

Contextualizing Care: Alternatives to the Individualization of Struggles and Support

by

Janet Theresa Newbury
B. A., University of Ottawa, 1998
M. A., University of Victoria, 2007

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ABSTRACT

The ultimate aim of this inquiry is to expand understandings of what it can mean to engage meaningfully with children, youth, and families and the systems designed to support them, in context. By widening our gaze to include the discursive, political, and other dimensions of lived experiences, practitioners and policy makers may be able to engage in practices that prioritize the wellbeing of all community members, recognizing social justice as central to this development.

Methodologically, the challenge has been to work emergently, in line with social constructionist and postmodern understandings of social reality in which conditions are always in flux. Since there has been a call from qualitative researchers to make visible more ‘messy texts’ through which decision making processes can be made transparent, this document tracks the course of the study from beginning to end. By making explicit the methodological decisions as they are made, and contextualizing these decisions within not only the academic literature and data but also within personal and political realities, the author aims to demonstrate an ontological

approach to learning and change. By experiencing research not only as product (findings), but also process (ways of engaging), the researcher highlights the transformative potential of relating differently with(in) one's inquiry.

The five-part exploration itself begins by unpacking dominant discourses of both struggles and support, which are becoming increasingly individualized due to a number of contextual realities. It then explores relational theories of subjectivity as well as theories of multiplicity, in an effort to look at other – albeit often concealed – dimensions of experience. By taking these theories and the multitude of practices they inform into consideration, possibilities for other ways of engaging in human service practices and policy development become intelligible.

However, even when relational processes are acknowledged, avenues for action are significantly constrained through power relations. Deliberately incorporating notions of nomadism, non-unitary subjectivity, situatedness, and diversity into our discourses and practices can function politically in that they can provide opportunities for us to embrace and enact new narratives and ways of being. These in turn open space in which different kinds of meaningful social engagement can occur.

In the pursuit of more just ways of being, deliberately attending to multiple stories can thus contribute to shifts in practice and policy that are responsive to what was, what is, and what may be possible. Drawing from existing empirical research as well as personal narratives shared by community members and policy makers, this dissertation argues that by blurring lines between self and other, contextualizing practices, understanding change as ontological, reconceptualising power, and recognizing justice as an ongoing and shared responsibility, we might collectively access and mobilize fruitful possibilities that are often obscured.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to *all* my relations – human and non-human; past, present, and future.

CHAPTER 1:

The Personal Side of Qualitative Research

In the Spring of 2009, I went to a conference in Illinois which inspired and motivated me when it came to my own research process. I was in the early stages, having just completed the coursework for my PhD program and had not yet developed a program of study or proposal. I knew my general area of interest, but had no idea how I wanted to go about studying it. That said, I was becoming clearer on what I *didn't* want to do. My two previous experiences conducting research involved interviews for data collection, but were both non-traditional in certain ways. After my experience at the 2009 *International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*, I was eager to push the limits of qualitative research further than I had up until that point.

Filled to the brim with ideas and concepts, I excitedly left with a new book in my bag: Adele Clarke's (2005) *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. The ideas presented in this book have greatly informed my perspectives not only on research, but also practice (Newbury, 2011a).

Perhaps because of this, when I returned to Illinois a year later for the same conference, now with a more developed (although still not entirely clear) idea of the research I hoped to conduct, it was to the book sale that I first headed. I thought, 'Now that I'm clearer on what I want to do, I just need to find a book that will show me how to do that, methodologically speaking.' In particular, I was looking for a book that would guide me in developing congruency between the content and form of my study. What I found were a lot of books about particular content areas, and a lot of other books about exciting new ways of engaging in and presenting research (through poetry and the arts, for example). But what I really wanted to know was how the two fit together – or rather, how the two could fit together in my particular case.

To my dismay, I left the 2010 conference emptyhanded. But in the time that has passed since then, I have done a great deal of learning about the book I wished I had come across that day. What follows is the unfolding of my methodology, in the context of my own study. I realize it is specific to my theoretical orientation, my topic of study, and my relational ideas around engaging in research. Indeed, it is because of the particularity of my own location and process that I was unable to find this book at that conference. I have come to believe that research unfolds differently for every researcher. With that in mind, this is very much *my* book. That said, I hope for this offering to be useful to those of you who are busy in the process of piecing together your own research journeys.

As a reader, I know that at times I want to read books about methodology, while at other times I feel frustrated when a book I am reading for its subject matter becomes mired in methodological details. I believe that methodology is important, and should be addressed with those for whom it is also important. But when I consider who I imagine will engage with my discussions around possibilities for human service practices that take into account the social conditions which both inform and are informed by individual experiences (my overall research curiosity)... well, I imagine a different audience. And thus, I have written two companion books – which are in constant dialogue with one another, if one chooses to read them that way.

Building on Previous Research Experiences

I was eager to further extend the limits of my learning at the conference in Illinois. Before doing so here, perhaps it would be useful to take stock of the ideas and experiences that had paved the way to that point. By sharing the stories of my two previous research experiences, I hope to illustrate how my understanding of the exciting potential that lies in qualitative research as it relates to social change has been developing (Denzin & Giardina, 2009).

Blurring the line between self and other

My first research project was for my Master's degree, in which I studied experiences of childhood loss. What made it 'nontraditional' was the fact that my research participants were family members, making this a very personal journey indeed.

Entitled, '*Even now*': *Ongoing and experiential interpretations of childhood loss* (Newbury, 2007), my thesis was an exploration of childhood loss. I hoped to contribute to the conceptualization of supportive roles for children as dynamic and relational. It was fuelled by a concern over expert-driven approaches to 'care', which run the risk of informing generalized responses to uniquely personal experiences of loss. As stated in the thesis abstract, in an effort to honour the complexity of both bereavement and research,

I simultaneously engage with multiple aspects of the research process. These include: dominant and alternative understandings of childhood loss, the personal experiences of my research participants, multiple perspectives on the meaning of their experiences, the relationships among researchers and participants, and my own processes of interpreting the stories that were shared with me. (p. iii)

Honouring the complexities of the task at hand (Shacklock & Thorp, 2005) was an overarching ethical responsibility that almost overwhelmed me at times. In order to do so, I adopted various strategies, beginning with my choice of participants.

New to the city in which I was living and studying, I felt it would be intrusive and irresponsible (not to mention, ineffective) to seek out bereaved children to participate in my study. After playing out this dilemma, a series of synchronistic events led me to invite my mother and her brothers to participate in the study. Their parents had died when they were children, and they experienced multiple, subsequent losses as a result.

By conducting research within my own family, several of my initial ethical struggles were alleviated (Clements, 1999): I had a pre-established relationship with my participants built on shared experiences and mutual trust; their losses had occurred decades ago and they were now adults, which made informed consent a less complex issue; and they were enthusiastic about the possibility of sharing their experiences with me for the purposes of my research. For these reasons, I felt comfortable that I was not exploiting bereaved children for the sake of my own learning; I was assured that the trusting relationship required for such a sensitive topic was honest (not contrived for the purposes of research); and we were all eagerly anticipating the process, as we expected some mutual benefit from the experience. In addition, because my participants were family members, using artificial names seemed moot. Rather than creating a dilemma, this sat well with me, my mother, and my uncles, since even though the intention behind confidentiality is protection of privacy, the effect can often be to render participants silent and invisible (Reynolds, 2008a). Thus, I was pleased to be able to use my participants' names, as were they.

All of that said, conducting research among family members introduced new ethical considerations to the research process (Ellis, 2007). First, I could be fairly certain that my participants would read the finished product. How would they feel about it and react to it? Second, I could also be fairly certain that other family members who are implicated in their stories would read the thesis. Again, how would they interpret my representations of them? Third, I was expected to make 'conclusions' of some kind for academic purposes. How could I, daughter and niece to the participants, state anything authoritative about their experiences? And finally, I know that the process of engaging in research has an impact on the situation being studied (Sandoval, 2000). How could I be as intentional as possible about the potential impact

this process would have on people I care about? As I considered these tensions, I realized they are not unique to working with family members; they are simply highlighted when doing so because of a heightened level of concern (and potential risk). In fact, carefully attending to these considerations increases accountability in research across the board, even when no ‘dual relationships’ exist between researchers and participants (Ellis, 2007).

Thus, my approach to the entire research process was guided largely out of a desire to be as respectful as possible to my participants, and to acknowledge that no approach would provide me with a ‘God’s-eye-view’ of the experiences of people who endured loss as children. With that in mind, I adopted a hermeneutic perspective, focusing on the interpretive processes of the research itself, rather than any reductionist, final statement about loss (Kvale, 1996). By trying on various theoretical ‘lenses’ throughout my analysis, I overtly acknowledged my own fallibility to both my participants and my readers. It was in drawing connections between this and my role as a Child and Youth Care practitioner that my conclusions came. In other words, I made no conclusions about the essence of loss. I merely made suggestions for ethical practice when faced with loss, based on the research experience. I continue to carry the important lessons learned from this experience with me as I engage in teaching, research, and practice.

Relational inquiry: Learning alongside research participants

My second research experience was a project entitled, *Understanding adolescent girls’ processes of moral weighting: Amphetamine use as a context*, which my supervisor hired me to work on with her. Unlike my previous study in which a trusting relationship was previously established, we knew that for this research to be meaningful we needed a way to engage with our young participants that would resonate for *them*. As it turned out, using photography to generate rich dialogue helped to move this project somewhat outside the bounds of traditional research (as

informed by notions such as objectivity, neutrality, and generalizability) by creating new possibilities for relational inquiry. As stated in the abstract of one of our articles:

Using both images and metaphor proved an effective qualitative method in our study with adolescent girls who use crystal methamphetamine. The combination increased the *depth* of learning by inviting less calculated responses and the *breadth* of learning by allowing for consideration of societal and contextual dimensions of experience. (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a, p. 167)

As described in greater detail elsewhere (Newbury & Hoskins, 2008), we provided our participants with cameras and gave them a couple of weeks to document - through photography - their responses to some very general questions (this process took place twice). In the conversations that unfolded, the researcher and participant sat side by side, flipping through the photographs on a computer screen. Sometimes the conversations veered away from the photographs taken by the participants, and moved instead to songs, Facebook, and journal reflections – but in each case, the use of photographs as an *entry point* enabled such shifts to occur. Indeed, by grounding the conversations in the images they took, the participants had more control over the direction of the conversations, could determine for themselves how much personal detail they wanted to share, and were still able to explore deeply nuanced ideas through the more abstract conversations the images facilitated. Rather than having to feel the penetrating gaze of the researcher on themselves as objects, the *photographs* were the objects of study. This allowed the participants to partner with researchers in the preliminary analysis of the photos, through conversation. It also allowed for a great deal of social commentary, as the metaphorical function of the photographs

connected their individual experiences with larger social phenomena (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a).

In the development of our methodology for this research, we found ourselves drawing greatly from the relational research in our field of practice, Child and Youth Care (CYC). As stated elsewhere, “the importance of relationship is central to our understanding of any interaction: be it therapeutic, educational, or otherwise. To us, it makes sense that research that involves studying human experience must consider the role of relationship throughout the process” (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010b, p. 643). In fact, the use of photographs as a safe medium through which to engage with our adolescent participants in this study had less of a foundation in arts-based research literature than it did in our experiences with CYC approaches to relationally engaging in the lifespace of adolescents (Newbury & Hoskins, 2008). By experiencing something together, researchers and participants can co-construct meanings and generate new and exciting possibilities.

When considering research in this way – as a co-construction – we were repeatedly forced to question our assumptions, reconsider our direction, and think creatively. In fact, there were times we found ourselves moving in directions quite different from where the girls were guiding us. By engaging in critical dialogue with each other as researchers, and re-engaging with the images and transcripts, we sometimes had to force ourselves to move outside of the traditional, linear momentum of research with its emphasis on objective findings (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010c). In fact, even though we set out with a desire to better understand the social dynamics at play within our participants’ experiences of illicit drug use, we were dismayed at times to find ourselves perpetuating the discourses we had set out to critically examine:

This is why the interpretive conversations we had with each other throughout this research process were so important. It was only when reflecting on our own tendencies to locate problems within individuals that space was made for alternatives. Challenging these pathologizing discourses does not only require critiquing dominant practices but, perhaps more importantly, it requires a commitment to critically engage with our own practices. (p. 19)

The intentionality with which we engaged in such reflexive processes (from using photographs as an entry point, to continuously having conversations with each other as researchers), shifted my understanding – once again – of what qualitative research *can* be. And, as with the case of my Master’s research, this learning informs much of what I do in both research and practice even now.

Relationally Engaging from Here

These previous research experiences helped me to reconsider some assumptions about what research can be. I realize there are a multitude of approaches that could lead to similar learning. In my particular experience, though, it has been by blurring the line between self and other and by understanding inquiry in relational terms that I found myself beginning to experience the process of research as deeply personal. At the conference in Illinois and in my subsequent learning, I have found myself inspired by qualitative researchers who are pursuing approaches to inquiry that are transformational – of themselves as researchers and the world in which they are engaging – and have begun to recognize that *all* research is transformational in some ways.

In the chapters that follow, I will share this methodological journey. I will begin by being as explicit as possible about my theoretical influences, as well as the hopes I have for the

implications of this research project. I will move into the process of conceptualizing it, and then – what I was hoping to find back in 2010 – the particular details of how I do it. By writing *throughout* this journey, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the messiness of undertaking qualitative research rather than focussing primarily on end results and findings. Indeed, as will become evident throughout the course of this book, *writing itself* is a significant aspect of my methodology.

As discussed above, relational engagement was a valuable aspect of my previous two research experiences, and has been described by Ellis (2007) as one possible way of contributing to ethical research practice. By engaging with you as a reader during my inquiry, I can add one more relational dimension to this process. Knowing that I intend to share the details of this research journey *as I go*, I will be forced to consider more deeply the choices I make along the way: Are they intentional? Are they congruent with my epistemology and my aims? Thus, ‘writing through’ in this way is not only a pragmatic choice; it is an ethical choice – as I hope this transparency helps me continue to have important reflexive conversations with myself and others along the way¹.

¹ While the methodological process is being shared here, the particular subject area is elaborated in the companion book entitled *Contextualizing care: Alternatives to the individualization of struggles and support*.

CHAPTER 2:

Inquiry into Human Service Practices

Before getting into the minute methodological details of this study, I would like to share what it is that is propelling me to do research in the first place. As was briefly implied during the discussion of the study about methamphetamine use (in Chapter one), I am very concerned with the tendency of human service practices to “locate problems within individuals” (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010c, p. 19). In the current chapter, I will articulate my overarching research curiosity, which can be described as an interest in *alternatives* to the individualization² of struggles and support.

Most of us who work as CYC practitioners, educators, health care workers, social workers, or other social service professionals work in these fields because we wish to help people who are experiencing difficulties. However, as is pointed out repeatedly by a number of well-known critics (see for example: Gharabaghi, 2008; Gergen, 1994; McKnight, 1995; Szasz, 2002), our bureaucratic, classist, and economically-motivated systems do not always serve the needs of their client base. In fact, McKnight (1995) suggests in some cases that there is an iatrogenic effect taking place: not only are we not achieving our stated goals of alleviating hardships, but we are perpetuating them with misguided notions of what it means to help. In my view, this is possible because of our tendency within the human services to focus our attention and interventions on the individuals who are seeking help, ignoring the complex dynamics that have led them to find themselves in such a position. For all intents and purposes, this can serve to turn those who are looking for support into problems themselves.

² Constrained by the limitations of language, I would like to acknowledge the inadequacy of the word ‘individualize’. While it does not completely capture the dynamic I wish to convey, I have chosen to use it because it is a *verb* which draws attention to the process by which social problems can be (conceptually) distilled down to the level of the individual, and then addressed primarily at that level.

Obscuring the *Social* Nature of Social Problems

At the crux of this assertion is the likelihood that the *social* nature of social problems is obscured as we focus more and more narrowly on individuals. It happens like this: increasingly specialized services require accountability to funders and decision-makers, and thus are dependent on ‘results’. Social life is messy - it is unpredictable; it consists of an infinite array of uncontrollable factors; and change within it is often multi-directional and long-term. Narrowing one’s gaze down to the level of the individual, on the other hand, can help to tidy up this messy reality and allow the needs of governments and agencies that demand measurable and evidence-based outcomes to be met (Newbury, 2009). Meeting those needs may be necessary for an agency to acquire the resources to continue offering much-needed services, and so compliance is (generally) easily acquired. This compliance helps to cement this way of conceiving of support for children and families as the new norm (see Blades, 1997 for further explanation of such ‘procedures of power’).

This process by which social problems are ‘individualized’ simply reinforces the status quo – or worse, moves us even farther away from our stated aims. The gap between rich and poor continues to grow as does a sense of social malaise (Albanese, 2010; Winegard & Winegard, 2011); resources shrink and services decline (Burnley, Matthews, & McKenzie, 2005); incarceration, apprehension, unemployment, and with this violence become increasingly stratified along lines of class and race (Artz, 2011). Not only are we now in a position in which the needs of our clients are not being met, but by locating the onus for change almost squarely on the shoulders of clients, we as professionals are not even meeting our own needs. Worker burnout has become a growing concern (Bennett et al, 2009; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Reynolds, 2011b), and more and more services are being pared away (Ismael, 2006). The

current approach seems to be serving next to no one – and is certainly not reaching a large percentage of those for whom these systems were *designed* to serve.

Of course, there are other ways forward. Clarke's (2005) notion of situational analysis reminds us that situations have no 'center', no pre-determined fulcrum of action that can be easily manipulated to alter the course of events. Rather, every situation can be understood a dynamic complex of relationships among multiple human *and* non-human actors (including discourses). In order to attend effectively to a given situation, it can be helpful to consider multiple factors (and the ever-changing relationships among them). For instance, rather than centering an individual's behavior, it may be useful to consider some additional dimensions of a situation to which behavior may be a response (including the relational dynamics at play, institutional expectations, time constraints, the physical space, and more). 'Intervention' in such a situation may not only involve working with the individual to change, but could mean altering such things as time constraints which may be playing a role (for example). Accepting that all situations are always in flux, our goals can shift from notions of predictability and control when it comes to supporting clients, to better understanding how we might engage meaningfully with one another when predictability and control cannot be achieved (see Newbury, 2011a for more detail).

Kenneth Gergen (1994; 1999; 2009) writes extensively about the relational nature of being, and demonstrates a humble posture towards change – one that is also quite hopeful. Rather than promoting a technical-rational approach to change, Gergen advocates attending to relational dynamics, and acknowledges that all dynamics we encounter or engage in have of course emerged in response to still others. Human service practices, from such a dynamic and relational perspective, would cease to be about *providing for* someone, and instead become about

engaging with someone. Stated differently (by Blades, 1997, in relation to change processes in general), change is not about what to *do* differently, but how to *be* differently. In order to engage in change processes in a meaningful way, genuine curiosity about the other person's reality (which is *always* different from my own) is where it begins and ends, since this is something that must occur again and again in constantly changing conditions (Levinas, 1982/2003).

From a relational perspective, then, the bureaucratic processes in which current human service professionals are trapped (such as risk-assessments, diagnostics, and behaviour management) can be counter-productive to the aims of the professions. Rather than engaging meaningfully with clients who seek their support, practitioners are often required to use tools that transform clients into problems, which then must be fixed. This individualizing process – which focuses on what the client must *do* differently – does not allow room for us to consider altering conditions in order to *be* differently, together.

Contextualizing Care: Alternatives to the Individualization of Struggles and Support

Suggesting that human service practices might be better understood as relational work for which the cultivation of just conditions is a goal is, in fact, not a radical idea. Aldarondo (2007) and the many authors whose contributions are included in his book, entitled *Advancing social justice through clinical practice*, assert that this is in fact the foundation of most human service professions – including family therapy, psychotherapy, mental health, counselling, and more. They demonstrate how we have moved away from the social justice ideals that once grounded us, due to a number of potential influences (such as the quest for professionalization, the influence of evidence-based practice, and the dominance of medicalized and other expert knowledges). They urge us to return to those ideals, in order to do justice to the children and families we intend to support.

Re-envisioning human service practices in a relational way, and making a point of always contextualizing practices, can be understood as a decolonizing methodology (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) in that it requires an understanding of both struggles and support in a manner that is *not* individualized, because “when individual responsibility is assumed, ... blame is followed by excuses and counterblame” (Gergen, 2007a, p. 373). Thus, attending to care effectively and ethically does not require practitioners to seek the ‘essence’ of individual experiences of their hardships nor the impact of certain experiences in any totalizing way. The extension of doing so risks short-sightedly placing the onus for change either on the shoulders of those who are struggling or on those who are being approached for support.

Contextualizing care, on the other hand, enables movement beyond responsibility and blame in this individualistic sense. It prepares the conditions for us to get to the important work of engaging in the way Derrida (according to Caputo, 1997) conceptualizes such ideas as ‘justice’ and ‘the gift’. In other words, it enables practitioners to inform and prepare ourselves so that our responses might be “continually invented, or reinvented, from decision to decision, in the occasionalistic and ‘inventionalistic’ time of the moment” (p. 138). This is what Braidotti (2006) refers to as ‘nomadic’ subjectivity, which implies a responsiveness to constantly changing conditions. Furthermore, it encourages us to consider historical and contextual complexities rather than isolating our responses to what might seem to be the immediate issue (Rose, 1998). In order to avoid assuming the universality of particular responses (which can lead to unwittingly propagating certain meanings among those we hope to support), ethical practice from this perspective requires that we contextualize experiences (Rogoff, 2003; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992). As suggested by Reynolds (2002), contextualizing difficulties can enable us to also reconceptualise struggles as shared rather than personal, and shift conceptualizations of

witnessing as active rather than passive, thus altering notions and experiences of helping in a profound way.

Contextualizing struggles is not just a nice alternative. In terms of mental health practice, for example, Szasz (2002) insists it is a necessary shift which can “free mental patients and mental health practitioners alike from having to play the roles of afflicted and deliverer” (p. 169). In his discussion of diagnosis, he urges human service professionals to recognize complicity in the subjugation of clients through the use of classifications and to insist on refraining from such practices. This discussion is relevant in terms of the kinds of problems described above (such as, incarceration, apprehension, and violence) which can be (and are) individualized in a way that serves to address certain *responses* to unjust or intolerable social conditions as dysfunctional (Farmer, 2005; Wade, 2007). Such assessments may not take into consideration the multiple dimensions of lived experience that extend across time and place. Indeed, Gergen, Hoffman, and Anderson (1996) recommend a “postmodern social constructionist perspective” of helping relationships so as to resist what they call the “tyranny of diagnosis” (p. 5).

Nikolas Rose (1998) explores in detail the “invention of a range of psy technologies for governing individuals in terms of their freedom” (p. 17). Through his genealogy of psychology (and other ‘psy’ disciplines such as psychotherapy and psychiatry), he illustrates the normalization of certain behaviours and responses to conditions as a “regime of subjectification” (p. 9, drawing extensively from Foucault). By overlooking the possibility that individual distresses can be valid responses to multiple complex social conditions (such as post-traumatic stress as a legitimate response to exposure to war), and ignoring the social determinants of health, might we be further perpetuating the conditions which we – as helping professionals – are attempting to support clients to work through? In the words of Bruno Latour (2004), in doing so,

are we limiting the discussion to “matters of fact” when we might better contribute by widening our perspectives to include “matters of concern” (p. 231).

By engaging relationally – as advocated by Gergen, among others – we may perhaps be able to shift our attention to such ‘matters of concern’ and finally begin to see some concrete improvements in the lives of the diverse range of people who seek support from our systems. But in my view, the prevalence of individualizing discourses is interfering with our ability to move beyond the current state of affairs. While this is ultimately the focus of my study as explored in the companion book, *Contextualizing Care*, I believe it is important to provide a brief overview of this content area here, as a precursor to the discussion on methodology, since central to my methodological approach is an interest in alignment between ‘what’ I am studying and ‘how’ I am studying. In other words, the means (process) and the end (product) of this inquiry are deeply related.

Individualizing Trauma: A Case In Point

In order to illustrate why I see individualizing discourses as potentially dangerous and counterproductive (particularly within human service practices) I will turn to a book I recently reviewed called *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror* by Judith Herman (see Newbury, 2011b for the full review). Judith Herman – a psychiatrist and professor of clinical psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School – identifies as a feminist and she (as her book title indicates) is particularly interested in addressing the trauma that results from violence. I am concerned, however, with the implications of her approach in three significant ways.

First, through the use of passive verbs and mystifying language, the causes of violence are rendered invisible in Herman’s analysis. When words such as ‘abused’ are used as

descriptors of women and children, for example, the abuse *conceptually* becomes part of the victim, while the perpetrator is gradually eliminated from the equation (see Brown et al, 2009; Coates & Wade, 2007). This can also be the case when it comes to social or systemic violence. For instance, when the label PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is used to describe an individual returning from a context of war, the PTSD itself often becomes the problem which is to be addressed (through counselling or psychotropic drugs, for example), rather than the social trauma to which it is a legitimate response.

Second, and very much related, I am concerned with Herman's (1997) reliance on psychiatric labels which locate problems inside individuals. Herman makes definitive statements about the universal nature of experiences of trauma, and proceeds to identify the common 'symptoms' in terms that convey these responses as dysfunctional. By doing so, the injustices that those who come for support may have already experienced are (in my opinion) exacerbated by a process that in turn identifies their responses as pathological.

Third, I am concerned that this individualizing language contributes to an expectation that it is the victims of violence or trauma who need to change. As described in my book review, the use of diagnostic labels places "the onus for change onto the traumatized individual whose goal is to 'recover', while those who inflicted the trauma are rendered invisible from both the problem and the possibilities for solutions" (Newbury, 2011b, p. 326). So even though responses to trauma such as withdrawal or depression might be protective and therefore completely legitimate (see Wade, 2007), Herman's book squarely places the onus for change on those who are struggling to overcome the traumas they have experienced – regardless of whether or not the traumatic conditions have change. To me, this adds further insult to injury; the conditions that initially lead to the trauma remain unaddressed, which means the likelihood that trauma will be

re-experienced is great when this individualizing approach is adopted. Along with Braidotti (2006), I wonder “what are our hopes of finding adequate ways of expressing empowering alternatives and of having them socially enacted” (p. 4)?

Social Constructionism and Matters of Concern

The unpacking of Herman’s (1997) book demonstrates the importance of allowing our gaze to extend beyond matters of *fact* to include matters of *concern*, as recommended by Latour (2004), above. By attending only to ‘what is’, as Herman largely does (and by interpreting her language as fact, as opposed to a construction), we run the risk of missing important dynamics that must be attended to if we wish to engage differently in power dynamics and to contribute to social justice. The theoretical orientation that prepares me to think along these lines in relation to my own research interest – *alternatives* to the individualization of struggles and support – is social constructionism.

In the particular context of this inquiry, social constructionism provides potential answers to the question: how does one conduct meaningful research in the midst of ongoing uncertainty? If we acknowledge that – due to the relational dynamics described earlier in this chapter - we do not and likely never will reach universal conclusions, then what are our responsibilities as researchers and engaged citizens concerned with social justice “in the meantime” (Caputo, 1997, p. 70)? With their emphasis on relational ways of being in response to such questions (Gergen, 1994), social constructionist perspectives also align well with Child and Youth Care (Garfat, 2003), making it a relevant theoretical framework in which to ground research in this field.

Social constructionists suggest that it is not merely the material conditions of our lives that give events meaning, but how we relate with those conditions (Gergen, 1999). Thus, the way we interpret a given situation or phenomenon will change across time and place. This

means research might best be understood as a process of engaging with certain conditions, as opposed to a process of identifying ‘objective findings’ about those conditions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In stating that “the word ‘fact’ comes from the Latin *factum* ... ‘to do, or to make’” (Hacking, 1999, p. 81), Hacking highlights the underlying assumption within social constructionism: that reality is as we know it because it has been constructed as such. The political implications of this are significant in that it requires the consideration of alternatives that have not been taken up as ‘facts’, critical reflection on why they have not, and an understanding that new ‘facts’ may be constructed depending in part on responses to current conditions. This is where some pragmatic suggestions are made by social constructionists in terms of what to do ‘in the meantime’, which is – it must be acknowledged – a moral question.

Gergen (2007b) asserts that behaviours that are considered ‘moral’ cannot be understood as such outside of context. In fact, he goes as far as to suggest that morality has almost everything to do with “choreography” (p. 370), that is, moving in step with social norms and expectations, and very little to do with the essence of a particular act as either good or bad. Understood in this way, learning how to get along together becomes the best that we can do, rather than finding any sort of final answer to moral and political dilemmas (Bastian, 2006). According to Donna Haraway (in Bastian, 2006), “undecidability should be understood as an intrinsic feature of political action, not as its death knell” (p. 1032) since it is in the very act of attempting to come together across differences - repeatedly and indefinitely - that we begin to move towards justice (Caputo, 1997). Social constructionist perspectives urge movement “beyond the understanding of persons or groups as units and come to appreciate the crucial value of collaborative action for all that we regard as good” (Gergen, 2007b, p. 378). Indeed, some

argue that this is not a choice: Hoskins (2002) proclaims that “when researchers work intersubjectively, they do so ... because they realize there is no other option” (p. 236).

To clarify, social constructionists do not declare *how* this is to be accomplished. It is the contingent, shifting, and emergent nature of reality that requires such questions to be re-addressed contextually and indefinitely (Bastian, 2006). “Only then,” Caputo claims (1997), “is there a genuine ‘responsibility’, which means the need to respond to a situation that has not been programmed in advance, to invent new gestures” (p. 120).

A Place for Theoretical *In*consistency

While I have already identified that my theoretical influences largely come from within social constructionism, I recently received feedback from a reviewer who recommended I pay more attention to theoretical consistency. This inspired me to critically reflect on the tradition of theoretical consistency – particularly within qualitative research that is informed by postmodern ideas. The conclusion I eventually came to was that the expectation of absolute theoretical consistency is not only at odds with certain aspects of postmodernism, but it can also limit the potential for surprises (and in turn, deep learning) within the inquiry process (see Newbury, 2011c for the complete discussion). The tradition of loyally adhering to a particular theoretical orientation makes sense from within a positivist worldview that is interested in uncovering Truth through research. But within qualitative research that emphasizes social justice - *doing* rather than *proving* (Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Fortun & Bernstein, 1998) – strict adherence to one particular theoretical school of thought may in fact limit a researcher’s ability to speak and listen across differences, thereby limiting opportunities for impact and growth.

Of course I am not arguing for haphazard conceptualization; I am arguing, however, that an overemphasis on theoretical consistency can actually lead postmodern researchers to be

inconsistent in other ways. If, for example, I am approaching the world and my study in a way that wishes to emphasize pluralism and diversity, why would I restrict my inquiry to a single interpretive framework? What possibilities might open up by drawing from several – even contradictory – theoretical lenses?

Multiplicity *is* being embraced within qualitative inquiry methodologically, with *bricolage* (Kincheloe, 2005) and the related concept of *metisage* (see Richardson, 2004), but not to the same degree theoretically. And as I have stated elsewhere (Newbury, 2011c),

While current developments in qualitative research open up multiple possibilities regarding *which* theoretical orientation from which a researcher might draw, there remains an underlying norm of singularity in the expectation that the key to a coherent study is theoretical consistency. (p. 337)

As I reflected on past research experiences, however, I came to see that it was often during those moments when I was most willing to consider ideas outside of my favoured theories that the richness of learning deepened. This is not about ignoring my theoretical orientation, but rather about a willingness to be flexible in it, in a way that is responsive to learning and to critique that comes from those who may identify with other perspectives. As Denzin and Giardina (2009) assert, ““We are no longer called to just *interpret* the world ... Today, we are called to *change* the world and to change it in ways that resist injustice while celebrating freedom and full, inclusive, participatory, democracy” (p. 13).

If this is the project towards which I wish to contribute in the current study, then I will be doing myself and the subject of my study a disservice by closing my ears and eyes to aspects of this messy reality that do not align with my preferred vision (Bochner, 2000). Instead, it is my hope that I can engage in inquiry in a way that does not assume social science research occurs in

a pristine laboratory, but which acknowledges the contradictory and competing influences and voices amidst which it will inevitably take place (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

By writing through my process as I go, and by making it public, I hope to 1) take the messiness of qualitative research out of the closet by sharing all of the minute aspects of it that often go unreported, 2) offer one example of what emergent postmodern methodologies *may* look like, 3) be as transparent as I can about what I hope to do and what I do, so that you can judge whether or not, in the end, I have accomplished my aims, and 4) really live this research.

CHAPTER 3:

Emergent Research in Constrained Conditions

How can we begin to reconstruct the inquiry infrastructure, and the charged cultural and political territory through which it moves, so that it better serves a system of democratic values? And how do we engage in that reconstruction of a charged assemblage, when it engages and catches us in its own unexpected reconstructions? How do we pursue a shifting reality [sic] that also pursues us? How should those reconstructive pursuits be judged, and by whom? (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 111)

It is easy enough for me to allow myself to resist the dominant trends of such things as ‘theoretical consistency’, for example. But the question remains: will the system in which I am working allow me the same freedom? In *Procedures of Power and Curriculum Change*, David Blades (1997) tracks the processes by which the status quo re-asserts itself, even within the very efforts that are designed to resist it. Greatly informed by Foucault, Blades observes that 1) power is a dynamic, and thus there is no getting outside of it, and 2) “power is a system that preserves the status quo” (p. 170).

In Chapter two, where the individualization of social problems was described, I offered one concrete example of how such power dynamics can operate: There are inequities and injustices that privilege certain groups and marginalize others. Human service professions emerge in response to these unjust conditions, in an “effort to promote wellness and happiness” (Aldarondo, 2007, p. 3). As these new initiatives develop professional identities, bureaucratic organization demands efficient use of time and requires service providers to measure and account for their activities, which in effect places the complexities of the social realities their clients are facing beyond the scope of their practice (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009). This leads to

an increased focus on - and even surveillance of - individual behaviour (both clients' and practitioners') (McKnight, 1995). The increasingly narrow focus on individuals means changes in their behaviour, actions, and experiences are now what is measured and recorded, while larger social forces remain largely unaddressed. As if to demonstrate the procedures of power to which Blades (1997) draws our attention, Forster (2007) notes that "subjects of research ... are so often the most marginalized groups in society, since rarely does social inquiry study the affluent classes ..." (p. 376-377). And so the status quo remains largely unchallenged, inequities persist, and happiness and wellbeing continue to be a struggle for most marginalized groups – who are now marginalized again through the systems designed to support them. Just as Blades (1997) describes: "there was no conscious conspiracy toward maintaining the status quo, no group or individual *had* power over the events ... *The events themselves were expressions of power*" (p. 101, emphasis in original).

For the purposes of this chapter, I will turn my attention to another concrete example of how such power dynamics can operate: the legitimacy of certain modes of practice over others within social science research. I will share my efforts to resist the limitations that dominant norms can impose, and my experiences of trying to find my way through them. The previous chapter explored the dominance of a particular tradition around theoretical consistency within academia. The current one will explore a few other areas in which the status quo has proven to be quite powerful during the beginning stages of this inquiry.

Despite my interest in form and content being congruent³ (Nussbaum, 1990), and despite my desire to push against the limits created by the hegemony of representational approaches to

³ I see the importance of 'congruence' in relation to content and form in this way: I need to engage reflexively with my research practice in order to ensure I am not saying one thing and doing another. Congruence in this regard is particularly important for the current inquiry, which involves understanding how to engage meaningfully in

research (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004), I continue to find myself in situations that I am still not sure I know how to get out of. Sixteen years ago, Gergen (1994) observed that “those attempting a transformation in methodology confront a common problem: the very concept of methodology as a warranting device is wedded to the empiricist tradition ... [and they] find themselves struggling to demonstrate their adequacy on these (empiricist) grounds ...” (p. 25-26). Here I am, having read many of those thinkers to whom he may have been referring, still experiencing difficulty in determining how to avoid this methodological and epistemological dilemma.

Staying Curious and Continuing to Question

Richardson (2000) insists that certain writing traditions within the social sciences favour, create, and sustain “a particular vision of what constitutes knowledge” (p. 7). My experience in relation to research questions has illustrated for me how this can play out.

Regardless of the theoretical approach or chosen methodology, as a student and qualitative researcher, I have nearly always been instructed to begin research by clearly stating a research question. Looking back on my Master’s research (described in Chapter one), however, I admit I do not know exactly what my research question was. The study was an exploration of experiences of childhood loss, and contributed greatly to my learning (Newbury, 2007). Even though I wrote a question into my proposal and my paper (to comply with academic expectations), what guided me throughout was a much more general curiosity. The same can be said for the study about moral deliberation among adolescent girls who use crystal meth in which

changing conditions (and is the case for both the subject of my study and the process by which I engage in it). This differs from my unpacking of ‘consistency’ in relation to theoretical and methodological influences in that it still allows for ‘polyvocality’ (Gergen & Gergen, 2000) *within me* as a researcher. Additionally, congruence is a retrospective exercise – always looking back to see if my means and ends align and adjusting in response to new learning – whereas consistency is a projective exercise, which can limit one’s ability to be flexible and adaptive, potentially leading to dogmatism.

I was the senior research assistant (Newbury & Hoskins, 2008). Again, there was a research question embedded in most documents about the study, but overall, the curiosity was of a more general nature and was – importantly – flexible. As we moved through the interviews and then spent time with the transcripts, that curiosity shifted, incorporating new fragments of what we had learned or been exposed to along the way (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010b). Ideally, qualitative research – particularly from social constructionist or postmodern perspectives – is responsive (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Having flexibility with the research questions in these two studies allowed for the richness of learning that emerged through such responsiveness, and kept us questioning all the way through, rather than seeking a singular answer.

As mentioned earlier, Todd (2008) insists that “it is pluralism and difference that needs to be made meaningful in creating possibilities for a better future” (p. 16). With this assumption as a starting place, I find it useful to think about the research question not as a problem to be solved (answered) once and for all, but as an entry point into inquiry which may shift in response to the learning that takes place. Stated differently, Lather (1991) speaks of ‘framing the issue’ (p. 1) and emphasizes the limits created by efforts to precisely define, which she says, “analytically fixes, and mobilizes pro and contra positions” (p. 5). Particularly now, after the postmodern turn, I see great value in such a posture towards questioning.

All of the methodological literature that most excites me speaks of opening up singular concepts towards multiple possibilities (such as Caputo, 2000; Gergen, 1994; and Winslade, 2009). This is quite different from the process supported by driving research towards particular answers, which may serve to narrow possibilities down, gradually eliminating alternatives from consideration. So, instead of distilling complexities down in order to achieve certainty, the aim of my present inquiry is to work outward in order to make space for a multitude of contextual

factors, concepts, potentialities, contingencies, discourses, or whatever else emerges throughout the exploration.

