out in chapter 3 where the detailed conceptual basis of the fieldwork research design is discussed and explained.

1.2.2 Orientation of Researcher

The following account of my background in social work practice is provided in order to clarify the formation of my interest in the nature of knowledge 'in' and 'for' social work. The intent is to explicate the process of experience and reflection that influenced the genesis of this thesis. It is recognised that…

> …research as a process of knowledge generation is inescapably a value laden activity within which the researcher plays a significant role in the process of knowledge creation. (Powell & Ramos, 2010, p. 231)

As a statutory social work practitioner - social worker / team leader / practice manager - with twenty years of continuous practice experience up until 2004 - I was intimately involved with the lived pleasure and pain of social work practice for a significant period of my working life (Hyslop, 2007).[14] It is important to acknowledge that this experience inevitably influences my perceptions of social work and the development of this thesis. In particular, practice experience has predisposed me to an interest in contributing to our knowledge of social work as 'practice': an interactive, engaged and fluid process as opposed to a procedural or conceptual map (Hyslop, 2009).

Description of initial concerns stimulated by practice experience provides the beginning point for the analysis which this thesis engages in. However, to take a step back, it is also considered that description of experience 'of and in' the practice of social work itself requires a process of analysis and reflection on that analysis. Inevitably experience and analysis - practice and theory - action and ideology - are conjoined. The following observation was made by research participant 18 in response to the issue of decision making in practice. It is included at this early point in the text because it captures the salient concept of socially embedded knowledge:

> ***The decision that I make will be influenced by my upbringing, by my cultural values and by my education, by my personal experience, by my***

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[14] The term 'statutory social worker' refers to social workers whose roles and functions are governed by statute law. Commonly this description refers to CYF social workers working within the legal context of child protection, youth offending, or adoption, although other social workers also perform statutory functions. The term 'practitioner' is used to distinguish those who are directly involved in social work with clients from workers in administrative or managerial roles. This distinction may not always be clear cut in terms of practice leadership and supervision.

religious view, by my moral view in terms of what I think is right and what I think is wrong - hugely shaped by that. Every time when you talk about something, when you ask a question, when you make a suggestion, it's all coming from that bunch of factors.

Although I worked for twelve months in an 'Ex-Offenders Hostel' in South London in 1982, my first taste of social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand was with the Otara Area Welfare Office of the then Department of Social Welfare (the state agency responsible for child protection and youth offending) in the mid-1980s.[15] As I spent seven years in practice before studying towards a social work qualification, experience can be said to have preceded theory - at least theory specific to social work - in my practice learning journey. Reflecting upon this period in 2007 I described its formative impact as follows:

> I started at the Otara office of the Social Work Division of the 'Department' (of Social Welfare) in 1984. I was not 'without issues' but I was keen. I was a socialist - of sorts; still am, sort of. I had a family, a flax kete, a Morris 1100 and $150.00 in the bank. I smoked roll your own cigarettes. I had travelled and seen a lot. Was I ready for Pearl Baker Drive, East Tamaki? Not really. The bare-floored, bare-walled poverty of South Auckland differs from the bare-earth, open-sky poverty of Africa. It is better hidden and no less stark and it still disturbs me more (Hyslop, 2007, pp. 4-5).[16]

Although unschooled in social work I was not without values and opinions. I was motivated by the belief that all people, regardless of class and circumstance, have an equal entitlement to a set of social rights before the state, perhaps the foremost of these being the right to be heard and to be treated with respect and dignity. I am mindful in hindsight of Ignatieff's (1994) rumination on the role of agents such as social workers in the mediation between strangers that is necessary within a welfare state and of the care which the exercise of professional responsibility demands:

> It is this solidarity among strangers, this transformation through the division of labour of needs into rights and rights into care that gives us whatever fragile basis we have for saying that we live in a moral community. (p. 10)

I was also and remain, concerned about the consequences of systemic structural disadvantage in New Zealand society, particularly with the way in which poverty impacts upon children and their families.

Some reference to processes of systemic change in the social work landscape of Aotearoa / New Zealand is made in chapter 2. At this juncture it is important to simply

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[15] Otara is a suburb of South Auckland where demographic factors in relation to health, education, employment, housing, ethnicity, class and age of population are indicative of relative socio-economic deprivation.

[16] 'Kete' is the Māori term for a woven basket / carry-bag (which I employed as a 'brief case' at this time).

register the fact that I became progressively more involved in definitively 'child protection' social work. In keeping with the experience of similar anglophone jurisdictions (Skehill, 2003), state social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand became increasingly specialised:

> Social workers within the intact, yet crumbling, welfare state bureaucracy of the mid 1980s balanced child protection cases alongside youth offending services, some community funding functions, foster care / institutional placements, housing needs, even services to 'individual adults with personal problems'. (Hyslop, 2007, p. 5)

As the welfare state retracted in the face of a changing social and political climate many of these generic services were either contracted out or simply withdrawn. By the time I left the Department of Child Youth and Family Services (as the state agency was titled at that time) in 2004, the practice environment had changed dramatically, although not in all respects. The work, although differently structured, was no less busy and remained infused with the sense of constant movement which Ferguson (2004) identifies as a powerful underlying theme in child and family practice through the twentieth century.[17] The poignant words attributed to a social worker appearing before the 2001 Lord Laming enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié in the United Kingdom are brought to mind: '"We always worked at a fairly cracking pace in north Tottenham" (Climbié Report, 2003, p. 184).[18] It is no exaggeration to say that the pace of practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand, particularly during the frenetic restructuring of the 1990s, often bordered on the absurd. Opportunities for social workers to think critically about the nature and quality of practice were minimal (Hyslop, 2007, p. 7).

Given my practice experience, the research interest which initially sparked this doctoral project focussed on child protection social work, particularly the management and organisation of practice. As a practitioner, I became increasingly disquieted by the way that mechanisms introduced to control and monitor child protection social work appeared to display such a limited awareness of the complex social nature of the processes which they sought to prescribe (Hyslop, 1997). I was perturbed by the way that the nature of communicative engagement between social workers and their clients seemed to be overlooked in practice developments driven by a production ethos. The relative calm of an academic teaching position has subsequently afforded me the opportunity to explore this unease and to ponder the disparity between practice as depicted in terms of rational efficiency and practice as experienced in 'the doing' of

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[17] The import of Ferguson's work is canvassed in some depth in Chapter 2.
[18] Lord Laming's 2003 Report into the death of Victoria Climbié was significant in the context of child and family practice In the United Kingdom and internationally.

social work (Hyslop, 2009). As implied above, I came to associate this phenomenon with a form of conceptual or paradigmatic blindness; as a 'relationship lost in translation'. I ventured to suggest that a cocktail of risk anxiety, fiscal prudence and instrumental measurement appeared to be generating a paradoxical reduction in the quality of child protection practice:

> …a resultant preoccupation with lineal procedures - task performance, timeliness, fiscal accountability, and above all, technocratic measurement - is ultimately counter-productive, in that a dispassionate and disengaged form of practice is promoted. The art of practice is buried beneath an anxious science of uncertainty. (p. 64)

Stimulated by Scott's (2006) parallel concern that child protection services in Australasia and similar jurisdictions were developing into dangerous juggernauts inflicting as much harm as protection, I began to wonder whether a good part of the cure for this malaise might be achieved by reintroducing social work values and practices into child protection work:

> It is contended that guidance may be found through consideration of what it is that social work knowledge has to offer child protection. Turning Ferguson's assertion on its head, it is proposed that the revitalisation of child protection policy and practice rests on reaching a deeper understanding of the nature of social work. It is suggested that social work embodies a dual tradition of state-sanctioned re-socialisation on the one hand, and empowerment and redemption on the other. An understanding of this ambiguous nexus, and of the knowledge and skills needed for reflexive practice in such a context, has the potential to inform creative practice development. (Hyslop, 2009, p. 64)

It is at this point that an interest in exploring the possibility of an identifiable knowledge form that is native to 'generic' social work practice began to crystallise.[19] The reasoning which led me to this focus can be set out as follows. Given that non-statutory social work has been subject to the same sort of socio-political pressures that have influenced child protection practice in recent decades and that I am suggesting a reconnection between child protection and the wider social work project, my attention has been drawn to the need to identify the knowledge generated and applied in social work practice. To advocate for a revitalisation of practice knowledge it is necessary to be able to identify what this purported practice knowledge consists of. Accordingly the focus of this thesis is on locating, exploring and describing the 'everyday practice' currently experienced by 'most' practitioners: the delivery of personal social services to

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[19] The term 'generic social work' does not refer to 'non-specialised social work' per se, but rather the notion that social work skills and knowledge are applicable and identifiable across a range of practice fields. As has been described however, social work is, for the purposes of this thesis, limited to practice individuals and families in what can be termed the 'casework tradition'.

individuals and families in the 'casework' tradition. Consideration of how such a research task might be productively undertaken has informed the conceptual and methodological development of this thesis.

1.3 Formative Reflections

In this chapter and the next, I begin to explore 'knowing' in social work by engaging with literature which offers some insight into the nature of social work knowledge and also the nature of knowledge in the social world more generally. There is evidence of a recent rekindling of interest in the utility of social theory for social work (Garret, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2013; Houston, 2010a; Stanley & Kelly, 2012), including some recognition of the importance of epistemological matters (Parton & Kirk, 2010; Taylor & White, 2001). Through this thesis, I set out to examine some of the theoretical issues which underpin contemporary academic debate in order to contribute to our collective understanding of what social work may be said to 'know' and how it may come to know what it knows. Further investigation of the nature and form of social work practice knowledge is grounded in an empirical study and subsequent data analysis which is informed by and builds on, existing scholarship in this area.

My concern for the future of social work is shared by a range of academic commentators (and practitioners) who have expressed varying degrees of discomfort, or even despair, regarding the coherence of social work development over the last ten or twenty years (Dominelli, 2004). As early as 1994, Howe (p. 513) identified "early signs that social work's intellectual outlook is fragmenting" and expressed misgivings about whether or not "there are any deep unwavering principles … that hold it together as a coherent enterprise" (p. 513). Although descriptions of the complaint and prescriptions for its remedy vary, many of the issues raised in academic debate concern the rationalisation of practice within an increasingly dominant neoliberal political climate (Ferguson, 2008; Garrett, 2009). This has been my experience of the Aotearoa / New Zealand context, albeit that there may also be indications of fresh opportunities for the emergence of a reinvigorated and reflective form of social work practice.

Parton (2008, 2011) asserts that Governments have become less concerned with explanation in the management of social problems and more focussed on the prediction and control of social risk. As the "governing world order" neoliberalism has, according to Houston (2012), "given rise to the McDonaldization of risk averse

practices and services" in "relation to human welfare" (p. 520). In my opinion there is significant tension between this demand and the ambiguous, 'contextual' and contingent world that is encountered in social work practice. The 'delivery' of social work 'in practice' is a process of engaged inter-personal exchange. In my experience the 'application' of known predictors of social risk to the circumstances of individuals in specific casework settings is be-devilled with the vagaries of individual temperament and circumstance, the sensibilities of human communication and the subtleties of human relationships. Social work judgements are made through a complex and interactive process of interpretive analysis. The following comment contributed by participant 12 during focus group discussion aptly illustrates an appreciation of the subjective nature of human judgements in professional practice:

> *I think it's scary sometimes how much power we have and we don't realise it. I guess following on a little bit from what (name with-held) was saying with the care and protection stuff - (… pause …) - I've done many, many referrals to Child, Youth and Family where children have been uplifted - and you sign your affidavits and go to Court and it's just that I could do a referral that is absolutely to the law - and you do - but it's about - (… pause …) - when so much of what goes into those is really also your value base and what you put into that and I think it always is when you're judging someone's life and what that's about and that can be the making or the splitting apart of a family.*

I am mindful of the conceptual challenges which confront the line of enquiry that I am exploring. To postulate that social work may have an identifiable nature which generates a particular kind of knowledge in practice is a problematic assertion on at least two levels. First, social work is no less susceptible to the influence of wider theoretical and practical developments than any other professional discipline. In fact, as an emerging and socially engaged profession, social work has been particularly vulnerable to contestation by competing theories, interests and political ideologies. Even cursory attention to the historical path of social work reveals complex processes of development within which a range of theoretical schools have waxed, waned and been transformed over time (Payne, 2005). In his critical review of practice developments in the United Sates across the Twentieth Century, Goldstein (1990), for example, describes an eclectic "grab bag of diverse (and in many instances incompatible) theories, methods, techniques, models, schools and specializations" (p. 37). Secondly, the very idea of social work containing a discoverable 'essence' may seem counter-intuitive when set against the postmodernist / social constructivist perspective which is increasingly drawn upon within the social sciences (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000).

It is important to make it clear from the outset that it is not being proposed that social work can be confined to a specific theoretical school (Nash, Munford, & O'Donoghue, 2005; Payne, 2005). Similarly, it is not contended that social work can necessarily be reduced to a particular value or skill base. It is suggested, however, that particular political / historical and contextual possibilities may be embedded in the practice of social work and that these discursive regularities may give rise to a particular form of experiential knowing. I have set out to explore this possibility through this doctoral thesis. The following section develops the notion of contextual knowing as it is applied here. The more specific notion of 'particular historical and contextual possibilities' is elaborated in some detail in chapter 2, where critical reference is made to the theoretical work of Michel Foucault and also to Mark Philp's (1979) application of Marxist and Foucauldian concepts to the question of knowledge in and for social work.

1.3.1 Contextual Knowing

The intellectual and methodological stance adopted throughout this thesis is informed by a concept which I will refer to as 'contextual knowing'. The notion of 'context' is routinely identified as a distinguishing feature of social work: that social work practice requires analysis of, and engagement with, wider social formations which impinge upon specific practice situations (O'Brien, 2001). Weick (1987) relates this concern with context to a humanist heritage and describes an associated tension between social structure and human agency:

> From the profession's earliest days, a belief in the capacity of human beings to develop their potential was balanced against a view of society as a constellation of forces that could support or constrain that development. Commonly referred to as the person-in-environment or, in a more contemporary vein, the ecological perspective, this viewpoint acknowledges the interactive dynamic that exists among people and their contexts. Implicit in this position is a recognition of the interdependence between people and the social institutions that structure their lives. (p. 220)

The question of 'agency' - the nature of the relationship between subjective possibility and objective reality - often sits at the kernel of theoretical debate in wider social theory (Houston, 2001). The manner in which human activity can be regarded as both structured and structuring - the relationship between structure and agency - choice, circumstance and power - is also an underlying concern within this thesis.[20] It is an enquiry into the knowledge that is applied in and developed through, social work practice. I am also curious about 'how' this knowledge is generated and in the degree

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[20] For a depth discussion of the significance of the meta-theoretical agency / structure debate for social work practice see Houston (2004).

of agency that is exercised by practitioners in the production and application of practice knowledge.

It is instructive to emphasise two related features that inform the concept of 'contextual knowing' as it is applied in this thesis. First, it is aligned with a materialist epistemology that connects conscious understanding with experience of and in 'the world': specifically a world configured by the capitalist mode of social and economic exchange and the ideological apparatus which legitimates the associated unequal distribution of wealth and authority in a class society (Callinicos, 2008: Garrett, 2013). Accordingly knowledge can be said to be socially produced. Secondly, it is proposed that consideration of the relationship between human behaviour and the structural / economic forces which influence the horizon of possible actions is crucial to theorising the practice of social work. Following Tesoriero (1999), it is recognised that "social work needs to acknowledge and understand the social and political construction of its practice" (p. 52). Skehill (1999) endorses this view, in asserting that "social work is necessarily a 'social' activity framed by the society within which it operates and the discourses that surround it. To attempt to problematise social work in the absence of this broader context is, it seems, a futile activity" (p. 177).

In this thesis I set out to develop an understanding of social work knowledge as it is related to the context within which it is produced and applied. In so doing I am proposing that an operational methodology native to social work practice - the notion of contextual engagement - is also applicable to the study of social work itself. Just as social work practice is inevitably informed by analysis of and involvement in the social worlds of its clients, it is suggested that a fuller understanding of social work practice knowledge may be generated by interrogation of the socio-political milieu within which it is located. The aim is to explore social work practice as an embedded social process by examining a theorised relationship between knowledge generated in and for practice and the contextual (socio-political) location of social work. The possible nature of this relationship is explored and developed in chapter 2. The concerns which emerge are filtered through my own experiential lens and subsequently translated into the process of fieldwork research. The fieldwork design can also be described as an exercise in contextual engagement. It is influenced primarily by a critical realist epistemology which is captured in the following description provided by Houston (2010b):

> Critical realism is a philosophical position that examines how human agency (actions, choices, meanings, understandings, reasons, creative endeavours, intentions, and motivations) interact with the enabling and constraining effects of social structures (durable, enduring patterns, social rules, norms and law like

configurations). To understand social life, it is argued, we must comprehend the interplay between these two central spheres. (p. 75)

The ramifications of this orientation are discussed and explained in chapter 3.

Although contextual engagement as a means to a deeper understanding of social work underpins the thesis structure and research methodology, I am mindful that application of the notion of contextual analysis is not itself unproblematic. Beneath the appeal of the proposition that social situations are constituted by a multiplicity of influences, lies the difficulty of identifying these influences and of assigning relative 'causal weight' to particular aspects or levels of 'context'. Processes of judgement are inevitably involved in discerning how causal factors might be related to one another or how various contextual elements might be best modified so as to achieve preferred outcomes. Consequently the explanatory conclusions drawn from a process of contextual analysis can be contested from differing ideological positions. However it is considered that the reality of ideological contestation in decision making processes does not invalidate the utility of this concept. Knowledge of context is influenced by where the process of analysis begins from - where the analysis is positioned ideologically. In the interests of transparency I will critically discuss the literature which has influenced my own conceptual lens in relation to how the socio-political location of social work may influence the knowledge that is produced in and for practice.

1.4 Synopsis

As canvassed in the foregoing discussion, this project is grounded in professional and academic concerns that have germinated over a period of thirty years. Consequently, although I am committed to academic rigour, I cannot claim the status of a disinterested observer. In a typically robust contribution to the on-going debate about the future of social work within a changing and likely threatening political context in the United Kingdom, Jordan (2004) makes the following assertion:

> The challenge for social work in the UK is to clarify what is distinctive about its values, knowledge and practice methods, and create strong links between all practitioners committed to these, in a whole range of public, voluntary, and commercial agencies. (p. 17)

In my opinion this sentiment is applicable to the development of social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand in equally challenging times. Arguably, social work is becoming increasingly aligned with neoliberal conceptions of self-responsibility and is

delivered in an environment dominated by output and outcome measures imposed from above. As Jordan (2004) suggests, it is incumbent upon the social work profession to articulate what, if anything, is distinctive about the practice of social work. This research project aims to add to our understanding of how social work might be distinguished by examining what social work can claim to know.

As the preceding discussion indicates, my intention is to identify knowledge which may be applied in, arise from and / or be inherent to, the practice of social work. In his socio-historical interrogation of child protection practice - "Protecting Children *in Time"* - Ferguson (2004) expresses the conviction that it "is no exaggeration to say that the very future of social work itself rests on reaching a deeper understanding of the nature of child protection" (p. 7). Despite the intriguing analysis which Ferguson presents, it is debatable whether the lessons to be drawn from child protection practice should be invested with such sweeping import. Nevertheless, I am persuaded by the promise of a somewhat broader assertion: that the future development of social work requires a deeper appreciation of the nature of social work practice knowledge. The underlying schema is that consideration of what social work metaphorically 'sees' and literally says and does, may shed some light on what social work may be capable of 'seeing', saying and doing in the future.

Finally, I have suggested that a process of contextual knowing is an appropriate means to a fuller understanding of social work knowledge. By this I mean that an appreciation of the socio-political parameters of social work, the unique 'social' nature of social work practice and of the relationship between these two domains, is both possible and necessary if an adequate understanding of the potential of social work is to be achieved. It is further maintained that the key to building this understanding lies in a clearer recognition of the knowledge which is produced in the practice of social work. This thesis seeks to identify contextual understandings as they are demonstrated and / or articulated by practitioners: to engage with the context of social work practice as experienced by social workers enmeshed in current practice. In much the same way that social workers set out to gain an appreciation of the social world of their clients by listening to their accounts of lived experience, this project seeks a contextual understanding of practice knowledge by attending to the voices of social work practitioners.

1.5 Outline of Following Chapters

This thesis is influenced by a materialist conception of the constraints which shape human agency. It is also informed by a social constructivist perspective concerning the capacity to explore and elevate subjugated knowledge. In this sense it is an epistemological question - the method or grounds of knowledge for social work practice - which is being examined. Chapter 2 engages in a review of literature relevant to theorising the social and political construction of social work knowledge. The tentative analysis which emerges is discussed with reference to current social work practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand and in similar jurisdictions. This discussion includes an application of Foucauldian theory concerning the relationship between ascendant political formations and the dominance of particular epistemological positions. There is a specific focus on contemporary socio-political change and how this may be related to changes in the legitimacy of knowledge claims in and for social work practice.

Chapter 3 is concerned with methodology and the design of the fieldwork enquiry which serves as the research engine of this thesis. A set of formative questions which arise from the theoretical enquiry developed in chapters 1 and 2 is set out. The critical realist orientation which has influenced the research design is explained. An apparent synergy between a critical realist approach to social science and the study of social work practice knowledge is discussed. It is argued that critical realism accommodates the central notion of contextual engagement and enables the requisite 'bridging' of constructivist and materialist epistemological positions. The details of the research process are also explained - participant recruitment, question design and the subsequent process of data assembly and interpretation.

The research data is discussed in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Particular emphasis is placed on insights into the substance of social work practice knowledge as articulated by the experienced social workers who participated in this study. The data generated through interviews with individual research participants is organised into key themes and sub-themes which are divided into two related categories - 'Knowledge in Practice' (chapter 4) and 'Practice Knowledge in Context' (chapter 5). There is also some analysis of the emerging relationship/s between these themes, with reference to theoretical constructs that have been explored within the thesis. Presentation and analysis of further data gleaned from two subsequent focus group interviews is provided in chapter 6. Finally chapter 7 distils and develops these connections in more depth and detail. The potential significance of the findings of this thesis for current and future policy and

practice development are discussed. Some of the strengths and weaknesses of the research process are appraised and opportunities for further research are considered.

CHAPTER TWO: Theorising the Territory

2.1 Social Work and Modernity

This chapter focusses on the socio-historical context within which social work knowledge has developed. The structural influences that have shaped social work as a profession are considered and I begin to theorise the framework within which social work practice knowledge is generated and applied. The discussion is mostly concerned with political formations and theoretical constructions which may contribute to our understandings of social work knowledge. The trajectory of social work as a project has inevitably been connected with broader historical conjunctions, particularly the rationalist humanist heritage of the enlightenment and the modernist vision of progressive 'scientific' social development. I begin with some examination of the uneasy place of social work within the rubric of modernity - the influence of the liberal political tradition and the capitalist economic system. The literature reviewed stimulates consideration of a postulated relationship between social work practice knowledge and the delivery of services to a client group that is drawn primarily from those who are socially disadvantaged as a function of the capitalist social form.

Following Garrett (2013), the primary orientation of this thesis is consistent with trhe materialist Marxist critical tradition:"… to locate social work within the matrix of social and economic relations structured by capitalism…" (p.61). However this chapter also makes reference to other theoretical dimensions which may offer insight in relation to the nature, form, and application of social work practice knowledge. The challenges which the thinking of Foucault and the wider postmodern school have posed in relation to modernist precepts about the nature of knowledge, including social work knowledge, are considered because of the pervasive contemporary relevance of this critique. I highlight the significance of Foucault's conception of subjugated knowledge and discuss Philp's (1979) application of Foucault's ideas in his influential description of a discursive form of knowledge that is specific to social work. Philp's work has significant implications for this thesis and resonates strongly in the analysis of the fieldwork research data which is undertaken in subsequent chapters.

This chapter also explores and critiques the ideologically contested perception that a postmodern social order has significantly broken with the modernist era. This debate is considered in relation to the rise of the neoliberal political project. A possible relationship between this project and the contemporary redefinition of legitimate

knowledge in and for social work is considered. . The final section of this chapter addresses the concept of tacit knowledge - the 'inner space' of social work practice knowledge which may be enabled or constrained by wider socio-political configurations. The theoretical elements discussed in this chapter are largely woven into the research design that is explained in chapter 3. The influence of critical realist epistemology is significant to the orientation of the research process. It is recognised that the materialist and constructivist understandings of knowledge generation canvassed in the following discussion give rise to theoretical tensions. It is suggested, in chapter 3, that this tension can be productively accommodated, if not 'resolved', by recourse to critical realist understandings of the relationship between complex underlying causation and constructed perceptions of social reality.

2.1.1 Historical Legacy

The philosophical and political traditions which underpinned nineteenth century liberal capitalism reverberate powerfully in the contemporary political world (Duncan, 2004).[21] Webb (2007) argues that the deep-rooted bourgeois fear of an imagined mob is not the least of these spectres: "The obsession with danger stalking the moral imagination of the late Victorians ascends directly, albeit in changing form, to the experiences of insecurity and panic in contemporary societies" (p. 42). Nineteenth century ghosts may also haunt the reptilian cortex of contemporary social work practice. . Webb's discussion of the Victorian heritage identifies social work as quintessentially 'modern' in its concern with the individual as citizen and its affiliation with the state as guardian of 'social' well-being through the management of individual morality. Procacci (1991) captures the formative orientation as follows:

> The pivot of this new guise of benevolent activity is the 'visitor of the poor', the
> true forerunner of social work, the instrument at once of the capillary distribution
> of 'household relief', and of that 'study of character' which was beginning to be
> considered indispensable for good social administration. (p. 165)

This representation of the Victorian Charity Organisation Society 'friendly visitor' foreshadows a persistent theme within the casework practice tradition. Early social work aspired to a moral science of 'the social', intended to combat the perceived civic insecurity of the times. Arguably the conflicted nature of this function continues to reverberate in present day practice. In my opinion a positioning as deliverer and watcher, participant and observer, engager and assessor, continues to structure the

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[21] Jordan (2004) suggests that social work's moral commitment to individualism is historically embedded within the liberal political tradition and that a lack of reference to collective social identity has left it vulnerable in a neoliberal political climate.

social work role. These multiple expectations are also suggestive of a fundamental contradiction in the sense that differing and perhaps contradictory, tasks must be balanced and performed simultaneously. I have come to think of this curious alchemy of authenticity and detachment as a 'duality of presence', or perhaps as a 'continuous play of presence and absence'. In a similar vein social workers' voices, their ability to see and hear, their intuitive capacities, their perceived 'selves', are the medium of client engagement. This 'deployment of self' is the mechanism through which understanding is reached or persuasion achieved.

In my experience, the reality of face to face communicative engagement within 'the social' in the practice of 'social work' is that you are not only delivering a service: you 'are' the service. Beginning practitioners are required to master this chameleon-like application of interpersonal skills (the 'use of self' in the context of 'clinical distance') as part of their professional acculturation: "Melding the professional self of what one knows (training, knowledge, techniques) with the personal self of who one is (personality traits, belief systems and life experience) is a hallmark of skilled practice" (Dewane, 2006, p. 544). The redefinition of these emotionally embedded and physically embodied, characteristics as practice skills or 'tools of the trade' also cuts to the contested, perhaps essentially dualistic, nature of social work practice.

Although the schematic map of agency-mandated practice often demands binary classifications such as deserving / underserving or guilty / innocent, I suspect that social workers in practice are routinely confronted with the task of mediating an uncertain and often disputed context. This is the terrain in which social work practice knowledge is applied and developed. This chapter begins to explore the way in which this context may be socially and politically configured. Through a process of social engagement that involves both separation and application of 'self', decisions that involve complex and sometimes onerous, judgements are made. Dualities are often effectively bridged in professional social work practice, but not without the potential risk of practice error or personal cost. It is instructive to ponder how the surveillance of social work, particularly through recourse to hierarchical supervision processes, often seeks to return practice to an objective stance: to a rational distancing from the social milieu.

2.1.2 Humanism, Science and Ontology

I have asserted elsewhere that social work has always been something of a paradoxical profession, awkwardly located within the schema of capitalist modernity, in

terms of what it 'sees', how it 'knows', and what it 'does' (Hyslop, 2012). Jones (1983) describes this positioning through a critical socialist lens:

> Social workers are themselves in a strategic position of considerable sensitivity to the state. They, too, from their different perspective gain an unparalleled view of the state in action; they, too, can see the sorts of problems that are created by these state forms and the immense toll which many capitalist processes exert on clients. There are few state workers such as social workers who inhabit as their primary domain these nether regions of society, and who can gain at first hand some insight into problems and circumstances which the state would like to minimize and hide. (p. 50)

In this analysis social work practice fosters a critical appreciation of the exploitative nature of the social relations inherent within the capitalist state form: that capitalism "hurts" (Garrett, 2013, p.60). However the double bind for social work is that as an engaged and applied profession - one which is organisationally and politically constrained - the 'operational' question becomes 'what can (practically) be done?' My experience of practice is consistent with this melding of socially configured insight with the exigencies of agency mandated social work practice action. These two levels of knowing are often conflated, or tacitly experienced as seamless, in the real-time, realpolitik of practice action. Potentially subversive insight beneath the ideological skin of the capitalist social form is tempered, perhaps obscured, by an awareness of the discursive limits of casework practice. Significantly the means to obtaining this potentially subversive knowledge (an understanding of systemic social injustice by way of insight into the validity of the 'other's' experience of the social world) is also the primary means for mediating 'practical resolutions' within the wider social systems which surround the lives of social work clients: inter-personal communicative engagement.

The process of relational engagement in the practice of social work is challenging because of the conflicted setting which has been alluded to. Nevertheless the notion of respectful relationships may go to the essence of social work as a communicative profession that is underpinned by humanist values:

> Successful worker-client relationships, irrespective of the model of practice adopted, are fundamentally built on the (at times very practical) value of respect - respect for their intrinsic worth as human beings accompanied by a sense of what they can become if enough resources are available (see, for example, the positions advanced by Amyarta Sen (2001) and Richard Sennet (2003)). (Gray & McDonald, 2006, p. 15)

The awareness required to effectively manage the demands of respectful relational engagement in a multiply ambiguous context may be characteristic of knowledge in and for social work practice. This contextually generated and applied knowledge can itself be viewed as ambiguous or conflicted. Social work can be seen to preserve oppressive capitalist social relations in the sense that individuated solutions are negotiated or mediated in relation to problems which are structurally located. Social work knowledge cannot be classed as revolutionary in this analysis. However the fact that practice engagement with clients' lives potentially reveals / creates knowledge of the destructive nature of capitalism means that analysis which challenges bourgeois interests may be promoted. Accordingly the latent possibility for revolutionary consciousness / action remains.

The challenging political context which frames contemporary practice may present a radical developmental opportunity in terms of the dialectical nature of systemic change: the generative power of contradiction. Within the limits of the welfare state model social work is, at worst, perceived as a force for social control and pseudo-benign coercion, or, at its best, as a voice for the empowerment of marginalised citizens (Brodie, Nottingham, & Plunkett, 2008). In the latter analysis social work discourse perpetually pushes the boundaries of the social franchise - extending the 'Schindler's list' of those who are included within the ambit of liberal citizenship (Philp, 1979). Nevertheless this conceptualisation tends to identify the function of social work as an integrative, balancing, or moderating influence within the finite totality of capitalist relations. The neoliberal political turn has arguably ruptured the container which the welfare state provided for social work, and generated something of an identity crisis for the profession. The findings of this thesis suggest that the practice knowledge generated and applied in practice is patently at odds with nascent neoliberal conceptions of self-responsibility and the associated drive to exclude underclass or 'feral' elements from the sphere of social citizenship. Arguably, the neoliberal context of practice has heralded a redefinition or marginalisation of social work. Paradoxically it may also motivate individual and collective strategies of resistance, and prefigure opportunities for overtly engaged and critical practice.

Goldstein (1990) proposes that social work carries a compassionate ethic which he suggests may be related to an alternative knowledge structure, or at the least to an alternate stream within the value system of the liberal enlightenment heritage:

> At its origins, and to the extent that these values have persisted over time, social work might be called "social humanism." Adams's "social ethics" and

Richmond's "serving humanity" are, in effect, natural extensions of the humanitarian commitments to charity, philanthropy, and caring that social work inherited when philanthropy became organized. The "social" in social work is the expression of this heritage. Implicit in these commitments is the recognition that we are, at the root of things, social beings existing with one another in a state of symbiosis, interdependence, and community. On reflection, this philosophical and also practical understanding of the social context of the human state might have served as the substratum or wellspring of the profession's knowledge structure. (pp. 32–33)

This formulation is significant for this thesis because it allows for the possibility that social work carries a submerged and unique narrative: that social work practice knowledge may be derived from distinct sources of influence that are specific to the social work practice context.

Goldstein (1990) further proposes that social work sought an alignment with science in its search for professional status in the twentieth century. This linkage of social work with medico-scientific knowledge can also be identified as something of a constitutive paradox (Blundo, 2001; Cnaan & Dichter, 2008; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). Modernist science seeks to develop understandings of the world by means of classifications and categorisations that are enabled by a foundational reliance on scientific method as the mechanism for producing definitive truth. The associated practice orientation demands a stance of calculative distancing: a dispassionate separation of scientist and subject. The comparative validity of 'social science knowledge' - relative to the explanatory power of the physical sciences - is undermined by the complex and contingent nature of the social world.[22] In the case of social work, a particular seed of unease is intrinsically planted in my view. Social work is a socially applied and relational activity. It requires an engagement between practitioner and client that is social in nature: communicative, embodied, emotional and ethical (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). It is as much a practice 'craft' as it is a science. As Ignatieff (1994) has observed, the poetics and the politics of care for strangers involve "gestures too much a matter of human art to be made a consistent matter of administrative routine" (p. 16).

According to Goldstein (1990), knowledge for social work may be more accurately located by attention to the experience of social work practice: to 'practice wisdom and artistry'. In entering the world of 'the other'…

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[22] For a discussion about the pitfalls of oversimplifying the positivist versus interpretivist (science versus art) debate concerning the appropriate form of knowledge for social work see Shaw (2010, pp. 246–263). Also see Bryman (2012, p. 28) in relation to the problem of conflating positivism with science. For a related in-depth consideration of the fraught relationship between social research and the notion of scientific neutrality, see Soydan (2010, pp. 131-148).

> …we quickly discover that we are dealing with uniquely personal and often opaque personal constructs and stories, with lives that are fluidly in process, with a culture that is in some ways alien to us, with odd metaphors and uncommon moral overtones, with beliefs in myths, legends, and faiths. (p. 41)

The friction which exists between relational engagement and assessment processes associated with scientific classification and measurement is an underlying source of tension in practice. Pease (2010) links the current ascendancy of evidence-based practice with the scientific paradigm, suggesting that this phenomenon needs to be understood within the context of a wider politically situated debate about the nature and credibility of differing forms of knowing in and for social work. This epistemological question is further explored within this and subsequent chapters. Arguably the limited view of social work practice knowledge afforded by the contemporary preoccupation with technical measurement tends to occlude more expansive and critical understandings of practice knowledge. Such conflict may be experienced as an obstacle but it may also be seen to generate a creative process which practitioners actively manage.

The tension between bureaucratic constraint and client need may be historically endemic to social work. Such conflict can be experienced as an obstacle but it may also be seen to generate a creative process which practitioners actively manage through the practice processes of discretionary or relational 'artistry', which Goldstein alludes to. Arguably, however, a reconfigured 'government of the social' has been generated by the global expansion of capitalist development in neoliberal times. Late capitalism is witness to the increased incarceration and demonisation of those who are positioned as surplus to the economic order (Wacquant, 2009). The dominance of instrumental approaches to practice may also mean that any emancipatory potential generated by social work practice knowledge is increasingly limited - the insight into the lives of the socially marginalised which practice affords is increasingly reinterpreted as a means of locating, classifying, and disciplining the sub-proletarian poor. In this analysis social work becomes implicated in both the physical and the symbolic / classificatory violence of the neoliberal state (Garrett 2013, p.179).

2.1.3 Intermediate Location

Within industrial societies social work has been said to perform functions which neither the bonds of family and community, nor the mechanism of the market, are capable of performing (Dominelli, 2004). Social work is historically connected with ministering to the needs of the socially disadvantaged, albeit that these needs are generally defined

by the powerful. As suggested by the quotation from Tawney (1978) which prefaces this thesis, 'need' is a socially contested and politically manipulated notion. Social provision within a climate of limited resources also self-evidently necessitates the mediation of conflicting claims. The act of social work often requires interaction between social workers and those classified as potentially unable or unwilling to participate appropriately in social life. Social workers are often required to exercise discretionary judgements based on notions of character and willingness or capacity to comply or reform (Jordan, 2004; Taylor & White, 2001). In this sense, social work can be seen as a mediating and essentially controlling 'practical / moral' activity.

The idea that social work, as an occupation and also as an activity, is located 'in - between' the state and the needy (Dominelli, 2004) is consistent with this analysis. Parton and O'Byrne (2000) describe social work as having historically occupied …

> …the space between the respectable and dangerous classes, and between those with access to political and speaking rights and those who are excluded (Philp, 1979; Stenson, 1993). … While it has always been concerned to liberate and emancipate those with whom it works, it is also concerned with working on behalf of the state and the wider society to maintain social order. (p. 37)

Social work, as an applied and socially located practice, inevitably requires a balancing of interests. The significance or otherwise of the apparent 'intermediary' location of social work is a critical point of concern for this thesis. Ferguson (2004, p. 188) describes social work practice as social mediation in a 'liminal' space. Epstein (1999, p. 8) characterises it as the Janus-faced profession:

> For example, it is common to state the intentions of social work as helping people to accommodate to the status quo and as challenging the status quo by trying to bring about social change. This dissonance is intrinsic to social work, to its essence. (p. 9)

Three themes which are identified in Ferguson's (2004) socio-historical critique of child welfare practice as a modernist enterprise are pertinent. First, there is an analysis of social work as historically engaged with those who are somehow "left behind" or swept aside in the headlong rush which the capitalist mode of social and economic development prescribes (p. 27). A foundational relationship between social work and those who are socially excluded as a function of capitalist society is theorised and problematised. Drawing on Bauman and Baudelaire, Ferguson prosaically describes the late nineteenth century social dislocation of the urban poor and the disturbing effect

which the related sense of threat and fear had upon the security and sensibility of the rising European bourgeoisie:[23]

> Faced with such stares, as well as the threat of being literally touched by the 'dangerous classes, a major social, moral, and political dilemma opened up concerning how to deal with the poor. The decisive bourgeois response was to contract out, mainly to social work, the job of dealing with the 'refuse' of modernity in order to try and sanitize these new spaces and seal up these wounds that modernization was creating. (p. 25)

This analysis is important because it highlights the persistently class-based (though often obscured) nature of social work.[24] It also reinforces the idea that social work has been concerned with moral order in modernist society. Later in Ferguson's text, the 'left behind' concept is fleshed out with reference to 'dividing practices' and the associated construction of deviant 'others'. Ferguson draws on research undertaken in the field of statutory practice in Ireland where social workers described some of the client families encountered as living in a '"time warp" and identifies " the implication that these marginal, dirty and uncivilised families have failed to move with and keep up with the times, that they somehow 'out' of time" (p. 189).

I find this description poignant because it resonates with my own experience of child welfare practice wherein a section of inter-generationally impoverished families exhibited a mix of exclusion and resistance: the 'habitus' of those living outside of 'modern' times.[25] Ferguson's (2004) reference to the 'carnivalesque' (pp. 99, 105) demonising of the deviant poor is equally troubling. The argument advanced is that this process is akin to a necessary reflex in the sense that a profession that is ostensibly concerned with social inclusion must find a way to justify the exclusionary face of practice. In twenty years of statutory social work in Auckland New Zealand, I repeatedly observed a disturbing phenomenon whereby groups of social workers in social or out-of-hours gatherings habitually engaged in the exaggerated mockery of individual parents and / or children who were perceived as inadequate and often as somehow grotesque. It was as if repetition in the form of tribal incantation would exorcise doubt. The relatively common perception that this phenomenon can be explained as a form of

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[23] Smith (2011) discusses the contemporary status of social work in relation to Bauman's analysis of the punitive social exclusion of 'failed consumers' within a reconfigured neoliberal regime driven by risk consciousness and associated social anxiety.

[24] Reflecting on the contemporary dominance of neoliberal political ideology Houston (2012) makes the following observation: 'Any critical realist project located in the social world must therefore take account, first and foremost, of how the economic policies of our times influence institutional, cultural, interactional and human domains of experience. Social class is a salient now as it was when Marx wrote his manifesto with Engels' (p. 1).

[25] There are several references to Bourdieu's central concept of habitus - ingrained, structured and structuring determinants of / orientations to class-based social identity - within this thesis. For a discussion of the relevance of this construction to social work see Garrett (2007).

restorative black humour that counter-balances the burden of care in circumstances of shared adversity does not seem to adequately account for the urgency and vehemence displayed in these rituals. It is as if the category of fully human subjects must be reduced in order for social workers to accommodate the domonising and objectifying practices that such government of the social requires.

The second relevant theme in Ferguson's (2004) text is the notion that the prima-facie construction of modernist social work practice as a rational bureaucratic mechanism grossly oversimplifies the nature of practice and massively distorts our understanding of it. Ferguson sets out to introduce the subjective, yet socially conditioned, experience of practitioners and clients into our understanding of child protection practice. The solid visions of bureaucratic certainty are contrasted with the nuanced and contingent (liquid) lived experiences of practice.[26] The question of whether this analysis of the essentially social nature of child welfare practice may be an equally useful conceptual tool for understanding social work more generally is explored within this thesis.

Ferguson (2004) divides the 'lived' aspects of practice into two categories: aesthetic sensibility and an expressive dimension. Although Ferguson is reliant on Foucault in identifying social work with the normalising regime of the 'psy-complex' and a historical shift from exceptional discipline to generalised surveillance in the 'government of the social', his concept of 'aesthetic sensibility' provides for a less deterministic view of practice. The aesthetic dimension is intended to connect social work practice with the creative energy underlying modernity; with the experience of movement, uncertainty and artistic possibility in practice. This is contrasted with what Ferguson interprets as the 'static' gaze of power theorised by Foucault (pp. 72-73). The expressive dimension encompasses the relational, symbolic and sensory elements with which the rich social world is infused. The aesthetic and expressive components of practice are also collapsed into a more tactile and evocative concept: the 'smell of practice'. The awareness, sensitivity and skill with which social workers manage their relationship with those who are positioned as clients - how they mediate the smell of practice - is identified as uncertain, potentially dangerous and potentially creative or empowering territory. The knowledge which may accompany this process is a concern of this thesis.

Thirdly, Ferguson (2004) identifies the changing landscape of practice knowledge with what is construed as a pivotal socio-political-historical 'sea-change': the contemporary unravelling of 'simple' modernity. I will now turn my attention to this matter. Various

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[26] In this discussion Ferguson (2004) draws on the concept of 'liquid modernity' as developed by Bauman - see Bauman (2000).

social theorists (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990) discern a shift in the trajectory of modernity from 1970 or thereabouts. The contested meaning of this perceived change, its significance for social work and for the exploration of practice knowledge within this thesis, is developed in the following section. This discussion explores the notion that social work is enmeshed with modernist discourse and that this discourse has been positioned as irrelevant in 'changing times'. It will be suggested that this construction consists of a set of ideas which are politically situated and ideologically applied.. It is argued that a sophisticated appreciation of the complex and contested perceptions which surround the concept of postmodernity is central to understanding the competing knowledge claims which are associated with contemporary social work practice. It may be that the daunting task of reconciling enlightenment ideals with postmodern critique is the key challenge for contemporary social work theory. The following section also begins to explore this contention.

2.2 Michel Foucault: Knowledge and Power

In the first section of this chapter it was suggested that social work may occupy a particular discursive place within the modernist enterprise. Arguably a concern with providing mediation or achieving balance between potentially conflicted positions is woven into social work practice and hence into the fabric of the knowledge which supports this practice. A distinction was made between an understanding (born of social engagement with those who are positioned as clients) of the contradictions and conflicts of interest which capitalist ideology conceals, and a situated awareness of the assistance which can be effectively negotiated with and for service recipients. In the lexicon of social work the associated practice 'stages' of engagement, assessment, and intervention are all supported by a process of communicative relational mediation.

According to Bauman (1999), Marxist and liberal social theory, although antagonistically positioned, can be subsumed within the modernist humanist tradition since both are anchored in the enlightenment schema of 'ascendant' man (*sic*):

> All this, when pondered in retrospect, appears to be a family quarrel inside the Enlightenment camp - a debate over the **best means**, waged by thinkers who agreed on the **ends**, that is on the urgent need of a thorough Reason-guided reconstruction of human society. (p. 112) [27]

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[27] The highlighted emphasis is present in original text.

Hugman (2003) suggests that the ethical stance of social work seeks to bridge the divide between the liberal and critical schools of modernist theory by melding the idea of respect for persons with a concern for social justice. The concept of intermediate location can be extended to this higher level of abstraction.

Postmodern social theory has posed a foundational challenge to the enlightenment world-view (Callinicos, 2008) and to the place of social work within this world view. It is considered necessary to traverse some of the central tenets of the postmodernist critique, particularly the complex scholarship of Foucault, because of its significance for our understandings of how knowledge, including social work knowledge, is constructed.[28] Conceptual tools associated with Foucault and the wider 'post discourses' have presented both opportunities and obstacles for the development of social work (Noble, 2004). Related notions of contested truth, subjugated discourse and the decentred subject have provided significant scope for creative practice.[29]The following discussion suggests, however, that the influence of Foucault's vision has proved enigmatic for social work: both freeing and constraining.

The project with which Foucault engaged derives much of its inspiration from the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (Epstein, 1999; Foucault, 1980). Nietzsche's critique radically undermines the notion that human identities can exist outside of the power relations through which they are produced. According to de Oliveira (2003), Nietzsche "questions the very possibility of formulating a conception of human nature, insofar as there always has been and always will be some subjective, power-effected interest behind every search for identity" (p. 95). Rather than the nature of human-kind, the focus of enquiry becomes the practices of knowledge production which are necessary for the exercise of domination: the mechanisms through which the 'nature' of the human subject is inscribed. Foucault, in turn, subverts the schema of enlightenment epistemology by attacking the modernist precept that human freedom and reason provide a means for the discovery of 'truth'. The crucial questions shift from how truth can be found to how truth is created and to how the mechanisms which legitimate power-driven regimes of truth may be revealed (Rabinow, 2009). Rather than seeking to develop a general theory of causal analysis, Foucault (1984) looks to examine (and potentially deconstruct) the smaller 'technological' means by which particular

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[28] It is important to note that this discussion is not intended as a comprehensive treatment of postmodern social theory. Postmodern ideas are only reviewed for the purposes of this thesis - in relation to social work knowledge claims.

[29] The use, for example, of the externalising metaphor in narrative practice to conceive of problem formations as outside of the individual rather than intra-psychically located, has facilitated liberating therapeutic work. (White & Epston, 1990)

constellations of accepted knowledge have come to be possible. He developed a methodology and a conceptual arsenal, that served this intent to investigate how relations of power are produced and demonstrated in the world as concrete practices / beliefs which both function within and produce, discourses of 'possible truth/s'.

Foucault's (1980; 1984) conception of power in society is one of complex relations of force rather than a stratified system of repression. This formulation can be usefully contrasted with Marxist political theory which postulates a 'divided subject' by connecting exploitative productive relations with a false consciousness that prevents alienated humanity from realising its true potential (Berger & Luckman, 1980; de Oliviera, 2003). Foucault's critical departure lies in his contention that power 'produces / creates' rather than 'distorts' awareness (Tew, 2006). This vision generates a far more sober view of the human condition. There is no inherent humanist destiny. Power is ever-present, relational, productive, constitutive, permissive and nuanced. It allows for a multiplicity of often hidden or subjugated truths. Human subjects are enabled by technologies of power and given voice within regimes of truth but they are also conditioned and normalised: "discourse is always a freedom and a bind" (Philp, 1979, p. 100).

