

# Re-Imagining Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

≡ MENU

## PROSPECTS FOR SOCIAL WORK IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND: SEGMENTATION OR SOLIDARITY?

Posted on **June 4, 2017** by **RSW Collective**



A guest post by **David Kenkel**

Like many social workers, I've been following the **debate about forcible data collection** and the design of what look likely to be very interventionist approaches by the new **Ministry for Vulnerable Children/Oranga Tamariki**. I've wondered why a large proportion of New Zealand citizens apparently approve of strategies being applied to others they would hate to have applied to themselves? In thinking about this I'm drawn to the whakataukī: *There, but for the grace of God, go I*. I like this saying because it captures a vision of solidarity and community. It reminds me that the differences between my life and the lives of others are mostly to do with accidents of history. It's a way of acknowledging that the good or bad fortune of ourselves and our neighbours

are as much to do with the lottery of social circumstances, as our own individual efforts. In the aftermath of the **Great Depression**, I suspect it was a similar vision, that drove Michael Joseph Savage and the **first Labour Government of New Zealand**, to introduce the Social Security Act 1938, establishing the first social security system in the world (Silloway-Smith, 2010). The economic circumstances of the time made it clear that the wellbeing of each was inextricably linked to the wellbeing of all.

In a sense, this way of thinking about others—the self, society and good and bad fortune—is at the heart of social work ethics. As the **IFSW (2014) definition of social work** states, “...social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”. In other words, our practice tries to make things better for people that life has kicked around; and, while doing so, we also consider the bigger picture: who’s doing the kicking and what can happen to make that stop. We do this because we recognise that life is not fair for a lot of people, who are really much like us, and we want to make it fairer, more just. I want to contrast this vision with a rather chilling statement made by Papadopoulos (2004) when he argued that, under neoliberal conditions, people are no longer regarded by social institutions as whole human beings, but rather as flexible assemblages of capacity with plug and play skill sets. Papadopoulos (2004) argued that the market has become the arbiter of a kind of ethics where thriving in the employment marketplace is the ultimate good. Developing flexible skill sets, that always present the best face to the employment market, has become more important than any coherent moral vision of what people are and should be. My concern is that, as a result of this neoliberal worldview, we are now moving from regarding New Zealanders as *assemblages of skills* that are fit for the market (or not), to viewing a proportion of society (those who don’t do so well or who come to attention of child protection) as *assemblages of damage* in urgent need of fixing. Media stories of benefit dependency and poor parenting by beneficiaries help to create the perception of these *assemblages of damage* as a drain on society, and a burden to the economically successful. The spectre of these supposedly damaged souls traumatising their children, in an endless cycle of intergenerational failure, adds a must-take-action urgency to the narrative.

This image of a society segmented into damaged individual *takers* and skilled economic *contributors* legitimates a “muscular authoritarianism” (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014) on the part of social support agencies: justifying the targeting, assessment and repair of the takers. These interventions are undertaken expediently, efficiently – and all too often – brutally. The validity of

this view is supported by the growing number of reports that describe beneficiaries' encounters with agencies, such as WINZ, as frightening and dehumanising (see, for example, **Morton, Gray, Heins & Carswell, 2014**). What is seldom visible in recent policy discourse is any recognition of the structural and systemic causes of vulnerability, trauma and damage. These broader social factors include: poor or unobtainable housing, wages insufficient for a family to live on, cruel welfare policies and the despair and hopelessness that inevitably occur when large segments of the population are marginalised and pushed below the poverty line (Duva & Metzger, 2010; Kenkel, 2005 & 2016; Murali & Oyebode, 2004; Rashbrooke, 2013).