While initially I believed this meant foregoing the institutional expectation to begin with a concise research question (experiencing it as one of the limiting traditions to which Richardson refers, above), it has been pointed out to me that this is not a necessary conclusion (D. Blades, 2 May, 2012, personal communication). Research questions can be very useful in all kinds of inquiry when it comes to such practices as setting intentions, establishing goals, and reflexively engaging with the various dimensions of a study (and re-engaging with them throughout). We need not disregard the entire tradition of starting with a research question in order to critically engage with *how* this is done. Developing questions that are flexible and understanding questioning as an ongoing aspect of any inquiry process can help us engage critically with this particular tradition and be deliberate with how it is enacted.

This interest I have in remaining open is not oppositional or deviant, but is actually quite consistent with traditional scientific inquiry. As Arendt (1958) points out:

Nothing, to be sure, could have been more alien to the purpose of the explorers and circumnavigators of the early modern age than this closing in process; they went to enlarge the earth, not shrink her into a ball, and when they submitted to the call of the distant, they had no intention of abolishing distance. Only the wisdom of hindsight sees the obvious, that nothing can remain immense if it can be measured. (p. 250)

I appreciate such invitations to allow for ‘immensity’ because from a social constructionist perspective, reality (as we experience it) *is* multiple and immense. Importantly, Winslade (2009) reminds us that “multiplicity does not ... suggest a simple buffet at which we might choose from a smorgasbord of lifestyles one that happens to suit our taste” (p. 336).

Agency is constrained by dynamics of power and force, among other things. Engaging in this process of inquiry which strives to embrace multiplicity and the possibilities that lie within it will also be constrained by these same forces, meaning the subject of my study and the process of conducting it may be more connected than initially presumed.

Although I allowed myself to think of the research question in flexible and ongoing terms (understanding it instead as a ‘curiosity’), I still found myself struggling to ‘pin down’ exactly how to articulate the curiosity that was driving this inquiry. I spent a great deal of time scouring my notes from the previous two years, highlighter and note tabs in hand, feeling sure (or at least hopeful) that by the end of the process I would be clear as to *what* I was inquiring into.

Once again, what the process clarified for me was that I was asking the wrong question. By focusing on *what*, I was defining my inquiry primarily in terms of content area, when the only very clearly consistent theme throughout my notes was this: regardless of the particular topic, it is the process – the *how* – that I am endlessly curious about. *How* questions clear space for multiple possibilities, and allow for verbs in response: dynamic and active, each answer to a how question can sit next to the others, rather than replacing them. Indeed, Foucault himself strategically avoided answering ‘what’ questions when it came to matters of power, preferring instead to discuss how power operates (Blades, 1997). Particular content areas frequently serve as cases in point, but the same questions keep arising within a vast array of contexts, and they always begin with how, not what.

My attraction to ‘how’ questions is not merely an arbitrary matter of taste. It springs from my ever-evolving ontological and epistemological orientations.

I draw from social constructionists such as Gergen (1994) and earlier relational theorists like Buber (1923/1970) who do not understand Being to be a relational process. A social

constructionist understanding of reality would consider how reality both forms and is formed by social practices, in an ongoing process of responding (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). By de-centering the individual and instead locating individuals within such a dynamic, knowledge and reality can be understood as active processes rather than static entities. Although individualistic discourses became increasingly prevalent with the Enlightenment (Taylor, 2007) and again with the rise of capitalism and psychology in the west (Rose, 1998), this relational way of understanding is not entirely new. As long ago as 1923, Martin Buber stated definitively: “In the beginning is the relation” (p. 69).

Most social constructionist thinkers do not stop there, but extend their relational ideas to individuals as well, suggesting that “individual action is inherently social” (Sugiman, Gergen, Wagner, & Yamada, 2008, p. 1) and that the concepts of “... self, causality, and agency ... are simply human constructions around which we organize our lives” (Gergen, 2009, p. xvi). Gadamer (1975/2004) asserted that it is through the unfolding of life’s relational processes that “intelligible unities” such as individuals are constituted and understood (p. 218). Current social constructionists have followed suit, demonstrating again and again in various contexts how reality is indeed co-constructed (Gergen, 2009; Hacking, 1999; Hoskins, 2002).

While social constructionists generally focus their theorizing within the human world, there are postmodern thinkers such as Clarke (2005) and Harraway (in Bastian, 2006) as well as material culture theorists (Vannini, 2009) who note that this relational dynamic extends beyond human beings. We engage with and respond to aspects of the material world as agents as well, just as the material world changes (responds?) as a result of these responses (and other non-human entities). In fact, Clarke (2005) avoids the word context in favour of ‘situation’ in an effort to de-centre the human within relational dynamics, encouraging inclusion of the

constitutive aspects of the material world into our deliberations as well. I believe these are important considerations that do not contradict, but strengthen, social constructionist ideas by extending them into realms that are often not considered the domain of social or cultural theorists.

Nietzsche (1913/2003) reminds us that “as far as ourselves are concerned, we are not ‘knowers’” (p. 2). If we are constituted through ongoing relational processes, then striving for concrete knowledge of ourselves would keep us looking back at what once was, as the conditions and responses continue to alter what is and will be. The way we interpret a given situation or phenomenon will change across time and place, so conducting research that seeks to learn ‘what is’ would be fleeting at best. If we cannot know ourselves in any lasting way, perhaps my main epistemological concern ventures towards exploring how we might *be*, rather than what we *are* or *do*. Indeed, there is a very pragmatic element to much of what social constructionists and other postmodern thinkers propose: if certainty is impossible then these theorists assert we must find ways of living in the midst of uncertainty. And the overall curiosity that drives this inquiry involves a desire to learn how to live better with this in mind. In particular, I wish to understand how to engage in human service practices in ways that adequately account for the social dimension of experiences, rather than reducing the struggles people face down to individual pathologies and responding them at that level⁴. I would like to find out how to create space in which *alternatives* can flourish in the midst of changing and uncertain conditions.

⁴ More detail about the tendency within human services to distill social dynamics down to individual problems can be found in the companion book: *Contextualizing Care: Alternatives to the Individualization of Struggles and Support*. In it, I argue that current practices, which are designed largely with the *generic* individual in mind, make it difficult for practitioners to engage responsively with *unique* individuals. Thus, I am not arguing that individuals do not sometimes need support, but that in order to do so effectively, greater attention needs to be paid to social forces.

Caputo (2000) explores along these lines and his ideas do not serve to move us closer to knowing, but to push the boundaries of what may be possible for us in this necessarily uncertain state. This brings me as a social science researcher away from natural scientific methods and into the realm of philosophers of ethics, such as Martha Nussbaum, Judith Butler, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida. Philosophy, here, refers to the school of thought that asks what determines “the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth” and “whether or not we can separate the true and the false” (Foucault, 2005, p. 15). From this more philosophical (and less naturalistic) orientation, Nussbaum (1990) is thus interested in inquiry that brings us towards “communal attunement” (p. 192), not absolute truth. This, too, is a process-oriented goal of inquiry that aligns nicely with a social constructionist orientation.

Although couched in the context of counselling practices, Doherty and Carroll (2007) articulate the situation from within which I am inquiring (Clarke, 2005) with this observation:

Missing from our discourse is a way to think of ourselves as citizens, not just providers, as people engaged in partnerships with other citizens to tackle public problems. Also missing is the idea of our clients as citizens with something to contribute to their communities ...

The provider/consumer dichotomy leaves out a third alternative – citizen partnerships where we are neither providers nor consumers – which our world sorely needs in an era of widespread disengagement from civic life. (p. 225)

I am very curious about how I might contribute to the cultivation of such a discourse, and what the implications might be in a practical sense (including, but not limited to, professional interventions). As stated above, my curiosity is process-oriented, and involves exploring how we might engage in the midst of uncertainty, regardless of the particular context. The situation that has propelled this inquiry is the prevalence of individualistic, linear, and causal discourses within

the human services that seem to preclude engagement that is collaborative, responsive, and non-hierarchical.

Ethical Review

Luckily, I have a wonderfully supportive committee. They provide me with valuable guidance, believe in my work ethic, and help ensure I am not veering into ridiculous, irresponsible, or incongruent places as I embark on my study. But they are not the only people concerned that I engage in research as I should. Because my study involves actual human beings, my proposed research must be reviewed and approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Board (HREB). The HREB is concerned that people's rights might be violated, that they might experience trauma, or that I may otherwise abuse my position of 'power' as a researcher with my participants. While there are, of course, many ethical considerations beyond those covered by this formality, my attention will turn, in this section, to these *procedural* ethics, which involve matters such as "informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). I share these concerns, and certainly appreciate having a system in place to ensure any research I conduct is safe and ethically pursued.

That said, the university's system of ethical review does not seem to be designed with emergent research in mind, and while preparing my application I found myself constantly wanting to 'exempt' myself from the questions on the form, because I felt they didn't apply to my study! Of course that was not an option.

Some of the difficulties associated with such review processes have been outlined by others before me. For instance, Carolyn Ellis, (2007), while conducting research with intimate others, notes that underlying this process is "the premise that research is being done on strangers

with whom we have no prior relationships and plan no future interaction” (p. 5). In my case, I am sure that I will know many of the people I interview; given that I am studying within my field of practice, they may be colleagues, mentors, or community members. However, not knowing in advance whether I will be interviewing people with whom I have a prior relationship, I was unable to identify on my application in certain terms what the quality of that relationship might be. This meant I had to anticipate, and list, as many realistic possibilities as I could think of, to ensure the door remained open for opportunities to interview relevant people as they arose.

I decided to use the overarching term ‘practitioners’ to refer to 1) front line workers, 2) researchers, 3) policy-makers, or 4) educators in the human services. I believe that saying my research participants will be ‘practitioners’ leaves the door open for many emergent possibilities, but I am aware that it closes the door to others. For instance, at one point I determined it was important for me to include experiences that implicated a previous client of mine. In order to do so, I had to submit a request for modification to my HREB application (which, fortunately, was approved). Thus, I am in some ways both extending beyond the constraints of existing procedures and simultaneously constrained by them. But I am satisfied that it enables me to retain the emergent nature of this study.

Related to this is the expectation of anonymity of participants that is nested within ethics reviews. This can be a difficulty when people who have a public identity may be interviewed. Even if their names are not provided, it may be impossible to completely obscure their identifying features – and it may in fact be counterproductive to do so. For instance, if I interview a prominent policy-maker, would I not want my readers to know that the data I am exploring comes from such a source? Indeed, the participant him- or herself may wish to be identified. As Ellis (Ellis et al, 2008) notes elsewhere, many academics like to have their name

attached to their ideas, when drawn from publically. Furthermore, as I expect to gather some of my data at public events such as conferences and workshops, there is a distinct possibility that even if I do not identify my participants, others who attended these events may recognize their ideas and words. Is it really an ethical responsibility to prevent that? As it turned out, and often does, the HREB required that I was *aware* of all these possibilities - not that I completely avoid them. As long as such likelihoods were foreseen and participants could be informed about them, I am permitted to interview them. A second request for modification was in fact required when, at one such public event, one of my participants specifically requested that his name be included. I submitted a modification to the consent form that provided an option for identity to be revealed, and this request was also approved.

A third presumption that underlies the HREB application is that as a researcher I will know who – and how many people – I intend to interview prior to embarking on the study and that I will know what I want to ask them. These have proven to be some of the most difficult aspects of the approval process for me. Despite the fact that I was unable to provide concrete details, in order to address these concerns I offered a rationale for my emergent research design. I also provided ‘possible’ responses to the more specific questions on the application form, which required a great deal of foresight and even imagination. In order to respond adequately to these matters, I had to think through my research more thoroughly than I otherwise may have, in order to consider multiple possibilities. That said, unexpected circumstances continue to arise. A third request for modification was made when I learned of an opportunity for me to study in Australia. My previous approval only permitted me to conduct research in Canada, but with this third request for modification I was granted approval to also conduct research during my time overseas.

So, despite certain institutional constraints, I am pleased to report that my study has been approved in a manner that allows it to be emergent. My experience of the HREB process is not that it is intentionally restrictive, but working emergently within it does require ingenuity, perseverance, and detailed explanation on the part of the researcher applying for approval.

The real learning that comes from all this, however, may not be about the logistics of negotiating the ethics approval process, but the understanding that the HREB review constitutes part of the ethical negotiation within a study, not its entirety. Following the lead of Ellis (2007), might I recognize that the ethical nature of research experiences spills out over the confines of such procedures, rather than being contained by them? Procedural ethics are important, but so are *situational* ethics, which Ellis describes as “the kind that deal with the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field” (p. 4). Nested in both procedural and situational ethics, but fully captured by neither, are *relational* ethics. Ellis says,

Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations ... As part of relational ethics, we seek to deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our research participants over time. (p. 4)

Drawing from the ideas above has enabled me to rethink my approach to research ethics. While I began by thinking the ethical review would serve as a hurdle in my research process because it would be unable to capture my study in advance, I now see it differently. The ethical review facilitated an important process by which I could think through some of the potential complexities of research. Rather than having to fully summarize and address *all* of the ethical dimensions of this inquiry, it served as a valuable starting place, to ensure that I am thinking ethics all the way through. For instance, my ethics approval does not require me to provide my

participants with the opportunity to review how I incorporate their ideas into my writing. But, relational ethics compels me to do this. Indeed, the conversations that have unfolded following the research interviews, through which feedback has been provided on my writing by my research participants, have been a valuable part of this research process for me. Understanding that procedural ethics do not encompass but sit alongside the situational and relational dimensions of ethics in research, I am reminded that the HREB approval does not mean I am finished; it means I have only just begun.

How Will This Be Judged?

In addition to developing a research question and gaining ethical approval for research, the notion of judgement is another hurdle when it comes to moving outside of the norms of social science research. Whereas traditional research might take things like generalizability as indicators that it is ‘valid’, this is not a possibility in much qualitative research – and certainly not this inquiry. So how *will* it be judged? Buber (1923/1970) insightfully declared that “an ordered world is not the world order” (p. 82). Though perhaps obvious, this observation complicates the task of evaluating research.

The notion of validity has precipitated great debate among qualitative researchers (see Bochner, 2000; Lather, 1995; and Polkinghorne, 2007). As Polkinghorne (2005) suggests “human experience is a difficult area to study. ... [It] cannot be halted for the benefit of researchers. ... Methods designed to study physical objects are not a good fit for the study of experience” (p. 138). This means I cannot use the ability to accurately reflect a static world that is ‘out there’ as the criteria for identifying valid research (Lather, 1991). Nor can I use the ability to ‘discover’ new knowledge (Hoskins, 2002) as the criteria. What, then, *can* I use?

There have been numerous suggestions made for evaluative criteria for interpretive inquiry of this kind. For example, Lather (1991) suggests alternative validity criteria for research in this “post-positivist context” (p. 67) including catalytic validity, face validity, and construct validity. Richardson (2000) shares the criteria she uses to evaluate manuscripts, which include such concerns as aesthetic merit and impactfulness. LeGreco and Tracy (2009) recommend attending to transferability and parameter setting. Kincheloe (2005) lists five aspects of bricolage research that he views as important to ensure rigor, such as the ability of the work to build a bridge between “forms of understanding and informed action” (p. 342). Wagner (2007) recommends attention to “both reflection and invention” (p. 35).

With so many possibilities for evaluative criteria already out there, how do I choose how my work should be judged?

Once again, I find I have asked the wrong question. Perhaps I might instead consider how to embark on this inquiry already knowing that it will be judged in *multiple* ways.

The people for whom I hope my research will be relevant will come to it with a multiplicity of concerns and will all be judging it based on criteria that are relevant for *them*. Thus, it is not for me to decide what criteria will or should be used; regardless of my intentions, my research may be evaluated based on all of the above criteria, and more. Knowing this in advance, Fortun and Bernstein (1998) suggest that instead of creating criteria based on a “purity that will never be there” (p. 124), researchers might instead *invite* multiple judgements by being public about the inquiry process. They suggest it can be judged on its ability to invite and respond to such judgements, and to be dialogically informed, rather than on the basis of “a list of methodological dos and don’ts” (Wagner, 2007, p. 35). This also means evaluation of research

can occur along the way, as it is both how it is done as well as what it contributes that must be attended to.

In my case, I have pursued this kind of ongoing validity check by making my inquiry (including the analytic process as well as the content) as public as possible along the way. I have written articles and submitted them for peer review, which has deeply enriched my learning and contributed to its rigor. For example, when questioning the expectation of theoretical consistency within qualitative research (as discussed previously), I wrote an article in which I explored the history of this academic practice as well as some of the ways research might benefit by drawing from multiple theoretical influences. This article received favorable reviews from all reviewers, who recommended that I add to the article some examples from my own experience of how such an approach might play out in qualitative research. This was extremely useful feedback, as it encouraged me to think deeply about the practical implications of my ideas. The article was subsequently published in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (see Newbury, 2011c).

The dialogical process of peer review has been valuable when it comes to the recommendations I have made within my field of practice (child and youth care) as well. In 2010 I wrote an article entitled: *Contextualizing child and youth care: Striving for socially just practice*. In this case, one of the reviewers invited me to engage in a public exchange about the implications of my ideas, which was eventually published (see Newbury, 2010). Engaging publically in this critical conversation encouraged me to think deeply about the various possible interpretations and implications of my words – a very different process than takes place during private reflections.

Another way I have sought feedback regarding the practical implications of my ideas has been through curriculum development. In the fall of 2011 I wrote and piloted a two-day Continuing Education course for the Powell River Diversity Initiative and Vancouver Island University (VIU). The focus of the course was facilitating community engagement (through both awareness and collective action) in relation to diversity in rural communities. The experience of piloting the course was an intentional effort to find out how participants experienced the process of engaging together towards community change in relational and contextualized ways. The response was overwhelmingly positive. I made some minor content adjustments based on participant feedback, and the course is now part of the VIU Continuing Education curriculum.

Additionally, of course, there have been pieces of work I have submitted for review that received critiques and rejections from reviewers. Upon receiving such reviews, I have to make decisions about whether I should revise and resubmit the piece of work, or let it go, on the basis of feedback from reviewers. Sometimes I do the former and sometimes the latter, and this process of determining which is the most appropriate next step also deepens my learning and strengthens my work. If a piece of writing is rejected (ie. deemed 'invalid'), then I need to reflect deeply on the critique and address the concerns somehow: by rewriting, changing gears entirely, or clarifying.

In addition to checking the validity of this work with others in my fields of study (by submitting articles for peer review and presenting my ideas at conferences for example), I have also been engaging in similar dialogues with the 'participants' in my research. After each interview, workshop, or presentation from which I drew insights that I incorporated into my writing, I shared my writing with the individuals from whom I was drawing. As with the peer

review process, this also precipitated meaningful and rich dialogues that added depth, rigor, and further insights to my learning. Inviting critical commentary from those whose ideas and experiences inform my work has added another means by which its validity can be checked along the way. This enables (and requires) responsiveness and adaptability on my part as a researcher, leading to an engaged, nomadic approach to qualitative inquiry.

This kind of *ongoing* validity check - which takes into account the fact that people will come to a piece of work with various concerns and criteria for judgement - does not mean ‘anything goes’. It does, however, mean ongoing reflexivity throughout the inquiry process, which in itself has been noted as adding rigor to qualitative inquiry (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

As identified earlier in this chapter, I wish to contribute to a discourse of multiplicity so that human service practitioners and policy-makers can be more responsive within contexts that are always in motion. I do not intend for this inquiry to work towards a fixed representation of what that might look like, such as recommendations for ‘best’ practices. Rather, since my curiosity involves better understanding how to engage within uncertain conditions, then I wish to *perform* this possibility (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998) in the way I undergo this inquiry process as well, in an effort to open space for other ways of being ‘in the meantime’ (Caputo, 1997). Thus, I hope my inquiry will be evaluated on the basis that it does this well, that it responds to this disordered world (Buber, 1923/1970) rather than striving for order within it, and that the *how* and the *what* of this inquiry align.

Against the Current

Critically engaging with how things are done – whether human service practices, or the ways we most regularly research them – is important when it comes to both social justice work,

and social constructionist ways of understanding the world. Gergen (2009) highlights the importance of such critical engagement as follows:

By placing our traditions under critical scrutiny they become denaturalized. That is, life as we know it ceases to be a reflection of human nature at work, but a tradition that has become so commonplace that we forget that it is a human creation. And if it is a human creation, we have the power to create alternatives. (p. 27)

As I reflect on my experiences above of negotiating my way through the dominant practices within social science research, I consider my satisfaction. Am I satisfied because I have managed to seep through the cracks of these seemingly immovable structures? Do I think that in some small way I am nudging them in the direction of alternatives that feel more suited to my style of inquiry? Alternatively, have I simply joined another community of thought, including a great many postmodern researchers who have paved the way for this inquiry with their previous and ongoing work (such as Clarke, 2005; Lather, 1991; and St. Pierre, 2000). Or – a third possibility – am I satisfied because I am, in fact, not swimming against the current after all? Am I allowing it to carry me with it? Am I fooled into believing I am somehow resisting, simply because within the confines of what already *is* I have been permitted to use my preferred language, or style, or approach? Blades (1997) suggests that consultation can in fact be a means by which power dynamics can persist, unchanged. Or, to use the words of Rose (1998), “the conduct of conduct” is the most effective way of re-instating the status quo, as it is unlikely to be met with resistance. If I, as a researcher, *believe* I am self-driven, while at the same time I am working precisely within institutional confines, then both I and the institution can rest easy.

But can I?

I suspect all three possibilities are at play in this experience. At this point I am reminded of the importance of continuously reflecting on what I do and how I proceed - and of asking questions. Although an answer to this one is not yet forthcoming, I will keep it with me as I move forward.

CHAPTER 4:

Writing Through: Research as Process *and* Product

For me to pursue the methodological possibilities towards which I am striving, *how* I write through them is of no minor significance. Richardson (2000) notes that “how we are expected to write affects what we can write about ... The conventions hold tremendous material and symbolic power over social scientists” (p. 7).

In order to engage with this inquiry and to explore outside of that which has been naturalized as *the* way to do research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), writing cannot merely be a matter of documenting after the fact. Documenting prior learning may indeed be straightforward to evaluate and respond to, but as a process it does not contribute deeply to my learning, and makes “creative insight far more difficult” (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 139). Moreover, writing in a way that suggests the writing itself is somehow separate from the inquiry process is not congruent with my theoretical orientation or experience of research. Instead, I will follow the leads of both Richardson (2000) and St. Pierre (1997), the latter of whom states that she intends to use “writing as a method of inquiry in [her] study and to pay attention to both the process and the products of that work” (p. 408).

Where to Begin?

While the answer to this question may seem to be obvious, once again, my experience tells me it is not. Assuming that I can begin writing about my methodological process at the ‘beginning’ of it would wrongly assume that I was a blank slate when I started this process, uninformed by prior experiences. But, as described earlier, it has been those prior experiences that led to my curiosity and then to my desire to engage in research in order to address it. Thus, the beginning is no place to start.

Caputo (2000) asserts that we *cannot* begin with the beginning, with some “imaginary zero degree” (p. 12). We can only begin where we are, with our responses to what came before, recognizing that we cannot imagine what will come next. It is through the process of inquiry that the refining may (or may not) take place, not before. As Caputo (1993) bravely admits, “I begin wherever I am, in the midst of multiple obligations, in the plural and the lowercase, nothing capitalized or from on high” (p. 6). And ‘in the midst’ is precisely where my starting line is.

In fact, most of the words you have read thus far were not initially written in the form (or the order) in which you now see them. The advent of modern technology has allowed me to copy and paste from many of my previous musings, articles, school assignments, candidacy papers, proposals, learning journals, and notes. Rather than a linear process of developing a methodology step by step, this writing process has, in large part, been a matter of drawing from my past reflections and seeing how they might inform my research methodology moving forward. Very much in the midst, I have been traveling back and forth through time, collecting thoughts and ideas, revising as I go, bringing me to the present moment.

But there is no reason to assume now that I am here the process will begin moving forward in a linear way. As I read, write, and converse, I continue to take notes - in tandem with the current piece of writing. To these notes I will continuously return throughout the entire process, ensuring that I will never be anywhere *but* in the midst. In this way, writing is an integral part of my research process, not simply a matter of ‘writing up’ an accurate representation of the research once it has been done. Thus, perhaps a more fitting preposition than ‘up’ is ‘through’. I will spend the remainder of this chapter clarifying how ‘writing through’ is a significant methodological component of this study.

Writing as Self-Reflection, or Dialogue?

As I have attempted to demonstrate periodically throughout this book, self-reflection “is at the heart of responsible and ethical practice” (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998, p. 92). Indeed, by making a habit of writing, I regularly come face to face with my own assumptions and biases, which may otherwise go unnoticed – or more easily get swept under the carpet. A great many thinkers and writers have made the case for keeping a journal in order to reflect on those otherwise unconscious aspects of ourselves and our actions (Altricher & Holly, 2005; Blades, 1997; Goodall, 2008).

But thinking of writing purely as a means to self-reflect may overlook one important assumption underlying this work: I am not autonomous. Or I should say: my autonomy is constructed within relationships (Gergen, 2009). As such, even the process of self-reflection described above is “inherently social and interactive from the beginning” (Nollman & Strasser, 2007, p. 96). Thus, writing is not only a process through which I might more thoughtfully engage with my own understandings. It is also a process by which I might engage in dialogue with others.

Research for which writing is an integral part of the process can be thought of in the way Nussbaum (1990) describes improvisation when it comes to stage acting. Rather than simply following the steps provided by a script, improvisation requires responsiveness on the part of the actor. Nussbaum says,

The salient difference between acting from a script and improvising is that one has to be not less but far more keenly attentive to what is given by the other actors and by the situation ... An improvising actress, if she is improvising well, does not feel that she can say just anything at all. She must suit her choice to the evolving story, which has its own form and continuity ... More, not less, attentive fidelity is required. (p. 94)

If understood in this improvisational way, writing *as* dialogue – with ourselves, with others, with the systems in which we work, and with our subject of study – allows us to move from reflection to *reflexivity*, which involves much more than just mirroring back. As described by Alvesson and Skoldberg, (2009), reflexivity is not “a one-way street between the researcher and the object of study; rather, the two affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research process” (p. 79). By writing throughout this ongoing dialogical process, researchers can make this reflexive dynamic both more explicit and more intentional. Importantly, we can also be sure not to follow research guidelines as scripts, but be responsive and attentive, like Nussbaum’s actor, above.

It is also useful to think of writing in terms of dialogue in order to remember that as a writer, the researcher is always engaging *with* someone. Whether or not my audience is my *intended* audience cannot be known (certainly not in advance), but understood as a dialogue with someone else, research writing becomes a very different process from simply putting ‘results’ out there into the ether via the written word. Dialogue requires both listening *and* speaking. Without listening, my research will be more likely to be unwittingly driven by my preconceptions. But if I remember that engaging in dialogue means listening along the way, then I will be more likely to respond to new information that presents itself – even if it may drive me off the course I thought I should be on. Writing is a useful tool by which this vital interactive process of listening and responding can occur, enriching the research process and also contributing to rigor within it (Goodall, 2008; St. Pierre, 2000).

A third reason it is valuable to think of writing as dialogue is because dialogue is not just about the finished product. It is a process that is comprised of tiny increments. Likewise, so is

writing. Gergen (2009) illustrates writing-as-dialogue in the following way in the opening of his book, *Relational Being*:

As you read these lines, isn't it clear: *You* are the reader, *this* book is before you, and *I* am the writer. We have, then, three entities – you, me, and the book – each separate and distinct. But reconsider: As I write I am using words that are not my own; I am borrowing from countless sources and shaping them for you ... Consider as well that the words on this page are not the specific property of the book itself ... all that it says ... is borrowed from elsewhere – one might have said ‘from me’ if only we knew where I began and ended. But hold on; precisely who are *you* in this situation? As these words crowd your consciousness are they not defining who you are at this moment? ... At the moment of reading, there is no clear separation between me, the book, and you. ... And as you put this book aside and speak to others, so will we be carried into the future. (p. 29, emphasis in original)

Recognizing writing – and reading, for that matter – as relational processes in which reader and writer are engaging with each other *and* with the material world enables researchers to be responsible and responsive in not only what, but *how* we write.

Fourth – and finally – understanding writing as part of an ongoing dialogue can be considered an ethical move. Jovchelovitch (2008) reminds us that there is “an ethical imperative of recognizing the other” in knowledge construction (p. 24). In the social sciences in particular, “non-dialogue provokes short-term solutions that do not work in the long run and prevent the expansion in the boundaries of all knowledges involved” (p. 31). Thus, if research is being conducted with aims of contributing to the social world, then recognizing research as part of that social world is of utmost importance. In order to effectively do so, engaging in dialogue

throughout the research process can be considered a responsibility of social science research – and writing is a powerful way of doing just that.

Form Matters

Although the relational dimension of writing as process has been emphasized, not just *any* writing will do. For instance, Blades (1997) reminds writers that

[i]f post-modern writing is an ethical act to open possibilities for freedom from the destining of modernity, then the author has an obligation to not make the presentation *so* strange or (not)familiar that the reader becomes bored or unable to make any sense of the text. (p. 127)

As another example, McKendry (2003) suggests that while debate can be “divisive, coercive and non-collaborative”, performance can bring people together towards the construction of a more collaborative public sphere (p. 1). In short: presentation matters. It is, in fact, for this reason that I have chosen to write about my methodology here in its own book, rather than in conjunction with the subject-related learning that has taken place throughout the course of this study.

The choice to write two books is of course a decision about form, but when it comes to the form of each of these books themselves, while similar (as it is my voice in both), they may look a little different. That said, both are greatly influenced by ideas about narrative, and this is by design. Writing is important beyond my own learning: it is in large part through writing that I hope to share my research with others, and engage with them in pursuing alternative approaches to supporting children and families. Thus, how I write is not only significant in terms of my interpretation and analysis. Perhaps more importantly, it is significant in that it can play a major role in whether or not I even *have* an audience with whom to share my learning (Goodall, 2008).

As a form of writing, *narrative* typically engages listeners. It encourages mutual sharing and listening, rather than defensiveness or adversity which is sometimes invited with abstract analysis or debate (Gergen, 1999; Goodall, 2008). If writing-as-dialogue is the goal, then attending to the types of responses a particular form of writing evokes is of crucial importance. Nussbaum (1990) sees an intimate connection between narrative form – stories in particular - and philosophical concerns in that

... stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them; to wait for the outcome, and to be bewildered – to wait and float and be actively passive. (p. 184)

Stories induce an embodied willingness in the reader/listener to be engaged without controlling - or as Nussbaum says: an active passivity. They open us up in a way that arguments and well-constructed essays do not, allowing us to feel the power of powerlessness introduced by Caputo (1993). From this place, we might find ourselves more able to be responsive to the particular Other, rather than being guided by an abstract universal other (Levinas, 1981/1998). Particularly if research wishes to contribute to concrete change, then writing in a way that invites this receptiveness in readers is a worthy consideration.

Reflexive Nomadic Writing

I find myself circling back to where I began, as this brief discussion on form reminds me of Richardson's (2000) recommendation that attention be paid not only to what we write, but how. Now more than ever I am convinced that attention should be paid to the process of writing, and that writing must accompany this inquiry throughout its entirety, not just at the end (St.

Pierre, 1997). Writing ‘through’ can enable me to make choices as I go, revisit them, and change direction as needed. It can give me the freedom not to adhere to a particular method too closely, but to be transparent about significant decisions along the way based on the learning as it occurs.

Reflexivity (discussed above) has become somewhat of a catchphrase in qualitative research, but the word is generally employed to emphasize the importance of careful attention to interpretation and reflection (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). In order to demonstrate reflexivity, it is increasingly recommended that researchers “write themselves into” their work (p. 270). Doing so offers transparency of process for readers, so that research does not only produce knowledge, but also “provides insight on how this knowledge is produced” (Pillow, 2003, p. 178), which is necessary from a postmodern position that does not accept knowledge as simply ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered.

This is, obviously, easier said than done. Pillow (2003) critiques researchers who simply locate their work situationally in order to get themselves off the hook of deep critical reflection. Instead she advocates something called “uncomfortable reflexivity – a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (p. 188). How to convey this uncomfortable reflexivity to readers is another question entirely. As a start, she suggests the research community could benefit from more examples of messy, unsuccessful, or incomplete works. St. Pierre’s (1997) offering of nomadic writing is another promising approach.

Nomadic writing draws directly from Richardson’s (2000) concept of using writing as a mode of inquiry in research projects. St. Pierre (1997) describes it as an ethical research practice in part because of its transparency. But more importantly, it is ethical because it enables research to move outside of the expected, to push the limits of the taken-for-granted trappings of order,

systems, distinct fields of study, and the quest for outcomes. She describes nomadic writing as follows:

This kind of writing is antihierarchical ... It stalls, gets stuck, thumbs its nose at order, goes someplace the author did not know existed ahead of time, stumbles over its sense, spins around its middle foregoing ends, wraps idea around idea in some overloaded imbrications that flies out of control into a place of no return. (p. 414)

Used as a tool to invite the unexpected, it is not written *by* its authors; nomadic writing “write its authors” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 414). Haphazard as this may sound, research requires a degree of chaos. Without letting go of control, nothing new would be learned; we would simply prove and re-prove what we expected from the beginning. But remember, nomadic ways of being are not passive. There is intention, along with a willingness to be responsive to conditions. The use of this metaphor is thus a good reminder of the kind of attention that is required to work in such a way. As such, it holds relevance not only in relation to writing practices, but in relation to *all* practices, according to Braidotti (2006). Her notion of nomadic subjectivity will be explored later in relation to research, practice, and citizenship in general.

Engaging in dialogue, influenced by the power of narrative form, and relinquishing control in favour of ‘reflexive nomadic writing’ ... all of this certainly complicates notions of what it means to write one’s research. But this book is an attempt for me to write through this process. As I mentioned in the opening chapter, I do not intend to offer a template for others to follow – St. Pierre’s description of reflexive nomadic writing, above, clarifies why this would be impossible.

If I believe, as stated earlier, that social change is not a technical matter of prescribing what to *do*, but an ontological and relational matter of rethinking how to *be*, then I’d better be

prepared to 'be' differently too. 'Writing through' this research, then, is the best way I can think to give that an honest effort.

CHAPTER 5:

So What *Is* Your Methodology, Anyway?

I have spent a lot of time trying to conceptualize a methodological approach in which the significance of the relational dynamic (introduced earlier) is acknowledged - not only within the subject of my study, but also within the inquiry process itself. And, as is so often the case, in an effort to press forward, I find myself drawn back in time ...

Metaphorically Speaking

When I was in Grade six there were a couple of important developments happening in my life. One, which was an immediate concern, was the upcoming science fair. I didn't really want to do a typical experiment, but I wasn't quite sure what it was I wanted to explore. The other, which was an exciting aspect of my life but less pressing, was the fact that I had within very recent years been developing a relationship with a 'new' uncle. We seemed to be genuinely getting to know each other as people, rather than simply slipping into the predictable roles of uncle and niece. I eagerly soaked up every opportunity to connect with him.

When my uncle learned about my science fair dilemma, he and I began exploring ideas together. I can't quite remember how it unfolded, but under his tutelage I eventually settled on an exploration of perception for my 'scientific' study. My young mind was hanging onto these complex ideas by a mere thread, but with the help of some visual representations, they began to make sense to me, even as we set to the task of complexifying them.

We began with a sketch of the map of Newfoundland, my home province. The rough shape was already pressed in my mind with such familiarity I could have drawn it in my sleep. The 'shape' of Newfoundland was a fact I had never previously thought to question. From there

we looked at an aerial photograph of the same land mass. Carefully studying both, we began to see nuances in the photograph that were not present on the line drawing.

We then looked at an image that was taken from even a closer vantage point. It no longer presented the entire island, but I could readily recognize it as its west coast. That was where I lived. In this image, there were more details: I could see wharves and boats, as well as colourful houses dotting the coastline. The picture actually looked nothing like the original line drawing. It was interesting to note that even the coastline itself had more visible nooks and crannies. The line was not straight or even smooth. Now that I thought about it, there was nothing that resembled the original drawing anymore. Yet my mind perceived them as the same thing.

Finally, we looked at a photograph that could have been taken by looking down at one's feet when standing at the water's edge. Rocks, sand, water, and foam mingled together in such an arrangement that the term 'water's edge' was hardly accurate any longer. I still knew it to be the west coast of Newfoundland, although at this point I would not have recognized it as such. It could have been anywhere. And even though I say 'coastline', the line that had been so clean and clear in the original sketch of the island was no longer legible. In fact, looking at the coast from this close a vantage point, it became impossible to discern where the land ended and the water began. Depending on how I chose to view it, I could perceive the image as if the water was sitting on top of the land, gradually petering out until it was nothing more than dampness on the rocks. Or, I could perceive it as if the land was slowly disappearing under the ocean, until it was nothing more than shapes, then shadows, then dark nothingness. The only things that were clear to me were a) the fact that how I approached the image determined what I saw in it, and b) that by looking at the coastline closely enough, there was no way to distinguish its various components from those which surrounded them.

The metaphor of the coastline clarifies for me my resistance to focusing my research in terms of content. Trying to define a focused content area artificially draws lines around things which I understand to be relationally constituted. Might we instead strive for language that articulates the intricacy of the coastline, as well as the fact that it is neither land nor ocean, but a relational process of the two constantly intersecting, interacting, and re-forming each other? By drawing from thinkers such as Buber (1923/1970), Gergen (1994), Levinas (1981/1998) and Butler (2004), perhaps we can continue the cultivation of such a discourse, enabling us to address particulars, recognizing at the same time that they are co-constructed through complex, dynamic, situated processes (Scott, 1998). Can this metaphor help me conceptualize the relational approach proposed by these and other thinkers in a way that recognizes it as relevant and grounded in lived experience, not idealistic and unattainable? Can it provide an avenue for me to continue asking questions, without having to shut out possible ‘right answers’ to them? Can it help to cultivate norms that do not insist on a fixed truth about what is, but instead invite reflection on the ebb and flow of interaction? Can it enable me to inquire and even make judgements in a way that does not force me to draw artificial lines around phenomena, but recognizes that those lines are merely representations of something much more dynamic – like the coastline?

Phenomenology

When I initially shared this reflection with my supervisor, she told me I had metaphorically represented phenomenology. I hadn’t had a lot of exposure to phenomenology at that time, but my first inclination was to articulate how what I was trying to express differed from phenomenology. I understood phenomenology to presume an essence to all things or phenomena (Wertz, 2005). I thought it was a methodology that centred finding ways to access

that essence, led by a belief that we could somehow accurately direct our focus “to the things themselves!” (Heidegger, 1962/2008, p. 50), unencumbered by perception. I was concerned by the sound of phenomenological techniques such as bracketing (Wertz, 2005), description, and reduction (Lucia Araujo Sadala & de Camargo Ferreira Adorno, 2002) by which researchers could get to this essence, and was also concerned by the use of such words as ‘objective’, ‘nature’, and ‘unveiling’ that frequently appeared in modern phenomenological writing (see LeVasseur, 2003; Lucia Araujo Sadala & de Carmargo Ferreira Adorno, 2002). My initial understanding of phenomenology was that on the one hand it is a science driven by a curiosity similar to my own: the researchers I read spoke of inquiring into the relational nature of phenomena such as perception, experience, and interpretation, for example. But on the other hand, when these researchers began to describe how they approach this curiosity I found myself resisting, because they seemed to approach the world from positivist understanding of what reality is; they seemed to believe they could access Truth.