The connection between historical shifts in the social relations of power and the deployment of new technologies of domination is powerfully illustrated in Foucault's descriptions of modernity as a disciplinary order. Foucault theorises movement in the modern epoch from a regime of exceptional punishment to one of generalised disciplinary surveillance necessitated by a changing order of power relations (Ferguson, 2004). The related notion of dominant truth regimes - that 'the possible' is constrained by the social relations of power at any particular point in time - is a powerfully persuasive, if somewhat closed or disabling, construction. However, Foucault also develops the concept of 'resistance' as part and parcel of the configuration of power. The status quo conceals a flux of competing voices. Although Foucault does not identify any clear engine for social change the notion of contested truth does allow for some degree of subjective agency; albeit that this agency seems to be constructed and thereby limited, within a totality of power relations. Foucault speaks of the possibility of change originating at the 'capillary' edges[30] of power regimes (Foucault, 1980, p. 158), yet, as Haber (1994, pp. 98-110) notes, it remains difficult to conceive of how sustained rupture - such as that ushered in by the shifting axes of

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[30] 'Capillary' in this sense refers to the social system as a metaphor for the circulatory system in human biology whereby small 'capillary' vessels move blood to and from the remote or obscure outskirts of the 'social body'.

power in the eighteenth century European world which Foucault focuses upon - could be generated within such ubiquitous mechanisms of control. Haber (1994) considers that Foucault's concept of 'resistance' is flawed - at least as a basis for oppositional politics - because of the way that it appears to be "inscribed within those very relations of power it opposes":

> Foucault states … that the existence of power "depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance," that resistance "can only exist in a strategic field of power relations." But this means that resistance is co-opted for the purpose of disciplinary and normalising regimes of power, and is evidence of the fact that resistance need not result in transformation. (p. 99)

Foucault was notoriously reluctant to unequivocally connect his theoretical constructs with events in the contemporary political world (Rabinow, 2009). Nevertheless, speaking in 1977, he compared the socio-cultural shifts of that time (such as the burgeoning feminist and anti-colonialist / anti-racist movements) to an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault, 1984, p. 81). In Foucault's terms, the various challenges to the patriarchal, euro-centric, science-centric hegemony of enlightenment reason which emerged from the latter half of the twentieth century can be interpreted as a partial discursive rupture, allowing for the subaltern voices of previously silenced groups to be heard.[31]

2.2.1 Contemporary Application

Foucault's analysis can be fruitfully applied to the changing face of social work practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand over the past thirty years or so - specifically with reference to the passage and implementation of the Children Young Persons and Their Families' Act, 1989 (hereafter CYP&F Act 1989).[32] Within the framework of this thesis, the discussion below reflects the emergence of a powerful social work voice (informed by practice knowledge) in the policy realm and a subsequent (politically driven) redefinition of appropriate social work practice knowledge. It could also be seen as the emergence of a practice-driven discourse of empowerment and its subsequent replacement with a discourse of risk and family self-responsibility.

The 'discovery' that twentieth century discourse naturalised a social world which privileged the "views, experiences and interests of white, middle-class, able-bodied

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[31] The Foucauldian concept of 'discursive rupture' concerns a break with a dominant regime of truth - which in turn presupposes a change in the underlying structure that 'enables' the dominant understanding of what is possible - that which can legitimately be spoken of.

[32] The New Zealand Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act, 1989 legislated for the adoption of an indigenous Māori perspective in relation to the place of the child in the context of extended family as a central construct for all statutory practice (Hyslop, 1997).

males" (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000, p. 21), was perhaps less of a revelation for social work than many other professions. In Aotearoa / New Zealand the sweeping legislative changes to the field of statutory social work which were enacted with the passage of the CYP&F Act 1989 can be related to the emergence of, and to some degree conflict between, two previously marginalised voices. First, there is the rising tide of concern with child abuse and the associated concept of children as citizens in their own right. The developing recognition of children's rights can in turn be associated with the rise of the women's movement. Secondly and more significantly for the argument at hand, is the powerful emerging narrative of indigenous rights associated with the 1970s:

> The evocative realization was that racist social work practice actively contributed to intergenerational alienation and creeping cultural genocide. It was the fall-out associated with this message that most affected the shape of the 1989 Act. (Hyslop, 1997, p. 62)

The passage and subsequent administration of the CYP&F Act 1989 can be read as an 'interruption' of modernist monologue. Two related phenomena warrant further attention. First is the fact that much of the agitation for change and also the practice innovation that prefigured the legislation, was actively advanced by practitioners at the local (capillary) level. This was driven by practitioner knowledge of the destructive nature of rescue mentality foster care and institutional placements, particularly for Māori children:

> Social workers responded creatively to the challenge well before 1989. With the zeal of those converted to a "new truth" social workers began involving extended family in all key intervention decisions. Paradoxically, the then existing rule-bound bureaucracy provided more room for innovative, politicised practice than the present inflexible environment. (Hyslop, 1997, p. 62)

The Departmental 'Social Work Development Plan' of 1989 arguably represents the high-water mark for a vision of bicultural practice development (Hyslop, 1997).The kind of practitioner-driven innovation which this plan envisaged is scarcely imaginable in the contemporary managerial environment of statutory practice overseen by a central Ministry of Social Development. Secondly, the resourcing implications of the socially ambitious CYP&F Act, 1989 were effectively buried in the avalanche of structural adjustment which engulfed Aotearoa / New Zealand in the 1990s (Kelsey, 1993, 1995).

The concept of family (whanau) autonomy was increasingly conflated with material independence:[33]

> The Māori cry to return the care of children to *whanau* (Māori family concept) fits neatly with the New Right illusion of free choice and concomitant responsibility. In the early days of the 1989 Act, families were resourced to meet the perceived care and protection needs of their children. As the administration of the legislation has developed, the concept of responsibility has increasingly been stretched to include financial and material responsibility. (Hyslop, 1997, p. 64)

A process of re-colonisation can be said to have effectively co-opted and silenced the subjugated voice which had challenged the dominant paradigm. Connolly and Doolan (2007) describe the associated change in practice orientation as follows:

> The battle of practice between "child rescue" and "family support" had been won by the latter. At least that is how it seemed in 1989. . . As it turned out, it was only a skirmish. The 1990's brought new struggles with respect to practice ascendancy. New Zealand child welfare began to emulate international developments that saw increased emphasis on risk assessment within investigation-driven bureaucracies. . . Once again, New Zealand practice started to look, and sound, like any other English speaking system. It was also beginning to experience the same problems. (p. 6)

This brief Foucauldian excursion into the trajectory of child protection practice relative to the CYP&F Act, 1989 suggests a process of partial 'discursive rupture' and a subsequent process of annexation and / or retrenchment by the power regime of a rising neoliberal political order. Conceptually the 1989 Act was influenced by socially liberal ideology - a break from welfare paternalism and an associated concern with the localisation and democratisation of decision-making processes. Subsequently the central notion of family responsibility was embraced within the political vision of free market economics, while the resourcing thrust of the legislation was minimised. The ascent of the neoliberal world view in social, economic and political life over the last two or three decades has significantly shaped the development of social work practice. The potential relevance of this economic and political change for the construction of social work knowledge is discussed later in this chapter. In relation to this thesis it is vital to consider the relationship, if any, between 'external' politically-driven developments in the design and delivery of social work and the 'internal' generation of social work practice knowledge.

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[33] 'Whanau' is the Māori word for the concept of family. It extends beyond the notion of immediate or nuclear family and includes a wider kinship group, reflecting the communal nature of Māori social structure.

2.2.2 Relevance to Research Orientation

The following section summarises the influence of Foucault's analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge in terms of this thesis, with particular reference to the fieldwork design process. Foucault is generally associated with the radical subjectivity of postmodern social constructionism.[34] However, as has been proposed, there are enigmatic and conflicted elements in Foucault's work (Haber, 1994). For example, the concept of pervasive and embedded formations of power is nothing if not a structural impediment to human agency. Nevertheless, despite his Nietzchean critique of humanist reason as an exclusionary will to truth, elements of the enlightenment ideal of human freedom also seem to adhere in Foucault's vision. Haber (1994) emphasises this emancipatory intent as follows:

> The point that I have been making in this section is that many of Foucault's critics do not take seriously his commitment to a politics of difference, to the project of creating the means by which marginalized voices can assert themselves - even if this means over-throwing the present power regime, along with the regime of truth and values. To understand Foucault is to appreciate his radical sympathies. It is to pay attention, and I come back to this again, to who the "we" is that Foucault speaks to, and more particularly, why he refuse to speak for them. (p. 93)

As I have suggested, Foucault's conception of an all-embracing power regime seems to militate against effective or sustained insurrections. Haber also argues that Foucault's 'universalising' of difference precludes development of the collective solidarity required for oppositional politics. It may be that the subversive orientation of Foucault's method of enquiry provides a more enduring legacy than his theoretical corpus. After all his goal is '…not to provide a theory of what ought to be done' (Haber, 1994, p. 96). What Foucault's deconstructive approach does provide is a potential tool of resistance - a means to lay bare and therefore destabilise, 'power-effected' regimes of truth, such as the neoliberal discourse which currently dominates our understandings of 'the possible' - in social work and in wider social and economic life.

As has been made clear, the theoretical corpus of this thesis is predicated on a materialist view of human social relations. Accordingly, I have not attempted to apply a Foucauldian framework of analysis within this thesis. However, I have incorporated elements of Foucault's theory and method as a means to uncover latent or concealed elements within the structure of social work practice knowledge. This intent is developed further in the following discussion of modernity. As canvassed in chapter1, I

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[34] Houston (2001) suggests that Foucault's theorising was initially directed against the determinism associated with the French structuralism of Althusser and others.

have asked what it is that social work 'sees, does and knows' (and what might make this seeing, doing and knowing possible), as opposed to the orthodox instrumental question which the dominant power interests relative to contemporary social work perpetually ask: how can we know that it works?(Smith, 2011). Secondly, I have located my enquiry in the micro-physics of 'every-day' casework practice. A close engagement with practitioners' understandings of the knowledge generated in this world aims to reveal the knowledge about the relationship between power and truth which the 'close engagement' of social work practice sustains. Accordingly, I have privileged the accounts of social work practitioners in relation to the genesis and application of social work knowledge in practice - exploring ways and kinds of knowing that may be enmeshed with practice. Turnell (2006) makes the following pertinent observation in relation to social work practice in the child protection field:

> In an environment dominated by the big answers of procedure, protocols, and frameworks, I believe it is vital to open up more conceptual space for the living but usually hidden knowledge of those at the frontline, so that there is greater capacity to reframe child protection practice as a human rather than bureaucratic endeavour. (p. 11)

Ironically this voice is seldom fore-grounded in our understandings of social work knowledge. As Staniforth, Fouché, and O'Brien (2011) observe, there is "little written about how social workers themselves define social work" (p. 190).

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2.3 Postmodernity and Social Work

Although Foucault's analysis can be employed to critique social work as a technology of domination, it can also be used to support an agenda of individual empowerment (Dominelli, 2004; Gilbert & Powell, 2010). It may be that the postmodern problematising of power and subjective identity has influenced social work because it deals with something which 'rings true' to the 'local' knowledge of social work: the notion that all social practices are influenced by complex, and often concealed or mystified, relations of power. Regardless of the political perspective from which it is viewed, social work practice routinely deals with unequal power relations; with people who are perceived and / or perceive themselves, to be vulnerable. To reiterate the argument made above, it is this deconstructive insight derived from Foucault which I am highlighting in this thesis. Foucault's focus on "the close examination of practices and unearthing of daily details" (Chambon, 1999, p. 60) is highly compatible with social work practice method.

Potentially this attention to detail can allow for the threads of social determinism to be unpicked and re-woven. The notion that oppressive identities are 'constructed' allows for the possibility that they can be deconstructed; for what Elliot (2003) describes as "the idea of never-ending self-constitution - the assembly, disassembly and reassembly of narratives of the self" (p. 6).

I have suggested that social workers tend to engage with the grey (perspectival and contested) circumstances of their clients' lives rather than the black or white binary divisions favoured by instrumental science and bureaucratic categorisation within the rubric of modernity. As rehearsed at length by Ferguson (2004), social workers deal with the uncertain, contingent, realities that belie the solid 'modernist' representations of the social world. Relational power within a complex social context is the meat and drink of social work, particularly as played out in the capillary realm of family life. The submerged rights or interests of those experiencing abuse or family violence - and the beliefs which support the abuse of power - are, for example, a frequent focus for intervention and advocacy.

Parton and O'Byrne (2000) connect social constructionist philosophy with what they classify as 'affirmative' postmodernity. The affirmative stance allows for 'agency'; for choice and responsibility in the identification of self. Negative self-identities associated with abusive histories can be re-examined, deconstructed and re-storied. This orientation is connected with creative "invitations to the possible" and is distinguished from the "gloomy" outlook of "sceptical" postmodernity which emphasises the impossibility of reliable meaning and purposeful action (p. 24). Parton and O'Byrne's consideration of the insights afforded by the social constructionist perspective makes a valuable contribution to the development of 'theory for practice'. It also illustrates some of the complex theoretical plurality of social work, seeming as it does to suggest a further accommodation between the social humanist heritage (Goldstein, 1990) and ideas arising from the 'anti-humanist' philosophy of Nietzsche. An ethical frame associated with the concept of collective human destiny and shared social responsibility meshes uncomfortably, yet creatively, with the notion of life as a continuous struggle for individuated identity.

2.4 Mark Philp: The 'Form' of Social Work Knowledge

When introducing the discussion of Foucault's conception of power in the social world, I suggested that developing a productive relationship between enlightenment ideals and

postmodern critique (Marx and Foucault) is a key challenge for contemporary social work theory.[35] Philp's (1979) discussion of the nature and scope of the 'social work knowledge form' suggests one way in which this kind of rapprochement may be possible. In chapter 1 I suggested that 'particular historical and contextual possibilities may be embedded in the practice of social work and that these regularities may give rise to a particular form of experiential knowing.' Philp's formulation of an underlying structure to the form of social work knowledge provides one possible account of these discursive regularities. Although the idea that social work knowledge is limited by discursive boundaries is maintained, his theoretical model reconnects social work practice knowledge with the enlightenment notion of potential (universal) human emancipation. The relevance of this construction to the knowledge revealed in the accounts of contemporary social workers in Auckland New Zealand is developed in relation to the analysis of fieldwork data in subsequent chapters.

Philp (1979) poses the following question which resonates with the spirit of enquiry that informs this thesis: "What, then, characterises social work knowledge: how does its product differ from these other forms of knowledge; what is social work's regime of truth?" (p. 91). Social work knowledge is aligned with the wider schema of enlightenment humanism. The foundational reasoning is anchored in Marx's materialist perception that "the structure of knowledge takes its form from a set of social relations" (p. 85). However, the concept of legitimate knowledge claims - or knowledge forms - which are generated within particular epistemic regimes and maintained within specific discursive limits is directly drawn from the work of Foucault. Philp proposes that the framework which structures social work knowledge - the discourse or 'regime of truth' for social work - was moulded by a particular socio-historical conjunction that arose in the late nineteenth century:

> It is suggested that it is here that the final cast of social work was formed: occupying the space between the respectable and the deviant; between those with access to political and speaking rights and those excluded, and between those who are represented through organized labour and those who are excluded, who remind us of mob fear 'traces of which are sedimented in our conception of deviance'. (p. 96)

A set of discursive rules by which social work can be identified - the framework within which its capacity to speak and be heard is enabled and constrained - is delineated. The form of knowledge for social work is described as paradoxical: "the final paradox of

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[35] It is implicit in this argument that the heritage of enlightenment reason is not as monolithic as postmodern analysis sometime implies - that there are divergences and contradictions ('subjugated streams' in Foucauldian terms) within this political and philosophical heritage: see Callinicos (2008).

social science". Social work discourse is said to invest individuals with a "universal subjectivity": an inherent potential humanity or sociability produced by "a built in belief in the fundamental good of humanity" (p. 91). Social work is seen to paradoxically produce a subject in objective knowledge - to bring forth a future subject. Essentially social work is said to direct its gaze to the possibility of future change which is integral to the notion of common humanity. This faith in potential sociability generates an ambiguous stance:

> To this extent, social work has an ambivalent relation to determinism, for determinism suggests forces beyond individual control. At the same time it utilises determinist theory to explain why an individual has become, for example, anti-social. It solves this problem by ultimately denying an absolute nature to determinism and by showing that, with compassion and an understanding of the individual's essential humanity, these forces can be transcended, thus realising the individual's inherently social self. (pp. 92–93)

It is argued that social work first emerged between the discourses of poverty and wealth and that it has subsequently become "institutionalised in the space between 'legitimate' working class politics and deviance" (Philp, 1979, p. 96). The 'feared' are translated into acceptable subjects by a process of individuated re-enfranchisement - a graduated return of subjective identity. This process is said to be comprised of three parts: the creation of subjects, the integration of objective characteristics and the function of "speaking for subjects" (p. 98). In its intermediary role social work is seen to serve both the client and wider society. The capacity of social work to allocate speaking rights to the disenfranchised is subject to 'discursive' limits. The humanisation of clients is not possible where the deviant behaviour is objectively perceived as too severe - where "the objective characteristics of the feared outweigh all the subjective possibilities" (p. 97):

> The social work discourse is located between the established and the residuum: between the successful and the failure, the secure and the insecure, the sound in body and the sick and handicapped, the law abiding and the law breaking, the still young and the suddenly dying, the sane and the borderline. In none of these positions will the social worker be heard if the objective characteristics of the feared outweigh all the subjective possibilities. (p. 97)

It is an on-going challenge to include those who are left behind. The boundaries of what constitutes a non-human state are said to be constantly tested through the discourse of social work. Philp (p. 102) encapsulates the essence of the social work role as "persuading the powerful that the others are safe". Interestingly the casework

role is also said to involve extolling the objectively 'unsafe' to aspire to the potential sociability which their underlying humanity affords:

> …the worker engages in a process with the client where the client is encouraged to see within himself his possibilities for social adjustment. The worker speaks to the objectified subject about the social subject which lies within him (*sic*). (p. 103)

The argument which Philp (1979) develops is pertinent to this thesis because it can be connected with several emerging questions. First is the issue of whether contemporary practice conforms to the discursive knowledge regime which is described. A challenging related issue is the notion of contemporary discursive rupture? Is change to the essential form of social work knowledge possible and if so, what might the implications for the future development of practice knowledge and practice activity be? Perceptions of possible change in the contemporary socio-political location of social work are tentatively drawn together in the discussion which follows. Many of the issues highlighted are further investigated through the fieldwork component of this thesis.

2.5 Socio-Economic Change, Neoliberal Capture and Social Work

As previously asserted, Foucault's influence can be seen as a double edged sword. While the postmodern challenge to enlightenment reason has provided a vehicle for innovative practice development on the one hand, the theoretical inheritance has also been applied with damaging consequences. Individuated identity is decontextualized and totalised - reified as a 'choice' within the ambit of neoliberal ideology (Garrett, 2013). I am also aware that Foucault's ideas are not necessarily synonymous with the broad and varied school of postmodern theory. According to Pease (2010) most of the innovative contemporary development of social work (and research) is influenced by the postmodern paradigm.[36] I am not proposing that this is necessarily a bad thing or that postmodern social theory is essentially anti-emancipatory, simply that elements of it have been selectively applied in ways that have had oppressive effects (Dominelli, 1996). There are powerful theoretical and political confluences at play and my concern is that something of a Trojan horse relationship has developed between postmodern discourse and neoliberal politics (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009; Ferguson, 2008, p. 112; Smith, 2011). This argument is explored in the discussion which follows.

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[36] For further critical discussion of the way in which postmodern perspectives have come to be associated with innovative or 'radical' elements in contemporary practice development see Ferguson and Lavalette (2004).

Noble (2004) suggests that the deconstruction which postmodernism makes possible has abetted neoliberal political development and contributed to a de-centring of the humanist discourse within social work:

> For while the postmodernists are arguing for the bankruptcy of meta-narratives, at the same time the neo-conservative ideology of economic rationalism, faith in market forces and deregulation pushes ahead unchallenged, along with the reduction of the role of the state in redistributing wealth and advocating for the disadvantaged in the allocation of societal resources (Dominelli, 2002; Ife, 1999; Midgely, 1999). (p. 11)

Neoliberal minimisation of the structural inequalities which impact upon social experience diminishes the place of social understandings afforded by a collective / inclusive view of 'the social' - arguably the very 'contextual perspective' which informs social work knowledge in practice.

Several of the theoretical positions associated with postmodernity leave it vulnerable to ideological capture within the neoliberal political project. I have suggested that social work has historically concerned itself with the redemption of individuals against a backcloth of structural inequality. The individuation which seems to be central to social work (Jordan, 2004) is congruent with the postmodern interest in the construction of subjective identity. In turn the postmodern distrust of social 'meta-narratives' can mean that structural analysis (and political awareness) is potentially devalued as a form of knowledge in and for social work. This is not a necessary outcome but the contemporary ascendancy of neoliberalism and instrumental social science mean that it is a probable one (Houston, 2012). Noble (2004) describes the effect of 'the postmodern' in social work as "enticing, almost mesmerizing" (p. 289).The potentially liberating idea that there are always strengths and choices in any social situation can, for example, obscure the sometimes overwhelming burdens of poverty and structural oppression in an unequal society.[37]

Ironically, given that a critique of power lies at its core, the analyses which postmodernity make possible have also been effectively utilised to facilitate political rhetoric which promotes the exclusive interests of the socially and economically powerful in western societies. Privilege and wealth can be explained as the righteous inheritance of the strong in terms of the life choices that they have made - the chosen identities that individuals have built for themselves. The neoliberal concept of self-determining agents as the fundamental unit of economic and social life can be, and

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[37] The earlier discussion of Haber's (1994) analysis of how Foucault's privileging of difference militates against the social solidarity that is prerequisite to political emancipation is apposite.

frequently is, associated with postmodern notions of difference and individuated choice. Noble (2004) makes the following assertion:

> For postmodernists' 'life' is to be embraced without 'truth', universal standards or generalizable ideals. Liberated from the metaphor of progress, the postmodern condition is a site of constant mobility and change, with no clear direction of development. (p. 292)

At its simplest, the postmodern privileging of difference (as a property associated with the socially disembodied self) is routinely reframed in neoliberal discourse as political justification for inequality (Smith, 2011).

It has been contended in this chapter that the moral humanist 'mediating' intent of social work is entwined, albeit paradoxically, with the project of modernity (Ife, 1997; Jordan, 2004). Social work, and the knowledge produced and applied in its practice, arguably reached its peak within the rubric of the post-Keynesian welfare state. The bureaucratic social work practice associated with 'high' or 'organised' modernity is historically tied to this political structure (Ife, 1997). A twin regime of care and control was administered through discretionary processes of 'professional' classification within the schema of applied social science. In turn the trajectory of the welfare state project is associated with the collective social insecurity experienced through the Great Depression and with the 'long boom' of the post war decades that followed (Callinicos, 2010). Garrett (2009) names this configuration of political power as "embedded liberalism" (p. 14). Within this regime, Bourdieu et al. (1999) associates public services with the left hand of the state - reducing the socially damaging consequences of unrestrained capitalism by making discretionary 'contextual' allowance for the circumstances of individual citizens:

> Paradoxically, the rigidity of bureaucratic institutions is such that, despite what Max Weber said about them, they can only function, with more or less difficulty, thanks to the initiative, the inventiveness, if not the charisma of those functionaries who are the least imprisoned in their function. (p. 190)

Although not immune from the divisive practices associated with capitalist modernity, state social work was, arguably, developed as an explicit vehicle for repatriation of the socially disadvantaged. In their historical review of Scottish practice, for instance, Brodie, Nottingham, and Plunkett (2008) describe social work as "a positive and radical force for social change" (p. 699).

Greater insight regarding the relationship between social work and the 'post-era' may be facilitated by consideration of the wider social, economic, and political imperatives

that have shaped our times. Postmodern theory, and the practice possibilities which it nurtures, has not been applied in a political vacuum. Skehill (2003) suggests a need to be cognisant of the "changing nature of neo-liberal society, calling into question the nature of society, the space of the social and social work within it" (p. 142). Wallace and Pease (2011) have recently argued that as …

> …'social work' is a continuous activity, conditioned by and dependent upon the context from which it emerges and with which it engages (Harris, 2008, p. 662), changes in welfare regimes will shape the way in which social work is constituted and practiced. (p. 133)

According to Callinicos (2010), the economic restructuring which Western Governments have embarked upon since the 1970s has been designed to re-ignite the engine of capitalist development: in Marxist terms to stimulate profitability through a "sustained increase in the rate of exploitation" (p. 55). The legislative changes that have accompanied this shifting political axis have been entwined with an ideological re-naturalisation of capitalist social relations, and couched in the language of 'freedom' and 'choice' (Femia, 1981; Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Smith, 2011). In a general sense the classification of appropriate social work knowledge has inevitably been influenced by this politically reconfigured regime of truth. Within a neoliberal policy framework, the measurement and management of social risk takes precedence over identification and analysis of social inequality. This thesis will consider the degree to which 'social work practice knowledge' - the 'internal' knowledge learned and applied in day to day practice - may have been influenced by such changes.

2.5.1 Critique of the State

I have argued that postmodern discourse has provided some of the intellectual leverage for a prising away of the foundational universal development ideology upon which the welfare state project rests. Critical appraisals of modernity often explicitly or implicitly connect the 'debilitating' functions of the 'welfare state', and with the perceived failings of wider visions of inclusive social democracy.[38] Ironically the increased reliance on punitive sanctions and 'rational' dis-incentives associated within contemporary neoliberal responses to relative poverty and exclusion are arguably far more 'paternalistic' than past practices - albeit that they are directed at a particular 'problematic' section of society (Peel, 2012; Schram & Silverman, 2012). Following Harris, Iain Ferguson (2008) identifies the close affinity between negative attitudes

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[38] Individuated and de-contextualised 'choice' is valorised at the expense of collective solidarity and inclusive social care which is, in turn, conflated with the bureaucratic modernity / embedded liberalism of the welfare state era.

toward social work and the capitalist critique of welfare state social services as morally, socially, and economically debilitating: "As Harris notes, within New Right theorising, social work was often presented as a metaphor for all that was perceived to be wrong with the Welfare State" (Harris, 2003, p. 36; cited in Ferguson, 2008, p. 38). Simplicity is arguably the cornerstone of the cogent, if beguiling, appeal of the neoliberal world view. In an insidious way, the blank slate self that the potential for postmodern deconstruction and reconstruction of identity promises is a near perfect cypher for the fictive, choice making, 'context free' individual of neoliberal theory. Ferguson (p. 107) argues that an emphasis on the centrality of difference, epistemological relativism, and individuated 'postmodern' identity, can potentially lead to the dissolution of universality and collective solidarity. As Elliot (2003) observes, Beck's notion of 'active citizenship', "fails to give sufficient weight to the possibility that individuation may actually embody systematically asymmetrical relations of class power" (p. 30).

The concept of self-development as a form of public duty, particularly as incorporated into 'third way' public policy, has been criticised by social work academics as undermining the voice of social work in relation to structural disadvantage (McCallum, 2007; Garrett, 2013). According to Jordan (2004) such exhortations assume a particularly punitive character when applied to the poor. Jordan (p. 9) comments on deployment of "technologies of the self" in the context of public policy in the United Kingdom in the first decade of the 21ˢᵗ Century:

> Hence the irony for social work (as a potentially emancipatory activity) is that in local authorities and other statutory agencies it is charged with motivating and cajoling service users towards projects of autonomy and self-development while controlling the deviant and destructive aspects of resistance strategies (crime, drugs, benefit fraud, self-harm, mental illness). (p. 10)

This is a policy prescription which the Labour-led Governments of Aotearoa - New Zealand borrowed heavily from over the same period (Lunt, O'Brien, & Stephens, 2008). By emphasising that "the inequality and immense imbalances in power, associated with 'simple modernity' remain'', Garrett (2013, p. 32) also alerts us to the danger of presenting the individuated choices open to an elite social group as universally available. An uncritical universalisation of difference potentially individualises responsibility for social failure (O'Brien, 2011). It may also marginalise the perceived value of social work practice knowledge in the ideologically configured realm of contemporary policy development.

2.5.2 Knowledge and Social Order in New Times

It is generally agreed that we have experienced accelerated social and political change on a global scale from the latter decades of the Twentieth Century (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). The substance of these changes is ideologically and politically contested. The apparent certainties produced and underpinned by the scientific paradigm of enlightenment reason have come to be perceived as far less clear, leading to what is variously described as a postmodern, late-modern, or reflexively modern era. Callinicos (2004) argues that postmodernism may be more usefully regarded as a symptom rather than a driver of social change, and if a cause, may be better seen as part of a cause and effect spiral than as a wellspring of radical departure.[39] It may also be that the technological change and societal anxiety that is said to characterise a new postmodern order can be better understood as endemic to the gales of creative destruction which are synonymous with the capitalist mode of development. As expressed by Garrett (2009), the Marxist preoccupation with "the fact that capitalism demolishes all repose, fixity and security reverberates into the 21st Century and describes, for many, their present day working lives…" (p. 208). The enhanced perception of uncertainty associated with the present may be a product of the precarious social circumstances generated by the erosion of state-mandated social security as much as with a generalised distrust in the institutions of 'modernity'.

A significant related argument is that the role of the state in the control and management of the population has not dissipated in recent decades. It is rather that both the aims of state control and the mechanisms for achieving this control have changed to accommodate altered economic and social objectives. Rose (2001) theorises a modified regime of advanced liberal rule involving individuated governance of the self and official oversight of 'expert' authority: a surveillance of surveillance:

> The powers once accorded to positive knowledge of human conduct are to be transferred to the calculative regime of financial management. And the enclosures of expertise are to be penetrated through a range of new techniques for exercising critical scrutiny of authority - budget disciplines, accounting, and audit being three of the most salient. (p. 53)

Anxiety about the fallibility of the instrumental rationality which informs bureaucratic modernity can be connected with a range of strategies that have significantly re-shaped social work and influenced our understandings of appropriate social work knowledge (Ferguson, 2004). However, the manner in which perceptions of unravelling modernity

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[39] In a similar vein Bauman's conception of liquid modernity is akin to a more fluid (but no less socially divisive) phase in the socio-political facilitation of global capitalist production (Smith, 2012).

have impacted upon most, if not all fields of contemporary social work practice, seems puzzling and largely counter-intuitive at first perusal. These impacts include greater recourse to practice tools and procedural frameworks, the increased managerial surveillance and monitoring of practice discretion, and an over-riding preoccupation with the identification and management of risk. Parton (2004) poses the problem in the following way:

> My central focus is to try to understand how it is that in an increasingly postmodern world, the responses of official agencies of central government have been so apparently modern in nature. (p. 31)

Ferguson (2004) suggests that managerial culture has become deeply embedded in the ethos of social work since the 1980s, both in terms of the management of social workers, and of the management of high risk individuals and families by social workers. Organisations which provide (or 'deliver' in neoliberal contractual parlance) social work services increasingly demand certainty in a context where no certainty is possible (Parton & Kirk, 2010). These developments have been described as "hyper-rational" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 164): a reactive and deeply ironic quest for certainty in an increasingly uncertain world through recourse to 'more science / more modernity'.

Dominelli (2004) describes social work as a socially engaged activity: "Social workers navigate the interstices of 'the social' or the sites in which individuals conduct the routines of their daily lives" (p. 41).This contextual engagement reveals the social circumstances which distinguish 'real' material 'freedom' from theoretical freedom of choice associated with neoliberal discourse. Academic critics within social work point to an erosion of the essentially relationship-based foundations of practice in neoliberal times (Garrett, 2007, 2009; Ferguson, 2008; Parton & Kirk, 2010). It is argued that trust and understanding based on relational communication and notions of professional expertise have been replaced by rational-technical approaches which are driven by concern with productivity, systemic reliability, and risk management (Butler & Drakeford, 2005; Smith, 2001). The neoliberal concept of individuated market choice and the associated demands for transparency and practice consistency have fostered some positive outcomes in terms of accountability and consumer voice, particularly in institutional settings (Beddoe, 2013). However, the notion of consumer voice is generally invoked as an adjunct to a production efficiency orientation which de-emphasises professional discretion and creativity. Pithouse et.al.,(2012) identify a qualitative shift from the relational, discretionary, construction of social work practice, toward a bureaucratic-instrumental approach whereby "the contemporary totem of

consumer voice, choice and co-production, inscribe new service relationships imbued with rules and rights that actively challenge professional power and discretion" (p. 160).

Parton (2008) questions whether the form of knowledge for social work may be undergoing a fundamental discursive shift from the 'social' to the 'informational': towards a de-humanised modernity dominated by the logic of the algorithm. It is suggested that non-human technologies, informed by the binary logic of the data-base, are increasingly being used to construct individuals against preconceived risk indices. The traditional realm of modernist mediation essentially begins from the place or position of the client, albeit as relative to a dominant social order for which social work is a mediating agent. The system which Parton describes seems to invert this process by beginning with definitions of social risk and locating deviant subjects who fit this regime of 'truth'. Parton and Kirk (2010) exemplify this concern by aligning the politically situated dominance of evidence-based practice and population-based research with …

> …a de-emphasis on the importance of the worker - client relationship as the medium for helping and an abandonment of attempts to explain and understand clients' problems. Developing in its place is an emphasis on describing people with unwanted behaviour, attempts to predict who is at risk, and with the advent of computer information systems, the growth of surveillance as a central purpose. (p. 32)

The imperfect and conflicted impetus for social inclusion associated with social work in the welfare state era has arguably been overshadowed by the exclusionary targeting of social risk (Blom, 2009; Hyslop, 2009; Parton, 2010). Concomitantly the knowledge and skills traditionally associated with the practice of social work may be undermined:

> No longer is the focus on trying to understand or explain behaviour, for social workers are less concerned with *why* clients behave as they do than with *what* they do. *Depth* explanations drawing on psychology and sociological theories are being superceded by *surface* descriptions. Coherent causal accounts which attempt to provide a picture of the subject in their social context … have become of declining importance, for the key purpose of the social worker is increasingly to classify clients for the purpose of judging the nature and level of risk and for allocating resources. (Parton & Kirk, 2010, p. 33) [40]

Within this risk-focussed practice paradigm, evidence-based practice knowledge is generally presented and perceived as being both supremely rational and morally neutral. However, as suggested earlier, this orientation may serve a very explicit political agenda. The emphasis on efficient technical 'means-ends' practice potentially

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[40] The italic emphasis is present in the original text.

subverts the identity of social work as an ethical social project (Ferguson, 2008, p. 51). It also potentially de-centres and obscures the relational social engagement and mediation which may go to the heart of social work knowledge and practice expertise. Social workers are often positioned at the forefront of efforts to humanise the instrumental exercise of institutional power. Such enabling practice is largely conditional on the exercise of judgement and discretion. This personalisation of practice delivery is captured by Houston's (2004) assertion that "social workers caught in the mire of procedural constraint can nevertheless find room to imprint their own distinctive styles of working, perhaps by subverting bureaucratic imperatives through a person-orientated style of working" (p. 265). Efforts to restrict this discretion (and by implication the interactive and contextually situated awareness which supports the competent exercise of professional judgement) have arguably driven state-sponsored development of social work practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand and internationally, in the recent past.[41]

2.6 Contested Futures

Garrett (2009) suggests, somewhat dismissively, that postmodern precepts are currently deployed to inform "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (p. 3) However, recalling Parton and O'Byrne's (2000, p. 23) distinction between sceptical and affirmative postmodernity, the 'post-era' is open to a range of classifications and analyses. At one end of the spectrum any search for meaning in the social world becomes an endless play of language and discourse. Alternately, the notion of 'reflexive modernity' is more amenable to the concept of positive human agency: of "modernity come to its senses" (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000, p. 42). Ferguson (2004) draws on the work of Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1990) in developing the notion of 'life politics' and the related capacity of citizens to be actively engaged in choosing and shaping a life of their own. The broad and highly influential movement for the deployment of a strengths focus in social work, which conceives of clients as valid actors with expertise, alternatives, and avenues of possible agency, is influenced by this analysis (Blundo, 2001). Such aspirational practice is not inconsistent with a critical enlightenment perspective which emphasises the need for 'real' choice and opportunity

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[41] In important respects the recent 'Munro Review' of Child Protection in England (carried out by Professor Eileen Munro) is an exception to this pattern. The Munro Review provides a comprehensive appraisal of child protection in England. The related documentation is contained in three report as follows: Interim Report (June 2010), Part One: A Systems Analysis (November 2010) and a Final Report (May 2011). The Review provides a comprehensive analysis of the deleterious effects of risk aversion and managerial prescription in the English context. The significance of the view of social work practice knowledge adopted in the Munro Review - and its relevance to this thesis - is referred to in chapter 7.

for all. Debate about where this vision requires revolutionary political and institutional change, and / or the degree to which it can be satisfied within the structures of liberal capitalism, is a hallmark of theoretical debate within social work and within modernity itself (Lundy, 2011).

According to Pease (2010), postmodern perspectives are not necessarily antithetical to the critical social work tradition. This correlation harks back to the earlier assertion that an accommodation can be reached between postmodern analyses of complex power relations and the critical enlightenment association of freedom with access to material resources.[42] In Foucault's terms it may be more a question of how, and in whose interests, ideas - including ideas about the validity of competing knowledge claims - are adapted and employed as tools for either the maintenance of, or for resistance to, dominant but never static constellations of power. In terms of analysis inspired by Marxist thought, several related concerns arise: the degree to which knowledge generated in the practice of social work exposes, or can continue to expose, social inequalities produced within the coordinates of capitalist production; the degree to which social work practice can challenge or at least seek to ameliorate the human suffering which is generated in a class society; or whether social work is to be reduced to a technical / rational activity designed to efficiently detect individuated social failure and administer a repressive form of social governance.

As explained, I consider that social work is always a politically situated undertaking. Jordan's (2012) review of the options associated with the 'big society' programme of the Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition Government in the United Kingdom entertains the possibility of a return to professional discretion and something of a rejection of individualism in favour of social interdependence. Despite the current pressure for reduced public spending, the global financial crisis has prompted a questioning of neoliberal values and a re-emphasis on the politics of the local. It may be that opportunities for the recognition and development of social work programmes and practices will re-emerge at this time. Jordan (2012) identifies the expertise of social work in the following way:

> Practice mobilises the dynamics of moral regulation, and this is particularly true
> of social work, because - unlike medicine or teaching - its only expertise is in
> social relations … Practice requires workers to engage in the production and
> exchange of value through empathy and accurate communication: it also

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[42] Bourdieu's (2005) theorisation of the way in which power relations are entwined with social capital and class habitus can also be viewed as an example of this sort of linkage - going beyond populist neoliberal-inspired representations of postmodernity as unfettered market choice and considering the influence of socio-political context in shaping and guiding such 'choices'.

expects them to be able to identify contradictions and omissions in people's accounts of themselves, and (tactfully or toughly) to induce (or demand) them to reflect on these, to adapt them (or shift them radically). (p. 634)

Wallace and Pease (2011) contend that "neoliberalism impacts not only on the structural and organisational context of social work practice but also in terms of how it is enacted". Lorenz (2008) formulates the central issue which arises from this concern as follows:

The socially relevant concern turns rather to the question of whether the notion of 'the social' itself, for which the social professions have traditionally stood, can still have a place in the political agenda of reordering social relations, according to capitalist principles of individualism and personal enterprise, and whether the social professions collectively promote 'the social'. (p. 640)

Not only may the mandate of social work have changed; the values, beliefs, and actions which underpin our conceptions of 'the social' may themselves have undergone a neoliberal metamorphosis. The disconcerting analysis which Lorenz proposes raises several issues which are relevant to this thesis. If social work knowledge has been modified by wider discursive change, what might the implications be for social workers and for those who are constructed as clients? Further, what might be lost if the voice and view which social work practice generates is altered or obscured? These concerns beg the question as to what it is that this vision and voice currently sees, and speaks of: what is encountered in the social practice of social work and what related knowledge is learned and applied? In terms of this thesis, this description returns us to the central question of whether social work possesses a particular (and identifiable) kind of knowledge, generated through the contextual experience of practice. Further, to what degree, might this posited knowledge form be resistant to shifts in the socio-political construction, and apparent contemporary reconstruction, of social work practice?

The final section in this contextual exploration exercise will focus directly on the experiential component of social work practice in action. The following discussion, which completes this chapter, moves away from examination of how the socio-political space that knowledge in and for social work occupies may be configured. The focus of enquiry shifts to consideration of how knowledge/s within this postulated space may potentially be described and understood. It has been suggested that a comprehensive approach to understanding the knowledge that is applied and produced 'in and for' the practice of social work requires an awareness that is informed by more than an appreciation of theoretical frameworks, practice models or agency procedures. This

assertion is premised upon the idea that the architecture of 'knowing' in and for practice is the product of engaged understanding which is qualitatively different from the sensibilities encompassed by 'technical rationality'.[43]

2.7 Tacit Knowledge

Schön's (1991) exploration of the phenomenon of thinking in action has significantly influenced understandings of how artisanal knowledge is applied and generated in the craft of professional practice: "Let us search, instead for an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" (p. 49). This perspectival shift challenges the positivist theory of knowledge, replacing the Cartesian separation of theory and practice with the pragmatically informed idea that our "knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action" (p. 49).

Several writers (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000; Morrison, 2010; Osmond, 2006) have given consideration to the form which professional knowing in action may take in the practice of social work. Osmond (2006, p. 6) identifies three interconnected knowledge categories: received / accepted knowledge; action knowledge which is concerned with the practical 'knowing how' of practice; and a third form of interactional or contextual understanding. Morrison (2010) articulates the postmodernist and constructionist view "that knowledge claims are embedded in socio-cultural milieu, and based on the social interactions, and discourses of meaning making communities" (p. 14). Knowledge in and for social work is aligned with the relationship-based nature of its practice, and connected with a narrative form of epistemology that is "based on a view of knowledge, not as an externally described phenomenon, but rather as a co-constructed social and relational process" (p. 24)

Hugman (2003) suggests that practice knowing is inextricably linked to the ethical dimension of social work and that both these components are tied to the process of relational engagement between social workers and clients. Social work is regarded as "praxis of head, heart, hands, and feet" (p. 11). Various commentators stress the interconnectedness of emotion and reason in the decision making process and acknowledge the insights which can be derived from an appreciation of the intuitive and

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[43] This argument is explored as this thesis develops and the ramifications of the emerging position are considered in some detail in chapter 7.

emotional context of practice (Davies & Collings, 2008; Taylor & White, 2001). Morrison (2007) identifies an emotional awareness in relation to self and others which seems to accompany the almost intangible mix of "unconscious competence, expertise and effortlessness" (p. 247) that can be seen in the work of very able practitioners. Fook, Ryan, and Hawkins' (2000) influential research into the development of social work expertise associates this phenomenon with a willingness to stretch the boundaries of practice through a commitment to process rather than outcomes, and a capacity to take calculated risks.

As explored in considerable depth by Ferguson (2004), the status of the emotive and embodied awareness which is innate to social work is often so deeply submerged that it is rendered invisible and hence indescribable. This process of concealment begs some intriguing questions when considered in terms of Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledge claims. Schön (1991) describes a foundational devaluation of practice knowledge and identifies the reluctance of practitioners to name their knowing:

> When people use such terms as "art" or "intuition" they usually intend to terminate discussion rather than to open up enquiry … It is as though the practitioner says to his academic colleague, "Whilst I don't accept your view of knowledge, I cannot describe my own". Sometimes, indeed, the practitioners appear to say, "My kind of knowledge is undesirable", or even, "I will not attempt to describe it lest I paralyse myself." (p. vii)

Osmond's (2006) research into the tacit dimension of social work practice suggests that it is too limiting to conflate tacit knowledge with the experiential awareness captured by the term 'practice wisdom'. Three ways in which tacit practice knowledge is identified in the literature are described by Osmond: knowledge that is impossible or difficult to articulate; taken for granted knowledge; and silenced knowledge. In terms of silenced knowing and the relative privileging of theoretical rationalism in modernist science, reference is made to what Weick (1999) has described as the "guilty knowledge of social work" (p. 238). It seems that a conceptual bridge could be made between the creative humanism that Goldstein (1990) associates with social work and the tacit knowledge which social workers form and apply in practice. Turnell (2006) endorses Weick's description of a hidden 'first' voice:

> Anne Weick (2000), writing specifically to a social work audience, suggests that the social work profession has two voices, a dominant, professionalized, scientized second voice of assessments and interventions, policy and procedures and a mostly hidden first voice of everyday caring, solution building and compassionate action. (p. 11)

I am largely persuaded by Osmond's preference for the concept 'tacit knowledge' although a case can also be made for the 'practice wisdom' as an appropriate umbrella term, which encompasses tacit knowledge along with other dimensions of understanding. O'Sullivan (2005) points out that practice wisdom is regarded as either a euphemism for unpredictable and idiosyncratic practice or valued as a basis for judgement in ambiguous and contingent situations:

> Two contrasting images of practice wisdom can be detected in the literature: practice wisdom as unreliable, personal, idiosyncratic knowledge built up through practice experience; and practice wisdom as the ability to make sound judgements in difficult, complex and uncertain situations. (p. 221)

Goldstein's (1990) perception of practice wisdom encompasses an 'accretion' of insights, skills, and values derived from three related sources:

> One source is the unique ethos of our profession that is expressed in our concern not only for the whole person and his or her social and physical contexts, but more important, the transactional and symbiotic bond that unites the two. The second involves not only the kinds of problems and conditions that are familiar to social work but the inclusive way (involving family, community, and society) in which we construe them. The third source of practice wisdom, oddly enough, includes not only the knowledge and theories that we import from other disciplines but that which we learn from the lives of our clients and from the experiences we share with them. (p. 41)

Tsang's (2008) discussion of Aristotle's three-part typology of intellectual virtue, suggests that the ethical element of 'phronesis' (virtuous action) can be connected with practice wisdom. As distinct from episteme (science) and techne (art), phronesis is said to be "context-dependant, and action orientated, and based on a sort of value-rationality" (p. 134). Virtuous action is connected to the character or intent of the performing agent, and "takes into account local circumstances, particulars and contingencies; weighs the trade-offs; and is iterative - repeats itself, and the aims may change in the process of deliberation" (p. 134). Despite the obvious moral overtones, I suspect that the implied notion of 'doing what is right' in particular situations would accord with the manner in which many practitioners approach difficult practice decisions.[44] Tsang (2008) also develops the Greek concept of 'kairos' which refers to timely action that is cognisant of justice. This subtle consideration of the significance of timing in social work practice is echoed in Ferguson's (2004) preoccupation with the

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[44] In this sense social work practice knowledge can be said to inevitably involve a 'moral' dimension (Smith. 2011). Also this analysis resonates with the following brief excerpt (attributed to Drucker, P.) from the Munro Review of Child Protection in England (Part One - 1.15, p. 14): 'In broad terms the difference between single loop learning and double loop learning can be characterised as; "A concern with doing things right versus doing the right thing".' See earlier footnote 40 for description of the Munro Review.

'fateful moments' when crucial decisions are made, and actions taken, which alter peoples' lives. Tsang's formulation is consistent with the notion of contextual understanding which is fundamental to this thesis. It also resonates with the concept of action and reflection on action as a process of knowledge development which bridges the theory - practice divide (Fook, 2002; Morrison, 2010).

On balance the term 'tacit knowledge' is preferred to 'practice wisdom' in this thesis , partly because of the trite associations which the latter term may be said to carry, and also because the notion of tacit awareness - the unspoken, unnamed, and perhaps fleetingly seen - more accurately encapsulates what it is that this research exercise seeks to explore.

2.8 Synopsis

Considerable ground has been covered in this chapter. The contested nature of knowledge in and for social work practice has been examined. Literature relevant to the possible form of social work practice knowledge, and its place within the wider socially and politically configured schema of legitimate knowledge, has been reviewed. Reference has been made to the work of Foucault (1980; 1984) and Philp (1979). Some complex, nuanced, and inter-related ideas have been explored in relation to how the knowledge (or knowledges) generated and applied in practice may be connected with the socio-political formations which structure this knowing. . The apparent legacy of social humanism in the discourse of social work has been identified. Possible generative tensions between the critique of power and possibility afforded by postmodernity and a materialist analysis of social causation afforded by Marxist-inspired understandings of the exploitative nature of capitalist social relations (Garrett, 2013) have been considered. In the following chapter it is proposed that insights into the nature of social knowledge offered by critical realism can provide a means of bridging these divergent theoretical influences within the analytical corpus of this thesis.

A postulated relationship between the social work knowledge form and the contemporary dominance of neoliberal political ideology has also been discussed. The final section of this chapter has considered the 'internal' make up of knowing in practice as it may be experienced and demonstrated by social workers. An active process of theoretical enquiry has shaped my understanding of the task with which this thesis is engaged and also influenced the way in which the research process has been

structured in order to explore emerging questions. I have been conscious of the need to further develop possible constructions of practice knowledge suggested by the literature and also to allow for these constructions to be challenged, refined, or reformed. The concept of social work practice knowledge as a product of engagement with the socially and economically constructed lives of those who are positioned as social work clients has been explored. The practice of social work intervention has been tentatively identified as a conflicted intermediary or balancing exercise in that the needs of clients are met within the confines of the liberal capitalist state.

The notion of engaged communicative understanding may be related to the radical enlightenment ideals of human equality, and freedom - of shared rights regardless of class and circumstance. However such noble, even politically revolutionary, aspirations within this heritage may also be compromised, or perhaps be essentially conflicted in their application, by the state-sponsored requirement for dispassionate assessment and moral regulation of the problematic 'poor'. Practice knowledge in this sense may be essentially dualistic and 'uncomfortable', and all the more so in the imperative contemporary context of neoliberal social expectations and the associated ascendancy of a reductive, hyper-rational, efficiency-centred practice paradigm. However a dialectical process may also be present in that this politically driven reconfiguration of social work may paradoxically fuel dissonant, critically aware and resistant, practice developments.

The tentative analytical work described and produced in this chapter is reflected in the process of research design which is described in the following chapter. However, as suggested, I have taken care not to invest such emerging constructs with the status of self-fulfilling prophesies in relation to the research process which informs this thesis. I have chosen to focus on the understandings of the shape and form of practice knowledge in and for case-work practice that are expressed by experienced social workers working in the contemporary practice context of Auckland New Zealand. As will be explained, I have an explicit theoretical lens but I am also at pains to allow the tentative conclusions of this thesis to rest on the experiential understandings of knowing in and for practice articulated by these practitioners. The key questions which emerge from this chapter in relation to the nature of knowledge in and for social work practice are summarised in the following chapter and the design of a research exercise to further explore these questions is explained in detail.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology - Paradigms and Practice

This chapter explains the theory and practice of fieldwork design in relation to this thesis. The discussion immediately below summarises the complex issues which arise from the analyses traversed in chapters 1 and 2. This theoretical discussion is distilled in the form of an emerging conceptual framework and a set of formative questions about the nature of knowledge in and for social work. The development of a research methodology which comes to grips with the task of further exploring and developing our understanding of these issues is explained. The critical realist stance which guides the research process is elucidated and the practical planning and conduct of the research process is described.