What might happen if society continues to travel down this path of dividing itself into healthy economic contributors (good) and problematic others (bad)? When I reflect on this from a social work perspective, particularly in terms of child protection, I am frightened. The bleak future I envisage – when reading the rhetoric published by the media, politicians and the Ministry for Vulnerable Children – is a society that perceives two quite separate groups of people: the majority who can offer their children a stable, loving home; and the smaller minority, the others, who cannot, and are regarded as complicit in creating their own ongoing cycle of misery and damage. Two groups with few points of emotional, spiritual or practical commonality, and little sense of kinship or fellow feeling. The majority group perceive the minority group as unable to parent adequately, justifying harsh interventions that disregard how a profoundly unequal society can damage a proportion of its citizens. In this context, the mission of social work is being deliberately reframed, away from social justice and social change, and towards individual family and whānau assessment–diagnosing the damage and the 'capacity to change' of individuals and families. At the same time, psychological experts are ushered into the field to instruct us on how to work with trauma. The risk is that the quality of our work will be measured against metrics of intervention designed by professions who do not share our commitment to social justice, social change and anti-oppressive practice. I find this an ugly and sad picture of social work and not one that I will sign up for.

What is required for social work to change this disturbing vision of the near future? Mostly, the answers are predictable: resist, challenge and educate! In this instance though, because what we are resisting is not just changes in policy and practice but a change in the way New Zealanders perceive each other, I argue we need to go beyond the usual remit of social work influence. We need to consider the ways in which the social work profession can inform the

comfortable majority of New Zealanders about the lived experience of so many of their fellow citizens who suffer under current economic and social policies. I think the timing is right for this kind of social work education of the wider public. There is increasing outrage about **homelessness**; blaming the poor for being poor is becoming a pathetically threadbare argument as the reality kicks in that **one third of New Zealand's children live in poverty**. We all know that deprivation and poverty make parenting harder and we need to assert the “well duh! – it’s obvious” argument. It is critical that social workers publicly advance the idea that social structure impacts the experience of individuals and families and resist the idea that the primary cause of dysfunction is rooted in individual and family pathology. We need to do this on every front. In particular, our professional body, the **ANZASW**, must take a very clear position and refuse to collude with a de-contextualised, individual blaming version of social work. If they won’t or can’t do this then they cannot continue to claim to represent social work as a profession with moral integrity. We also need allies, we need to work with professions and groupings who also understand that individual experience is shaped by social context.

There is no use pretending that this kind of resistance will be an easy task, even though it *must* be done if our profession is to retain its moral heart. We are up against the deeply embedded societal myth that individual choice is the driver of everything, a myth that has become – as a result of 30 years of neoliberal dominance – naturalised, and taken for granted: we are all free, we use our liberty to make individual choices, and by so doing we become the responsible agents of our own circumstances. However, against that story, the daily, lived experience of our service users suggests an alternative view. Every day social workers witness the struggles of fellow citizens oppressed by inequitable systems. Fellow citizens whose so called choices are seriously constrained by social and economic inequality, by racism, sexism and a host of other oppressions. Our experience teaches us that **private problems cannot be separated from public issues**.

We need to talk about this and not just to each other! Social work needs to stop being a silent profession that is only ever commented upon. We need to find ways of bringing our clients back in from the cold world of being perceived by the public as damaged goods waiting to be fixed; back to the warmer world of being neighbours and ordinary people with unsurprising struggles.

In the decades ahead it is our task to tell this counter-narrative to the larger world. This is a job that all social workers need to attend to, but it is particularly the responsibility of our professional body and those social workers lucky enough to have a foot in the academy and some space and mandate to promote alternative understandings. We need to challenge the destructive certainties of neoliberalism and tell the story of our clients in humanising ways, ways that rekindle a truth that we are all in great danger of forgetting: *There, but for the grace of God, go I.*

Image credit: **John Darroch**

## References

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# 14 thoughts on “Prospects for social work in Aotearoa New Zealand: Segmentation or solidarity?”



**David Dallaston** says:

**June 9, 2017 at 10:42 pm**

Thanks heaps for this David. A timely and helpful reminder for a new and passionate social worker like myself. This made me reflect about how much talk there is around ‘strength based practice’ in both social work education and on paper/practice frameworks in social work agencies. But what the hell does this actually mean in practice when it comes to writing assessments which are geared and structured to pathologise? What does it mean when funding and contracts are given to the highest bidder pandering to the latest one size fits all intervention?

I have been thinking about a theological concept along the same line as the whakataukī you mentioned called the Imago Dei. This idea denotes that every human bears the image of God and is sacred, divine and valuable regardless of where they have ended up through the messy nature of humanity and constructs of power and greed.