My supervisor still insisted that Merleau-Ponty’s particular approach to phenomenology might resonate for me, so I decided to expose myself to it. Drawing from Heidegger, but pressing further still, Merleau-Ponty is even more willing to forego certainty. When I finally ventured toward reading his words directly, all else fell by the wayside. In *Eye and Mind* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), his writing is so poetic that my experience of reading it was more than cognitive. It was my first exposure to phenomenological writing that effectively enacted what it wished to explore. The ‘what’ and the ‘how’ aligned beautifully. To illustrate what I mean by this I will share how he conveys “the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed” (p. 3), by drawing from art:

Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees ... possessed of no other 'technique' than the skill his eyes and hands discover in seeing and painting, he gives himself entirely to drawing from the world (p. 3) ... The eye is an instrument that moves itself, a means which invents its own ends; it is that which has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the traces of a hand ... The painter, any painter, while he is painting, practices a magical theory of vision ... It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze ... The painter's role is to circumscribe and project what is making itself seen within himself It becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted ... The painter's vision is an ongoing birth. (p. 6)

This excerpt (and, I could happily go on!) pulls together the many theoretical threads I identified as important in the previous sections: the relational nature of being emphasized by social constructionists (Gergen, 1994; 2009), the roles of materiality (Clarke, 2005) and embodiment (Bastian, 2006) addressed by postmodernists, and the importance of how ideas are conveyed through writing as highlighted by Nussbaum (1990), Richardson (2000), and St. Pierre (1997). Finally - and perhaps most significantly for me - is the fact that the subject of Merleau-Ponty's analysis is not the painting as product (noun) but is the painting as process (verb). It is the ongoing conversation that occurs during the doing that is portrayed as most transformative. The reason I say conversation (and not only response) is because in the above excerpt, Merleau-Ponty does not place all agency within the painter/subject. There is also a willingness to forfeit agency, an acceptance of not-knowing that is required for the painter to adequately receive the mountain's presentation of itself. Methodologically speaking, this is what I did not encounter in

the other phenomenological texts I read, which seemed to be more concerned with working towards accurate findings or representations. But with this writing, Merleau-Ponty effectively demonstrates for me the potential that lies in work that has process as central to its content, its method, and even its product.

The openness required for the painter to be able to fully and effectively engage in the painting (process) by submitting himself to it does not defeat him or render him powerless. Instead, his acceptance that no painting is the complete or final action allows him to understand every painting as a contribution towards something beyond it (which will remain unknown). And perhaps ironically, it is this forfeiting of control that has the potential to contribute something great – not only the product, but the process that occurs in the collaborative construction of it (Braidotti, 2006; Caputo, 2000; Gergen, 2009).

This is not the same as humility, nor is it idealistic. It is, rather, grounded in lived experience and dynamic, relational notions of power. Reflecting on Merleau-Ponty's painter has helped me to think differently about inquiry in the social sciences. In fact, many of the authors I have cited thus far are working in a similar direction, although not explicitly aligning themselves with phenomenology (Caputo, 2000; Gergen, 2009; Nussbaum, 1990). I, too, wish to approach this inquiry as does the painter who "thinks in painting" (p. 12).

It is precisely this movement away from mastering in a finite way, toward intentional engagement in an ongoing way, that I am striving for in my own work (and about which I am curious in terms of human service practice in general). However, Butler (1988) cautions us that while the strength of a phenomenological approach lies in its commitment to grounding theory in lived experience, it is important to be cognizant of a potential risk that lies in such a commitment. Wedding oneself too loyally or literally to this emphasis on the politics of acts

themselves, one might forget that “the relation between acts and conditions is neither unilateral nor unmediated” (p. 525). So for Butler – and for me in the current project – while attention to particular acts as they are performed can shed light on important possibilities for change, the focus is not on individuals themselves as completely autonomous change agents, but “transforming hegemonic social conditions” since individual acts do not only constitute, but are also constituted by those conditions (p. 525).

This ‘chicken/egg’ dilemma may leave us feeling like we are running around in circles, which indeed we are. In order to address this adequately, it is probably a good time to add hermeneutics to this discussion.

(Radical) Hermeneutics

When I initially found myself disagreeing with my supervisor about phenomenology it was because I believed I had already ‘found’ the approach that best suited my methodological inclinations. I recognize the hypocrisy I exhibit in admitting that: I was adhering to particular ideas in just the way I had been intending to avoid all along. I thought the coastline metaphor was a fitting illustration of hermeneutics – radical hermeneutics to be precise. Introducing myself to phenomenology complicated things in a way I had not invited. However, this exploration has helped me flesh out, situate, and contextualize my ideas, thus enriching them. This does not mean I now abandon hermeneutics in favour of phenomenology. It means I have a better understanding of how they both inform the way I will engage in research.

As described by Heywood and Stronach (2005), hermeneutics as a scientific methodology centers the importance of interpretation. It rejects “the correspondence theory of truth,” in order to emphasize “understanding as a situated event in terms of individuals and their situations” (p. 115). From a hermeneutic perspective, then, the goal of science cannot be

untampered truth drawn from raw data, but rather engagement in a “... dialectic – as a mutual and recursive provocation” (p. 116). By acknowledging up front the active role of the researcher in such a dialectic, hermeneutics allows researchers to do things – as opposed to prove things – through their research. Hermeneutic researchers explore ‘texts’ (as opposed to ‘facts’ or ‘data’), drawing attention to the fact that interpretation occurs not only after ‘data’ are collected, but that interpretation is going on all the time, already. From this perspective, researchers are simply stepping into an ongoing interpretive and constructive process, which is both continuous and multi-directional, meaning that as a researcher, all I can do is engage, not ‘conclude’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

Such a busy state of affairs does not organize neatly into a linear logic. Instead, Heidegger (1962/2008) speaks of the hermeneutic circle, which describes a “constant alternation between merging into another world and linking back into our own reference system” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 120). It also involves a constant shifting of one’s gaze by zooming in to particulars and panning out to larger situations in order to always remain cognizant of how each informs and is informed by the other (Kvale, 1996). This brings us to “a knowledge which is wavering” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 121) but relevant in an ever-changing social world.

As did Gadamer (1975/2004), Polkinghorne (2000) reminds us not to think too mechanically about hermeneutics. While it was introduced above as a scientific methodology, Polkinghorne understands it instead as a philosophy which can inform both the inquiry process itself and the product of inquiry (the *how* and the *what* of research). That is, a hermeneutic philosophy will call up a situated, “... textured, interrelated understanding of the significant aspects of the situation” (p. 462); it will also lead us to certain possibilities when it comes to how to respond to (or within) that situation as it is understood. Thus, in a very pragmatic way, this

philosophical understanding contributes to the construction of a dialectic that never ends, but “leads to progressively more adequate responses without a final closure” (p. 475), as the situation continues to change with each new response. Polkinghorne is emphatic about the importance of historical and spatial particularity of hermeneutic interpretation. In this way, it is a fitting complement to phenomenology, not an alternative (see Heidegger, 1962/2008).

Caputo (2000) concurs that hermeneutics is much more than a methodological approach. He (1997) endorses hermeneutics’ willingness to acknowledge the interpreted and constructed nature of all that we may presuppose to be factual. This acknowledgement encourages and even demands that we put our own standpoint ‘at risk’ by including it in the fold of our inquiry. However, that is still not quite enough for him. Caputo (2000) also draws Derrida’s deconstruction into hermeneutics in a way that pushes it in an even more radical direction:

Where hermeneutics bows its head to our finite condition, deconstruction does a shocking, lewd dance of infinity which scandalizes the faithful and sends them heading for the doors.

Deconstruction is bad and makes no bones about it. (p. 55)

It is this desire to step across the line and knowingly ignore the limits of possibility in a subversive move to extend them beyond themselves that Caputo (2000) is working towards with what he calls ‘radical hermeneutics’. Perhaps desire is the wrong word here; although portrayed above as a mischievous rule-breaker, radical hermeneutics is driven by something other than simply making waves. It moves in this radical direction out of obligation.

Obligation is Caputo’s (1993) word of choice, as opposed to ‘ethics’ or ‘responsibility’, in part because it conveys that he is not in control. Much like Merleau-Ponty’s (1964) painter, he is not driving himself, but is driven; not moving, but moves. “Obligation happens,” Caputo observes. “It arises ... from the lack of an alternative” (p. 24). By acknowledging his

situatedness amidst multiple powerful forces that cannot be fully understood, Caputo (2000) suggests that hermeneutics is not a method at all, but “the ontology of understanding itself” (p. 156). And a more radical hermeneutics embraces this ontology in an effort to press it ever so slightly in the direction of the impossible. Amidst this blur of confusion, he suggests that the goal is not to find the correct next step, but instead to “let many flowers bloom ... advocate[ing] pluralisation and novelty, experimentation and innovation” (Caputo, 1993, p. 39). As Fortun and Bernstein (1998) offer: “... it is better to err on the side of openness and multiplicity than on the side of monologic consensus” (p. 134).

In this way, despite the negative connotation of its prefix, deconstruction provides me with a sensation of hope in its insistence on opening up present understandings in order to render alternatives intelligible and thus, possible. As stated by Caputo (1997), “... far from being nihilistic, deconstruction is deeply and profoundly ‘affirmative’ ...[but it] does not affirm what is ... On the contrary, deconstruction affirms what is to come” (p. 41). Importantly, such a perspective affirms what is to come without confirming precisely what that is, for that would limit possibility. Instead, it is the trust, openness, expectation, and readiness for the unknown that makes deconstruction so powerful and promising.

The responsibility this implies is not only current, but constant. It involves responsiveness to the multiple possibilities of what may lie ahead and the willingness to shift and adjust in light of it. In other words, when we accept that what is to come is completely unknown (at present, impossible) then we are required to reflect on how to conduct ourselves in the meantime. For (as Caputo reminds us), “it is always the meantime, the in-between time, just because what is coming is always to come” (p. 70, emphasis in original). Recognizing that my role as a researcher is not to reach the end, but to ethically engage ‘in the meantime’ feels about

right. Deconstruction, Caputo (1997) says, “does not come down to knowing anything, but to doing something” (p. 112).

On that note, the coastline metaphor introduced above can effectively illustrate the importance of radical hermeneutic interpretation in initiatives within the human services. Engaging in this constant inward and outward movement and critically reflecting throughout the process can set the stage for encounters with ‘the Other’ (Levinas, 1981/1998). These encounters can attune me to nuances of the coastline that I may not have noticed before, and prepare me to recognize and respond to small changes if and when they occur. Recognizing the relational nature of this process, my responsibility is to consider my own part within the encounter (whether in research or practice). And since I can never be certain about what lies ahead, my engagement in each moment along the way must be such that I can be responsive to each unknown next moment.

I am not proposing the coastline as a new shared metaphor to replace those already being employed. I believe the metaphors of lines of flight, rhizomes, and the fold (Winslade, 2009), for example, serve similar functions. This particular metaphor, however, challenges me to continue looking more and more closely at those things I take for granted (such as the ‘shape’ of Newfoundland), and to question some implicit assumptions in an attempt to contribute to a discourse of multiplicity. In so doing, it illustrates my key methodological concerns.

Muddling Through

So is this inquiry primarily ‘phenomenological’ or ‘hermeneutic,’ or something else entirely? As demonstrated above, I have been influenced by both schools of thought in ways I was not entirely aware. When I tried to contain my methodological influences to a particular approach I limited my ability to respond to the unexpected, thus restricting the potential learning.

Indeed, I am sure there are possibilities (many of them) that are at play that did not make their way into the above discussion, just as phenomenology would not have if it had not been recommended.

Observing how influences have found their way into my work thus far can serve as a powerful case in point for the methodological approach I wish to take. It also illustrates how a discourse of multiplicity might be worth working towards in this inquiry, as there is no singular or linear way to describe this process. To assume a tidy logic ignores the many other factors at play that contribute to the development of my ideas (such as the amount of time I have for reading, the informal conversations I have with friends around the dinner table, a childhood science project, the influence of my supervisor and other mentors, and the fact that I am drawn to creative processes). By writing in the midst of it I can document and explore the ‘kludged’ reality that is this research (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998) because I believe that to be my only choice. There is no ‘after the fact’ in this ongoing process.

Fortun and Bernstein (1998) insist that ‘mudding through’ is the way all sciences work – and have always worked. Regardless of tidy public representations, “any decent scientist knows that results and explanations are always open to revision” (p. xiv). Rather than keeping this messy reality a secret, they suggest “an emphasis on muddling actually forces us to a new kind of precision – both practically and conceptually ... [so that] precision and ambiguity end up in an uneasy co-existence, requiring a series of judgements” (p. 17-18). The relational dynamic at play described above in my own process of developing ideas effectively demonstrates exactly this point, and serves as an example as to how phenomena (including but not limited to scientific inquiry) simultaneously constitute and are constituted by reality (Butler, 1988) – harkening back to the ocean and the land within the ever-shifting coastline.

CHAPTER 6:

Planning the Unplannable: Trying to *Design* an Emergent Study

Elizabeth St. Pierre (1996) highlights the responsibility held by *readers* in the production of knowledge:

Since meaning does not reside in the text itself but in the transaction between the reader and the text ... readers have always been and continue to be required to do some very hard work indeed. Most importantly, in light of the kind of work we do in academia, readers need to be able to identify broad theoretical frameworks, including their own, within which knowledge is produced. Each framework has its limits and its possibilities; each framework shuts down and opens up knowledge production. (p. 535-536)

Within this inquiry I intend to take such a responsibility seriously. By engaging with existing texts and practices in ways that push beyond the limits of which St. Pierre speaks, I aim to make intelligible new (or existing) possibilities for justice-oriented human service practice. I intend not only to consider why things are the way they are, but also how they *might* be otherwise. My engagement with human service practice will extend to the discursive practices within which they are located. What might be the logical extension of discursive threads that have *not* yet been taken up? My intention is not to pose a new preferred single truth, but to allow for multiplicity, or as Caputo (1993) says, “to let many flowers bloom” (p. 39).

The purpose of my study, then, is to *open up space for alternative possibilities when addressing social problems* (other than locating them inside individuals). I wish to consider how we might move forward in the midst of uncertainty: what other possibilities may exist? What are the extensions of those possibilities?

I will not imagine these possibilities on my own. Instead, I wish to do the work to which St. Pierre (1996) refers, and engage with existing texts in order to consider what other possibilities may have presented themselves already (or at least what *seeds* of possibility have). What alternatives have been in evidence but for various reasons have not been taken up? What might happen if they were? What alternatives *are* being taken up, but may not be recognized as viable? What might be the implications of these other realities if taken seriously within human service practices or other efforts towards social justice? What shifts need to take place in order for this to happen? How might these shifts occur?

Context

While my overriding interest is social justice in general terms, I have located this study within human service practices in particular. Aldarondo (2007) reminds us that most helping professions (including but not limited to family therapy, social work, counselling, and psychiatry) emerged at least in part from a commitment to social justice. That is, from the early days of these professions, “social justice concerns and the will to act on behalf of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy were shared by many of the founding figures” (p. 12). However, as the professions developed and formalized, logistical and other concerns sometimes overtook center stage. Thus, the ability of these initiatives to reform systems became restricted, all too often leaving the ideals of equity and justice that brought them into being in the shadows of yet another individualized professional helping practice (Aldarondo, 2007). Of course this is not the only truth at play. As Foucault (1961; 1972) demonstrates, many institutions that are historically connected with human services (such as schools, asylums, and corrections facilities) emerged in an effort to control and assimilate those who deviated from ‘desirable’ or productive paths.

Either way, while many human service practices are often seen as inherently individual-oriented, I believe they are a suitable place to explore *other* possibilities as it was social aims by which they were (at least in part) initially developed and driven.

While I am not studying within the discipline of psychology in particular, psychological theories are considered foundational knowledge in many fields of human service practice, including early childhood education, child and youth care, social work, and education. Indeed, according to Rose (1998), the ‘psy’ disciplines have played a large role in the increasing emphasis on individuals when it comes to governance and social control. Rose’s interpretation thus provides another important rationale for locating the current exploration within the context of human services practices. If Aldarondo (2007) is right (that helping professions are largely driven by the goal of social justice) and if Rose (1998) is also right (that such practices are actually moving us farther from a just society), then I believe there is indeed a strong likelihood that alternatives do exist *already* within the context of human service practice that could bring us beyond individualizing practices. Through the course of this inquiry my intention has been to become familiar with what some of those alternatives may be, and what dynamics are at play that might enable us to engage differently with them, or cast more light on those who are already doing so.

Related Concepts

Before moving into the program of study, I would like to clarify my use of some of the terms that have appeared thus far.

Justice

My dictionary defines justice quite simply as “fairness” (Bisset, 2002, p. 539), and Rorty describes social justice as “the minimization of useless suffering and humiliation and the

maximal creation of diversity” (in Caputo, 2000, p. 116). Etymologically, ‘justice’ contains elements of both (the quality of being just, and equity) as well as justice in the sense of legal authority (Hoad, 1996). I am reminded by MacIntyre (2006) that the concept of justice itself “appears to be indefinitely contestable” (p. 49). Understanding this to be the case, there are two key aspects to the notion of justice that have presented themselves as relevant for the current study. While discussions of justice certainly extend beyond them, I believe attending to these two key considerations can convey what is meant when I use the word social justice, as they emphasize the vastness of its scope.

First and most significant is the idea that *justice can have no exceptions*. If justice excludes anybody, it does not exist. In Caputo’s (2000) analysis, we have become misguided by thinking about justice in general and universal terms. In his estimation, it might be a mistake to keep our gaze too wide and desire to treat each individual uniformly, in that it leads us to overlook the singularity of all individuals and their unique needs, thus detracting from a kind of justice. Derrida (1995) also distinguishes between initiatives that center the concerns of a generic individual and those that focus on the unique (actual) individual. He says “the individualism of technological civilization ... is an individualism relating to a role and not a person” (p. 36). The danger is that in a quest for perceived justice for all (generic) individuals, actual individuals go unnoticed and are not able to experience the justice being sought in their name. Acting in the name of justice, then, requires attending to particulars, and it does not allow any exceptions to be made. Paradoxical as that may sound, this notion of justice leads to an ethical posture of attending not only to ‘particulars’, but to *every* particular. This also allows for careful attention paid to the fact that there is no consensus as to what ‘justice’ looks like; such an approach requires engaging in each new encounter with fresh eyes.

That is what makes justice an ongoing task, bringing us to a second theme, which is the notion that *justice is always yet to come*. Moss and Petrie (2002) loosely describe justice as responsiveness and responsibility to the suffering of others in all its forms. They emphasize (as influenced by Jacques Derrida) that this responsibility is “infinite” (p. 48) in that it must be ongoing over time and across contexts and is thus always an unfinished project. Caputo (2000) concurs, by saying that “the most unjust and undemocratic thing we can say today is that justice ... is here, today, now” (p. 177). This is crucial because acknowledging that we are constantly in the process of seeking justice keeps us engaged in its pursuit in an ongoing and diligent way. By insisting that justice is always to come, we will expose the present state of affairs to “an absolute scrutiny which has zero tolerance for injustice” (p. 178). By so doing, we intentionally insist on instilling “bad conscience as a kind of structural feature of ethical life” (p. 178). To be clear, Caputo (2000) believes the function of this notion of justice (and of democracy) as *to come* is “entirely critical, not predictive. It is prophetic not in the sense of telling the future, but in the sense of denouncing the limits of the present” so that we may more consciously engage with each other in the present as we move into the future yet unknown (p. 119).

Thus, the concept of justice (fairness, equity) as spoken of above does not exist if 1) it has even a single exception, or 2) we cease pursuing it. It extends infinitely over both space and time and cannot be contained.

Discourse

According to Gadamer (1975/2004), “the truth of things resides in discourse ... and not in the individual words, not even in a language’s entire stock of words” (p. 412). Thus, while the terms language and discourse are often used interchangeably, Gadamer’s observation suggests discourse consists of something much more than language alone.

Wagner, Mecha, and Carvalho (2008) define discourse as “any talking or writing done in a social situation” and adds to that “any overt – bodily – action in a social setting, which by virtue of its semiotic powers conveys meaning to other social actors” (p. 38). The important commonality among these seemingly disparate signs is that meaning is being conveyed through them. But it is not as simple as that: while meaning can be intentionally conveyed by individual actors, their agency is in some ways constrained by the discursive moves of other actors. As Howard (2007) explains, if meanings are conveyed through discourse, then in certain ways potential meanings are delimited by the relational construction of “discursive fields” (potentially intelligible discursive action) (p. 4). These discursive fields, then, both constitute and are constituted by the modes of subjectivity of those individuals who act within them. The collective construction of discursive fields, and constant shifts among them, demonstrate how power dynamics continue to play out: certain interpretations are “favoured, legitimized, and celebrated, while others are criticised, marginalized, and problematized” (p. 5). (At present this could be said, for instance, of ‘bottom-line’ economic discourses, growth discourses, and individualizing discourses).

Thus, the concept of discourse is intricately connected to power relations, in ways that the language is not. Foucault (1972) speaks of “discursive regimes” to explain “the effects of power peculiar to the play of statements” (which easily extends to discursive activity beyond statements) (p. 55). Discursive regimes would be one of many ways ‘power relations’ are enacted. Rather than seeing power as something to be either held or missing, Foucault understands power to be a dynamic, which can recodify in such ways as (for example) reinscribing discourses. Understood in this way, discourse is not merely the words (written or spoken) or actions that convey meanings; discourse is also an important component of power

relations by which all individuals are on the one hand potential agents of change and on the other hand defined by power relations that are already at play. Thus, discourse can simultaneously make “a practice appear routine and ... give rise to possibilities for change” (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p. 1519). It is both of these aspects of discourse that interest me. Taken together they enable this inquiry to include critical engagement with existing practices, but not get so mired in critique that possibility, creativity and the more *generative* functions of power are overlooked (Braidotti, 2006).

Text

Written text can indeed be an effective way to access, observe, and, at times, even alter discourses. I use the term ‘text’ in this literal sense (referring to written documents) at times throughout my inquiry. I also use it in another way:

Because I am interested in the ways discourses are being interpreted always and already, I do not perceive any ‘data’ I encounter to be somehow ‘raw’ or pre-interpreted. For this reason, I agree with Heywood and Stronach (2005) who suggest that the goal of science cannot be untampered truth drawn from raw data, but rather for the researcher to engage in a “... *dialectic* – as a mutual and recursive provocation” (p. 116, emphasis in original). As explained earlier, they claim that hermeneutic researchers explore ‘texts’ (as opposed to ‘facts’ or ‘data’), drawing attention to the fact that interpretation is going on all the time, already.

From this perspective, the word ‘text’ can be used not only to refer to pre-existing written documents, but any discursive construction (be it spoken, written, or enacted). Throughout the course of this study, I also use the term ‘text’ in this way.

Method

I am interested in inquiring into possibilities beyond the individualization of social problems when it comes to striving for social justice. In order to do this, I am influenced by three qualitative approaches to research: 1) situational analysis, 2) discourse tracing, and 3) reflexive nomadic writing.

Situational Analysis

According to relational theorists such as Buber (1923/1970) and Gergen (2004), we only know a situation through our engagement with it; indeed, we only know *our* experience of a situation, which means knowledge is always partial. That said, there are some tools which can help us to relate differently with(in) a situation. Adele Clarke (2005), for instance, recommends an analytical approach called situational analysis, by which we can consider multiple elements of a given situation – including but not limited to the material world, discourses, human actors, non-human actors, cultural influences, policies, systems, and practices – as all constitutive of one another in multiple ways. Situational analysis is a process through which we can explore some of these dynamics, knowing of course that we will always be engaging with them from a particular vantage point. It is useful in that it challenges us to also consider what goes *unsaid*, such as particular sites of tension or omissions. In these ways, it invites us to consider that “a situation is always greater than the sum of its parts because it includes their relationality in a particular temporal and spatial moment” (p. 23).

Situational analysis is not concerned with generating theories, but with cultivating “thick analysis” (p. 29), which can be done through the development of visual tools such as maps. These maps are not to be understood as accurate or complete representations, but can be engaged with in such a way that helps cultivate opportunities to ‘relate’ with aspects of a situation that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. They also encourage attention to be paid not just to the

various components of a situation, but also the spaces between them (that is, relational dynamics through which they are constituted).

Thus, situational analysis involves not only considering what exists in a situation, but what changing dynamics give rise to them (or eliminate them) over time. The ongoing process of inquiring into these dynamics means the ‘map’ itself cannot hold more than fleeting meaning. But *the process of engaging in questioning* that gives rise to multiple maps over time can add ‘thickness’ to the experience for the researchers. In these ways, situational maps are a way of both perceiving and engaging within the constantly changing situation under study. Such an approach to inquiry encourages close attention to even the most nuanced aspects of a situation such as “silences, tacit knowledges and practices” (p. 75), and an acknowledgement that no knowledge is complete or final.

The ultimate goal within situational analysis is not to clarify or predict normative patterns, but to cast light on multiple elements of a situation in order to “interrogate them in fresh ways”, giving way to new possibilities for action that may have previously been unintelligible (p. 83). In this sense, situational analysis can be used as a way to inquire not only into what is (which can never fully be known), but also into what may be.

Discourse Tracing

An interpretive process called ‘discourse tracing’ proposed by LeGreco and Tracy (2009) is a useful way to facilitate the type of ‘thick’ analysis Clarke advocates, by helping me to note not only what is going on in a situation, but also the relationships among various elements. It is the emphasis on “generative transformation” (p. 1537) that particularly intrigues me about this approach. While LeGreco and Tracy (2009) describe four distinct phases of this method, I think of their approach in a less linear fashion.

The components of discourse tracing that are methodologically useful for the current inquiry are 1) the review of existing texts, with an emphasis on discursive processes, 2) chronological organization of such texts, in order to examine relational dynamics among multiple elements of a situation (as well as what is missing), and 3) the development of narratives for the presentation of thick analysis (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009).

Beginning by reviewing literature pertaining to the situation of interest, and then extending outward to include a discursive analysis of other relevant material, I can increasingly deepen my analysis of the situation. As this is taking place, texts (in the broad sense of the term) are organized chronologically. This can enable me to trace discursive threads across times and contexts, to recognize simultaneity, and – importantly – to recognize when discourses are abandoned or transformed. By situationally locating important discursive shifts, I can attend not only to what appears in the texts being explored, but also to what does not appear. By tracing where certain threads appear, travel, and disappear, I would be able to attend to the situational elements at play during those significant shifts, including nonhuman actors (Clarke, 2005). The attention to temporality can shed light on the situation under exploration by illuminating shared situational elements *among* the various aspects of the inquiry that I may not have otherwise recognized as related.

These chronologically ordered texts require a very close reading that I can organize around particular questions posed to the texts, acknowledging my perspective as an integral component of the analysis. My intention here is to provide context-dependant knowledge, rather than universal findings (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). Instead of allowing ‘raw data’ to speak for itself, discourse tracing involves a process of translating the accumulated texts into “a more accessible narrative” (p. 1535). Indeed, I can even translate them into various narratives, telling

different and relevant stories to different audiences, or foregrounding different aspects of the situation. This technique acknowledges the multiplicity of the situation being explored as well as the role of story in meaning making processes (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). Nussbaum's (1990) observation of the relationship between narrative form and philosophical concerns (discussed in Chapter five) supports this approach.

In the case of my current study, I expect to explore not only how individualized approaches to social problems have become dominant practices within the human service professions, but also where other possibilities have emerged – how they have or have not been taken up, and what else was going on at those important junctures, in order to demonstrate where significant relationships exist and the potential for alternatives.

Reflexive Nomadic Writing

As discussed more thoroughly in Chapter five, St. Pierre's notion of reflexive nomadic writing is a significant aspect of this research. I see reflexive nomadic writing as an important complement to the discourse tracing process, as it can help me to make decisions about what to include, where, and why transparent. It can also enable me to undergo Clarke's 'thick' situational analysis as I go, thus helping me to make analytic decisions in a more intentional and informed way. Finally, it provides a means by which I can embrace the ontology of 'nomadism' which Braidotti (2006) advocates as "a necessary precondition for the expression of an ethics that reflects the complexities of our times" (p. 43).

Research Design

The following sections outline in more concrete detail how I *initially imagined* these three influences might find their way into my research design. In them, I will include considerations of which texts I was planning to include, how I expected they would be gathered,

the interpretive process, and presentation. Bear in mind: things do not always unfold as anticipated.

Empirical Landings

Although LeGrego and Tracy (2009) speak of ‘data collection’ within their description of discourse tracing, I agree with Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) who are concerned that the widespread use of this term within qualitative research communities suggests that “many people do not think of the concept as a metaphor” (p. 309). They remind readers that over-confidence in empirical data as ‘the truth’ can fix our attention on the actual and draw it away from the possible – and interpretive inquiry involves more than simply reporting back what already is. As an alternative, their metaphor of “empirical landings” (p. 216) conveys that this inquiry includes but also extends *beyond* the texts being explored. As empirical landings, the texts themselves function both as creative generators for the inquiry to “encourage imaginative richness” (p. 307), and at the same time to set some important limits on the imagination as well. The tension that occurs in the dialectic in the space *between* what is and what may be is cultivated this way. The term ‘empirical landings’ “allows a new understanding of the empirical situation” that is being explored (p. 306).

Because I am curious as to how to engage within human service practices (what opportunities for alternative approaches exist?), the first ‘empirical landing’ I intended to explore was that of child protection practice in British Columbia. To begin, I planned to interview *researchers* who have studied decision making processes among child protection workers. While these interviews would not be representative of human service practices in general terms, it is *particulars* with which I am interested. As particular instances, these interviews could provide a suitable entry point into this inquiry, as the questions these researchers asked the

practitioners they interviewed centred around the issues of decision making and moral deliberation. Based on this research, several articles have been written detailing child protection workers' work environment, the expectations placed upon them, their training, their interpersonal interactions with children and families, and even their own concerns and doubts. In short, they speak of the complex relationship between what child protection workers do and what they *intend* to do, which calls to mind the importance of Aldarondo's (2007) and Rose's (1998) observations discussed earlier. Exploring these diverse texts would enable me to begin the process of tracing multiple discourses with which child protection work takes place: which ones are supported by other (human and nonhuman) actors in the situation, which ones are not, what else is happening in the situation, and what becomes of these multiple discursive threads?

By organizing the information chronologically as recommended by LeGreco and Tracy (2009), I hoped to be able to observe which elements of the situation require more attention in order for me to develop a thicker analysis. I would then take these as cues to explore more texts that could help deepen my understanding of the multiple dynamics at play in those moments. These texts may consist of policy documents, current events as found in the news media, curriculum, or even other interviews. These new texts would likely not only add to my understanding of elements that had already presented themselves, but also present new elements (and new 'empirical landings'), thus deepening my understanding of the situation.

As the process of discourse tracing continued and my analysis of the situation deepened and broadened, I would begin to see narratives emerge: discursive threads that have been taken up and carried through and across multiple 'empirical landings'. I would also likely see the potential for other discursive threads which did *not* get taken up and carried across multiple empirical landings. These would also be of interest to me, and might lead me to explore further

texts to help me understand the relational dynamics at play that precluded them from being carried forward, as well as critically consider the possibilities to which they point.

As such, I expected the processes of ‘data collection’ and ‘data analysis’ to occur simultaneously throughout this inquiry – the ongoing analysis informing what new texts should be explored and when. This would require that I constantly write as I read, in order to be organized and deliberate about selection processes.

Engagement with the Texts

Please note, this is not a study about child protection practice; child protection practice was simply to serve as the first of several empirical landings by which I might consider 1) the discursive process of individualizing social problems and 2) potential for other ways of engaging in human service practices. The inquiry would extend beyond the particular topic of child protection as I was led by the material I explored.

Clarke (2005) describes this type of process (by which new sites of inquiry are added as analysis begins) as “a form of theoretical sampling” - often necessary within qualitative inquiry that explores a situation that does not occur within only one site. So, for instance, the situation which propels me to undergo this study is the prevalence of individualizing discourses when addressing social problems. In the past I have explored this in relation to loss (Newbury, 2007), addiction (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010c), and family support (Newbury, 2009). Others have also examined this situation in relation to diagnosis and mental health (Fewster, 2002; Szasz, 2002), eating disorders (Hoskins, 2002), and gender identity construction (Pascoe, 2007). Since I am inquiring into a situation that emerges in these and many other sites, and since I wish to explore the *relationships among* diverse sites in which there is a tendency to individualize social processes in order to better understand the discursive processes that connect them, it follows that

as I inquire within one empirical landing (ie. child protection), I would likely be led into others by tracing discursive threads.

As recommended by LeGreco and Tracy (2009), particular questions are to be posed by me (the researcher) to the texts. What is gleaned in response to these questions would help determine where I should next move within the inquiry. This enables the process to remain contained, manageable, and focused on the curiosity being addressed. In my case, I planned to ask questions about:

1. Individualizing discourses within human service practices,
2. Alternatives to individualizing discourses within human service practices,
3. Efforts towards social justice within human service practices (and their implications), and
4. Efforts towards social justice outside of human service practices (and their implications).

I imagined that as I engaged with the child protection interviews with these questions in mind, I would document my learning as I went, through reflexive nomadic writing. It is crucial that all steps of this process along the way be thoroughly documented, as this would enable me to determine where I should next seek further texts to explore. For instance, I may have found myself wishing to explore some of the policy documents to which these researchers refer in order to understand the mandates towards which child protection workers strive. On the other hand, I may have wished to interview a worker within a different system (such as a non-profit organization) to understand how he or she may be differently working through similar issues and what other dynamics may be presenting themselves. Then, when I organized these texts chronologically, I might be able to observe relational dynamics between the two systems (the government system of child protection and the non-profit organization) that otherwise may not have been evident. The possibilities are endless, but if I kept my original curiosities in mind and

document thoroughly, the inquiry would guide me in a direction that would help deepen my understanding of the dynamics at play.

Presentation

Earlier in this chapter was a reminder by St. Pierre (1996) that readers hold some responsibility in the production of knowledge. She said that “since meaning does not reside in the text itself but in the transaction between the reader and the text ... readers have always been and continue to be required to do some very hard work indeed” (p. 535). I agree: the hard work involved in this inquiry involves what I choose to do with the texts I encounter.

Folding together LeGreco and Tracy’s (2009) recommendation to construct narratives and St. Pierre’s (1997) recommendation to write nomadically, I determined that each text with which I engaged would leave me with several writing tasks:

1. First, I would reflect on the text in light of the four questions posed above. This should leave me with a document that articulates the key learning as to whether or not individualizing discourses play a role (and if so, how), what other possibilities might exist, and the implications of both in relation to social justice.
2. Second, I would revisit my reflections on the other texts I have already visited, and incorporate this new learning into an ever-growing narrative. This document would continue to grow as I inquire, deepening my understanding of the situation as well as casting light on where more learning was still needed. It might also have lead to the construction of sub-narratives that I began to see emerging, as I recognized even chronological ordering will not bring about one, linear story, but multiple possibilities. I would be interested to learn which possibilities emerged and what their extensions may be.

3. I would be developing an ever-growing ‘situational map’, as recommended by Clarke (2005). This would serve as an ‘at-a-glance’ outline of the narratives that were unfolding. As I added elements to the situation and explored the relationships among them, I would be able to determine the next step for my inquiry: where do I go from here?
4. Then I would begin the process of reading/engaging with new ‘texts’ again.

The above four tasks resemble a back and forth, hermeneutic process of inquiry by which there is constant movement between the whole and its parts (Kvale, 1996), much like the coastline metaphor introduced in Chapter six. I believed this was more fitting for my inquiry than LeGreco and Tracy’s (2009) four distinct steps of discourse tracing, although it does – in the end – encompass them all. I anticipated that when the process is complete, the narratives might largely be written, and could serve as the final presentations of the inquiry. My intention was not to provide conclusions or truths, but to open up multiple possibilities for responsive engagement within human service practices (and beyond). Thus, I hoped that this inquiry could do just that: explore existing alternatives to the individualization of social problems in such a way that they become intelligible, and thus possible.

Limitations

All research has limitations. Research that focuses on a specific content area can achieve depth at the cost of breadth. In the current study, I am seeking breadth - I desire to understand not only certain elements of the current situation of human service practices deeply, but also the relationships *among* them in an effort to consider alternative possibilities. With this quest for breadth comes the risk of another limitation: the possibility that this project could expand to an unmanageable scale.

If seemingly disparate elements of the situation (such as child protection practices, government funding requirements, school curriculums, community-based initiatives, the function of diagnoses in the helping professions, a growth economy, and power relations) are seen to be related through discursive practices, then how and where would I draw the line? At what point would I stop and how would I determine this endpoint?

Fortun and Bernstein (1998) insist that ‘mudding through’ is the way all sciences work – and have always worked. Regardless of tidy public representations, “any decent scientist knows that results and explanations are always open to revision” (p. xiv). Rather than keeping this messy reality a secret, they suggest “an emphasis on muddling actually forces us to a new kind of precision – both practically and conceptually ... [so that] precision and ambiguity end up in an uneasy co-existence, requiring a series of judgements” (p. 17-18).

It has been suggested that “many difficulties in the social sciences appear to be caused by importing a positivist view of how science ‘should’ be practiced” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 22) and that this view is based on an “erroneous picture of how the natural sciences really work” (p. 22). Fortun and Bernstein (1998) support this claim. They insist that we need methods that do not presume certainty, but are honest about the fact that the social and natural worlds are *performed*, not *preformed*. They argue for a reconstruction of “the inquiry infrastructure, and the charged cultural and political territory through which it moves, so that it better serves a system of democratic values” (p. 111). Even though our approaches to knowledge catch us up in their own “unexpected reconstructions” (p. 111), we need “*something* to help us live better with the sciences, in the middle” (p. 261). We are urged to draw from multiple mediums, theories, and methods in order create new assemblages, ones that “threaten to fly apart any minute” in order to pursue sciences more responsibly (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p.

292). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) agree that good research avoids “following a monolithic logic” (p. 201).

So, while the risk indeed exists that this project could “fly apart at any minute”, Fortun and Bernstein (1998, p. 292) suggest that this is an important risk to take if the purpose of the study is to provoke change. I came to the conclusion that my responsibility as a researcher is to be aware of it, to be intentional, organized, and responsive as I go in order to protect against this risk to the best of my ability.