3.1 Implications of Analysis for Fieldwork Enquiry

As prefigured in the introductory paragraphs of chapter 1 and at the conclusion of chapter 2, a process of literature-informed theoretical exploration has produced some tentative questions regarding the existence of social work practice knowledge, and about the possible nature and form of this knowledge. A broad interest in the association between knowledge 'in and for' practice and the contextual / discursive location within which it is produced has been discussed and some emerging areas of interest for further enquiry have been described.

3.1.1 Emerging Concepts and Questions

At this point it is useful to provide a summary of this developing conceptual framework and the related questions which inform the fieldwork design.

- It seems that social work practice knowledge is formed and applied in action: it is fluid rather than prescriptive and is informed by relational / communicative engagement; what Ferguson (2004) has named as the interactive and multi-dimensional 'smell of practice'. It has been postulated that the process of active engagement with the lived experience of 'the other' has the potential to stimulate insight into the exploitative nature of capitalism as a social form, and to motivate a desire to redress associated inequalities.

- It appears that a compassionate thread of social work practice knowledge may be informed by 'inclusive' elements within the enlightenment vision - the

perception that freedom must be enabled so that innate human potential can be realised. The application of such practice knowledge may be limited by the lens of individuated liberal philosophy and subject to the constraints of agency-mandated casework practice, but it can also be associated with a critical awareness of the oppressive social and political structures which constrain human development. In this sense links can be made between casework practice and critical theory,

- In the foregoing chapters I have suggested that social work practice is also characterised by a series of constitutive paradoxes - structural tensions which can be presented as dualisms: standing between art and science, bureaucracy and exceptional discretion, static systems and social fluidity, structure and agency, order and freedom, the included and the excluded. It seems that these representations are managed, resolved, and perhaps transcended in the engaged practice of social work.

- It has been suggested that social workers historically occupy an intermediate space between the poor and the powerful and that they undertake a process of social mediation which comprises elements of both care and control. In this sense social work knowledge is a knowledge born of occupying a site of conflict - between an appreciation of the circumstances of individuals and the remedial limitations of the liberal capitalist state. Social work could be said to mediate the contradictions of capitalist modernity in microcosm. The postulated 'in-between' positioning can be linked with a range of dualities such as the need to connect wider social context with individual circumstance, or the way in which social workers simultaneously engage 'subjectively' and assess 'objectively'. Social work knowledge may be characterised by perspectival shifts - a play of agency and structure: presence and absence.

If the knowledge generated and applied in social work is related to the occupation of a particular relational social space, the question arises as to how this space is constructed. It may be that the neoliberal reconfiguration of this space, and the associated distancing of social workers from their clients, has serious implications for the form and function of social work practice knowledge. Exploration of these underlying issues is located in chapter 7 where the possible ramifications of this research for future practice are considered. This summative discussion builds on formative analysis of the fieldwork data developed in chapters 4, 5, and 6 and connects this analysis back to these theoretical dimensions. The immediate task for the current

chapter - following from the contextual engagement process that has been undertaken - is to translate the emerging theoretical concerns into a research structure that allows for a direct exploration of practitioners' perceptions of practice knowledge. This task includes the construction of specific interview questions.

Consideration of this 'working summary' of key issues which arise from the foregoing process of theoretical enquiry highlights various matters which beg further examination and development. The divide between this broad and tentative conceptual framework and the questions put to research participants is bridged by the following list of inter-related 'questions for exploration'. These questions begin to engage with the problem of how the ideas generated through the process of contextual theorising might best be explored in relation to the experience of practitioners. There is a need to walk a line between testing formative notions and facilitating the emergence of new or contradictory ideas.

- How, if at all, might social workers recognise / describe insight into the relations of power within the capitalist sate of Aotearoa / New Zealand.? To what extent is the analysis of social work as an 'intermediary' site of practice, located 'in-between' the powerful and the marginalised, commensurate with the contemporary experience of social workers?

- Is 'knowing in practice' recognised as a communicative / relational / artistic or as a technical / rational process? What might social workers perceptions of the relationship between these two things be?

- What do practitioners perceive the place of care, compassion and empathetic understanding in contemporary practice to be? How, if at all, might social workers recognise, describe, or demonstrate the application of 'tacit' knowledge in practice?

- To what extent might social workers acknowledge the exercise of discretion in practice, and how might the exercise of discretion be informed? How might the exercise of discretion at the margins - in 'hard cases' - be described? What sort of values and judgements might be applied?

- Does the experience of practice engender a questioning of the accuracy of binary 'either / or' distinctions as applied to subjects in the social world? How, if at all, might the over-arching idea of 'contextual knowing' be experienced and understood (named and described) by social workers? What might the

71

relevance of this construction be for understanding and developing knowledge in and for practice?

- How might social workers acknowledge and / or describe the ethical basis of their practice action and practice knowledge? In terms of Philp's (1979) analysis of social work discourse, is the process of humanising /'re'-presenting and 'speaking for' clients central to practice?

- Are uncertainty and risk perceived as over-riding concerns in contemporary practice? What is the degree of recourse to risk indices and assessment instruments in practice? How might social workers connect such developments with the relational, interactional, and contingent elements which have been said to go to the heart of social work? (Parton & Kirk, 2010)

- Have social workers' conceptions of 'the social' (of the social whole) been influenced by neo-liberal perceptions of self-responsibility and exhortations to self-governance? Do social workers perceive the discursive shift that has been partially theorised? (Jordan, 2004, 2012).

It is important to note that this bulleted summary of related and exploratory questions which have arisen is not necessarily complete or exhaustive. Conversely, although the unfolding research process will elucidate all of the matters touched upon above to some degree, it does not definitively and explicitly 'answer' all of the questions which have been raised. Some complex conceptual formations and related questions have been identified and explored. As has been set out, the broad initial focus of this thesis concerns the identity of social work - what might we be able to say that it 'is', as a function of the knowledge which is produced and applied in its practice? The construction of a framework of enquiry to support this intent - the contextual engagement (theory generating) process and the questions identified through this process - was itself a creative process of enquiry. A theoretical engagement with the existence of social work practice knowledge (ontology) generated information about the possible nature of that knowledge (epistemology) which, in turn, begs questions about the value of this knowledge (axiology). The construction of an appropriate research design to support the developing process of enquiry has been part and parcel of this engaged and reflexive thesis project.

3.1.2 A Critical Theoretical Frame

I have asserted that the relationship between structure and agency in human conduct is a fundamental issue for social work and for social theory (Oliver, 2012). Arguably the more theoretically complete constructions of the social world develop a coherent analysis of this relationship.[45] I have explained that the philosophical roots of this thesis are grounded in a materialist vision of social causation within the machinations of late capitalism. However I have also asserted that elements of social constructivist epistemology inform the work of this thesis. Accordingly the methodological orientation of the research design has been shaped by plural or eclectic influences. Although claims to plural influence often mask theoretical incoherence, I do not consider that this is the case here: theoretical coherency is not necessarily dependent upon paradigmatic purity (Oliver, 2012). I will explain how the relationship between structure and agency has been conceptualised for the purposes of this research, and how the relevant epistemological contradictions have been resolved, or at least accommodated. Before describing the explicit theoretical frame in relation to the planning, conduct, and analysis of the fieldwork research process which informs this thesis, it is considered necessary to explicitly locate the orientation of the research within the critical social work tradition.

Social research, like social work, engages in the application of social theory to the activities of actors in the social world. Accordingly, like social work itself, social research is a complex, potentially contradictory, and ideologically contested undertaking. In the interests of transparency it is important to state that in relation to both social work and social research my sympathies lie with the 'critical tradition', as described by Pease (2010):

> The critical tradition in social work emphasizes: the role of economic and political systems in shaping experiences and social relationships; the impact of structural oppression such as class, race, gender, age, disability, and sexuality on people's lives; a commitment to working alongside oppressed populations to challenge the process and structures that perpetuate oppression; the importance of challenging the power imbalance between practitioners and service users by forming egalitarian relationships and validating people's lived experiences of oppression. (p. 98)

As suggested in chapter 1, this lofty position may seem counter-intuitive given the practical and administrative constraints which apply to casework practice generally,

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[45] See, for example, Garrett's (2007) discussion of Bourdieu's configuration of this relationship and the relevance of the key concepts of Habitus, Capital and Field for social work. For more comprehensive critique of Bourdieu's sociological constructs, see Calhoun, Li Puma, and Postone (1993).

and to the contemporary context in particular. Further, the tradition which Pease (2010) articulates is itself contested. It is also both a political project and a philosophical orientation. As such, it is difficult to translate into a process of research. Nevertheless, it is this very kind of engagement with complex social causation which confronts the research process at hand and I would argue, is also faced in the engaged practice of social work. The aim of this thesis is, at least in part, to explore the degree to which the knowledge applied and generated in the context of practice is consistent with the emancipatory intent of this critical perspective. I have asserted that this thesis sets out to more clearly reveal the nature of social work practice knowledge as a potential means to critique current practice, and to inform practice development. As with the practice of social work, this research exercise is not simply a technical activity (Gray & McDonald, 2006). The active goal is to facilitate practice development in a way that is consistent with the critical tradition, or more accurately to first explore whether there is a form of social work practice knowledge which supports this possibility. I have sought to reveal something of the shape and form of social work knowledge through a process of theoretical exploration and subsequent engagement with current practitioners in Auckland New Zealand. I am also mindful of the importance of attending to this voice rather than speaking in its place. As will be explained, the theoretical orientation afforded by critical realism effectively supports a methodology which is consistent with these aims and intentions.

3.2 Contextual Engagement, Critical Realism and Social Research

As stressed above, the contested relationship between structure and agency which is central to debate within the social sciences is also a pivotal concern for this thesis. It has been further suggested that an 'in-between' positioning characterises social work practice in a variety of ways. The process of bridging or mediating contested / divided social space may be a distinguishing feature of social work practice (Ferguson, 2004; O'Brien, 2011). Reflecting upon my own practice experience several years ago I expressed this perception in the following terms:

> Social work inhabits the ideologically contested terrain between the 'big picture' and the circumstances of individual lives - public issues and private troubles; between Capitalist economics and the human consequences of structural disadvantage. (Hyslop, 2007, p. 5)

The conflict which this description alludes to is mirrored (also in various ways) in the epistemological tensions that trouble the field of social research. The larger debate engages with the question of how we might best 'know' the world. Specifically the issue in this research situation concerns how we might best understand social work. Pease (2010, p. 103) speaks of the need to move beyond what he terms the ''paradigm wars'' - the dichotomous positioning of objective / realist versus subjective / constructivist ways of understanding and the universal versus relativist knowledge claims which arise from these positions: "We need approaches to research that bridge the tension between structure and agency" (p. 99). Pease reviews several examples of ways in which realist and constructivist paradigms may be combined under a critical umbrella. Of these alternatives, critical realism seems best suited to the approach required in this research exercise. In the realist worldview knowledge is perceived to be a "social and historical product" (Robson, 2002, p. 34). The associated research orientation is "critical in the sense that it provides a rationale for a critical social science; one that criticises the social practices that it studies" (p. 34).

Critical realism is primarily associated with the theoretical exposition of Roy Bhaskar in relation to the foundations of knowledge in the philosophy of science (Robson, 2002). Bhaskar (1997) regards the static 'tool-box' view of scientific method envisaged within the classical positivist tradition as a flawed and inadequate means for comprehending the complex nature of the world. Bhaskar (1997) argues that science should be fundamentally emancipatory - concerned with revealing the underlying causative mechanisms which shape our experience in, and our understandings of, the world. Our socially constructed understandings of reality - and of the accepted 'means' for understanding this reality (epistemology) - may be contested, but this does not make these underlying generative structures any less 'real' or any less worthy of investigation (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2010). For Bhaskar, unlike Nietzsche, 'truth' exists.[46] A level of 'causal' reality is presumed to exist below empirical (experiential) and actual (existing but not necessarily experienced) levels of reality. Unlike the underlying causes which are its 'object', science is itself a social product which must also be subject to critical scrutiny. As Bhaskar (1997) observes, "the sting is only removed from a system of thought when the particular conditions under which it makes sense are described" (p.

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[46] This orientation can be instructively compared with the Nietzchean view of truth as a function of power which informs Foucault's view of knowledge as elaborated in chapter 2. For a critical introductory discussion of Nietzchean thought for social theory and how this relates to Foucault and postmodernity see Callinicos (2008).

8).[47] Bhaskar (1997) further argues that being (ontology) cannot be reduced to knowing (epistemology) - or at least not to a particular hegemonic conception of 'how' we know. These philosophical questions are relevant to the rubric of this thesis. In chapter 1 I suggested that that this thesis is concerned with developing a deeper understanding of the ontology of social work practice knowledge by investigating the possibility of an alternate understanding of its epistemology - how (the method or means by which) it knows what it knows.

Houston (2001) describes Bhaskar's critical realism thesis as founded in the belief that "reality exists independently of our thoughts or perceptions about it" (p. 223). According to Oliver (2012), "Bhaskar would see the poverty, disability and violence experienced by our clients not merely as part of their narrative or a function of our beliefs about them, but as present whether or not we or our clients choose to acknowledge them" (p. 374). For the purposes of this thesis, the appeal of the critical realist perspective is twofold. First, in my experience-informed opinion, it is consistent with the view of knowledge of and in the world that is afforded through the practice of social work. The view of social causation afforded by critical realism is complex and contextual: tendencies can be discerned but not in overly deterministic forms As articulated by Blom and Morén (2010), 'empirical-analytical' knowledge of the underlying causal reality hidden beneath the empirically observable surface can be developed, but such knowledge can only ever be partial and tentative. The following viewpoint which Houston (2010b) assigns to critical realism resonates powerfully with the contingent world of social work practice, recalling …

> …the way in which human agency, in the form of reasons and motives, combines with unseen generative mechanisms to produce effects in the social world that are multi-layered, complex, and at times pockmarked with ambiguous contours. (p. 74)

Oliver's (2012) recent contribution also demonstrates an appreciation of the moral / practical congruity between critical realist epistemology and the nuanced social understandings which characterise social work:

> It marries the positivist's search for evidence of a reality external to human consciousness with the insistence that all meaning to be made of that reality is socially constructed. It accepts that the social constructions themselves can constitute what we know as the reality of the social world. (p. 372)

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[47] Bhaskar's ground-breaking text - A Realist Theory of Science - was first published in 1975. Critical Realism was couched as 'transcendental realism' at this point and the debt to Kantian method in relation to the formulation of transcendental questions was acknowledged.

Socially constructed and ideologically conditioned understandings of social reality may constitute the effective limits of subjective understanding in relation to social circumstance and social possibility but in terms of the underlying structures of materialist causation these understandings do not constitute the 'real' limits of social possibility. As outlined in the discussion which follows, a critical realist perspective is consistent with the form of knowledge generation which this thesis engages in: a contextual exploration of the underlying generative mechanisms which influence the nature of social work knowledge. As explained in the following excerpt from Houston (2001), the melding of materialist and constructivist understandings which I have claimed for this thesis can be accommodated, albeit uneasily, within the critical realist framework as developed by Bhaskar:

> Like Giddens (1984) he sees social structures as predating, enabling and constraining individuals even though their existence is dependent upon the creative actions of those individuals. It is this crucial insight that allows a synthesis between objectivism and subjectivism in critical realist philosophy. (p. 24)

Human agents are credited with significant capacity to perceive and shape the world. I am reminded, however, of Marx's oft - quoted aphorism: 'Men (*sic*) make their own history but not in circumstances of their own choosing.'

Three further aspects of critical realism provide foundational support to the conceptual structure of this thesis. First, investigation of generative causes requires analysis that is driven by the exploration, critique and development of theory (Robson, 2002, p. 167). Secondly, there is a clear emancipatory thread - if causal mechanisms which generate oppression are revealed, social scientists are obliged to engage actively in a search for solutions. Finally, as touched on, it is crucially acknowledged that the workings of the social world are complex, multiply influenced and fundamentally uncertain - that the consequences of 'generative mechanisms' are 'contextually contingent' (Blom & Morén, 2010, p. 100). Social causation does not require the positivist touch-stone of constant conjunction. Analysis of the social oppression which characterises capitalism is not, for example, invalidated by the social mobility of exceptional individuals.

> Critical realism also suggests that the social world comprises a myriad of interconnecting systems – personal, familial, institutional, to name a few – each with their own particular generative mechanisms. The combined effect of these competing and sometimes countervailing mechanisms makes for a rich tapestry of cause and effect at the empirical level of reality where it becomes problematic to predict with certainty what will happen. (Houston, 2010b, p. 75)

Chapter 1 introduced and considered the notion of 'contextual knowing' as a means of interpreting complex causation in the social world. Contextual knowing was contrasted with the dominant orthodoxy of evidence-based practice and the instrumental knowledge form which underpins that particular mechanism of truth production. A broad and tentative theorisation of how structural (and constructivist) influences may impact upon the form of social work knowledge was undertaken in chapter 2. This exercise has been described as a process of 'contextual engagement'. This mode of understanding is consistent with social work methodology and significantly, with my experience of the insights fostered through the practice of social work.

In terms of deciphering meaning within a complex social world, social work and social research face similar challenges. Not only are there salient parallels between social work and research, but the specific research task at hand involves investigating the construction of social work knowledge. In Bhaskar's critical realist formulation, evidence-based practice measures fall within the form of knowledge associated with surface empiricism. I would argue that the limitations of this way of knowing mean that it is not an adequate tool for developing a more complete understanding of social work. Alternately, a critical form of knowing derived from careful and subtle contextual engagement holds the promise of depth understanding. As suggested by Shaw (2010), once "we give nuanced attention to theorising, a contextualising focus has the potential to enrich social work research, both methodologically and substantively" (p. 213).The philosophy of critical realism offers the possibility of straddling and resolving epistemological conflicts. It also advocates a methodological engagement with social complexity that goes beyond the identification and testing of simple causal relationships. It is well suited to an examination of social work practice knowledge. In a sense it affords social work an opportunity to gaze into a mirror.

3.2.1 Method and Methodology

Moving from a coherent theoretical framework to a specific prescription for research methodology and the detailed application of research method is a further challenge. Several parallels between social work and social research have been drawn on in the foregoing discussion. Somekh and Lewin (2011, p. 3) provide further fuel for this comparison, suggesting that art and science are combined in the practice of social research. In his foreword to Somekh and Lewin's (2011) text, Ball (2010) stresses the belief, attributed to Charles Wright Mills, that social science is a disciplined and engaged process of intellectual craftsmanship. Research is a structured intellectual practice but as an integral part of this process the researcher brings creative energy

and vision to the interpretation of evidence. The challenge is to carefully combine rigour with imagination: we "need to understand and 'use' methods rather than follow them" (p. xix). In this thesis I am seeking to reveal and construct (or perhaps reveal / construct) knowledge of knowledge. Comparison between empirical exactitude and the kind of engaged understandings which this project aims for is essentially invalid in that empirical exactitude is not the goal. The kind of specificity associated with purely positivist research forms is not appropriate to the task at hand. Accordingly a theoretical and methodological structure capable of supporting a more complex and abstracted view of truth is required.

I have argued that critical realism provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for the conceptual structure of this thesis. However, there are also some departures from a critical realist perspective in terms of methodological purity. The research literature (Bryman, 2012) identifies an array of theoretical schools with particular histories, disciplinary genealogies and internal variations. It is possible, and probably useful, to identify the conceptual strands associated with differing research approaches that are relevant to the exercise at hand. There is a phenomenological influence in that I am looking to see how social workers make sense of their worlds and to identify the knowledge claims which support this sense making. I am interested in "gaining access to the thinking" of research participants (Bryman, 2012, p. 30). An ethnographic influence can also be inferred in that I begin by listening very carefully to the accounts of research participants in an attempt to understand their perspective - to see as they see. There are hermeneutic elements in that I am seeking to understand human action through a process of interpretation. In a manner that is consistent with the critical realist frame, I am not necessarily accepting that actors' constructions are the only level of reality / meaning at play. Through a process of contextual engagement I have developed a range of explanatory possibilities which have been outlined above as an emerging conceptual framework and a set of formative questions. These possibilities influence my "interpretations of others' interpretations" (p. 31) but I have also made a deliberate effort to allow conceptual space for differing interpretations to arise. The intent is to find a balance between the structure provided by theoretical enquiry and understandings built from the 'bottom up' through accounts provided by research participants.

It is also helpful to consider two recent attempts to articulate an appropriate social research methodology within a critical realist frame and to consider the extent to which the research approach that I have adopted is comparable with these formulations. First

I will refer to Houston's (2010b) exploration of the utility of critical realism for action research. Houston suggests that the contextual understanding which critical realism posits can be analysed systemically as the interaction of various specific layers or domains of social life. This analytical frame and the emancipatory imperatives attached to critical realist method can enable groups engaged with action research to focus on ways of understanding and changing oppressive practices. For the purposes of the current exercise I will focus on Houston's discussion of 'retroductive' reasoning. This is identified as the key methodological tool in a critical realist arsenal - thinking 'backwards' from a particular state of affairs "to a description of something that produces it or is a condition for it" (p. 83).

I am not certain that this approach differs as substantially from the more common notion of 'hypothetico-deductive' method as is claimed. Nevertheless Houston (2010b) emphasises that the way in which the research question is formulated is of central importance to establishing a 'retroductive' focus. As explained, the critical realist approach involves a search for underlying generative mechanisms of social causation (albeit that the effect of such mechanisms is perceived to be contextual, conflicted and uncertain). According to Houston, the beginning point for identification of these deep level structures is the construction of a "transcendental question" (following Kant): "what must be the case for events to occur as they do?"/"what has to be in place to make this happen?" (p. 84) [48]

In the enquiry at hand such a recursive question might be framed as follows: what conditions are needed to produce social work practice knowledge that has a particular nature? Such questions are then followed by the formulation of an explanatory hypothesis and a search for evidence which confirms or denies this explanation (Houston, 2010, p. 83). I believe that theory inevitably influences research and that it is incumbent upon the researcher to make this process as transparent as possible. I have gone as far as to suggest a link between the socio-political location of social work and the knowledge which is formed in practice and I have explored various ways in which this relationship may be manifested. The historical discursive regime proposed by Philp (1979) is perhaps the most developed theorisation. However the research orientation remains exploratory and I have not limited the fieldwork design to the confirmation of a specific hypothesis.

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[48] Interestingly, as footnoted earlier, this strategy is reminiscent of Foucault's unsettling methodology which questions the conditions that make apparent certainties possible. Foucault's focus is on the power-effected forms of practice / knowledge exhibited at the local / micro level.

The 'transcendental question' drafted above is inevitably part of the enquiry, as are related questions about the use value or moral value of such knowledge. The emerging question posed by the theoretical engagement process is 'what may happen to social work practice knowledge if the conditions of its production change and what might the consequences of such change be?' These broader questions are acknowledged and tentatively 'answered' as the process of theory informed data analysis unfolds, but they are logically dependent on addressing the earlier question - the identification - inevitably a provisional identification - of what (and 'how') social workers 'know' in practice. The beginning point and primary focus of this exercise is the description of social work practice knowledge. I am also mindful of the argument that such knowledge is inevitably described - and therefore always 'exists' - within a particular interpretive context.

I have explored and tentatively outlined theoretical explanations of the nature and form of social work practice knowledge at various levels of abstraction. However, I also believe that it is important to allow for divergent ideas, or new theory, to emerge from the exploratory research process. Accordingly, I have adopted an approach that is potentially more generative by applying grounded theory method within a framework that is informed by critical realist epistemology. This orientation is explained in the following paragraphs. The emerging constructions of practice knowledge developed prior to the research do significantly influence the structure of the research process. However, I have also taken care to allow for speculative and iterative engagement with the data rather than emphasising a firm retroductive hypothesis. In this sense, I see the practitioner interview process as part of a relatively seamless - although not necessarily linear - process of exploration and knowledge acquisition rather than an exercise which proves or disproves pre-existing beliefs.

This brings us to the second academic appraisal of an appropriate fit between critical realist philosophy and social research methodology. As noted earlier, Oliver (2012) draws attention to the synergy between the complex causality envisaged by critical realism and the ambiguous world encountered in social work practice: "The reality envisaged by Bhaskar is a complex, multi-layered, multi-causal web of interacting forces, much like that experienced in social work practice" (p. 374). Oliver suggests that grounded theory could provide the best vehicle for critical realist research:

> The regeneration of grounded theory by critical and postmodern theorists suggests both its flexibility and the ways in which it can be adapted to the needs of critical realist enquiry. Grounded theory can provide critical realism's method and in doing so, tie research more firmly to practice. (p. 373)

This assertion is immediately controversial in the sense that grounded theory is generally associated with an inductive approach which aims to deny, or at least minimise, a priori assumptions and allow emerging data to generate knowledge. A process of data coding and thematic categorisation generates rather than tests theory (Oliver, 2012). However Oliver (2012, pp. 377–378) suggests that a 'second generation' of grounded theorists are increasingly conscious of the significance of pre-existing social structure in the making of social meaning; the inability of actors to know all of their motivations and the impossibility of researchers ridding themselves of all preconceptions. This latter point is reinforced by Gilgun's (2010) avowed reappraisal of the concept of inductive reasoning in social research:

> The original users of this approach considered these processes inductive. I did too, for a long time (see Gilgun, 2005b, 2007) but I have changed my mind for two reasons. First, research that begins with hypotheses is automatically deductive because deduction begins with a premise, which theory and hypotheses are. (By 'premise' I mean an idea and no technical meanings are attached. By 'deduction' I do not mean deductive logic but simply approaching something with an idea in mind. Within the grounded theory and analytical induction tradition hypotheses are simply statements of relationships among concepts). Second, I now believe that induction is impossible, simply because no one is a blank slate. We bring prior conceptions with us, whether or not we have formally stated theories and assumptions. Those prior understandings influence what we notice and how we interpret what we notice. (pp. 285–286)

Oliver (2012) argues that grounded theory can accommodate the critical realist approach to the relationship between social construction and complex underlying causation and also take account of the tentative / fallible stance in relation to understandings of social reality:

> Critical realist grounded theory would address both the event itself *and* the meanings made of it, approach data with the preconceived analytical concepts of emergence and generative mechanisms and pursue emancipatory rather than merely descriptive goals.[49] (p. 378)

Oliver's analysis is passionately and forcefully rendered. I am not entirely convinced by the assertion that the gap between retroductive and inductive analysis can be bridged by the adoption of an abductive stance whereby a retroductive approach is applied to all possible explanations that arise from a data set. However I do find the wider argument that there are broad areas of compatibility between grounded theory and critical realism persuasive and useful: useful in the sense that the analysis of fieldwork

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[49] The italic emphasis of the word '*and*' is present in the original text.

data for this thesis has been guided by both critical realist intent and method informed by grounded theory approaches.

In designing the fieldwork component of this thesis - and in analysing the resultant data - I have taken careful account of the tentative critical theoretical constructions developed from an engagement with the literature and the influence of my own practice experience / practice knowledge. In further exploring these tentative ideas / hypotheses about the nature, meaning and even the possible trajectory of social work knowledge, I have been aware of the need to facilitate new and perhaps different or deeper understandings by attending respectfully to the practices and beliefs of research participants. In this way I believe that a spiral of reflexive engagement has been generated. The methods applied in this process are informed by the discussion which has been canvassed in this chapter. This is hopefully evident in the following description of fieldwork design and more importantly in the process of data presentation and analysis which is undertaken in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Bryman (2012, p. 406) suggests that the "cogency" of qualitative research findings depend significantly on the quality of theoretical reasoning applied. I have set out to make this reasoning as overt as possible. Prior to the interview process I developed the umbrella idea that a relationship exists between social work practice knowledge and the socio-political location of practice within the liberal capitalist social form.This notion is broad enough to appear tautological and I acknowledge that the process of interpreting / analysing practitioner accounts of this relationship is an ideologically situated practice. Theoretical constructions concerning the socio-political location of social work knowledge are explicitly developed in chapter 2. I have explained the elements of theoretical and ideological analysis which I find persuasive and used these elements to construct a tentative framework of understanding as a basis for fieldwork investigation. In the sense described above, the conduct of the research interviews and analysis of the data became a recursive process (Bryman, 2012, p. 386). Formative data was gleaned from individual interviews for further exploration by means of further focus group enquiry for example. The rationale for the focus group component of the research interview process is summarised below under the sub-heading 3.3.2. Thematic analysis of the individual interview data and further interrogation of the data gleaned from the two focus group interviews informs a process of theory testing and theory building which is initiated in chapters 4, 5 and 6 and further refined in chapter 7.

3.3 Fieldwork Design

As stated in the introduction to chapter one, the first three chapters of this thesis are essentially an exposition of the genesis of the fieldwork component of the enquiry. The fundamental research questions, reproduced below, drive the design of the practitioner interview process. This framework has been distilled from the experience-driven and literature-informed, enquiry set out in chapters 1 and 2. The applied research process, as discussed below, is informed by the theoretical and methodological orientation canvassed earlier in this chapter.

An enquiry into the knowledge generated and applied in social work practice and the relationship, if any, between this knowledge and the socio-political location of social work practice:

1. **How do a group of experienced social workers describe the knowledge generated and applied in the practice of social work?**

2. **Do a group of experienced social workers perceive this knowledge to be related to the socio-political location of social work and if so, how do they understand and describe this relationship?**

The two-part format is significant. On reflection the literature-informed contextual knowledge exploration process generated questions that could be clearly grouped into two related categories - experience-informed understandings of the knowledge that is generated and applied in this context (through the practice of social work) **and** experience-informed understandings of the context of social work practice (the socio-political location of practice).

3.3.1 Participant Recruitment and Selection

The decision to generate data through interview processes rather than a questionnaire or other means was partly informed by the fit between a process of engaged interview and social work practice. In the early planning stages of this research, I made some decisions about the recruitment and selection of research participants. Some of these decisions were pragmatic but they were also thought through with care. I decided to limit participants to social workers within the greater Auckland area for reasons of accessibility. I also decided that I needed a large and varied enough sample to generate some diversity of data and to allow for possible patterns, connections and / or contradictions to begin to emerge. I was interested in accessing the perspective of

social workers who had 'enough' practice experience to draw from and reflect upon. After some discussion and thought I decided on the cut-off point of at least three years' experience. This decision was influenced by my own experiential knowledge. In my fifteen years as a social work supervisor in the statutory setting, I found that it took approximately three years for social workers to comfortably accommodate to the scope of their practice roles and develop confidence in their practice craft. I also wanted social workers currently employed in practice given the focus on contemporary realities.

In terms of the recruitment process, I was wary of approaching employing organisations in the sense that my research intent had little emphasis on agency mandate. I decided that the focus on the nature of practice knowledge was more attuned to broader notions of professional identity. Accordingly, I approached the Aotearoa / New Zealand Association of Social Workers in order to access Association members as potential research participants.[50] The recruitment process turned out to be very straight-forward. An introductory e-mail inviting 'expressions of interest in a participating in a social work research project' was sent by ANZASW to all Auckland members of the professional association. This communication introduced the project and encouraged notification of initial interest by attaching the introductory summary which is reproduced as follows:

Research Participant Request - Introductory Summary:

My name is Ian Hyslop. I am enrolled in Doctoral Study with the Department of Health and Social Services at Massey University, Albany campus. My Supervisors are Dr. Barbara Staniforth and Associate Professor Mike O'Brien. My PhD project is concerned with investigating the possibilities for the future development of social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand.

I am interested in two areas: the way that social work is socially and politically positioned within New Zealand society and the knowledge that is generated and applied by social workers in their practice. I have developed a research process that aims to develop a greater understanding of these two areas - and the relationship between them - by investigating the accounts of experienced practitioners.

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[50] Membership of Aotearoa - New Zealand Association of Social Workers - New Zealand's professional social work association - is voluntary. A range of services are offered to members including a process of competency assessment which is aligned to 'registration' under the Social Work Registration Act. A parallel process is also 'offered' directly by the statutory Registration Board.

I am in the process of recruiting twenty social workers from the Auckland area with at least three years practice experience to take part in this research. Participants are being asked to take part in two interviews: a one hour long individual interview and a slightly longer focus group interview. Participants who are only available for an individual interview will be considered but availability for both is preferred. Both of the interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The time commitment should not be too onerous and I will do my best to ensure that the process is user friendly and works around the needs of participants. **If you are interested in making yourself available to take part in this project please register your interest by contacting me at the e-mail address below.**

If interest is expressed you will be sent a detailed Information Sheet which sets out the aims and structure of the research process in detail, including information relevant to the process of informed consent and the protections which apply to participants.[51]

If you wish to receive this information please confirm your current e-mailing address. Please be aware that an expression of interest at this point in no way obligates you to participate in the research project. However you are warmly invited to express an interest in participation.

Approximately thirty potential participants responded to this invitation and were subsequently provided with the full Information Sheet. Participants effectively self-selected, so it must be said that the social workers who took part had a degree of interest in the topic which the thesis is concerned with. I also decided to inform participants who I knew personally, had worked with directly, or taught as students, that I would give preference to participants that I was not acquainted with in any of these ways. This is because I was concerned that familiarity could possibly influence or distort open communication in some manner. As it transpired there were about ten expressions of interest from social workers that I knew in one or other of these ways. The twenty that remained all went on to participate in the study. One Māori participant requested that a colleague join her for the interview so that one interview involved two participants and in this way a total of twenty one social workers took part in the interviews.

I was concerned to recruit participants from a mix of practice fields that included statutory practice, the NGO sector and District Health Boards. One of the propositions

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[51] The full Information Sheet provided to participants is attached as **Appendix 2**.

underlying the thesis is that professional knowing in social work is likely to transcend practice field divisions to a significant degree. I was also hoping for a cross section of participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and practice experience. As it transpired both of these wishes were realised. Of the twenty one practitioners who participated in the individual interview process seven were Māori, nine were of Pakeha / European ethnicity, two were Chinese, one participant was Tongan, one Samoan and one was of Indian descent.[52] Four male social workers participated in the study and the age range carried from the mid-twenties to over sixty years of age. The majority of participants were over thirty years of age, most falling within the thirty to sixty years age bracket. This is partly a function of the experience level that was targeted - all of the participants, bar one, had over seven years of practice experience. The majority had over ten years of practice experience and nine participants had close to, or in excess of, twenty years of practice behind them. In terms of practice field / location, eight participants were employed as statutory practitioners at the time of interview, eight were working under the DHB umbrella and the remaining five were in the NGO sector. It should be noted that approximately half of the participants had worked in more than one of these areas during the course of their careers. Beyond occasional speculation in relation to possible indicative patterns across groups within the data set, little strong reference is made to such correlations in the data analysis as it is recognised that the sample size is too small to draw meaningful generalisations from and such correlations were not a central focus of the thesis question/s.

3.3.2 Focus Group Component

As signalled in the initial e-mail invitation and in the full Information Sheet, I incorporated the invitation to participate in a focus group interview, subsequent to the individual interview process, into the research design at the outset. The focus group component was built in to the research as a means of potentially deepening the analysis through the development of an additional layer of data. The intent was to facilitate further scrutiny of themes generated in individual interviews by literally 'focussing' small group interviews on some key points of emerging interest. Focus groups can also provide an added dimension to data production - the interactive process of group discussion potentially facilitates the formation and expression of new or different ideas (Bryman, 2012, p. 501).[53] The detail of how key issues arising from

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[52] 'Pakeha' is the Māori term for non-Māori people/s. It tends to be associated with people of European decent, as opposed to other non-indigenous New Zealanders, because of the historical colonial relationship.

[53] This is process is evident in some of the data reproduced in chapter 6 where passing reference is made to expressed views stimulated by statements from peers.

analysis of the data generated through individual interviews were translated into focussing questions for group discussion is explained in the introduction to chapter 6. The process of organising these interviews and the subsequent analysis of the focus group data is also located in chapter 6.

3.3.3 Ethical Procedures

Ethical approval for the proposed conduct of this doctoral research project was granted by the Massey University Human Ethic Committee: Northern, in a letter dated 28 April 2011, a copy of which is attached to this thesis as **Appendix 1**. In addition to the 'Full Information sheet **(Appendix 2)** several ancillary documents relating to and utilised in, the conduct of the research are also attached as appendices:

Appendix 3 - Individual Interview Consent Form

Appendix 4 - Focus Group Consent / Confidentiality Agreement

Appendix 5 - Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Appendix 6 - Transcript Release Authority

3.3.4 Question Construction

Significant time and supervisory consultation went into the process of question design for the individual interviews. Beyond the background theoretical enquiry, the quality of these fieldwork interviews would become the engine of the thesis. I was conscious of 'getting the questions right'. After all, language is arguably the primary tool which social workers employ (Mantysaari & Weatherley, 2010, p. 182). I vacillated between the desire to generate unstructured reflection through general theme-based discussion and the desire to explore the specific issues that arose from the theoretical / contextual exploration which I have summarised as an emerging conceptual framework and formative questions. After giving this matter some thought I settled on the design of a formal semi-structured interview process (Bryman, 2012, pp. 472–473).[54] Essentially I concluded that I needed enough clear data to either support or displace a range of important formative propositions and that a less structured format would be unlikely to achieve this level of specificity. However I also took care to build a degree of flexibility into the question structure, so as to allow my theoretical starting points to be challenged and for new and / or unforeseen constructions to emerge. I was wary of

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[54] This interview schedule is not included as an appendix to this thesis as the questions are set out and their development explained, in the following section.

questions being overly prescriptive and keen to find a balance in this area. I wanted to allow for provisional understandings to be refuted, modified, developed or reconstituted: for both more specific and more expansive understandings to be facilitated.

In moving from the wider conceptual framework and umbrella questions reiterated at the beginning of this section to the detail of question design, I reflected upon the key provisional understandings about the nature of social work knowledge which had emerged from the forgoing process of contextual engagement. I developed questions designed to potentially test and build upon these understandings. I also gave pragmatic attention to the 'volume' of material that could be effectively processed in an hour long interview. A concerted effort was made to 'permit' participants to answer the questions on their own terms. Questions were repeated and / or clarified if participants requested this, but I generally let the questions 'stand-alone' - encouraging participants to apply 'their' interpretations and 'their' answers. Answers were seldom interrupted. At times a question was clarified if it appeared that a participant had misheard or misunderstood. Follow-up probes were occasionally used when participants provided unclear responses or responded in a way that showed an original, creative, or otherwise 'interesting' perspective in relation to a topic area - particularly where answers suggested unforeseen conceptual developments. At times when participants seemed to have addressed specific questions prior to them being asked, this was acknowledged. However the relevant questions were still put to participants with an additional comment asking if anything should be added to previous remarks.

The balance between specificity in relation to areas of central concern and open-ness to different, original, or contradictory, responses is demanding. A deliberate effort was also made to structure the questions in a way that potentially fostered what could be termed a 'flow of reflection'. The questions were designed to build on one another. For example the format of questions 2 and 3 (below), provide for a general enquiry into the notion of 'advocacy' followed by a specific question about the concept of 'in-between' positioning. Consideration of advocacy is intended to potentially provide a reference point for speculation about the conceptual question which follows. The aim is not so much to lead the participant into a positive acknowledgement of an 'in-between' practice location, but rather to potentially afford the participant some purchase on the application of this concept to practice experience - to scaffold from one idea to another. However there is also the possible risk that in-between positioning could be read solely in relation to advocacy when in fact I am hoping that a wider perspective will be

applied. The structuring and ordering of questions in this way requires some degree of 'trade off'. Careful balances were considered in this exercise.

3.3.5 Format and Explanations

The question format arrived at is set out below. The interviews were not totally inorganic in that clarifications were provided and derivative or different questions were asked at times, but the following questions were put to all the research participants. An explanation of the thought processes behind the construction of each question is set out in order to illustrate the intent of this work.

Section One:

Practice Location (Context of practice) - How do experienced social workers describe their experience of the <u>socio-political location</u> of social work?

1. **Who are your clients? – Do they tend to be come from any particular section of society? If so, what do you think this means for you and your clients?**

This opening question is clearly intended to elicit views about the relative socio-economic positioning of social work clients. The final part of this question - what societal positioning may 'mean' in practice for social workers and their clients? - is intentionally open-ended. The aim is to 'test' the perception that clients are drawn disproportionately from lower socio-economic groupings. However, I am also interesting in developing our understanding of what social workers think about the consequences of socio-economic factors for their work, the lives of their clients and their relationships with their clients. I wanted to be open to new ideas and perspectives rather than limit responses to my existing perceptions.

2. **Do you advocate for your clients? Can you tell me about this?**

As described above, this question was partially designed to prepare ground for consideration of the question that follows. However client advocacy is arguably common to all forms of social work and I am looking to see if this is universally acknowledged by participants. Also the question potentially links to the notion of speaking for others and the care needed in relation to the pit-falls associated with this process. Finally the idea of 'getting close' - engaging with the lived reality of client experience - can also be associated with the concept of advocacy. This creates the possibility of generating data with wider implications. For example such data could be associated with the process of gaining a deeper understanding of the 'other's world' or

of insight into the relations of power between those who seek access to resources and those who decide who is eligible. In this way a seemingly straightforward question can generate data that is potentially relevant to much wider constructions.

3. **Social workers have been described as occupying an 'in-between' location and performing a mediating role. Is this consistent with your experience? If so, can you describe this?**

As indicated above this is a direct question about the notion of 'in-between' positioning. The link to the concept of mediating proved slightly controversial in that some social workers who affirmed the in-between concept questioned the idea of 'mediating' - preferring the notion of strong advocacy to the connotation of compromise which they associated with mediation. This question is also designed to potentially identify data relevant to wider questions about power in the social world and social workers' perceptions (or perhaps 'positional view') in relation to power, privilege and social capital. Such issues are considered to be too conceptually difficult to translate meaningfully into specific questions for an interview such as this. However the aim is to indirectly create the possibility for data to emerge that is consistent with more complex constructions. These constructions may be prefigured to some degree but they may also be emergent and unforeseen.

4. **Are there some clients that you can't work with because they fail to qualify for assistance or refuse to accept assistance for some reason? If so, can you tell me how you feel about this?**

This question is also broadly expressed and designed to elicit an interpretive response from participants. It is designed to include the issue of emotional involvement or investment in client 'welfare' (or perhaps in commitment to client well-being through social work engagement). This is why emphasis is placed on 'feelings' that may be generated for the social worker. It also potentially captures beliefs about self-responsibility and choice that may or may not resonate with the foregoing theoretical discussion about the political construction of social work in the neo-liberal era. Alternately there is potential for data to be generated in relation to exceptions, special cases and the 'bending' of rules in relation to client need and eligibility for assistance - the 'impulse to inclusion' that has been theorised as a 'big picture' component of the social work ethos. In this sense question 5 (below) is prefigured as per questions 2 and 3 (above).

5. What about cases that are borderline or 'grey' areas? Can you tell me about how you manage these situations?

This question is concerned with the notion of inclusion and potential conflict between this 'reflex' and agency mandates / resource constraints. The idea of managing borderline situations potentially relates to the concept of 'practice discretion' and the power which individual social workers are able to exercise. This notion touches on the issue of how this discretion - if it exists - may be constructed and managed. This in turn prefigures the later question (8 below) regarding the moral parameters of social work judgements about inclusion. As is the case with question 3, there is potential for emerging data to inform theory construction that extends well beyond the prima facie question.

6. Are there some clients that you go the 'extra mile' for? What sort of situations might this apply to?

This question is also facilitated by the previous question to a degree. It is asking for reflection about the application of discretion and motivations for exceptional practice in particular situations. Potentially it refers to some of the tensions underlying social work practice - namely the injunction to treat all clients with equal care, the posited imperative to enable those who are excluded, and also where social work sits in relation to socio-political constructions which position some people as being of greater social or moral worth than others.

7. Do you ever take risks in practice? If so, can you tell me about this?

This question is both closed and open. I am interested in responses to the direct enquiry as to whether or not risk taking occurs and beyond that I am seeking to hear whatever participants have to say. The aim is to invite participants to describe responses to any perceived conflicts in their 'own words' as opposed to unduly influencing their answers. The question aims to explore some of the conflicted terrain which the literature discussion identifies as part and parcel of social work. 'Risk' is particularly topical in contemporary practice for a number of reasons. There is little disagreement that social work, particularly, statutory work, has become increasingly preoccupied with risk measurement, avoidance and minimisation. Organisationally social workers are constrained from engaging in risky practice. Alternately social workers work with the human condition in the context of social circumstance. By its nature such work is uncertain and contingent: inherently 'risky'. Social workers are concerned about 'doing no harm' to the human lives which their practice inevitably

influences. However social workers are arguably concerned with human potential - possibility as much as probability. In relation to question 6 (above) social workers are asked to consider the making of 'exceptions' to some degree. Exceptions to rules are inherently 'risky'.

8. **Are some of the decisions that you make in your work difficult? If so, what guides you when you make difficult decisions? Is your practice influenced by moral values?**

This question also connects to several of the previous questions. It invites participants to ponder the complexity of social work practice and to consider the influences which may impact upon decision making processes. It encourages interviewees to consider this issue broadly and is potentially suggestive of the 'contextual analysis' motif which recurs within this thesis. It also implicitly 'begs the question' as to whether personal and/or professional social work practice values (values and beliefs embedded in a moral / political position) are applied in the process of practice. It may also potentially yield data about any tension that can exist between such a values system and practice as it is organisationally and politically situated.

9. **Is awareness of power important in social work? If so can you tell me about this?**

We return to a wider theme here and again I am looking for information that will generate further analysis. It is intended that earlier questions will have provided some degree of preparation for a broad consideration of the various ways in which relations of power may impact upon social work practice. The question has been posed in this relatively unstructured way because I am reluctant to pre-empt the ways in which social workers may describe their perceptions.

10. **Do you think that social work practice has a special area of knowledge and skill? If so, can you describe this?**

This question is designed to encourage participants to articulate what, if anything, they believe might set the practice of social work apart. I am interested in the degree to which concepts described or developed in the foregoing interview are drawn upon and also whether new or unexpected answers are supplied. Again I have pre-existing broad formative ideas about positioning in the social world and the socio-historical 'place' of social work. However I am mindful of not clouding the data with these preconceptions.

11. **Do you think that there is something about social work that gives you a special learning opportunity? If so, can you describe this?**

This question follows from question 10 (above) in that if social work has an area of special knowledge, it is likely that the related notion of special learning for practitioners will be recognised. How this might be described is of interest. I am aware that the tentative theoretical analysis which I have assembled points to the engaged, communicative, interactional nature of practice and am wondering how this may potentially be related to what social workers learn in practice. The nature of the learning under consideration - about practice, about self, about society - is deliberately ambiguous so as not to unduly confine the range of possible responses.

12. **Would you say that the things you have seen and done in social work have influenced your view of New Zealand society? If so, can you tell me about this?**

This question specifically targets the issue of socio-political awareness as a function of social work practice experience. Clearly it ties to questions of political policy and socio-economic ideology and is potentially associated with issues of social power in relation to categories like class, ethnicity and gender. I am interested in the degree of congruity found in the data which emerges.

13. **Is anything changing in the way that social work is delivered in Aotearoa / New Zealand? If so, can you describe this?**

Given the wide range of organisational settings represented in this study I am interested in whether similar processes of change are identified across practice settings. There is also a link to the previous question (12 above) in that I am interested to see whether participants make connections between perceived changes and the political rubric against which change is occurring.

14. **How much freedom do you have as a social worker?**

This is another widely constructed question designed to elicit 'unconstrained' responses. It connects back to the notion of discretion and professional autonomy - what this looks like in practice and how it is experienced? How much of it exists and how much of it is desirable? It also potentially relates to wider notions of how freedom is constructed in western liberal societies and the place of social work within this schema.

15.   Do you think that social work is influenced by politics and economics? Can you tell me what you think about this?

The final question in this section directly addresses perceptions about the political location of social work. It does allow for the possibility of participants denying a significant connection between social work and politico-economic context and also leaves open the question of the nature and degree of this influence.

Section Two:

Practice in context (Practice Knowledge) - How do experienced social workers describe the knowledge that is generated through the practice of social work?

1a.   Social work has been described as a balancing act - a tightrope walk. Does this description fit with your experience?

I sometimes employ the metaphor of a tightrope walker skilfully balancing a range of demands in order to achieve a precarious outcome as an image of social work practice. This image seems to go some way to conveying the nature of practice as a function of its location and also the degree of autonomy possessed by practitioners. Here participants are asked to reflect on this metaphor without embellishment or explanation.

2a.   Some theorists talk about the idea of a kind of practice knowledge that is hard to describe - knowing what / when /and how to do things. Can you tell me how this fits with your experience?

This question is designed to focus participants on the notion of tacit knowledge or knowing in action. It concerns the balance between emotion, intuition and reason and also the significance of experience. I have endeavoured to keep the form of the question uncomplicated so as to facilitate clear engagement with the idea.

3a.   Can you tell me about how interactions with clients might influence the decisions that you make?

This is a direct probe about the interactive and relational elements of practice - the fact that some clients are more persuasive, articulate, personable, even more 'likeable' than others - and whether such interactional processes influence the quality of service provision. It is a question that I was required to clarify several times. On reflection it was not formulated specifically enough. In later interviews I routinely clarified the question in similar terms to those expressed above.