I currently have a family going through the courts with the agency formerly know as CYFs trying to take custody of the children. I re-read my assessment knowing that it may contribute towards a negative and unfair narrative about this family. I was appalled at what I had written and realised that although I have a great relationship with this family I had drifted with the current and written a horrible assessment. I reflected that using the lens of clinical assessment a social worker could just as easily write an unsavoury and pathologising assessment about me as a human being. Anyhow, I deleted the assessment and started from scratch.

As a new social worker I am trying to develop a ‘human based practice’ where I enter the struggle of the people I have the privilege to journey with, see their mana and worth, walk with them and engage with the complex question – How did you end up here?

I don't think my assessments are going tick many boxes or help us get funding but I hope that if the families read my assessments they would see that I care for them and see them as people of worth.

## REPLY ▶

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**David Kenkel** says:  
**June 14, 2017 at 2:26 pm**

Thank you David, a really thought provoking and interesting response. I very much like the notion of Imago Dei.

I think you do a great job of speaking to some of the more difficult questions that arise when thinking about managing the tensions that arise between policy initiatives and the hopes and ambitions of practice.

A question that arises again and again is – ‘so what can I do ? – and I think in what you’ve written you begin to answer this in some very useful ways.

Firstly: about how to manage tension between policy initiatives that are potentially pathologising of clients versus the beating heart of social work that is about continuously remembering and working with others as beings like ourselves.

You speak very honestly and courageously to the ways in which policy drivers can colonise our practice as social workers. And – the effort of reflection, vigilance and courage required to resist this. It’s a powerful and important reminder that we are all vulnerable to capture; and I think this applies to us both as individuals in the work and to us as a larger profession.

I take your words as a challenge and a call to all of us – of the need to actively manage this tension in what we do.

Secondly:

in your statement that:

“I hope that if the families read my assessments they would see that I care for them and see them as people of worth.”

Your statement reminds me that a very practical thing all us social practitioners can do is to ensure that how we define the people we work with in our written reports stand up to the scrutiny of –

‘If I was reading this about me – would I know that my social worker is seeing me as someone of worth?’

Thanks again David – Your comments have given me both practical suggestions and much food for thought.

**REPLY** ▶

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**Peter Matthewson** says:

**June 26, 2017 at 11:35 am**

Thanks Dave for you beautiful honest comments which reflect genuine love for the people we all serve. A friend once got told off for using the word “love” in an academic article, however I think it is an ideal we need to reclaim, as Max Harris does in his chapter on The Politics of Love. I would be worried if your assessments were expected to help your organisation get funding!! Surely assessments should be an objective portrayal of a situation and funding should not depend on what you say. It would be especially alarming if you were expected to say something negative or pathologising to get funding!!!

**REPLY** ▶

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**Jan Flinn** says:

**June 6, 2017 at 7:34 pm**

Thank you David for articulating so well what I have been despairing about as a social worker of 20 odd years. And you are 100% right about our need to educate others and particularly the need for our professional bodies to take a firm stand. I’m afraid I am personally burnt out from having this argument to other professionals who simply do not understand the social justice aspect of our profession and unfortunately they often end up being our bosses! With gratitude

**REPLY ▶**

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**David Kenkel** says:  
**June 7, 2017 at 1:59 pm**

Thanks Jan, Yeah its a hard struggle.!

I think its why its so important we foster internal solidarity.  
The big challenge is how we create resource for us to connect and talk and find shared strategies.

**REPLY ▶**

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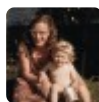


**Jan Flinn** says:  
**June 7, 2017 at 5:03 pm**

I guess if we go back to basics like poverty, addiction and child protection, like or not the public responds to changes in the law, additudes do change. So the first response is that encourage people to vote for a party who is more likely to be persuaded to deal with the core issues. Yes we are stuck with neoliberalism (for now at least) but perhaps we can start to address these systemic issues politically? Recently joined a group called Vote National Out 2017, don't necessarily agree with the content but I like the concept.