Significance of Research

If embraced as such, perhaps this limitation can indeed contribute to the potential significance of this research. Kincheloe (2001), for instance, describes his *bricolage* approach to research methodology as “boundary work”, and says such research does not only tolerate difference, but *cultivates* it “as a spark to researcher creativity” (p. 687). Intentionally working in and around boundaries enables researchers to critically engage with what is by drawing lessons from across boundaries, pulling old ideas into new contexts, and considering alternative constructions and their implications, thereby pushing the limits of knowledge. This can contribute to innovation rather than replication, privileging possibilities rather than certainty, and help to “discover and develop means for unleashing the flow of meaning” Gergen (2009, p. 371) encourages us to pursue.

Importantly, I believed such innovation could move me beyond critique of the current prevalence of individualizing discourses and practices within the human services. By conducting research that is boundary work, I hoped to push beyond what is towards new possibilities. I believed I could account for the complexities of the current situation and begin to work against the socially constructed constraints that limit our sense of what may be (Kincheloe, 2005).

Perhaps more importantly, through the process of discourse tracing, I expected to be able to bring light to the fact that such processes are already underway. And in this sense, the possibility of *impossibility* might be highlighted (Caputo, 1997), and (paradoxically) the ‘not yet’ *may* in fact be exposed as, in some ways, ‘already here’.

That is what I *planned* to do ... before the impossibility (and incongruence) of planning an emergent study made itself clear to me.

CHAPTER 7:

And Then It All Came to A Screeching Halt

(Alternate title: And Then Things Really Got Started)

Throughout the winter of 2011 I thoroughly enjoyed several months of writing, reading, and deep thinking. During that time I also received approval for my study from the HREB, and felt as though I was well on my way to really embarking on my research. In the spring, I attended several workshops and conferences, including: 1) a two-day symposium entitled *Critically Reflecting on Discourses of Prevention*, 2) the University of Victoria's third *Child and Youth Care in Action* conference, 3) the seventh international *Congress of Qualitative Inquiry* in Illinois, and 4) a two-day intensive training on *Nonviolent Communication*. I was considering each of these events to be an opportunity to do some 'data collection' for my study, as I expected the workshops and presentations to present new and relevant perspectives, which they indeed did. Since there was a lot of learning in a short period of time, I decided to take a little break from writing, assuming I would come back home and then immerse myself in the first of several 'empirical landings' as described in the previous chapter. Whereas up until that point I had been writing and reading simultaneously, I expected the next phase of my research to involve a great deal of reading and interviewing, after which I would organize my notes from these texts and begin to write narratives. This was going to mark a time of transition within my process, from preparation to actual research.

It was all feeling very neat and tidy, and I was ready. But when I finally returned home, I could feel my heels digging in. As I pattered in my garden, went running, and worked on other projects, I wondered where this resistance was coming from. I am generally not a procrastinator,

so I trusted there was more going on. My mind travelled back to the international conference in Illinois I had recently attended ...

Writing as Research

This had been my third year in a row attending the *Congress of Qualitative Inquiry* in Illinois. In fact, it is the same event that propelled me to write this book, as described in the opening chapter. This time, much of my learning at the Congress centered around the use of writing as a mode of inquiry:

The day before the Congress began, I took a pre-conference workshop facilitated by Bud Goodall who is a prolific writer of creative nonfiction and a communications professor. During the three-hour workshop, he taught us about specific narrative techniques (upon which he elaborates greatly in his 2008 book entitled *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life*). He emphasized the importance of not only having a story to tell, but of engaging readers at the outset. Although we have been trained in the academy to think that information is the most important thing where research is involved, Goodall reminded us that that is not how *readers* work – and all the good information in the world is worthless unless someone is engaging with it. Writing, he said, is not about simply documenting information, but developing a relationship with the reader as a co-producer of knowledge. This is not merely a matter of presentation, however. Rather, Goodall insists on embracing the emotive dimension of experience and learning. He said, “reading something that makes us smile or moves us to tears can be a form of learning that is important to the scholarly mission.” He also insists that writing itself is indeed analytical - not just representational - as the choices involved in composition require judgements about what to include and what not to include, decisions about how to represent matters, interpretation, and analysis. In this way, he suggests that we think of the

experience as “writing *to* the conclusion, rather than reporting back” from it. Or, drawing from his colleague Ron Pelias, he said “it is a process of writing *into* rather than writing *up* a subject.”

This approach to writing certainly resonates for me, and I believe I have experienced the transformative potential that lies within it. Much of my learning has come in moments during which I have written through the experience of feeling unclear or stuck. But when I read back over the ‘method’ section of the previous chapter with this in mind, I began to recognize where my resistance may have been coming from. But wait: there’s more.

Elizabeth St. Pierre, whom I have referenced greatly thus far, also presented at the conference in Illinois. I attended several of her talks. As I listened, I simultaneously experienced a) the recognition that her ideas were very much in line with how I have had been engaging with my study up until that point, and with my understanding of qualitative research in general, and b) the awareness that what I had set myself up to embark upon when I returned home – the in-depth engagement with and analysis of specific ‘empirical landings’ – was in fact quite far from what she was describing.

In one of her talks St. Pierre questioned the fact that courses that teach qualitative research methods seem to privilege direct quotes from interviews with participants as if words are neutral and waiting to be interpreted – almost as if they are numbers. Instead, she offered that *all* words are already interpretations, products of theories that can always be reinterpreted by still other theories. Moreover, St. Pierre allows for things that are not words and cannot be reduced to words (such as dreams, emotions, and senses) to also be considered legitimate sources of potential ‘data’ in that they inform new ways of understanding the world. So, while introductory qualitative methods courses often privilege the practice of *collecting* data and then *coding* it in order to *analyse* it, St. Pierre submits that practices such as reading, writing, and

thinking are in fact legitimate qualitative research methods. St. Pierre questions the possibility that ‘collection’ and ‘analysis’ can be separated from the ‘data’ itself; she posits instead that the three come together when a researcher is thoughtfully engaging in inquiry. She said, “I would suggest instead that data are produced, come into existence, in the course of a study” and offers that this often occurs through rigorous reading, writing, and thinking.

On the topic of *reading* as research, St. Pierre asks

Why don’t we treat the words of experts in journal articles, texts that have probably been peer reviewed, with the same privilege as we do the words of participants in interviews, words that may actually have been spoken carelessly, thoughtlessly? I expect it’s because we privilege presence over absence—Foucault’s words seem absent, while the words of Susie, my participant, seem present. But words from journal articles that we collect in the literature review are surely as important as words from interviews that we collect in the field.

And on the topic of *writing* as research, she insists

... that writing is a method of data collection—that when I write, I collect all sorts of data as I write word after word. Struggling to write that next sentence, to say something, to produce meaning, forces me to collect words, data, from everywhere. Words come from a newspaper article I read that morning, from a movie I watched the night before, from my dreams, from a colleague, from any page of a text by Deleuze, from my big, unabridged dictionary that I stand over and read looking for words. All the words I write do not come from my interview transcripts and field notes. An audit trail from those “official” data to my written text is impossible, because I collect more words as I write. *All* the words are data.

Reconceptualizing qualitative research in this way, according to St. Pierre (and I have to agree), is more reflective of interpretive, social constructionist and postmodern understandings of knowledge construction, which I have outlined in greater detail earlier in this book. It does not draw arbitrary distinctions between data collection and data analysis. Nor does it treat some information as ‘raw’ or uninterpreted until it goes through “the validity-making machine” of systematic analysis (as Murphy Augustine expressed it in her presentation at the same conference). Instead, it opens up exciting possibilities for interpretive research as an organic process of learning, described previously as reflexive nomadic writing.

Stated succinctly by Augustine during the conference, analysis is “the intermingling of data and theory and living.” Speaking of her recent doctoral research, Augustine acknowledged that at times she felt insecure about her inquiry process and its legitimacy as research, since she “wasn’t drilling down into anything.” I can relate with that feeling, which may explain why I went to such great lengths to develop the methodical approach to ‘data collection’ and ‘data analysis’ presented in the previous chapter. But, she could not help but continue along these lines as she watched “data and theory contaminate each other in productive ways” when she refused to draw lines between them. Indeed, since so many researchers at this conference convincingly conveyed their experiences of this type of emergent research as richer and more fruitful, I have to consider that St. Pierre may have been right when she proposed in her talk that perhaps “we teach coding because it’s teachable. On the other hand it’s difficult to teach *thinking*, which is what analysis is.”

Did I say that?

At the same conference, I also presented on writing as a mode of inquiry. The following two paragraphs are drawn directly from that brief presentation, which I entitled *Writing Through: Research as Process, Not Product*:

Working from a place of curiosity rather than from a particular research question, has meant my committee and I have also had to learn to be very deliberate about how we engage in this process together. Working without a precise research question and direction has meant a lot more conversations and writing exchanges with them. Since I am interested in how to make meaningful decisions in the midst of uncertainty, I suppose it is fitting that my committee and I are in a constant process of doing just that when it comes to my research. Doing so, I am learning, requires a great deal of trust, humility, and willingness to change courses – on my part and on theirs.

And every time I think I have nailed down the direction I am moving in (with, for example, an outline of a piece of writing) it is necessary for me to remind myself to remain open enough to change it, or even scrap it, when my learning suggests I should. Since the focus of my study is human service systems, which exist to support children and families in constantly changing social conditions, the learning that comes from the moments of tension within this inquiry process is hugely significant for my work.

When I returned home from Illinois, I reflected on those words, as well as the presentations by St. Pierre and others, while I pondered my resistance to proceeding with the program of research outlined in the previous chapter. It quickly became apparent to me that this was indeed one of those times when changing courses might be necessary – once again illustrating for me the value of ‘reflexive nomadic’ research. In fact, as I re-read the ‘method’

section in the previous chapter it became clear that it was driven more by institutional expectations than my own theoretical and methodological approach to research.

Prior to meeting with my supervisor to discuss the possibility of shifting my approach away from in-depth exploration of ‘empirical landings’ and towards a less linear process of ongoing reading, writing, interviewing, learning, and interpreting, I worked through these ideas in my learning journal. In it, I wrote:

As I reflected on the last supervisory conversation Marie and I had, and on my writing thus far, I realized I have actually already begun my research. I began to find it hard to determine why I felt it necessary to dive deeply into particular ‘empirical landings’, when I was already using ‘cases in point’ in my writing and could continue to do so. Marie had expressed concern over the use of the term ‘empirical landings’, and during our conversation, I thought she meant I should just come up with another word.

But now I am beginning to think perhaps I need to come up with another approach. Or rather: I don’t. Perhaps I simply need to keep writing, inquiring, and analyzing through my writing, which I was already doing throughout the winter – as with St. Pierre’s reflective nomadic writing, which I am drawing from so heavily. I’m beginning to realize that to now halt this reflexive nomadic process for the purposes of ‘documenting’ and tracing various discursive threads would mean moving away from the analytic process I’ve been so involved in, and moving towards a more positivist understanding of what research is, and what the process of inquiry looks like. (June 9, 2011)

At the same time that I was experiencing this confusion about my own direction, I was in the midst of reading a beautiful book called *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War* by Susan Griffin (1993). This complex, layered, emotive, and well-researched book was also

influencing my critical engagement with my own inquiry journey in ways I had not anticipated. But as Augustine had stated in her conference presentation: “The best discoveries are always serendipitous.”

I was noticing that the way I was planning to approach the ‘empirical landings’ treated individualizing discourses, relational discourses, and discourses of multiplicity as somehow distinct. Doing so would of course make the process of ‘discursive tracing’ (LeGreco & Tracey, 2009) fairly tidy and manageable. But on a certain level it was becoming clear that such a distinction is an artifice. Rather than enriching my learning, I feared this would limit it. It also represents some discourses in a more favourable light than others, and began to feel like I was being driven by my biases towards certain conclusions before I even began. Later in the same journal entry, I wrote:

What I have learned so far in Griffin’s book (among other things) is that our use of individualizing discourses is very much part of a relational process: thinking, speaking, and behaving in ways that presume the individual is the locus of change is something we have come to do collectively – and it sustains those very systems and practices we may wish to unravel. These discourses are not separate. We cannot move towards alternatives (ie. discourses of multiplicity) without first understanding why we are collectively engaging in the current ways of doing things. This is where power comes in, and I think I need to do far more analysis on that front as well.

So what I am now proposing is that I do not go down the ‘empirical landing’ route at all. I worry that it would keep me stuck in ‘critique’ for far too long, and there is already plenty of that out there. I want to better understand the dynamics at play so that alternatives can be made intelligible (and thus feasible), and I want to know what

alternatives might actually be realistic, given those relational and individualizing dynamics. In order to do so, I want to go through what I've already written and, taking Marie's feedback from our last conversation, be more careful of pitching one way as 'good' and one way as 'bad'. Then, I want to enter into the third section: Discourses of multiplicity, and explore it as I did the first two. And then I want to look at how they are all at play all the time – together, not separately. (June 9, 2011)

The Shift of Gears is No Shift at All

The utility of returning to earlier writing and thinking when it comes to directions for moving forward never ceases to surprise me. This is the case on a historical level of course: There is so much to be learned not from looking ahead, but from attuning our ears to the wisdom of those who came long before us. It is also the case on a personal level.

Whereas I had anticipated my meeting with my supervisor would be a matter of asking permission to change directions, it became clear when we talked it through and when I looked back on my earlier writing that what I was in fact proposing was that I *not* change directions. The opening sentences of the current chapter read as follows: “Throughout the winter of 2011 I thoroughly enjoyed several months of writing, reading, and deep thinking. During that time I also received approval for my study from the HREB, and felt as though I was well on my way to really embarking on my research.” I had been assuming throughout the winter and spring that my return home from the various conferences and workshops would mark a transition, from preparing to do research to actually *doing* it. I was expecting a major shift in my approach to take place at that time.

Interestingly, as it turned out I did not need to ask permission after all. My supervisor was not only supportive of my desire to continue along the path on which I had already been

travelling; she was relieved. She agreed that as an approach it was more congruent with my overall intentions, as described earlier.

The learning from the Congress, the feedback I got from my supervisor on my writing throughout the winter, and my own resistance to this transition all indicated to me that, in fact, I had been doing research all along. The shift in gears needed was no shift at all.

Intentionally engaging with my reading, writing, and thinking as I had been doing and critically reflecting along the way – this is my methodology. And I had already begun. I sense now that I am back in line with the theoretical and methodological approaches outlined in the earlier chapters of this book. This feels like a fit not only for my approach to research, but also for my area of interest: human service practices. As I concluded my presentation at the *Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*, so will I conclude this chapter:

In a recent presentation, St. Pierre exclaimed that for her, “language is movement, and being lost in language is inquiry.” I have to agree. Writing enables me to stay in motion, and that is precisely what I believe I must do: within the systems designed to support children and families, and within my own inquiry into them. Instead of drawing lines around data, I am tracing the movement of its ebbs and flows. By observing the implications of large and tiny shifts, I aspire to imagine the potential that might present itself within them, considering possibilities as to how we might live as part of this constantly changing dynamic while simultaneously inquiring into it. In my experience, it is by blurring the lines between what I am studying and how I engage with it that research comes alive.

CHAPTER 8:

From Nomadic Writing to Nomadic Being

After writing the previous chapter, I temporarily put these methodological musings aside and set to work continuing my exploration of alternatives to the individualization of struggles and support. I interviewed community members, watched documentaries, attended meetings, and read articles, policy documents, and books (lots of books). Throughout it all I wrote, and wrote, and wrote. My writing took me to some interesting places: sometimes exposing me to practices I had never encountered before, and other times challenging me to re-engage with some familiar initiatives by looking at them in a new light. At times I focussed closely on some individual accounts that provided insight into the systems I was exploring; and at other times I zoomed out and considered them in larger - even international – political and economic contexts.

In these ways, I moved through the various discourses I was curious about: individualizing discourses, relational discourses, and discourses of multiplicity. And by also taking a deeper theoretical look at power, I developed a better understanding of how they inform one another and how they play out in the lives of both human service professionals and those we aim to support. I moved where the learning took me, instead of mapping it out beforehand. I did work with outlines, but these too were flexible and emergent – and things moved around, disappeared and reappeared, depending on the possibilities I was being exposed to through the research process.

While still in the midst of the ongoing learning that has been coming from these continuous and simultaneous processes of reading, writing, and thinking, I have become compelled to re-engage now with what this all means methodologically. What I am in fact

experiencing is the coming together of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ to which I have been repeatedly referring. In a profound sense, the change processes I am seeking on a systemic level closely resemble the change processes I am experiencing methodologically throughout the course of my own inquiry. Specifically, the shift from technological-rational to ontological approaches to change is playing out in both my subject matter and my methodology. As explained by Blades (1997), when change is approached as a technical ‘fix’, the result is often a re-enforcement of the status quo. But when change is approached as a way of engaging differently with existing conditions, then there seems to be greater transformative potential. Additionally, for both my subject matter and methodology, the notions of multiplicity and nomadic forms of movement are also central.

Since I have already explained how these ideas inform methodology, what I would like to share now is the way I have been making sense of them within my subject of study – shifting from discussions of nomadic writing to nomadic *being*. I will begin by drawing directly from my explorations on discourses of multiplicity as they relate to alternatives to the individualization of struggles and support. I will then share the possibilities I explored in relation to human service practices in order to shed light on some potential that may also exist within qualitative research practices. Then, in the final chapter, I will consider the implications for both research and practice moving forward.

Nomadic Subjects

I began this journey of seeking alternatives to individualization by exploring relational notions of the self. Within that discussion, the possibility of the relationship as primary, rather than the individual, was put forward (Buber, 1923/1970; Gergen, 1994; 2009). Relationships in this sense extend beyond interpersonal dynamics to include embodied experiences, relations with

the natural world, and more. I continued down that line of questioning, wondering what might be meant by the word 'subject' if not an individual? The question led me to the work of Rosi Braidotti (2006) who presents what she calls 'the nomadic subject'. For me, this concept, coupled with Braidotti's notion of 'the ethics of sustainability' are useful in terms of reconceptualising both human service practices and qualitative research with social justice as a central feature.

Gergen and Gergen (2000) describe the subject as 'polyvocal', meaning that through our many relational encounters, our identities are comprised of a "multiplicity of competing and often contradictory values, political impulses, or conceptions of the good" (p. 1037). Embracing such complexities means the 'self' must be conceptualized in a way that does not require a central core or coherence (Gergen, 2009). Braidotti (2006) further complexifies the notion of the subject by including biological, technological, and informational factors as well. As the subject moves through time and space it is constantly coming in contact with all of these (and other) dimensions of experience, and transforming as a result. Thus, who I am cannot be separated from anything else, and it certainly does not remain constant over time. The nomadic subject must be recognized in its embodied form; but the body, too, is in a constant state of becoming as it is "a multi-layered material entity that is situated at the intersection of biological, genetic, social, cultural and endless other levels of codes of information" (p. 96-97). Braidotti (2006) importantly points out that "nomadic subjects are not quantitative pluralities, but rather qualitative multiplicities" (p. 94), highlighting again the fact that this is indeed an ontological shift, not merely a technical one. It is also not only understood in human terms, but must be opened up to include the animate and material worlds. In her opinion, the anthropocentric nature of our conceptualizations of the subject are in part what contribute to some of the global crises in

which we now find ourselves. If we could better recognize the fact that there is no distinction (materially-speaking) between us and the natural world, for instance, perhaps we might engage in practices that take this connectedness into account. The movement of nomadic subjects through time and space, from Braidotti's (2006) perspective, bring us in intimate contact with (and dependence upon) all kinds of 'others'. Braidotti (2006) says, "Such a vision of the subject ... does not restrict the ethical instance within the limits of human otherness, but also opens it up to inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces" (p. 45). Thus, the significance of reconceptualising subjectivity when it comes to ethical practice begins to become evident.

The Ethics of Sustainability

The earlier discussion on situational analysis highlighted the fact that although we may perceive it as such, there is likely no 'centre' to a situation, but rather a multitude of relational dynamics through which the various aspects of a situation comprise one another (Clarke, 2005). While some may feel that this lack of perspectival focus can lead to an 'anything goes' sort of relativity, Braidotti (2006) argues otherwise. She insists that when the relational nature of all aspects of being are appreciated, then our very notion of what is ethical will deepen and lengthen. We will be more inclined to think beyond what most readily presents itself (or ourselves) and instead consider implications (including those that are unintended) and recognize that there are many actors in a given situation, which means we cannot control or predict outcomes. This leads to humility and tentativeness which are important components of what she terms 'an ethics of sustainability'.

By referring to her approach as 'the ethics of sustainability,' Braidotti (2006) builds on Clarke's (2005) notion of situatedness and emphasizes the 1) spatial, 2) temporal, and 3)

affirmative qualities of an ethics that is understood as a process (approach) rather than a goal (see also Caputo, 1993). Her emphasis on materiality and embodiment highlight the spatial nature of both subjectivity and ethics, and requires us to resist a reliance on abstract and universal norms, attending instead to what it is we face in a given moment (see also Derrida, 1995). Her emphasis on the nomadic, transformative nature of the subject encourages us to resist the assumption that the truth is static, and instead supports a more responsive approach to ethical engagement (see also White, 2007). And her emphasis on power as *potentia* (rather than power as *potestas*) rejects the notion of power as zero-sum, and instead conceives of it in terms of its potential to generate new realities (Braidotti, 2009). As such, ethical behaviour is about more than simply avoiding harm, but is instead about contributing to the cultivation of more just and sustainable futures.

Taken together, the three aspects of Braidotti's (2006) ethics of sustainability increase the sense of responsibility among each of us, and disperses it among all of us as something to be pursued in an ongoing way. By taking contingency, multiplicity, embodiment, embeddedness, vulnerability, and interdependence as rich starting places, we may a) really begin to get creative when it comes to what we imagine to be possible, and in turn b) realize it into being (Butler, 2004).

This is no Utopic Vision

When it comes to human service practices, it is exciting to consider what might be possible if we accept Braidotti's (2006) invitation to move forward with 'the ethics of sustainability' in mind:

Instead of falling back on the sedimented habits of thought that past tradition has institutionalized, I would like to propose a leap forward into the complexities and

paradoxes of our times ... What is ultimately at stake in this ... is the very possibility of a future, which is to say a sustainable present. (p. 36)

However, with this comes a responsibility to be diligent, as these reconceptualizations of the situation, the subject, and ethics along the lines of multiplicity do not suddenly mitigate the possibility of exploitative power dynamics. Just as they provide new avenues for us to move forward in the direction of justice, these dynamic perspectives also provide new and unforeseen avenues for all kinds of interpretations and ways of engaging with/in the material world, some of which may in fact strengthen the injustices and inequities these theorists are aiming to resist.

For instance, Braidotti (2006) draws attention to the ways we are already ‘capitalizing’ on multiplicity and difference. In fact, she describes modern capitalism as the practice of constantly “making ‘differences’ proliferate to ensure maximum profit” (p. 44). Here it becomes crucial to attend to her distinction between multiplicity in qualitative terms and plurality in quantitative terms. When difference is understood in quantitative terms alone, it becomes the means by which the “consumerist or vampirist consumption of ‘others’” is made possible (p. 44). For example,

women’s bodies are farmed for their ova, the nurturing capacities of their uterus, their generative powers ... the bodies of animals, just like black or native bodies, are ‘farmed’ for their productive, reproductive and generative powers; for sexual services in the global sex trade; for spare parts in the organ transplant industries ... (p. 132)

The negative power (*potestas*) that also finds its way into the concepts of multiplicity, difference, and fluidity creates the conditions in which bodies can be treated as ‘disposable’ in this way (Braidotti, 2006). Thus, notions of nomadic subjects and the ethics of sustainability are not entirely safe constructs. Since all ‘alternatives’ are vulnerable to being consumed by

dominant norms, those who seek alternatives approaches by employing discourses of multiplicity and the ethics of sustainability must remain vigilant and reflexive. This is why, if social justice is an ultimate aim, it is worth remembering Caputo's (1997) assertion that justice must *always* be understood as 'yet to come'.

Power Relations, Social Justice, and Qualitative Research: Possibilities Abound

Throughout my inquiry into human service practices as they relate to children, youth, and families, some hopeful possibilities emerged. Interestingly, when nomadic being is considered, it becomes clear that these possibilities are relevant when it comes to systemic change not only within human services but also where qualitative research is concerned (among other things, of course). This is no longer surprising once we contextualize our practices; larger societal discourses are at play in multiple contexts, and as such there are similar dynamics unfolding across various disciplines or areas of interest.

These possibilities, as they relate to the potential for qualitative research practices, can serve to contribute both to richness within a given study and to implications beyond it. I will conclude this chapter, then, by sharing the possibilities I see emerging. My intention is to demonstrate how this shift in perspective to nomadic being erases arbitrary lines between areas of interest and in doing so can bring forth a multitude of opportunities where previously the focus might more readily have been placed on limitations.

The possibilities to which I am referring involve approaching change ontologically rather than technically (Blades, 1997). Importantly, when diversity is prioritized, we can let go of the expectation that there is a particular solution and instead think of positive change as something that might be more realistically pursued by embracing and utilizing diverse approaches. Such

diversity allows for adjustments to be made, based on critical reflection that takes place along the way (hooks, 2010).

To think pragmatically about social justice and qualitative research as they relate to human services requires that we reconsider some foundational assumptions that are often taken for granted. For instance, the notion of disciplinary boundaries makes sense from within a particular paradigm; they can contribute to prestige and professional recognition, for example (Beker, 2001). But Moore (2011) suggests that when we “hold tight to disciplinary knowledge” individuals are “more likely to ‘fall through the cracks’ of service delivery” (p. 356). Thus, moving beyond disciplinary boundaries is one possibility that opens space for us to engage differently – and collaboratively – in qualitative research.

This in turn also allows us to address the political dimensions of research, which is crucial if we wish to do more than report on what is, but better understand how things might be differently (Denzin & Giardina, 2009). Politicizing experiences can thus lead to us to seek and activate the opportunities for resistance that exist in troubling or unjust circumstances, and as such is another possible way to bring social justice to the fore of qualitative research (see for example Ajandi, 2011 and de Finney, Dean, Loiselle, & Saraceno, 2011). With this, however, comes the requirement that we courageously name injustices as we encounter them, rather than prioritizing ‘objectivity’ (Leonardo, 2004). This enables us not only to confront inequitable realities, but also opens our eyes and ears to counter-narratives which may provide the concrete footing on which to chart new directions (Goodall, 2010; Madigan, 2011). Such counter-stories often deliberately cast light on strengths that have been obscured by existing power dynamics (Madigan, 2010), which is another useful strategy.

Additionally, including personal stories within research can help us to recognize our own complicity in the very conditions we may be critiquing. This possibility can add rigor to a study and contribute to the establishment of new precedents within qualitative research for deep consideration of implications (Denzin & Giardina, 2009; Goodall, 2008; hooks, 2010). The possibilities that emerge when researchers resist conforming to positivist norms in these ways can inspire hope and new directions that otherwise may have been unintelligible.

Shifting perspectives in these ways can also help researchers to see existing practices in new light. For instance, what may have previously been understood as unbiased research practice might be recognized as grounded in Euro-western norms and knowledge constructions (deFinney et al, 2011). This may contribute to the development of research practices that are more culturally attentive, deliberate and intentional, thus hopefully reducing the possibility of damaging effects that can come when we neglect to acknowledge the cultural nature of our knowledge and the practices informed by it (Madan, 2011; Tuhiwai Smith, 1990).

Such awareness can contribute to a professional humility that opens up further possibilities for research practice. For instance, rather than being positioned as a subject expert, qualitative researchers may instead engage in inquiry in ways that advocate for personal agency (Madan, 2011) and/ or participate in social action (Ajandi, 2011; Mitchell, 2011; Newbury & Hoskins, 2010c). Such citizen partnerships (Doherty & Carroll, 2007) can deepen not only the content, but the impact of qualitative research for which social justice is a priority.

By letting go of a perceived need to control outcomes in these ways, and instead inviting diverse modes of engagement and their diverse outcomes, space is opened up not only for new

ways of engaging in research practice, but also – perhaps more importantly – for creative engagement with existing conditions that invite new possibilities yet unanticipated.

CHAPTER 9:

Lessons Lived:

Conducting Research as a Nomadic Subject

It was serendipity that led me to simultaneously encounter nomadic writing in terms of methodology and nomadic ethics in terms of subject matter. In retrospect, of course it makes sense that how I study and what I study might coincide in this way. I am undergoing this inquiry as a researcher, practitioner, *and* concerned citizen. In all of these respects, I am genuinely eager to learn about what it means to pursue a more just society. As a non-unitary, nomadic subject, I cannot parcel off these different positions I assume and expect to perform distinct sets of activities within each of them. From a technical-rational perspective, I might think that ‘doing research,’ ‘engaging in practice,’ and ‘being a citizen’ would involve activities and responsibilities that are distinct from one another. They might be understood as completely separate roles.

But when discourses of multiplicity are embraced and emergent understandings of knowledge and being are considered to be inevitable (based on nomadic conceptualizations), then the intermingling and oneness of these various dimensions of my life become undeniable, and the activities required within each of them become inseparable. My researching self, my practicing self, and my personal and social self – these are not separate selves at all, but ‘I’ move through these fields, changing *them and myself* as I go (Braidotti, 2006).

In this final chapter, I will share my current understandings of research methodology as a process of living my learning, in order to shed light on how I have experienced this emergent, post-modern inquiry process. As I stated at the beginning, I do not wish for this to be read as a template; it can’t be. This is *my* research because I am the subject who is living it. My intention

here is to share my journey and what I have learned from it in order to contribute to the ongoing conversations about how to conduct qualitative research ‘after coding’ (as St. Pierre stated it in her conference presentation). Perhaps if we continue experimenting with the possibilities presented in the previous chapter, and continue to cultivate new language for and conceptualizations of what emergent research design can look like, more people may be supported when attempting to work outside existing models – within the contexts of research, practice, and citizenship.

Situated Research/ Practice/ Citizenship

In some ways, it seems my generation of qualitative researchers may be the first to have the privilege of choosing to opt out of the ‘paradigm wars’ (Lather, 1991; 2007) and focus instead on the business of conducting qualitative research. I realize in saying this that I am indebted to the ongoing work of a great many qualitative researchers who have ‘fought this war’ relentlessly (see for example: Denzin & Giardina, 2011; Lather, 1991; St. Pierre, 2011) and who have imaginatively begun the difficult work of charting alternative methodological paths (Clarke, 2005; St. Pierre, 2011), developing alternative vocabularies (deFinney et al, 2011; Gergen & Gergen, 2000), and establishing alternative criteria for evaluation (Kincheloe, 2005; Richardson, 2000). I also realize that I make this statement standing in a very particular time and place: My research is being conducted within a school that is supportive of qualitative research, and my committee has modelled for me what good qualitative research can look like, mentored me in experimenting with qualitative methods, and guided me supportively as I embarked on my own.

The Politics of Location

With all of that said, I know there remain very real barriers for a lot of people who wish to conduct emergent, qualitative research – including the priorities of governments and other

funding bodies, and difficulties establishing the credibility of approaches to research that are considered by some to be 'soft'. The fact remains that the norm continues to be informed by modern, positivist ideologies which means language, measures, and findings of qualitative research are often required to fit in the boxes created from within such a worldview (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

So, yes, it has been possible for me to partake in qualitative research without much adversity. Situated as I am within a particular political and social reality, however, it would be naïve and irresponsible for me to assume that this is not also related to some of the privileges I personally experience, which I know are not accessible to all members of my generation. Since an overall interest of mine is social justice, then I must acknowledge the inequities of access that allow some members of my generation to enjoy this hard-fought privilege and not others. As discussed earlier, there is a political dimension to insisting on acknowledging the situatedness of experiences and phenomena; when they are put in context of other events and experiences, then they can no longer be spoken of in universal or 'objective' terms (Braidotti, 2006; Butler, 2004).

The type of methodology I have laid out in these pages - one that allows for nomadic processes of writing and inquiry to unfold – is not *only* possible because of the hard-fought paradigm wars of previous generations of qualitative researchers, although that is an important part of the context for its possibility. It also *requires* a degree of privilege – and this is a statement I find difficult to acknowledge, but compelled to nonetheless.

To have the time, space, and imaginative and actual freedom with which to embark on such a fluid endeavour, certain conditions have to be in place. I am a middle-class, married, white, English speaking, educated woman with no children, who has full funding for my education. For me to ignore these factors and simply write about my 'methodology' in

decontextualized terms would replicate the very individualizing tendencies I have been working to resist. Making them explicit, on the other hand, demonstrates the significance of what Pillow (2003) refers to as ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ (as explained earlier). This methodological approach is thus a privilege in itself, but shouldn’t be. In 2011, in a wealthy province of a prosperous nation, *all* citizens – male or female, parents or not, and regardless of other barriers – should have access to an education in which they can fully participate. By ‘fully participate’, I simply mean having the time and space that is needed for the deep reading, writing, and thinking that allows for the development of emergent methodologies if they so choose (as an example).

Situating Research within a Larger Political Context

Throughout my research into systems of support for children and families, I developed a deeper understanding of the obstacles that are moving services in the direction of reactive interventions rather than prevention (Aldarondo, 2007). I learned about how changing political and economic contexts are creating a culture of surveillance among service providers, as well as a culture of scarcity that limits creativity and freedoms for practitioners (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009). I also learned about how “procedures of power” manifest in such a way that even those of us who seek alternatives do, in certain ways, reify the very systems we oppose (Blades, 1997). And I explored some very real possibilities for different ways of moving forward – ways that adopt a collective approach to change and work towards cultivating conditions of wellness that can serve to protect children and families before situations become desperate (see for example Kral, Wiebe, Nisbet, Dallas, & Okalik, 2009; Madsen, 2007; McKnight, 1995; Reynolds, 2010).

As I reflect now on the situatedness of my research methodology, unfortunately (but not surprisingly) I see the very same dynamics playing out within the context of research: the bureaucratization of education and the influence of capitalism on educational pursuits

(Nussbaum, 2010) are creating a context in which the onus is now on students to market themselves to funders, and on instructors to market themselves to students and to schools. This is putting us in situations of competition rather than collaboration, and leaving those who could most benefit from free education relegated even further to the margins. The systemic change processes I have been exploring within human service practices are also at play within my own research experience. Methodology itself is situated. Without the time and space required for creativity, students will continue coding.

There is nothing wrong with coding. There is, however, something wrong with doing it because of ease, rather than appropriateness (St. Pierre, 2011). If we want rigorous research coming out of our educational institutions, then students must be supported to adopt the most appropriate approaches for their research. We must allow for the fact that even the process of determining what this might be requires plenty of time and space for thorough exploration of the possibilities.

Generating Alternative Realities

In the interest of engaging differently in power dynamics, however, it is important not to stop here, but to also acknowledge a hopeful reality. Braidotti (2006) reminds us that power is not just the negative, limiting force possessed by some and not by others; power also includes *potentia*, which is the subject's "capacity to express his or her freedom" (p. 148). This generative power is what enables us to collectively transpose conditions – shifting through multiple, simultaneous, contradictory, and micro moves in such a way that "a creative leap that produces a prolific in-between space" becomes possible (p. 6). It is what the authors featured in the social justice issue of the *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies* (from

which I drew many of the possibilities discussed in the previous chapter) are creatively tapping into.

With this in mind, interesting openings appear when we take note of the fact that the funding I received for my studies is federal funding for *qualitative* research. The fact that our government has invested in this kind of learning means perhaps the constraints many students feel are not quite as restrictive as we would believe – or at least that perhaps they do not have to be, moving forward. For instance, in 2009 there was an attempt by the federal government (under the leadership of Stephen Harper) to alter the requirements of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), which would have meant all applicants, regardless of discipline, would have to explicitly state the business-related goals of their proposed research (Rabble.ca, 2009). There was a huge public response, as SSHRC is the largest source of public funding for research in the humanities in Canada (Pinchin, 2009). As a result of the organized response, the decision to focus on business-related degrees was short-lived. In 2010, awards were offered “with no strings attached” (Bradshaw, 2011), creating the conditions today in which research such as mine can still be federally funded.

Depending on how we participate in these current conditions - in which on the one hand, the federal government is funding qualitative research and on the other hand it is placing restrictions on human service practices that do not fit neatly within a neo-liberal framework (Albanese, 2010; Newbury, 2009) - there may be room to nudge those boundaries even further.

This is what I aim to do by sharing this non-linear, nomadic research process publically. As a student I have experienced real potential when I hear or read about the work of others that moves in directions I did not know were possible. If we continue moving in such ways – and sharing our experiences – then perhaps students’ senses of what is possible can realistically be

extended to include more. Little by little we might, together, “actualize virtual possibilities in the present” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 262).

Responsive Research/ Practice/ Citizenship

As I mentioned in Chapter one, the overall curiosity driving this research was borne out of my experiences as a human services practitioner. I felt dissatisfied with the systems I was representing when I worked in group homes or with families, particularly in mandated contexts. It seemed to me that, as professionals, we were individualizing social problems: locating problems inside individuals and neglecting to address the larger social dynamics within which they were living. The language used in reports and the types of interventions employed largely focused on the individual as the locus of the problem. I experienced this as not only ineffective, but unjust. Wasn't my role to support the youth and families I was working with? Why did this support feel more like surveillance?

These are the kinds of experiences and questions that led me to pursue a PhD in the first place. But, when reading and learning more about qualitative research methods, it seemed I was being (indirectly) told to leave these experiences at the door as I entered the world of research. I should find myself a clear research question that would sustain my interest for the next few years. I should then conduct a thorough literature review, in order to better understand what other researchers have learned about my topic in order to carve out a niche for myself within the scope of broader scholarly literature. And I should determine what methodology and methods might best allow me to pursue my particular study in a way that is congruent with my theoretical orientation.

These steps serve to remove my curiosity from the context of my personal and professional experiences and re-locate it into a scholarly context of research findings. By doing

so, this process of decontextualizing my research from the material world would methodologically replicate the very dynamics I was hoping to study: removing phenomena from the social contexts in which they occur. Stated differently, it would artificially distinguish my researching self from my practitioner and citizen self, erasing the fact that my desire to conduct research was a legitimate response to ongoing experiences within my professional and social life.

Whereas traditional approaches to qualitative research that are informed by positivist understandings of what inquiry looks like often aim to ‘begin at the beginning’ – with a literature review, for example – *there is no beginning* to an inquiry process that is situated within ongoing personal experiences as a practitioner and a citizen; nor is there an end. Even as I enrolled in my PhD program, I continued engaging in civic life, attending professional workshops in my community, and doing work with youth and families. Instead of drawing artificial lines separating out these aspects of my inquiry (since, of course, they do inform the direction of my learning, whether I acknowledge this fact or not), I wanted to pursue research in a way that allows for this responsiveness to be acknowledged. After all, it has been noted that it is often the case that researchers choose an area of study that intrigues them for personal reasons first and foremost; in fact they are often advised to (Bernard, 2000). Why should we pursue research in such a way that denies this reality?