4a.   The process of listening to your clients - Can you describe how you go about doing this?

This question alludes to the idea that in order to establish meaningful relationships a 'close' and / or respectful engagement needs to be achieved. I was interested in exploring how practitioners described such a crucial micro-process in the practice of social work and the insights that might be generated by this exercise. This focus also relates back to the tacit practice knowledge concept addressed in question **2.a** (above) – that what you know and believe is embedded in what you do, or perhaps more importantly in the context of social work, 'how' you do things.

5a.   Can you tell me about the sorts of things that you are watching out for when you are conversing with clients?

This question potentially relates to a range of issues. It holds the promise of generating data about the notion of practice duality - doing and watching - a process of simultaneous engagement and assessment. It also connects to the idea of complex contextual communication - that communication and understanding between social workers and clients is a complex and multi-layered process. I am looking for data that will assist in exploration and description of this context.

6a.   Persuading people to look at situations differently - Is this part of your work? Can you describe how you do this?

This question potentially yields further data about the communicative nature of practice and it also relates to questions of power in relationships, both with clients and with 'the authorities': speaking with clients and speaking for clients. In relation to Philp's (1979) hypothesis, I am interested in whether this question sheds any light on the proposition that social workers 'humanise' excluded subjects. I am also interested in the possible tensions which practitioners might experience between the ethical liberal commitment to choice and autonomy and the capacity (or need) to influence the perceptions of clients. I am also interested in how such processes of influence may occur in the context of 'relationship' (in the sense of embodied / interactional human communication) and how social workers identify or negotiate any dilemmas which may arise from this.

7a.   Empathy - Do you make an effort to see situations from the perspective of your clients? How do you go about doing this?

The notion of feeling 'with' or 'for' others as a dimension of 'deep' understanding is often associated with caring work. I am interested in participants' views about the nature and validity of this construct. As with question **4a** (above) I am also interested in the micro-description of how social workers 'conduct' themselves in this process.

8a.   Thinking in action - When you are engaged with clients do you think about how you are being seen and heard? If so, can you describe how this process works?

This question again refers to the 'connected' and interactive elements of client engagement and to the notion of reflection in practice. To what extent do social workers see themselves as presenting a 'role' or a persona? What, if any, are the boundaries between 'self', practice 'skills' and 'professional' role in practice? How might these boundaries be established or negotiated in practice?

9a.   Emotional context - Do you encounter situations in your work that make you sad or angry? Can you tell me about this?

This question directly relates to the emotional context of practice and also potential connects with 'motivations' for practice. I am wondering how the emotional context of practice is managed by experienced practitioners and whether a desire to alleviate suffering or redress injustice in the lives of particular individuals and families fundamentally motivates the practice and / or the 'identity' of social work. I am interested in the degree of 'passion' which is expressed by 'long-serving' practitioners. Wider constructions of social work as a conduit for 'individuated social justice' may be connected with an on-going desire to alleviate individual suffering. The friction that can be associated with a mandate for individual assistance and perceptions of systemic causation is also of interest in terms of elucidating the tensions which afflict social work. Again, these and other potential analytical associations are not directly suggested - rather they are left to emerge from the narrative.

10a.   Are there times in your work when how you are presenting yourself and how you are feeling do not fit together? Can you tell me about this?

This final question seeks to investigate the relationship between the notion of interpersonal engagement and professional identity - a further aspect of the concept of duality in practice. I am interested in the degree to which social workers recognise any emotional incongruity between 'feelings' and 'presentation'. To what extent might emotion be concealed from clients and what purposes might such an orientation serve?

- Is there anything else that you might want to say about what experience has taught you about doing social work?

- Is there anything else that you might want to say about what you have learned from doing social work?

The above bulleted questions are designed to 'mop-up' anything which a participant may feel is left unsaid or unclear. The emphasis is again shaped in the form of a 'duality' - what have experienced practitioners learned about the nature of social work practice and what, in the broadest sense, have experienced practitioners learned as a result of sustained social work practice.

3.4 Data Analysis

As discussed earlier in relation to the theoretical underpinnings of the fieldwork research, a range of tentative notions about the nature and contextual genesis of social work practice knowledge are developed within the first three chapters of this thesis. Inevitably, this theoretical orientation is likely to influence what is 'seen' within the data sets. However, I also took some pains to avoid what has been termed a 'shoe-horning' approach to the generation and analysis of data (Rafalin, 2010). Although the questions explained above are designed to potentially develop these formative notions, they are also couched in a way that seeks to access the original views of practitioners - to allow for new or contradictory ideas to emerge and for unforeseen connections to be made. Similarly with the process of thematic analysis, I adopted a grounded theory approach, at least in part, to the disaggregation and reassembly of the interview data. First and foremost, I endeavoured to identify themes as they presented 'within' the data generated from participant interviews, developing findings from the 'ground-up' rather than imposing a pre-ordained structure. The question design sought to balance theory testing with theory development. In order to further this approach I consciously made an effort to set the questions aside during the process of analysis so as to allow the information which the questions had facilitated to generate its own patterns.

All of the interviews were recorded and carefully transcribed by an experienced third party contracted for this purpose. This arrangement included the signing of a confidentiality agreement as indicated under the earlier sub-heading 3.3.3: 'Ethical Procedures'. As noted, participants were given the opportunity to peruse and amend, or otherwise comment, on their manuscripts. I took a deliberately cautious approach to

analysis of the interview manuscripts. As much as possible, I wanted to suspend my own propensity for prejudgement. I closely read each manuscript through twice without highlighting particular pieces of text in order to get a broad feel for the data I would be working with. I then began the task of discerning common threads within the data in relation to the key points of enquiry - the existence / nature of social work practice knowledge and the impact which the context within which it is generated may have for the 'form' of this knowledge. I experienced this process as engaged and thought-provoking and also as both disciplined and creative. Care was taken to facilitate the emergence of patterns within the data set rather than impose categorisations. At first, data which appeared potentially insightful, suggestive of wider relevance, or merely 'interesting' in some way, was provisionally identified in each of the transcripts. Although I was conscious of attending to points of commonality, I was also interested in divergence and originality. I simply highlighted sentences or paragraphs / part paragraphs (sometimes short phrases or key words) in each transcript by using the electronic word document 'review function' and inserted margin comments tentatively expressing or querying how these pieces of data might potentially be relevant to the thesis. These comments then became the mechanism for collating the discrete 'bites' identified. I was conscious of my own preconceptions about which interviews might contain more 'productive' information and aware that an early focus on particular transcripts risked the premature imposition of a particular order on the interview data. Accordingly I worked through the transcripts in the random order in which they were stored in the electronic 'word' folder I had created for the interview material.

Patterns within the data inevitably began to recur as the analysis progressed and 'identifying phrases' relevant to possible themes began to be repeated as I continued to highlight material and insert margin comments. The process of identifying meaningful data and assigning tentative thematic headings - interrogating the text/s and tentatively building analytical categories in relation to recurrent patterns - occurred simultaneously, or 'recursively' (Bryman, 2012). I remained mindful that potentially important associations could be overlooked if data was prematurely placed in tight categories. The following are two random examples of the form of margin notes made at this point in the process:

> 'Respect' connected to treat others as you would like to be treated; discussion.

> Example of flexible approach to client engagement / idea of 'guiding' intention to engage in empowering practice - comment re client socio-economic status.

Some of these margin comments merely suggested possible categories while others highlighted particular nuances which could be connected with possible categories. The process could be well described as both engaged and reflective - actively performing the task of emergent codification and simultaneously thinking about the potential patterns across developing themes. Although this activity proceeded organically in the sense that making possible connections between tentative themes (and 'back to' the theoretical body of the thesis) were inevitably part of cognitive process, I was careful not to get 'too far ahead of myself' - to 'hold lightly' to emerging associations so as to 'allow' the concertina effect of this analytical process to unfold and retract. Once all the transcripts had been processed in this way, I began a gradual and methodical process of data reduction - thematic identification and consolidation.

This 'filtering down' and reordering of relevant data was carried out carefully and deliberately. This stage in the process is consistent with the concept of open coding where categories remain generative and flexible to some degree. I re-read through all of the 'processed' transcripts several times with an eye to apparent patterns and connections. I then began to electronically 'copy and paste' highlighted sentences / paragraphs, complete with margin comments and provisionally group these excerpts under tentative thematic headings. I was aware that applying this method in an overly hasty or prescriptive way might compromise the integrity of the inductive approach being applied and also potentially overlook important information within the data set.[55] The transcript data was reassembled broadly and flexibly at this point, although I was also mindful of retaining (and noting as necessary) the contextual meaning of discrete pieces of text taken from the interview transcripts. Approximately twenty provisional thematic categories were created during this initial 'coding' process.

I was cautious of imposing structure on the material too definitely as I did not want to 'close down' interpretations of the data, or of possible associations between ideas expressed within the data. Accordingly, the thematic headings generally contained several words or phrases, indicating related, but differing, emphases. Data was also often 'positioned' under more than one heading at this stage. The following example indicates something of the flavour of this process. One such tentative thematic category was entitled, '**Influence of Politics / Economics / Wider Social Awareness**'. Some of the data provisionally collected under this category was also included under an overlapping heading: '**Client characteristics / Poverty / Structural Inequality**'. The connections and over-laps between the named categories were also

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[55] Although I am not claiming that this research is anchored in grounded theory, this approach did influence this process of data assembly as prefigured in the earlier discussion of Oliver's (2012) work.

often complex, subtle and uncertain. This was not unexpected. Differing levels of analytical abstraction are involved and as has been suggested, the process being scrutinised - the application and development of practice knowledge - is often experienced and understood as 'organic' in nature.

This provisional organisation of complex and nuanced data provided a platform for a further engaged process of categorisation and thematic refinement. I was able to carefully and systematically review the thematic categories and ponder the associations between them. Several of the data categories originally created were consequently amalgamated, renamed and / or reconfigured as sub-themes within broader categories. This process is akin to the concept of axial coding: merging initial 'related' codes within 'higher order' categories (Bryman, 2012, p. 577). In the final arrangement of data, six over-arching themes were identified. Several of the concepts which were common to more than one of the open coding categories discussed above were amalgamated into larger thematic headings as follows: **Relational Engagement**, **Self in Context, Enabling / Advocating, Locus of Practice**, **Humanising Practice** and lastly **Political and Economic Influences**. Less frequent or discrete data categories were organised as sub-themes (related sub-sets of data) beneath these 'master themes'. The individual interview data is arranged and discussed under these themes and sub-themes in chapters 4 and 5. I have chosen to reproduce a significant amount of interview transcript data in the following chapters so as to allow the voice of practice experience to be directly heard. This dialogue is also intentionally presented in verbatim form, although I have punctuated the excerpts minimally to enhance comprehension.[56] Although grammatical errors arise in the direct translation to written text, I refrained from editing this material so as to preserve its authenticity. However, I have removed statements that might potentially threaten the anonymity of participants. This is indicated in the text of the interview data as required.

3.5 Synopsis and Structure of Following Chapters

This chapter has explained the theoretical and methodological underpinning of the research process within this thesis and provided some detail of how these influences have been translated into the nuts and bolts of the research exercise. As has been

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[56] This punctuation was also tackled with care so as not to distort meaning. I added speech marks to the verbatim transcription when conversation was indicated in the text and also inserted commas to enhance readability. Where text is underlined in the excepts reproduced in the discussion of research data which follows (with the bracketed comment 'Emphasis added') the intent is to emphasise relevance to the analysis which is being suggested in the research commentary rather than an emphasis made by the research participant/s.

suggested, I have aimed for a degree of synergy between the research method applied and the nature of the subject being scrutinised. I believe that the disciplined process which was undertaken, ensures that the final themes and sub-themes arrived at can be said to have emerged from the raw interview data. However, it would be misleading to claim that the structure arrived at is the 'only' way in which the data could have been organised, or that the form of presentation is not significantly influenced by the preceding process of tentative theory building. The way in which the data is presented in the following three chapters, allows for a formative discussion of emerging connections between the interview process and the wider thesis exercise. Some interpretive connections to the literature are developed and tentative theory building comments are made as the research data is examined.

I have spread the discussion of the individual interview data over the two following chapters. It is considered that the volume of material is easier to digest in this format and also the assembled data does fall within the organising categories envisaged in the 'umbrella' research question as set out in chapter 1 and reiterated in this chapter: the knowledge generated and applied in practice and the way in which this knowledge may be related to socio-political context. It should be noted, however, that in the process of interrogating the nature of practice knowledge I have unfolded elements of practice awareness which are normally folded together. Although the conceptual division between internal 'doing and knowing' and the external context which shapes this doing and knowing is a useful explanatory or analytical device, the relationship between these perspectives is essentially seamless in the lived reality of every-day practice. Accordingly, it is important to emphasise that the themes and sub-themes which are presented and explored in each of the following chapters are inter-related, nuanced and slippery. There are often circular or reciprocal connections between the themes which are delineated.

As mentioned, the commentary provided in chapters 4 and 5 also informs the development of questions for the focus group component of the fieldwork interviews. The data generated through the focus group exercise is presented and discussed in chapter 6 of this thesis. In-depth discussion of the findings of the thesis in relation to understandings of social work practice knowledge, and of the potential ramifications of these findings, is located in the concluding chapter. The summative analysis in the final chapter is informed by the import of the thesis as a whole - data from both the individual and the focus group interviews and by a reflexive engagement with the

concepts and questions generated through the process of experiential and theoretical analysis which is outlined in chapters 1 to 3.

CHAPTER FOUR: Knowledge in Practice

The first two major themes discussed in this chapter - 'Relational Engagement' and 'Self in Practice' - can be clearly related to the notion that knowing and doing are not as clearly separable as the traditional hierarchical division between rational-technical knowledge and applied practical skills would have it (Morrison, 2010; Schön, 1991). The third and final major theme explored in this chapter - 'Advocating / Enabling' - provides something of a bridge from this exploration of 'what' experienced social workers perceive practice knowledge to 'be' in relation to how it is generated and applied, to a more explicit focus on the socio-political context which frames the production and application of practice knowledge canvassed in chapter 5.

4.1 Relational Engagement

(Sub-themes **Engagement**, **Skills / Knowledge**, **Head / Heart** and **Empathy / Intuition**)

This is the most 'data-saturated' of the major themes which emerged from analysis of the individual interviews. The relationships between the sub-themes listed above are complex and the boundaries between the categories tend to overlap and blur. This is an intriguing phenomenon in itself and as suggested, underscores the challenge of describing the holistic nature of social work by means of division and categorisation. The participants at times struggled to name the features of their relational practice. In part, this also reflects the challenge with which this thesis engages: articulating the often tacit / unarticulated knowledge that informs social work practice.

The overwhelming number of unsolicited (in the sense that no direct question was posed) references to the significance of the relationship - 'relational engagement' - between social workers and clients indicates that this concept is perceived to be of central significance to social work practice. This belief is roundly expressed by participant 8:

You've got to have a good relationship. The bottom line is you've got to have a good relationship with those whanaus,[57] you've got to be able to talk to them, you've got to be able to speak their language and you've got to be able to put yourself in their shoes, show empathy and know where they're coming from.

The traditional primacy afforded to the notion of the social worker-client relationship as the vehicle for change is also potently named in the following excerpt from participant 6:

How can you still maintain that kind of non-judgemental attitude and still work with that client? I think the main thing that guides me is that if I do something which is judgemental, I actually risk damaging or jeopardising the relationship between us. I really don't want that to happen so I think under that principle I will still be non-judgemental because otherwise I will destroy everything that I have done. I don't want to do that. The person will know if you judge them, she will know and she will reject you whatsoever so I don't want to jeopardise the relationship. <u>Because it's only a relationship, it's the only tool that can help the person. There's no other way</u>. If I can't have a professional relationship with that client, there's nothing that can help so it's based solely on that relationship.
(Emphasis added)

4.1.1 Engagement

The concept of engagement is variously named as 'connecting to', 'sitting alongside', 'joining with', or in some sense 'getting closer' to clients. There may be echoes with humanist ideals in that these phrases could serve as metaphors for the underlying notion of shared humanity that sits behind the concepts of equality and partnership. The following excerpt from participant 5 can be neatly identified with this analysis:

I think social work has a particular area of skill and engagement - (…pause…) - and I think what that's about is recognition that we are partners with the guy we work with. I hate the word 'empowerment'. It is like, "Where do you go and buy a bucket of that?" We're always talking about empowering people as if we can just 'dunk this'. But I think that <u>knowledge of the relationship is a shared thing</u>. You're not becoming an expert but you're coming as somebody who's trained in engagement.
(Emphasis added)

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[57] As noted earlier 'whanau' is the Māori language (te reo Māori) term for 'family' and encompasses a wide extended family group. In Māori syntax the plural form does not have the letter 's' added, so that a reference to one whanau (family) and the plural reference to many whanau (families) is written in the same way. However with the colloquial mixing of English and Māori spoken language forms in common usage, the correct grammatical form may not be adhered to, as is the case in this excerpt.
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Participant 2 places particular emphasis on representing the interests of 'grass roots people' or more accurately of removing barriers so that they can represent themselves. The following excerpt may be best understood in connection with the notion of intermediate location and the conscious 'joining with' clients as a route to empowering practice. Also perhaps there is something in the collective nature of Māori social relations which 'naturalises' the joined relationship one to all and all to one:

> *And I love working with people because it's a passion – <u>but for me I become part of them</u> - but not to the point where it's unprofessional. I just <u>feel with them</u> and say, "Okay, maybe we can do this, what do you reckon?" But I always include them in the plan. I'm very transparent in what we do and I think for me, that's why I like working in social work - because we become a team, my client and I or the whanau I work with. We become a team and work together.* (Emphases added)

In terms of intermediate location, the process of engagement can be associated with a moving away from the pole of institutional power and towards the social position of the client. As mentioned, participant 7 is employed by an NGO which engages with families who may have negative associations with CYF. Accordingly a strategic distancing is employed:

> *The chances are they're reluctant because of CYFS[58] involvement prior to coming to us. In that case we distance ourselves as much as possible from CYFS. We take referrals from CYFS but our question is, "How can we help you?" So we straight away align ourselves.*

Participant 21, a Youth Justice CYF social worker, also describes a conscious presentation designed to disassociate the social worker from the 'system':

> *When young people first see me, particularly if they are from say a Māori heritage, they'll be seeing a Pakeha man wearing clothing that might not be quite as smart as the youth advocate's but is of a standard that I can go to court and so forth. So they're not immediately seeing me as somebody sitting alongside them - they're seeing me as part of the establishment. It's important that I've got to try and build a rapport with them and with their whanau to try and break that down barriers and to try and say, "Look, actually my role may partly be involved in a system that you don't like and I acknowledge the fact that you don't want to be in this situation but I think I do have something to offer."*

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[58] As explained Child Youth and Family (CYF) is the state agency responsible for statutory social work services. Prior to the most recent of a long series of restructurings the organisation was commonly referred to as the Child Youth and Family Service ('CYFS') and this expression has adhered in common usage as demonstrated throughout the interview excerpts.

Similarly participant 17 explains the perceived need to take concrete steps to separate the social work role in a school setting from the orthodox conventions of staff - student authority:

> *Mrs … (name withheld) - which is just my worst nightmare! When I get inside here I say, "My name is (name withheld) and I don't want to be Mrs … (name withheld)" - because it's the whole power dynamic.*

A variety of participants recognise inequality of power as a barrier to meaningful engagement. Several participants mention getting down to the level of their clients - literally assuming a sitting position in hospital settings where clients may be bed-ridden for example. The following excerpt from participant 1 suggests something of a 'stealthy' slipping under the barriers which unbalanced power relationships generate - a subversion of inequality by means of relational engagement:

> *I always try to go in, slide in under rather than come in from over the top. Like I always do try to come in from under and just move alongside.*

The aim is to foster trust and enhance communication by putting clients at ease. Participant 21 articulates the intent which underpins the engagement process from his perspective:

> *So it is around trying to engage the brain and the emotions as well to really give yourself the best chance of empathising - of building relationships and making people feel at ease when they're talking to you and being aware of the factors that would stop them doing that - and trying to do something in what limited way you can to reduce the significance of those factors.*

Participant 17, a Pakeha social worker, recounts a story of engaging with a Tongan family and the consequences of failing to demonstrate respect for custom - omitting steps to equalise relations of power from the outset:

> *Yes. As a European worker, I think the whole power is just so - (…pause…) - I remember once I had this Tongan family, new to New Zealand but was somebody else's client. She had gone on leave and they asked me to babysit this client - just while the social worker was on leave. I was really busy and I went in to this family and they said, "Oh, don't worry about taking your shoes off." I was really in a hurry, didn't take my shoes off - went in: "Okay, what sort of support? Okay, I'll do this, this and this." I came across really efficient but then that family's social worker then left so I inherited this family and I had to do so much back-pedalling because of what I'd done. I'd go there the next time and they'd say, "Oh, don't you worry about taking your shoes off, we've tidied the*

house." And so I had set myself up as this authority, or created a power imbalance that it was actually so hard for me to backpedal from.

Research participants generally demonstrate an awareness of the essentially 'social' and interactive nature of communication between social workers and clients. Participant 15 emphasises reciprocity within the engagement process:

Yeah, it's interesting because we think that we're looking at them but we've also got to remember that they're actually looking at us and depending on what day it is and what you have to say, they'll like you maybe better today than tomorrow. But that's that whole relationship thing. I think that's how they form a relationship with you if they choose to and it's about what sort of relationship they decide. I think that your clients kind of decide what sort of relationship you're going to have pretty early on and that's them sussing you out. <u>If they're not sussing you out then there's something mighty wrong.</u> It's not human nature for someone to walk into your house and tell you how to parent. (Emphasis added)

4.1.2 Skills / Knowledge

Skills and knowledge relating to communicating and interacting are frequently named by participants as being fundamental to social work. The following opinion is offered by participant 1:

I think it is great because that's what we do, we do hold incredible knowledge in working with people.

In a comparable statement participant 2 describes the essential skills as follows:

I don't know what the training is like now of course but I think you don't need all that scientific 'blah blah' - all they need is real, very good people skills - and it opens up the gate.

These assertions beg the question as to how 'people skills' might be named and explained. More importantly, in the context of this thesis, it is suspected that such generalisations are indicative of the difficulty involved in explaining the dynamic and subtle application of 'skills' in the fluid context of practice. Participant 19 indicates something of this in the following comment:

It just comes so naturally - (…pause…) - and having to actually identify the skills that you're doing can be <u>really hard for us because we don't look at it that way</u>. (Emphasis added)

It is also possible that participant 19 is indicating a belief that the separation of self from practice skills is a particular challenge for Māori practitioners.

In common with many other research participants, participant 19 stresses the significance of listening to clients:

> *It's sort of like, this is how we korero*[59] *through … you just sit and listen and all this stuff they want to answer -* <u>*if you just keep quiet*</u>*.* (Emphasis added)

Although it is self-evident this statement impresses as particularly profound. It is reminiscent of the Ram Das dictum: 'the quieter you become the more you will hear'.[60] Participant 9 treads on similar ground with an emphasis on listening and adjusting to client context:

> *I usually take two or three appointments to do the assessment and that's not because I set out to do that but because I think that I really try and create space for clients to just tell their story and that often doesn't mean just firing off a series of questions - it often means just starting out the conversation, guiding it a little bit but just getting them to talk about what's important for them and creating that level of comfort and trust for them to be able to tell you things that matter to them.*

Participant 1 depicts a 'chicken and egg' relationship between rapport and listening:

> *So somehow my listening puts them at ease. I could count, probably on one hand this year, how many clients it didn't work with and that always disconcerts me when I hit those clients. I go, "What's wrong, what was that about - why!?"*

Participant 5 expresses the notion of simultaneous use and submersion of self:

> *But when it's about what the person that you're working for needs - then it's also about putting yourself aside.*

Something of this orientation is also conveyed by participant 16 in the following excerpt:

> *"Okay, walk with me through what happened." It's about being listened to. I'll listen to what you're saying and from that listening - (…pause…) - for me putting myself 'there' and really listening to what you're saying - (…pause…) - and she takes me through their path and whatever happened to them. From there I know okay, this really happened. She's been abused for so long and she's been placed in different places too and you can imagine how a child feels when that happens. So all those things come*

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[59] 'Korero' is the Māori term for spoken language / speech - referring to 'conversation' in the context of this excerpt.
[60] Ram Das is an American author associated with spiritual growth and development and influenced by the Hindu spiritual tradition.

> *into the picture and <u>when you really know</u> you can say, "Okay, now I see things from your point of view."* (Emphasis added)

It is interesting to note the apparently uncritical belief that the relational engagement which is encouraged will be beneficial for the client. There seems to be an assumption that the social worker's skills and knowledge (arguably including self-knowledge and the 'use' of aspects of the self) are deployed in the service of the client. The voice of the social worker is perceived as a conduit to give voice to the client rather than being an end in itself or a servant of dominant social interests. The emphasis is not so much on the act of empowering the client to speak but a more 'self-less' focus on the benefit to 'the other' of being 'really' listened to in an empathetic way (heard / understood / validated). The important and vexed concept of empathy is discussed further under the following sub-theme of 'Head and Heart'.

A significant number of participants link the skill of listening with the 'story' which the client carries and deserves the opportunity to tell. The central concept can be related to the discussion of individualising and humanising intent which is located in chapter 5. The following excerpt from participant 7 succinctly links rapport building and individuating as a respectful foundation for listening to the client's story:

> *Just put people at ease, just babble and then you tell them who you are, what you do - and again, "How can we help?" Again if that doesn't work then for some people it's that, for some people it's this. Every family is different - (… pause …) - then inviting them to tell their story.*

Participant 15, a CYF child protection social worker, expresses a similar approach, although as might be anticipated in relation to statutory practice, the process is described in more dualistic or instrumental terms:

> *I suppose most of the clients we have here where I work now don't want us involved and I think that the key to a lot of the families I work with is being able to engage them and I don't seem to have lots of problems with engaging. I think that's probably a strength of mine and that's probably because I go in at a level which I think is non-threatening and I think my biggest buy-in that I've learnt is that <u>I just let people have their story. If I give them the opportunity to tell me where they're at they're more prone then to let me have a say into what I think</u>.* (Emphasis added)

There are numerous references to the importance of body language and checking that messages, either received or given, are understood. There is also frequent mention of 'reading' people or situations. This is often tied with the concept of multi-tasking or of a focus that simultaneously has regard to varying layers of social context. A combination

of calm, centred and 'multiple awareness' is illustrated in the following excerpt from participant 15:

> *So - (…pause…) - it's body language, it's the ticking of a pen or something that they've got. It's just watching as well as listening because you're either watching to see if they're so angry that they could do something. It's reading what you're going into but being open that there could be another part to a story that you're dealing with when you're going into family groups. I think it's just being aware of your surroundings.*

Significantly, in this excerpt we have a contemporary representation of the dual motif of listening and watching - being there and being aware - which parallels some of the historical descriptions of the social work role reviewed in chapter 2 (Ferguson, 2004; Procacci, 1991).

When pressed as to the nature of 'listening' to clients, participant 8 provided the following explanation of the process of attending to others - the 'how of practice' in situations where child abuse may be present:

> *There's different ways. There's the body language, there's the silent thing - there's so many different ways. It's just being able to catch on. When you see it, you know the signs of when they want to just talk or they want to share or there's stuff going on and you 'know'. Does that sound right?* (Emphasis added)

Participant 8 goes on to describe some of the layered awareness entailed in engagement and assessment during initial 'home visits' in this highly charged context:

> *But really there's more to it – you go in at 150 mile an hour, even though you're talking to them and saying, "Oh, that's nice, that's good, so how's things going with baby? Did you take baby to Plunket?" And all the time you're looking - you're hearing - (…pause…) - you're 'smelling' - you've got to be up with the play. It's normal. We just know it as something normal. Even where you sit when you go into a house. I always make sure before I sit I know where the back door is or the front door or if there's a ranch slider. I always make sure I know where it is and I try and sit close to one of them because I don't know what to expect. And I'll have a 'look-see' who's at the back door, the ranch slider door before I sit. All those things - a lot of stuff going on - and counting how many adults in the house.* (Emphasis added)

Participant 6, a ward-based hospital social worker, describes the strain which the intensity of the professional role can entail:

You need to be very attentive - and you need to be focused. It's tiring, especially when you have already seen three or four patients in the morning. It's difficult to be professional all the time to be honest.

It may be that part of the difficulty alluded to by participant 6 can be appreciated by consideration of the following excerpt from participant 4:

How do I go about listening? <u>Always think about respecting that person</u> and as part of your role you need to assess – so I'm mindful if I don't listen I'm not going to be able to assess. I'm not going to know what's going on so I need to be able to listen to what they're saying <u>and listen even deeper than what they're saying</u>. Just thinking about the way they're saying it, how they're saying it. It's not just about what they're saying because you need to effectively assess and to work with that person or to bring in some ideas about an effective plan of action or a care plan, or whatever you want to call it. If you don't listen you're not going to get there and you're not going to be effective. You're not going to have an effective outcome. So it's being mindful of that and knowing that it's key to doing your job well. (Emphases added)

As suggested, the process of relational engagement seems to be difficult to dissemble and articulate for many of the research participants. It appears to be experienced and understood as an alchemic mix of factors such as culture, training, experience, self-identity, mandate and interpersonal elements. Participant 2 describes a flexibility that is informed by experience and also what might be described as an astute use of self in context - a deployment of skills and contextual social awareness designed to engage clients who could be perceived as challenging. All of this adds up to a 'knowing how in the doing' as indicated in the following description. The excerpt below resonates with Schön's (1991) analysis of professional knowing in practice and also with Ferguson's (2004) concept of being attuned to the emotionally and physically embodied 'smell of practice':

So - if I just see these young parents that are really aggro, then it's going to tell me how to approach it - (…pause…) - and the environment I'm in. So it depends on the environment - the way the people approach me - and then <u>I'll mentally be flipping that around very quickly</u>. Usually I'll say, "Kia ora",[61] or whatever - and then they'll know how to respond straight away when I'm first talking to them. One guy said to me, "How the bloody hell are you?" I said, "Well, I'm bloody alright thank you very much. What's your name again?" And so it just breaks the ice. (Emphasis added)*.*

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[61] 'Kia ora' is a Māori greeting that is commonly understood by the general population. The literal translation is 'be well / healthy' and in everyday usage the expression equates with 'hi' or 'hello'.

The sort of 'thinking on your feet' practice which is described here resonates with my own experience of working with experienced and able social workers who juggle possibilities, process complex information and complete challenging interactions with the seemingly effortless skill of accomplished acrobats - social acrobats is perhaps an apt description.

There are also frequent references to the role experience can play in the acquisition of this practice knowledge. Participant 4 suggests that some learning can only be gleaned through experience:

> *I experience that a lot and I think about that often and I have thought about how it's not training that teaches you that, it's not getting a qualification that teaches you that stuff. Its experience of working with families and its life experience all mixed up in it as well - and you start to be able to read what someone really might be saying. <u>You start to see deeper than what is on the surface and I think that can only come through experience and practise. You can't teach that stuff really</u>.* (Emphasis added)

Participant 8 describes a 'whole of person' approach to understanding knowledge for practice in the following terms:

> *The reality is that you've got to have life experience. You've got to be able to walk in others shoes. A lot of stuff that you do in social work you can't just learn off pen and paper. You learn from your mum, your dad, your nana, your papa, your aunties, your uncles, your friends, their whanau. You're looking at the wider picture. All that stuff that you grow up with and you take in there. That's all you need. All of that stuff, that all helps towards being a social worker.*

Finally, in this vein I have included the following excerpt from participant 12:

> *It's more just not what you learn from the University or wherever you've learnt, it's about knowing people's circumstances, knowing their body language, knowing how to – say for a drug addicted person – to mediate and try not to rationalise with someone that's not rational. <u>So there's so much more to it. It's almost at times like being an actor</u>.* (Emphasis added)

The closing reference to a dimension of performance in the practice of social work struck a chord with me.[62] Although this interview was conducted close to the mid-way point of the individual interview schedule I included a question about this in subsequent interviews. There is an intriguing irony in the notion that a practice which embraces

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[62] Participant 12 also compares practice with 'acting' in subsequent excerpts recorded under the sub-themes of 'Flexible Presentation' and 'Performance' where the possible implications of this orientation are considered further.

lofty ethical precepts may also be said to contain elements of 'acting' and I wanted to know more about participants' perceptions of this suggestion. This matter is addressed further under the following theme of 'Self in Context'.

Many participants also identified aspects of 'time' or 'timing' as significant to the formation of relationships with clients. Some NGO social workers worked with comparatively long mandates and spoke of the time required to effectively develop deep relationships with individuals and families. Participant 16 describes the challenge of building rapport with displaced and often multiply stressed refugee and migrant families:

> *So it's quite an intense job, not only providing the resettlement support but to deal with all those traumas and things that people have brought with them. There's an enormous energy needed for us as social workers and for us to build that rapport - build that relationship so they will trust us - knowing that we are there to provide the support. That takes a long period of time.*

Participant 17 contrasts the period of time spent developing relationships with long term Family Start [63] clients with the hurried exchanges that often characterise statutory practice:

> *Those first six weeks is just building rapport. I think that can't be discounted. When I went to CYFS that was the big thing - I thought, how do you make rapport? How do you build relationships? So how can change happen?*

The CYF social workers who participated in this study were no less enthusiastic about the importance of relationship. Perhaps due to the comparative brevity of the time-frame involved there was repeated reference to the critical quality of the initial 'social worker - client' encounter. Participant 15 builds on her earlier comments about allowing time for clients to tell their stories in the following excerpt:

> *I've watched other colleagues who probably go in and the message is given straight away and then you'll see people's defences go up - and then that's when that engagement thing tends to step backwards and you're not going to get a quick way back in.*

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[63] 'Family Start' is a family support / home visiting programme targeted at 'high risk' parents with young children. Delivery of the programme is 'contracted' through the Ministry of Social Development to a variety of NGO providers in Auckland.

Participant 20, a Māori CYF social worker who engages primarily with Māori clients, sets out his notion of engaging people at a pace that is appropriate - small beginnings are described as building toward a process of rapport and empowerment:

> *It's an old story like how you bait your hook and what sort of bait you put on so that the fish will come. If you want a snapper, you put that bait on. Now to capture the person, you give a little bit of that bait and you don't give them the whole lot. And you gradually feed them. The same things happen with whanau - you gradually feed them and all of a sudden they say to you, "Oh, I can see what you're saying. Right, let's go with that." You put things in front of them that you know are going to benefit them and that you know are going to help them. Where you look at it from a social worker's point, they give a word to our people and they don't know where to start eating from - the back or the side or from the front. Because they don't know how to start it, but if you give a little bit to let them catch on - (…pause…) - then you move the whole process forward.*

Research participants commonly connect the notion of relational engagement with the virtue of 'respect'. Some participants identify respect as an underlying value - something which colours both the actions of social workers and the relationships which they form with clients. It is an ethical principle which informs an attitude or 'stance', as opposed to an instrumental skill set. Participant 8 identifies respect as the passport to relational reciprocity:

> *Respect - having respect for others, that's a big one because it doesn't matter how many certificates or whatever you may have. It doesn't matter how many big-wigs or managers you may know, at the end of the day all that stuff ain't going to get you a foot in the door - (…pause…) - if you aren't able to have respect for relationships with whanau. And for me it's about quality. If you're going to do the work, it's got to be quality even though you may not be able to do quantity. At the end of the day, it's about quality and I look at it like if that was my whanau out there and if someone was a social worker for my whanau I would expect them to treat my whanau respectfully and give them a quality practice.*

Several of the Māori participants identify relational engagement as a vehicle for 'straight talking' - giving clear and direct messages. Participant 8 describes adherence to the principle of 'pono' as understood in Māori cosmology - being truthful and honest in her actions.

Participant 13, a Pakeha practitioner, associates the practice of respect with a degree of empathy in the sense of humanising[64] and normalising:

> *Treating people with respect - I suppose that's the biggest thing - you've got to try and treat anyone you meet with respect. I mean to say - I hate dealing with Government Departments and I quite often think, "How I would react if a social worker turned up at my door?"*

Knowledge connected with relational engagement is consistently identified as 'the key' to practice competence, but it is also the means to a parallel process of assessment and judgement about referral or intervention options. This is another way of portraying the two sided essence of social work and the liminal, both 'in' and 'out' nature of the territory which practitioners frequent. The two sub-themes which follow examine the question of empathy. The discussion is also related in various ways to the theorised notion of the social worker as both participant and observer - exhibiting a fluid 'duality of presence'.

4.1.3 Head / Heart

This sub-theme explores participants' perceptions of the correspondence between emotional rational elements in the practice of social work. As canvassed in chapter 2, the debate about the relationship between science and art in social work is complex. One of the core realities is that social workers are often interacting with situations that are emotionally fraught: dealing with human pain, grief, anger and loss. The work inevitably has an emotional context. Social workers are also required to deal rationally with volatile and distressing situations (and often several such situations simultaneously): to broker outcomes, prioritise need, apportion resources and make 'balanced' decisions. The intersection between the rational and the emotional is arguably a further instance of the intermediate location which social workers occupy. Two participants spoke spontaneously of the need for social workers to achieve a balance between 'head and heart'. Arguably this distinction is a manifestation of the science versus art dichotomy often said to characterise social work (and therefore, perhaps, the knowledge which supports competent practice). Several other participants made indirect references to this process. For instance, participants spoke of containing emotion in challenging situations so as to preserve an appropriate level of social distance and role clarity. In the case of participant 21 this presentation is regarded as a professional duty at times:

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[64] The theme of 'Humanising Practice' is elaborated in chapter 5.

… maybe you've got people in floods of tears and so forth. Part of me might be feeling the same way, but in my role as a social worker I would see the need to lock that away. Part of my role is to handle that type of emotional response and deal with it later in my own ways and my own time because it's important that I don't become part of the problem through inappropriate reaction, whether it's only empathising with a family or the victim or the young person. I've got to carry on with a role which sometimes is very difficult and to see it through despite whatever pressures might be kind of throwing me off course, if you like.

Conversely participant 17, an NGO social worker, provides an example where she believes that an open display of emotion - recognition of and allowance for, the depth of feeling around a particular situation - made for a deeper reciprocal relationship:

I was sitting there and I wiped the tears away from my eyes and I looked up and this girl was looking at me and I thought - (…pause…) - we just had that eye connection and she's been to me since and I think for her, she saw that actually I was someone who was feeling what they were feeling. I think that's the thing - of listening and seeing with your whole being - then you're actually going to pick up on things.

This relationship between emotion and practice is considered further under the following and final sub-theme in this section.

4.1.4 Empathy / Intuition

Empathy is concerned with the idea that depth understanding of others can be connected with an appreciation of their experience/s - at the emotional as well as the 'purely' rational level of understanding. This discussion also intersects with later discussion under the theme of 'Humanising Practice' canvassed in chapter 5. There is an identifiable link to humanist discourse in the idea that an embodied mix of emotion, reason and experience come together to inform a compassionate appreciation of the experience of 'the other'. Empathy in this sense is perhaps a prerequisite to the practice of 'care' - part of what it is to be 'human'. Several participants connect an appreciation of the feelings of others with the process of 'joining with' or 'getting closer to' clients. Participant 2 expresses this sentiment in the following excerpt:

Because I always put myself in the situation with my mokos,[65] or my kids and I always feel - (…pause…) – "How would I feel if that happened? How would I like people to approach me?" So I work on that.

Participant 17 offers the following explanation for the 'practice' of empathy:

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[65] The expression 'mokos' is an abbreviated form of 'mokopuna' - the Māori term for grandchild.

> *Sometimes I think you can't understand peoples' lives unless you've walked a mile in their shoes. But you can only get a little inkling of it by <u>opening up yourself to actually see</u> what is happening.* (Emphasis added)

Participant 17 shared the following striking instance of getting 'close enough' to see / feel / understand the experience of another:

> *One of the families I worked with, she had a child who was very sick and had to have oxygen and she used to tell me how much people judged her; Pacific people - she was Pacific Islander - she was Samoan. Even when she told me I thought it can't be that bad, "I'm sure you're being a little bit sensitive", because I just didn't believe that people did that. So I went out with her one day. People then probably intensified it because they thought, "Good, she's got a social worker". We were going to Housing New Zealand and Housing New Zealand wouldn't let us go to the seminar - and we went and sat in McDonalds.[66] I was doing a narrative letter with - that narrative letter with David Epston - and I wanted to talk to her about the things that she wanted to put into this letter.[67] I saw people just stop and stare at this poor child as if she was holding a stop sign - stop and stare! I said to her, "I'm so sorry. I totally didn't believe how bad it was for you."*

Participant 4 illustrates the process of empathy in the following terms:

> *…think how it would feel if your child had a disability. What it would mean? Maybe if your husband had died. <u>What that might mean?</u> I think it's just trying to - (…pause…) - I think you need to try to think - emotionally connect. How that might feel, what that might mean, how that might be? Draw on your experiences - and draw on what you've seen others go through.* (Emphasis added)*.*

Conversely, participant 18 cautions us about the limits of empathy and our capacity to understand the reality of others' experience:

> *…sometimes you just can't get there. You just cannot get there. I mean, how could you understand biculturalism that much unless you are Māori - unless you have been faced with marginalisation, those types of effects?*

Empathy can be associated with the idea of compassion, the Judeo - Christian concept of forgiveness and the humanising process. This can create conflict in practice in the sense that understanding an action and condoning an action are different, yet related, processes. There is some relevant reflection from participant 21 about it being more difficult to develop empathy with individuals who have committed immoral crimes. Also

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[66] Housing New Zealand is the agency responsible for the administration of state owned rental housing in New Zealand.
[67] David Epston is a social worker/ counsellor, author and teacher, based in Auckland.

in the context of children, family, community and society, social workers must sometimes weigh conflicting claims to freedom and protection.

It does seem that the research participants associate a broader sense of compassionate understanding with social work in comparison to some other professional perspectives. Participant 11, a social worker engaged with the criminal justice system, offers the following piece of insight:

> *Sometimes I might do something that Probation Officers might not and I know that I've done it when somebody turns around and says, "You're being a social worker aren't you?" Because, "You are being a social worker", is a dirty word in Probation - (…pause…) - it means that you're perhaps going a bit further for someone than you strictly need to.* (Emphases added)

This distinction is also relevant to subsequent discussion under the final theme of 'Political and Economic Influences' at the conclusion of chapter 5, given that we are arguably living in an era where individualised (in the sense of 'stripped of reference to social context') conceptions of accountability and responsibility are increasingly dominant. The ethos or 'value imperative' of social work as it is emerging in this study contrasts with what could be described as the dominant contemporary political 'value imperative'.[68] Such tensions are evident in the following excerpt from participant 13:

> *I think you have to try and just try to understand if you were in there - if you lived in a street full of gangs, if you're on a benefit, if you're a solo parent - how might it affect your ability to parent? And I suppose just saying, "Okay, this is your situation, what supports can we put in place to improve it?" I suppose if you take the trouble of - (…pause…) - if you become too empathetic it can almost excuse some things that shouldn't happen and I suppose it's just trying to keep a balance.* (Emphasis added)

This is a poignant example of the tension which can arise within social work between the need to understand the relationship between social causation and individual behaviour and the requirement to individually locate and change or modify behaviour. It may be that an excess of empathy could prove disabling for statutory practitioners. This may be particularly relevant to the contemporary practice climate.[69]

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[68] The term 'value imperative' refers to the idea that an identifiable philosophical position may underpin the knowledge structure for social work. It is suggested that this 'value imperative' may conflict with the philosophical position which underlies the neoliberal political project. This is taken up under the theme of 'Humanising Practice' discussed in chapter 5.

[69] For example the vehement statement from the Minister of Social Development which introduces the New Zealand Government White Paper for Vulnerable Children that 'poverty is no excuse for abuse' appears to minimise the significance of social understandings in relation to child welfare (Bennett, 2012)

The related notion of 'intuition' appears to have been discomforting to a degree for some participants and the interview data reveals some conflict of opinion regarding its significance as a form of knowing in practice. Given the primacy of a technical-rational platform for understanding the world in Western society (Plumwood, 1993), it is not surprising that there is some reluctance to consider the influence of intuition in social work practice. As foot-noted briefly in earlier theoretical discussion, this too is a complex area in that contemporary ideas in the philosophy of science do recognise the role of speculation in the production of knowledge (Shaw, 2010).[70] Intuitive understandings cannot necessarily be neatly separated from reason. Also intuition can be variously described and understood. It is mixed with the unarticulated 'knowing how' of practice experience which is less 'mysterious'. As suggested in the discussion of 'tacit' practice knowing at the close of chapter 2, there are perhaps several related dimensions to intuitive knowledge in and for practice: knowledge that is not examined or articulated, knowledge that is difficult to articulate and knowledge that cannot be articulated. I have also asserted that this thesis exercise takes issue with Shaw (2010) in proposing that practice knowledge specific to social work can be identified and that the unarticulated underpinnings of such knowledge can be explored.

Two participants were particularly reluctant to accept a place for intuition within the pantheon of practice knowledge. Participant 5 makes this case forcefully:

> *The other one is that when we begin to practise via intuition, as if we 'know'. You see that an awful lot in the mental health game. You will hear people say, "You just get that feeling." That's not good enough because that feeling is about something that you can't explain – (a) you can't document it and (b) you can't explain to the person you're working with why we're doing what we're doing. Because it's just what you know. So I think when we start to practise via intuition, we probably need a good slap from the supervisor.*

Similarly participant 12 links the ability to express the theoretical base of your practice in concrete terms with both experience and importantly with the need for professional credibility:

> *It used to be but I think that I learnt fast that you've got to be able to articulate your practice. If you can't how on earth do you expect to go and advocate for the practice or with people. I learnt very fast that everything that we do as social workers isn't just what I might have thought in the beginning to be instinctive. It is a model, it is a process, it is part of what*

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[70] See foot-note 17 which refers to the contested nature of 'scientific' knowing.

you do - and now with my own practice and to make sure with who-ever else I work with I can reel those off.

Participant 21 was ambivalent, suggesting that his own practice is more 'head-centred' - concerned with intellectual analysis and reflection, while recognising the apparent role of intuition in the practice of colleagues:

I would say I would describe my approach to social work as being much more head than heart so that is something that I would recognise in colleagues rather than necessarily being a strength that I would claim for myself. I'm aware of some of my colleagues will go through a route which seems to me to be based on intuition and on feelings which I can't always follow, but then they'll end up often getting outcomes which maybe I wouldn't have been able to achieve because I tend to be a rationalist who does like to analyse and to think a way through things.

Although the question of wairuatanga[71] is distinct from the notion of intuitive communication, some Māori participants made reference to how a spiritual dimension can impact upon social work practice. Such phenomena are certainly in the realm of the 'scientifically' inexplicable and are at the opposite end of the conceptual spectrum in this sense. Participant 19, for instance, describes the situation of a caregiver hearing of a child coming into her care through a dream:

Sorry - and it's really funny because that caregiver had a dream and it was her mother-in-law that came to her and told her that these children were coming up. So when I first met her she said, "I knew you were coming to me because I've already been told."

Participant 8 offers the following observations about the '**wairua' side of things**:

However, if you come from a cultural perspective - I am guided by wairua. I have to mention that. You know, your wairua, you'd know as a social worker - you know when you get that feeling; you know if it doesn't feel right - you know not to even walk in that door if it doesn't feel right. That wairua - just having that feel for wairua.

Participants frequently link intuition in practice with a 'knowing' that is aligned with experience. In the following excerpt participant 2 struggles to describe the complex genesis of developing an empathetic connection with the experience of other people - developing a 'feeling' for a social situation. This understanding is influenced by many of the elements identified in the preceding discussion of relational engagement and empathetic communication:

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[71] 'Wairuatanga' is the Māori language term for beliefs / knowledge related to the spiritual dimension of existence.

> *It's not just about standing in their shoes, it's about listening skills and for me sometimes I can have empathy with them and I'll say to them, "Well, yeah, I've never been in that situation, but I'd like you to tell me what that feels like so I can get a better understanding of how I can help you." It's just going in that way with them - (…pause…) - and a lot of the times I work - (…pause…) - <u>it just comes out. I don't think - it just comes - because I just get the feel of everything.</u> But a lot of that is - (…pause…) - I always make sure that we're all on the same page.* (Emphasis added)*.*

Participant 10 refers to the way in which experience can build to an 'unconscious' level of practice competence which is 'second nature'. This experience-informed sensitivity is described as follows:

> *I think that's part of the intuitive nature of practice - if you've been doing it long enough you do gain a sense of where this person might be at and what might be going on for them. Maybe some of the underlying things that are said or not said; how the body language is coming to you, how you're reading their body language. I do trust in that and I do trust very much in the puku[72] reaction. So if I'm in a situation where I'm assessing a client and what they say to me in response to a question creates a puku reaction for me, I'll explore it further to find out what brought that reaction about. So I do trust in the puku. I do trust that very much. I do like to think that I work with head and heart in balance but I have to also take into consideration what might bring about a reaction.*

Some social workers in this study linked the intuitive dimensions of communication to the quality of the relationships developed with clients. Participant 9 speaks of a picking up a 'feeling' around an adolescent girl who eventually made a serious abuse disclosure:

> *I said I just think this girl needs to keep coming down because something is going to come out … I think again - relationship! I know now with this girl she's a little bit cagey about something-she's actually got something pretty big to tell me. But it's looking and hearing with your eyes and your ears and just being open to what they're saying – even the words that they speak.*

Participant 1 recognises a strong intuitive element in her practice, although she also found this hard to explain and in a sense hard to accept, as is evident from the following excerpt:

> *I don't know how you manage it to be honest. I just try and wing my way through it. I probably work more intuitively so when I work in those situations I work intuitively - and I'm always assessing so I'm always*

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[72] 'Puku' is the Māori word for stomach. The reference is to a strong intuitive feeling - a 'gut reaction'.