**REPLY ▶**

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**David Kenkel** says:  
**June 8, 2017 at 2:50 pm**

Thanks Jan, I agree about the need for political action – An area we have been a bit weak on historically. To take a leaf out of the the Com Dev world – in the community work I do we talk about being very active politically in terms of politically resisting policies and practices that injure our communities. But – this not being a party political activity instead specific issue based.

We do need ways to resist the chilling and silencing effect of the various 'high trust' gag clauses in so many of the new funding contracts. Alfred Ngaro's comments seem to me to be a rather clear message of what current actual on-the-ground policies are around SW'rs expressing dissent. I tend to think that solidarity and connection between SW'rs is the only real answer. That and having a very clear idea of what sorts of policies we need to 'politically resist'. It does raise a critical question of where our shared concerns can and should be voiced from. I do think SW needs to move a bit away from a position of compromise and working within / with systems that are increasingly hostile to the people we work with. Some howls of outrage and active dissent are I think needed right now. Maybe we all need to be pressuring the ANZASW and the SWRB to speak up more? And - if they wont / or cant perhaps we need new voices?

**REPLY ▶**



**Jon Blackshaw** says:

**June 7, 2017 at 6:22 pm**

I really enjoyed this piece as well - my own solution to this 'inequality' 10 years ago - was to pickup sticks and move from our [quiet, older] middle-income suburb in Porirua into a [louder, younger] lower-socio economic community - and then get involved with helping out locally there [neighbors, community etc].

Ten years on and while the experience has been highly varied for our family - but overall - I feel [including from a SW perspective] that this has been a good move... it certainly disrupted my extended and immediate whanau's views about the N.Z class system [or supposed lack thereof] in N.Z - but I think also sent a clear message about who I was choosing to identify and have solidarity with, and not me just acting like some richer white guy who gets paid to 'do good works' [i.e SW] for 'the supposed poor brown communities'.

I think that's one of the essential tensions as a SW professional: are we really 'walking the talk' by working with people in poverty just as our job or do we need to go and actually choose to live in these harder places [and yes

- they are often harder in my experience] and feel/see how it really is day to day, be in greater relationship to people there - and from this local knowledge - then really have a greater right to speak on behalf of my [economically poorer] community? [I think so]. Cheers everyone.

**REPLY ▶**



**David Kenkel** says:

**June 8, 2017 at 3:29 pm**

Thank you Jon,  
Really interesting points.

It seems to me that a strong emerging theme of late, is the need for SW to re-identify and express in active ways our simple human solidarity with the people we work.

As I've argued - I believe the effect of recent policies is to effect the opposite.

The critical question for me then is how can we best do this as a profession?

I'd be really interested in peoples thoughts?

**REPLY ▶**



**David Kenkel** says:

**June 6, 2017 at 5:59 pm**

Alastair just made a really important comment on face book about language and how we refer to those we work with. - I find myself strongly in agreement with him- follows his comment and my response - I would truly welcome ideas on this!

ALaSTAIR

Whilst social workers continue to talk about their "clients" the chances of meaningful acts of solidarity are very small, probably non-existent. David Kenkel's analysis is robust apart from perpetuating the differentiation between

the professional social worker and their client. I share a common political interest with the people I work with and am therefore willing to take calculated risks.

DAVID K's response:

Good point Alastair! The professional language we are encouraged to use becomes complicit in dividing practices that suit the interests of no-one but those few who benefit from a fragmented and divided resistance to neo-liberalism. I'll ponder hard how to resist that kind of fracturing language in how i Talk about the work. You are right about the need for solidarity – It is the phenomena that the neo-liberal project has fought hardest as it is the biggest threat to its Hegemonic success. I've been reading David Harvey on the history of neo-liberalism and he makes the point very clearly on how hostile this ideology is to all things collective and connected. Its good to be reminded how we can all too easily reproduce these harmful discourses in how we are taught (and teach) about social work. All ideas welcomed about how we can reclaim a language of solidarity in Social work!

Thanks Alastair – a damn important comment!

**REPLY** ▶

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**Dale Little** says:

**June 6, 2017 at 8:32 am**

I so love the way you think, David. Totally agree and worth continuing and deepening this dialogue. We need to join together effective short-term strategies addressing current oppressions with an ongoing anti-stigmatisation campaign turning back the rhetoric of hatred and anger against 'the poor' towards demanding 'where is this shit coming from, what does it cover up and who benefits?' Aroha to you mate!