Simultaneously living life as a researcher, practitioner, and citizen has informed my learning in a number of very concrete ways. The most apparent of these involved my data collection/ participant selection processes. Instead of determining in advance who I would interview or what I would consider to be data, I began writing, and I continued living. As previously mentioned, this ‘living’ included experiences attending events such as: 1) a symposium about *Discourses of Prevention* in which I was exposed to diverse approaches to

suicide, addiction, and mental health, 2) a conference about *Qualitative Inquiry* in which I learned about the complex relationship between politics and qualitative research practices, 3) a *Child and Youth Care* conference in which the relationships among research, policy, and practice were highlighted, and 4) a two day course on *Nonviolent Communication* in which I experienced the shift from epistemological approaches to change to ontological approaches, on a very personal level. While I attended these events as a learner/practitioner and a concerned citizen, all of them also constituted research material for me: my own notes as well as the words of the speakers themselves (including handouts) were approached as ‘data’ and folded into my learning and writing. In each case, the events led me to then read in new directions, and consider people for interviews who I may not have otherwise approached. I also experienced the events as fortuitously ‘timely’ in relation to my research, although upon reflection I see that they were timely because I participated in them at times in which I was actively seeking such learning.

Just as I engaged in certain events depending on the writing and reflecting I was doing at a given time, I also pursued certain interviews in the same way. For instance, the Nonviolent Communication training I attended brought the notion of compassion to the fore for me. It was presented in such a way as to be intimately connected to wellness – on both an individual and collective level. This called to mind the work of a local teacher who supports “The Compassion Project”, an extra-curricular student-led initiative at the high school in Powell River. I decided then to delve more deeply into these notions of compassion and collective wellness by interviewing this teacher.

Other interviews unfolded similarly. During one point in my writing and reading I was more deeply exploring the implications of policy in the lives of children and families. I have been impressed by the advocacy work of our local MLA, Nicholas Simons, and decided to look

into his background more closely. Interestingly, I learned that he moved to politics from a career in Child Protection. I decided to interview him about this choice to move from direct practice to the world of politics, and – as expected – the conversation was enlightening.

Allowing this kind of responsiveness in my data collection/ participant selection process has made certain aspects of this research cumbersome – particularly as related to ethical approval (as discussed in Chapter four). But overall, I have experienced it as a very organic process in which each step I take (whether interviewing, attending a workshop, writing, or reading) is a direct response to that which preceded it. This has meant I am able to retain my practitioner and citizen concerns as integral aspects of the research experience, rather than leaving them at the periphery. By allowing myself to both guide and be guided by the learning that emerges in my outside-of-academia life, I feel the relevance of this inquiry in everything I do – and I feel the relevance of everything I do within this inquiry. To me, this is a significant aspect of the richness of both nomadic methodology and nomadic subjectivity, and it highlights how responsiveness and situatedness go hand in hand.

Affirmative Research/ Practice/ Citizenship

As discussed in more detail earlier, Braidotti (2009) describes *potentia* as a fruitful combination of critique and creativity. In the same way that strength-based practice with youth and families is not just a matter of seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses (Madsen, 2007), neither is affirmative research simply a matter of focusing on positives. It is, rather, about finding the potential for change within existing obstacles, and finding opportunities for learning in all that presents itself by identifying strengths in order to more effectively mobilize them (Ajandi, 2011). This approach enables the practitioner/researcher to respond to all that presents itself (including surprises) instead of seeking control, uniformity, predictability, or consistency.

Whereas discussions of methodology often draw from notions of power as *potestas*, nomadic methodologies move in the opposite direction. By allowing for the vulnerability of both the researcher and the research process to other dynamics at play within the situation, there is always the possibility that things will “fly apart at any moment” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 292). Rather than methodologically asserting an approach to knowledge that is infallible, this research acknowledges fallibility, which requires closer attention to transparency, responsiveness, ethics, and responsibility. Therein lies the ‘power of powerlessness’ of which Caputo (1993) speaks. Researchers are invited to pay attention to the generative potential of unpredictable and uncontrollable reality, rather than trying to find ways of predicting and/or asserting control within it.

Non-Unitary Research/ Practice/ Citizenship

Within the realm of qualitative research, there has been a great deal of emphasis placed on recognizing the ways researchers themselves are implicated in their subject of study (see for example, Ellis, 2007). Rather than assuming objectivity, or the possibility of an omniscient view on what it being studied, most qualitative researchers allow for the fact that biases and preconceptions need to be acknowledged – for the sake of transparency and reliability (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

As a non-unitary subject, then, it is important also to acknowledge that my research is not taking place in isolation, entirely separate from practice in particular or citizenship in general. Allow me to illustrate by way of an example: In my study I incorporated my reflections on practice experience in a rural community in which I worked with the same woman in two different professional contexts. In one context, I supervised visits between this woman and her infant daughter who was living in foster care. This was a mandated relationship. But I also

worked with her in another context: she frequently attended a family resource centre at which I worked, and about which I have written elsewhere (Newbury, 2009). In this voluntary context, our relationship had a different quality, and I wanted to include my reflections on these different experiences within my dissertation.

Doing so, however, proved complicated for a number of reasons. First, my research participants had been identified (for the purposes of ethical approval) as ‘practitioners’. Since, in this case, I was the practitioner whose reflections were being used as ‘data’, then perhaps I could have argued that this was autoethnographic research and left it at that. However, I did not feel comfortable with this. Since she was a former client of mine, and her story is so implicated in my reflections, I felt an obligation to seek her consent before finalizing my draft. Being members of the same relatively small community, we encounter each other fairly frequently. This being the case, acquiring her consent could have been as simple as keeping a copy of the writing in question (as well as the consent form) in my vehicle until we ran into each other, at which time I could share with her my ideas and see if she consented to them being included in my writing.

That said, it was not simple at all. This is a woman who continues to live a life that is intricately connected to the very systems I reflect on in that piece of writing. She is also someone I respect and care about. I read and re-read that piece of writing during the weeks it spent tucked in the visor of my truck, trying to imagine what her response would be. What would my response be if I were to read those words about myself? Would she appreciate the fact that her story has deeply informed my learning process and feel pleased that her experiences are contributing in this way? Or would she completely disagree with my interpretation of events? Might she even be offended at the way I represent her in my reflections?

I toyed with the idea of changing some words slightly in order to lighten the impact of certain statements. At times I entertained the idea of scrapping this altogether. But, in the end, I decided that these tensions that occur when research cannot be separated from the world in which it is situated are a significant component of nomadic research conducted by a non-unitary subject. Acknowledging my own vulnerability in this process, and recognizing that depending on this woman's response I may have to change tacks, is an important part of my learning not only when it comes to research methodologies, but also human service practices themselves. I had to be willing to hear her response, and alter what I *thought* I knew on the basis of it.

From this perspective, decontextualized data is meaningless. In the same way, practice must also be informed by the very contexts in which it takes place, lest it renders itself meaningless as well. Non-unitary research, practice, *and* citizenship all demand similar things of the subject: responsiveness, openness, vulnerability, and a willingness to strive to live meaningfully amidst contradictions. In this way, my learning when it comes to methodology *and* when it comes to human service practices merge once again.

Concluding Thoughts on Methodology

As it turned out, it was several months before I met with the former client about the possibility of including her experiences in my writing. I had seen her a few times in passing, but the moment just didn't present itself. Although I began feeling somewhat impatient, I challenged myself to trust the process, as I kept those wrinkled documents tucked in the visor of my truck while the seasons changed, and my first draft had almost reached completion.

Then one day I ran into her at the bus stop. I had already mentioned the possibility to her and it seemed to me she knew what I was thinking. We made small talk for a few minutes and

then I asked her if she was heading somewhere. She gave me a grin and a knowing look, and said no: She was free and accepted my invitation to go for coffee.

We headed inside out of the cold, and I explained to her again about why I was doing research, and why I found myself reflecting on our time working together throughout my studies. I repeatedly emphasized the fact that there was no obligation for her to consent to my using these experiences with her in my writing. She waited patiently for me to begin, and it seemed clear through her body language that she was already in favour of the idea, but curious.

Despite her openness to the process, I felt nervous as I began reading to her. I heard my words, and the assumptions that reside within them, and desperately wanted to know what she was thinking. My voice cracked and I felt the possibility of tears as I read aloud about the repeated abuses she had experienced. I stopped at one point to give her the heads up that what I was about to read was *my* experience of our time together, and that I would be very interested to know if her interpretation was different. I felt my heart race as I heard my own voice speak about the wellbeing of her children, and would have given anything to have known what she was feeling in that moment. I made some small edits along the way in order to use language that would convey my ideas as respectfully as possible.

When I finished reading I looked up at her face and tried to read it. I wanted to somehow communicate to her that my priority in this interaction did not lie with the words I was reading, but with her. As I looked at her during the short silence that followed the reading, I was humbled by her willingness to hear the words I had just read, and felt gratitude for her openness. I waited.

The conversation that followed began slowly and a little awkwardly, but eventually unfolded into a warm interaction. She told me she liked the idea of this experience being

included in my writing and learning, and she didn't feel the need or desire to correct or change anything. I explained to her some of the ways it might be used, and also clarified that even though identifying details had been changed, she might still be recognized in this writing by community members if they read it. I reiterated that she could withdraw at any time, no questions asked. She maintained that she was pleased with her experiences being drawn from in this way.

When the formalities were out of the way, she shared with me some news about her children. She told me how much they had changed, and shared some stories about some of the times she'd spent with them recently. We talked about plans for Christmas and other things that are happening for both of us these days. We continued chatting as our coffee got cold, and eventually headed off to run some errands together.

As I reflect on this interaction now, I am reminded of the importance of contextualization – in both research and practice. Rather than seeing the process of seeking consent from participants as simply a logistical hurdle in the formal pursuit of academic approval for my research, I now see it as an important step in my overall learning. The situated, responsive, affirmative, and non-unitary nature of research, practice, and citizenship as explored in these pages allows me to recognize the significance of how each small step is attended to. Possibilities and new opportunities can either disappear or present themselves, depending on how even one small interaction is approached.

Coming face to face with this woman to share how her experiences informed my research was a very important reminder for me that research is not just product; it is process. Contextualizing inquiry in this way can contribute to ethical research practice not necessarily by changing what we do, but by responsibly attending to how we do it.

PART ONE: THE POWER OF ONE

Support or Surveillance?

I'd like to introduce you to Jennifer. If you are reading this book, Jennifer's story may be familiar to you. She was raised in foster care, experienced abuse repeatedly at the hands of both guardians and partners, and is now the mother of two children – each being raised in a different household, and neither of them by her. While her story is indeed uniquely hers, the fact that it is so familiar to those working in the human services points to the significance of the aspects of her experience that lie beyond individual struggles. There is a social – and systemic – dimension to her story. It is the social, political, and systemic dimensions of what are often interpreted as individual troubles that are ultimately of concern in the coming chapters.

My role involved supervising visits between Jennifer and her daughter, whom she was breastfeeding. The visits were pleasant and comfortable – I am fairly certain all three of us enjoyed the many hours we spent together. But all of these moments were couched in something else: surveillance. My role did not just involve sitting with Jennifer⁵ and her baby, Carrie. These visits were mandated. When they were over I had to head back to the office and document them. Knowing the visits were documented, Jennifer would either censor herself when we chatted, or say, 'Don't write that down, OK?' Her life involved many professionals, and her sense of privacy was limited; she knew she had little.

Documenting the visits felt very wrong to me, as I was aware there could be implications to the words I put on the page (in relation to custody decisions, for example). I struggled every

⁵ I have changed names and certain identifying characteristics to protect the dignity of the people involved.

time not to be dishonest, but also not to over-document. I wanted to be sure her strengths appeared in the report but not in a way that was misleading. I knew any conflicts or difficulties also had to find their way into my notes but I constantly asked myself if I was pathologizing things I would not see as problematic with a friend or sister of mine who is a mother. I wrote every report knowing Jennifer was fully entitled to read it. I wrote only my observations and experiences of our visits together, and tried to avoid making interpretations on the basis of them.

Perhaps at this point I should be clear: I was not Jennifer's social worker. I was very aware that she had other professionals in her life whose roles were to provide guidance. I tried hard to remember my role, which was to be present and attentive, and to help cultivate a safe space where she and her baby could visit together. When asked by Jennifer, I did not give advice (about custody, for example). I also refused to read her file because it was not necessary for my particular job. At first, I had no opinions whatsoever about whether Jennifer should or should not have custody of her child. As time went on, it seemed apparent that not only was foster care (or adoption) a good option for her child, but that Jennifer herself believed this. In fact I think I came to this conclusion in large part due to those conversations in which Jennifer shared her desires for her children to have stable, loving homes. One of her children had some disabilities, and lived with a wonderful foster mother who was willing to adopt him. Jennifer was excited at this possibility, but feared that admitting this would 'work against her' in the case of her other child.⁶

⁶ I have checked these assumptions with Jennifer since writing this, and she has agreed that this is an accurate representation of her experience of the situation as well.

This tension that was developing with the government ministry to which she was accountable is seen by some as an unavoidable aspect of such a troubled life as Jennifer's. Her unwillingness to graciously accept mandated 'help' is often interpreted as resistance that is simply a result of her lack of understanding of what is best for her. This, however, is not my opinion, as I was fortunate enough to work with Jennifer in another capacity as well: she very regularly attended a family resource center where I also worked. In this non-mandated (ie. voluntary) context, my experience of her relationship with 'support' was quite different.

Often, immediately following her visits with Carrie, Jennifer would arrive at the family resource center and spend the rest of the afternoon there. Everything about her was different there – even the interactions we had together. In this context, Jennifer could come and go as she pleased, she was confided in by the others, and she voluntarily pitched in with dishes and craft preparation. This was a place where Jennifer was not always the person at the receiving end of helping relationships; it was a place where she was very much a help to the staff and other families. In this context, she was also more inclined to seek support or guidance, as doing so there did not threaten her autonomy, but strengthened it.

The family resource center emerged out of the efforts of parents in our community, and the staff there hold no power over the families who attend: no files are kept on them, parents attend planning meetings and influence programming decisions, and there is no obligation to attend. In this environment, Jennifer seemed to hold her head a little higher, encountered no conflicts with others, and took on more and more responsibility over time. The organizational structure of this center enabled a different kind of helping relationship to emerge in Jennifer's

life. And it seemed the fewer demands placed on her, the greater her interest to reach out to the supports that do exist became.

All of these changes and supports call to mind Cathy Richardson's (2005) work about dignity, and it just seems so painfully obvious. Why *shouldn't* Jennifer respond negatively to all the surveillance and control she has experienced at the hands of the many professionals mandated to be in her life? Informal, respectful, voluntary services are of great value to her, and Jennifer herself acknowledges that she needs quite a bit of support to move through life. However, prior to this, most of her supports had been based on her deficits. Her problems needed to be verified before the government would not only provide – but mandate – support for her (such as counselling, psychotropic drugs, and supervision). In some cases these programs were helpful for Jennifer. In others they were not.

But what is interesting to me is that even the process of getting these supports forced Jennifer to relinquish even more of the limited control she had over her own life. Rather than recognizing her struggles as responses to her lived experiences (Wade, 2007), her difficulties were individualized and treated as if they were part of her very being before they could be taken seriously. For example, despite the history of abuses she had experienced and the difficulties she continues to face in the community, her 'anger' was addressed with an anger management program; her experiences as a victim were addressed with training about communicating with respect; and in order for her to get certain supports she underwent a series of tests - measuring her IQ and offering her diagnostic labels.

The family resource center *was* different in these regards, and I believe systemically, relationally, and individually, a lot can be learned from Jennifer's story. Important to note as

well is the fact that this family resource center, as an organization, struggles to survive in today's bureaucratic climate of evidence-based practice, economic feasibility, and measurable outcomes. While the mandated work described earlier enjoys more stable funding, the family resource center remains in a precarious state indeed. This increasing tendency to privilege interventions that locate social problems inside individuals will be explored in more detail throughout the course of this book.

Jennifer's story centers a particular individual, but the tensions that arise within it are experienced in a wide variety of contexts. By exploring some of the tensions that are evident (and implicit) in Jennifer's story, and considering how they play out in other stories as well, I hope to both draw from and inform practice, in an effort to continue moving closer toward the "ethical practice" in which we strive to be engaged as human service professionals (School of Child and Youth Care, 2012; see also Aldarondo, 2007; Bennett et al, 2009; and Province of British Columbia, 2011). The ultimate aim of this book is to open up our understandings of what it means to meaningfully support children, youth, and families in context. By widening our gaze to include the discursive, political, and other dimensions of lived experiences, perhaps we can develop our practices in ways that contribute to the wellbeing of all community members, recognizing social justice as central to this development. Part of the process of extending our perspectives includes opening up notions of who 'we' are: thus I am not writing these explorations with a particular profession or field of practice in mind. Rather, *I am speaking to all of us for whom the wellbeing of children, youth, families, and communities is central to our professional commitments*. That said, many of the ideas and experiences from which I draw

have emerged from within the field of child and youth care, which is the context for much of my training and practice experience.

The remainder of this book is organized into five parts. Part one, *The Power of One*, includes four chapters and explores the current state of affairs in human service practice, in which individualizing discourses inform practice to such a degree that possibilities beyond the status quo are almost unintelligible. In it, I will trace the history of social justice in human service practices, explain what is meant by ‘individualizing discourses’, and explore how I believe individualizing discourses have served to move us farther from our stated function, by obscuring the social nature of social problems. I will also examine some of the useful implications of our current individualized way of interpreting events, including human rights advocacy. Before concluding part one I will address economic rationalism, how it informs individualizing discourses, and the implications of such a worldview on practice.

Part two, *The Relational Nature of Being*, includes three chapters and explores alternatives to dominant individualizing discourses with an emphasis on relational theories (Gergen, 1994). The social justice ideals from which most of our fields of practice emerged have not simply disappeared. They may not be the dominant discourse informing practice, but they continue to play very important roles – both within and outside of the ‘system’ as we know it. In this section, I will consider how relational ideals can and do inform human service practices in different ways.

The three chapters that comprise part three, *Let Many Flowers Bloom*, move beyond what *currently is* to the new possibilities that present themselves when we take a more encompassing view of what is presently taking place. In other words, this part of the book points to the future. When we develop a contextualized understanding of existing practices, then the options for the

future become even more far-reaching and diverse. Drawing multiple discursive threads to their logical extensions, how can we be more intentional about the systems and practices in which we engage – now and in the future?

Part four is entitled *Playing with Power*. Its three chapters take a realistic look at why systemic change of this scale is so difficult. It is not a simple matter of identifying a desirable alternative and enacting it. By taking the dynamics of power into consideration, this part explores how agency is constrained, how the status quo is sustained by all of us in complex ways, and where the spaces exist for positive social change to occur.

The intention of this book is not to erase or replace one single story (one which has an individual and immediate focus) with another. Rather, the intention is to consider the implications of the multiple stories that are already at play, many of them largely unacknowledged. Thus, in the single chapter that constitutes part five, *Contextualizing Care*, I will return to the notion of social justice and consider how human service systems and practices might be re-organized so as to facilitate movement in the direction of justice. What worlds open up when we take for ourselves a slightly different starting place and vantage point, one which begins (and ends) in a place of diversity rather than consensus (Sen, 2009)? Might what is currently conceived as *impossible* become possible (Caputo, 1993)?

If we take Caputo's (1993) advice, and "let many flowers bloom" (p. 39), then I believe we will set ourselves up to be more capable to respond responsibly to unknowable futures. This book is my attempt to contribute to such a possibility.

CHAPTER 10:

Social Justice and the Origins of Human Service Practices

What is meant by the term ‘social justice’? Although bandied about so frequently and casually that one might assume it contains some uncontested shared meaning, Sandel (2009) explains that this is certainly not the case:

To ask whether a society is just is to ask how it distributes the things we prize – income and wealth, duties and rights, powers and opportunities, offices and honours. A just society distributes these goods in the right way; it gives each person his or her due. The hard questions begin when we ask what people are due, and why. (p. 19)

Since Sandel (among others) has dedicated a life to political philosophy and the concept of justice and has still not come up with the ‘right’ definition, I am going to take as my starting place this simultaneous commitment to justice *and* uncertainty as to what, exactly ‘it’ is. Indeed, feuds over the very question posed above have led to some of the most *unjust* conditions the world has seen. Perhaps, with that in mind, the most just position to hold is one of uncertainty and consider how to meaningfully move forward from there (Caputo, 1993).

In fact, Caputo (2000) posits that there *is* no ‘right’ definition. Instead, justice can be understood as an ongoing task – a verb, not a noun (or perhaps, both). Moss and Petrie (2002) loosely describe justice as responsiveness and responsibility to the suffering of others in all its forms. They emphasize (as influenced by Jacques Derrida) that this responsibility is “infinite” (p. 48) in that it must be ongoing over time and across contexts. Caputo (2000) concurs, by saying that “the most unjust and undemocratic thing we can say today is that justice ... is here, today, now” (p. 177). This is crucial because acknowledging that we are constantly in the process of seeking justice keeps us engaged in its pursuit in an ongoing and diligent way.

By insisting that justice is always to come, we expose the present state of affairs to “an absolute scrutiny which has zero tolerance for injustice” (Caputo, 2000, p. 178). By doing so, we intentionally insist on instilling “bad conscience as a kind of structural feature of ethical life” (p. 178). To be clear, Caputo (2000) believes the function of this notion of justice (and of democracy) as yet to come is “entirely critical, not predictive. It is prophetic not in the sense of telling the future, but in the sense of denouncing the limits of the present” so that we may more consciously engage with each other in the present as we move into the future yet unknown (p. 119). A similar position towards justice is put forward by Rosi Braidotti (2006) who suggests that the pursuit of justice requires an appreciation of the fluid nature of both that which we pursue (justice) as well as the subject pursuing it. This nomadic approach to justice ensures it is an ongoing and relentless activity.

In a nutshell, justice is thus something we can never fully know, but must relentlessly strive for regardless. But, here I am speaking of justice in general, while I began with a question about *social* justice. What is the difference?

It is a good question, and a simple answer might be that social justice pertains to the wellbeing of human beings, while justice in general is more encompassing. But it does not take much scratching beneath the surface to realize the two are hardly distinct. Abram (1996) describes how humans are constantly in relationship with the ‘more-than-human’ world. He posits that it is only when finally locating the human experience within its broader relationships that true understanding and wellbeing can occur:

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth – our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the

honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own sense of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is nonhuman. (p. 22)

If we allow our gaze to widen beyond the human-only experience, examples of this interconnectedness abound. From consumer choices to activities as mundane as eating or breathing, our inability to completely separate ourselves from the material world is evident (although we act as if we are separate). So although Abram's topic is not justice per se, his point is well-taken and can inform notions of social justice as well. While social justice emphasizes implications for the human element, due to the relational nature of being described above it cannot be achieved without justice in the grandest sense being taken into serious consideration. This means ecological and all other forms of injustice are relevant, even where human wellbeing might be of primary concern.

Social Justice and Human Services

Etymologically, a tradition is "that which is handed down as belief or practice" and it comes from the Latin word *tradere* which means "hand over, deliver" (Hoad, 1996). Paul Farmer (2005) warns against conflating the *practices* that are commonplace within a particular group of people with idealized notions of that group's culture or tradition. It can be dangerous, he suggests, in that it ignores power relations: practices are adopted when people do what they do *within existing conditions*. So, for instance, patriarchal practices may indeed be 'handed down' from one generation to the next, but romanticising such practices as 'traditional' can be dangerous.

Despite this warning, many current human service practitioner (including counsellors, child and youth care practitioners, educators, health professionals, and others for whom the wellbeing of others is a central commitment) continue to describe their traditions in terms of the practices that were most commonly employed in the past. For example, traditional child and youth care in North America is often described as residential care. This tendency to understand professional traditions by describing practices obscures the fact that most fields of human service emerged in direct response to unjust social conditions, and if we return to the etymology that opened this section, it is clear that traditions may be comprised in part by practices, but *beliefs* are also ‘handed down’ in a similar way. Many fields of human service practice, when viewed contextually and historically, can in fact be seen to come from a strong tradition of social justice (Aldarondo, 2007). These days, some find it radical or misleading to begin thinking about ‘practice’ in terms of responding to social conditions – practice is often described as individual interactions with clients, not to be muddied by politics. But, I submit that in addition to certain practices, the collective ‘tradition’ of human services also involves a belief in the importance of responding to unjust social conditions, which I will elaborate on shortly.

So while my overriding interest is social justice in general terms, I am locating this study within human service practices in particular because of my belief that human service practices emerged from this very tradition – and because of my belief that they have something important to offer in that they provide an opportunity to attend to both particular interpersonal dynamics *and* broader social conditions simultaneously. Aldarondo (2007) and the authors who contribute to his book *Advancing Social Justice through Clinical Practice* remind us that many helping professions (including but not limited to family therapy, social work, counselling, and psychiatry) emerged at least in part from a commitment to social justice. That is, from the early

days of these professions, “social justice concerns and the will to act on behalf of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy were shared by many of the founding figures” (p. 12). However, as the professions developed and formalized, logistical and other concerns (such as economic interests and competition for scarce resources) sometimes overtook center stage. With professions now striving to remain viable within existing conditions, the ability of these initiatives to *reform* the systems in which they were embedded became restricted, all too often leaving the ideals of equity and justice that brought them into being in the shadows of yet another individualized professional helping practice (Aldarondo, 2007). This will be explored in more detail later.

Interventions within various fields of human service practice often take place on an interpersonal level (with counselling, life space interventions, and group work for example); there is great value to such forms of support. However, because of the context outlined in this section, I believe human service practices are also a suitable place to explore *other* possibilities as it was social aims by which they were (at least in part) initially developed and driven.

The Not-So-Just Traditions of Mental Health Practices

At this point I would like to insert my own ‘yes, but ...’, since this analysis may appear to be slightly idealized thus far. Approaching this study from a social constructionist orientation forces me to acknowledge that multiple truths are always at play, and no story is ever the only or final one (Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999). While Aldarondo (2007) does indeed make legitimate points from which I draw extensively and to which I will return shortly, it is important for me to acknowledge that history is not always chronological or singular. Indeed, one event does not only lead to the next; phenomena (which are often seemingly incompatible) also occur simultaneously. So, while it may be the case that human service practices emerge from a

tradition of social justice, it may *also* be true that they simultaneously emerge from a tradition of oppression.

Before pursuing the social justice thread, then, I would like to briefly explore the emergence of certain mental health practices as a case in point, in order to better understand this dual (or multiple) reality. I believe that doing so may help us better understand much of the confusion and inconsistency in present day practices and policies in the human services.

In relation to multiple phenomena (including madness, space, governmentality, truth, and the self) Foucault (1961; 1972; 1980; 2005; 2007 see also Blades, 1997 and Rose, 1998) has developed a critical approach to history, demonstrating through his various genealogies how reality is discursively constituted, and how discourses are informed by power and other relational dynamics. Drawing from Foucault's ideas and analytical methods, Ron Solinski (2010) traces the history of mental illness from a social constructionist perspective – including how it has been (and continues to be) conceptualized and responded to. It becomes clear in his genealogy that how mental illness (previously, madness) is understood and treated has much to do with social conditions and norms, which is why understandings of and responses to madness change over time. For instance, prior to the period known as the Enlightenment in the western world (and individualized understandings of the self and the psyche), madness was understood as evidence of contact from spirits and was thus responded to with such practices as exorcism and witch-burning in some cases, and reverence toward the impacted person in others. (The plurality of responses can be understood by way of Foucault's notion of power which produces effects, some of which are desirable, some of which are not) (see Foucault, 1972). While these ways of understanding have not completely disappeared, they ceased to be the dominant discourses of mental illness after the Enlightenment, when it instead began to be interpreted as individual

pathology, eventually drawing largely from a medical model of interpretation. In this way, mental illness began to be treated as would any other physical ailment: as an individual, biomedical problem. This has led to social stigma of another kind: mental illness was now associated with deficiency rather than spiritual influence.

The work of Foucault (1961; 1972) suggests that, historically, professional interventions with madness likely had less to do with cultivating a ‘just’ society than it did with cultivating a ‘desirable’ society; that is, with social control. These ideas have contributed to the development of rich scholarship addressing the matter of the social construction of mental illness (Gergen, 2007; Rose, 1998; Solinski, 2010), and continue to inform ongoing critical engagement with current practices (Fewster, 2002; McKnight, 1995; White & Morris, 2010). Nikolas Rose (1998) continues Foucault’s genealogy by offering a deep critique of current psychological practices.

As time proceeded and the industrial revolution took place, there developed an increasingly keen interest in training citizens to be productive. Those who struggled with mental illness (be it through spirits or through brain deficiencies) interfered with this process. Solinski (2010) says, “the concept of madness as disease serves to separate those whom are judged unfit to live within society, from the greater whole” (p. 19). So, in both pre- and post-Enlightenment practices, the response to madness often involved separating those who were unfit/unproductive from those who were deemed to be fit/productive. While Solinski acknowledges that “there was no doubt that some in society had a genuine desire to help the inflicted” (p. 19), their efforts were quite constrained. Resources were limited, and control (first through segregation, then through assimilation), not support, seemed to be the primary concern of government and its social and economic systems.

Foucault's work (see for example 1972 and 2005) and the work of others who have drawn from him (such as Moss & Petrie, 2002 and Rose, 1998) suggests that enforcing social control (through the regulating practices of surveillance and pathologizing discursive constructions, for example) is not peculiar to systemic responses to mental illness. In fact, by looking at the work of critical scholars in the social sciences it becomes plausible that these are predictable historical trends across a wide variety of contexts. The introduction of work houses for transforming the poor into productive citizens or simply getting them off the street is one example (Green, 2006). The systematic abduction and apprehension of Aboriginal children and the widespread use of residential 'schools' to indoctrinate them into the language and practices of the dominant culture is another (de Leeuw, 2009). In both of these examples, segregation is used to facilitate processes of eventual assimilation. In these and other cases, the overarching systemic concern is not one of justice at all, but can better be understood through a lens of power relations and oppression. By identifying certain groups as deviant, individuals within those groups are identified as problematic (rather than the systems that marginalize them). In this way, *social* problems become understood as *individual* problems, and are treated at that level. From this perspective, such individualizing practices perpetuate *unjust* conditions.

Lord and Hutchison (2007), whose work focuses in the area of social inclusion particularly for those who struggle with disability (physically and/or mentally), observe that "although the helping professions and community services have expanded dramatically since the 1960s, in the past decade there has been a growing sense that community services often fail to address quality of life issues" (p. 4-5). They go on to note that even though the systems by which exclusion was forced have in many ways been eliminated, "the long, bleak history of

services and policies that foster exclusion continue to influence how current service systems support people and create the attitudes we all hold toward difference” (p. 6).

Child and Youth Care in North America: Another Case in Point

Alternatively and simultaneously, another history is at play. In order to take a slightly different look at the historical development of current individual-oriented practices within the human services, I will explore professional child and youth care (CYC) practice as a case in point. How the emergence of child and youth care in North America is identified depends on how the field is defined. If CYC means simply caring for children, then of course it has always occurred in some form in all societies (see Rogoff, 2003). However, if the interest is the emergence of child and youth care as a human service practice – which is the case here – then one must look to how it began to take form as a professional activity. And this, according to Charles and Garfat (2009) began with orphanages in the 1700s, which were often run by religious orders and were home not only to children whose parents had died, but those whose parents could not care for them due to poverty or illness. Alsbury (2010) highlights the significant shift that occurred in the 1800s when “both government and society [were] beginning to act on behalf of children” who were exploited as labourers in the factory system which emerged through industrialization and urbanization (p. 29). Institutions such as orphanages, schools, and even asylums were among the various sites of practice of this early form of CYC, but in each case, the emergence was a direct response to the unjust conditions experienced by child factory labourers or by children who were impoverished, as Charles and Garfat point out.

Following this, a great wave of immigration to North America occurred, and with it the all too familiar relationship between racism and classism became evident. New immigrants often came to North America to escape impoverished conditions, but many continued to face poverty

once they settled. The emergence of recreational programs (or the ‘fresh air’ movement) such as the YMCA, YWCA, and the Boys and Girls Clubs was an effort to better support the newcomers to Canada and the United States. According to Charles and Garfat (2009), these organizations were founded “in part, to provide services to young people who came from backgrounds of poverty common in the greater immigrant population” (p. 18). These programs still exist and serve people from a wide variety of backgrounds, and the mission statement of a nearby YWCA makes clear the ongoing justice-oriented aims of the organization. It states:

Since 1897, YWCA Vancouver has been working to improve the quality of life for women and their families. Our vision is Achieving Women’s Equality. We foster economic independence, wellness and equal opportunities through ongoing advocacy work and integrated service delivery. (YWCA Vancouver, 2007)

Charles and Garfat (2009) continue to trace the emergence of the field of CYC through what is often referred to as the ‘corrections’ movement (such as schools for juvenile delinquents and insane asylums) to the residential school system that imprisoned Aboriginal children and youth. Both of these initiatives hearken back to the previous discussion of human services as social control, and their legacies remain as colonizing practices continue today. Indeed in a recent keynote presentation, Artz (2011) effectively illustrates how the two in fact work together, as Canada has a long history of “the over-representation of Aboriginal people, particularly, Aboriginal female youth in custody” and the relationship between this ongoing practice and overarching political discourses and interests in maintaining particular status quos. Statistics Canada (2011) reports, for instance, that Aboriginal youth are incarcerated at rates greater than non-Aboriginal youth country-wide, with the highest rates of Aboriginal youth incarceration taking place in Alberta, “where [in 2006] the incarceration rate for Aboriginal youth was seven

times greater.” While among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, males are incarcerated at rates higher than females, “female Aboriginal youth in Ontario and Alberta were incarcerated on Census Day at about the same rate as non-Aboriginal males” in 2006.

In these cases, the focus of intervention is troubling in that rather than concern over problematic social conditions (Statistics Canada, 2011, documents high rates of poverty and low levels of education among Aboriginal youth as compared to non-Aboriginal youth), the concern is with ‘problematic’ individuals (as in the previous discussion on madness). Regardless of the intentions of those adults who participate in these systems past and present, the social impacts are devastating. By drawing primarily from examples within British Columbia, Artz (2011) chillingly demonstrates that many incarcerated young women have not even been convicted, but are apprehended for the sake of their protection, and treated as criminals due to the multiple risk factors to which they are exposed. The Native Women’s Association of Canada (2011) supports this assessment, and draws attention to the ongoing and systemic failure to protect Aboriginal girls. They note that in “2011, Aboriginal women represented just fewer than 4% of women in Canada, yet accounted for 34% of all women in federal penitentiaries” (p. 5). In their analysis Aboriginal females, who are often driven out of their homes due to male violence, are more likely to be criminalized and institutionalized than protected; “91% of Aboriginal women incarcerated in Canadian prisons today are survivors of sexual or physical violence” (p.5). Since the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* has been enacted, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal girls in remand has grown (with a 26% increase among Aboriginal female youth and an 8% decrease among other female youth). This increase in the criminalization of Aboriginal girls has taken place at a historical period during which crime rates and severity of crimes have dropped nationally (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2011).

Indeed, the cases of punitive ‘corrections’ programs and residential ‘schools’ certainly strengthen Farmer’s (2005) earlier point that tradition must not be identified by drawing from practices alone, lest we carry forth without questioning such responses to complex conditions. They also serve to illustrate the complexities of what Foucault (1980) refers to as power relations – dynamics that entrap us despite ourselves and through which movement is much more complicated than simply ‘having power’ or not. He says,

... in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. (p. 39)

Foucault goes on to explain that in his estimation, power is exercised “from *within* the social body, rather than *from above* it” (p. 39, emphasis in original). This means we are all engaging with power in a variety of ways that may be serving us. Recognizing this, we might think more creatively about how to engage *differently* in such dynamics.

My observation is that when we get mired in expert practices that involve seeking particular ‘outcomes’ for children and youth, we run the risk of taking current ways of doing things for granted, accepting them unquestioningly. My hope is that we do not lose sight of these other important social justice foundations, so we can prevent the possibility of inadvertently labeling children as ‘ill’ or ‘deviant’ based on the injustices they experience.

Panning Out

The historical emergence of CYC offers one example of some justice-based origins of human service practices, and Aldarondo’s (2007) book *Advancing Social Justice through Clinical Practice* makes the case that this is more the norm than the exception. Indeed, he runs

through a wide variety of fields of practice - including mental health, psychoanalysis, counselling, psychiatry, and family therapy – tracing their roots to social justice ideals.

Significantly, he observes:

Every major discipline in our field today includes important social justice legacies, which have remained largely absent from our institutional memory ... Lack of awareness about this history is, in our view, a significant obstacle to the growth and development of social justice-oriented theories and practices. (p. 6)

Moreover, Aldarondo (2007) effectively argues that rather than being a fought-and-won cause, it is more crucial than ever that we continue to place social justice at the heart of what we do. Perhaps ironically, an increase in the prevalence of human service professionals has *not* led to an increasingly just society. Rather, by letting the justice-oriented dimension of our history slip from the fore, and at times being driven by desires to be respected as professionals, the needs of the professions may be restricting “the reformist potential” of human service practices (p. 13). Farmer (2005) observes the same trend in the field of medicine, and notes that “the language of social justice is increasingly absent from public health parlance” (p. 177). He urges health professionals to intentionally re-incorporate this tradition into their/our practice, lest “we allow not only the continuation but the *entrenchment* of inequalities” (p. 173, emphasis in original).

The fact remains: “social realities are important determinants of distress that must be addressed as part of our efforts to promote the wellness of those we serve” (Aldarondo, 2007, p. 13). Not only does a historical interest in social justice remain significant within today’s social contexts, but Ismael (2006) argues that in fact it is more pressing than ever that this remains central to the work we do. When it comes to the wellbeing of children in Canada, and child poverty in particular, she links concrete policy changes with ideological positions, illuminating

the on-the-ground effects of particular political values when taken up in policy. Tracking Canadian government policy changes over time, Ismael sheds light on how we have now reached a point in which helping children out of poverty is understood as a charitable act, rather than a basic right to which all children are entitled. Ismael presents this shift as directly connected to the shift from a welfare state (in which social justice was a central concern) to our current residual state (which explicitly promotes an ethic of liberal individualism). To exemplify the implications of this transition, she notes the accompanying discursive shift to an emphasis on child development (which individualizes child poverty by interpreting the struggles children face as developmental inadequacies, and addressing them with ‘experts’ who can help children catch up to their peers along an age-based understanding of development), and the transition from federal to provincial jurisdiction over matters of social policy. It is this emphasis on the movement towards individualization of services (both in conceptual and practice terms) that will be the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 11:

Individualization: What Does that Mean?