> *looking for anything that will tip the scale one way or the other … So for me intuition is huge I have got to say. I'll own it - I feel slightly uncomfortable because it's so 'not social working'.*

The process described seems to indicate a mix of flexible, reflective and engaged practice that seeks to find a way to make progress 'with' clients.

Some participants expressed the belief that the level of emotional sensitivity associated with empathetic and intuitive practice is something innate in competent practitioners rather than a cluster of skills that can be learned. Participant 14 articulates this conviction in the following excerpt:

> *I think there is something that's kind of hard to explain. I don't know if it's a knowing - or an 'awareness' - and I think that can come with time being a social worker but I think some people have it and some people don't. I know social workers that do the theory and do the course - but still don't necessarily - (…pause…) - but still don't necessarily have that, whatever it may be.*

Participant 7 reinforces this perceived truth in the following colloquial observation:

> *Dunno - it's not something - (…pause…) - I don't think it's something that you can be taught. I think that's also part of why people become social workers - or therapists - maybe. Nobody that's not empathetic would ever choose this job, would they? I don't have a mechanical brain, I'm not a mechanic. I think I've always been quite sensitive to other people so a job where I can sit on my bum and talk and get paid for it is great. And hopefully make things better for people.*

Alternatively participant 3 suggests that relational insight / intuitive competence can be developed:

> *There would definitely be intuition involved as well - and you can learn and develop that intuition. You can learn and develop those other skills about trying to read people.*

The strong sense of trust in experience-informed knowledge expressed by participants in this study should also perhaps be tempered by consideration of the following reflection shared by participant 21 which refers to the way in which experience can generate a greater appreciation of the unknown - dissipating the 'arrogance of youth' and increasing awareness of the uncertainty of the social world:

> *Hopefully, although I'm not sure everybody who works with me would necessarily agree, but hopefully I've learned a little bit of humility - (…pause…) - I think of the difference between the world view that I have*

and the world view and the world experiences that are out there - and the range of different situations people are in and the difficulty of actually telling right from wrong. What is the level of risk which is reasonable to take? That's the hard part of social work.

Experience may well increase competence but awareness of uncertainty and human fallibility is perhaps part of the understanding which informs the practice knowledge and practice competence of experienced social workers.

4.2 Self in Context

(Sub-themes **Flexible Presentation**, **Friendship** and **Performance**)

Much of the foregoing commentary is relevant to the concept of 'the self' in practice - the sense in which social workers may be said to employ relational skills which are linked to, or 'part of', their own identity in their dealings with clients. Most of the practitioners interviewed made reference to the importance of the embodied and emotionally sensitive 'self' as a vehicle for service delivery. Participant 14 refers to a focusing process in preparation for client engagement:

> *I take a small break if I can and try to <u>re-concentrate myself</u>.* (Emphasis added)

The key issue at hand is the relationship between the personal and professional self in the practice of social work. The idea of 'the subjective self' is, of course, a theoretically contested concept, as discussed in chapter 2. Philp (1979) has argued that the discursive root of social work may be tied to the notion of human nature and potential human freedom: that a redeemable 'goodness' can be revealed / reclaimed once the contaminating effects of social circumstance are pared away.[73] This is where Bauman (1999) argues that Marx is part of the tradition of rational enlightenment science. For Marx true human potential is released once the yoke of oppression is lifted. Alternatively Foucault's postmodern vision argues that individuals are constructed. There is no essential self. Truth and identity are created rather than simply distorted by oppressive relations of power.

Social work makes productive use of the idea that change can result from an awareness of power in its many forms - at both structural and interpersonal levels.

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[73] Arguably the relational communication which facilitates the 'redemption' under consideration is between the authentic self of the social worker - or at least elements of personal self - and the self of the client, or in Philp's (1979) construction with the 'potential human self' of the 'other.'

There is considerable evidence within the data set to support the assertion that social workers are afforded a particular awareness of the contextual nature of power in 'the social' (social relations within the social world) and that this awareness may be related to the nature of their social / societal 'positioning' between the powerful and the marginalised. This applied awareness of the social effects of power is explored in some depth under the third major theme within this chapter: 'Advocating / Enabling'. There are also indications that social workers are chameleon-like at times - making use of differing relational skills in differing contexts to ultimately achieve outcomes for clients. Ethical challenges can be associated with this phenomenon. As explored in chapter 2, the idea that aspects of the self can be separated from the whole and re-packaged as practice skills is debatable. The interview data also provides support for the 'duality of presence' (connecting and watching) concept that I have tentatively developed. This notion of a split between relational engagement and dispassionate assessment can also be traced to the western Cartesian heritage: the idea that the rational and emotional (head and heart / thinking and doing / skills and essence) can be effectively or usefully separated. Although it is inappropriate to claim any degree of certainty, there is also data to indicate a possible pattern of resistance to this separation amongst Māori / Pasefika[74] research participants.

The seemingly underlying assumption that relational engagement will benefit the client through a process of enablement is also debatable in the uncertain, politically constrained and power-saturated social world in which the practice of social work is embedded. The question of judicious deployment of self – of **real, very good people skills** (participant 2) leads to the question of integrity. Of all the professions social work is perhaps the most preoccupied with ethical concerns about authenticity within the boundaries of practice relationships - what participant 8 describes as the need to be **pono** (honest and truthful). As noted I was intrigued when participant 12 connected social work practice with 'acting'. Perhaps the need for supervision, self-reflection and practice codes is related to this apparent ethical tight rope - a fault line that runs through the performance of social work practice. Participants' responses in relation to the issue of self in context are discussed under the following sub-themes.

4.2.1 Flexible Presentation

The need for flexibility in the practice of social work and the implications of this for the 'performance of self' in this context are summarised in the following excerpts from

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[74]The term 'Pasefika' is a generic reference to people/s whose ethnic identity is linked with the numerous pacific island nation states which stretch across the south pacific region.

participant 17. First, flexibility is associated with the constitutive uncertainty of social work:

> *…whereas in social work you don't know whether today somebody is going to tell you something that is going to be life changing for them that you need to make lots of - (…pause…) - you don't know whether a family is going to be in crisis and that you've got to work with that crisis, or whether you're going to sit and do paperwork all day. I think people who are not flexible enough cannot be good social workers.*

Secondly, the mix of flexibility and integrity to which the conduct of self in practice must aspire is captured as follows:

> *…that you have to be strong, but you have to be sensitive and you have to be structured, but you have to be flexible - and that's the whole thing, it's all those balances that <u>you have to be what you are</u>.* (Emphasis added)

Several research participants, in different ways, sought to describe the relationship between social work and self-identity. Participant 15 expresses a holistic view of the many aspects of knowledge and identity which contribute to social work practice, naming connections between theoretical / academic learning and life experience and also between the rational and emotional elements of social work practice. She concludes with the following remark:

> *Social work, I think, is part of who you are.*

This observation can be related to the idea that social work is a unified 'head and heart' undertaking and it can also be associated with the notion that social workers need to 'know themselves' in order to be aware of how beliefs and personal experiences may influence their perceptions of others. Something of this is evidenced by participant 16 who speaks of how the practice of social work has honed her self-awareness:

> *The only thing I can say that I've learnt from social work is knowing who I am because I think it's important that I know who I am first before I can reach out and know someone else.*

Participant 10 expresses the satisfaction of being able to connect her self-identity with her practice orientation - linking doing, knowing and being:

> *That's what's been really - (…pause…) - having those kinds of inspirational discussions and being able <u>to combine what I do with what I am</u>. I'm Māori, I do social work but I do it through the Māori world view.* (Emphasis added)

Participant 16 also articulated important aspects of her self-identity in terms of familial roles and religious / church affiliation and relates these experiences to competence in the social work role. She also indicates some capacity to separate her own beliefs from the rights and interests of others - a degree of 'selflessness' - as suggested by the following statement:

> *There are some decisions that are made in the organisations that are totally against my beliefs and so forth and also with the team - things that I know that were working for me in the past that I put forward and recommended for the team but the team didn't want to go ahead with that. For me to be able to overcome that I put myself - (…pause…) - I think of, "Hey, this is not about me." This is not about me, this is about the whole team - this is about the whole, not just individuals, not just me.*

This sentiment is consistent with later discussion in chapter 5, under the sub-theme of 'Contextual Understanding', which further indicates that self-awareness can involve putting self-interest aside in the context of wider client, or in this case collegial, interest.

Several Māori social workers connect social work with traditional helping and supporting roles that are entwined with cultural experience and identity. Participant 8 expresses this conviction in the following excerpt:

> *Overworked and underpaid, but then you look at it as Māori - (…pause…) - we did this every day, just we didn't call it social work - we just called it manaakitanga and aroha,*[75] *and they didn't get paid for doing it. They did it every day for their whanau, hapu, iwi.*[76] *At least I get money now and I'm doing something that my whanau, hapu, iwi have done for generations.*

Participant 10 describes her social work education as having 'put names' to 'instinctive' practices associated with her upbringing and culturally ingrained identity:

> *One of the biggest learning things for me has been - (…pause…) - I've often heard Māori social workers say we were born social workers, but it wasn't until I was actually in a social work role that I could understand what they meant After I did the study, I was able to put names to what it was that we did instinctively that had a place in social work practice.*

Interestingly, participant 11, a Pakeha social worker who practised for many years before completing an academic qualification, also speaks of becoming aware of 'names' for concepts / practices that she has learned from experience:

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[75] 'Manaakitanga' is akin to the European concepts of kindness, generosity and hospitality. 'Aroha' refers to the sense of compassion / care / love for others.
[76] 'Hapu and 'Iwi' refer to Māori social structure - a group of related whanau form a hapu and a collection of hapu form an iwi or collective tribal entity.

> *I think so because suddenly they would talk about things and I would think, "Is that what they call that?" Like an anthological model which I've always known as giving a social history. Or systems models - you always know that the family dynamics change when somebody moves in or moves out but it had a name.*

Participant 11 describes academic learning as an on-going experience in her interactions with student social workers:

> *…that's what I get from the students <u>because they come with the theory but not the knowledge</u>. There have been a number of times when I have said, "Oh, so what you really mean is …" - (…pause…) - So I've known it but not known what it is I know - if that makes any sense?* (Emphasis added)

Social workers in this study associated flexibility in self-presentation with acute awareness of the importance of relationship. Participant 3 acknowledges this connection as follows:

> *I am conscious of how they perceive me and it's important because in any sort of therapeutic relationship – if they don't trust you or feel comfortable then it might take a bit more work to develop that relationship.*

Several participants describe the use of humour to diffuse tension. Humour tends to have a humanising / levelling function but must be used with care as noted by participant 13:

> *I try from the first twenty minutes to get some sense - (…pause…) - some jokes and some sense of humour going. It sometimes gets me into trouble.*

Participant 1 is also aware of the function of informality and careful sharing of self:

> *I think I come in, I will usually use humour, so humour is one of my tools that I use quite strongly and it just puts people at ease and I sometimes will reflect on personal stuff if it's appropriate. Sometimes probably if it's not appropriate if the truth be known.*

Most participants acknowledge adapting their style of communication to the situation before them. Participants 2 and 8 speak of modifying their use of language to demystify and clarify the messages being delivered. Several participants express the view that since relational engagement is the catalyst for change it is important for the social worker to engage in a manner appropriate to the client. Participant 8 expresses recognition of the need to adapt to specific situations in the following excerpt:

Do I think outside the box? Yep, if I can see it's going to help this family, to help them work towards wellbeing. And not everyone is black and white. Everyone is unique and so I have to be able to work in a way that will suit them. And look, we've got a melting pot here. It is 'multicultural as' - <u>so you've got to be able to work with the whanau, not the whanau work with me. That ain't going to work</u>. (Emphasis added)

The implication is that the social worker must, to an extent, adapt or change themselves in order to be a conduit for change in others. The following excerpt provides an apt example. It alludes to adapting communication style to fit with cultural expectations - in this case taking account of inter-generation differences. Participant 17, a Pakeha social worker, describes adjusting her approach to communicating with a teenage Samoan parent once the grandparents were involved in the process - and explains the confusion expressed by a student social worker who observed her practice:

Of course, it was completely different talking to these Samoan parents about their teenage daughter to start with and what a good job I felt she was doing as a parent and when we left the student social worker said, "Oh, I can see you don't like that second client as much." I was like, "What makes you think that?" And she said, "Oh, just the way you were." I said, "I actually think both of these families - (…pause…) - they're lovely to work with - but of course I had to change how I was interacting because her parents were sitting in on a meeting and if I was joking with her and treating her as an equal in their eyes it wouldn't have been appropriate, because they were my age, her parents were my age -and that's not the way." And so you can't write a book and say this is how you deal with Samoan families and this is how you deal with a teenage Mum, because every situation is going to be different.

Participant 7 also connects flexibility with the concept of 'contextual understanding'. Rather than blaming a client for an inability to respond appropriately, the social worker must seek to understand the context of that individual in order to stimulate effective engagement. Significantly the emphasis here is on what the social worker might be able to do as opposed to the obligations which the client must meet:

We come across people who can be seen to be shooting themselves in the foot all the time but I look at context. I focus on context. If they're shooting themselves in the foot, why are they shooting themselves in the foot? And again, is there something that could be done differently that hasn't been accessed? To me there's no such thing as a reluctant client - (…pause…) - there is, but to blame it on the client as opposed to stepping back and looking at what you can do differently, or do better, or could somebody else do better than you? If we don't work then maybe somebody else does.

Resistance is an invitation to practice more creatively - to try harder to adapt in a way which will be effective.

The most candid expression of this notion of 'change your approach / change yourself' in order to enable client engagement is provided by participant 12:

> *I think about it all the time. I can be (name withheld) that's Māori or (name withheld) that just happens to be a social worker that is Māori. I think I change according to the circumstances. Not change greatly but because I come from two cultures so it's easy to be both sides.* <u>*Read someone and learn how they're going to be*</u>*. What's going to be acceptable to them?* (Emphasis added)

The phrase 'not change greatly' is noted here. It seems participant 12 is referring to subtle and deliberate behaviours. This can be usefully connected with the forgoing discussion of empathy and intuition.[77] These decisions about presentation and relational communication may be spontaneous - made in the moment - an 'organic' process for the experienced social worker. Also this observation can be connected back to the earlier discussion of synergy between practice and self-identity. In this example participant 12 is not expressing a loss or dispersion of self - rather the description seems consistent with a postmodern sense of the multiplicity of elements from which a coherent self is composed.

This kind of flexibility is reflected in the following anecdote provided by participant 2:

> *This young thing comes waltzing downstairs - (…pause…) - She says, "And who's asking?" I said, "Oh, you must be the one with the happy hands eh?" She goes, "Yep". I said, "Well, I'll tell you what - I'm pretty good with mine too. Now come over here!" She looked at me - (…pause…) -* <u>*I guess you've got to be the sort of person that can pull that off but also 'read' at the same time.*</u> *So I told her, "You shouldn't have done that because they're going to have you up for assault - but if you write an apology …"* (Emphasis added)

This is an illustration of a social worker 'using what she brings' in the sense of relational skills and 'feel' for social context. This is the 'self in practice' which social workers draw on. It is a skilled process and can be related to the artistic dimension of social work in practice - to Ferguson's (2004) aesthetically and symbolically configured 'smell of practice'. In my experience it is often the quality which separates competent from exceptional practitioners. It is also notoriously difficult to quantify which is problematic

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[77] Earlier reference is made to Participant 12's comparison between elements of practice and the concept of 'acting' under the sub-theme of 'Skills / Knowledge'. The implications of this analogy are also considered under the later sub-theme of 'Performance'.

given the contemporary state / managerial drive for evidential measurement, quantification and control. This issue is also revisited under the final major theme developed in chapter 5 - 'Political and Economic Influences'.

4.2.2 Friendship

The interview data contains some insightful descriptions, particularly from participant 17, around relationship, friendship and the boundaries of 'self in context'. Participant 17 discusses building long term relationships with multi-stressed / socially excluded individuals and families in the course of her work with an NGO in South Auckland. She refers to a perceived class of socially excluded / multi-problem families - 'that' sort of family - perhaps a contemporary reflection of Ferguson's (2004) 'refuse of modernity':

> *Me and my colleague, who's also European, we often joke that there are certain people who can't work with 'that' clientele. I don't even know how to explain it but just that they're usually European, their houses are a mess, there's just - (…pause …) - that stereotype of that.*

An example of developing a relationship of trust with such a family is provided as follows:

> *For that family I did go the extra mile. Even if I was on holiday; if I got a text from them I would make sure that I followed through on that because I knew she wouldn't make that connection with anybody else at that time and even when I took four months off to go and do my placement - (…pause …) - I had taken four months off Family Start - and they had a locum in and in that time that they had the locum, she completely disengaged from Family Start. It was a shame because we had worked quite hard to get her to be able to engage with the locum, but I think that she - (…pause …) - and that's the difficulty sometimes - <u>if you go the extra mile then people see you as being the service</u>. Like that (name withheld) is Family Start rather than seeing that other people can actually step in and do that as well. So that's that whole balance again.* (Emphasis added)*.*

This comment resonates with the suggestion that current practice design is increasingly concerned with systemic rather than individuated 'professional' trust (Smith, 2001). Given that programmes like Family Start are based on the idea of establishing effective relationships with high needs families, this is once again a site of potential contradiction. Participant 17 considers the sometimes indistinct line between friendship and social worker-client relationships:

> *But I think at one stage when I was less experienced I probably confused people that I was actually their friend more than their social worker. But then I made a physical change. My external supervisor spoke to me about*

> *this and one of the things was that I put my badge on when I went to this family - my photo ID - and I put it on which was like saying, "I'm not your friend, I'm actually a social worker."*

This gesture to symbolic distancing can be instructively contrasted with the following comment from participant 20:

> *All these people still wear these tags. The only time that I wear these is when I open the door to come into the building. A lot of people hide behind this, a lot of people use this to get into the door and I say to them, "Don't ever use that - don't ever use it."*

In this case the symbolic representation of state authority is removed in order to reduce social distance. It is, it appears, all a question of balance.

4.2.3 Performance

Several participants were sympathetic to the idea that an element of 'acting' can enter the social work role[78] Participant 15 responded as follows:

> *I think so - I think we do a lot of play acting. It's the way you sell something to a family at times - it's a way of conveying a certain message ….*

Other participants expressed discomfort with the notion that social work could be aligned with the concept of role play, or performance. This is not a dismissal of the idea that social workers can and perhaps should, present themselves differently depending on the needs of particular clients, since the same participants also talk about the need for social workers to adjust their behaviours in order to foster engagement. It seems that this may be more a reaction against any implied suggestion that this way of presenting is less genuine or sincere.

Participant 7 suggests that aspects of performance could be identified in the various life roles which we all play:

> *A 'performance' - I guess it is in some ways, but it's almost like saying that you're performing when you're with your children or your parents, so I don't think I could agree with that.*

Participant 10 puts this in the following way:

> *I don't think it's false – it's part of who I am. So, yes I do think that there is an element of performing.*

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[78] This discussion connects with an earlier reference to comments from participant 12 discussed briefly under the sub-themes of 'Skills / Knowledge' and 'Flexible Presentation'.

The area of relational flexibility also connects with the notion of professional identity or the concept of professional persona. Participant 1 describes assuming the cluster of behaviours, values and ways of relating that constitute her 'social work' identity:

> *So some of it is about how you put on the persona - you put on the persona of the social worker; you jump into the legs and you go into automatic pilot and that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's not like an unthinking thing but it's almost like you have to check your head at the door or check your head in the car - leave your own head in the car and step into a social work head and go in there and practice and do your thing.*

In relation to this concept of 'persona' and a considered element of self-disclosure, participant 9 concedes that there are aspects of 'performance' in the role but links this with discretionary professional relational engagement:

> *So I think to an extent there is a bit of a performance but I don't think in that sense it has to be insincere either. I think it's your professional persona which also can be real in the ways that the client needs to see that you're real. They don't need to know that you didn't sleep last night or that you're feeling sick or whatever but they might need to know that as a parent you've also struggled with issues …*

Social work is practiced in emotionally demanding contexts where the human experiences of pain, triumph and banality are all played out. Participant 18 likens the experience of practice to a 'psycho-drama':

> *Yes it feels like a psycho-drama. I think in some ways it is a psycho-drama. You have to 'perform yourself'. You need to be 'professional' to your colleagues. I don't think that is a good behaviour - (…pause …) - if you are upset you don't just put it out on your colleagues because your colleagues are in the same position. So I think as social workers we learn to perform - even when we are upset we just learn to 'suck it up'.*

This excerpt touches on a further aspect of professional persona - the idea that emotional distress is hidden in the process of 'professional' practice and that this mechanism may also come to influence the wider social behaviour of practitioners. The following excerpt from participant 15 affirms this view:

> *I think so. I think we have faces that don't marry how we actually feel inside - I think we do that. I think I learnt more to do that as a social worker than probably how I used to be - (…pause …) - this just develops I think.*

4.3 Advocating / Enabling

(Sub-themes **Rights**, **Systemic Advocacy**, **Speaking on Behalf** and **Empowerment**)

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the third and final theme - 'Advocating / Enabling' - serves to connect the foregoing discussion of knowledge embedded in practice activity with the forthcoming discussion (chapter 5) of the ways in which the socio-political location of social work may be seen to structure practice knowledge. The process of advocating for clients in the perceived context of practice can be related to the functions of speaking for clients, enabling clients to speak for themselves, and also to wider agitation for social change. Advocacy, both individually and systemically, was identified by all the research participants as a core social work function. It was also repeatedly linked to a multi-dimensional awareness of how communication is influenced by the social relations of power.

4.3.1 Rights

Ignatieff (1994) connects the process of translating needs into rights with the rudiments of a 'civilised' society. Research participants variously associate the notion of 'rights' with questions of voice, respect, entitlement and access. Needs and rights are often linked with social workers' beliefs about social justice. Although there are undoubtedly elements of wider systemic advocacy, the notion of justice seems to be primarily associated with individual 'cases' - connected with the idea of fairness for individual clients in their particular circumstances. In this way social work can be aligned to the individuated practice of social care as a form of social justice (O'Brien, 2011).

Participant 21 speaks about protecting individuals by upholding their rights to procedural fairness within the youth justice process:

> *I think part of our journey as social workers involves us trying to sit alongside young people and their families to ensure that they have access to a lot of other areas that they need support from - and trying to ensure that they're not held back from attaining their full range of potential allies or potential access to their rights.*

The data also suggests that advocacy is particularly prominent in situations where clients are perceived as unable to effectively advocate for themselves, or are unaware of the rights which they are entitled to:

> *The majority of people I've seen have been willing to accept a crap service because they don't know any better. They have no idea at all that services*

should be better than this and in actual fact you deserve better than that. I've got into trouble a number of times actually for being somewhat outspoken about this aspect. (Participant 5)

A wide range of participants extend advocacy to individuals who are seen as inadequately served by existing services - both within social workers' particular agencies and in relation to external organisations. Protection of the vulnerable is associated with the discourse of needs and rights by participant 12, who speaks of trying to ensure that social care is extended to a needy individual who fails to qualify for specific services:

> *Lots of things - (…pause …) - he's targeted in the community by people just because of the way he looks and lots of head injuries and everything. He has fallen through every gap everywhere. I've got nearly every organisation under the sun involved - like the Police Safety Team, I've got stops on WINZ,[79] I've been to the Probation Officer of his brother-in-law who continually beats him up, I've come to the attention of Head-hunters [80]… it's really, really hard.*

A particular interest in pursuing the rights of clients who are not assertive about their entitlements is expressed by some participants. The following excerpt is provided by participant 17:

> *Yeah, I think there are people who know what they are entitled to and they see us as a way to get what they are entitled to and there are other families who struggle and struggle and struggle and don't realise there are other supports and things. So it's those families who actually – I don't know, it's that they are actually just really humble I think in trying to make the best of what they can and be able to say, "Hey, actually you are entitled to this."*

Participant 8**,** a CYF social worker, expresses a similar sentiment:

> *If they don't know their rights, if they don't know who to turn to - (…pause …) - for example, if a teenage Mum, she has no idea how to parent a child or whatever then I'll get in there and I'll work with her and I'll advocate for her. If she needs help to get on a benefit I'll make sure that she gets Work and Income on board. If she needs somewhere to live, a house, I'll make sure that Housing New Zealand come on board and I'll do the advocating for her so she'll get financial help…*

There may be a faint echo with the 'charitable aid' concept that the most morally deserving - or perhaps the 'least undeserving' in Poor Law parlance - are made up of

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[79] WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand) is the state agency responsible for the administration of benefits and pensions.
[80] 'Head Hunters' refers to a well know motorcycle 'gang' associated with West Auckland.

the 'honest poor': the humble, innocent and least assertive (Ehrhardt & Beaglehole, 1993).

Finally there is some evidence of an identified relationship between individual rights and wider notions of universal rights to justice and freedom (self-determination). This association is broadly consistent with Goldstein's (1991) alignment of social work with social humanism and resonates with foundational debates that are associated with the liberal political tradition. The 'theoretical' freedoms espoused by classical liberal philosophy can be contrasted with the notion of 'real' rights supported by distributive equality - access to the social resources necessary for the exercise of said rights (Duncan, 2004). Participant 7 describes being motivated to advocate for parents to have access to a child in a state care situation:

> *And they had four, one hour, supervised access visits a year. And this case had been put on the back burner. It was in a kind of 'closed because everything's ticking along nicely' box until they referred it to us at which point I met with the social worker, I met with the supervisor and I said ,"What heinous crime have these people committed that they are only allowed to see their children for four hours a year?" And there was no heinous crime that they had committed over and above anybody else that's under CYFS. So I raised the flag there and said, "What's going on here?" It was just left to rot. And to me that's unacceptable. These parents have a right to see their kids.* (Emphasis added)

Participant 7 also articulates a more global desire to defend personal freedoms as a driving influence in her practice:

> *I have an incredibly strong sense of people having the right to their own freedom and that includes the right to make their own mistakes. With families, I will fight to the death for them to have the right to make their own mistakes.*

4.3.2 Systemic Advocacy

Several participants clearly associate a wider advocacy role with social work practice. In the words of participant 12:

> *…I think we do that all the time. I think that's the crux of what social work is about. In so many different ways, politically, research wise, not just the task centred approach sort of stuff - but trying to have some kind of effect on policy and legislation.*

Participant 3 gives the example of making a legislative reform submission despite a subsequent sanction from the Government agency which employs her:

> *Like I did do with the changes in section 59 of the Crimes Act,[81] I wrote a letter on behalf of our team – got everyone to sign it and sent it off as a submission and got slapped on the hand afterwards.*

4.3.3 Speaking on Behalf

Participants generally identify with the idea of speaking on behalf of socially disadvantaged individuals. Participant 9 provides a broad overview of the forms which this process may take:

> *I think that advocacy takes different forms. Sometimes it might be advocating for a particular type of treatment or advocating for a particular type of treatment to not be predominant, such as the medical kind of treatment. Other times it might be around getting access to services. Other times it might be around having a child's voice heard in a family or in a system - in a school system or something like that. So yes, I do consider advocacy to be very much part of my role.*

Participant 5 also identifies with the advocacy function and locates it within an explicit ideological frame:

> *It's that story about not having a voice - and who doesn't have a voice? The people who don't have that are people who don't have the power and the people who don't have the power tend to be people who don't have the money. If you're not advocating for your clients you're not doing your job.*

Participant 7 endorses this perception with particular reference to Māori clients as follows:

> *We are the buffer between the disempowered, often Māori clients and CYFS. We're the voice for them where they have no voice.*

Participant 15, a CYF child protection social worker, also regards advocacy as an essential element of practice:

> *I believe we do. I think we could do it a bit more openly but because we're a statutory organisation we tend to think that when we pass families to NGO's - then the advocacy work begins there, but for me I think my advocacy starts from when I'm engaged with families.*

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[81] This legislative change was controversial. It involved the removal of 'reasonable force' as a defence to a charge of assault against a child and led to a polarised debate about the role of the state in relation to 'family life' and the physical discipline of children in New Zealand.

As suggested, participants identify advocacy for clients within the ambit of agencies which they are employed by and also with external services. In relation to the former, participant 9 suggests that this may be something of a fading imperative:

> *I think that as a social worker I try and place myself in a position that doesn't align always with what necessarily is the expected organisation stance or whatever. I try to always keep the client's interest in my mind and if the organisational policies or structures don't, in my perception, match the client's interests then I do try - (…pause …) - I see it as my role as a social worker to raise that and try and challenge that and have some discussion about that. I do wonder if it's a little bit of a dying thing in social work.*

Discussion of advocacy produced many references to knowledge about the social effects of power disparity. Participant 17 alludes to various dimensions of power-related behaviour in the following excerpt:

> *I'm just thinking about when I used to take families to Work and Income. Just that whole - (…pause …) - if the family would go to the Work and Income I would just sit beside them to begin with rather than talking because I don't think we should be taking our clients every time, because they need to have that ability themselves. But until the worker would know that I was perhaps a social worker they would treat the client quite differently. Even that whole language used with the client by Housing New Zealand - (…pause …) - they don't even care if you've got a social worker, they're just the biggest power-hungry . . . don't get me started on Housing New Zealand!*

Several participants stress the ethical challenge which 'speaking for' clients can generate - in the sense that such an approach can in itself perpetuate a silenced/disempowered status. Participant 21 names this phenomenon as '***white horse syndrome***' but also goes on to suggest that judicious advocacy can have an enabling function:

> *We often go in and we'll try and be arguing for people to get housing that's more appropriate or supporting people who are having difficulties getting their entitlements from the various other statutory agencies. So our role there is an enabling role to try and support people, whether it's through simply having somebody sitting beside them in a supporting capacity or sometimes with people who feel quite intimidated by agencies we can speak on their behalf - maybe have a meeting before the meeting, ascertain their views, go in and do the talking on their behalf if that's what they request. Quite often there are cultural reasons around why we might do that rather than leave them to talk by themselves.*

4.3.4 Empowerment

A wide range of research participants expressed views about awareness and management, of power in relation to their clients. Various references are made to the balance involved in assisting clients while encouraging self-reliance. The notion of 'empowerment' is commonly linked to instilling a belief in the potential capacity of individuals and families to make positive changes for themselves. Participant 5, for example, shares the following opinion:

> *Yes, so I learned a lot regarding that so I try to share power with the client. I notice that some social workers, they actually do everything for the client. Some still do, I notice that and I think that's disempowerment in my opinion.*

The following statement from participant 15, a CYF social worker, is consistent with this view:

> *I do truly believe in the word empowering and I do believe that's what my job is as a social worker - and empowering is getting families to understand and to know so that they themselves have the potential to help themselves.*

Participant 15 also questions the awareness and sensitivity of some of her colleagues as follows:

> *…with the organisation that I work in, social workers don't know the power that they do have - and that power is making those decisions <u>for</u> those families if you're not making those decisions <u>with</u> the families.* (Emphasis added)

Statutory social work is a field that is associated with power and authority as illustrated by the following comment from participant 3, an Area Health Board practitioner with prior statutory experience:

> *… and now coming in to this place where it's a bit of an in-between - seen to have power and authority probably, being a Health Board and Government funded and Ministry of Health and all that stuff. But not nearly as much power - not the same as CYFS of course. You can't do a lot of things but probably you are perceived to be quite powerful and I think these perceptions are very important to be aware of.*

Participant 18, also a CYF practitioner, speaks of emphasising the importance of sensitivity to power differentials to student social workers experiencing fieldwork placement:

When I have a student social worker working with me I always point out at the first instance, in the first situation with them that statutory work is different. Statutory work is social work that comes with a lot of power and you need to control it. I always tell my students, "Don't abuse it" and I always remind myself not to abuse it because when you talk to your client - you come with that much power. It is impressive. <u>It's like an elephant in the room</u>... (Emphasis added)*.*

Participant 2 also refers to her experience of statutory practice and colourfully describes her cautionary advice to student social workers about the relationship between knowledge, power and respect for clients:

I say, "Don't ever think that because you've got a degree and you're going out to those families that you know everything because you know what? - they can see you coming a mile away." And I've said, "They'll rip it up and use it for arse paper." That's exactly how I used to talk to them. So I say, "When you go out there, especially young ones, you remember if they're older than you they know - (...pause ...) - <u>they've seen the world in the worse way. So they can teach you something</u>." That's what I talk about - the approach to people. I say, "The people we're working with are very sensitive and they can pick up just by looking at you. So you've got to be honest with them because they can see that from a mile away." (Emphasis added)

Participant 7 connects an 'empowering' practice stance with having '***your head and heart in the right place.***' When pressed to clarify this statement, she describes a union of personal and professional integrity as follows:

Because what I see I do is very much empowering families to get their act together as defined by them - I can put my whole heart and soul into that. It's a very honourable thing to do.

It is interesting to consider this description in relation to the idea (attributed to Shaw (2010) in Chapter 1) that it is 'heretical' for social work to see itself as holding a humanist value perspective that is of special merit. It may be that in this particular practice role participant 7 aspires to just such an ethical position.

Participant 2 offers an example of how the capacity of clients can be supported and strengthened:

Then they come on board because so many of them, they've just been put down all the time. Through their own doing half the time, most of the time, but they expect that of someone coming out. They expect that there's going to be negative conversation all the time so when I turn it around they go, "Oh!" I put a chart up on the wall - "Well, why can't you do so and

so?" "I'm not good at doing anything." "Well, you cook? "Yes". "I'll just put it down - (…pause …) - you said you can't do anything but you just told me you can do all these things so you can wipe out all these other things." I just really enjoy it. I put it out to them to show them. I do it in a way that suddenly they see all the skills and knowledge they have that is being covered by all the negative stuff. So it's just trying to find all that stuff and pulling it all out.

Participant 2 is a very experienced Māori social worker who furnished compelling illustrations of strength-centred practice. In her case this style of working impressed as more 'heart than head' - 'organic', 'tacit', or 'naturally occurring' - as opposed to academically theorised and instrumentally 'applied'. Significantly, for participant 2 the practice of empowerment appears to be informed by a thorough-going commitment to the right and potential capacity, of clients to control decision making processes:

That's what I am saying about getting our people that we deliver the service to, to be part of the decision-making process. They're the ones that are in this situation so they're the ones that can tell you how to get them out. It's a simple thing really.

4.4 Synopsis

It is useful to summarise some of the key concepts in relation to the nature of knowledge in and for practice which have emerged to this point. The experienced social workers in this study provide evidence of sophisticated applied understandings of the ways in which empowering relationships with clients are managed in conflicted settings. This 'how' of practice might be said to involve the application of knowledge related to the interactional and essentially social, nature of communication 'in the doing' of social work. This knowledge includes an acute awareness of the nuanced effects of power and of the ways in which power imbalances can be alleviated in social exchange. The applied expression of this knowledge seems to involve a careful deployment of engagement practices that are connected with the self-identity, or 'human-being' of the practitioner - a deployment of 'self' in order to foster shared meaning and relational understanding. The related 'practice' of deep attention to the experience of 'the other' may, it seems, be premised on the application of the value of 'respect' for the 'reality', or validity, of that experience.

The theoretical exploration and discussion traversed in the early chapters of this thesis suggests that the purpose - or social function - of this process of multi-facetted relational understanding is ideologically configured and contested. It is to the

construction of this 'purpose' that the following chapter now turns. The first major theme, 'Locus of Practice' and the final theme in chapter five, 'Political and Economic Influences' are concerned with the socio-economic positioning of social workers and their clients. The remaining central theme, 'Humanising Practice' brings together interview data which lends significant support to the theorised identification of social humanism as a socio-historical structure which frames the production of social work practice knowledge (Goldstein, 1991; Philp, 1979). Although this is the broadest 'umbrella theme' in chapter five, it also, perhaps paradoxically, includes numerous excerpts which resonate directly with the application of knowledge in practice exemplified and discussed in chapter 4 above. This is significant for the thesis as a whole as it exemplifies how the socio-political-historical context of social work may be connected with the genesis and application of knowledge in practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: Practice Knowledge in Context

As signalled, the themes in this chapter are focussed on the possible contextual / structural determinants of social work practice knowledge in the contemporary context. The over-arching research question pays particular attention to the socio-economic location of social work. In chapter 2 the historical association between social work and the perceived needs of those who are economically marginalised and / or socially excluded in Aotearoa / New Zealand and comparable societies, was canvassed. As noted in this discussion, the 'in-between' location associated with this positioning also appears to be manifest in a range of other understandings about the role and place of social work and social workers. Data relevant to these phenomena are blended under the first major theme of this chapter. It is worthwhile re-emphasising that, as explained in the description of question design set out in chapter 3, the specific question related to the relative socio-economic status of the social work client group was framed in an open / non-directive form.

5.1 Locus of Practice

(Sub-themes **Socio-Economic Status** and **Intermediate Location**)

5.1.1 Socio-Economic Status

The following are a sample of interview transcript excerpts which express perceptions about the socio-economic status of the social work client group:

> *At the end of the day, if we didn't have any whanau that needed help I wouldn't have a job! All of it depends on poverty and stuff like that otherwise I wouldn't be here. They wouldn't need social workers. I work for the Government. We're under the Ministry of Social Development so what more can I say?* (Participant 8 - CYF social worker)

> *We know that poverty, isolation and stress are three key factors in contributing to abuse occurring in families - abuse and neglect. And we know that we have communities in the Waitemata area who are really struggling - families really struggling with not enough money.* (Participant 4 - DHB social worker)

> *I've worked with one client who is not in the lower socio-economic grouping. My clients tend to be down here, specifically more Māori, Pacific Island, occasionally a few Vietnamese or Cambodian. Just recently we've had a couple of Indian clients.* (Participant 1 - NGO social worker)

I've had clients who have been with a Child, Youth and Family caregiver and they've got flash TVs, the X-box, play stations and of course they go back home to a family who has just enough money to feed them and try to work through those dynamics about, "Yes, I can understand why you might want to stay with the caregiver but your family is your family." (Participant 13 - CYF social worker)

My clients come from every section of society. I guess because working in health, trauma, accidents, health impacts on everybody – not just on one specific level, however most of the crisis work that I've done is with people from the lower socio-economic area. I've worked with drug addictions and mental health and gang affiliated people and they are mainly Māori and because I'm part Māori I think they put me in that area as well. (Participant 6 - DHB social worker)

Yes, ethnic make-up coincides as well. I'd say about forty per-cent are Māori, maybe twenty per-cent Pacific Island, probably about eighty-five per-cent on the poverty line, maybe ninety. Not working, on the dole, no car, no food. (Participant 7 - NGO social worker)

Some participants impressed as uncomfortable about identifying their clients with socio-economic status; in the sense of appearing wary that all clients could be categorised in a narrow or judgemental way by this emphasis. For instance, participant 13, a CYF practitioner, was eager to stress that abuse and neglect are not the exclusive preserve of the economically underprivileged:

My clients are children, basically up to the age of seventeen and a half. It would be very easy to say they're from the lowest social economic groups - and yes, a lot of them are but a lot of them are right across the screen. I haven't had it but I know there have been people who have had - (…pause …) - Judge's children - lawyers or whatever.

These comments do need to be read in light of subsequent statements which express the belief that children of affluent parents are less likely to come to CYF attention:

We see where a lot of the clients come from, it's like the third, fourth generation in a cycle and actually just seeing the strength of people who actually say. "No, I want to break the cycle. I want to get out of it." A lot of families out there do a heck of a lot of really hard work. I'm sure there's the same problem in a lot of rich communities in New Zealand - <u>maybe they just have the ability to hide it better</u> and I think that is the key thing with families - actually acknowledging that it's not an easy journey. Once you're in the system it's quite hard to get out. (Emphasis added)

Participant 2, an experienced Māori social worker, currently working within a DHB, was also initially reluctant to associate social work clients with any particular section of society:

> *Not necessarily, they come from all walks of life. It depends on what the issues are around the families at the time and what brings them to the attention of the Departments that may be involved. I would not pin it on just one sector. The problem there is that unfortunately the worst end of the stick is always the ones that are mainly focused on.*

However, much of the subsequent interview dwelt on the need for 'the system' to better appreciate the capacity and potential of those - particularly whanau Māori - who are socially marginalised.

Participants 19 and 20, who chose to be interviewed together, are Māori practitioners working within CYF. Participant 19 offered the following response to the question of whether clients come from any particular section of society:

> *I suppose to me in regards to that, Pakeha are - excuse me, no offence - very much into labelling people. So you do have the poor ones I suppose and the not so, but all I see is Māori and I suppose in working across the board, the clients are the children.*

Again, much of the interview which followed was also concerned with the challenges of working in an empowering way with whanau Māori and tamariki Māori, in statutory practice, including the following perception:[82]

> *In regards to society, I suppose - I think it's changed a lot where Māori are still behind - from my perspective. And I say that because of my children. They're twenty and twenty-one and they see it. They see how Māori live and they say things - (…pause…) - 'Well, that's not fair Mum'.* (Participant 19)

The ambivalence expressed above is touched on by participant 5, who implies that the class-based nature of child and family social work practice remains a somewhat uncomfortable fact for many practitioners:

> *I think it would be really easy to say that the majority of the clients who I've worked with have come from across the board but it's not true. I think that's what everyone wants to say but in actual fact it isn't true. The majority of the people I have seen, whether it's been in mental health, drug and alcohol, basically life problems, it's mostly the lower socio-economic scale. You can't get away from that and one of the main problems people are suffering from is poverty. End of story.*

The majority of participants identified their clients as being drawn disproportionately from groupings in society that live in relative poverty. In turn individual clients and

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[82] 'Tamariki' (literally 'man child') is commonly used as the generic Māori term for children.

families were often associated with social groups which are disproportionately affected by poverty. It is not surprising to see this correlation. The involvement of social workers with individuals and families in need is not restricted to the poor but lower socio-economic status routinely equates to greater social need. In Auckland New Zealand it is no secret that Māori and Pasefika families are disproportionately represented in terms of relative poverty and social hardship (Perry, 2012).

Perhaps the occasional reluctance to make the connection between poverty and the social work client group is of more interest. Two possible explanations come to mind. First is the theorised association between social work and the individuation of clients. The value of respect for the unique circumstances, worth and potential of individual clients or families may create an innate resistance to categorisations of this kind. A concern with labelling may be related to consciousness of the twin stigmas associated with poverty and client-hood. Some social workers may be sensitised to the potential that these kinds of generalisations have for the perpetuation of racist and classist discourse. Secondly, it is interesting to speculate about the residual influence of the (arguably) deep-seated commitment to a foundational (albeit increasingly counterfactual) perception of Aotearoa / New Zealand as an egalitarian society. Social workers may routinely 'see' the socio-economic disparity between the poor and the privileged. The extent to which this is core element of 'acceptable' discourse - even 'that which is spoken of' in social work discourse - is another matter.

Conversely, many of the research participants did emphasise the insight into social disadvantage that may be afforded through the practice of social work. The five excerpts below all refer to a view 'beneath the surface' of New Zealand society. The first three are from practitioners who immigrated to Aotearoa / New Zealand as adults. The final two were provided by social workers whose eyes were opened to otherwise hidden realities:

> *Glenfield - (…pause…) - and the guy I was with was an old mental health nurse and he said, 'We've got to be careful around here." And I'm looking at this beautiful place where there are detached houses - all with their own gardens and it was a beautiful sunny day. And I've just come from (large northern hemisphere city - name withheld) and I'm thinking, "You've got to be careful around here?" But you've just got to scratch the surface.*[83] (Participant 5)

> *Yes, definitely. If I'm not in this profession I don't think I would get to know New Zealand society in this manner. Because I come from overseas,*

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[83] Glenfield is a 'middle New Zealand' suburb on Auckland's relatively prosperous North Shore.

when you look at New Zealand, New Zealand is quite a paradise - (... pause ...) - ("You see beneath the surface?" – Interviewer prompt) - Yes, it is not that simple - (...pause...) - and then you get to see more things about social justice - you get to see about cultural conflicts - you get to see how much interplay between majority and minority - not only around ethnicity but also about wealth versus poverty. (Participant 18)

I think that I would have a wider range of experience, certainly as a result of my work in social work in New Zealand than I would have had coming in as an outsider. It really allows you to get under the skin of a country and that is in both positive and negative ways. I don't think as an outsider living in a comfortable house in Mt Wellington I would have understood some of the issues around poverty, for example, in New Zealand. It's not an image of New Zealand that's very well known at all. (Participant 21)

I think in terms of understanding more about people and about society, until I became a social worker (...pause...) - as I said I worked in CYFS - that was my first job. That was my hometown. When I worked in CYFS there I did not even know anything that was going on in my hometown that I was born and bred in. Because I had such a great life there and then <u>I got to the other side of the fence and I was just like, "Wow, there's so much going on!"</u> So I think that really helps you to <u>understand other people and not judge other people because you learn more about their situations and why they do the things or why they are the way they are</u> … (Participant 6) (Emphases added)

I didn't join this Department until I was about forty I think and I didn't know anything like this in the community was happening to our children. I had no idea. (Participant 20)

5.1.2 Intermediate Location

This study is not a large survey in a statistically significant sense and does not aim for a comprehensive treatment of the apparent connections between social work and the relative poverty of its client group. However, this link can be related to the suggestion that social work (and social workers) occupy an intermediate location. This location was theorised in chapter 2 in a variety of ways and particularly as a position located in between the powerful and the marginalised. It was suggested that this positioning may significantly influence the nature of social work practice - its tensions and its possibilities. It is to the participants' perception of this contested space and to the implications of these perceptions for an understanding of social work practice knowledge that attention is now directed. In various ways, all of the participants identify roles or functions consistent with the notion of 'in between' location: mediating, negotiating, facilitating communication and understanding.

Participant 7, an NGO social worker engaged with children and young people (and their families) in the care of the state, expresses an emphatic view:

> *Totally - CYFS on one side, families on the other, us in the middle.*

Participant 21, a CYF social worker, employs the metaphor of a bridge:

> *…I think because the nature of social work is around building bridges and pathways and linking up a lot of different professions and engaging the young people.*

Participant 8, also a CYF social worker, describes her role in coordinating the case-work relationship between CYF and NGO service providers under the then current Differential Response protocol in the following terms:[84]

> *I work with prevention now, just networking, appropriate supports for our whanaus and putting those supports in place for them, so it doesn't end up escalating where it's a risk - where 'our' social workers have to work with it.*

It appears that this role involves navigation of the contested space between risk and need.

Participants 21 and 11 each carry out social work tasks in the criminal justice system. Both suggest that elements of wider community interest and accountability must be considered when making decisions about the well-being of 'offenders'. Participant 21 makes this point as follows:

> *… to balance some of the risks that you would like to take on behalf of young people which would really maximise their life opportunities and give them the option of the least restrictive form of sentencing or form of plan. For example, with the legal and agency requirements of the other agencies that you're working with to protect the wider community to ensure that they answer for their crimes or their offences.*

Participant 21 goes on to link this dual focus with a central dilemma facing social work:

> *So very much so, I think we would be foolish to attempt to say that we can somehow be independent of that system. As individual social workers we can try to make some difference on the ground but realistically we have to also be aware of those wider agency pressures and principles and*

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[84] Differential Response is a practice development concept / initiative where notifications of child abuse are prioritised in terms of presenting risk. Lower level child abuse / social need concerns are channelled away from the state agency and dealt with by NGO social work service providers. The triage process relies on good communication and a sometimes tenuous distinction between 'risk' and 'need'.

> ***ultimately <u>we are part of the system as well - and that is always part of our dilemma I think.</u>*** (Emphasis added)

The need to negotiate the 'fit' between the claims of authority and the needs of clients and to establish relationships of sufficient trust with clients as part of this process, is not exclusive to statutory environments. Participant 17 refers to balancing the cultural / disciplinary environment of a school setting with respect for the individual rights and needs of students:

> ***Students need to have a certain level of compliance and you can understand that because you don't want anarchy at the school. But as a social worker, what we're trying to do is help them to feel empowered and have that self-determinacy that the school is trying to keep a lid on in a way. It's a real balance and you can't do too much so that the school doesn't want you there. Again, it's balance.***

Although the concept of intermediate location resonated collectively with participants, this positioning has multiple incarnations as indicated by the sample of excerpts provided above. The following discussion explores a variety of these dimensions, sometimes identified in connection with particular practice fields. Significantly, many participants talk about the need to move from the starting place of practice field / agency function to the point where an effective connection is made with clients. This area was canvassed in more detail in chapter 4 when exploring the first major theme drawn from this data set – 'Relational Engagement'. At this juncture, it is sufficient to emphasise that differing agency mandates appear to be one of the factors configuring the space which must be traversed in order for social workers to connect with their clients.