**REPLY** ▶

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**David Kenkel** says:

**June 6, 2017 at 12:53 pm**

Thanks Dale,

Its really important that SW works to cherish its moral heart and also to

change the public perception of those we work with – This is a tricky time to be a social worker!

**REPLY** ▶

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**Gale Burford** says:

**June 5, 2017 at 12:03 pm**

The citation you have for Featherstone, White & Moss should be Featherstone, White & Morris.

**REPLY** ▶

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**RSW Collective** says:

**June 5, 2017 at 12:23 pm**

Of course, quite right Gale. Apologies to Kate. That's what we get for cutting and pasting from the BJSW review of the book 😊

<https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article-abstract/44/5/1356/1633567/Re-Imagining-Child-Protection-Towards-Humane>

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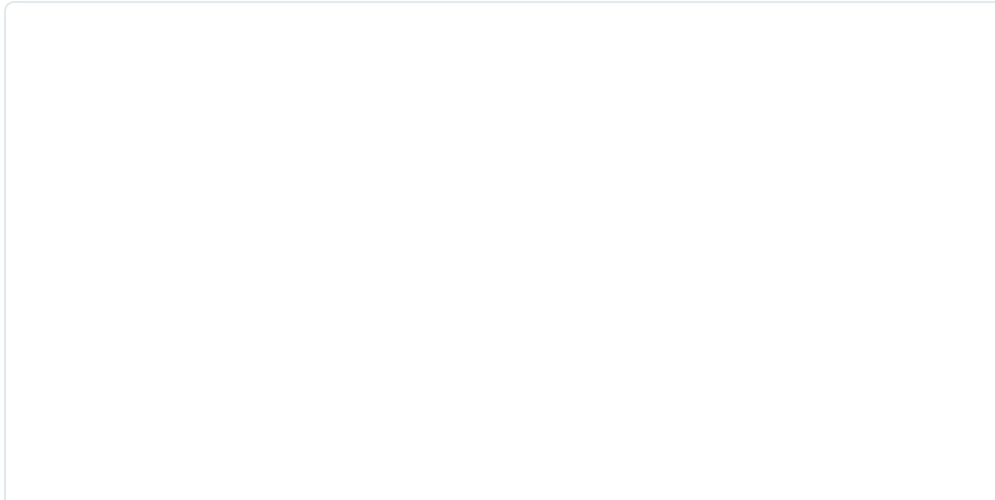
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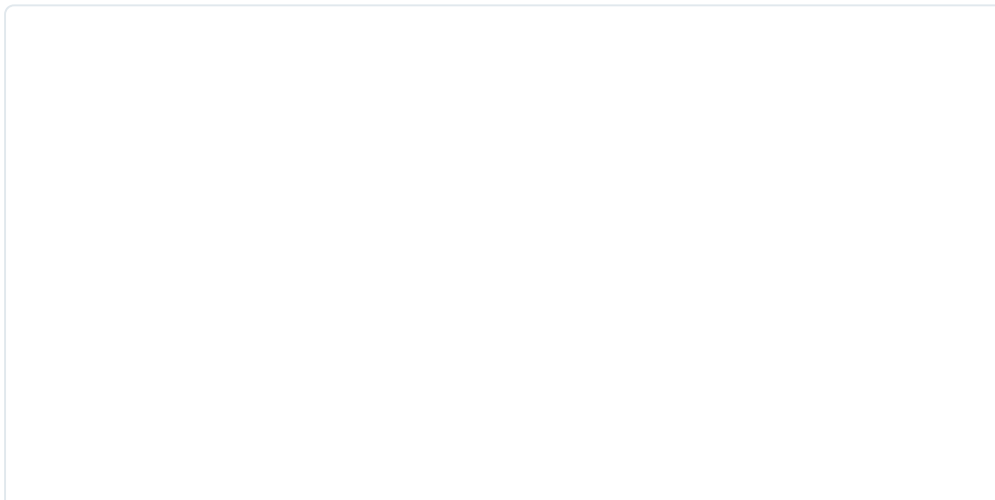
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