By drawing from Aldarondo (2007), I believe space can be opened up for alternatives to current approaches to human service work, however I do not intend to obscure the oppressive practices outlined previously. In fact, while Aldarondo (2007) portrays the origins of human service professions as largely altruistic, Nikolas Rose (1998) more cynically conveys the role of the ‘psy’ disciplines within our society, arguing that in many ways they are more grounded in control than help. Through his genealogy of psychology in particular, Rose’s poststructural analysis of helping discourses shines light on the darker implications of individualizing helping practices. Recognizing that individual professionals are most often driven by a genuine desire to support their clients, he suggests that they may unwittingly be further contributing to their imprisonment. Deeply informed by Foucault, Rose expresses concern over the fact that populations are convinced to manage their behaviour and responses in ways that are socially acceptable, and that this ‘conduct of conduct’ is facilitated in part by the mainstreaming of the ‘psy’ disciplines and their discourses. By policing ourselves and each other to become more productive or to participate in certain kinds of relationships, we are less likely to critically engage with the societal expectations around these aspects of our lives. As we sense ourselves as less powerful in the face of political forces we instead turn to our personal lives to exert and experience power, leaving larger systems uncritically examined (see more in Newbury & Hoskins, 2012).

Elsewhere I have written on such diverse themes as the potentially violent implications of individualizing trauma (Newbury, 2011b), the inherent risks in adopting a ‘business model’ of care (Newbury, 2010), possibilities for contextualized approaches to addiction (Newbury &

Hoskins, 2010a; 2012), not-for-profit education (Newbury, 2011d), community-based support for families (Newbury, 2009), social justice and child and youth care practice (Newbury, 2010b), and centerless systems of human service practices (Newbury, 2011a). Looking back at these works a consistent theme becomes evident: critique of the implications of individualizing discourses on human service practice and a quest for alternatives when pursuing social justice.

In fact, I entered the field of child and youth care by enrolling in a diploma program, believing it would offer an alternative to individualizing practices, as core to the curriculum was a relational perspective (Garfat, 2003). My work placements during that program, however, took place in group homes, where I quickly became frustrated with the role I felt expected to play: an authority figure in the lives of youth who have been removed from their contexts and were treated as problematic individuals in many aspects of their complex lives. Upon graduation I held a job as a Family Initiatives Counsellor in northern British Columbia and then worked at two groups homes in Calgary, Alberta. The relational approach that had drawn me to CYC seemed impossible to effectively embody in a system in which individualizing discourses prevailed (this concept will be explicated in the following section). It was frustration with this set of circumstances that led me back to university to pursue a Masters and again to embark on a PhD.

I believe the relational approach that drew me to CYC is becoming increasingly difficult to enact, and I believe it may be in part due to its (generally) de-politicized nature. By exploring the pervasiveness of individualizing discourses, our movement away from the social justice ideals outlined previously may become clearer in the chapters that follow, and the political dynamics that have contributed to current practice may become evident. I will begin by explaining what I mean by individualizing discourses, proceed to explore what some of those

discourses are as well as their origins and implications, and consider why we in the human services seem so reluctant to embrace alternatives.

Coming to Terms: Individualizing Discourses

Discourse

According to Gadamer (1975/2004), “the truth of things resides in discourse ... and not in the individual words, not even in a language’s entire stock of words” (p. 412). Thus, while the terms language and discourse are often used interchangeably, Gadamer’s observation suggests discourse consists of something much more than language alone.

Wagner (2008) defines discourse as “any talking or writing done in a social situation” and adds to that “any overt – bodily – action in a social setting, which by virtue of its semiotic powers conveys meaning to other social actors” (p. 38). The important commonality among these seemingly disparate signs is that meaning is being conveyed through them. But it is not as simple as that: while meaning can be intentionally conveyed by individual actors, their agency is also in some ways constrained by the discursive moves of other actors. As Howard (2007) explains, if meanings are conveyed through discourse, then in certain ways potential meanings are delimited by the relational construction of “discursive fields” (potentially intelligible discursive action) (p. 4). These discursive fields, then, both constitute and are constituted by the modes of subjectivity of those individuals who act within them. As a result of the collective construction of discursive fields, “certain discourses carry more weight or have more power”, which means certain interpretations are “favoured, legitimized, and celebrated, while others are criticised, marginalized, and problematized” (p. 5). (At present this could be said, for instance, of ‘bottom-line’ economic discourses, growth discourses, and individualizing discourses – all of which will be discussed later). Stated simply: Because we are entering into the world in which

certain norms are already at play, we are not (individually) free to engage in discursive practices any way we like, but nor are we passive pawns.

Thus, the concept of discourse is intricately connected to power relations, in ways that language is not. Foucault (1972) speaks of “discursive regimes” to explain “the effects of power peculiar to the play of statements” (which easily extends to discursive activity beyond statements) (p. 55). Discursive regimes would be one of many ways ‘power relations’ are enacted. Rather than seeing power as something to be either held or withheld, Foucault understands power to be a dynamic, which can be recodified in such ways as (for example) reinscribing discourses. Understood in this way, discourse is not merely the words (written or spoken) or actions that convey meanings; discourse is also an important component of power relations by which all individuals are on the one hand potential agents of change and on the other hand restricted by power relations that are already at play. Thus, discourse can simultaneously make “a practice appear routine and ... give rise to possibilities for change” (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p. 1519). It is both of these aspects of discourse that interest me: Understanding how discourse can make a practice appear routine may help me to understand why current practices – even those commonly understood as problematic – can persist. Understanding how discourse can give rise to possibilities for change may help to open space for realistic alternatives.

Individualizing discourses

I have been very intentional about using the verb ‘individualizing’ rather than the adjective, ‘individualistic’. There is much popular debate about our increasingly individualistic cultural reality. What is sometimes conveyed as a self-centered tendency is often described as the source of many current global issues: from overconsumption, to climate change, to shifts in how social services (including health care and education) are delivered. I believe these are

important conversations (superficially represented here), but discursively bypass an important aspect of the phenomenon: how is it that we have come to this ‘individualistic’ place?

Cosmo Howard (2007) and others who study individualization would posit that not only are we enmeshed in important dynamic processes that lead to this central location of the individual, but ironically, that these are *social* processes. Perhaps we are not operating as the distinct individuals we think we are, even as we (collectively) become more individual-oriented. According to Howard (2007), “the contemporary shift toward the individual is being driven by collective processes that involve new forms of socialization, regulation, and resource allocation, all of which promote particular kinds of individuality” (p. 1). He goes on to explain that modernization extracted the individual from the bonds of such social institutions as the family, tradition, and social collectives. Taylor (2007) suggests that the increasing prevalence of individualistic discourses that came with the Enlightenment was in some ways an effort towards a more just society. By recognizing the capacities of individuals in their own right, the hope was that they would be less bound by the class distinctions and religious indoctrinations that had previously sealed their fates. This tendency can be observed even today, with such things as the human rights movement (to which I will return in more detail in Chapter 13).

However, Howard (2007) reminds us that once ‘liberated’ from the tethers of family and tradition, we became bound by other social structures. For instance, “people are now more dependent on a series of modern institutions and structures, including the welfare state, education systems, and labour markets, and that these impose new and often contradictory demands on individuals” (p. 2). We are also constrained by more amorphous structures, such as discourses (Rose, 1998). Individualization theory, then, emphasizes individual agency and choice, but in a way that also acknowledges power dynamics and social constraints to our ability to exercise such

choice. So, while neo-liberalism (which is arguably the most powerful force in asserting the ‘individualism’ of today) celebrates the autonomous and rational individual, individualization theory challenges the assumption that any of us can or do operate independent of social institutions (both formal and informal).

Importantly, Nollman and Strasser (2007) remind us that

In all societies, there have always been ‘individuals’. This is not a specific feature of modernity ... The far-reaching change associated with modernity is the extent to which people usually address persons as causes of behaviour and thereby ‘individualize’ them.

Note that this process is inherently social and interactive from the beginning. (p. 85)

It is precisely this aspect of our current individual-centered ways of interpreting both the struggles people experience and the means by which we aim to support them that is of interest to me. While I am not arguing that focusing on individual wellbeing is a problem in and of itself (indeed, it is important work), I believe the danger lies in doing so uncritically, without considering larger social and political dynamics (and in this pursuit I follow the lead of narrative therapists such as Denborough, 2008; Madigan, 2011; and White & Epston, 1990). Locating agency entirely within human beings takes society off the hook when pursuing explanations and alternatives. I assert that instrumental approaches to supporting children and families which narrowly locate the locus of change within individuals do a disservice by neglecting to address the social conditions that often play significant roles in precipitating the struggles of already marginalized populations. This runs the risk (or invites the inevitability) of further marginalizing them and perpetuating social injustices.

By describing discourses as *individualizing*, I am referring to the process by which these dominant discourses serve to transform inherently social processes into processes we have

increasingly come to understand in terms of the individual, thus obscuring the *social* nature of social problems. What are some of the individualizing discourses that have contributed to such a state of affairs within human service practices? How did the discursive shift from a social to an individual focus arise?

Developmental Psychology

When it comes to human service practices, the influence of developmental psychology cannot be overstated, particularly when it comes to the conversion of *social processes* to *individual characteristics*.

Let me acknowledge up front that this conversion is a product of the ways we have come to *take up* the language of developmental psychology over time, and it has been informed by a great many other simultaneous political and theoretical dynamics (such as free market economics, human rights advocacy, and globalization). In fact, it can very persuasively be argued that popular understandings of psychological theory today are *not* the logical extension of those whose work initially led to their development. Regardless of intention, however, developmental psychology has had, and continues to have, a great impact on the interpretations of and responses to individual behaviour.

There are many ways developmental psychology has significantly informed diverse fields of human service practice, such as education, social work, child and youth care, and early childhood education. Three that are particularly worth noting are 1) the emphasis on age-based stages of development, 2) attachment theory, and 3) the increasing prevalence of diagnosis within mental health practices.

Age-based stages of development

Jean Piaget put forward a model of age-based developmental processes which notes increases in physical, social, and cognitive capacities as children age (in Craig, Kermis, & Digdon, 2002). For example, Piaget contrasts the sensorimotor ways that infants make sense of the world with the more abstract approaches of older children. The idea that there are predictable and universal capabilities and behaviours demonstrated by children at certain points in their development has been adapted and elaborated by a number of theorists (Cech, 2010, Taylor, 2004).

There has been great value for parents, as well as teachers and other professionals who work with children, in developing an understanding of these age-based stages of development. Even when they are understood as culturally determined (Rogoff, 2003), these general descriptions can be helpful in better recognizing some of the struggles children may be having so that supports can be put into place at an early stage and children can move through life more comfortably. For example, there are presently no biological indicators of autism spectrum disorder, so behaviour is the primary indicator (Wetherby et al, 2004). Since it is known that early intervention can increase the responsiveness of children with autism, understanding from a very early age what behavioural indicators to look for is crucial. Knowing what typical behaviours – or developmental milestones – look like for a toddler (according to developmental theory), parents and other adults can recognize behaviours such as lack of eye contact or vocal atypicalities (such as squeals and growls) as potential indicators of autism spectrum disorder (Wetherby et al, 2004). As another example, learning difficulties are more readily recognized and addressed when adults understand what ‘typical’ classroom behaviour looks like for a child of a certain age and when they understand what might be indicators that a child is experiencing difficulty (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2006). Being able to recognize

such struggles early can increase the likelihood that the child will get the support he or she needs. These are some of the reasons developmental theory has been considered foundational knowledge for many of the human service professions.

Things have become complicated, however, with the fact that these general understandings about development have in many cases shifted from being presented as useful *descriptions* to being discursively constructed as powerful, universal *prescriptions*, whereby children whose behaviour does not reflect that of the ‘normal’ child of his or her age may be read as pathological. Everyday discourses reflect the expectations that are drawn from these age-based stages of development. It is not uncommon for a parent, teacher, or health professional to describe a child as “ahead”, “behind”, or “slow” in relation to other children his or her age and to express concern if a child is not developing precisely along the lines of the norms presented by these theories of development (or better yet: surpassing them).

Attachment theory

But age is not the only aspect of developmental psychology that informs human service practices. Linked to these developmental theories is the concept of attachment. Attachment theory presumes that in addition to changes that occur as a child grows older, there are also certain tasks that are ideally achieved before the child moves from one stage to the next (Ainsworth, 1978). Primarily this has been understood to involve developing a bond with his or her mother, although research has suggested that any consistent, dependable figure in the child’s early life can be considered an ‘attachment figure’, or even that multiple people can serve the same function (Rogoff, 2003). The point, however, is that if attachment does not take place during earlier stages of development, then the child may experience significant behavioural, social, and psychological struggles as he or she grows older.

Attachment theory has given us a greater understanding of how to best nurture and support children in the early years of life. Recognizing the value of stable, loving figures in the lives of young children has, for example, contributed to the shift from institutionalizing parentless children in orphanages to systems of foster care, and has also contributed to discussions and policy decisions about permanency planning for children in care (Gauthier, Fortin, & Jeliu, 2004). There is much to be said for the learning that has come from attachment theory.

Again, however, developmental theories have been *taken up* in ways that create norms and standards which set the stage for processes of categorization and classification. In the case of attachment, for example, we can see how social processes (dependable adults not being present) are then interpreted in terms of individual pathology (attachment disorder), and responded to as such (with one common response being ‘mother blaming’). This is an example of the conversion of a relational or social process to an individual problem that causes me concern.

Diagnosis

In addition to age-based stages of development and attachment theory, a third but increasingly significant outcome of developmental psychology within the human services is the emphasis on diagnosis, which is one such process of individualized classification. Because developmental psychology emphasizes individual and neural activity, it has precipitated the increasing tendency to interpret behaviour as an ‘effect’ of individual psychological processes. As a result, energetic behaviour is often referred to as hyperactivity, understood to be a ‘symptom’ of a disorder, and responded to with treatment (counselling, behavioural intervention, or medication). Sadness, worry, despair, loneliness and endless other behaviours are currently

interpreted similarly, using language such as depression, anxiety, and anti-social tendencies. By viewing children through a purely psychological lens, norms are created and ‘pathologies’ can be identified almost anywhere. Strengthened by developmental psychological theories and the American Psychiatric Association’s multi-editioned *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), this tendency has been highly criticized as not only a simplistic but dangerous way of interpreting behaviour. Critics claim it does not acknowledge the possibility that people may not only be passively experiencing *effects* of disorders. Rather, such behaviours can also be understood as active *responses* to oppression and marginalization in other aspects of their lives, and it is these *social* dysfunctions that must be addressed if meaningful and just change is sought (de Finney, Dean, Loiselle, & Saraceno, 2011; Madan, 2011; McKnight, 1995; Wade, 2007).

Perhaps the most publically criticized aspect of the DSM is not the fact that diagnostic labels exist, but the ways in which they are constructed and changed over time. For instance, Madigan calls into question the procedures by which a “multidisciplinary team is ‘chosen’ to make decisions on what to include and exclude in the DSM” (p. 50). Recognizing the social and political dimension of the development of any inherited knowledge requires us to consider the larger contexts in which the practices it informs have emerged. Perhaps doing so can also help us to better understand why it is developmental theories have increasingly been interpreted in these individualizing ways, in order to then make room for us to consider other possible interpretations of and responses to children’s difficulties.

Disenchantment

Taylor (2007) believes that “the number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself” (p. 1). Of particular concern to him is the manner in which the “progress of

disenchantment” (p. 49) has altered our ‘social imaginaries’. Taylor explains that during the historic period known as Enlightenment, disenchantment led to an ideological shift that was primarily democratic in its aims. By emphasizing empirical evidence over all else (such as spirituality or magic, for example), it was believed that equality among individuals might finally be attainable. Rather than privileging certain people due to their inherent gifts or lineage, all people would have the opportunity to reach great heights by having access to the same empirical realities with which they could do what they will. Those who succeeded would do so on their own merit (or so was hoped).

Of course this emphasis on the empirical world did not lead directly to such a utopia, but that does not mean it was without impact. Indeed, because of the ideological shift that was ushered in through the Disenchantment (along with other simultaneous political and social developments), our modern social imaginary (as Taylor, 2007, would say) is one in which we have come to conceive of society as largely “comprised of co-existing and cooperating individuals – that which is emotional, spiritual, and beyond the immediately visible realm is dismissed as unscientific or irrational” (Newbury, 2011c, p. 337). With this conceptualization of society, we have in many ways removed other dimensions of experience from consideration (although, of course one discourse does not entirely replace the other, and there remain exceptions to this dominant story). We have also prioritized individual agency to such an extent that we have conceptually disembodied ourselves from each other and the rest of the world. Taylor (2007) refers to this process as the “great disembedding” (p. 49) and is concerned that it leads us to prioritize our individual selves over our collective selves to an alarming extent.

Taylor (2007) acknowledges the hope this disembedding can foster: by conceiving of myself as independent from the context in which I live and its constraints, I may experience a

sense of freedom otherwise inaccessible to me. On the other hand, he also cautions that it overlooks very real power dynamics and material realities.

Unfortunately, such a hopeful perspective does not take into consideration the power dynamics that may constrain the agency of some, and privilege others. Tronto (1993) warns against presuming an equality that does not exist, as it obscures the dynamics that prevent some from ‘realizing’ their potential (and allow others to ‘realize’ theirs on the backs of fellow citizens). Braidotti (2006) insists on keeping in mind the material and historical dimensions of a situation. Doing so, she reminds us of the concrete dangers inherent in *decontextualized* approaches to change with the example of “the Burka-clad bodies of the Afghan women in whose defense an anti-abortionist, arch-conservative and anti-feminist president, George W. Bush, cynically claimed to launch one of the many commercially driven wars of conquest” (p. 46). Focusing too squarely on the individual means such inequitable conditions – and illogical responses - remain unaddressed. Furthermore, as Dr. Jennifer White (personal communication, 21 July, 2011) pointed out, “some people (young children, persons with disabilities, elderly) will always be dependent on others for their care, which many neo-liberal ideologies fail to make explicit.” I would add to this observation the fact that *all* of us belong to those categories (of people who are dependent on others) at certain points in our lifespans.⁷

Neoliberalism

Earlier I addressed the fact that human services are informed by larger discourses – such as those that emerged from within developmental psychology. When citizens and practitioners

⁷ Please note, segments of this section about disenchantment have been published previously in: Newbury, J. (2011). Contextualizing care: Alternatives to the individualization of struggles and support by considering loss. In A. Pence and J. White. *Child and Youth Care: Critical Perspectives on Pedagogy, Practice, and Policy*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
Newbury, J. (2011). *A case for theoretical inconsistency*. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 10(4), 335-347.

take up these ideas, our understandings of what we do and why we do it are altered. With this in mind, I would be remiss not to spend some time addressing the implications within our practices of one of the most pervasive individualizing discourses of our current political climate: neoliberalism. By spending some time considering how the discourses and norms of neoliberalism emerged and play out in our practices and policies, we may better understand why human service practices have so readily evolved in the direction of individual intervention (see also Newbury, 2011e for more on neo-liberalism as it relates to work with children, youth, and families).

Although there is a relationship between neoliberalism and capitalism, they are not synonymous. Whereas capitalist practices take place in a number of political contexts, neoliberalism is an *ideology* within which capitalism is readily taken up. According to Klein (2008), neoliberalism first emerged in America as a direct response to Russia's version of communism. Its intention was to 'liberate' markets, based on a hopeful assumption that they would moderate themselves, through the dynamics of supply and demand. The emphasis on 'free' markets is linked directly to the Chicago School of Economics, and continues to have global reach. It involved 'liberating' markets from constraints so that markets could well and truly be 'free', thus moderating themselves through their own inherent, natural processes.

So while neoliberalism is often discussed in terms of the capitalist practices (Klein, 2008), it involves much more than that, meaning its implications extend beyond economic matters to also include all aspects of social life. Recalling the opening discussion of how an emphasis on practice alone can mislead, it is important to ask what else neoliberalism involves, and why is it relevant here?

What we now call neoliberalism has its roots in liberalism, which (as in the earlier discussion on disenchantment) emerged in Europe as an ‘equalizing’ ideology in so far as everyone should have equal opportunity to participate in social and political processes. Importantly, however, while liberalism promotes an equality of *access* to participation in matters that affect citizens (and this, with limits), it rejects any design by which equality might be cultivated as an *outcome* (Treanor, 2005; see also Rawls, 1993; 1997). It is this aspect of the ideology that many claim contributes to growing gaps between rich and poor, particularly in places where neoliberal policies have been embraced (Albanese, 2010; Klein, 2008; Winegard & Winegard, 2011). Farmer (2005) suggests this is in part due to “misguided notions of cost-effectiveness [that] have already trumped equity” (Farmer, 2005, p. 245). For instance, countries that embrace neoliberal policies are more likely to fund and foster interventions that are targeted at ‘high-risk’ families and individuals (in relation to health services, welfare services, and education), rather than providing universal supports for citizens (such as parental leaves and higher minimum wages, which serve a preventative function). This makes it very difficult for families to transition from an ‘at-risk’ situation to one in which they no longer need the support of the state (Albanese, 2010), making them overly reliant on services and programs that limit their chances of independence and upward social mobility. It also is seen to cultivate attitudes of blame and further marginalization that come when the social determinants of health are concealed (Winegard & Winegard, 2011). This helps illustrate how neoliberal ideals have found their way into human service practice and policies, and beyond.

Ismael (2006) explains how neoliberal philosophy has contributed to the development of powerful economic institutions, such as “the United Nations, the World Bank, and the

International Monetary Fund” (p. 7), and how the power of such institutions can be felt in relation to all aspects of life and wellbeing. She says,

Indicative of the distinctly ideological spin of neo-liberalism, developmental outcomes are measured in terms of a child’s development of cognitive, motor and social skills – a skill set directly related to competitive individualism. In the changed ideological context of state discourse, the image of the competitive society had replaced the just society in the assessment of impact. (p. 15)

In addition to child development, neoliberalism also informs how we interpret broader, social phenomenon: “The framing of child poverty as a problem of economic development in poor nations is consistent with the goals of economic development and globalization these agencies sponsor” (Ismael, 2006, p. 7). Ismael’s observation of the seemingly simultaneous emergence of these discourses within the human services and these larger neoliberal discourses points to the very political nature of our work, and to the importance of being intentional about the discourses we employ, as the implications can be devastating.

I believe this is where individualization theory comes into play. Whereas neo-liberalism operates from an assumption of individualism, individualization theory reminds us that agency is constrained in many ways (Howard, 2007). When neoliberal thinking is extended beyond a single individual or generation, it can quickly be observed that access to these participatory processes can be limited by events or circumstances in which a particular individual did not even participate. For example, being born within a particular socio-economic bracket or in a particular moment in history can have huge implications regarding the degree of agency an individual can exercise. Tronto (1993) cautions us about drawing from individual-centered

theories that presume universal equality, and urges us instead to approach care in a way that allows for responsiveness to conditions. She says,

To assume equality among humans leaves out and ignores important dimensions of human existence ... [O]ne reason to presume that we are all independent and autonomous is to avoid the difficult questions that arise when we recognize that not all humans are equal ... The moral precept of responsiveness requires that we remain alert to the possibilities for abuse that arise with vulnerability. (p. 135)

It is in these regards that neoliberalism is in many ways in direct odds with social justice, even though it currently informs many of the practices and policies within the human service professions. For example, Winegard and Winegard (2011) critically consider the concrete implications of neoliberalism (ideology and practices) in relation to public health. They note that with the global neoliberal revolution that began in the 1970s, the world has seen (and continues to see) increasing disparities in wealth:

From circa 1942 to 1978, the top 10% of households held around 33% of the nation's wealth. Currently, the wealth share of the top 10% stands at 47%. Even more strikingly, the top 0.1% (1 in 1,000) of households increased their share of income from less than 1% in 1978 to roughly 5% in 2008. (p. 1)

While the relevance of this inequity has been downplayed by those advocating neoliberal policies, these authors remind readers that “hundreds of studies demonstrate that inequality is destructive socially and psychologically” (p. 3). Indicators such as overall population health, mental health, life expectancy, child well-being, homicide rates, drug use, and imprisonment are all negatively correlated with inequality. Winegard and Winegard (2011) note that “even social

mobility, the cause célèbre of neoliberal aficionados, is negatively correlated with inequality (i.e., the more equal the society, the greater the social mobility)” (p. 3).

In addition to looking at the impacts of inequality, the pair also note that since the current generation is growing up amidst practices, institutions, and norms that are deeply influenced by neoliberal ideologies, then taking a look at changing trends over time can also shed light on how shifts in the direction of neoliberalism impact populations. While advocates of neoliberal policies and practices highlight the fact that individuals experience greater freedoms (particularly freedom of choice), Winegard and Winegard (2011) observe that these increasing freedoms do not necessarily translate to wellbeing, happiness, or health. Across all age groups they note declines (since the 1960s) in social capital, voter turnout, conversations with neighbours, and cooperation. Simultaneously, they note there have been distinct increases in depression, anxiety, mental illness, materialism, cynicism, apathy, and self-centredness, as well as a rise in the belief in a just world, which in turn means that “youth today are more likely to justify the status quo and blame victims than were youth in the 1970s” (p. 5).

Winegard and Winegard (2011) caution us not to blame the current generation for these trends. They state that “they are caused by material and cultural changes, not by changes in innate psychology. These are the outcomes of a culture predicated on material values and individualism. In short, these are the predictable results of neoliberal policy” (p. 6, see also Gergen, Lightfoot, & Sydow, 2004 for another relational interpretation of these trends). The historical foundations of social justice that traditionally informed the emergence of many human service practices, combined with the prevalence of neoliberal discourses influencing our current policies and practices, can be understood as a conflict of interest that must be addressed.

Hanging on for Dear Life

At this point, I have become familiar with much of the literature that effectively criticizes individual-centered and individualizing approaches to social justice issues within human service practice. John McKnight (1995), Michael White and David Epston (1990), and Ken Gergen (1994) for example, have spent lifetimes tirelessly addressing this problem. While what I perceive to be the systemic individualization of social problems is what drives me to do research, not everyone in my field of practice shares my concern. As an example, my supervisor and I submitted a manuscript for publication in 2010, in which we drew from McKnight and Foucault in trying to bring social justice concerns into practice. A reviewer of this manuscript expressed concern that the field of child and youth care might cease to exist if we move in the direction of social justice and anti-oppressive practice.

I would like to respond directly to this fear before proceeding, as I suspect there may still be concern among some readers about the fact that sometimes individuals still do need support. I wholeheartedly agree that this is the case; by drawing attention to social conditions I do not intend to turn my back to individuals. Regardless of how well conditions are addressed, there will be people of all walks of life ('privileged' or otherwise) who periodically experience struggles for which they could benefit from both formal and informal supports. I believe, however, that our current approaches (with their largely decontextualized interpretations of the lived experiences of individuals) actually obscure their unique hardships by overlooking the effects of conditions upon their experience. Often, as in the case of Jennifer that opened this book, *actual* individuals who need support feel 'unseen' by the system as it currently exists. Her file is processed as if it represents *her*, and she is surveilled to such a degree that it would seem that she alone is the source of her difficulties. She can experience further marginalization within her community as a result of such bureaucratic forms of intervention. Alternatively, by stepping

back and contextualizing practice, we might see and respond to the unique experiences of individuals like Jennifer for the first time, or at least more clearly. Perhaps in so doing, our interventions will be experienced as the support we wish to provide.

I would also like to caution that the moment our practice becomes about sustaining our own positions rather than contributing to collective and individual wellbeing, we have already lost our way.

Striving to Avoid Perpetuating Notions of Powerlessness

I fear I am dancing close to a dangerous trend here. On the one hand I share Tronto's (1993) concern about assumptions of equality, and want to draw attention to the potential for systemic violence that can occur when we do not recognize how our systems do indeed privilege certain groups over others (Farmer, 2005). On the other hand, I want to be sure I do not simply paint those who might find themselves identified with less 'privileged' groups as incapable, as victims, and as bound by existing conditions. Moreover, I do not want to diminish the struggles of those who fall on the 'powerful' side of these binaries. Pain is not limited by class, gender, and race. Suffering is experienced by all of us, and I do not wish to minimize the suffering of some in order to ensure attention is drawn to the suffering that is perpetuated by unjust conditions. I am not suggesting there are comparisons to be made when it comes to different kinds of suffering, for even the distinction between 'natural' forms of suffering and those that come about from oppression cannot clearly be teased apart when it comes to particular disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

By simplifying complex processes, by overlooking or diminishing polyvocality (Gergen & Gergen, 2000), and by adhering to binaries (*any* binary, including those of center/margins, powerful/powerless, and privileged/underprivileged), I am running the risk of perpetuating

notions of powerlessness and in turn working against the possibility of a more just society. How can we simultaneously acknowledge inequities *and* hold space for the multiple and diverse experiences that exist within them, though not necessarily represented by them?

When I began my doctoral research, I was working within a more specific area of study: grief and loss. During that first year, I wrote a paper which (in retrospect) marks the transition in my focus of study. It was when exploring the common experience of loss and the social function of such a profoundly personal experience, that my topic of study shifted to *alternatives to the individualization of struggles and support* in general terms, rather than only in the case of experiences of loss. At this point, however, I see value in returning to that paper - which is now a book chapter (Newbury, 2011e) – in order to address the concern I raised in the above paragraph. What I found illuminating about the topic of loss is the fact that regardless of gender, class, and ethnicity, the experience of loss “has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (Butler, 2004, p. 20) in three important ways: 1) we all are certain to experience it (albeit differently), 2) it instils a profound “reverence for life” (see Scott, 1998, p. 345), and perhaps most importantly for my purposes, 3) it highlights the relational nature of human experience in that loss seems “to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others ...” (Butler, 2004, p. 20), serving as a very real reminder of the vulnerability of all human beings.

In these ways, loss provides an opportunity to consider social conditions *and* hold space for the diversity of experiences within them. While on the one hand, loss is a uniquely individual and personal experience, on the other hand it is also (not instead) a relational and political experience. It can, in fact, furnish a deep sense of connectedness, foster hope, and inspire commitments to social responsibility (see Newbury, 2011d for a more thorough

discussion). As such, it invites us to deviate from the ‘disembedded’ and individualizing norms described previously, and more readily embrace those emotional, nonmaterial aspects of political and social life that have been largely dismissed as a result of the modern emphasis on rationality. My reflections on loss help me to simultaneously recognize the implications of social and relational processes on individual experiences *and* remain curious about the particular experiences of those processes in each and every unique situation. Loss does not abide by the dualistic categories we so neatly delineate. We must be careful not to mistakenly overlook those experiences that exist in the spaces in between, lest we perpetuate polarizing discourses that contribute to the injustices against which we aspire to be working.

CHAPTER 12:

Individualization and Human Rights Discourses

On December 10, 1948, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights was formalized. The Declaration consists of thirty articles which outline the rights upheld by the document, and it has more than 90 signatory countries worldwide (Gumbis, Bacianskaite, & Randakeviciute, 2010). At the outset it was a *potentially* important formal document which was still waiting for the life to be breathed into it. But the popular awareness of the Declaration and its implications grew in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, making human rights an idea that those of a wide range of political orientations could get behind – in theory at the very least (Moyn, 2010). The notion of human rights continues to be evoked in a wide range of political contexts globally, such as in lively debates over internet accessibility during political protests in Egypt in the winter of 2011 (see Human Rights Watch, 2011 and Kendal, 2011). As in the case of internet access, the concept of fundamental human rights is often called upon as a preventative measure: for example, some suggest that upholding free access to information in this increasingly globalized world can prevent further human rights abuses. The discourse of human rights is thus taken seriously by people from a wide range of schools of thought, and is as much about promoting just social conditions as it is about protecting individuals from abuses.

In relation to the topic at hand – the individualization of social problems – human rights discourses have played a pivotal and complicated role. I have decided to dedicate a chapter to this issue, in order to hopefully make explicit some of the complexities of the relationship between human rights discourses and the processes of individualization, particularly pertaining to support for children and families within fields of human service.

The Emergence of Human Rights Discourses

The Declaration of Human Rights was drafted as a response to the atrocities of World War II. Prior to its ratification on December 10, 1948, rights discourses usually involved discussions of rights *within* a given nation-state. This was the first time the notion of *universal* rights emerged. As Gumbis et al (2010) stated, it was believed that “the law of the princes’ has finally become the ‘universal’ law of human dignity” (p. 127).

However, perhaps due to the political climate of the day, the document arguably held no real currency until the seventies, when US President Carter drew on the notion of universal human rights in his inaugural address (Moyn, 2010). In fact, Moyn posits that although the formal document emerged in the 1940s, at that time “human rights were stillborn and then [later] somehow resurrected” (p. 36). In his analysis, the true emergence of human rights as a viable and meaningful public discourse occurred thirty years later. Conditions changed greatly between the 1940s and the 1970s, and Moyn (2010) suggests that – along with chance – there were a collection of significant changes that set the stage for the (re)birth of the human rights movement: Europe was seeking an identity beyond cold war terms, neoliberalism was drastically shifting American foreign policy, and decolonization was providing western countries with “a new view toward the third world” (p. 36). The conditions were finally perfect for human rights to be taken seriously on an international level.

But, while the notion of human rights were drawn on more readily during and beyond that point in history, the question remains whether the function served by this discourse is anything more than rhetorical. Gumbis and colleagues (2010) suggest that rather than moving from national to universal concerns for the wellbeing of all people, human rights discourses have in many ways simply served to legitimize the status quo. In fact, they argue that the 60 years following the ratification of the declaration has “witnessed greater violations of these rights”

than any other. Moyn (2010) concurs. He fears that since rights have “many faces and multiple possible uses” (p. 36), they have justified a great many actions that run in contradiction with the spirit underlying the Declaration – actions such as “liberal warfare and ‘intervention’” in the name of democracy promotion (p. 37).

Despite the fact that we are collectively still determining exactly how to effectively employ the Declaration of Human Rights, it remains a widely supported and relevant document. Perhaps because of the support it enjoys from many corners of the world, it was more recently followed with a similar document: this one with a particular emphasis on children.

Rights for Children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted in 1989, and today, “scholarly work on children’s rights is almost inconceivable without considering the Convention as the bearer of the children’s rights debate” (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, & Vandeveld, 2009, p. 518-519). Prior to the ratification of the UNCRC (by all but two member countries), there was a tendency to view children as ‘people in the making’ who were valued primarily in terms of their potential. But the emergence of a rights discourse about children paved the way to seeing children as *beings* in their own right (rather than ‘becomings’), providing valuable critique of existing child protection practices and expanding notions of viable supports for children (Reynaert et al, 2009, see also Moss & Petrie, 2002).

The UNCRC is a legally binding instrument, and it has contributed monumentally to the growing child rights discourse. While it acknowledges that children often do require special protection, this agreement entitles children to more than protection, but also participation (Reynaert et al, 2009). As stated in the Convention itself, “the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection,

before as well as after birth” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011). It then goes on to assure that a child has “the right to express [his or her] view freely in all manners affecting the child”, that “the child shall have the right to freedom of expression”, “freedom of thought”, and “access to information”, and so forth. As such, the 54 articles of this Convention have been recognized as contributing to shifts in policy and practice that contribute greatly to the dignity of children by honouring their agency when it comes to their own wellbeing.

Although the preamble of the document explicitly takes into consideration the diverse realities and needs of children, the Convention has been criticized as reflecting “a white, western, middle-class model that fits a particular group of children more than others” (Reynaert et al, 2009, p. 524). In fact, although it has been said that the greatest merit of “the children’s rights movement [is] that it has grasped the concept of individualization ... and brought to the fore a group in society that has for a long time been invisible and discriminated against on the basis of age” (p. 522), this may also be its greatest downfall. Reynaert and colleagues (2009) suggest that not only does the emphasis on autonomy of the individual reflect a particular cultural worldview, but it also diminishes the relational nature of children’s experience, particularly the power dynamics in which they are enmeshed. Indeed, the emphasis on children as distinct individuals can serve to shift the “responsibility for realizing rights from the state to the individual” (p. 224). When it comes to supports for children and families, this shift in emphasis can certainly be felt.

As Foster and Wharf (2007) illustrate, even child protection practices in the province of British Columbia have shifted over recent years to become increasingly individual-centered. They note that such shifts have often come about as responses to situations in which individual

children have suffered, such as the well-known inquiry into the 1992 death of Matthew Vaudreuil conducted by Thomas Gove in 1995. These shifts have also been informed by larger, global discourses of child rights. Even though Gove and other decision makers wish to protect individual children from harm, the fact remains that current approaches to child protection practices in British Columbia (which increasingly emphasize assessing risk in the lives of individual children) are not entirely succeeding (Foster & Wharf, 2007).

In my quest for reasons as to why this might be the case, I encountered Derrida's (1995) differentiation between a generic individual and a unique (actual) individual. He says, "the individualism of technological civilization ... is an individualism relating to a role and not a person" (p. 36). Unfortunately the unique personal and emotional aspects of actual individual experiences are often the first to be dismissed within 'rational' inquiries in child welfare that center the generic individual. Such inquiries are more likely to take on the universalistic and legalistic tone that is also evident in human rights discourses (Reder, Duncan, & Gray, 1993). However, the emotive and personal dimensions that are missing from this approach are not secondary, but in fact often *central* to the experiences of the actual people we aim to support (Damousi, 2002; I also explore these ideas in Newbury, 2011e).

Critically Engaging with Rights Discourses: Individualizing Implications

Although the notions of autonomy, individuality, and self-determination *can* be freeing, that is not the only function served by such concepts; they can also imprison us in certain ways. Human rights discourses have contributed greatly towards this shift in understanding ourselves as autonomous and self-determined beings. However, Tully (2005) effectively demonstrates how self-determination as a concept has contributed directly to "the imperial rule of development and normative globalization" (p. 38), particularly when it comes to groups who generally are not

able to exercise as much agency within existing power dynamics (such as children). Much like Foucault's (2005) notion of governmentality, Tully's analysis suggests that the idea of self-determined, autonomous individuals (which is promoted within both of the monumental United Nations human rights documents discussed above) may not in fact challenge currently occurring human rights violations after all. On the contrary, this conceptualization can actually contribute to the perpetuation of human rights violations by obscuring relational dynamics and systemic processes and placing the onus for change squarely on the shoulders of de-contextualized individuals. For example, Farmer (2005) points out that despite public health slogans such as 'AIDS is for everyone', "the distribution of AIDS is strikingly localized and non-random; so is that of human rights abuses. Both HIV transmission and human rights abuses are social processes" (p. 230). This may elucidate the observation made by both Gumbis et al (2010) and Moyn (2010) that despite wide acceptance of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, we have not seen a significant improvement in conditions. In fact, it is argued elsewhere that in the past 20 years, the gap between rich and poor (in economic terms and also in terms of wellbeing) has steadily grown (Albanese, 2010; Rabet, 2010). In a 1995 World Health Organization executive report readers were reminded that

Beneath the heartening facts about decreased mortality and increasing life expectancy, and many other undoubted health advances, lie unacceptable disparities in health. The gaps between rich and poor, between one population group and another, between ages and between the sexes, are widening.