The notion of intermediary / positional balance is further evidenced in the following excerpt from participant 10, which identifies the need for social workers to engage meaningfully with clients, colleagues and Managers:

> ***…be effective in social work practise? So that's whether you can relate to not only the client group, but to management, to colleagues and all of those kinds of things and be able to quickly assess how you might be received by people when you're engaging with them for the first time.***

Some Māori social workers, either currently employed in statutory practice or reflecting on past practice in this setting, talked about the need to communicate their knowledge of client / whanau values and beliefs to colleagues and Managers in order to promote understanding:

I've seen in my experience that what happens in a rural area - or not so much rural like Whangarei or Dargaville - (… pause …) - <u>they have their own ways of working in their whanau, which doesn't slot into what the system sees as being normal</u>. So that's the barrier I had within my workplace - trying to get the system to understand - this works for the family, this is what a lot of families used to say to me.[85] (Participant 2) (Emphasis added)

Participant 5, a ward-based social worker in a hospital setting, speaks of occupying a position that is between patients and their families:

Normally if I need to make a difficult decision it is because there is conflict between the family and the patient. Normally, for me, if this happens, the way I guide my decision making will be according to what the patient or what the client really wants and that will be the main focus. If the family member does not agree with the client, what I'll do is to try and help the family member to listen empathetically to what the client needs. In order to motivate and to have a consensus, that's what I will do.

Similarly participant 9, a DHB social worker in the child mental health area, alludes to the 'gap' between children and their families:

Yes, I think it does - weighing up competing interests and I guess the most frequently occurring one would be a conflict of interest between a parent and a child in a family situation - the parent sees things in a particular way or wants a particular outcome and the child's needs indicate otherwise - and so that is definitely walking that line of balancing the child's needs and keeping the parent on board so you can actually do something useful, which has happened quite often.

Several participants speak about exercising an intermediary function between clients and those who make decisions over the allocation of resources, particularly Government Departments:

I think a mediating role or an advocating role - I guess the service is still the same. It's a matter of knowing - (… pause …) - identifying the needs of our families and identifying the appropriate services that we need to link them on to. Or if there are any issues from Housing New Zealand or WINZ we mediate for them or advocate for our families. We sometimes sit down with them and talk about appropriate options or services they need to provide for the family. (Participant 16)

The social workers in this study repeatedly describe the experience of bridging or balancing differing interests. Some participants were not comfortable with the notion of

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[85] Whangarei is the northern-most provincial city in New Zealand. Dargaville is a relatively large town centre situated on the west coast of the northern North Island.

'mediation' – seeing themselves in more of a strong advocacy role for the needs of their clients as was canvassed in chapter 4 under the theme of 'Advocating / Enabling'.

Some participants, particularly statutory practitioners, described the continuous performance of multiple tasks - managing complex roles and accountabilities. The following excerpt is from participant 8, a CYF social worker. It brings to mind Harry Ferguson's (2004) description of child protection practice as an experience of continual movement:

> *Social working to me involves mediation, facilitation, coordination, being able to advocate, all the above roles - all in one! You can't really just say they're mediators because at the end of the day it involves a whole lot of other skills. If you want the best outcome for your whanaus you have to be able to have all those other skills.*

It seems that a range of differing intermediary tasks and accountabilities may be balanced simultaneously. The following comment from participant 19 evokes the image of a juggler on a high wire:

> *I do have to walk that one - (…pause…) - and that is more important than the one I have to walk over here with the Department because I'm accountable to our people and cultural supervision with a kaumatua [86] outside the Department. Of course he just keeps reminding me that our people know what I'm doing in here. So I'm accountable to them - so I've got all these people - this is the least of my problems, being in here: the Manager, the supervisor, I'm accountable to that child, I'm accountable to their whanau. So we do have to walk that line…*

Some participants also made reference to 'location' in an explicitly political sense. The idea of social work as a mechanism for the dampening of social discontent is articulated by participant 5:

> *Social workers have tended to become the buffer between the powers that be and the people seeking service. I think what's happened, I can only talk from experience in the U.K. and here - but it's certainly my experience that in New Zealand - (… pause …) - you have buffers that appear to be there for one reason and that is to remove the conflict. So the social worker's job is the shock absorber.*

Participant 20, a long serving Māori social worker with CYF, speaks of frequently diffusing situations where whanau perceive that their interests have been poorly served:

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[86] The Māori term 'kaumatua' refers to respected person and is normally associated with age, experience and cultural wisdom.

I get a lot of these cases in the Department where I eat humble pie because of what they've done. I eat a lot of humble pie for this Department. And by my own people I get told off, I get sworn at but hey, I let them get that out because that's what they want to say to me - but at the end of the day I'm still welcome to go to that Marae.[87] The doors are still open for me because I'm able to take what they give me. And I've got to take it. If the Department says to me, "How did it go?" I say, "Oh – awesome." When all the time I get kicked from pillar to post but hey, I'm quite used to that now.

The assembled data suggests some potentially significant implications in relation to the identification of the parameters of knowledge in and for social work. First, the perception of intermediate location indicates the existence of a gap that is spanned by social work: a specific territory or social space which social workers occupy and become familiar with. Part of this familiarity may involve a capacity to tolerate the unfamiliar, ambiguous, uncertain, or unexpected. This configuration is consistent with the theorised suggestion that, as a socially applied practice, social work is difficult to define in clinical scientific terms. An appreciation of underlying uncertainty (and an associated need for adaptability) is also consistent with the tentative understanding of social reality afforded by critical realist epistemology as discussed in chapter 3. Participant 10, a very experienced DHB social worker, illustrates the point in the following excerpt:

Most of the professional groups like occupational therapists, physiotherapists, doctors and nurses are clear about what their roles are but social workers are not so clear. And that's the beauty of social work I think. It's because we are so flexible we are able to be quite creative and innovative in the way that we provide the service. (Emphasis added)

The significance of flexibility in practice was developed in chapter 4 under the theme of 'Self in Context'. A second implication of this positional flexibility, or familiarity with uncertain social space, seems to be that social workers must have the capacity to be comfortable and credible in more than one social context - to walk in more than one 'social world', perhaps 'holding' or accommodating contested views of social reality. The associated knowledge and skill base may be related to fostering understanding - of the 'other' and of 'the system' - enabling communication one to the other and of 'potentially' negotiating transitions for those who are constructed as clients.

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[87] The Māori term 'Marae' refers to a tribal gathering and meeting place. Marae are sites of spiritual and cultural replenishment and are the centre-piece of Māori communal culture where significant ceremonial and decision-making processes take place.

It is useful to highlight two ways in which the concept of intermediate positioning may be connected with the theorised idea of 'duality in practice'. The following excerpts are reminiscent of the dualism which Chambon (1999) captures when she describes social work as the 'Janus-faced' profession. First is the concept of simultaneous interpersonal presence and calculative distance evident in the following excerpt from participant 17:

> *I think that's the thing, we ask lots of questions and I think part of that's curiosity and interest in people, but also part of it's that assessment that we're doing at the back of our head <u>all the time as well</u>.* (Emphasis added)*.*

This phenomenon of simultaneous relational interaction and analysis was explored in chapter 4 under the theme of 'Relational Engagement'. Secondly, the various representations of in-between positioning and the associated balancing acts which social workers may be said to perform in the micro-environment of practice, can also be viewed as a reflection of the conflicted imperative to address social injustice. Participant 18 expresses the belief that an overt concern with social justice differentiates social work from other professional groupings:

> *Social workers have two roles. One role is to help people to help themselves, the second role is to address the social injustice because we are different from - (…pause…) - the other role, helping people to help themselves - a counsellor can do that, a psychologist can do that, other helping professions, a nurse can do that. However, the second part only social workers do - the social justice part. I mean the other professions can do that but they don't look at it as such.*

The interview data provides support for the idea that concern with social justice in the practice of social work is predominantly focused on the impact of structural disadvantage for particular individuals or families. In terms of Foucault's formulation of pervasive power, social work 'sees' the results of social deprivation but does so within a framework that is constrained by a focus on individual need and entitlement. There are also several references to wider advocacy for social change and an element of unease in relation to the sometimes conflicting aspects of social work practice experience is apparent at times. Definitions of entitlement are mediated through institutions and systems that are themselves arguably a product (and a servant) of unequal social relations. Participant 13 captures something of this tension in the following excerpt:

> *Basically I see the job of as a social worker also to challenge present discourse in society and of course, being a government social worker it's a bit of - meant to be politically neutral so - (…pause…) - so be politically*

> *neutral but also challenge when you see things going on. Sometimes I find myself on the wrong side of the fence.*

The degree to which ideas of justice or fairness may be a driving influence in the practice of social work is further explored under the following major theme.

5.2 Humanising Practice

(Sub-themes **Contextual Understanding**, **Individuation** and **Social Justice**)

As signalled in the conclusion to chapter 4, this theme is perhaps the 'widest' in terms of considering the socio-structural boundaries of practice knowledge. Importantly, however, there is also a sense of immediacy in the linkages that are apparent between this theme and its 'application' as knowledge in practice. The data presented here focusses on what individual interview participants have to say about the individuated and / or redemptive stance of social work. Much of the commentary can be linked with Philp's (1979) conception of social work discourse as a process of re-socialising / re-presenting the potentially 'excluded other' to wider society (persuading the powerful that 'the others' are safe). An emerging construct is that the intent to humanise and thereby re-socialise clients may be mirrored in the practice of social work itself. The social worker sets out to normalise her or his self in relation to the client (to get closer/alongside) in order to establish a 'relationship' which becomes a vehicle for de-stigmatising / humanising the client. This tentative analysis is implicit in the following description provided by participant 17:

> *Totally, I think that's the thing, you're always balancing what the needs of the client are with the needs of the organisation or what - (…pause…) - sometimes I say that to my families when I go to Housing New Zealand, "Yeah, what we're going to have to do now is we're going to have to play the game. What I'm going to be saying about you and your family I don't completely believe but I have to make it sound as bad as I possibly can to get these guys to hear me."*

The social worker joins with the client in order to represent ('re-present') the client. In this excerpt the intent to advocate for a particular representation is explicitly articulated to the client. In the example above, the family is depicted as meeting eligibility criteria rather than competent in the sense of no longer warranting state sanction or exclusion - it may be that the narrative which is constructed / emphasised depends on the particular assessment of need and how client interest may be best served.

5.2.1 Contextual Understanding

To recap, Philp (1979) argues that social work seeks to re-enfranchise excluded or potentially excluded individuals by focusing on potential sociability. Innate generic human potential is translated into the potential future inclusion of the particular failing subject. This attention to the possibility of individual change / redemption / re-inclusion can be tied to Goldstein's (1990) notion of social work as a form of applied social humanism. As suggested in chapter 2, further broad conceptual associations can also be made. Social work can be seen to perform both caring and controlling functions tied with social conflicts integral to the logic of capitalist modernity. A faith in 'assisted' individuated change can also be aligned with the socially inclusive strand of liberal enlightenment ideology - the 'embedded liberalism' which Garrett (2009) associates with the welfare state. I have further suggested that this commitment to the possibility of redemption is broadly consistent with both social constructionist and critical perspectives: what is perceived to be socially created can also potentially be undone. The key to this 'undoing' in the practice of social work seems to lie in a dual focus on the individual and the surrounding social context: agency and structure.

In social work discourse barriers to potential are generally socially configured - explained in terms of the social experience and social circumstances which inhibit appropriate socialisation. I have termed this interest in the dynamic relationship between individual circumstances and wider social systems as a concern with 'contextual understanding'. A range of participants indicate that a focus on contextual understanding is fundamental to social work and perhaps sets it apart. Participant 9 expresses this view in the following excerpt:

> *I really like that social work has the breadth to look at the macro stuff and the micro stuff and everything in-between, basically because for me both are important and both are interesting … I like the big picture / small picture - constantly going from one to the other and seeing how one fits with the other. That is the stuff you learn till you die really, don't you? So that is something that if I hadn't trained as a social worker I wouldn't be so attuned to.*

This observation is echoed by participant 14:

> *Sometimes it's actually personal issues but again it might be a reflection of a social problem like mental health, drug use, whatsoever, youth problem, unemployment. It's personal but actually it is a reflection of the whole society. So if you are not a social worker you won't have insight or any deep understanding regarding that.*

Participant 12 articulates what this perspective has meant for her as a social worker in the Public Health field:

> *I guess since I've been working in health social work for me it's about the fact that for every medical issue, there is a social side and a social impact and trying to get that across to consultants and other people. It's like love and marriage, you can't have one without the other. To every kind of trauma and crisis there is always going to be a follow on.*

Participant 1, an NGO practitioner, identifies 'systems theory' ideas as central to her practice:

> *So it's that whole - it's about policies, it's about looking at the bigger picture, it's the individual but it's the individual within the context of the bigger picture of what's going on around them. That's what I love about social work and that's what I wouldn't want to give up.*

Participant 4 describes how assessing the safety of an individual child from a multi-layered perspective is perceived to be a 'social work approach':

> *So you'd be thinking, "What are the things that are placing this child at risk of possible harm; what is happening to the child, what is happening around the child, to the family environment, what's happening at school, what's happening in the peer group?" - All that basic social work stuff.*
> (Emphasis added)

Although it has been suggested that change at the level of the individual is more often than not the primary objective of social work practice, the notion of contextual understanding also fosters awareness of the constraints which can hinder individual change and of the need to target intervention accordingly. Participant 16 is cautious about expecting ingrained behaviour to change rapidly:

> *Because if it's like thirty or forty years being brought up in something that you know and it becomes normal for you and then all of a sudden you need to change that. It is so hard and it takes a lot of time.*

Participant 9 articulates the view that an appreciation of social context promotes an awareness of the way in which freedom of choice is constrained by the relations of power which pervade the social world - as was discussed in chapter 4 under the theme of 'Advocating / Enabling':

> *I think sometimes our expectations are that people can do something – but actually they can't and that's not because of their personal inability, it's because of the power dynamics in the situation. Again, I think that maybe for me something like that might be an ethical thing about where*

you target your intervention in a situation, rather than just focusing on an individual level, targeting whatever system is going on around that person. (Emphasis added)

As explored in chapters 1 and 2, the idea that social work considers the relationship between individuals and the wider social context that influences their lives is itself uncontroversial. The concept is applied in various theoretical guises - systems theory, ecological ideas, person-in-environment analysis and social constructionist perspectives (Nash, Munford & O'Donoghue, 2005). Interestingly, the individual interview data also offers some support for the notion that social workers separate the underlying (potential) humanity of their clients from an understanding of the circumstances that shape their lives. Social context needs to be understood in order to be differentiated from the individual client and then used as a tool to appeal to and appeal for, latent human potential. Participant 21 talks about assisting individual clients in a youth justice context despite a coercive mandate that goes with the territory:

…it is important that we try to <u>get through to the basic humanity of the person</u> we are dealing with and at the end of the day, we are all people, we do have the same common needs and common requirements. (Emphasis added)

This interpretation can be connected with the importance attached to suspending 'judgement'. Research participants make numerous references to the centrality of a non-judgemental stance: maintaining respect for individuals and/or families despite what they may have done. In the following excerpt participant 11 distinguishes the offending history associated with an individual from the making of a personal communicative connection with that person:

…it's hard to generalise because when I deal with people on an individual basis - (…pause…) - I've not met people on a one to one basis I would have said were truly evil. They might do some very bad things and some of them have done some very bad things, but as individuals - (…pause…) - so there isn't really anybody. I've dealt with child sex offenders, I've dealt with gang members, people who have done the most horrendous things to other people but one to one, they're usually - I find I can work with them.

Participant 12 alludes to this distinction as follows:

Sometimes that's really hard but I think <u>to survive in social work you've got to be able to just see the client and not the circumstances around them.</u> I mean, a lot of cases I've got at the moment are people of all ages that are hoarders and it's really difficult but if they see for a minute that

you're going, "Oh my God!", then you're not going to get in there. That's why I think sometimes it's like acting. I am oblivious to that now. I can just see the person but it's like learning to control your own emotions so that you can centre directly on that person. You know that mindfulness practice? If you can do that you'll be fine. (Emphasis added)

Just 'seeing the client' in this sense seems to imply perceiving the client as she/he potentially (and innately) 'is' rather than as she / he is in the current context. As suggested, context must also be 'seen' - it is, perhaps, a question of seeing both the wood and the trees. Several participants also speak of the need for social workers to understand the origin and nature of their own values and beliefs, in order to remove personal prejudice in dealings with their clients to the degree that this is possible. The apparent contradiction is the importance attached to 'knowing yourself' in order to put yourself aside.

There is also significant reference to the perceived need for social workers to extend the humanising mandate to themselves:

> *You need to be tolerant towards your own limitations. You need to accept who you are and I think sometimes you need to forgive yourself. And you need to move on when you need to move on.* (Participant 13)

Participant 3 shared the following reflection about the emotions that engaged practice generates for social workers:

> *I still get sad a lot and angry. I get really angry sometimes and that anger probably inspires me to do more - to be a bit more active and proactive. I don't know about the sadness, maybe the same, similar thing. <u>It reminds me that I am human</u>. Sometimes I'm really happy, not happy – that's an oxymoron, but I'm glad I get sad because it means I haven't become hard, slowly hard and cynical. So maybe that's a good thing.* (Emphasis added)

A link between humanising the professional self and engaging with clients is overtly expressed in the following excerpt from participant 1:

> *Yes, I suppose I wear my heart on my sleeve so clients can see sometimes if you've had a tough day. I suppose I want clients to see hey, I'm human. Yes, I work for a government agency but actually I am human and so I quite often might use an example - if something happened to my family - if I'm talking to someone. Actually say, "Yeah, that's happened to me. I'm not the perfect parent with the perfect kid who does everything perfectly. <u>I'm human just like you</u>."* (Emphasis added)

Participant 17 had significant NGO experience before completing a fieldwork placement[88] at CYF. She applies the compassionate individuating perspective to her seemingly overworked, systemically constrained and seemingly disillusioned statutory colleagues:

> *And then at CYFS, I felt like a little bit of a spy in there because I'd gone in with my NGO head and the lack of respect that a lot of NGO social workers have for CYFS social workers - but then I saw, actually <u>the CYFS social workers as individuals, they're trying their hardest</u>. Every time we'd get in the car with one of them I'd say, "Do you feel like you're making a change to children's lives?" And none of them did.* (Emphasis added)

5.2.2 Individuation

As suggested, many participants refer to the underlying humanity of their clients and to the process of generating change at the level of the individual or the family. Several participants refer to the unique value that attaches to particular individuals and families and to the privilege of working with vulnerable human lives. Several also express the idea that their practice is validated if 'just one person' is helped:

> *I think there's always going to be people in much worse off positions and it really is the idea of 'even if I can help one person' - and I think that's what you need to draw it back to - to individuals.* (Participant 6)

There is significant evidence of a humanistic conflation of difference and commonality which is consistent with Philp's (1979) thesis. The sentiment is succinctly and poignantly, encapsulated by participant 3:

> *…all souls are precious and everyone's story is valid.*

The inference appears to be that we are all different but we are all the same in the sense of potentially exercising a claim to equal human worth.[89]

As indicated earlier, interview data also supports the perception that social workers present, or re-present, the circumstances of individuals to social institutions so as to ensure that the entitlements associated with citizenship are received or restored. Participant 12, a long serving hospital social worker, describes explaining the need to

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[88] 'Fieldwork placement' is the term generally applied to the practicum learning component attached to all social work tertiary degree programmes - students spend significant time 'on placement' in a practice learning setting.
[89] Some critics of the historical trajectory which the enlightenment vision has taken suggest that the question of what constitutes fully human status is conveniently and often tragically, determined by the powerful. (Plumwood, 1993)

record social history in terms of individualising and humanising clients within the wider clinical system:

> *…we're doing this because it's really important in the hospital notes that <u>you're not seen as just a diagnosis or a number - that you're seen as a person who's got kids and that</u>. It always works, but I do mean it genuinely. It is actually really interesting to see a person evolve - see who they've been and what they've done in their life.* (Emphasis added)

Another very experienced hospital social worker, participant 10, speaks of the need to make medical staff aware of how adverse social context can hinder the capacity of individuals and families:

> *So it's about saying, "Hang on a minute, have you ever had a chance to actually understand what's going on for families?" Just providing them with a different point of view or giving them an opportunity without saying you're absolutely wrong, to see you've got no right to make those kinds of judgements. I tend to like the softly, softly approach and say, "Hang on a minute, have you ever considered that this might be something that's out of their control and that they need the services that we can provide in order for them to get some kind of normality back?"*

The following excerpt from participant 11, a social worker with significant criminal justice experience, neatly connects the previous discussion of contextual understanding with a focus on individual circumstance and an associated appreciation of the 'validity' of alternative conceptions of social reality:

> *One young man a few years ago described New Zealand society as having an underworld and an upper world and he didn't know the rules in the upper world - that's the world that people who go to work and have a house and don't get into trouble inhabit. The underworld was one where coming to Court is a fairly regular thing to do - and if you grow up there and you see a car with keys in, well obviously you were meant to take it. Or the view that allows you to sell some cannabis because you need to make some money. Or the view that allows you to go to the Police and make a false allegation so that somebody will be locked up and then you can feel safe…*

In this way deviance can be understood as a rational response to social experience.

Philp (1979) asserts that speaking with and speaking for, clients can culminate in the return of full discursive rights when the individual is perceived to have regained their underlying humanity. The following excerpt is provided by participant 1, an NGO practitioner, who describes providing a 'reference letter' for a client appearing before the District Court:

…at the moment I'm writing a letter for a client who is getting sentenced on Thursday and she has done over a year now - she has done the most unbelievable inspiring journey and so I'm writing to the Judge for her sentencing about this incredible journey that this woman has been on - and why actually, when looking at her sentence, taking into account the fact that most of this work actually she's already done. She's actually already there. That the beginning bit was the catalyst that was needed - and that was all she needed - and she's just done this incredible journey and <u>she's not the same woman that she was</u>. (Emphasis added).

The way in which this client is presented suggests that the individual has attained a new identity and is now worthy of reclaiming the rights associated with full human citizenship.

Some participants describe the pursuit of human possibility in active terms - as a belief that must be carried by practitioners and fostered in clients' minds. Participant 13, a CYF social worker, describes the need to promote potential human good in the following terms:

So I suppose it is just telling people, "Hey, even if they've done the worst crimes imaginable - that's only part of you. You can actually change that part and move forward."

The following excerpt from participant 7, an NGO social worker, speaks of holding tenaciously to the possibility of change:

There are always strengths there that they can't see. Sometimes I can be absolutely obstinately, immovably, unshakable in my idea that, "Your kids are actually lovely" - when everyone else has told them they're little shits. Especially with single parents, single mothers struggling. All they've ever heard is criticism, criticism, criticism. So I look for the strengths. I've been immovable in telling people that things can be different and things can change. <u>You have to be</u>. (Emphasis added)

This perspective is echoed in the following comments made by participant 15, a CYF child protection practitioner:

It's about allowing people to believe that they can make changes and I think if you put that early out there with families that you work with, you give them just that bit of hope. <u>It's interesting what humans can do</u> and I believe that if you've been neglected and been told that you're a loser all your life – and if you're not, you're starting a family - and someone comes along and says, "Hey, nah, you're not." That - just that - reaffirming something positive to that person. I've seen it happen and <u>I still believe that people can change</u>. (Emphases added)

Participant 6 further alludes to the idea of instilling or rekindling hope:

> *So it's important to help them see their future positively. That's what I do and it's not that easy for them to see that way in their situation. It's like the room is all dark, how can you find your way? I just try to help them find a way.*

Participant 12 refers to the notion of including those who are ineligible for, or incapable of, accessing available services that provide for their needs:

> *But those kinds of people, I will try and go the extra mile for or try and find somewhere where they can fit into the system <u>so they're not lost</u>.* (Emphasis added)*.*

The notion of 'being lost' can perhaps be equated with Ferguson's (2004) notion of the 'left behind' and a desire to extend citizenship to the disenfranchised. This issue is developed below and is also further considered in the sixth and final theme - 'Political and Economic Influences' - where reference is made to tension between the Government / managerial agenda to fund and measure practice against preconceived indices and the apparent social work predilection to make exceptions - to fit client need to services.

Several social workers express the idea that client need is the beginning point for their practice rather than organisational mandate - that organisational systems need to adapt to client need rather than the other way around. The significance of a primary focus on client need is discussed further under the following sub-theme of 'Social Justice'. This orientation is potentially antagonistic to the evidence-based standardisation of service that is promoted in contemporary social work environments. Participant 5 makes this point unequivocally:

> *My whole practice is based on a belief that society needs to change to meet people's needs … The challenge is about people, not the machine. I think that's our struggle every day, to work for the people and not the machine.*

Developments in the structure and function of social work practice in neoliberal times have arguably become increasingly focussed on generalised probability, while it appears that the underlying 'ethos' of social work may be primarily concerned with individuated human 'possibility'. It is interesting to speculate about whether the friction which can exist between the sort of emancipatory social work ethics articulated above, and the contemporary focus on risk prediction based on notions of objective probability, can be understood in terms of an underlying clash of values. The following excerpt

from participant 21 clearly connects a compassionate / redemptive orientation with the notion of shared human potential - in this example by stressing the obverse belief that, as individuals influenced by wider social context, we are all potentially capable of anti-social behaviour:

> *At least try to understand the place that they're at and how they've got there - and the fact that if we look worldwide at the ways in which people will act when they've been through traumas and through difficult situations themselves - (…pause…) - like the classic electric shock experiment that was done that showed that actually if people are given endorsement by a figure of authority, they are willing to administer electric shocks and so forth. So what we need to learn from that is actually if we're in a different situation, and we've got different world experiences, we'd be different people. We can all act in ways which we can't visualise from where we're sitting at the moment. We need to be aware that within all of us there is the potential to behave and to objectify other people in ways that do mean that the most horrendous things can be done.* (Participant 21)

The apparent underlying commitment to human potential can have challenging dimensions when translated into the testing reality of practice. Participant 8 describes treating people respectfully while simultaneously applying judgements about their potential risk to children:

> *At the end of the day I try to build respectful relationships with all my whanaus - even if I know they are offenders. They may be had up for physically abusing a child and they may die or something. So knowing that information - knowing that they are offenders going up for big time crime - I will still be respectful to them, and I will still talk to them in a respectful way. I would never ever judge them knowing what I know about them but in saying that I would also make sure that I am - (… pause …) - I know the other side of it - (… pause…) - Am I making sense? -* ("Yes you are" - Interviewer prompt) *- (… pause…) - I won't judge them in a way that I know their crimes and I know the offenders - I will still respect them however the reality is I would never put a child in a position where they would end up with someone like that.*

Participant 14 also brings some balance to the discussion by acknowledging that at times individuals are unwilling or unable to reframe their own lives or their perceptions of others:

> *People's mind-set is not that easy to change and I think it's the greatest challenge regarding social work, "How can you change a person's mind-set?" It's just very difficult. Even if it takes time, it's just sometimes it's not going anywhere. I think it's the most challenging in terms of casework*

> *- working with individuals is a real challenge regarding balancing interests of different people.*

Participant 3 describes how she has come to accept that clients are not always ready to take the steps needed to change their situations:

> *Absolutely because I've seen - and it's not about when I'm ready. I'm ready for you to make a change now but they're not necessarily ready. They're only about five per - cent on that task to be ready - even thinking about that. So is that what you mean? So it's getting that - yeah, I'm at a point where it's go! Action! And not understanding why they can't, they're not at the same place as me. So it's not about that. And I've seen good things happen when the time is right, when they're right, when people are ready and right to make change.*

5.2.3 Social Justice

A wide range of research participants talk about being motivated to practice social work, or in their practice of social work in specific situations, by a concern with justice or fairness. This perception is often related to 'making a difference' for specific individuals or families. Participant 18 connects the satisfaction attained from assisting others with the desire to work harder in this demanding profession:

> *…and I guess for me because it's my choice to come into the profession and I enjoy the happiness, the satisfaction when I actually make some difference. And this type of satisfaction is so impacting, it's so fulfilling that probably it just motivates me so much that even though for me probably I don't need to work so hard as such - but these incentives are so strong.*

This common motivation appears to have antecedents connected with the values, beliefs, and life experiences of particular practitioners. Participant 16, for example, appears to be motivated by a broad ethic of care and links her desire to influence the lives of others with values embedded in social experience:

> *I'm a Christian and a lot of principles in my religion have contributed a lot to my experience in doing a social work role. I believe in making a difference in people's lives, making things whether small or big - (… pause …) - at least it's something that makes someone's days brighter or puts a bit of smile in someone's life. For me there was one teaching that my Mum always - (… pause …) - that is in my heart - that the purpose of life is making a difference in someone's life - someone else's life. So that is a strong principle.*

Participant 7 speaks of a guiding sense of social justice and connects this with the narrative of her family life.

> *I guess my personal background, in my home life I was always brought up with that. My mother … (experience of war / oppression - detail withheld) - and my father … (experience of oppression - detail withheld). So that sense of social justice has been really strongly instilled in me right from the word go. So I guess that would make me a little bit more 'pushy' in terms of not accepting laws for what they are. It doesn't matter. If the law is wrong, the law is wrong.*

Participant 5 expresses a powerful daily sense of socio-political injustice:

> *Every single day I see the injustice of it all. The nonsense that gets printed in the press and we see on T.V. and Paul Holmes,[90] every single day. People not only have to put up with the injustice of how their society is built, but then they get shat on by the news media and society in general, every day.*

Three research participants spontaneously allude to the Christian precept of 'doing unto others' as you would have done to yourself. Many participants speak of aiming to maintain an equal level of commitment to all of their clients, although several admit to being motivated by particular situations with a high level of need or apparent injustice. Bourdieu's (1999) perception that functionaries like social workers provide the exceptional and/or compassionate practice which humanises bureaucracy - effectively defending bureaucracy against itself - is brought to mind. Participant 7 expresses her position clearly:

> *It's about justice and need. If there's a crisis and we are able to help then we will go the extra mile. If there's what we see as a huge injustice we'll definitely go the extra mile.*

Significantly participant 7 also perceives that injustice can be concealed behind apparent procedural fairness in situations of unequal power and resources:

> *And the other thing I find is that some of the social workers, they really do mean well - there is one case that I've had where the social worker can stand up and say she's bent over backwards for CYFS not to take custody of the kids. And I absolutely agree. She has. But at the same time, it's very much these are my rules and if you don't go by my rules and play my game then I can't support you. And those rules are often very questionable - (… pause …) - and that underlies everything I think, particularly with ethnic minorities. They've got an even bigger fear because they don't know, and because they don't have the power to resist or to counter-attack, or to stand up for themselves, and the ones that do,*

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[90] Paul Homes was a journalist / public broadcaster and a long standing prime-time 'current affairs' television presenter. It seems participant 5 is focussing on the stereotypes and generalisations that are commonly associated with popular journalism. Sir Paul Homes had recently retired from this role prior to this interview and has since passed away.

> *it's bloody hard for them. **<u>The system is set up in such a way that it's kind of coercive in a very benign, looks to be a nice sort of way</u>**.* (Emphasis added)*.*

This analysis suggests that in the absence of social equality, theoretical access to procedural justice may merely conceal unequal relations of power. It also suggests that insight into this illusion may be part of the vision which social work potentially affords.

A range of participants also make reference to the notion that the rewards of social work are found in the specific, perhaps infrequent, situations where practitioners significantly influence outcomes for individual clients. In the following excerpt participant 21 illustrates this belief in the value of individuated assistance / enablement / empowerment against a back-cloth understanding of structural injustice:

> *I'm pretty clear in my bedrock beliefs of where I'm coming from and why I'm doing this kind of job, as with most social workers. We are not getting involved in this to make a fortune or to change the world overnight, but <u>we are involved in that general push towards trying to redress some of the inbuilt unfairness of the type of society that we live in</u>. We don't tend to get involved in families living in multi-million dollar mansions. We're at the rough end and we're trying to do what small amounts we can to redress balances within society that I think most social workers would feel act unfairly in a number of ways on the young people and communities that we deal with most. So I think that's got to be part of your basic motivation for wanting to be a social worker. It is around - (… pause …) - the phrase that comes to mind from my training is 'Weltanschauung' - the world view, which says if something is at a structural level unfair, either you can be part of the problem and as an agent of the state help to keep that situation in place, or you can attempt to be <u>a small part of the solution</u> and be what I would see as progressive and attempting to do what small part you can to reverse the balance.* (Emphasis added)

It is this sort of analysis which connects case-work with the critical social work tradition. Social work is cognizant of social injustice and actively aligned with resistance. Social work is not a revolutionary activity but, as intimated above, it can perhaps be likened to a constant war of attrition. Foucault (1980) would likely couch this form of resistance within a wider configuration of discursive power.

The idea of individuated justice or fairness also tends to be merged with the concept of 'need'. Participant 12 describes an ethical commitment to doing what is right in situations of high need, regardless of procedural constraints relating to informed consent:

I think if there is no informed consent then - this is maybe me more as a person than a social worker - I will, if I really believe there is a genuine need for them, I will try and move heaven and earth to get alongside them and get that consent. Sometimes I won't wait for that. If there is a danger to someone's life or to people around them I'm not waiting for consent. I will go in because there is that need. It really depends on the circumstances.

The relationship between need, access and fairness is captured in the following excerpt from participant 10:

In Health, if there is a need, a client has a need that doesn't strictly fall into the categories that we usually look to, we're always looking for ways that we can go around, work around or look at alternatives and so that's on-going. We're always hoping to find a service that's going to be able to provide the things that clients are asking for or needing. That never ends.

Participant 9 further suggests that perceptions of need can motivate service provision in situations where eligibility criteria are not strictly satisfied:

It is based on my perception of need. I think sometimes it just comes down to your own sense of just wanting to help because you can see that if you don't, they don't fit in any services criteria. You'd rather do it yourself than say, "Sorry, you don't meet our services criteria"- knowing full well that actually no-one else will pick them up and provide them with that kind of support. Sometimes it's just about looking at what the alternative is or isn't.

Several experienced social workers also talk about 'knowing the system' in order to 'use it' for the benefit of clients. Participant 18 reflects on the discretionary power that comes from understanding how resources are managed and decisions made within the hierarchical bureaucracy of CYF:

When you get to know the system you become more capable. You become more confident and then you become more verbal about your view and especially I'm coming from a minority group. Learning the system is really important. (Emphasis added)

The significance of this perspective is not that agency mandate is necessarily unreceptive to client interest. The important point is that client interest is seen as the primary concern and agency mandate is regarded as a means to this end. It follows that social workers are likely to seek to exercise professional discretion in situations where agency mandate is perceived to deviate from the bests interests of the client. Participant 11 provides examples of exceptional advocacy for the morally deserving -

be it for the young, the aged, or the emotionally frail. The exercise of this discretion is said to be informed by a 'sense of justice'. Difficult decisions are guided by:

> **_Firstly the requirements of my employer - I think, "What should I be doing here?" Then I am guided by <u>my own sense of justice</u>._** (Emphasis added)

I discuss the tensions that social workers can experience when this 'sense of justice' does not align with the dictates of organisational practice in the next and final theme, 'Political and Economic Influences'. This discussion is pre-figured by Participant 15 in the following observation:

> **_…part of my struggle as a social worker is trying to marry what I think to be a social justice model that I want to be working with and trying to fit that in the framework of the statutories[91] - (… pause …) - the policies around social work and how that's defined by the government of the day._**

This description can also be related to the notion of 'Intermediate Location', exemplifying the way in which the identified themes are so closely inter-woven.

5.3 Political and Economic Influences

(Sub-themes **Socio-Political Awareness**, **Risk**, **Political Change**)

At this point in the discussion of the individual interview data, it is useful to underline the central notion that the knowledge developed and applied in social work practice is a product of constitutive contradictions. As has been repeatedly suggested, a range of underlying and probably inherent, tensions underscore the practice of social work. It may be that the zeitgeist of social work is related to an imperative desire to individualise, humanise and include the socially excluded. However social work operates within a capitalist state form which arguably replicates unequal power relationships and which socially and economically marginalises a section of the population. It may be the case that a set of inclusive, socially liberal values, continues to underpin the social work project. Every-day social work practice, however, is conducted in the 'real' world of targeted budgets, time constraints and specific agency mandates: social workers tend to 'juggle many balls' and attempt to balance a range of interests.

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[91] The usage of the term 'statutories' is assumed to refer to the constraints of working in an official capacity for a state agency - compliance with the rules imposed by a statutory legal framework, practice systems and policy guidelines.

Some of the specific contemporary tensions which social workers are faced with in this context are addressed under the final major theme which follows. This dimension is crucial because the process of contextual engagement, which seems to underpin knowledge in and for practice, operates within a specific political context. As well as forming a relationship with clients for altruistic purposes, social workers are also engaged in assessing matters of eligibility, safety, risk, compliance, willingness, or capacity depending upon the 'brief' of their employing agency. Increasingly, evidence of both process and outcome are instrumentally recorded against predetermined criteria for the purposes of measuring and monitoring practice efficiency and effectiveness. It is considered that these tensions are reflected to varying degrees in the discussion of practice context which this chapter has engaged with. They are also reflected in various ways in the knowledge which underpins the practical performance of social work as evidenced particularly in the 'Relational Engagement' and 'Self in Context' themes which were presented in chapter 4. Analysis of the political dimensions of practice knowledge, as informed by the voice of experienced practitioners, is the final focus of this chapter.

5.3.1 Socio-Political Awareness

The interview data, particularly as evidenced under the 'Locus of Practice' theme, contains a range of responses which suggest that social work experience has provided participants with a level of 'social awareness' that they believe would have been afforded them otherwise. Various participants also connect this heightened awareness with the critical perspective fostered in the course of their formal social work education. Participant 14 is an overseas qualified Chinese social worker. She employs the metaphor of a snow ball to describe the process of learning in practice. Interestingly, she perceives a cultural bias towards practice-based learning in the Aotearoa / New Zealand context:

> *I really think that people here value experience a lot. Not only social work, but in general, which is actually different from our culture When I first came, no-one actually when I had interviews - (… pause …) - I'm not saying that they should hire me or not but no-one was actually very interested in my academic background, but they are very interested in the real life experience. When we do an interview in our country, normally they will be more focused on the academic background but not here.*

However, several participants do emphasise the importance of tertiary education in relation to knowledge for practice - in understanding the impact of colonisation for example:

I studied the foundations of the country and the Treaty of Waitangi and all that sort of stuff so I'm really aware of colonisation and the impact of dispossession of land has had on New Zealand as a society. Also the roots of social work itself - I think it was never socially or politically neutral or anything like that. It was always about - (… pause …) - like with the missionaries that came here, they thought they were helping people out! So it has changed my view. (Participant 3)

Participant 1 describes having learned about and then 'seen', the effects of colonisation and urbanisation on Māori social structure:

I've learnt that the world is a lot bigger than my circle that I normally work in - that there's a far bigger world out there. I've learnt the impact of urbanisation on Māori. I've really seen that and that process of going up to homeland and what that does in connection with their turangawaewae[92]- and then becoming a statistic down here. I've actually seen that. (Emphasis added)

Experiential learning is inevitably connected with a process of analysis which is influenced by the understandings which the 'learner' brings to the learning experience. Academic and experiential learning is described by several participants in terms of a continuum:

Heck yeah, it's been a huge, life-changing, learning curve. From the day I set foot - (… pause …) - I actually started extramurally when I was living in (place name withheld) studying social work - total soul searching stuff and I am now doing some men stopping violence programmes groups … (location withheld) - and that too is like a learning curve all the time - about your own self, all the time. (Participant 3)

Several participants refer to social work experience stimulating a broadened world-view in terms of gaining a deeper appreciation of the social and economic barriers that their clients contend with and also respect for the courage that is shown in adversity. A deeper awareness of social circumstance can generate a more nuanced understanding of social behaviour. This process of interpretive insight is evident in the following excerpt from participant 17:

That's that whole thing, that whole cycle of poverty. One of my families, they would get their benefit and they would go out that morning, buy their kids their school lunches, breakfast - (… pause …) - Because they have no money - people then see that family doing that and they think. "No wonder you're so poor". Then they've got to Tuesday morning or whatever day and they've got nothing in the house. Of course, logically

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[92] The Māori term 'turagawaewae' literally translates as 'a place to stand' and is associated with a place of origin, or 'home place', which is connected to the essence of individual / collective identity.

172

we know that if you buy a packet of Weetbix at the supermarket and some milk it'll feed you for a week. But it's that whole thing of, "I've got the money today, I need to do what I need to do." So many families just don't get enough.

5.3.2 Risk

Research participants expressed varying degrees of concern with the current managerial focus on the monitoring and measurement of practice. Participant 3 describes the political climate as essentially hostile to social work:

Economically speaking, we are now living in the monetary sort of world so that's a lot about individual responsibility and that sort of thing which goes in line with the whole neoliberal thing as well. And this government at the moment, National, is right into that and getting to know the New Right to be extreme and taking all of that - (… pause …) - It's not about a collective thing at all is it? So that contradicts what we're trying to do I suppose in social work. You're pushing shit uphill half the time really because the overall subliminal message is about 'building walls around your house' because it's a scary world out there. We're trying to actually get people more in touch with each other and stuff like that so it becomes a bit hard.

Participant 21 expresses a perception of increasing conflict between social work values and organisational requirements in statutory practice as follows:

A very recent example of that in general terms is that since Child, Youth and Family has become part of MSD, the Ministry of Social Development, we've had increasing organisational pressure to share information with the likes of Work and Income. The recent Code of Conduct which just came in has specifically addressed the role - (… pause …) - the need for social workers who become aware of 'benefit fraud' issues to take certain action.

Participant 21 goes on to describe the political dimensions of a shift from professional discretion to a preoccupation with the management of 'business risk':

I think because we're operating in a political climate as well and we're all aware that when cases become high profile and hit the media the focus comes on both the individual social workers and the organisation. To some extent I think at the moment Child, Youth and Family is swinging away from the need for professional judgements to be pushing cases forward or to be the overriding impetus behind our intervention - that need for professional judgement and professional assessment, as indicated in the Munro report[93] for example. I think that Child, Youth and

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[93] This reference is to the Munro Review of Child Protection in England as per earlier footnoted discussion.

Family at the moment is swinging somewhat the other way towards everything being reported back to Managers and for Managers to be making decisions about business risk. And for decisions that used to be made at relatively front line level, probably being escalated to more and more senior Managers who are making assessments about the potential risk to the organisation or to the Minister if questions are asked around an outcome. So a lot of our risks and risk management focus is changing from the risks to the community and to the young person and their family by adopting certain plans and certain routes through - (… pause …) - to a focus around the business risk to Child, Youth and Family - and how things would look in the media if things went wrong. So examples of that are assessing processes for whanau caregivers that used to be done at a very front line level and you would certainly go no higher than the Site Manager in making a decision about whether a whanau caregiver was appropriate or not. (Emphases added)

A focus on accountability through the activation of computer generated measurement systems can promote an organisational response that is unduly focused on the provision of data to satisfy such tools. Participant 17 makes this point in the following excerpt:

It's all about shifting the numbers and I think what then happens, because they're so stuck on numbers that people start fluffing it and I saw that happen at CYFS. I knew that I was late on a Court Report - I thought I shouldn't be writing this court report because I'm a student. Anyway, I was doing it and I knew that it was due and they do the whole traffic light[94] thing every morning, "These are the people that are overdue so instead of going on a home visit make sure you're traffic lights are whatever they're supposed to be." And I said to my supervisor, "Wouldn't the court reports be red because that report?" - And she's like, "Oh no, that's sorted."

Participant 13 also makes reference to increasing practice surveillance in the statutory setting:

I suppose it's a tightrope, you are working for clients, and you are working internally, especially if the case is being watched by Regional or National Office. Sometimes it's directed by them. - ("What sort of cases are those?" - Interviewer prompt) *- High profile in the media cases - generally you're just basically directed by Regional Office – "You'll do this and you'll do that and it'll be done this way." Even if that's against the way you practice and I suppose they're the ones I find hard.*

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[94] 'Traffic light' reports is the informal term for the electronically generated management reports - primarily in relation to timeliness and efficiency - which all CYF Site Offices are subject to as a measure of efficiency and compliance.

Participant 13 goes on to describe the management of 'cases' being taken out of his hands:

> *I find it hard. I've had a case taken off me because in the end it was just like I actually can't because this is the way I want to practice, this is what I want to do. Actually if you're not going to let me do that, for someone who doesn't even know the family – doesn't meet the family and yet you're the front face of the Ministry so you're having to go, "This is what I'm doing", and it's like, "But why?" And I've already got told off a couple of times for going, "Well, Regional Office told me to." And you're not allowed to say that.*

Although the sample is far too small to generalise from, there is also a suggestion that workload demands may compromise practice quality in the statutory social work sector. Participant 13 explains the effect of workload pressure as follows:

> *I know myself, if I can get four hours sleep a night sometimes that's good. Just lying in bed keeping awake thinking about the work you haven't done and the work you should - (… pause …) - cutting corners, getting Court Reports in that really aren't quite up to the quality. I suppose if you get a 'critical'[95] you might really want to spend four or five hours but in reality you'll spend two or three getting the information and so you're always worried, '"Have you really missed something that's staring you in the face?"*

This sentiment is echoed by participant 12, a DHB practitioner:

> *It's totally influenced by budgets and money. It's more for less and the Honourable Paula Bennett.[96] I think it is tougher being a social worker at the moment than it was when I first started out, or even a decade ago.*

Perhaps the business model transformation of public services is best captured in the excerpt which follows, again from participant 13:

> *The reason I joined was my father worked for … (a Government Department - detail withheld). I remember this - every Friday at four they'd stop work, go to the boss's office for a drink after work. We can't even get the social club - (… pause …) - to get enough time for the social club to organise a mid-winter bash that we have to pay for ourselves. It's not unusual to work seventy hours a week.*

Participant 2 regards the skills associated with relational engagement as secondary to a more controlling and punitive stance in contemporary statutory practice:

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[95] The 'critical' category refers to child abuse reports of concern that are deemed to require immediate - same day - follow up.
[96] The Honourable Paula Bennett was the Minister of Social Development at the time of this study.

> *I think it's getting worse because it's getting very like - (… pause …) - they may as well be cops.*

The implication is that the enabling social work role may have been sacrificed in this process of neoliberal reform:

> *They still have a role in there, but I think within their role there should be some subtle changes, where they become a friend rather than the policeman and start working with them that way and give more assistance at actually helping.*

Finally participant 2 expresses a negative view of 'corporate' identity:

> *When social work, you know they had Matua Whangai [97] and they did a good job and they cut it. So they cut all these positive things that were happening but I think it's become too much of a corporate business or some bloody thing.*

'Business risk' consciousness in relation to statutory practice also impacts upon parallel NGO and / or community focussed social work services as illustrated by participant 12:

> *I think that at the moment the money, the budget, the focus is on everything - partner abuse wise and care and protection wise and that is majorly important, don't get me wrong, but there's kind of a culture of blame almost for social workers. It's like - the team I was in before which is why I moved over here - (… pause …) - a CYFS referral was made for most of them before they were even seen, and they had to prove that they could manage before the child was even born. It used to be that, "Okay, there might be some difficult circumstances but we're going to work with this woman for nine months and we're going to try and put in the supports and make sure that there isn't - (… pause …) - and we may do a CYFS referral but it will be with all these supports." It's like watching for the one or two things that might not go completely right instead of the ten things that have gone right. And I don't mean major trauma. It's a little bit scary. Management seem to - and I don't mean social work but management as a whole - seem to be looking at what makes the organisation look good.*

In the NGO sector accountability mechanisms are normally tied to funding criteria as participant 1 observes:

> *A CEO there who's good mates - we all set it up together and when I was with him he said, "We've been offered bulk funding from MSD. What do you think?" I went, "Don't take it if you want to hold your autonomy, if you*

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[97] The Matua Whangai programme was an inter-departmental government Initiative designed to provide whanau Māori with a culturally aware response from mainstream state services, particularly in relation to child welfare.

want to do the work you want to do how you want to do it. Try and get it from somewhere else. If you want to lose that power and you just want - (… pause …) - just know that money comes with strings attached." That's my thought.

Participant 17 offers some telling observations about the tyranny of measurement for professional practice:

What happens is at the moment in Family Start – we're delivering a programme and sure, a lot of money goes into it, so there has to be accountability but <u>they're getting non-social work people to choose how the accountability looks. So what they're doing is they're saying these are the hoops you have to jump and it doesn't matter if, when you land you're landing on your client's head</u>, because that's what's happening at the moment. (Emphasis added)

Several examples of the paradoxical effects of measurement rigidities upon social work practice are provided by participant 17:

… that high intensity level are the ones who are going to be the hardest to engage to start with, and perhaps be a bit transient, so we're not seeing them all the time. So then because we're so strung out on our numbers, getting the numbers in for the Ministry, we then exit the families who need us the most because they can't meet the criterion that's being put placed upon them by people who are not social workers, trying to quantify something that's not quantifiable.

Participant 17 goes on to suggest that Managers are too intimated by funding threats to question inappropriate and / or counter-productive quantification regimes:

I think we're all so scared - the NGO's are so scared they're going to lose the contract from Family Start which is constantly being threatened. At that upper level, like I think our managers, the CEOs of the NGOs should be saying, "We can't do this - this isn't going to meet the client's needs". But everybody is so busy jumping to the tune that the Ministry's telling us to. Who suffers? - The clients, and the social workers because they're going to be burning out all over the place, and so then we won't meet any of our key performance indicators because we're stressed and burnt out.

5.3.3 Political Change

The individual fieldwork interviews were completed in 2011 which was an election year. Several participants made reference to the looming election in terms of concern about the implications of political programmes for social work services.[98]

> *When it comes to the election year we are all dreading who's going to be in and what that might mean to services that we currently have and whether they're going to stay.* (Participant 10)

Participant 17 makes a direct reference to political pressure within the statutory practice environment:

> *When I was at CYFS I couldn't believe how influenced it was. They were saying, "It is election year, we don't want anything that is going to look bad for the Minister. If you think something is going to happen we need to know about it." So it wasn't about actually let's make sure these children are safe, it's about if you think something is going to get to the media.*

The interview data indicates that the notion that social work is influenced by political change is generally recognised. Participants 18 and 14, for example, reflect on the irony of state service cut backs in times of economic hardship. Participant 12 refers to the effects of this retrenchment:

> *I think there's been a major, within the last three or four years, withdrawal of finances, a worsening of social situations that I'm seeing and I didn't even - I think I might have voted for this government but big mistake, big mistake. Maybe I didn't but no, there's definitely been a worsening of situations. We do lots of work with Housing New Zealand and WINZ, and they've cut back in what is being offered to people.*

Participant 6 expresses her understanding of the relationship between politics and practice succinctly:

> *Definitely in terms of depending who's in power and how it's working depending on the budgets and economics, and also <u>depending how many social workers get cut</u>.* (Emphasis added)

Participant 5 proffers a more ideologically centred critique:

> *And I think that with the current political climate - this particular government and unfortunately the latter Labour government, redistributes*

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[98] The context surrounding the 2011 General Election was arguably of particular concern to social work / social service providers since the 'public mood' as evidenced in political opinion polls (and as justified in the eventual outcome) indicated the likely return to power of a centre-right coalition government committed to fiscal prudence and the on-going 'rationalisation' of the state sector.

the money to fit its own ideology - the money that's available for services, the money that's available for people, we're going to be fighting harder for every single resource that we've got. And so the economic climate and the ideology of the government in power impacts on our day to day work. I hope the (… inaudible …) can make it easy for us but they don't have to make it this hard!

Perhaps the most compelling reference is provided by participant 7 however:

The plug has been pulled so we're totally at the mercy of the policy makers up there who decide yes, we'll put money into child and youth - or we won't, or child and family - or we won't. So I guess somewhere along the line some decision has been made that has affected my job totally. I'm redundant. I'm looking for work. (Emphasis added)*.*

A range of participants indicate that practice has become more accountable and centrally controlled. In statutory practice this control is exercised directly in terms of the design, recording, measurement and monitoring of practice. Monitoring in the NGO sector is associated with performance measures that are linked to funding criteria. Some participants see increased accountability as beneficial:

I think professionals need to be a bit more careful about what they say, how they say it, who they say it to - which is a good thing - we are much more accountable than we used to be which again is great. (Participant 7)

Some research participants also regard the expansion of social work services within the NGO sector in a positive light:

We still have our challenges of funding and things but I see that there is a whole lot more opportunity out there for social workers to be able to utilise their experiences, their knowledge and things in different organisations out there and a lot of people are aware of it now, of what social work is about. (Participant 16)

Participant 8 associates the development of assessment tools in statutory practice with increased 'professionalism'.

Accountability and all that, especially with the new processes that have come out with assessments. We have strength and risk assessments, we have safety assessments, we have child assessments, we have all these new assessments that are coming out - assessment frameworks, all this different stuff that is coming in that we need to make sure that we complete when we go out and see a whanau. There's a lot of new stuff coming in which is good because it makes a social worker competent and it makes a social worker accountable.

This comment can be usefully contracted with the following excerpt from Participant 21 who sees these tools primarily as a 'safety net' rather than a recipe for practice competence:

> *There are various tools and so forth which are provided for us which are supposed to aid our ability to make informed decisions and there has also been some mandatory training rolled out over the last couple of years which is supposed to inform that decision making process. But I have to say that certainly in my case, I will tend to rely on my own experience and knowledge built up over a number of years when making these decisions, rather than refer too much to the organisational tools because I think, particularly with large statutory organisations, a lot of the tools and a lot of those basic processes are in place as a safety net.*

There are several references to formal social work registration as a positive process of professionalisation. However participant 5 associates the process with the centralisation of state control:

> *With the Social Work Registration Board and with more and more centralised influence, what worries me is that there are going to be aspects of social work that are going to be pushed aside and we'll be taught what's needed. We'll be taught how to be better shock absorbers.*

Participant 5 links this perceived depoliticising of social work with the role of the Ministry of Social Development (MSD):

> *So I think that's a real worry. I think a centralisation of power where social workers become more and more taught to be street level bureaucrats by the Ministry of Social Development basically. I don't know about CYFS, but I imagine that's what happened really early on in CYFS. <u>Social workers got colonised by the MSD</u>.* (Emphasis added)*.*

There are several negative references to the centralisation and standardisation of practice and to the current climate being 'all about money'.

Participant 11 associates greater demands for transparency and accountability with greater public awareness and media influence in contemporary times:

> *It's much more structured and much more accountable. These frameworks of practice - because the media are much more - there's much more response to media, media pressure. Things that wouldn't have been reported twenty years ago are now reported regularly and so the public is much more knowledgeable.*

This is consistent with Ferguson's (2004) analysis of 'ruptured' modernity. The following comment from participant 11 is the final excerpt included in this commentary. It brings to mind Parton's (2004) concern with the paradoxical increase in the bureaucratic measurement and management of practice in ostensibly postmodern times. Participant 11 expresses misgivings about the pending introduction of a standardised assessment framework into the criminal justice system which may restrict professional discretion and practice deviation:

> *October - but I've been involved in the Probation one and we are set mandatory standards that we have to apply to every circumstance. So you have to apply these mandatory standards of performance and sometimes I make suggestions that might not be said to comply.* (Emphasis added)

5.4 Synopsis

The data presented in this chapter provides a rich and varied account of the way in which social work practice knowledge may be shaped by socio-structural influences that are specific to social work. Detailed analysis of the patterns which can be discerned, and the meanings which can be constructed, in relation to the larger thesis project, are the subject matter of the concluding chapter 7. At this juncture it is sufficient to highlight some salient connections that have been identified in the foregoing commentary. It seems clear that social work clients are often drawn from the ranks of the relatively impoverished - Auckland's proletarian poor. An evident reluctance to impose such 'labelling' on the social work client group may, it seems, be related to the notion of an inherent (as opposed to 'actual') equality in relation to human rights - the potential for individuated re-inclusion which can be connected with the discourse of social humanism. The notion of intermediate location appears to equate to the discursive territory which social workers occupy and it seems that this context may produce a knowledge that is particular to social work practice. As has been repeatedly stressed it is difficult to clearly separate the apparent structural influences from the practice knowledge described in chapter 4: respectful relational engagement. Social work and a particular set of perspectives and practices related to social justice are connected in this way. Significantly this research exercise points to the resilience of this discourse against a back-cloth of hostility in the shape of the ascendant neoliberal socio-political paradigm. This and related questions are further explored through the process of focus group enquiry which is discussed in chapter 6.

CHAPTER SIX: Focus Group Interviews

6.1 Focus Group Process

As described in some depth in chapters 4 and 5, thematic analysis of the individual interview data supports some potentially significant insights into the nature of social work practice knowledge, and how this knowledge is structured. I essentially completed this process of data presentation and tentative analysis - although not in 'final draft' format - prior to convening the focus group interviews. The group interview participants were selected pragmatically due to issues of timing and availability. I was confident that all the interview participants were capable of making a significant contribution to group discussion. However, I limited the number of participants to six per group so as to allow sufficient space for all participants to be heard. I advised all of the individual interview participants of two possible interview dates, times and venues, and essentially accepted the first six participants who made themselves available for each slot. There was some limited purposive selection within the eventual group make-up, so as to allow a cross-section of practice fields / employing organisations to be represented within each group. While recognising that such a small sample could not support generalised findings, the intent was to potentially facilitate dialogue relating to differences, or commonalities, across differing fields. As it transpired, a smaller number of participants than planned for were able to be present on the appointed days so that this kind of representation was not achieved for the first focus group. However, as set out below, this turn of events did provide a productive forum for two female Māori social workers to share their views and understandings.

As with the individual interview process, I spent some time crafting the 'questions' which would frame the discussion, and I also sought some supervisory input in relation to this task. I wanted to make the most of this opportunity to further 'drill' down (Barbour & Shostak, 2011, p. 63) into some of the key issues apparent within the individual interview data. As was the case with construction of the individual interview questions, I found that there were careful balances to be considered. I was conscious that not all areas of interest to me could be covered in the available time-frame, and that an overly prescriptive set of questions risked imposing outcomes to a degree - not allowing sufficient scope for the creative process of group discussion (Barbour & Shostak, 2011, p. 62). Through careful scrutiny of the individual interview data I developed questions in

relation to four significant areas of interest concerning the nature and form of contemporary social work practice knowledge as follows:

1. **Does the experience of social work practice teach you something about power?**

This question is concerned with the notion that social work practice yields a particular insight into the dynamic effects of power in the social world - perhaps as a function of the socio-political location of practice.

2. **Does a concern with justice and fairness for your clients influence your practice?**

This question relates to the issue of social work practice being linked with (and perhaps 'generative of') a concern for social justice, particularly in relation to an 'individuated' social humanist heritage.

3. **Engagement / Relationship building is said to be the key to effective practice. Do you agree? What does this mean for your practice?**

The question/s is concerned with further exploring the overwhelming confluence of individual interview data in relation to the identification of 'relational engagement' as a central vehicle for the practice of social work. Given the data from individual interviews I was prepared to take this as a 'given', but wanted to further explore what this 'meant' for 'practice knowing'.

4. **Has anything changed in recent years? What might the future hold for social work?**

Finally, there is the matter of the changes and challenges - discursive or otherwise - which may be facing social work practice knowledge in our times.

The focus group discussion questions set out above were intended to stimulate dialogue in relation to participants' practice-informed opinions, insights, or uncertainties in relation to these key areas. The questions are designed to allow for emerging research findings to be elaborated on, but they are not structured in an overly prescriptive way - allowing for unforeseen or contradictory data to be generated. The focus group interviews were less structured than the individual interviews, in that these four direct questions formed a platform for open discussion. Conversely, the group discussion process could also be said to be more structured. The focus group process

was more interrogative in the sense that the intent was to explore, and develop in more depth, some specific patterns apparent within the individual interview data. This intent is also reflected in the analysis of the focus group interviews in that the data is collated and presented under headings which correspond to the four key questions above. This formula is distinct from the more inductive, or generative, process of disaggregation, open coding, and thematic assembly applied to the individual interview material.

The discussion questions were communicated to participants by e-mail prior to the interviews so as to allow some degree of preparation. These focussing questions were also written on a white board in the interview room so as to prompt the group's attention. The focus group interviews were facilitated with a 'light hand' so as to 'permit' the group process to take its own course (Bryman, 2012, p. 503). Introductions were made, queries answered, and the process of discussion commenced.[99] Interview prompts were used very occasionally where potentially interesting points were made, or where discussion appeared to be straying 'too far' from the topic. Both focus groups worked through the four questions above and discussion moved 'naturally' to the next point when conversation around the topic was exhausted - or perhaps 'saturated' in qualitative research parlance. Focus group data and commentary is presented separately for each of the two groups. As it turned out, each group had a distinct character and followed a unique path. Although there are clear and apparent commonalities, it is considered that presenting the material in this way does justice to the data content and to the process which generated it.

6.2 Focus Group One

Two participants were involved in this discussion due to various unforeseen attendance problems for the other potential participants.[100] Both are very experienced Māori women currently working as DHB social workers - Participants 2 and 12. Despite the small attendance an animated, wide-ranging, and productive, discussion took place.

6.2.1 Power

Participant 2 expresses discomfort with social work being too closely linked with power in the authoritarian sense of ***…telling people or families how to live their life…*** when

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she perceives the knowledge and skill of social work to lie in the ability to interact constructively with clients:

> *Working with the families, and working alongside them. The word 'power' I see is empowering families to do - (… pause …) - helping them to change their lives.* (Participant 2)

Participant 12 acknowledges raw authoritarian power in certain situations where the Police will suspend the rights of individuals, and also expresses awareness of the subtle ways in which social workers may hold and exercise power:

> *I think for social workers it's about knowing how to not abuse that power and use it correctly, and not telling people that you can do things that you can't just to be the good guy. I guess that whole communication thing - <u>we hold a lot of power just in our communication</u> and what we give to people in situations.* (Emphasis added)

Both participants refer to equalising or breaking down power imbalances in relationships with clients - being non-judgemental and treating people with genuine respect:

> *All people are entitled to respect and dignity - being treated as equally as possible.* (Participant 12)

Participant 2 perceives that the reality of the life circumstances of many of the people who present as social work clients are seldom recognised or understood by policy makers, particularly in relation to poverty, because such people do not have a voice in this realm:[101]

> *I think in all fairness they should have people on board that are in that situation where they can talk about the reality, because they're it. And I'm only saying that because when we wrote the changes for the (major institutional reform - identifying detail withheld), and we had two (individual 'clients' with significant 'consumer' insight - detail withheld), and they shaped those policies and it worked.*

Participant 12 sees social work as a voice for justice and fairness and perceives the profession to be under increasing pressure in terms of workload and resources. In relation to what social work sees and knows - and what is at stake if this voice is silenced - she offers the following:

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[101] This insight connects with a suggestion arising from Beddoe's (2013) research into professional social work identity in Aotearoa / New Zealand (specifically in relation to the health sector context) - highlighted in chapter 1 - that social work potentially offers a particular 'insider' insight into the health and welfare needs of the socially marginalised.

...we stand to lose a voice for those - that with legislation and policies and government systems, whether it's health or education - that are never heard and never will be because the majority are always going to be the ones that are heard.

6.2.2 Justice

Both participants regard a commitment to justice / fairness as central to their practice. Participant 12 linked a social justice orientation with the notion of 'seeing' the experiential 'reality' of people in the context of their history:[102]

I think it comes into everything we do. I think what I'm always looking for is, "Who is this person and what is this person?" More what 'are' they from the Māori side of things - what 'belongs' to this whanau - and where they've been, and what's happened to the family? And what belongs to society, and the legislation, and the attitudes of other people.

Participant 2 shared some frustration about her experience of constrained resources and agency mandates. Participant 12 picked up on this point and describes a focus on immediate client need that may also involve policy advocacy while taking account of professional obligations - in effect a 'juggling act', as the practice of social work was described in several of the individual interviews:

So you're kind of juggling what you need to do with justice and fairness for them, and what the gaps are in the Government, and trying to turn the policies of whatever organisation around to make sure that you're covered professionally, and that it works for your clients.

In terms of balancing these dimensions, both participants related to the idea of 'walking in more than one world' - and both spoke of learning 'the system' in order to best serve the interests of their clients:

I think that to practice safely, unless you get what the organisation, whoever you're working for, their policies and process right, you're going to get into a lot of trouble really early on - and you learn how to use those policies to your best advantage for your client.

Participant 12 describes thorough knowledge of, and compliance with, Agency procedure as a 'safety net'.

You have a safety net underneath when you're walking that tightrope.

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[102] Ii is 'culturally' significant that historical experience in relation to personal identity is seen to be connected with collective whanau / family history from the "Māori side of things".

6.2.3 Relationship

As consistent with the material provided in their individual interviews these two highly experienced social workers speak of the importance of developing rapport, building trust, and of seeing individuals as part of a wider context. Participant 12 refers to the 'multiply aware' contextual 'feel' that comes with practice experience:

> *You're going to sit back and you're going to hear their answers first and you're going to watch their body language and see where they sit in the room - all that kind of thing. What their place is like, who's in the room with them, who actually comes when the social workers come in and sits there to listen in? All that kind of stuff - It's a whole bigger picture - (… pause …) - when you've been in social work for a while you learn how to suss that out fairly quickly.*

Participant 2 suggests that sincerity may be the key to effective engagement, in that clients will perceive and respond to genuine respect.

> *I think that's a lot of the way around - it's just how we work with people, how we see them and view them - or how I see them and view them. And just that initial introduction, and then the next time is more relaxed because they may just start to see who I am, how I'm seeing who they are without anyone saying too much.* (Emphasis added)

A 'lived commitment' to both difference and equality is implied in the following excerpt, also from participant 2.

> *More insight about myself and - (… pause …) - and it's about walking my talk I guess - (… pause …) - but understanding of others. We're all in a different mind-set, but it's taught me how to not judge but listen because in everything people say, I pick up something that I've learnt. Maybe just one word or whatever, so it's about that equality regardless of what background, and I learn from them.*

As mentioned in discussion of the individual interview material, participant 2 impresses as very able in terms of flexible engagement skills - perhaps particularly in relation to Māori clients and those who are potentially excluded from access to social power. Within this flexibility she talks about 'being herself' - drawing on her skills of self:

> *Yep, I think it is because that's just the way I am. Like you said before, you can suss out a situation when you get there, so you know how to approach it - and then it's just that warming up bit, but I'm usually myself. I'm just myself.* (Emphasis added)

Participant 12 expresses a conscious relational adaptability to client context:

> *Yeah and unless you can get that rapport going and see that person for who they are and not treat them with contempt or judgement - I mean, it works in every area. If I go into a house in Remuera[103] I'm not going to be necessarily the same in how I articulate things as I am in other areas and you've got to go with what those people are going to be comfortable with. I don't think it's about being false - it's about reading those people and knowing what their values are, because otherwise you're not going to be able to do anything or have any kind of effective relationship.*

As with focus group two, both of these practitioners acknowledge being entrusted at times with personal information that clients have never revealed to anybody else. Both participants also acknowledge the balance needed to avoid becoming 'too close' to clients in the sense of losing perspective or professional 'usefulness':

> *I think it's that professionalism. You do get close to families. You're talking to them but you have to maintain that boundary. I think because if you get too close, they get too used to you, you're not going to be able to do the work in a real, positive way.* (Participant 2)

6.2.4 Change and Practice Futures

Both participants perceive the contemporary climate as a difficult one for social work and social workers. Participant 12 describes the flow-on effect of reduced state support for the disadvantaged as follows:

> *Very much harder - there's been so many changes. Like being in community social work with the hospital in terms of legislation and polices - all the changes with Work and Income, the not wanting to have a DPB for anyone under eighteen, unemployment benefit – you must turn up to the job first regardless of your experience. Housing New Zealand - half of the staff, literally half of them around New Zealand have lost their jobs, so all of those that are floundering or haven't got money and that - there's nowhere you can go. We've got people that literally are on the streets. They fit the criteria. We know the criteria for Housing New Zealand, to apply for a house and the urgency but there's nowhere to go because they've closed their offices - and people have been rung up on cell-phones, if they happen to have one, and asked a question or two over the phone. Judged on that - without any support letters or anything like that, they've been told they haven't got one. So there are major ramifications.*

Participant 12 also describes social work (and perhaps the 'view of the world' facilitated by social work practice), as being associated with social distress - as being

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[103] 'Remuera' is recognised as a wealthy 'blue ribbon' suburb in central Auckland.

paradoxically 'blamed' for the breakdown of social cohesion which social work is intended to address:

> ***But I think the social work voice out there is only ever heard negatively at the moment because it's so much - (… pause …) - - like I guess the 'risk society' and the 'blame society'. If something goes wrong the media seizes on it. It is hard I think when we are kind of the 'meat in the middle', sort of thing, and we're really only seen as the 'fixer-upper' of everything that's going wrong in society.***

There is a shared view that social workers are overworked and spread too thinly and that the social work 'voice' is poorly understood:

> ***I think social workers have actually got a pretty clear idea but the constraints are that they haven't got the time to actually even voice that or put that into any kind of constructive voice out there because of budgets and funds. Because the bottom line for me with all of this is that it's a very shaky future out there at the moment for our clients with less and less resources and not much really we can do but tell them, "I'm really sorry".*** (Participant 2)

Participant 2 goes on to suggest that social workers should be included in future practice and policy development. Participant 2 also seems to sense an ideological bias that in the contemporary government of the social.

> ***We're expected to do more and more with less resources and I believe myself that more and more personal judgements seem to come into legislation - values that are put out there, and that's really scary. Very scary for New Zealand - and I don't know how we're going to manage because I think we're getting more and more clients all the time. We just are doing even more now but with less and less resources.***

6.3 Focus Group Two

This group was comprised of four participants. Again, as a result of work commitments, only four out of six invited participants presented for interview. However this group was representative of the practice fields targeted: two participants from within the DHB structure, one from CYF, and another currently employed in child and family work with an NGO. Significantly all of the group members expressed that they enjoyed the cross-

agency dialogue about the nature of social work, its current challenges and their future visions, which developed in the ensuing discussion.[104]

6.3.1 Power

The focus on awareness of the social relations of power struck a chord individually and collectively with this group. Participant 21 speaks of witnessing the constructive use, and also the abuse, of discretionary authority in the youth justice setting. Participants 1 and 10 both speak about sensitivity to power imbalances and using power in a way that supports the needs of their clients. Participant 1 regards social work as being *… so entwined and enmeshed with power.* This perception includes the apparent public/client conflation of social work, statutory practice, and state authority.

> *So you either work at WINZ or you work for CYFS - and so, "You're going to take my babies off me." So there's already - because that is so enmeshed in their mind of that is what social work is, that that can make it - like, you have to work really hard to come from a lower, more humble place and try and balance out that sense of power.* (Participant 1)

Participant 3 connects the process of contextual engagement with an analysis of power as follows:

> *It comes like thinking from the ecological model idea in that every different area of someone's life - (… pause …) - that is what we do as social workers, and learn, and are taught - how to look at the dynamics of power affecting people from all angles and every level of that ecological system.*

Participant 21 makes an explicit link to consciousness of social and economic injustice:

> *I think also we'd be remiss if we didn't also look at some of the wider, contextual stuff around power. Like clearly, working in … (location withheld) … for example, you can't help but go out in the community and see the effect of economic power and lack of economic power. Going into those households and knowing for example that a family you're trying to work with is clearly living in housing that's completely and utterly inadequate, wishing you had the power to do something about it but actually 'organisationally', having nowhere to go. This system doesn't work, so that you can actually necessarily do anything about some of the aspects. So there is that wider feeling of economic power, the system, the way in which society is shaped to keep some people at the bottom and with very little opportunity to get out of that.*

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[104] Interestingly interview participants throughout the study stressed that they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect and articulate their thoughts concerning professional knowing and identity in social work practice.

Discussion was generated about the feelings of powerlessness caused by structural barriers and other dilemmas which social workers must inevitably manage, such as women returning to violent relationships, or children and young people enduring the fraught consequences of sexual abuse disclosures. There are significant resonances with individual interview data in terms of an imperative to hold doggedly to an individuated faith in human possibility:

> *I think they've got to. You'll never give up, never, ever give up or think that that's a lost cause.* (Participant 3)

Participant 21 connects elements of faith, small rewards, and determination in a manner that is consistent with the individuating and humanising intent discussed in chapter 5:

> *I think sometimes it feels like you're trying to hang onto a spark of hope here and there amidst a mass of things that you aren't going to be able to affect in any real, positive, meaningful way - but you can't predict when that spark's going to arrive. So partly for me it's about <u>having some faith in basic human nature</u> and hope that occasionally something goes right and occasionally it can be just pure chance and when something like that happens. Then you stick that away and try and use that as, "Oh yes, it's worth carrying on. I can do the next ninety-nine years!"* (Emphasis added)

These thoughts are summarised by Participant 10:

> *Yeah, we're easily pleased. It is holding on to that spark of hope like you said.*

6.3.2 Justice

The perception that a concern with justice is an inherent element of understanding in and for practice was shared by all participants within this group. Participant 21 speaks about bringing a contextual understanding to the phenomenon of youth offending. As a Māori practitioner, participant 1 spoke of aligning the personal with the professional self in terms of an awareness of the effects of colonisation:

> *So for me it's really personal and I think that's why social work fits for me. It's because of seeing family members who are being impacted on down the generations with the alcohol use, and all of those things. So it's a lived experience but it's one that keeps me mindful of others - and fairness for others is really important for me.*

Participant 1 speaks of a client facing a serious criminal charge, and a perceived disregard for her human rights:

…and the things that the lawyer said to her! - 'how' she said things to her! I kind of thought, "I wonder if you were a really well to do, well dressed, Pakeha woman, if you actually would have said that?" It sounded so disrespectful, so disrespectful - and I just said to her, "Would you like me to come next time you go to see her?" She said, "Oh, I think that'd be really good." For me that whole thing of justice and fairness, of going, "Actually this isn't okay." Regardless of if she's guilty or not, it's still not okay. It's still not okay to treat someone as something less than human. You know? Like a class system.

6.3.3 Relationship

Again some powerful synergy arose within this group during discussion of relational engagement. Participant 3 spoke of the difficulty of making a CYF child protection notification, and managing the effects of this with a family where she has an on-going supportive engagement. Dilemmas where some degree of honesty is compromised were seen as particularly difficult by all group participants. This led to a wider discussion about a perceived growth in the centralised monitoring of social work. Participant 1 speaks of the facility she has for 'joining' with clients and the dilemmas which can sometimes arise because of the level of disclosure which is facilitated by a trusting relationship. As with focus group one, all participants recalled occasions when they were entrusted with intimate information that clients had 'never' revealed previously.

6.3.4 Change and Practice Futures

All participants spoke of resource scarcity and funding pressure. In the statutory setting participant 21 speaks of the prohibitive volume of computerised recording compliance:

I think there are lots of ways in which we're all shoved through the sausage-maker - aren't we? - and one of the ways in Child, Youth and Family that it feels more and more controlled from above, if you like, is that little screen in front of us. And somebody came in from a residence who's been doing a placement with us this week and I was chatting to her yesterday and she said when she first came she assumed that she'd be coming into a virtually empty office because, obviously, all social workers are out working with their clients, face to face. She can't believe that we're all crowded together like sardines because we're all spending such a high proportion of our time sat in front of the computer <u>having to input data - and being controlled by the machine and being told this is the tool that you must use in this situation and once you've used that tool and done that tool upon the client, then thou shalt come back and input it into the almighty machine and if you don't you haven't done social work. That just grates me at like nobody's business</u>. And it's one of the struggles I have with trying to fit into that type of organisation, and then I'm aware as well

of those pressures from above to out-source and push more work out to the community. (Emphasis added)

Participant 10 talks of her experience of the expanding role for NGOs in the delivery of child and family work:

So we've gone from the expectation of one hundred and sixty families to two hundred and forty a year. And these are really high and complex families. They're not like, "Oh, we've got a little bit of a problem." There are multiple problems and it's really complex. We are doing 'out-sourced' work for Child, Youth and Family. So it's really, really stressful and our work - (… pause …) - our work has to alter. Our focus has to alter and is determined - to get the funding - by what MSD - basically what Child, Youth and Family want. So our services have to then change and alter to meet their expectations in what they want.

Participant 3 perceives an ideological motivation in the increasing volume of high needs work that is contracted to NGO providers:

But it's also - sorry to interrupt - it is that 'volume problem', but it's also that the government of the day has made it really, really clear about the ideology -and public service does not fit it, that's why they're squeezing us, as public services, out.

Participant 21 suggests that as a result of this policy prescription, statutory practitioners have little or no respite from critical case scenarios:

I can see, particularly my care and protection colleagues, I can see the effect of that because you used to have cases where you could have a bit of a breather and it wasn't that absolute worst case scenario every time. I now look in their eyes and it's like shell-shock because every day it's just crisis after crisis and court cases and people getting photos in the paper and getting photos taken into court - and who's going to write something in the media, who's going to put something on the Internet?

In terms of the increasing centrality of measurement in service provision, participant 1 made the following comment:

What has happened to NGOs is that it's 'evidential based' - you have to have numbers - so now we are tied like you to a computer screen, to show how many numbers went through - was it completed, were the needs met? We have to be able to produce that to MSD and say, 'Yes, you're justified in giving your money to us." If we can't meet that and show the statistics then the plug gets pulled and we all lose a job.

The following excerpt, also from participant 1, provides a powerful summary of many of the issues drawn out through this focus group. It also strikes a chord with much of the analysis arising from the individual interviews:

> *For the future I think what I love about social work is that we think big. We think systems. We think in the ecological systems kind of thought process, so we look not just at the individual that's in the context, but the wider context. Not every other practice does that In fact I don't know any other - if you're looking at nurses they're looking at a medical - (… pause …) - I look at our parent support workers who we have going in and they just don't have the lens. Social work gives you a specific lens and I think it's about partially tied up with number one, about issues of power. I think it's tied up with a lot of things of fairness, justice and engagement, relationship. All those things before are tied up with this lens that we use, the lens that we look at families through and without having someone with those lens, I think that our families have the potential of losing a voice. I think that they have the potential of things being missed and taken out of the context for them.*[105]

Despite the obvious challenges there was also a tangible commitment to the value of social work within this group. Participant 10 speaks of a global role for social work as a voice for social justice and 'fairness for all'. Participant 21 obliquely acknowledges the ascendancy of neoliberalism and expresses faith in the capacity of social work to 'fight another day':

> *I think these things are affected by the pendulum swings of wider politics and wider economics and I think for me, at the moment, we're on a swing in the wrong direction. Part of our role when we're in that type of context is just to keep the argument going, to keep the flame burning if you like - so that we can then pass the torch onto new people coming through - and saying, "There is something I can do here that <u>isn't just about doing social work to people to keep them in their place and release a little bit of tension</u>. Release the pressure a little bit but otherwise just keep the machine grinding on. I don't want to be part of that process, <u>I want to see myself as part of a process of social justice and fairness and trying to push the pendulum back in the other direction because I think we're a vital part of a wider context</u>.* (Emphases added)[106]

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[105] Interestingly this analysis reflects the concept developed by Connolly and Harms (2012) - as discussed in chapter 1 - that social work can be distinguished from other professional groupings by the broad interpretive 'lens' which social workers apply.

[106] This analysis can be instructively compared with participant 5's comments about the perceived 'shock absorber' role of social workers in an unequal society: reproduced in chapter 5 under the sub-theme of 'Intermediate Location'. The question of the function of social work within the 'wider context' is examined in chapter 7.

6.4 Synopsis

In conjunction with the presentation of data from the individuals discussed in chapters 4 and 5, these focus group interviews potentially offer a wealth of insight regarding the knowledge that is learned and applied in the practice of social work. The words / voices of practitioners have been foregrounded in order to illustrate the diverse, complex, but often recurrent patterns of analysis that are articulated and exemplified. As explained in chapter 1, this thesis does not purport to discover or produce final or definitive understandings of social work practice knowledge. However, it is considered that a process of dialogical engagement between the theoretical constructions explored in chapters 1 to 3 and the understandings evidenced in the accounts provided by experienced practitioners can inform a deeper appreciation of knowledge in and for social work. In terms of the umbrella research questions which structured the interview process, the data indicates that a range of influences do contribute to an identifiable 'professional knowing' in the practice of social work. There is also a demonstrable link between practice knowledge and the socio-political location of social work practice.

At this point, it is instructive to stress three related findings that are apparent from the data analysis undertaken thus far. First, as in Schön's (1991) formulation of practice knowledge, there is evidence of what might be termed a 'productive reciprocity' between doing and knowing in practice. There is strong evidence of a set of applied skills - a 'knowing how' - that is related to the artistic / creative 'doing' of social work. This aspect of practice knowledge is consistent with Morrison's (2010) formulation of the relational and reflective processes of knowledge application and generation which bridge the academic - practice divide. Importantly there is synergy between this view of knowledge production and the methodological schema of this thesis. The intent is to develop awareness by melding theoretical / academic constructions of knowledge for practice with understandings gleaned from the accounts of experienced practitioners. As foreshadowed in chapter 1, the view of practice knowledge which is facilitated by this approach may go some way to addressing Parton's (2003) concern with the inability of social work to reconcile its theoretical base with its operational mandate: to connect doing with knowing.

Secondly, the research data provides evidence to support the notion that the process of 'knowing how' in practice embraces a recursive link between human agency and social structure. Knowledge in and for practice results from, and is premised upon, awareness of the communicative and interactional nature of understandings produced

in practice within a particular socio-economic milieu. The micro-relational engagement which characterises social work promotes, and arguably requires, awareness of the power relations embedded in the macro-social context.[107] Finally, there is persuasive evidence to support the related concept, most fully set out in Philp's (1979) analysis, of a discursive framework which structures a 'knowledge form' that is particular to social work.[108] This proposition is explored in some detail in the chapter which follows.

The following and final chapter develops the generative process of dialogue between theoretical constructs and understandings gleaned from practice experience. The tentative patterns and connections developed in chapters 4, 5, and 6 are further explored and refined in a summative appraisal of what this doctoral thesis might be reasonably said to reveal about the existence and nature of practice knowledge in and for social work. The depth and breadth of analysis which the thesis attempts means that although understandings are potentially expanded and/or developed, new questions also arise. Fresh avenues for research enquiry are identified, or at times merely glimpsed. Chapter 7 concludes with some summative discussion of the relevance which the thesis may have for the development of social work policy, practice, and education.

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[107] Several excerpts presented in Chapter 4 and 5 - particularly under the theme of 'Humanising Practice' - allude to this construction. Participant 10, for example, articulates a respectful / relational double act - a 'mindfulness practice' that separates the person from their circumstances while having regard to the behavioural and attitudinal significance of circumstance.

[108] As outlined in Chapter 5, Philp's (1979) description of the humanising imperative is captured by numerous participants - none more explicitly than participant 12: '… It is just telling people, hey, even if you have done the worst crimes imaginable, that's only part of you. You can actually change that part and move forward.' (See chapter 5 under the sub-theme 'Individuation')

CHAPTER SEVEN: Practice Knowledge Distilled

7.1 Analysis of Practice Knowledge

This chapter explores and summarises the indicative findings of this thesis. The term 'indicative' has been chosen with care. As suggested, the engaged process of experience and literature-informed theorising, and the subsequent fieldwork enquiry and analysis, has produced some persuasive insights in relation to the existence, nature, and underlying form of social work practice knowledge. The emerging concepts and questions which prefigured the fieldwork research process (see chapter 3 - 3.1.1) are all elucidated, to varying degrees, by the data produced through the practitioner interview process. In some areas, the evidence is more equivocal and the analysis more speculative than others. The following bulleted list sets out a range of key points which can be said to clearly follow from the process of focussed interplay between theory and practice which this thesis has engaged in.

- Social work practice knowledge is the product of social engagement. As such it is influenced by the socio-political positioning of social work and social workers.

- Social work occupies an intermediate / intermediary location. The stances that are adopted to facilitate the tasks required in this territory - mediating, juggling, balancing, bridging - generate particular kinds of awareness and particular skills / knowledge - flexible presentation / managing uncertainty / tolerating ambiguity / standing in more than one world.

- Social work practice knowledge involves an acute awareness of how relations of institutional and interpersonal power shape processes of communication and understanding.

- It involves the development and application of communication skills which diminish social distance and enhance interpersonal understandings. Knowledge formed through this process of relational engagement is generated in dialogue with those who are constructed as clients.

- Social work practice knowledge involves an analysis of the influence of social and material context in structuring the lives of clients. However, it is also cognisant (and respectful) of an underlying 'possibility' that characterises human 'being'. The social work knowledge form can be described as

paradoxical. It resists discourses that deny human potential but simultaneously acknowledges that social circumstances may prevent human potential from being realised.

- Social work practice 'knowing' is cognisant of the complex and uncertain relationship between structure and agency in the conduct of human judgement and human action. The practice of social work reinforces this nuanced understanding of the relationship between social structure and individual circumstance. It involves, and also stimulates, a concern with social justice within a structurally unjust capitalist society.

The following discussion is concerned with these and related ideas. The interconnected processes of reflection, theoretical exploration, research design and analysis that have informed this thesis support some potentially important insights into the nature of knowledge in and for social work practice. Dialogical engagement between theoretical constructs and practitioner-generated data both informs emerging conclusions and stimulates new paths of enquiry.   At times foot-noted references are made to the interview excerpts and commentary outlined in chapters 4, 5, and 6. Occasionally, excerpts are partially reproduced to highlight or otherwise illustrate the analysis which is developed. At the end of this chapter some reference is made to the understandings of social work knowledge which are emphasised in the recent Munro Review of Child Protection in England. There are some important resonances with the view of social work practice knowledge afforded by this thesis. Finally the potential implications of this thesis in relation to the theory, practice, and 'value' of social work are considered and summarised.

As traversed in the introductory chapters, this thesis seeks to develop our understanding of knowledge in and for social work by examining social work as a socially situated phenomenon. It has been suggested that social work is a socially constructed activity in two important senses, and that these two dimensions are related. Social work is governed through institutions that are embedded in structures of economic and political power, and it is practised through processes of interpersonal social exchange. It has been further proposed that the relationship between these two elements may account for a particular knowledge in and for social work practice. In other words the key to understanding social work practice knowledge lies in understanding this relationship.

Mark Philp's (1979) construction of one persuasive account of the socially configured form of knowledge for social work is discussed in chapter 2. Philp (1979) refers to the Marxist perception of a generative relationship between the social relations of power and the production of knowledge, and relies specifically on Foucault's theorisation of socio-historical conjunctions that enable discursive regimes of truth. The concept of discourse is doubly generative - knowledge produced within a discursive formation that is particular to social work is said to reproduce social work discourse. In terms of the idea of 'contextual understanding' developed within this thesis, the knowledge generated in the micro-environment of case work practice reproduces the wider form of knowledge for social work practice. Conversely, the big picture of socio-political context is reflected in the micro-physics of practice knowledge. The key implication of this analysis is that social workers, in their role as mediators of the social, develop insight, and apply knowledge, which is informed by experientially generated understandings of the social nature of knowledge in a particular social and economic context. Essentially this translates into cognisance of the way in which social class and social power affect knowing and doing in 'the social'.[109] In this chapter I will consider this analysis in terms of the research data and also touch on two broader propositions: that social work practice knowledge is connected with the emancipatory imperative of the critical enlightenment heritage, and that an accommodation between enlightenment ideals and postmodern insights may productively inform the development of contemporary social work theory. I will also consider the impact of neoliberal social and political change for social work knowledge.

7.2 Social Humanism

As indicated in chapters 4 and 5, there is significant interview data which connects the structure of knowledge in and for social work practice with the wider discourse of social humanism (Goldstein, 1991; Philp, 1979). To recap some key features of the argument assembled in the foregoing chapters, I have also proposed that the motif of contextual understanding which informs social work practice methodology - appreciation of the relationship between the 'big picture' of social structure and the 'small picture' of human agency - is equally applicable to an examination of how knowledge is created and applied in social work practice. The concept of 'contextual knowing' developed and applied in this thesis affords a non-linear, perspectival, and relational view of knowledge production. This orientation provides a means of enquiry that resonates with

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[109] Bourdieu's concept of habitus and the related complex and subtle reproduction of social privilege is relevant in this context. See, for example, Garrett (2007).

the mode of understanding native to social work: holding a methodological mirror to the practice of social work. It has been suggested that this approach to understanding knowledge formation is no less valid than more reductive approaches to the description and classification of knowing in and for practice.[110] Knowledge applied and generated in the practice of social work is perceived to be nuanced, and uncertain, as a function of the essentially 'social' nature of its production (Morrison, 2010). Recognition of the complex nature of social causation does not mean that understanding is undesirable, but it does mean that appropriately flexible theoretical and analytical tools must be employed. This way of approaching practice knowledge is perceived to be consistent with a critical realist orientation to the tentative identification and exploration of underlying generative mechanisms which operate in an uncertain context (Bhaskar, 1997; Houston, 2010b).

All of the theoretical constructions alluded to above contain the common thread of offering a dynamic accommodation between materialist and constructivist perspectives - social trajectory and creative possibility. This is the sense in which it may be possible to accommodate critical enlightenment ideals and postmodern subjectivity - collective humanism and individuated identity - within a theoretical understanding of contemporary social work practice. In chapter 1 I indicated that one of the aims of this thesis is to investigate the relationship, if any, between the apparently constrained environment of contemporary case-work practice and the legacy of the critical enlightenment tradition - emancipatory practice which promotes human equality and social justice. In considering this question, it is important to recognise that humanism is itself a conflicted 'discourse'. Humanism is a historically and politically situated philosophical formation within which contradictory strands of theory and ideology coexist.[111] The utility of human 'reason' as the engine of scientific / modernist / capitalist economic and social development arguably privileges rational-technical knowledge forms (means-ends logic structures) and in so doing, is perennially at risk of performing exclusionary functions by favouring the interests of the powerful in a socially and economically unequal society (Plumwood, 1991; Smith, 2011). It is argued that this thesis provides evidence which supports a historical, and current, connection between social work practice knowledge and the inclusive dimension of enlightenment philosophy which Goldstein (1990) characterises as 'social humanism'.

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[110] This summary refers to argument developed in chapter 1 under heading 1.3.1: 'Contextual Knowing'.
[111] See Duncan (2004) for detailed discussion of the continuing relevance of the liberal enlightenment philosophical tradition in the constitution of contemporary government and politics in Aotearoa / New Zealand society.

The following discussion of the understandings of knowledge in and for practice which flow from the fieldwork research exercise draws on Foucault's (1980) perception that resistance is inherent to the way in which power is configured.[112] Analysis of the research data indicates that the discursive experience of practice - and the knowledge of the social relations of power which this experience engenders - may be productive of social understandings which are intrinsically resistant to the 'scientised' technical-rational view of knowledge privileged within the neoliberal strand of humanist discourse. It is further suggested that this resistance is politically situated in that the social work knowledge form may be predicated on a set of historically / ideologically embedded values and beliefs that run counter to neoliberal ideology. The legacy of 'social' humanism, and of what I have called the critical enlightenment position, can be viewed as a 'countervailing' force, and as intrinsic to social work practice knowledge. This is reflected in, and evidenced by, the stubborn commitment to the ideal of shared humanity and social inclusivity demonstrated by many of the participants in the fieldwork research interviews.

7.2.1 Relational Understanding

In chapter 1 I suggested that what social work essentially 'is' - its ontology, or identity, is connected with what it 'knows'. The fieldwork data supports the further assertion that a generative / discursive confluence can be identified between practice action and practice knowledge - that what social work knows is a function of 'how' it knows. It seems that 'knowing in practice' can be related to an epistemology that differs significantly from the dominant 'rational-technical' lens commonly applied to social work practice. 'Relational engagement' appears to be the medium of knowledge production in and for social work practice. The importance of developing effective working relationships with clients is, perhaps unsurprisingly, an overwhelming theme which emerges from analysis of the fieldwork research data. Effective relationships require and produce a reduction in social distance. In order to generate the degree of trust required for meaningful engagement, social workers must get 'close enough' to their clients' lives and their perceived social realities. This close engagement with the circumstances in which people make decisions potentially generates deeper understandings and better informed judgements about motivation, capacity, and causation. The need to 'really' listen, to hear and be heard, means that inter-subjective (as opposed to purely objective or instrumental) understandings of behaviour and

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[112] As discussed in chapter 2 there is academic debate / ambivalence about whether 'resistance' as envisaged by Foucault is capable of providing a mechanism for significant or lasting social change.

beliefs are facilitated.[113] Participant 14's professed understanding of the motivation for spending benefit money 'unwisely' is a cogent example.[114]

I have also argued that contemporary social work practice is heir to a contested and creative narrative. On the one hand, as Goldstein (1990) proposes, the underlying knowledge structure for social work is akin to 'social humanism' and is tied to the emancipatory ideals of human freedom and equality. However social work, and the knowledge base which supports its practice, has also developed within a conflicted capitalist / modernist political and social context. As Foucault would argue, social work can be connected with social governance - the administration of social order through processes of 'scientific' classification, categorisation and intervention - particularly into the lives of the residual / recalcitrant poor (Rose, 2001).This function is potentially consistent with what might be termed the 'shadow side' of the enlightenment schema of development - colonisation, homogenisation and exploitation in the interests of the socially powerful (Hyslop, 2012).

As discussed in chapter 3, several authors associate social work practice with a heightened awareness of the effects of power in relational communication and also link contemporary social work practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand with the notion of shared / common humanity (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Weld & Appleton, 2009). In the context of agency-based casework practice, this engagement also reproduces the uneasy ontological duality which Chambon (1999) alludes to in her description of social work as the Janus-faced profession. As mentioned in chapter 2, Weick (2000) associates this duality with the two voices of social work - rational scientific assessment is contrasted with a compassionate / practical ethic of care. The research findings discussed under the sub-headings which follow indicate that the interstitial / intermediary location of social work - essentially between the powerful and those who are potentially excluded - generates a field of knowledge related to the resolution of social tensions through the communicative mediation of differing interests or perspectives. This social mediation in practice is, however, premised upon an appreciation of the injustice implicit in a society which is structured by the logic of capital (Garrett, 2013).

It seems apparent that despite its concern with social order, social work's practical engagement with the 'worlds' of the socially marginalised constantly rekindles the

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[113] There is significant material presented in chapters 4 and 5 which supports the notion that close interactive understandings are developed through practice engagement.
[114] Participant 14's relevant comments are set out as the final excerpt under the sub-theme 5.3.1: 'Socio-Political Awareness'.

critical humanist voice. This thesis goes further in asserting that this 'care imperative' is stimulated by a view of social need that is informed by an understanding of structural oppression and power imbalance. Social work practice knowledge is coloured by engagement with the perceived social realities of those who are positioned at the social and moral margins of societies such as Aotearoa / New Zealand. Although it is recognised that the data does not unequivocally justify the following assertions, it appears to be clear that the weight of participant commentary does suggest that practice experience of the validity of the social actions and associated world-view of those positioned in the nether-regions (Jones, 1983) of capitalist society does produce a desire to challenge (at least through individuated practice) the material and ideological contradictions which are revealed through this engagement. It follows that the imposition of practice parameters which increasingly constrain or countermand this imperative may, in turn, stimulate the development of resistant or critical social work. The threat of scientised / neoliberal discursive rupture may paradoxically (dialectically) generate a more engaged and politicised practice.

7.2.2 Balance

As demonstrated in chapter 4, the interview data contains numerous references to the image of social work as a bridging, balancing, or juggling process. Participants name many aspects of this tight-rope act in relation to the structure, and the practice, of social work. The relationship which participants describe between personal communication skills and formal assessment processes[115] is consistent with this metaphor, and can be connected with parallel dualities: emotion and reason, engagement and clinical distance. Research participants also provide frequent observations which support and develop the related concept of 'intermediate location' - and the associated notion of social workers as communication conduits - seeking to facilitate understanding, and to resolve social difficulties. Various levels and / or dimensions can be associated with this conception of the often disputed terrain which social work occupies. Arguably the skill of competent practice, and the knowledge base which supports its exercise, involves negotiating / mediating, and at times transcending, these binary parameters.

There is also significant data which suggests that the practice location of social work lends itself to awareness that definition of the social 'difficulties' in question, and of the appropriate means of resolution, are contested, perspectival and power-affected processes. As has been outlined, several participants' describe social work as affording

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[115] This tension and associated practice experience has been equated to managing a 'duality of presence'.

a view beneath the surface of New Zealand society - revealing hidden practices and social disparities. The resulting social insight is expressed by participant 6:

> *So I think that really helps you to understand other people and not judge other people because <u>you learn more about their situations and why they do the things or why they are the way they are</u> …*[116] (Emphasis added)

This awareness can, in turn, be connected back to the idea that social work practice knowledge is born of the social engagement / inter-personal connection which the practice of social work requires. It involves insight into the 'life-worlds' of others. It fosters a materialist appreciation of the effects of oppressive social structures on the lives of individuals, families, and communities and also promotes an associated 'post-modern' awareness that differing subjective perspectives produce differing 'objective' views of social reality and understandings of that reality. Social work practice knowledge is, it appears, receptive to an appreciation of conflicted truth claims, and tolerant of the ambiguity and uncertainty which accompanies this view of knowledge (Morrison, 2010). The complex view of social causation which is afforded by physical and psychological connection with the lives of others - Ferguson's (2004) sensual 'smell of practice' - can be roundly evidenced through the assembled data. The sort of understanding derived from this insight is captured clearly in the excerpt from participant 11 which is reproduced below:

> *One young man a few years ago described New Zealand society as having an underworld and an upper world and he didn't know the rules in the upper world - that's the world that people who go to work and have a house and don't get into trouble inhabit. The underworld was one where coming to Court is a fairly regular thing to do - and if you grow up there and you see a car with keys in, well obviously you were meant to take it. Or the view that allows you to sell some cannabis because you need to make some money. Or the view that allows you to go to the Police and make a false allegation so that somebody will be locked up and then you can feel safe...*[117]

It also seems that social work practice fosters an acute sensitivity to the nuanced social effects of power - to the use and abuse of power in the practice of social work and the subtle effects of power in the social world more generally.[118] This perspective is captured by participant 9:

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[116] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.1.1: 'Relational Engagement'.
[117] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under the sub-theme 5.2.2: 'Individuation'.
[118] This is particularly evident in the presentation of data from focus group 1.

> *I think sometimes our expectations are that people can do something - but actually they can't and that's not because of their personal inability, it's because of the power dynamics in the situation.*[119] (Emphasis added)

This level of engagement also seems to support a sophisticated understanding of the material barriers which militate against simplified neoliberal conceptions of context-free market choice and individuated self-responsibility, and of the effort needed to promote genuine empowerment for the socially marginalised: the way in which administrative fairness can perpetuate the illusion of justice in a structurally unequal society.[120]

7.2.3 Self in Practice

The notion of balance, and the importance of an awareness of the social effects of power, are also poignantly illustrated in the exploration of social workers' application of 'self' in practice which is afforded by the fieldwork interview data. The crucial bridging of social distance that is required to develop the trust needed to engage effectively with potentially reluctant clients requires what I have termed 'a judicious deployment of self'. This process is also congruent with the synergy that I have suggested between what social work knows and 'how' it knows. The phenomenon is frequently described and exemplified within the interview data. Some of the descriptions provided by research participants evoke a tacit, almost seamless, process of reason-informed assessment and relationship-driven engagement / intervention. I have characterised the perspectival shifts associated with this simultaneously 'in' and 'out' positioning as 'chameleon-like': a continuous play of presence and absence.