Today, with increasing momentum behind the Millennium Development Goals striving to reverse such trends, disparities persist. In the 2010 World Health Organization executive report it is observed that

Rich women generally obtain similar levels of coverage, wherever they live, but the poor miss out. Women in the richest 20% of the population are up to 20 times more likely to have a birth attended by a skilled health worker than a poor woman. . . . But income is not the only factor influencing service coverage. In many settings, migrants, ethnic minorities and indigenous people use [health] services less than other population groups, even though their needs may be greater. (p. 8)

So, while Farmer (2005) insists that “human rights can and should be declared universal”, he simultaneously cautions that “the risk of having one’s rights violated is not universal” (p. 231). Sharon Todd (2008) agrees that asserting rights is not enough, and encourages us to engage with the “underlying principles upon which rights are based” (p. 52). She reminds us to keep in mind, always, that human rights are a series of historically-constituted human articulations. They are not, in fact, an objective reflection of any essence of what is fundamentally human. Recognizing their socially constructed nature can help ensure we are mindful in terms of how we interpret and engage with the constructs of human rights, opening space for collective efforts such as ‘Child Honouring’, which engages with human rights and the responsibilities they evoke in a larger ecological context (Cavoukian & Olfman, 2006). Remembering that rights themselves “have also been forged through the sheer force of political struggle”, we are granted permission (or rather, obliged) to interrogate the entire notion of rights and how they get taken up (Todd, 2008, p. 55).

Todd does not recommend that rights be discarded. Rather, she suggests rights may in fact be re-affirmed by looking at them anew. She insists we pragmatically acknowledge that current understandings of rights are incomplete. They simply describe what is relevant in current conditions; they cannot predict what will be relevant in future as conditions change. Thus it is

our duty to continue asking such questions, lest we sit back believing the work is done. This, you may have noticed already, is reminiscent of Caputo's (2000) articulation of an ethical posture towards *justice*, in which he urges us to never presume the work is done. Considering the function of rights is to facilitate movement towards more just social conditions, the two concepts are very closely connected.

As mentioned briefly above, and supported by Todd (2008) here as well, one of the key critiques of human rights discourses is the fact that "rights are saturated in western values of liberal individualism and are incompatible with non-western societies" (p. 79). It is this aspect of the critique to which I will now turn my attention more directly.

For those countries that choose to sign either the Declaration of Human Rights or the Convention on the Rights of the Child, these become legally binding documents. The implication being, of course, that there is then something formal for the law to fall back on when someone is known to have violated a right identified in these documents. In this way, not only are all human beings whose rights are being *upheld* within these documents recognized as autonomous and self-determining, but so are those *against* whom these documents protect us. In other words, perpetrators are also seen as self-determining, autonomous individuals. According to Farmer (2005) this can potentially lead us astray when it comes to effectively addressing real conditions of injustice, which often occur as complex responses to "structural violence" (p. 8) as such social processes are rendered unintelligible by this individualizing understanding of human rights. He says,

It is disingenuous, surely, to affect surprise each time we learn of the complex and international processes that lead to another Haiti, another Chiapas, another Rwanda ...
Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect.

Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm. (p. 7)

In the case of the current inquiry, I would also add that it is disingenuous to affect surprise each time we hear a story such as Jennifer's, shared at the opening of this book. Indeed, it is my guess that for most readers who have experience with the human services (either as providers or recipients of services), her story was quite familiar. The familiarity of this story within this relatively 'affluent' social context is surely an instance of the structural violence to which Farmer is speaking. Yet it is impossible to effectively address by means of the individualizing discourses of rights as they are currently employed, or by means of individual-centered interventions, which are informed by such discourses. Such an approach does not measure or address systems, relations, or conditions. Instead it narrows our gaze down to the individual, which (as we can see with the World Health Organization reports, above) does not necessarily lead to functioning supports for those who need it most. As Braidotti (2006) asserts, "individualism pushed to the extreme breeds horror" (p. 46).

In his book *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, Farmer's (2005) critique of current manifestations of rights discourses is extensive. As a physician, he even goes so far as to suggest his own field of practice can constitute a human rights abuse, if things such as "market forces" continue "to sculpt the outlines of modern medicine [which] will mean that these unwelcome trends will continue" (p. 138). In other words, knowingly engaging in the provision of services that perpetuate current unjust conditions is not acceptable, if human rights are to be taken seriously beyond the rhetoric. His recommendation is that we learn to "resocialize our understanding of human rights abuses" (p.

138). To do this he insists we must: 1) widen the view of human rights beyond legal rights to include more serious consideration of social and economic rights, 2) remember that the concept of human rights emerged not to ensure we are all treated *equally*, but “to protect the vulnerable” (p. 212) which (reminiscent of Tronto’s points, above) in many cases requires “preferential treatment” of the poor or otherwise marginalized in order to account for unjust power dynamics (p. 227), and 3) unmask the “mechanisms of human rights violations” by refusing to reduce our analysis down to the individual actor (p. 233).

This points to my objective in the current exploration: which includes considering how we might move beyond our increasingly limited scope of practice in order to contribute to the cultivation of just conditions in which the well-being of children and families may in fact become a reality. How might our practices transform into “pragmatic solidarity” with those we aim to support, as Farmer suggests (2005, p. 121)? I believe, as is likely evident by now, that we must move beyond locating social problems (and their solutions) inside individuals. I agree with Doherty and Carroll (2007) who say,

Missing from our discourse is a way to think of ourselves as citizens, not just providers, as people engaged in partnerships with other citizens to tackle public problems. Also missing is the idea of our clients as citizens with something to contribute to their communities ... The provider/consumer dichotomy leaves out a third alternative – citizen partnerships where we are neither providers nor consumers – which our world sorely needs in an era of widespread disengagement from civic life. (p. 225)

Before I bring this exploration in the direction of possibilities, I will shed a little more light on why I believe change is imperative. What is the role economic rationalism plays in the process that has led human services to a place so distant from our tradition of social justice

advocacy? Perhaps understanding this will allow us to take a closer look at how individualizing discourses can obscure the social nature of social problems, leading us in an unproductive direction with our interventions. This, in turn, may open the door to considering what other options we have – to be explored in the next section.

CHAPTER 13:

Obscuring the *Social* Nature of Social Problems:

Economic Rationalism + Individualizing Discourses = the Bureaucratization of Help

As alluded to in the previous discussion on neoliberalism, ‘bottom line’ logic has become pervasive even within human service practices, ensuring that regardless of the particular issue of concern, economic interests seem to be privileged above all else. Even the metaphors by which we conceptualize and articulate our practice are deeply infused with norms of economic rationalism. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1987), the metaphors we employ can have sustaining impacts in that they serve to promote certain attitudes or actions and silence other possibilities. In this way, norms are not only communicated via our use of metaphors, they are also (at least in part) established that way. I am concerned about the implications of this when it comes to supporting children, youth, and families (about which I have written in greater detail elsewhere (Newbury, 2010a; 2010b; 2011a; 2011e, and Newbury & Hoskins, 2010b).

Business and economic metaphors have begun to permeate popular discourse (ie. ‘buying into an idea’, ‘offering your two cents’, ‘investing in their future’, and ‘the way we do business’). Indeed, Braidotti (2006) critiques this developing “social imaginary which amalgamates citizenship with consumerism and sells cheap promises of human liberation through endless consumption” (p. 61). Human services are certainly not exempt from this trend and its implications. It seems to me that the regularity with which we rely on business metaphors has contributed to a shift whereby these *metaphors* have transformed into *truth,s* or as Blades (1997) calls them, “public truths” (p. 156). As I expressed elsewhere, “such metaphors/truths can render actions based on business logic to be more intelligible, rational, and responsible than other

potential actions. Thus, economic metaphors are currently serving much more than linguistic functions” (Newbury, 2010a).

Evidence-Based Practice

These shifts are contributing to a political climate in which practice and policy decisions are in large part informed by economic rationalism, despite the fact that there is evidence to suggest that these directions are not in the best interest of children and families (Albanese, 2010; Ismael, 2006). Despite the roots of social justice I traced earlier, I am not convinced that our current work is guided by entirely altruistic aims. With economic rationalism as a foundational logic within our systems of support, decisions that are based on this ‘bottom line’ are often deemed to be the most viable, responsible, accountable, and thus favourable (see for example Burnley, Matthews, & McKenzie, 2005). As has been elaborated in previous chapters, a discourse of economic rationalism can be traced to the increasingly individualized ways we have come to understand social processes, as largely influenced first by the Enlightenment and then by neoliberalism. By noting how this logic concretely informs policy and practice, perhaps space can be made for possibilities other than economically-driven ones to be recognized as viable when it comes to how support for children and families is conceptualized and implemented.

One of the ways practice has been impacted is the growing emphasis on what is called evidence-based practice (EBP). Importantly, those who are critical of this trend are not opposed to evidence. They are, however, concerned with what gets measured and counts as evidence, and what does not get measured – and thus counts for nothing (Newbury, 2009, Walker, 2003). The concern is that EBP shines a light on certain dimensions of human service practices (those that are most easily measured and accounted for), which leaves others in the shadows. This emphasis

on measurable outcomes further individualizes our practices, as it is very difficult to measure collective and preventative initiatives (see Newbury, 2009 for a more thorough discussion).

In principle, drawing from evidence in practice is not inherently problematic. But when we neglect to consider questions around evidence (such as ‘What counts as evidence?’, ‘What does not?’, ‘What measures are used?’, and ‘What are we unable to measure with existing tools?’), then there is the potential for us to be placing priority in areas that are more relevant for our tools than for our clients. For example, within the fields of adventure-based education and therapy, Harper (2010) demonstrates with his depiction of the “hierarchy of evidence” (p. 42) that the way EBP is being employed is in fact rendering certain kinds knowledge and evidence irrelevant. Privileging evidence that is gleaned from randomly controlled trials above all else can actually move us away from learning from existing knowledges and towards a more bureaucratic approach, in that drawing from and replicating ‘model programs’ can “simplify the allocation of government funds” (p. 47). This is particularly problematic in emergent and relational fields of practice, in that it places practitioners and researchers in a position in which predetermining (contrived) outcomes to be measured can feel like an “incongruous act” (p. 45).

Thus, as with the earlier discussion on developmental psychology, it is not necessarily the notion of EBP that troubles me, but the way it has been *taken up* within our current neoliberal context. There is indeed utility in drawing on evidence to ensure we learn from past experience and existing knowledge. The measures that are currently used to determine what constitutes evidence, however, are being increasingly called into question by a large and growing body of literature which critiques what I described elsewhere as a business model of care (Newbury, 2010a), and which Harper (2010) indicates is “guided by political and economic forces” (p. 38, see for example Madigan, 2011; Rolfe, Segrott, & Jordan, 2008; Wilson, 2010). Particularly

given the pervasiveness of neoliberal norms within the current political climate, Braidotti (2006) urges that our very tools of analysis need to come under critical scrutiny.

Service Design and Delivery

Foster and Wharf (2007) note that economic feasibility has become such a key consideration in the organization and implementation of human services that interventions that are considered economically feasible in terms of delivery, measurement, and supervision are often favoured. Even though in many ways our approach to services can be seen to be following a business model, it is one which seeks “little input from its customers” (Callahan & Swift, 2007, p. 158). I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere my concern for the fact that when individualism and economic rationalism become our underlying logics, our gaze may narrow to such an extent that we cease to acknowledge the contexts in which our practices take place. This in turn can lead us to overlook the social justice dimension of our work (Newbury, 2011e).

For instance, Armitage and Murray (2007) and de Finney and colleagues (2011) point out that Aboriginal children, families, and communities are more likely to be deemed ‘at risk’ than non-Aboriginal Canadians. The 2006 *BC Children and Youth Review*, submitted to the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) by Honourable Ted Hughes states that “a narrow focus on safety can obscure the social context in which child protection cases arise” (p. 52).

Hughes continues to say that

The challenge facing us all is to reduce the number of Aboriginal children who are at risk of harm by finding ways to make sure their families and communities are in a position to keep their children safe and well. It seems clear by now that the answers do not lie wholly, or even mainly, in the child protection system. Rather, the solutions lie in building strong, economically viable and culturally robust communities. (p. 52)

Despite this assertion, recent changes within British Columbia's MCFD prioritize individual-centered interventions rather than the kind of community capacity building recommended above by Hughes. For instance, in the Ministry's *2011/2012 – 2012/2013 Revised Service Delivery Plan* (MCFD, 2011), goals and strategies demonstrate increasingly targeted interventions which focus on "vulnerable children and youth" and base Ministry activity on "the assessment of individual needs" (p. 10). Such goals can be more easily linked with "performance measures" (as on page 11 of the service plan), which are frequently used as a way of understanding services delivery as accountable (see also Albanese, 2010 for a discussion of targeted interventions). Not only are individual-focused goals and outcome-focused measures evident in the MCFD's service plan, but there is also an acknowledgement that economic rationalism informs some of the decisions on which it is founded. The document states that "continued fiscal pressures faced across government have required the Ministry to examine how services are delivered and to look at innovative approaches to managing staffing needs" (p. 8).

Acknowledging the influence of such conditions on the development of our practices can contribute to a better appreciation of the complexities in which practices are developed and implemented. Even though it can be understandably daunting to seek a bigger picture (Farmer, 2005), by locating human service practices within larger social, cultural, and political dynamics, we may be more cognizant of the multiple forces at play as we begin to pragmatically envision other possibilities for service delivery and design, and in turn more able to critically examine our own practices.

Importantly, our collective resistance to approaching our work in a way that acknowledges these larger forces may not only be because it is difficult to do conceptually; it can also be challenging psychologically. As Segal (2011) observes, "deeply sitting with and

experiencing the psychological and spiritual pain associated with one's own contributions and compliance towards the injustices perpetuated by the industrial growth society can be despairing" (n.p.). Despite – or perhaps because of – the difficulty in critically reflecting in this way, he insists that this is a crucial step by which we might begin to see our own complicity in sustaining the hardships we then busy ourselves trying to remedy. This can contribute to profound change that is simultaneously far reaching, personal, and systemic (see also Griffin, 1993).

Specialization

Simultaneous with the bureaucratization of social services is the increased specialization within human service practices. This is no coincidence as it, too, can be seen as largely informed by neoliberal notions of individualism and competition. Specialization and professionalization can go hand in hand, in pursuit of public recognition of specialized skills in relation to a particular area of practice.

Within the field of child and youth care, for example, Beker (2001) observes that “arguments for a separate identity” are based on the premises that 1) there are specific skills and knowledge associated with the work, and 2) current disciplinary structures do not satisfy the needs of workers for “autonomy and power” (p. 346-347). He points out that, as in other disciplines, the impetus towards professionalizing specialized services has emerged from a wide range of circumstances, including “the low current status of the field ... difficult working conditions, low pay, [and] limited opportunities for promotion” (p. 346). It has also emerged in an altruistic effort to work towards “quality of care, autonomy of practice, and differentiation of the child care function from other services as a distinct, potent helping modality” (p. 346). He makes the case that having “an area in which their primacy and expertise are recognized and

accepted” can provide workers with “a power base” which will afford them increased influence over program development (p. 350).

Of course CYC is not the only field of practice in which such moves have been pursued. Axelsson and Axelsson (2009) note the “increasing specialization of welfare services and the increasing professionalization of occupational groups engaged in the provision of these services” (p. 320). They also observe the “professionalization of more and more occupational groups, for example in health care” due to “increasing specialization in the modern society” (p. 321). While one might presume such a shift can strengthen the quality of care experienced by service recipients, Axelsson and Axelsson (2009) note in their study that it in fact “leads to a fragmentation of services” (p. 320). With the somewhat arbitrary distinctions made among areas of expertise (and in turn, the lived experiences of children and youth) for the sake of professional recognition and bureaucratic organization, “specialized languages, attitudes and values” are cultivated among the various professional groups (p. 320). These can serve as “barriers to collaboration” (p. 320). Collaboration among specialized groups is also limited by territorial behaviour: as noted by Beker (2001) above, many groups professionalize in order to carve out a niche for themselves and improve conditions for ‘their’ workers. Therefore, collaboration with other professions may be experienced as a threat to their ‘turf’ (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009, p. 321). This self-protecting posture can be seen as an understandable response within our current neo-liberal context, as described earlier, but is not the *only* possible outcome of specialization. Thus, as with the earlier discussion of developmental psychology, it is not the notion of specialization in itself that I wish to call into question, but the way it seems to commonly be taken up in the current context.

Specialization within human service practices may place pressure on professionals to carve out territory over which their ‘expertise’ resides. This can be seen, for example, in the increase in ‘streaming’ of university programs – providing students with ‘specialty areas’ for their practice upon graduation (see for example: University of Victoria’s School of Child and Youth Care (2012) and School of Social Work). The shift towards specialization is accomplished in part through increased reliance on bio-medical understandings of social and experiential phenomena, strengthened by the continued development of diagnostic categories through which behavioural responses to experiences are understood as individual pathologies (Madigan, 2011). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) has become a mainstay in many human service professions, and practitioners are increasingly finding themselves in situations in which funds for support or treatment are less likely to be made accessible unless a diagnosis is forthcoming, leading to professional responses that are increasingly targeting those individuals who are struggling (see for example Madsen, 2007; White & Hoskins, 2011). This demonstrates how economic rationalism, specialization, diagnosis, and individualization can work together to effectively efface social justice from the realm of human service practice and – in turn – increase the likelihood that injustices will be perpetuated through the further pathologization of those who are struggling.

A fifth edition of the DSM is set to be published in May of 2013 (see American Psychiatric Association, 2012), a development which is being met with vast and organized resistance from within professional mental health communities globally. In a well-researched open letter to the DSM-5 Task Force and the American Psychiatric Association (with accompanying petition), the Society for Humanist Psychology, Division 32 (2010) expresses concern

... about the lowering of diagnostic thresholds for multiple disorder categories, about the introduction of disorders that may lead to inappropriate medical treatment of vulnerable populations, and about specific proposals that appear to lack empirical grounding. In addition, we question proposed changes to the definition(s) of mental disorder that deemphasize sociocultural variation while placing more emphasis on biological theory. In light of the growing empirical evidence that neurobiology does not fully account for the emergence of mental distress, as well as new longitudinal studies revealing long-term hazards of standard neurobiological (psychotropic) treatment, we believe that these changes pose substantial risks to patients/clients, practitioners, and the mental health professions in general.

The letter goes into great detail supporting each of these concerns. For example, whereas in previous editions of the DSM bereavement was an exception from ‘Major Depressive Disorder’, the proposed fifth edition will eliminate this exception which “currently prevents the pathologization of grief, a normal life process” (Society for Humanistic Psychology, Division 32, 2010). Without going into all of the details elaborated in the letter, I do wish to express my concern over the fact that the individualizing discourses I have been addressing thus far render these pathologizing and decontextualized understandings of human responses and experiences possible. The conclusion of the letter states, among other things, that “clients and the general public are negatively affected by the continued and continuous medicalization of their natural and normal responses to their experiences; responses which undoubtedly have distressing consequences which demand helping responses, but which do not reflect illnesses.” This clearly demonstrates that individualizing discourses – perpetuated by the bureaucratization, professionalization, and specialization of human services – are not merely a matter of academic

concern. These shifts are not only moving us away from our stated aims of supporting people who are struggling, but leading us to further contribute to their struggles (McKnight, 1995).

Contextualizing Recent Trends in the Human Services

As human service professionals, in these ways we have been steadily moving farther away from our roots of social justice activity (despite our own rhetoric that may claim otherwise). Collaborative community partnerships with youth can become more and more difficult to manifest, while at the same time young people are increasingly diagnosed and even medicated (despite limited evidence of the appropriateness or effectiveness of medication for behavioural and emotional concerns) (Foltz, 2010).

The move towards specialization also means we are more frequently pressured to identify ourselves as ‘experts’ within the lives of young people. Madsen (2007) explains that this can make collaborative, relational practice more difficult to enact, since it presumes a hierarchical relationship between the professional and the ‘client’. This hierarchy, he argues, is counterproductive to the goals of practices which aim to support people who are struggling, since “studies have suggested that the degree of client collaboration and client participation may well be the best predictors of successful treatment outcomes” (p. 34). McKnight (1995) goes further by suggesting expert-positioning risks devaluing and disintegrating valuable existing *informal* community supports among citizens, including youth. He fears the development of specialized knowledge and the privileging of professional interventions may undermine pre-existing efforts towards social justice that level hierarchies and make space for multiple voices to be heard and valued in communities.

In order to take a closer look at how this can play out in practice, I will draw from the field of child and youth care. Although the language taught to and used by CYC practitioners

emphasizes strength-based approaches, relational practice, informal life-space engagement, and so forth (Garfat, 2003; Ricks & Bellefeuille, 2008), practitioners often find themselves working within fields of practice that demand a different form of engagement (see for example, Bates' observations of CYC practitioners working as child protection workers, 2005). This can create a sense of tension, particularly when certain practices are experienced as perpetuating deficit-based practices such as apprehension, diagnosis, surveillance, and medication (Bennett et al, 2009 and White & Hoskins, in press). Taken collectively, these practices can serve to deplete rather than strengthen community, potentially increasing the likelihood that community members will struggle individually and interpersonally, as their informal resources can become disrupted or destroyed (see for example, Kral, Wiebe, Nisbet, Dallas, & Okalik, 2009).

Of course, the profit motivation for locating problems within individuals, discussed earlier, must also be acknowledged. Although often done with the understandable intention of preserving programs (see for example Burnley et al, 2005), this runs in contradiction with our stated aims, discussed earlier. While I am not suggesting here that human service professionals should not be compensated for their work, I do submit that a serious problem emerges if economic rationalism replaces justice as the bottom line within our policies and practices.

My intention thus far has been to establish why I believe it is necessary for us to pursue alternatives to dominant practices within current human service systems. I do not, however, wish to get mired in critique at the expense of creativity (Braidotti, 2009). So at this point I will shift gears and consider what other realities also, simultaneously, exist. By looking beyond *dominant* practices, we might find that there are hopefully possibilities already at play. If we commit to learning from, fostering, and imagining new incarnations of existing relational ideas

and practices, we may be better equipped to be deliberate as we take our next collective steps in this continuously unfolding process.

PART TWO: THE RELATIONAL NATURE OF BEING

Strengthening or Replacing Community Supports?

I would now like to introduce you to Linda. She is a psychologist, educator, and child care worker who is trained and experienced in the types of systems explored thus far in this book. With well over thirty years of experience in these areas of practice, however, Dr. Linda Hill has opted for a unique route toward the goals of social justice for children, youth, and families. Her experiences have taught her again and again that narrowly focusing on individuals can further marginalize people who are struggling. Fortunately, her experiences have also demonstrated that when she widens her gaze and partners with diverse people to *all* play supportive and strengthening roles for each other, there can be surprising and exciting implications.

Linda grew up in Deep Cove, Vancouver and remembers her early years as happy, safe, and social. Her parents, relatives, and neighbours intentionally cultivated an 'extended family' which she recalls as a very successful way of ensuring they lived in a welcoming and supportive community. A bustling house with people of all ages and abilities flowing in and out of it was young Linda's benchmark for 'normal'. As she recalls, it was comfortable, and she grew up with a sense that everyone belonged.

One day, Linda came home from kindergarten to find her mother, her aunt, and her best friend's mother in the kitchen crying; they were discussing something that seemed very serious. Linda didn't know what was going on, but was soon informed that her friend, Mary, was not smart enough to continue going to her school and so she would have to begin taking a bus to another school from that point forward. It was devastating.

Years passed, and Linda was now nine. One day, her principal invited Linda and her parents into the office to inform them that, as it turns out, Linda was *too* smart to continue attending this public school. Although to Linda this was just as shocking as the news she'd received about Mary several years earlier, everyone was somehow overjoyed and full of smiles to learn that Linda would be taking the bus to another school on the other side of town. More years passed and she and Mary began losing touch with each other and their 'extended family' of relatives and neighbours. Their peers no longer knew them – and neither did their classmates, as they lived far away in Deep Cove. Life became a little more isolating.

In addition to Linda and Mary moving to other schools, Linda's brother also experienced the same fate. He was deaf, and although Linda and her family had successfully learned sign language and they could communicate together using visual language systems, the public school was not able to support him. He, too, attended a school outside of his home community. People there did not learn the skills to communicate with him and thus didn't know how to relate with him either. Some people would run away from him or avoid him, others would taunt him, still others would treat him like a baby. Over time, the 'community' ceased to be the safe place that had been so intentionally cultivated in the beginning.

During those years when Linda's bus would travel across town taking her to school, she would go through Burrard Indian Reserve, which it was called at that time, and through the window she would see a number of kids her age who were waiting for *their* bus to go to *their* school. It turns out the public school did not include them either. This curious pattern of separating everyone based on their differences, and the sense of exclusion it perpetuated, led Linda to have one burning question throughout her life: "How can we stop being so mean? How

can we take down some of these walls and start building bridges that will connect our many differences together?”

Even though Mary, Linda, and her brother were all informed that this individualized style of education was designed to better meet their needs, Linda’s experience of it was quite the opposite. Without having supports that existed within their community, and watching those supports deteriorate as the kids all went their separate ways, Linda saw that people no longer knew how to respond to each other’s differences and different needs. As a result of ‘supportive’ interventions, her world was becoming more – not less – difficult to navigate.

Almost as if in response to her burning question, things changed for Linda when she went to a high school that had an amazingly compassionate and committed principal. It was in the late sixties and early seventies when she started to experience what it felt like for these walls to begin coming down. She and others who had previously been separated began arriving at each other’s school. Particularly significant for Linda was the commitment her principal had to bringing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students together. He was also committed to providing all of the students with learning opportunities they had not previously had, and she began to experience a diverse range of exciting subjects that had not been offered before: students could choose courses based on their interests and passions. A new world opened up for Linda at this time.

So she learned about inclusion that way: by experiencing it firsthand and the differences it made for her. And that is what has helped her realize the importance of supporting children, youth, and families through their struggles in ways that recognize the interconnectedness of all of us, our systems, and our wellbeing. Linda advocates striving for social justice by adopting

approaches that encourage us *all* to learn to connect across our many differences with each other – in order to build stronger networks and communities.

Based on the experiences she had in her adult life traveling, living, and working in gift-giving cultures (such as Micronesia and the Solomon Islands), Linda conceptualizes working towards a just society in a way that doesn't rely on experts providing services. Instead, she suggests there is value in recognizing that *each of us* have special gifts. If we could cultivate a culture in which we recognize what those gifts are, and then share them with each other, we might learn the transformative value of something as accessible as a smile.

It is this concept of gift-giving as something that we can all do to heal ourselves and our communities that lead to the eventual development of what Linda calls Inclusive Leadership. Inclusive Leadership involves “preparing socially and environmentally responsible global citizens for living in our increasingly diverse communities and for being leaders”. An underlying assumption is that everyone who can be part of a safe and respectful community and who has equal access to many positive choices has the potential to become an inclusive leader. This means everyone – regardless of age or ability – can share responsibility for making things fun and inclusive. Therefore, Inclusive Leadership includes people of all ages and all backgrounds; it is “youth-focused, intergenerational, intercultural, diversity education.” Of course such practices are easily spoken about than enacted, and they come with their own complexities and challenges.

Linda's high school experience – and her earliest childhood experience – of being immersed in a community without walls tipped her off to an important aspect of inclusive leadership: it is an immersion model. Linda believes that, like learning a language, the best way

to really understand is to immerse oneself as fully as possible. So that's what she strives for with what she calls Inclusive Leadership Adventures (ILAs). These are weekend retreats that bring people from many different backgrounds together in what becomes a co-constructed inclusive community – in which everyone contributes and everyone learns.

In fact, I first met Linda at an ILA in Port Alberni in March of 2010. Adults and youth from six different communities came together, forming some solidarity around how rural communities do anti-racism and diversity education. We focused on a step-by-step process to immerse ourselves in a culture of inclusion, to share responsibility for creating and living that culture, and for developing skills. The six youth who I went with from my community have carried those experiences with them and some of them have become heavily involved in initiatives in Powell River around inclusion and diversity. Their experience in Port Alberni of being *included* has led to them being very intentional about being *inclusive* as they move forward. And that is precisely the premise behind Linda's work with ILAs. Everyone can be a leader.

Although Linda has a background in Child and Youth Care and in many ways identifies with a CYC approach in all she does, she laments one aspect of the move towards professionalization of the field. She values an approach of play-filled, creative, activity-based education to build positive communities where children and youth are the center. But she is saddened by the fact that the move to professionalize has tended to 'therapize' what to her are just part of a healthy community. Speaking of play, music, and sports has great potential – which 'play therapy', 'music therapy', and 'sports therapy' minimize. So she urges us not to therapize these things, but to help make our communities healthy by being role models. She

urges us to just be people who can make it easy for children and youth to get involved in our communities.

This shift from individual-centered, expert-based, deficit-focused professional practices to collaborative, intergenerational civic engagement is the focus of section two of this book. But in order to consider why such practices may strengthen efforts towards social justice within the human services, it is worth considering the foundation upon which these possibilities are set. Whereas the focus of the previous section was theories that move us towards seeing the individual as the onus for change, this section will begin by exploring what might be gained from relational understandings of being.

CHAPTER 14:

Relational Being: What If It's Not All about Me?

Linda's work is indeed a deviation from the most commonly practiced approaches to support for children and families in today's political climate. Due to a number of factors (many explored throughout the previous section), interventions that focus on individuals as the locus of change are certainly the flavour of the day, and often more readily supported by government dollars (Newbury, 2009). Our theories, ideologies, and practices have become increasingly individualized over the course of the past three decades (Ismael, 2006), in turn contributing to the normalization of practices such as those explored in the previous section of this book which continue to privilege certain populations over others.

But Linda is not alone in her pursuit of relational ways of engaging. In fact, at the same time that *dominant* discourses and practices have been becoming increasingly individualized and specialized, there has been a simultaneous movement towards a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness, and consideration of how this might better inform human service practices. Although the theories about individual change processes may dominate psychological, educational, and even political literature, there is a growing body of work which refutes these norms as 'objective', and a renewed appreciation for Indigenous knowledges which often emphasize the relatedness of all beings (Abram, 1996; Hall & Livingstone, 2003; Reynolds, 2008; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This relational approach suggests that our belief in the primacy of the individual is a *socially* constructed concept, which frees us up to also think otherwise.

The Primacy of Relationships

My own introduction to relational ideas came when I was exposed to the work of social constructionists, and the writing of Kenneth Gergen in particular. According to Gergen (2009),

“self, causality, and agency ... such assumptions are neither true nor false; they are simply human constructions around which we organize our lives” (p. xvi). Social constructionism is thus not primarily concerned with proving or disproving any particular truth; it is more interested in understanding what we *believe* to be true, what dynamics lead us to believe those things, and the concrete implications of our beliefs. It posits that since truth cannot be accessed with any certainty – and is likely inconsistent over time within changing conditions anyway – we might better spend our time understanding how truth is *constructed* within social conditions (Hacking, 1999). Similarly, Foucault (1972) says, “each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (p. 73). In his estimation, understanding truth is not about understanding an unchangeable dimension of reality, but rather developing an appreciation for “the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements” as they function (p. 73). Perhaps such an appreciation will allow us to be more intentional about the conditions we collectively create, rather than basing policy and practice decisions on *reactions* to conditions as if they somehow represent an unalterable truth that exists outside of us.

The notion that we collectively construct our understanding of what is true or real (and the conditions from which ‘truths’ emerge), however, is nested in another important assumption: that “individual action is inherently social and, more specifically, deriving from shared meaning” (Sugiman, Gergen, Wagner, & Yamada, 2008, p. 1). Whereas much of modern science has involved narrowing our focus to smaller and smaller, isolated pieces (from the collective, to the individual, to even the atom), social constructionism looks at the world from precisely the opposite vantage point. Thus, rather than understanding myself as a unique individual who then engages in relationships with other individuals, a social constructionist perspective would

suggest that in fact I am who I am *because of* the various relationships in which I engage. I do not – and cannot – exist outside of them or precede them, but am comprised of these relational dynamics just as they are comprised in part by me. Stated differently, “independent persons do not come together to form relationship; from relationships the very possibility of independent persons emerges” (Gergen, 2009, p. 38).

Although my own exposure to this notion of the ‘relationship as primary’ was through social constructionists like Gergen, these relational ideas have been explored for a very long time. In his book *I-Thou*, Martin Buber (1923/1970) convincingly conveys our inability to experience *anything* outside of the relation. Although we may believe we can understand another person in an objective sense, and we may even begin to think that we get to know who that person is (essentially) through our experience with them, Buber reminds us that all we actually know is *our own experience* of that person. Indeed, that person is not a knowable entity, as he or she continues to change throughout their own multiple encounters. In fact, he or she will be different in each new encounter (as will I). Buber says, “When we walk our way and encounter a man who comes toward us, walking his way, we know our way only and not his; for his comes to life for us only in the encounter” (p. 124).

Years later, Gadamer (1975/2004) explored similar relational ideas, and challenged the notion that *I* am separate from *you*. He states that “the relation is the primary thing, and the ‘poles’ into which it unfolds itself are contained within it, just as what is alive contains all its expressions of life in the unity of its organic being” (p. 241). As such, these and other thinkers concur that there is nothing outside of the relation.

Narrative Understandings of Self

This relational understanding of being is taken up in a number of different ways. One, which is readily engaged with across a variety of disciplines, is a *narrative understanding of self*. Put simply, a narrative approach is one which assumes “human beings are storytelling beings. We live our lives as narrative quests” (Sandel, 2009, p. 221). While this premise may not meet a great deal of resistance, the relational nature of such an assertion is a little less apparent. Storied or not, what could be more individual than the *self*?

We have indeed come to conceive of these two terms (individual and self) as almost interchangeable. But according to Sandel (2009), “the narrative account is at odds with modern individualism” (p. 222). Gergen (1994) concurs. He understands the self as “a narration rendered intelligible within ongoing relationships” (p. 185). In other words, we cannot narrate our lives in isolation. In his most recent book, Gergen (2009) posits that the self is indeed a collaborative construction. Self and individual are not synonymous (see Brison, 2000 for a discussion on relational autonomy).

In order to illustrate exactly what this means, we must let go of some of our preconceived notions of self. Or rather: we must critically reflect on them. By considering how our preconceptions about the self are (in part) narratively constructed, we can begin to understand how it may be possible that the *self* is socially constructed (in part, through narrative processes) as well. (I intentionally note that narrative is *part* of the dynamic through which relational understandings of the self take place. I do not want to suggest here that narrative understandings can explain relational being in its entirety. However, as this is largely a discursive inquiry, narrative processes are highly relevant.)

Assumption one: I am singular and discreet

Social constructionists and others have long been refuting the notion that an individual can be understood in isolation from others, or from his/her surroundings. Although many of us currently accept the conception of the self as singular and discreet as an unbiased description of objective reality, others have convincingly pointed out that this understanding has emerged from a particular set of conditions (as discussed earlier). Levinas (1982/2003) claims that “this conception of the ‘I’ as self-sufficient is one of the essential marks of the bourgeois spirit and its philosophy” (p. 50). In this sense, it can be seen as *prescriptive*, rather than *descriptive*.

Arendt (1958) asserts that despite this politically-driven prescription, “no human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings” (p. 22). The mere fact of being born, for example, is a testament to our interdependence. But according to narrative theorists, interconnectedness in terms of identity goes much deeper than that. Gergen (1994) explains how the process of developing a self-narrative highlights the relational nature of being.

In his book, *Realities and Relationships*, Gergen (1994) explains that none of us can move through life if we see our experiences “as simply ‘one damned thing after another’” (p. 186). To guard against this, “we formulate a story in which life events are systematically related” (p. 186). The ongoing development of this story necessarily places one event in relation to another, and also contextualizes those events in relation to the life stories of others around us. Importantly, these self-narratives do not reflect so much as they *create* our understanding of what is true. In this way, not only do self-narratives give us a sense of who we are in relation to others, but they also serve as “communal resources that people use in ongoing relationships” (p. 189). My self-narrative, for example, is deeply informed by that of my mother, and by that of my husband, and by the cultural narrative within which it rests, and so forth. With such an

understanding of the ongoing development of my own sense of self, I can no longer see me as singular and discreet.

Assumption two: My identity is self-determined

The above description of how self-narratives are constructed might lead one to believe that I have authority over the narratives with which I choose to align – can I not simply narrate my own story in such a way that portrays me as its hero? This would, indeed, be fitting with neo-liberal notions of autonomy and self-determination. However, a relational perspective complicates notions of agency and autonomy.

Agency, in short, is “the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahern, 2001 in Vannini, 2009, p. 76). From our increasingly individualized perspectives, there is a tendency to believe in one’s own capacity to act. On the other hand, when trying to account for conditions, we sometimes tend to swing in the opposite direction, seeing ourselves simply as pawns of larger forces. Butler (2004), however, recommends we take conditions into consideration when attempting to understand agency, while *at the same time* recognizing our capacity to move within them:

Conditions do not ‘act’ in the way that individual agents do, but no agent acts without them. They are presupposed in what we do, but it would be a mistake to personify them as if they acted in the place of us. (p. 11)

Thus, from a relational perspective, agency is a complex dialogical phenomenon. Viewing agency as contingent on factors that lie outside of ourselves as individuals in this way also calls the notion of *autonomy* itself into question. Am I – or can I be – self-directed? Can others?

Gergen (2009) reworks commonly held notions of autonomy by saying relationship is “a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self ... virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship” (p. vx). Thus, the very concept of autonomous action, from this perspective, is a social construction. In fact, such thinkers say, all of our actions – whether acknowledged as such or not – are relationally informed (not necessarily to be understood as causally determined). Even that which “we interpret to be a free action is also a result of interactions between personal predispositions and the external socio-cognitive environment” (Kozakai, 2008, p. 295). As a middle class, white woman living in 21st century North America, I can ‘freely’ act in certain ways and not others. I experience constraints and freedoms, as does everybody, and these are different for all of us. I must thus acknowledge that I am never entirely self-directed; rather my supposition of autonomy itself is a socially constructed phenomenon (Kozakai, 2008).

So, if agency is constrained and autonomy is a social construction, what does this mean in terms of the narrative construction of the self? According to narrative theorists, the story that comprises who I am is not entirely up to me to determine. Madigan (2011) describes how “communities of discourse” provide the parameters within which meanings can be rendered intelligible. He says,

Our community of discourse is not based in truth but does involve all the rules we make up in formulating what is believed to be normal and what is not. Our community of discourse allows for social norms to be dictated through a complex web of social interchange mediated through various forms of power relations. (p. 49)

This concept of ‘communities of discourse’ helps explain how the norms for creating intelligible self-narratives may vary depending on when and where a particular individual

resides. Gergen (1994) suggests, for example, that narrative forms are historically and spatially contingent – and a self-narrative that might be constructed in contemporary Western culture could (and likely will) differ greatly from a self-narrative that is, for example, less informed by norms of individualism and capitalism. He reminds us that the “conventions for structuring stories sensitize us to the limits of self-identity” (p. 189). Recognizing the cultural influence on how my self-narrative might be structured allows me to better understand the way larger social norms encourage me to interpret my life’s events in certain ways and not others.