In chapter 4 I also developed the proposition that the deployment of 'self' in the practice of social work can be seen as a vehicle for 'humanising' clients. In order to foster honest communication a degree of 'connection' is needed. Interview data indicates that 'contextual' adaptability (situational creativity / inter-personal flexibility) is perceived to be part of this process. The social worker has the opportunity to facilitate change / insight / movement if an effective means of working can be found. As has been illustrated in detail, participants provide many examples of the strategies used to establish communicative rapport. The underlying orientation appears to be enmeshed with perceptions about the use and abuse of power. As reinforced above, interview data indicates a heightened sensitivity to social power and of the relationship between

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[119] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.1: 'Contextual Understanding'.

[120] See brief discussion of participant 7's apparent insight into the way in which procedural fairness does not necessarily ensure socially just administration in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.3.3: 'Social Justice'.

institutional authority and interpersonal communication. Participants' comments make frequent disparaging references to the potential misuse of coercive power.

A trusting connection is fostered, in part, by efforts to reduce the power disparity between social workers and clients: to humanise / personalise the encounter.[121] Several interview excerpts suggest that awareness of the need for this gap to be bridged, and of the means for achieving this task, are part and parcel of the professional skill / responsibility / practice knowledge which social workers carry. This sentiment is perhaps best captured by participant 8:

> *…you've got to be able to work with the whanau, not the whanau work with me. That ain't going to work.*[122]

Importantly the onus is perceived to be on the social worker to adapt to the client as echoed in the following excerpt from participant 7:

> *To me there's no such thing as a reluctant client - (…pause…) - there is, but to blame it on the client as opposed to stepping back and looking at what you can do differently, or do better, or could somebody else do better than you?* [123]

The social worker is seen to hold power in the relationship in the sense of having greater capacity to adapt so as to reduce the communicative constraints and distortions which power disparity can create. Ironically the power to dissipate power is seen as crucial.

The research participant interview data also points to one further paradoxical dimension of the conduct of 'self' in practice. Although 'the self' in the sense of relational communication / interpersonal awareness has been described as a central vehicle for the production of practice knowledge, there are times when 'the self' in the sense of judgements and beliefs must be 'set aside' - a degree of 'selflessness' also structures practice. Again an element of synergy between outcome and method can be discerned - research participants speak of reaching understandings which challenge

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[121] There is obvious tension between this interpersonal communicative engagement with uncertainty and increasingly rational-technical practice models which both aim for certainty and emphasise the professional distance between social workers and clients (Smith, 2011).
[122] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 4 under sub-theme 4.2.3: 'Flexible Presentation'.
[123] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 4 - also under sub-theme 4.2.3: 'Flexible Presentation'.

conventional moral judgements and also refer to suspending or withholding judgement as a necessary pathway to engagement.[124]

The assembled interview data supports the assertion, consistent with Philp's (1979) proposition, that relational engagement in social work practice produces, and requires, an awareness of how social circumstances, such as the experience of deprivation, abuse, and violence can detrimentally affect human capacity. Participants' perceptions of the barriers which impede social / circumstantial / behavioural change are clearly exemplified in the following excerpt from participant 13:

> *I think you have to try and just try to understand if you were in there - if you lived in a street full of gangs, if you're on a benefit, if you're a solo parent - how does it affect your ability to parent?* [125]

Significantly there is also evidence consistent with the second component of the paradox which Philp (1979) identifies as embedded within social work discourse. The difficulty and social complexity which is revealed by close attention to the reality of client experience is not perceived to preclude the possibility of change. Although analysis of circumstance - the perspectival placement of clients in context - is seen as a means of understanding and explaining behaviour, it is seldom, if ever, regarded as necessarily defining the capacity for individual reformation. Interview data suggests that relational engagement is coupled with this apparent faith in the possibility of reform / individuated change.[126] It appears that the conceptual framework which shapes social work practice knowledge blends psychological and sociological analysis of human behaviour. The reasoning seems to be that since individual deficits are the product of structurally embedded social processes and circumstantial barriers which can be altered - albeit with great difficulty at times - then the possibility of human redemption cannot be extinguished. The recurrent references to the fundamental need to treat 'all' clients with the respect due to them as human beings is consistent with this underlying belief.

7.2.4 Needs, Rights, and Social Justice

The research interview data indicates an apparent linkage between recognition of human need and perceptions of entitlement to social rights. I have suggested that intent to translate the needs of clients to 'the system' requires, and results from, an appreciation of another's lived reality. This understanding is achieved by an

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[124] See for example the significance accorded to non-judgemental approaches to practice by participant 6 reproduced in chapter 4 as part of the introductory discussion of the major theme 'Relational Engagement.'
[125] A fuller version of this transcript is reproduced in chapter 4 under sub-theme 4.1.4: 'Empathy /Intuition.'
[126] See particularly discussion in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.2: 'Individuation'.

interpersonal connection. In this sense the nature of the insight gained corresponds to an epistemology of shared understanding that is generated in relationship: subjective knowledge 'with' as opposed to objective 'knowledge of' (Morrison, 2010). As such it is a form of knowing born of engagement with social uncertainty rather than the dispassionate stance associated with rational scientific knowing. This process is implicitly recognised by participant 2:

> *So that's the barrier I had within my workplace - trying to get the system to understand - this works for the family, this is what a lot of families used to say to me.*[127]

The transcript material also clearly connects this orientation with the intent to 'help' - the idea of advocacy and going the 'extra mile' which participant 11 associates with the essence of social work:

> *…"You are being a social worker", is a dirty word in Probation - (…pause…) - it means that you're perhaps going a bit further for someone than you strictly need to.*[128]

This motivation is informed by appreciation of 'need' within a framework of universal human rights. It is important to reiterate that these influences / orientations occur in complex, and often contradictory, practice environments. Research participants, for example, frequently express concern with upholding the human rights of their clients,[129] while remaining aware of the rights of others, the demands of Agency mandate, and the interests of wider society. A concern with client needs and rights can be connected with a focus on the issue of social justice within a complex social context. Research participants tend to describe practice intent as restorative rather than revolutionary - a remedial approach to social injustice. This sentiment is persuasively captured in the following excerpt from participant 21:

> *We are not getting involved in this to make a fortune or to change the world overnight, but we are involved in that general push towards trying to redress some of the inbuilt unfairness of the type of society that we live in. We don't tend to get involved in families living in multi-million dollar mansions. We're at the rough end and <u>we're trying to do what small amounts we can to redress balances within society that I think most</u>*

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[127] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.1.2: 'Intermediate Location'.

[128] A fuller version of this transcript is reproduced in chapter 4 under sub-theme 4.1.4: 'Emotion / Intuition'.

[129] Perhaps most graphically expressed in the excerpt from participant 4 in relation to freedom and the right to make mistakes recorded at the conclusion of discussion under sub-theme 4.3.1: 'Rights' - in chapter 4.

> ***social workers would feel act unfairly in a number of ways on the young people and communities that we deal with most****.[130]* (Emphasis added)***.***

The description highlighted above corresponds to an individuated view of social injustice and a careful deployment of countervailing power. Crucially, however, the justification for the exercise of this power rests on a perception of societal injustice. As in Philp's (1979) analysis the remedial focus is individualised but the cause of the ailment is, at least in part, socialised. This orientation may well distinguish the social work voice and go some way in explaining the suggested friction between social work and neoliberal philosophy. In the neoliberal world-view causation (blame) is individualised rather than seen as structural. Social problems are perceived as the sum of individual dysfunction rather than as an outcome of social dysfunction. Remedies are only socialised in the sense of reinforcing the obligations of family, community, and civil society. State intervention is narrowly justified to protect the law abiding from the dangerous 'other'. If the impetus to re-include deviant individuals is back-grounded there is less need to engage with the lived experience of the 'other'. The target of intervention shifts from the social circumstances and needs of such individuals to the social risks that deviant / dangerous people pose. Socially informed understanding is not necessarily part of effective and efficient intervention in the neoliberal ethos and may, for example, take second place to rational-technical mechanisms designed to detect and punish. Evidence related to this argument is explored further under the later section heading of 'Neoliberal Capture Revisited' (7.3).

It seems that the postmodern / social constructivist view of potential self-creation may also be blended, in social work practice knowledge, with an understanding of how the reality of structural oppression affects, but never extinguishes, this possibility. There is evidence of this militant tradition of hope in several of the excerpts reproduced in chapter 4. There are numerous references to a belief in innate human potential, perhaps most clearly articulated by participant 13:

> ***… even if they've done the worst crimes imaginable - that's only part of you. You can actually change that part and move forward.****[131]*

Several participants allude to a separation of potential from past and present circumstance, as intimated in the following excerpt from participant 11:

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[130] A Fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.3: 'Social Justice'.
[131] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.2: 'Individuation'.

I've dealt with child sex offenders, I've dealt with gang members, people who have done the most horrendous things to other people but one to one, they're usually - I find I can work with them.[132]

This perspective informs practice in an active sense as expressed by participant 7:

So I look for the strengths. I've been immovable in telling people that things can be different and things can change. You have to be.[133]

7.2.5 Social Inclusion

The view of social work practice knowledge afforded by this thesis emphasises an underlying belief in, and an active commitment to, human potential. This is captured by participant 15 as follows:

It's about allowing people to believe that they can make changes and I think if you put that early out there with families that you work with, you give them just that bit of hope. It's interesting what humans can do …[134]

In part this orientation may be fostered by social work education as alluded to by several participants, and / or linked with pre-existing motivation, but more importantly in terms of the focus of this thesis, there is persuasive evidence to suggest that the lived practice of social work informs and strengthens the 'imperative to include' those who are 'left behind'. The belief system (or knowledge form) which sustains this commitment is both facilitated and reinforced by the process of relational engagement that has been described. This knowledge form encompasses the concept of genuine respect for clients - accepting the validity (although not necessarily the accuracy) of their perceptions of social reality, and appreciating the complex systemic difficulties which can militate against personal change. Genuine respect is seen as fundamental to practice.[135] As articulated by participant 2 social workers learn from their clients and seek to build understandings 'with' them:

"…they've seen the world in the worse way. So they can teach you something." That's what I talk about - the approach to people. I say, "The people we're working with are very sensitive and they can pick up just by looking at you. So you've got to be honest with them because they can see that from a mile away."[136]

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[132] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.1: 'Contextual Understanding'.

[133] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.2: 'Individuation'.

[134] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 – also under sub-theme 5.2.2: 'Individuation'.

[135] The foundational importance of respect in the development of client relationships is explicitly voiced in excerpts from participants 8 and 13 for example – reproduced under sub-theme 4.1.2: 'Skills / Knowledge'.

[136] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 4 under sub-theme 4.3.4: 'Empowerment'.

This approach to knowledge production in turn promotes an interest in finding or creating exceptions, and a parallel resistance to definitive generalisations and categorisations. The reluctance of several participants to recognise the pervasive links between poverty and the social work client group may be a somewhat ironic example of this process.[137] Social workers are resistant to accepting that negative social identities are necessarily fixed or that some individuals can't be worked with. Participant 19's identification of the perceived 'Pakeha' penchant for labelling people is consistent with this seemingly inbuilt resistance.[138] Social workers are interested in exploring the possibility of individuated exceptions. Beginning from the place of the client requires a suspension of judgement or at least a 'holding' to the possibility of alternate understandings. Significantly the fact that social workers are often unable to influence the behaviour and circumstances of challenged and challenging individuals does not seem to dim the commitment to this task. As expressed by participant 3 in the second focus group interview, you **… never give up, never, ever give up or think that that's a lost cause.**[139]

Recognition of structural social inequality does however potentially fuel intent to **… redress some of the inbuilt unfairness of the type of society that we live in…**[140] as expressed by participant 21. This phenomenon can be aligned with the driving **sense of justice** identified by participant 11,[141] and can bring social workers into conflict with organisational mandates. Participant 13 alludes to this tension, describing insights that can potentially place statutory social workers on the **…wrong side of the fence**.[142] Other participants also express the need to manage misalignment between organisational dictates and the demands of social justice.[143] This is where the balancing nature and function of social work may have wider socio-political significance. Social work is arguably part of the system of social 'management' but it also challenges the fairness and equity of that system: perpetually raising the question of individuated inclusion within a socially unjust structure. In this sense the social work knowledge form might be said to be inherently subversive or to contain elements of

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[137] See discussion of this apparent contradiction in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.1.1: 'Socio-Economic Status'.

[138] See relevant excerpt from participant 19 recorded in chapter 5 - also under sub-theme 5.1.1: 'Socio-Economic Status'.

[139] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 6 under focus group 2 analysis heading 6.3.1: 'Power'

[140] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.3: 'Social Justice'

[141] See discussion of this remark from participant 11 in chapter 5 - also under sub-theme 5.2.3: 'Social Justice'.

[142] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 also under sub-theme 5.2.3: 'Social Justice'.

[143] See for example the remarks from participant 15 recorded at the conclusion of sub-theme 5.2.3: 'Social Justice'.

embedded resistance to structural oppression. This analysis is graphically reflected in the following excerpt from participant 21:

> *I want to see myself as part of a process of social justice and fairness and trying to push the pendulum back in the other direction because I think we're a vital part of a wider context.*[144]

The question arises as to the consequences which may follow - in the 'wider context' - if this knowledge form is changed or dissipated. For example, in a system preoccupied with the management of social risk, social work practice knowledge perennially problematises the separation of risk from need by emphasising the relationship between individual pathology and social structure. Communicative engagement with those who are perceived as constituting a social risk produces a wider, albeit personalised, awareness that risk is inevitably entwined with questions of human need and systemic social inequality. Dominelli (2004) describes this phenomenon in the following terms:

> Social workers engage clients in exchanging knowledge about their life experiences so that their voices can be heard and their stories can expose the inadequacy of official constructions of their lives. By supporting the creation of counter discourses social workers assist those outside their circles to understand the world from client perspectives. (Dominelli, 2004, p. 38)

The impetus to humanise, individualise and re-include that such engagement generates can be usefully contrasted with increasingly dominant risk-averse social interventions designed to categorise, differentiate, and exclude or punish. This assertion is examined further within the following section.

7.3 Neoliberal Capture Revisited

It has been suggested that the wide view of knowledge production adopted within this thesis allows for more than discursive replication - it includes the possibility of change and development - complete or partial discursive rupture. Essentially the proposition is that since the parameters of social work practice knowledge are shaped to a significant degree by the socio-political structures that frame the practice context, the nature of practice knowledge may be influenced by shifts in this discursive structure. In this regard I have considered the question of structural and methodological change to social work practice within an ascendant neoliberal political climate. Within this ethos

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[144] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 6 under focus group 2 analysis heading 6.3.4: 'Change and Practice Futures'.

'going the extra mile' to assist those on the social margins can be seen as 'soft': promoting 'dependence' as opposed to self-reliance. Appeals to common humanity can be regarded as misguided and permissive. Treating those who have transgressed social norms with respect can be perceived as 'rewarding', or potentially reinforcing, anti-social behaviour. This kind of critique is ideologically loaded in the same way that the social work knowledge form which I have described may be said to be ideologically configured. However there is strong evidence within the assembled research data to suggest that 'knowing' in social work practice is not as naive as its detractors might claim: it is merely more insightful, subtle and balanced. One of the keys to understanding social work practice knowledge is an appreciation of the capacity to hold (and weigh / mediate) more than one 'truth' or social reality.

7.3.1 Engaging with Complexity

A balancing of hope for the best possible outcomes with awareness of the consequences of worst possible outcomes, often frames practice planning. For instance, treating an objectively 'dangerous' individual with the respect due to all people does not mean that risk is ignored. As explained by participant 8, a statutory child protection social worker, these demands are not mutually exclusive:[145]

> *I won't judge them in a way that I know their crimes and I know the offenders - I will still respect them <u>however the reality is I would never put a child in a position where they would end up with someone like that</u>.* [146]
> (Emphasis added)

I have suggested that the research data supports the notion that practice knowledge creates an awareness of human frailty and barriers to change. A belief in social inclusion underpins practice but it is not a blind faith. Practice judgements involve a balance of interests and in this field child safety is necessarily paramount. The dual structure of the professional role requires effective engagement with adults and also strategies which guard against workers being 'captured' by such relationships. Within this process the subjective 'possibility' of reform - individuated change - is weighed alongside the knowledge claims associated with objective / scientific 'probability'.[147]

Conceptually separating respect for shared humanity, and belief in human potential, from an awareness of the destructive effects of individuated social history, does not mean that the risk which this history poses is ignored. This is part of the skilled

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[145] Miller (2009, p. 115) refers to this balance of care and safety as 'grounded hopefulness'.

[146] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.2.2: 'Individuation'.

[147] This construction is consistent with Munro's (2010) conception of a socio-technical knowledge form (Munro Review, Part One: 1.21, p. 16). This correlation is developed in the subsequent section: 7.3.3.

balancing process which is routinely performed in the 'every-day' context of engaged casework practice. This stance is reflected in the notion of 'respectful scepticism' identified by the London Assistant Directors of Children's Services and reproduced in the First Report of the Munro Review of Child Protection.

> Underlying all the work that social workers do is a value base which incorporates an approach where empathy and warmth are central, <u>where respectful scepticism is a priority</u> and which is based on a holistic view of the child and family. Social workers act as advocates and at the core is the preservation of human rights for children, and families, where this is not in conflict. (Emphasis added). (Munro, 2010, p. 55)

I have explored the associated notion of duality in various ways throughout this thesis, suggesting that social work accommodates seemingly conflicted influences. There is also considerable research data to suggest that social work practice requires more than binary arbitration: at times skilled social work practice can be said to transcend such distinctions. Social workers manage a complex range of interests and tasks, giving simultaneous attention to multiple demands. Their practice mirrors the social complexity with which they engage. This process is particularly evident in the descriptions which participants provide in relation to the fraught and complex environment of statutory child protection practice. Participant 15 alludes to a heightened sensory awareness:

> ***It's just watching as well as listening because you're either watching to see if they're so angry that they could do something. It's reading what you're going into but being open that there could be another part to a story that you're dealing with when you're going into family groups.***[148]

Participant 8 graphically captures this familiarity with the process of multiply aware engagement and assessment:

> ***…even though you're talking to them and saying, "Oh, that's nice, that's good, so how's things going with baby? Did you take baby to Plunket?" And all the time you're looking - you're hearing - (…pause…) - you are 'smelling' - you've got to be up with the play. It's normal. We just know it as something normal.***[149]

The finely attuned interpersonal awareness required for effective communication must be 'practised' while the other dimensions of the social work task are adhered to simultaneously. As I have suggested, competent practice in this field - this 'knowing

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[148] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 4 under sub-theme 4.1.2: 'Skills / Knowledge'.
[149] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 4 under sub-theme 4.1.2: 'Skills / Knowledge'.

how' - can appear seamless, but it is, in fact, a practised art which social workers apply and develop in practice.

7.3.2 Changing Knowledge Constructs

Comments from interview participants include a range of direct and more oblique references to the ways in which socio-political change may be influencing the form of knowledge for social work practice. Participant 3, for example, perceives an ideological shift away from social understandings of complex causation, and towards individualised, and perhaps more punitive, constructions of responsibility.[150] An expectation to do more with less is linked to the cumulative effect of perceived service cut-backs across the public service: times becoming tougher for both social workers and their clients.[151] Several participants also indicate that a focus on the provision of data to measure efficiency - and ultimately justify funding criteria - produces a focus which may conflict with client interests. The following excerpt from participant 17 refers to this 'tail wagging the dog' critique:

> *…what they're doing is they're saying these are the hoops you have to jump and it doesn't matter if, when you land you're landing on your client's head, because that's what's happening at the moment.* [152]

Many participants describe differing ways in which a culture of risk aversion has influenced social work, particularly the relationship between 'business risk' for provider organisations and political risk for Government. Research participants associate this heightened risk consciousness with tightened processes of monitoring and accountability, and an associated reduction in the scope for application of professional knowledge and judgement. The following comment from participant 13 is apposite. It clearly suggests a reduction in the credibility of decisions informed by discretionary professional judgement - predicated on the process of relational engagement - and a move towards the primacy of more socially distant / objective judgements:

> *I've had a case taken off me because in the end it was just like I actually can't because this is the way I want to practice, this is what I want to do. Actually if you're not going to let me do that, for <u>someone who doesn't even know the family</u> …*[153] (Emphasis added)*.*

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[150] See relevant excerpts and discussion recorded in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.3.2: 'Risk'.
[151] This emphasis is particularly evident from the transcript excerpts reproduced in discussion of both focus group interviews.
[152] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced.in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.3.2: 'Risk'.
[153] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 5 under sub-theme 5.3.2: 'Risk'.

This level of risk-averse practice accountability brings to mind Rose's (2001) observations concerning reconfigured neoliberal structures of governance that entail greater oversight of professional conduct: a 'surveillance of surveillance' in Foucault's terminology. Similarly Dominelli's (2004) concern with an increasing 'proletarianisation' of professional practice is brought to mind.

These developments can be usefully conceptualised in terms of the notion of intermediate location; as a move away from the needs of clients and towards the needs of the system (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004, p. 304; Smith, 2011). Rational-technical ways and means of knowing are increasingly dominant in the current practice climate. The associated centrality of computerised recording processes and 'tool driven' decision making is perhaps best captured in the following contribution articulated by participant 21 in focus group 2:

> *…we're all crowded together like sardines because we're all spending such a high proportion of our time sat in front of the computer having to input data -and being controlled by the machine and being told this is the tool that you must use in this situation and once you've used that tool and done that tool upon the client, then thou shalt come back and input it into the almighty machine and if you don't you haven't done social work.* [154]

The tyranny of hyper-rational technocracy which this observation suggests is reminiscent of Parton's (2008) ruminations about discursive change in the form of social work knowledge: from a 'narrative' to an 'informational' knowledge form. Relational engagement that is predicated upon humanist values is replaced by the de-humanised 'impartial' assembly of client identity against a matrix of pre-ordained risk indicators. The inherently uncertain and relational structure of social work practice knowledge is supplanted by the binary rational-technical logic of the algorithm.[155]

7.3.3 Munro Review

The view of social work practice knowledge developed within this thesis can be favourably compared with the understandings which underpin the recent Munro Review of Child Protection in England. The Munro Review perceives that institutional risk anxiety, and the associated dominance of a rational-technical knowledge schema, has generated convoluted recording regimes, compliance-driven models of assessment, and an unduly rigid preoccupation with timeliness as a measure of practice quality.

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[154] A fuller version of this excerpt is reproduced in chapter 6 under focus group 2 analysis heading 6.3.4: 'Change and Practice Futures'.
[155] The relevant analysis developed by Parton (2008) is canvassed in chapter 2.

The following statement which is taken from the second of the three reports which comprise this review is clearly consistent with the descriptions of multiply engaged practice provided by statutory child protection practitioners through the fieldwork interviews for this thesis. There are also echoes of the concern - most explicitly outlined in focus group 2 - with the threat to practice quality which research participants associate with an excessive contemporary reliance on rational-technical constructions of knowledge for practice.

> When social workers are talking to a child and their family in their home, they are drawing on several sources of information and making swift decisions and changes as the interview progresses. Their conscious mind is paying attention to the purpose of their visit; at an intuitive level they are forming a picture of the child and family and sensing the dynamics in the room, noting evidence of anger, confusion or anxiety … It will be argued that previous reforms have concentrated too much on the explicit, logical aspects of reason and this has contributed to a skewed management framework that undervalues intuitive reasoning and emotions and thus fails to give appropriate support to those aspects. (Munro, 2011a, p. 35)

This analysis corresponds to a foundational concept within this thesis: that social work practice knowledge has an essentially social character. Munro does not deny the theoretical / technical dimensions of knowledge for practice but emphases the interactive 'social' application and production of knowledge in practice. The resultant knowledge form is described as socio-technical.

> Taking a 'socio-technical' approach to child protection points to the work being essentially 'social' even though there is a place for technical aids; it deals with people not with objects. (Munro, 2010, p. 16)

The 'socio-technical' approach allows for knowledge that is generated through the processes of communicative engagement that have been explored through the thesis, including elements of intuitive and empathetic understanding. Importantly Munro assigns a central role to evidential evaluation in the development of social work practice, but does not see this approach as a hegemonic substitute for professional judgement. The vision expressed in relation to evidence-based practice highlights, rather than de-emphasises, the importance of practice knowledge.

> Here it is used in the broader sense of drawing on the best available evidence to inform practice at all stages of the work *and* of integrating that evidence with the social worker's own understanding of the child and family's circumstances and their values and preferences. It is not a case of taking an intervention off the shelf and applying it to a child and family. (Munro, 2011b, p. 92)

In social work practice the application of 'evidence' involves a flexible / discretionary matching of intervention to the needs of clients in their particular circumstances.

7.3.4 Findings, Reflections and Implications

The concept of practice knowledge, as explored in this thesis, has some important ramifications in terms of the pragmatic conduct of 'everyday practice' - how social workers can be supported to learn and apply their craft in this complex and skilled domain. We devalue the human aspects of social work practice at our peril. Relationship skills are, for instance, clearly central to the key task of communicating with clients. It is also important to recognise the central place of intuitive and emotional responses in both communication and reasoning processes. The intermediate / relational deployment of 'self in practice' is a necessary and challenging activity. The reflective contextual analysis which supports engaged social work practice takes time, care, and effort, and requires high quality professional supervision. As expressed bluntly in the Munro Review, "you can deliver a pizza but you cannot deliver a child welfare service" (Munro, 2011a, p. 17). Smith (2011) emphasises the relevance of Bauman's reaffirmation of ethics as an orientation to 'the other' that needs to be "re-personalised and contextualised within the inevitable complexities of everyday practice" (p. 4). Workloads need to be manageable and supervision processes need to actively support practitioners in walking the ethical tightrope which practice involves: acknowledging vulnerability, nurturing intuition, and balancing 'head with heart'.

As prefigured in chapter 1, it is also contended that a deeper understanding of social work practice knowledge can better inform decisions about practice development. Both Turnell (2006) and Morrison (2010) perceive that knowledge which is generated in the doing of social work is an important source of learning for practice improvement. Practice-driven innovation in the development of client-centred social work services must be nurtured and the place of flexible delivery in specific circumstances needs to be recognised within this orientation. I would also argue that the view of practice knowledge articulated in this thesis has proven to be a fruitful means of understanding more about social work itself. The social workers interviewed for the fieldwork research component of this thesis provided a plethora of practice-informed insight in relation to the nature and quality of social work practice knowledge. The 'work' of the thesis has been in constructing an adequate conceptual framework within which to present and analyse the complex, at times tacit, 'knowledge of practice knowledge', held by experienced practitioners. As suggested, the indicative findings of this thesis must be stated tentatively and with varying degrees of certainty. Uncertainties clearly, and

appropriately, remain in relation to both the micro and the macro determinants of social work practice knowledge - and in relation to the disputed connection between these realms.

The research design is qualitative and the sample of practitioners is relatively small, so there are various ways in which the research process could have been expanded or varied. It is possible that an on-going dialogue, perhaps in on-line form, with a smaller number of experienced practitioners could have allowed for a deeper exploration of the subject at hand. Also certain specific themes apparent within the data could have been explored in more detail and a variety of questions have arisen for potential exploration through further research. Three examples come to mind as follows. First, a larger pool of practitioners may have afforded some insight into possible field-specific practice knowledge variations. Secondly, data provided by less experienced practitioners may not have indicated the degree of resistance to discursive change that has been suggested here.[156] Thirdly, there is material within the data set which suggests that the practice knowledge of Māori social work practitioners may be qualitatively distinct and influenced by particular culturally driven constructs. Investigation of this possibility would likely be best carried out by a Māori researcher/s within an appropriate research framework.

This doctoral thesis has repeatedly reinforced the notion of social work as a socially engaged and politically situated balancing process. The emerging view of practice knowledge as a socially generated and applied phenomenon, located within a structurally oppressive capitalist social form, does have significant implications for social work education and social work management. It follows that even the most competent practitioners will make errors in practice. Employing organisations need to develop mechanisms that both learn from practice error, and promote the ability of social workers to remount the apparatus which supports the social acrobatics which they perform in the practice of social work. The degree to which social work practice knowledge can be associated with experiential learning also points to the importance of mentoring and/or apprenticeship-style practice teaching, particularly in the early years of practice. As Munro observes in relation to child protection practice in England, a primarily managerial / rational-technical understanding of knowledge for practice "has fostered a view that the more important part of social work is carried out on a computer" (Munro, 2011b, p. 87) It is crucial that social work learning curriculums take

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[156] Resistance in this sense is related to the apparent resilience of what I have described as the 'social humanist' voice in social work discourse.

account of this fallacy and provide experiential learning opportunities which enhance the skills and knowledge relevant to the interactive 'doing' of social work.

It is equally crucial that the socio-political construction of social work is critically examined in the context of tertiary education. As argued within this thesis, social work is heir to an often 'submerged' strand of enlightenment discourse which promotes empowerment and genuine inclusion within a capitalist social form that often militates against socially just outcomes for individuals and families (Garrett, 2013). Houston (2012) asserts the need for social work to appreciate the socio-political construction of its practice as follows:

> Neoliberalism is the "hottest game in town" but it is not the only one. Any attempt to take emancipatory social work seriously has to start with an understanding of the games rules and deep structures. (Houston, 2012, p. 520)

Smith (2011), in turn, recognises that social work "needs to adjust to the new order, but not to accept it" (p. 6). The conclusion which follows considers the significance of the Foucauldian resistance which appears to be part and parcel of social work practice knowledge.

7.4 Thesis Conclusion

This thesis has evolved through a process of engaged and recursive enquiry. Many dimensions of analysis have been explored and as noted, several of these could be further developed. As suggested in earlier theoretical discussion, at one level of abstraction my concern has been with epistemology and ontology: with knowledge of knowledge. The understandings generated have not resulted from purely linear enquiry and as with social work itself, I believe that a degree of synergy between purpose and method, or process and outcome, is evident (Pease, 2010, p. 104; Powell & Ramos, 2010, p. 231). The view of 'knowing' which emerges involves a mix of deductive and inductive processes and as such, is best seen as a circular, or perhaps as a spiralling, blend of knowledge discovery and creation. Knowledge is, in my view, ideologically shaped and socially constructed but it is also materially influenced - located within a 'real' constellation of socially configured power relations. This thesis is embedded, as is the theory and practice of social work, within a wider philosophical heritage in relation to politically contested understandings of the interplay between structure and agency in the determination of human activities, the meanings of those activities and the social outcomes which result.

There are several intertwined threads which knit the thesis together conceptually. First is the suggestion that the contextually engaged approach to knowledge generation adopted here mirrors the stance that is native to social work. Secondly, I have proposed that materialist and constructivist - objective and subjective approaches - are combined within the form of knowing in and for social work. Finally, it has been argued that critical realism provides an adequate framework for a practical research process that is both consistent with this theoretical analysis, and also appropriate to an investigation of the coherence of the analysis. This thesis has undertaken a broad exploration of the nature and form of social work practice knowledge, and developed insights by engaging with the 'voice' of practice experience. The understandings revealed by this exercise characterise social work practice as a product of subtle communicative engagement in a complex social world. 'Knowing' in social work practice is contextually configured by practical, moral, and political influences. Within this framework, the knowledge that is generated and applied in practice is the product of a process of relational engagement.

The notion of intermediate location is a further pivotal construction explored in the theoretical work, and developed through the research findings presented here. I have identified the conduit forming, or bridge building, functions which social work can be seen to perform in a variety of ways. A social, or 'socio-technical', analysis of practice knowledge suggests a kind of knowing that deviates from rational-technical practice models and theoretical understandings. Social work practice knowledge is generated through respectful interpersonal engagement with those who are positioned as clients. The 'mediational' processes of assessment and intervention also eschew asocial or narrowly rational understanding of human behaviour. Social work is located, sometimes paradoxically, in-between art and science. (Carey, 2008; Hyslop, 2009)

The findings of this thesis suggest that professional knowing in the practice of social work involves a socially configured and materially constructed view of causation. There is a discursive, or self-fulfilling, element to this phenomenon. In terms of knowledge generation, there is a circular relationship between method and outcome. The locus of practice generates an awareness of social inequality, and sustains an 'individuated' intervention focus that balances risk with empowerment and inclusion. Contextual analysis is combined with individuated engagement. For example, in the realm of child protection the circumstance of deprived or abused children and their families are placed within a broader frame of social analysis and also within a more specific personal context. This conceptual position is clearly illustrated by practitioner

understandings of practice knowledge articulated within the fieldwork research data. It is also consistent with the notion that outcomes are co-produced through an interactive relationship between practitioners and clients. It has been suggested that social work supports an individuated view of social justice - it 'sees' objective social disparity and structural injustice while engaging with the complexity of subjective circumstance and differential understandings of those circumstances. Social workers balance objective knowledge with subjective client-centred understandings of social possibility. This balanced sense of possibility can be aligned with the ethical notion of 'doing the right thing' in particular situations as opposed to doing what is procedurally right in terms of dispassionate probability.

This thesis has explored and developed an understanding of social work practice knowledge as a 'knowledge form' that is embedded within a particular structure of socio-political power. In finding ways to accommodate the needs of individuals and families within a structurally violent capitalist system, social work can be seen to preserve the status quo: in Foucault's terms it can be perceived as a form of 'resistance' that is nevertheless enmeshed within, and paradoxically maintains, wider discursive relations of power. However, in a contemporary social-political climate that has moved from the embedded liberalism of the welfare state to a dominant neoliberal world view (Garrett, 2013), the social work knowledge form is arguably both more threatening to, and more threatened by, dominant socio-political formations. The autonomous, utility-seeking, rational individuals that populate neoliberal economics are a world away from the socially located individuals with which social work practice engages. In this sense, social work practice knowledge is perpetually and stubbornly subversive.

It is the view, and voice, from the relatively underprivileged side of the economic tracks which social work inevitably attends to and articulates. As examined in this thesis social work practice cannot be described as a revolutionary activity, although the insight generated through practice engagement, particularly within a repressive neoliberal framework, does have dialectical potential. To a degree this potential is thwarted by the practical demand to accommodate the needs of clients within the resources of the neoliberal state - within the confines of political mandate and Agency structure. However the knowledge which social work practice generates does perennially give the lie to neoliberal negations of social citizenship. This orientation is 'emancipatory' to the extent that full human citizenship is perceived to be achievable for all. Arguably this is itself an illusion within the capitalist mode of social and economic development and

here lies the paradox with which the profession of social work continually grapples. The social work voice perpetually questions the boundaries of social exclusion. It is unsurprising that practice mechanisms which effectively disenfranchise this voice through an emphasis on instrumental assessment and practice at a distance have become increasingly dominant in a global climate of hyper-capitalism and the associated demonising of the sub-proletarian poor.

It seems that much of the development of social work practice in recent decades - both in Aotearoa / New Zealand and in similar Anglophone jurisdictions - has not taken adequate account of the nature of knowledge in and for practice. As Ferguson (2011) has recently observed, an excessively rational-technical approach has led to …

> …a curious absence from a great deal of social work and child protection literature, policy and discussions about practice of any considered attention to the core dynamic, experience and methods of doing the work. (p. 4)

This is exemplified by the recent New Zealand Government White Paper (Bennett, 2012) concerned with the reform of services for vulnerable children. In contrast to the Munro Review, this seminal policy document proposes a raft of initiatives that are informed by a rational-technical view of practice knowledge. Minimal attention is afforded to the nature and form of knowledge in and for social work practice as it is articulated within this thesis. Consequently professional social work judgement appears to have been largely marginalised and consigned to the realm of procedural compliance and recording practices. Elements of social work knowledge are doubtless of a rational-technical character, but the application of knowledge in practice, and the creation of understandings 'with' clients in the process of practice, involves a knowledge form of a different order. In terms of practice quality, and ultimately in terms of outcomes for those who are constructed as the clients of social work, it is regrettable that social work is not better understood and valued within the policy realm.

As is consistent with the critical realist orientation, it is intended that this thesis will contribute to an enhanced understanding of the place and function of social work, and of the knowledge form which sustains its practice. The analysis presented here identifies that social work practice knowledge is inherently resistant to rational-technical commodification because it is not a rational-technical form of knowing. The standardisation and measurement (commodification) of practice does strengthen managerial control and accountability but it also potentially undermines the social work predilection to adapt intervention to the requirements of specific situations. A rational-technical lens only affords a partial view of practice expertise and this distorted vision is

arguably responsible for many of the shortcomings of current social work practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand. The processes of relational engagement, shared knowledge generation, and structurally informed notions of empowerment, which the fieldwork participants in this study name as so critical to social work practice, are not well supported in systems which are preoccupied with risk reduction and managerial accountability.

Practice within an environment that is potentially hostile to the social work knowledge form clearly poses significant dilemmas for practice education and development. Accordingly, this thesis has endeavoured to reveal and articulate the often tacit or submerged underpinnings of this knowledge form. Beginning social workers need to appreciate the importance of the practice knowledge generated by the social work view and voice as articulated in this thesis. They also need a critical awareness that in the current neoliberal-inspired practice environment they may be 'swimming against the tide' in the application of this knowledge. The intent of this thesis is to contribute to an understanding of the barriers to the propagation of what Garret (2008, p. 237) has termed '… the green shoots of a more engaged practice'.[157] The reinvigoration of relational social work practice is not an easy task. However, a coherent analysis of the obstacles which stand in the way of this project, in the context of a coherent understanding of social work practice knowledge, provides conceptual tools of resistance in this struggle, both locally and systemically. As asserted in chapter 1: in order to defend a territory it is necessary to map its contours.

Fittingly, at this juncture it is also useful to consider the wider social function or 'value' that might be associated with the nature of social work practice knowledge as encountered and constructed in this thesis. It has been argued that understandings of social work practice knowledge are crucial to developing the micro-world of case work practice, but it is also suggested that social work performs a more global function within capitalist societies like Aotearoa / New Zealand (Houston, 2012). Contrary to the view expressed by Shaw (2010), it does not appear heretical to suggest that social work embraces a particular ethical commitment to human potential.[158] This commitment is not blind but it is fundamental and enduring. The practitioner interview data suggests that social work practice knowledge is both resistant and resilient: the knowledge form may be submerged, hidden, or silenced to varying degrees within a neoliberal inspired rational-technical paradigm, but it is difficult to eradicate altogether because it is

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[157] This quote is reproduced from the introductory discussion in chapter 1.
[158] See discussion of Shaw's (2010) views about validity of the proposition that social work applies and generates carries a particular form of knowledge in chapter 1.

reproduced in the practice of social work. The critical humanist tradition and the associated commitment to inclusion, equality and human potential is, it seems, woven into the texture of 'everyday' casework practice. If these values are not upheld it becomes significantly easier to categorise, denigrate and 'other' those who have 'failed' to maintain the behavioural requirements which capitalist society both 'requires' and simultaneously excludes an increasingly large group of citizens from achieving,

Crucially, as Ignatieff (1994) has argued, if we are not all human, we are all potentially less human. If some categories of people are overtly or insidiously labelled as less than fully human, social injustice is 'naturalised'. This releases us from the moral burden of care and understanding, and potentially paves the way for more efficient punitive exclusion of those who are deemed to be less than equal citizens within a structurally oppressive social form (Smith, 2011).The consequences of this sort of thinking do not need to be spelled out. However it is, I believe, important to record the observation that the critical enlightenment ideals which social work practice knowledge appear to sustain, are intrinsically anti-fascist. The following excerpt from participant 1 in the second focus group discussion is as sound an explanation as any of the conceptual lens which social work practice knowledge affords and perpetuates, and of the consequences should this vision be obscured:

> *Social work gives you a specific lens and I think it's about partially tied up with number one, about issues of power. I think it's tied up with a lot of things of fairness, justice and engagement, relationship. All those things before are tied up with this lens that we use, the lens that we look at families through and without having someone with those lens, I think that our families have the potential of losing a voice. I think that they have the potential of things being missed and taken out of the context for them.*[159]

In my opinion the social function which social work performs, despite the sham, drudgery, and broken dreams with which it often engages, is perhaps most succinctly and profoundly captured by participant 2 in the first focus group discussion:

> *…it's about equality regardless of what background.*[160]

This thesis has not sought to resolve, in some totalising manner, all of the complexities and contradictions which characterise the contextually situated practice of social work.

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[159] A fuller version of this transcript excerpt is reproduced in chapter 6 under focus group 2 analysis heading 6.3.4:'Change and Practice Futures'. As noted earlier this description parallels the concept that social work identity is characterised by the application of a particular interpretive 'lens' to the social world - as developed by Connolly and Harms (2012).
[160] A fuller version of this transcript excerpt is reproduced in chapter 6 under focus group 1 analysis heading 6.2.3: 'Relationship'.

To return to the challenge articulated by Parton (2003, pp.1-2) on the first page of this text, it is considered that a contribution has been made to the important task of "…articulating an approach to its theory and practice which adequately reflects the nature of its operations." A clearer recognition of the form of social work practice knowledge has critical implications for the future of the social work project. As suggested in chapter 1, developmental decisions are ideologically enmeshed with the ethical and political question of what constitutes a good society. The intent of this thesis is to contribute to an understanding of how the knowledge that is created and applied in the interactive practice of daily social work - within the contemporary social context of Aotearoa / New Zealand and similar societies - connects social work with the critical enlightenment discourse of intrinsic / collective human worth and individuated human rights. It is this vision, and this function, which in my opinion sets social work apart as 'the beautiful profession'. It is hoped that this thesis goes some way to revealing the emancipatory form of social work practice knowledge and the consequences of politically and economically driven decisions which deny, disregard, diminish, or otherwise denigrate, the significance of this vision in the politically hostile climate of late capitalism.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ethics Approval Letter:

MASSEY UNIVERSITY

ALBANY

28 April 2011

Ian Hyslop
c/- Dr B Staniforth
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Massey University
Albany

Dear Ian

HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL APPLICATION – MUHECN 11/016
'Social Work: Practice Knowledge in Context'

Thank you for your application. It has been fully considered, and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, a 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 Ralph Bathurst
Chair
Human Ethics Committee: Northern

cc: Dr B Staniforth
College of Humanities & Social Sciences

Appendix 2 - Full Information Sheet:

Research Project - Social Work: Practice Knowledge in Context

Thank you for expressing interest in this research project. The following Information Sheet is a formal invitation to participate in this research. Please read this information carefully and advise whether you are willing and able to take part. A written Consent Form is attached for your information. Normally this form is signed immediately prior to the interview when an opportunity for any questions or clarification is provided.

Social workers with a minimum of three years of social work experience in any field of personal social services practice have been invited to participate. Please consider this an opportunity which may contribute to our collective understanding of social work knowledge. The time commitment is not too heavy and I will do my best to make sure that the process is 'user friendly'. Participation is however completely voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. If further information or explanation is required please do not hesitate to contact me. You are warmly invited to take part in this project.

Introduction:

My name is Ian Hyslop. I am an experienced social worker and more recently a lecturer in the field of social practice with Unitec in Auckland. I am enrolled as a Doctoral student with the Massey University School of Health and Social Services at Albany Campus. The research exercise is part of this program of study.

Broadly this project is concerned with the future development of social work practice in Aotearoa / New Zealand. I am interested in finding out about how social workers develop and apply knowledge in the conduct of their practice. I am also curious about how social workers experience the place of social work in a structural or political sense – the limits and possibilities for social work action. My aim is to learn more about practice knowledge and the wider place of social work by listening to what experienced social workers have to say. The intention is to identify potential for practice development by increasing our understanding of contemporary social work.

Project Description:

The research project is in two parts. Please note that you are being asked to participate in two interviews – an initial individual interview and a later focus group discussion. It is

possible to take part in the individual interview only but availability to participate in both interview processes is preferred.

Individual interviews will look at the knowledge that social workers apply in practice and explore perceptions of how social work and social workers are positioned within New Zealand society. Following analysis of data from these interviews, individual participants will be divided into two separate focus groups for one further semi - structured discussion which will consider how practice knowledge may be related to the broader context of practice and what this may mean for the contemporary development of social work. I am intending to begin the individual interviews in June 2011. Prior to the focus group interviews I will need to complete some analysis of data from the individual interviews so that there will be a gap between the two processes. I am hoping to convene the focus groups in October but please be aware that these dates are not certain.

Recruitment:

This Information Sheet has been sent to you after an expression of interest following an invitation forwarded by the Social Work Association – ANZASW – to its Auckland members. The research is focused on social workers who have at least three years of practice experience because of the depth of practice reflection required.

The research aims to investigate commonality within a diverse discipline. Accordingly participants that collectively represent a wide range of experience in terms of practice fields and organisational contexts are being sought. Preference has been given to participants living in the greater Auckland area so as to minimise the expense and inconvenience of travel.

If you accept this invitation you will be one of approximately twenty social workers interviewed. This number is considered necessary to lend credibility to the findings and to allow for sufficient candidates in each of the two proposed focus groups. You will be paid a travel allowance of twenty dollars to offset travel costs and generally interviews will be scheduled outside of normal working hours or otherwise at your convenience.

It is envisaged that individual interviews will be of one hour duration and that the subsequent focus group discussion will run for approximately ninety minutes. The location of individual interviews is negotiable and arrangements will be made to suit your needs. For both the individual interviews and the focus group process I have the option of using a room at Unitec in Waitakere or Massey, Albany if appropriate.

No harm or discomfort is anticipated for participants. Although the questions posed may influence you to consider the nature and quality of your practice in new and possibly challenging ways, the kind of reflection required is not unusual within the context of professional social work practice.

Confidentiality can be guaranteed in relation to individual interviews. In the focus group setting anonymity is protected beyond the participant group and participants will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement to this effect.

Procedures:

You are invited to participate in one individual interview and to take part in one subsequent focus group interview / discussion. Participation in both interviews is desirable but you are free to indicate a willingness to participate in the individual interview only. Both of these interviews will be audio- recorded and subsequently transcribed. You will be asked to review the transcribed individual interviews for accuracy and return them to me with any queries or suggested alterations.

It is important that you note the overall time commitment. The two interviews combined will require two and a half hours of your time in total and perusal of interview transcripts may potentially take as long as three hours. I will do my best to minimise travel requirements but up to two hours travel is possible. The overall time commitment will add up between four and eight hours at the outside.

Data Management and Use:

All recorded and transcribed data will be treated confidentially and stored securely. The person who transcribes the recorded interviews is required to sign a written confidentiality agreement with respect to all of the information processed. Transcribed data will be stored electronically on a password protected computer system and only accessed by myself and possibly my PhD Supervisors, Dr Barbara Staniforth and Associate Professor Mike O'Brien. Once the analysis of data for the purposes of this project is complete the records of interviews will be securely stored for up to five years and then destroyed.

Nothing in the subsequent publication or presentation of findings will identify any individual participant in the research process. Similarly any reference made to the names of employing organisations will not be referred to in subsequent analysis. However in relation to the presentation of focus group data it is likely that co-participants will be able to identify the origin of particular material. In order to protect against the possibility of individuals being identified, participants are required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

All interview participants will be provided with a summary of the project findings after the analysis of the research data is complete. The main purpose of the project is to inform my PhD work and the research findings will be integrated with analysis of the literature and theory building in the completed thesis. This study is due to be completed in mid - 2013. It is also possible that the research data may be employed in related academic articles or presentations.

Culturally specific data:

The Interview Schedule and subsequent analysis may potentially generate data that is relevant to specific cultural groups, particularly Māori. If such indications do emerge

from the data it will be made clear in any subsequent analysis that generalisation is not possible or appropriate given the sample size.

Participant's Rights:

Please take note of the following formal Statement of Rights that will apply if you agree to participate in this Research:

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation.

If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- **decline to answer any particular question;**
- **ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;**
- **withdraw from the study at any time up until you have completed the review of your interview transcripts;**
- **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 provided with a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.**

Contact Details:

Please do not hesitate to contact me (at first instance) or my Research Supervisor Dr. Barbara Staniforth, at Massey Albany, if you have any questions or queries about this project generally or your part in it specifically.

- Researcher: Ian Hyslop – Tel (09) 8132196 / e mail - ihyslop@unitec.ac.nz

- Supervisor: Dr. Barbara Staniforth, e mail - B.L.Staniforth@massey.ac.nz

Ethical Approval:

> **Please note that this Research Project (as outlined in this Information sheet)** has been **reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application __/__** *(insert application number).* **If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Ralph Bathurst, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800 x 9570, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.**

Appendix 3 – Individual Interview Consent Form:

Social work: Practice Knowledge in context

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

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 to the interview being sound recorded.

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

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

Signature: .... **Date:** ....

Full Name - printed

Social work: Practice knowledge in context

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

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 not to disclose anything discussed in the Focus Group.

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

Appendix 5 – Transcriber's Confidentiality Agreement:

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Social work: Practice knowledge in context

TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I .... (Full Name - printed) agree to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those required for the project.

Signature: **Date:**

Appendix 6 – Transcription Release Authority:

Social Work: Social work knowledge in context

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interviews conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: .... **Date:** ....

Full Name - printed ....