But that is not the only way a narrative perspective calls into question the notion that my identity is self-determined. There is also the important possibility that others will construct narratives *about* me which I will encounter and respond to in one way or another. I may take up the stories others construct about me, or I may resist them. Either way, I am relationally engaging with them, and they likely play a role in the ongoing development of my own self-narrative.

Assumption three: Who I am is constant over time

When we understand ourselves to be discreet, self-directed entities, it seems to follow that who we are remains constant over time. But when the notion of the bounded self is called into question, and when we recognize the responsive and relational construction of our self-narratives, then the notion of self as constant being begins to make less sense.

Gergen (1994) demonstrates how the norms around constructing intelligible narratives lead us to draw attention not to those aspects of our stories that remain constant over time, but to moments of conflict, drama, and change. It is through the instances of tension that our life stories in fact take shape. Reflecting on what makes for a good movie or novel, for example, can help us understand that it is often the moments of drama through which stories unfolds.

Importantly, however, Gergen (1994) encourages us to consider what it is that constitutes a dramatic moment. He suggests it is not events in themselves that can be described as dramatic, but the relationships among them through which drama is rendered. Thus, one event – such as a kiss – may be considered dramatic or mundane, depending on how it fits within the context of other events that are also taking place. In this way, once again narratives are demonstrated as necessarily relational. An important additional insight that comes from this observation is the idea that self-narratives are constructed not around consistency, but around change. Thus, who I am *requires* change; it is the changes that take place in my life during which I construct my identity (and/or others construct it). This means I am not a static entity, but am constantly changing through relational engagement. According to Mahoney (1991), both consistency and change are integral components of narrative constructions of self. Such fluid understandings of the subject are embraced also by thinkers like Braidotti (2006), who speaks of the subject as non-unitary and nomadic, and Butler (1988) who addresses the discursively constituted dimensions of identity.

Reflecting on Assumptions about Self

We do not merely tell stories, we live them (Bruner, 2004). In order to make sense of the people we meet and how they and their lives ‘fit’ within the world that we know, we tend to formulate narratives around them: their stories. Over time, we also come to see our own lives as a series of events that follow one from another, with a beginning, middle, and an assumed or expected endpoint. In important ways, this narrative structure imposes certain socially determined limits around how we come to understand our own lives. At the same time we can also exercise some agency within those constraints as to which stories we may choose to take up (Bruner, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). In fact, therapy or counselling work is often a

matter of learning to tell one's life narrative in a way that allows for more desirable possibilities for ourselves (Gergen, 1999; Mahoney, 2003; Peavy, 2004). As put forth by Gubrium and Holstein (1998), "as social research increasingly points to the narrative quality of lives, the personal story is being resuscitated as an important source of experiential data" (p. 163).

A narrative perspective is an accessible route to relational understandings of self. It enables us to reconsider some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about ourselves as discreet, self-directed individuals who remain constant over time. This opens space for new ways of not only conceptualizing who we are, but also considering how we might differently engage in practice that aims to support children, youth, and families. With this more relational conceptualization of the self, dominant practices that focus mainly on individual change begin to feel restrictive.

Fortunately, the 'community of discourse' (Madigan, 2011) that comprises these relational views opens space for exciting new possibilities. A relational perspective is not a fatalistic view which assumes we are entirely vulnerable to the conditions in which our lives take place. It acknowledges that discourses are socially constructed, and serves as a reminder that we can collectively alter conditions through intentional engagement with(in) them. In this way, relational practice is more than understanding the importance of interpersonal relationship. It also means thinking critically about the complex relationships among people, conditions, institutions, discourses, and self-narratives. Understanding that the 'self' is more than the individual means human service practice requires working with multiple relational dynamics in order to continue to strive for the construction of just conditions.

Relational Being and Human Services

These alternative conceptualizations are not merely a matter of playing with ideas. According to Gergen (1994), “enriching the range of theoretical discourse with the particular hope of expanding the potential for human practices is one of the central challenges for constructionist scholarships” (p. 185). If this is the case, how do relational perspectives differently inform how we might engage in human service practices?

I have written elsewhere about a full day workshop I attended in February of 2009, which was facilitated by a representative of the Reservation School Survivor Society (see Newbury, 2011e for a more detailed discussion). Those who participated in the workshop were all human service practitioners of some kind (including police officers, health care professionals, youth and family workers, and more). By sharing his experiences during and following his time at a residential school, the facilitator presented personal and community change as intimately interconnected. In doing so, he encouraged us to consider change as it related to ourselves and how we engaged with(in) our communities of practice, which is quite a contrast to the very individualized way support is often conceptualized and practiced within fields of human service. Throughout the course of the day, we were invited to think about practice in a way that was not about changing the individuals who come to us for support. It was, rather, simultaneously inward-looking (personal) and contextualized (political). The approach invited hope and possibility into the workshop in that this relational approach to change dispersed the responsibility for the creation of healthy communities among all of us. This enabled us to see the interconnections among our many initiatives, which were previously experienced in isolation.

It is the potential I sense within this approach which propels me to continue inquiring into the possibilities that may exist for human service practices that move in the direction of

relational understandings of change and being. And it is in the direction of such possibilities that I intend to move throughout the following chapters.

CHAPTER 15:

Relating With/In the Non-Human World

The relational approach is one that acknowledges the dynamic nature of lived experience. While social constructionists insist that “in social constructionism, a dichotomy between inner and outer worlds and thus the mind-in-body paradigm is rejected” (Sugiman, 2008, p. 135), it has been in recent years that social constructionist literature has begun to more deeply explore embodiment and/or the non-human world (see for example, Carless, 2010; Nash, 2010). Meaning making processes, which are significant from a social constructionist orientation, are most often explored mainly as linguistic, cognitive, and/or interpersonal processes. While social constructionism certainly *allows for* consideration of other forms of meaning making (such as those that come about through the senses), these aspects of experience are less frequently explored (although are increasingly so, as exemplified by the performance pieces noted above, and in Gergen, 2009).

It is my intention within the current chapter to draw what I can from social constructionists and from others in order to ensure this discussion is not arbitrarily limited. By including consideration of embodied experiences and of the non-human world, new perspectives will be folded into the notions of relationship and narrative processes previously discussed. Stretching notions of relational being to include such a wide scope will alter how it is we can conceive not only of human service practices, but also the broader notion of justice in which our practices are embedded.

Embodiment: Mind and Body as One

In *Relational Being*, Gergen (2009) presents the radical possibility that “mental states are wholly fictional” (p. 69). He elaborates by explaining that despite vast psychological discourses

which attempt to describe what happens in the mind, relational theorists would argue that there is no ‘mind’ that exists in isolation from the body, other people, and the world as a whole.

Alternatively, Gergen suggests that mental, cognitive, and emotional experiences “are not ‘in the mind,’ – separated from the world and from others – but embodied actions that are fashioned and sustained within relationships” (p. 95). Although we have come to think of ‘inner’ processes as private and individual, this perspective indicates otherwise. Once the mind/body division is seen as an artifice, then notions of interdependence extend beyond matters of the mind itself, to the body as a whole. As Johnson (1993) says, “our embodiment, therefore, is far from being private – it is the ground for our shared experience of a world” (p. 226). What exactly is meant by the term embodiment?

According to Schubert and Semin (2009), consideration of *embodiment* - or “the role of the body” (p. 1136) - extends psychological conceptualizations beyond “a closed loop of symbols or an internal model of the world” to also consider “ecological, existential, material and biological” aspects of experience (p. 1135). While this is a useful extension, others who explore the embodied nature of life go even further. For instance, Braidotti (1993) identifies the body as “the first and foremost of locations in reality” (p. 7) and Abram (1996) considers the body to be “the very subject of awareness” (p. 47). Adele Clarke (2005) emphasizes the political importance of acknowledging the embodiment of knowledge producers. Doing so, she says, can draw attention to their subjectivity and to the way the knowledge of certain bodies is privileged by its conspicuous *disembodiment* (with such knowledge often understood as ‘objective’).

Butler (2004) concurs with Clarke’s insistence that to deny embodiment is to move us towards dangerous tendencies when it comes to knowledge, justice, and responsibility. She points out that we have now found ourselves in a world of our own construction in which horrific

violence is perpetuated in part because we have demanded “a world in which bodily vulnerability is protected without therefore being eradicated” (p. 42). In other words, by denying the vulnerability that is an inherent part of being human bodies, we have made ourselves (and particularly the least privileged among us) *more* vulnerable. In terms of alternative possibilities, she suggestively asks, “What politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself?” (p. 29).

Indeed, since embodiment is a necessary condition of being human, what might we learn from embracing that reality, rather than denying or obscuring it? Butler (2004) argues that doing so would help us finally accept our connectedness to others, and thus be more intentional with regards to it. Braidotti (2006) concurs and suggests that such an understanding is a precondition for being-ethical. A beautiful and powerful example of the potential that lies in this approach is Eve Ensler’s (2010) poem, *The Gift of Cancer*, through which she metaphorically expresses an intimate connection between her personal struggles and the sexualized violence towards the women of the Congo, among other global injustices. Ensler’s embodied experience of this interconnectedness fuels her commitment to social justice initiatives on a global scale. In the poem, she says,

The tumor of rape that began growing in me when I was only five and now has matured
into something the size of a mango

That's what the doctor said

Which of course is the fruit of the Congo

The most delicious in the world

The women of Congo are in my body

And she continues, later:

I know that everything is connected

And the scar that runs the length of my torso is the markings of an earthquake

And I am there with the 3 million

Who are living in the streets of Port au Prince

And the fire that burns in me on day 3 through 6 of treatment is the fire that is burning the forests of so much of the world

Cancer made it clear

That time is short

Butler (2004) explains, “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others” (p. 20). She goes on to describe how “grief displays ... the thrall in which our relations with others hold us ... in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (p. 23). She urges that by thus acknowledging our embodied interconnectedness we might find “a basis for community” (p. 19), or a more profound understanding of the relational nature of being, an assertion echoed by Gergen (2009), advocated by Braidotti (2006), and demonstrated above by Ensler (2010).

From these perspectives, then, embodiment is simultaneously deeply personal, inherently relational, and necessarily political. The case for engaging with embodied aspects of being and meaning making is thus made. What this means or might look like, however, has not yet been explicated.

For me, David Abram’s (1996) book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, powerfully illustrates what living and learning as an embodied being can be. While there may be a tendency to think of the body as a fixed, concrete entity, Abram reminds us that “the sensuous, breathing body is,

as we have seen, a dynamic, ever-unfolding form, more a process than a fixed or unchanging object” (p. 120). As such, the body engages with all other dynamic forms with which it comes in contact, and understanding emerges from these ongoing interactive processes. Our senses – all of them – are what enable us to engage in such relational processes with the world around us. But since the advent of the alphabet, we have so trained ourselves to engage primarily with *words* rather than the things those symbols represent, that we often forget to attend to what our senses have the capacity to pick up. But, “whenever we assume the position and poise of the human animal ... then the entire material world itself seems to come awake and to speak, yet organic, earth-born entities speak far more eloquently than the rest” (p. 65). Acknowledging our own embodiment, then, means recognizing ourselves as ‘earth-born’ entities, and (re)learning how to speak and listen eloquently.

This is a difficult task, as we have “linguistically defin[ed] the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects” (Abram, 1996, p. 56). In so doing, “we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies.” To the sensing body, on the other hand, “*no* thing presents itself as utterly passive or inert” (p. 56, emphasis in original). Thus, embodied being is inherently relational being. It is “an experience of reciprocal encounter” (p. 56), and our challenge is to learn how to recognize that this is in fact going on at all times, by attuning ourselves to the experiences of our senses as we move through life. It is for this reason that, in her inquiries, Clarke (2005) identifies as her locus of study the ‘situation’ as a whole – comprised of all human and non-human actors *and* of the relational dynamics among them. She intentionally avoids use of the word context, as it tends to artificially foreground human actors, positioning other components up as mere ‘setting’ for human activity. Abram (1996) supports Clarke’s shift of focus, with his critique that some of the most significant and powerful forces are

so often overlooked by “‘civilized’ Europeans [as] just so much scenery, the pleasant backdrop of our more pressing human concerns” (p. 9).

Abram draws greatly from Merleau-Ponty, who also effectively conveys the exciting possibilities that emerge when we allow our whole bodies to participate in our efforts. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty (1964) uses painting to illustrate an embodied way of perceiving. He describes the process of painting as more than simply transferring or translating what the eye sees to canvas. Rather, (much like Butler, above) he suggests that relinquishing *cognitive* control is required in order for the rest of the senses to begin to participate, thus deepening and enriching the experience and its creative potential. The following excerpt demonstrates the value of such relational engagement as an embodied being:

Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees ... possessed of no other ‘technique’ than the skill his eyes and hands discover in seeing and painting, he gives himself entirely to drawing from the world (p. 3) ... The eye is an instrument that moves itself, a means which invents its own ends; it is that which has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the traces of a hand ... The painter, any painter, while he is painting, practices a magical theory of vision ... It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze ... The painter’s role is to circumscribe and project what is making itself seen within himself It becomes impossible to distinguish between who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted ... The painter’s vision is an ongoing birth. (p. 6)

Human/Nature: Humans and the Non-Human World as One

What begins to become evident in Merleau-Ponty's scenario above is the fact that once the mind/body divide is revealed as an artifice, we begin to bump up against another socially constructed division. A Pandora's box has been opened, and now the distinction between human and non-human entities ceases to make sense from this new embodied, relational perspective. Abram (1996) says,

contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*, that the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate element, or Flesh, that is at once both sensible and sensitive. (p. 67, emphasis in original)

Indeed, while there is, in some circles, increasing discussion of the importance of nature and of being in the natural world, we rarely think of ourselves *as* part of nature itself. But once we embrace the corporeal aspects of being, this oneness becomes difficult to avoid. Arendt (1958) states the obvious with profundity: "the split between subject and object ... disappears altogether in the case of a living organism, whose very survival depends upon the incorporation, the consumption, of outside matter" (p. 312-313). But once again Abram takes this interdependence even further, by acknowledging its importance in order not only for our bodies to survive, but for meaning making processes as well, which inform how we carry ourselves in every encounter - with the world and with each other.

Abram (1996) laments the fact that when we surround ourselves primarily with human-made artifacts and technologies, we only reflect *us* back to ourselves. We then begin to understand the world through this experience (of us at center) and forget our "carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities" (p. 22). As Butler (2004) argues, this makes for leadership and practices that deny our vulnerability, leaving

others and ourselves in our own wake of destructive moves that lack foresight and ignore our interconnectedness. Abram reminds us that even our bodies – our eyes, our ears – developed in response to *other* bodies (sights and sounds). By shutting ourselves off from the ability to be responsive, we risk a great deal, and we put a great deal else at risk. But if we acknowledge the intimate relationships among all else, then we might recognize that “we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is nonhuman” (p. 22). What if we understood our own body as “a multi-layered material entity that is situated at the intersection of biological, genetic, social, cultural and endless other levels of codes of information” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 96-97). Imagine the sense of responsibility that could be cultivated with this knowledge at the fore.

The Situatedness of Narratives and Relationships

In the previous chapter I spoke at length about how a narrative perspective can highlight the relational nature of being. Now, by adding the dimension of embodiment to this dynamic, we can begin to see just how significant this perspective is. The importance of embodiment, in this case, comes largely with the spatial/temporal nature (ie. situatedness) of the physical body: stories and relationships have to happen *somewhere* and at some *time*. Cognitively, we can overlook this fact to a degree, as I did in Chapter 14. But once embodiment is acknowledged, then we must also take spatiality and temporality into consideration as bodies are undeniably located in space and time. Abram (1996) reminds us that

narrative events ... always happen somewhere. And for an oral culture, that locus is never merely incidental to those occurrences. The events belong, as it were, to the place, and to tell the story of those events is to let the place itself speak through the telling. (p. 163)

Rather than simply being the context in which a story takes place, then, physical space and its moment in history are integral parts of the learning that comes from a particular narrative (Clarke, 2005). This is one of the reasons why oral teachings are often told as stories, rather than as universal truths. A story does not – and from this perspective *cannot* – take place somewhere else (Abram, 1996). With this comes an interesting paradox: paying attention to particulars in all their unique detail is how responsibility on a societal scale is cultivated through such teachings. Thus, my concern with individualizing discourses as they are currently being utilized in the human services (through diagnosis, for example) does not come from a place of not wanting to attend to individuals. The concern, paradoxically, comes with the fact that when we speak in decontextualized terms about individuals' experiences, our ability to attend to them in their particularity is, in fact, diminished (Derrida, 1995).

Braidotti (1993) explains that this is where the political nature of knowledge, stories, and events comes into play. We can deny the political nature of events by decontextualizing them, and as Butler (2004) illustrates, political leaders are quite effective at achieving that. But when we acknowledge that certain events take place in places and times as responses to other events, then “the politics of location functions as a strategy of resistance” (Braidotti, 1993, p. 8). Braidotti insists that “attention to the situated as opposed to the universalistic nature of statements is the key idea. In its political applications the politics of location determines one's approach to time and history” (p.8).

It is for this reason that intentionally acknowledging embodiment is a political move: it requires that we speak to particulars, and that we locate our knowledge historically. This can serve to honour the complex relations that contribute to ‘truth’ as it is, and open space for the possibility that other ‘truths’ are simultaneously possible. It opens our eyes to the power

dynamics that lead to some ‘truths’ manifesting as dominant. This allows us to consider the possibility that the story that we are living is one of many, and provokes us to pursue others more intentionally. Caputo (2000) reminds us that “it is always possible to find some context in which an otherwise false statement is true, . . . and this tends therefore to undo the universalizability that we would want to attribute to a transcendental property” (p. 97). Thus, the situatedness of stories is perhaps one of their most valuable attributes.

Another interesting observation when thinking in terms of situatedness is that the distinction between time and space becomes moot. For example, if I board an airplane today in western Canada and disembark in Japan, am I not travelling through both time *and* space? Is there any way to disentangle the two? Abram (1996) says there is not, and it was not until relatively recent linguistic conventions that the singular concept became separated into two. After studying Navajo conceptions of time and space, for example, he reports that time is as much spatial as it is temporal – and that it can be understood as *cyclical* rather than forward moving. Indeed, what is so commonly referred to as ‘the future’ “is experienced by the Navajo to be like a stock of possibilities, of incompletely realized events and circumstances” (p. 192). Stories, from within this particular cultural perspective, are not a matter of characters and events progressively moving through time, but are situated instances. Embracing narrative, relational, embodied, and situational aspects of reality can thus move us to consider what was previously conceived of as *impossible* as possible (Caputo, 2000).

It is important to emphasize, however, that this coming together of time and space through embodiment and story is not the same as timelessness. In fact, precisely the opposite is true. It is by removing our bodies from meaning making processes and relating instead only with our own ideas through the written word that we have begun to perceive ourselves, truth, and

reality as timeless. Abram (1996) notes that “the literate self cannot help but feel its own transcendence and timelessness relative to the fleeting world of corporeal experience” (p. 112). Our challenge, particularly from a social constructionist perspective, may therefore be to invite corporeal experience back into our modes of understanding, in order to avoid the dangers inherent in believing we can transcend them as so aptly depicted by Judith Butler (2004).

Indeed, doing so can bring us back to the relational theory introduced in Chapter 14, but perhaps embracing it in an even fuller sense. This embodied approach ensures that in all our endeavours we never cease to keep in mind the fact that “every actual relationship to another being in the world is exclusive” (Buber, 1923/1970, p. 126).

Human Service Practice as More than Human

In earlier chapters of this book, I traced the process by which human service practices have gradually shifted focus from social justice towards individualized interventions. Abram’s (1996) ideas help to explain some additional historical processes that allowed for this shift towards specialization and individual-centeredness to take place.

The development of the alphabet and of tools for archiving the written word (such as the printing press and computers), as well as other human artifacts, have allowed us to perceive ourselves as self-sufficient and primary. The more removed we have become from our own sense of embodiment and embeddedness in the natural world, the more we have narrowed our sense of what is meaningful with regards to lived human experience. This has contributed to the development of human service practices that are largely human-focused, decontextualized, and individual-centered. We have become ‘experts’ in more and more specialized fields of practice, narrowing our focus depending on factors such as 1) the age of our clients (describing ourselves as early childhood educators, youth workers, or family counsellors, for example), 2) the struggles

they are facing (positioning ourselves as behavioural aids, addictions counsellors, or family preservation workers, to name a few), or 3) the techniques we are using (adventure or arts-based therapists, response-based therapists, outreach workers, or narrative practitioners, as examples). As we become specialized in these and other ways, our sense of ourselves as professionals may be strengthened (Beker, 2001), but it may come at the cost of our understanding of complex human and non-human dynamics – or even the work of other human service professionals. The implications of this for children and families may be monumental.

There is an abundance of research that shows our increasingly individualized interventions may not be bringing about the kind of change towards which we are striving. I do not wish to diminish the great work that is being done by committed human service professionals by saying this. (Here I would like to offer a reminder of the earlier discussion of multiple histories that are always simultaneously at play, in Chapter 10). In some ways, great strides have been taken to serve those who seek supports from professionals in more contextually-responsive ways. For instance, there are now a wider range of options for families and children that do not require institutionalization, such as foster care and kinship care (Cech, 2010). There are also more programs and supports in place for youth who are transitioning out of residential care, to increase their possibilities of experiencing success in adulthood (Nickerson, Colby, Brooks, Rickert, & Salamone, 2007). I think these are great examples of contextualized responses to struggles that take social realities into consideration.

Unfortunately, that is not all that is going on – and current trends in Canada (and British Columbia in particular) seem to indicate that as resources are drawn away from these kinds of responsive supports, we are beginning to favour more punitive and institutional options (see for

example Artz, 2011 and Mallea, 2011). For instance, referencing Canada's recent 'tough-on-crime' bills, Mallea (2011) observes that

... up to 80-90% of offenders in some institutions are addicts (mostly to alcohol), and up to 40% have mental illnesses. A huge proportion are Aboriginal people. Many offenders are homeless, illiterate, or victims of sexual abuse. What is significant is that we have the means to deal with all of these conditions. We know how, and the resources required would be a fraction of the budget necessary to incarcerate so many new inmates. Dealing with these issues would not only reduce crime, but would also make for a healthier community. Because the Conservatives are so concentrated on the punishment model, there will be no resources (and no inclination) to fund the programs necessary to deal with these fundamental problems. (p. 16)

Artz (2011) highlights how neoliberalism and economic rationalism play into these trends: as resources are drawn from community-based, preventative initiatives, the supports that could benefit a lot of the young people who end up incarcerated are eliminated, leading to an increase in number of the most vulnerable populations living in institutions – particular female Aboriginal youth. All of this despite the fact that these shifts contradict a mountain of research about the value of relational, preventative, strength-based and community-based initiatives when it comes to supporting children, youth, and families (see for example Cech, 2010; Madsen, 2007; Shimoni & Baxter, 2008).

In a great many different fields of practice, we can also see how individualization is becoming an accepted norm within our conceptualizations of what citizens and families need. McDaniel and Tepperman (2011) present this development in a positive light, observing that “with industrialism and post-industrialism came a package of changes that had the net effect of

allowing people to lead more separate yet interdependent lives ... With individualization We expect people to be self-sufficient actors in their economic, household, leisure, and intimate relationships” (p. 354). This, however, is a concern for me in that it can also pave the way for placing the onus for change on individuals who are struggling when they are not effectively self-sufficient. This, in conjunction with specialization and bureaucratization (discussed previously), may be moving us towards increasingly individualizing and pathologizing interventions which are detached from the contexts in which they occur (see for example Fewster, 2002, McKnight, 1995, Szasz, 2002).

Focusing on individuals, the complex realities of the social conditions that in part contribute to the difficulties faced by many children and youth in BC outlined earlier by Hughes (2006) may be obscured. This has caused some to question whether the child welfare system succeeds in “protecting children from harm and neglect” (Bennett et al, 2009, p. 1). For instance, in a recent report entitled *Hands Tied, Pivot Legal Society* notes that

... up to 65 percent of those who end up living on the streets have been involved with the child welfare system. Seventy-three percent of youth involved with the young offenders system in BC are also involved with the child protection system. Only 21 percent of former youth in care graduate high schools, compared with 78 percent of the general population. In BC, young women who have been in care are four times more likely to get pregnant than young women who have never been in Care. (Bennett et al, 2009, p.6)

This observation is not intended to presume a causal relationship among these factors, but to highlight the importance of widening our gaze to also include the wider contexts in which they occur. By doing so, we may begin to see valuable dimensions of the situation that might

otherwise rest just outside of our scope of practice, which can open up different kinds of possibilities for practice.

For instance, Michael Kral's (Kral et al, 2009) work with Indigenous communities in the north suggests that suicide rates may increase in communities where prevention interventions are imposed from outside. But in communities where *collective wellbeing* is prioritized (rather than suicide prevention in particular) and generated from within, incidents of suicide appear to plummet. This means contextualizing our practices can make space for pragmatic and hopeful possibilities to emerge.

Psychiatric labeling of young people provides another example of how human services may benefit from broadening the scope of practice to include historical, cultural, and political considerations. Even while powerful campaigns to reduce the stigma of mental illness persist, the fact remains that there is no biophysical evidence that some of these disorders exist (see Madison, 2011; Society for Humanistic Psychology, Division 32, 2011). This is not to say that the *experiences* described by patients are false, but rather that there is nothing to confirm that these are all 'disorders' rather than reasonable responses to very real experiences (such as trauma, abuse, loss, over-stimulation, and isolation) (see Wade, 2007). For example, Dowbiggin (2009) provides a history of the emergence of anxiety as a disorder, even though the experience of anxiety has always been present for human beings. He notes shifts in public discourses around the common experience (also referred to as stress or shyness), political events (including increasing attention paid to the threat of terrorism), the developing pharmaceutical industry, and other social and economic factors (such as the burgeoning self-help industry) as all playing a role in the acceptance of these experiences as disorders and anomalies for which "relief [is] just a prescription away" (p. 432).

Despite likely good intentions of the workers who dole them out, there is evidence that the use of psychotropic drugs by young people can have debilitating and potentially irreversible effects, both physiologically and socially (Cheung, Emslie, & Mayes, 2005; Madigan, 2011; Ryan, Katsiyannis, & Hughes, 2011). For example, ADHD is the most commonly diagnosed disorder among children. Despite known risks of adverse effects that are both physical (including blurred vision, nausea, diarrhea, dizziness, weight loss, trouble sleeping, fevers, and more) and emotional (nervousness, tiredness, suicidal thoughts, and others), “it is likely that medication therapy will continue to be widely prescribed to an ever increasing number of children with ADHD” (Ryan et al, 2011, p. 59) because of the ‘positive’ effects they have on behaviour and academic performance. Such individualizing practices deny that children’s behaviours are often responses and locate problems inside young people rather than creating opportunities for social conditions to be addressed (Newbury, 2010b; Wade, 2007).

Continuing to narrow our gaze in these ways, sifting out the situational dimensions of human experiences (even of such things as depression and anxiety, for example), focusing attention only on outcomes that are quantifiable, and targeting our efforts primarily on individuals and behaviours may limit our capacity to be responsive to the struggles of the children and families we aim to support. What is worse, these tendencies can have negative implications for those who are already struggling for a variety of reasons. We know that children and families do not live in isolation and do not make decisions independent of the conditions in which they live (Cech, 2010; Shimoni & Baxter, 2008). We also know that while many of the dimensions of their lived conditions are human, there are significant implications of the material, discursive, and other aspects of experience as well (Cavoukian & Olfman, 2006;

Pence & White, 2011). Acknowledging these aspects of lived experience might better equip us as practitioners to respond to their struggles in supportive, and even preventative, ways.

Interestingly, while studying with traditional healers in Indonesia, Abram (1996) learned that even though their work was to alleviate the ailments or other suffering of community members, the medicine person's "primary allegiance ... is not to the human community, but to the earthly web of relations in which that community is embedded – it is from this that his or her power to alleviate human illness derives" (p. 8). In fact, many of them intentionally chose to live on the outskirts of villages in order to cultivate deep relations with the beyond-human world. They recognized that surrounding themselves with only human matters would limit their capacity to perceive what else was going on, and that "without a continually adjusted awareness of the relative balance or imbalance between the human group and its nonhuman environ, along with the skills necessary to modulate that primary relation, any 'healer' is worthless – indeed, not a healer at all" (p. 8). How can such a perspective inform human service practice? How might it widen our sense of what is possible when working to support children and families?

Urie Bronfenbrenner's 'ecological model' has been transformational when it comes to how support is conceptualized in many of the human services professions (see for example, Brendtro, 2006; Cech, 2010; and White, 2007). It is a perspectival shift in which individuals are understood in the context of the various systems in which they live and interact: beginning with microsystems of personal relationships with family members and friends, and extending to mesosystems which include larger institutions and political realities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Larry Brendtro (2006) describes Bronfenbrenner's contribution as one which has facilitated a move within the human services from seeing a child in isolated terms toward a better understanding of "the ecology of human development" (p. 163). The ecological model of

development put forward by Bronfenbrenner was in many ways a direct response to the individualizing discourses and interventions I have already discussed. In contrast, he suggested that perhaps intervening at the individual level alone misses important possibilities for change which emerge when we consider that sometimes it is not the child, but aspects of his or her context that require change (see also Derksen, 2010).

The entry of the ecological model into professional discourse has opened up a great many new conceptualizations of what supportive practice might look like. White (2007), for example, offers her ‘web of praxis’ as a further elaboration, or alternative representation, of the complex ideas that come with an ecological understanding of human experience and change. She notes that perhaps in part because of the fact that the ecological model is often symbolically depicted with concentric circles, then the multi-directional nature of the influences Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights is often overlooked. For instance, we may use the ecological model to help us understand how an individual child is influenced by the school environment, but we may overlook the agency the child may have within this or other contexts. White’s (2007) metaphor of a web has thus recently been embraced as a way of highlighting “the active, intersecting, embedded, shifting and asymmetrical qualities” of any situation (p. 241; this discussion has been further elaborated in Newbury, 2011a).

The perspective offered by Abram (1996) pushes these ideas even further, reminding us to continue extending our gaze beyond human dynamics as well. His approach would suggest that the web depicted by White (2007) must include all elements of a situation – including the non-human world. Clarke (2005) would concur, and Butler (2004) might suggest that doing so is in fact an ethical responsibility.

Broadening our focus in this way makes space for an approach to human service practice that removes the individual human being from the center of the ecological model, while still holding the wellbeing of individuals as a paramount concern (Newbury, 2011a). While this may sound like a contradiction, Abram (1996) suggests that this opens us up to a host of resources we otherwise would not tap into as practitioners, just as the Indonesian medicine people draw strength from that which exists outside of their human communities, as do other Indigenous healers. Abram (1996) posits that by opening ourselves to the additional dimensions of a situation, “like suburbanites after a hurricane, we find ourselves alive in a living field of powers far more expressive and diverse than the strictly human sphere to which we are accustomed” (p. 65).

An example of how this might play out was evidenced in a study I recently conducted with Dr. Marie Hoskins (Newbury & Hoskins, 2008). We were exploring meaning making processes among adolescent girls who use crystal meth. Rather than conducting formal interviews, we gave each of our participants a camera, and asked them to document their responses to certain questions about identity. We anticipated gleaning insights from their photographs and the conversations about them as to how addiction counsellors could better understand their experiences in order to direct interventions more effectively. In fact, when we first began engaging with transcripts, we ‘saw’ what we expected to see: despite our best intentions, we focused our gaze narrowly on our participants’ individual processes.

However, after many reflexive conversations with each other, we re-engaged with the transcripts and photographs, and saw completely different possibilities emerging. It was more difficult to fit these observations in with our preconceptions about what human service practice might look like, but the exciting potential of these alternatives was immediately evident.

For example, several of the participants chose to take pictures of the natural world: reflections of trees in puddles and windows, roots bursting through concrete, and ivy enveloping a fence. When taken collectively, and in the context of our conversations with participants, it became clear that they

see themselves as part of something larger. Rather than overwhelm them, this awareness enables them to think outside of their individual struggles, consider them in context, imagine alternatives, and ultimately feel capable of making changes. In seeing nature overcome hardship, and in seeking themselves reflected in nature, they can entertain possibilities that might otherwise feel unattainable. (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a, p. 27)

This recognition forced us to critically engage with a service orientation to help. And when we did, a vast array of strength-based alternatives opened up. Human service practice, from this perspective, does not require providing *for* children, youth, and families. Indeed, doing so may reduce their opportunities to engage with the world beyond their individual struggles in meaningful ways, which is where our participants found a great deal of strength. Might support, instead, be conceptualized as providing opportunities for interconnectedness to be highlighted, and meaningful engagement to be experienced? What might human service practice look like with this as a driving ethic?

Returning to (Social) Justice

Another interesting finding from our research with adolescent girls who are struggling with drug use is their commitment to issues of social and environmental justice. In fact for several of them, their will to address their personal struggles was intimately connected to their involvement with causes that are much larger in scope. Admittedly, we were frequently

impressed and surprised “at the passion, depth, and commitment with which they engaged socially” (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a, p. 24).

It intrigued us that “far from being marginalized by their hardships, they are located in positions that give them unique experiences and powerful perspectives when it comes to social justice” (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a, p. 24). As a result, one of our participants has become very involved in school-based initiatives to help other youth avoid the lure of drugs. Another has begun to participate in environmental movements, including protests. A third eloquently critiqued the legal and justice systems which in her estimation are more concerned with control than justice; she incorporates resistance into her life by confronting police officers when she witnesses class discrimination. Resistance entered into several of the participants’ lives in these ways and also by the refusal of some to participate in the education system, and by intentionally living ‘off the grid’. It became clear through conversations with one of our participants that

Her addiction is not something she needs to control in order to engage socially. Perhaps it is precisely the opposite: her desire to engage in the world may enable her to overcome her addiction. As practitioners, it is our responsibility to attend to such dynamics, rather than insisting on centring her addition when she is striving not to. (p. 25)

With the above examples comes the possible value in *reversing* service-oriented notions of what is helpful: rather than finding ways of ‘providing for’ children, youth, and families who are struggling, might we instead see our role as supporting their capacities so they might contribute to the world beyond them in their own unique ways? This calls to mind Doherty and Carroll’s (2007) urgent plea that as practitioners we might do well to “think of ourselves as citizens, not just providers, as people engaged in partnerships with other citizens to tackle public problems” (p. 225).

Reconceptualizing support in this way our work might, in part, involve the cultivation of conditions in which otherwise marginalized people have the space to engage in meaningful ways. Stated differently, we might find ourselves moving towards our original goals of justice, but in an even more profound sense. Rather than simply seeing the role of practitioners as the cultivating of just conditions, this reversal enables us to see ourselves partnering with children, youth, and families as citizens.

Returning to the work of Abram (1996) can serve as a reminder not to distil this down to a means/end kind of process, as ‘justice’ itself cannot be defined in universal or abstract terms. Drawing from the ideas shared earlier about the situatedness of narratives, Abram points out that “prior to the spread of writing, ethical qualities like ‘virtue’, ‘justice’, and ‘temperance’ were thoroughly entwined with the specific situations in which those qualities were exhibited” (p. 110). He elaborates:

The terms for such qualities were oral utterances called forth by particular social situations; they had no apparent existence independent of those situations. As utterances, they slipped back into the silence immediately after they were spoken; they had no permanent presence to the senses. ‘Justice’ and ‘temperance’ were thus experienced as living occurrences, as events. Arising in specific situations, they were inseparable from the particular persons or actions that momentarily embodied them. (p. 110)

Blades (2006) supports this conceptualization of justice, and notes that “Levinas is profoundly postmodern in his refusal to universalise ethics. He does not tell us whether dissecting a frog is ethical or not, he cleverly leaves such decisions up to us” (p. 663). Thus, such decisions must be made within the context of the particular temporal and spatial situations in which they arise. This notion of justice – which is simultaneously particular and contextually

contingent – can inform an approach to human services in which the pursuit of justice requires attending to its cultivation at every step through *relational* engagement. It upsets commonly held notions of expert knowledge and instead allows for engagement with children and families that recognizes our embodied, situated interdependency and vulnerability as an *asset* from which we can draw in the pursuit of justice. This relational approach enables us, finally, “*to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I is oneself*” (Levinas, 1982/2003, emphasis in original, p. 55).

This problematizes prediction and control when it comes to practice, and requires a more responsive and ongoing approach to pursuing justice. As an example, ‘Child Honouring’ (referred to previously) is an effort to recognize that beyond ‘intervening’ in particular lives, there is also an opportunity to engage differently in the world by recognizing global ecological wellbeing as a central priority in *all* actions, erasing arbitrary lines that separate us from one another and the non-human world (Cavoukian & Olfman, 2006). The very process of doing so, it might be said, could contribute to the justice we collectively seek, and serves to illustrate the potential implications of the shift invited by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model. This moves us in the direction of an *ontological* approach to change rather than a technical one, which will be explored shortly.

CHAPTER 16:

Collective Understandings of Wellness

In February, 2011, I attended a two-day multi-disciplinary symposium entitled, *Critically Reflecting on Discourses of Prevention: Suicide, Substance Use, and Mental Health*. Here is a brief overview of the event, as provided by its facilitators, Dr. Jennifer White and Jonny Morris:

This unique, interactive event features leading thinkers and utilizes Open Space meeting processes. It has been designed to engage people with diverse experiences and perspectives. Researchers, students, educators, policy analysts, practitioners and activists are being invited to this symposium. Given your interest, knowledge, experiences and skills in critical thinking, prevention practices and/or mental health issues, we think you have an important contribution to bring to this discussion.

By drawing on multiple perspectives, ways of knowing and the collective wisdom of the group, and by calling into question some of the mainstream assumptions that currently frame prevention work, we hope to plant some seeds that might invite a different kind of conversation. We wonder if such a conversation could ripple out in a way that might create new possibilities for everyday practice in the fields of mental health, substance use and suicide prevention. (White & Morris, 2011, personal communication)

As described in detail in Chapter 15, allowing ourselves to include spatial, temporal, and embodied dimensions of a phenomenon in our understanding of it can then make space for the possibility that *current* practices are in fact particular to *this* time and place. Whereas change – especially systemic change – can feel improbable when the status quo is interpreted as universal

or permanent, when we understand the historical context through which current practices have emerged, we are more likely to believe change is possible and to pursue alternative possibilities.

In the present chapter, I will share some of my learning from this two-day symposium on discourses of prevention, drawing most particularly from the context of suicide prevention. Throughout the development of this chapter, I will trace the shift in thinking that was made possible by the contextualized understandings explored during the symposium, sharing what seemed to become a theme throughout the event: movement away from individualized notions of problems towards collective understandings of wellness. My reason for going into detail about this particular event is not to present the right way to move forward, but to offer an example of how things *may* play out when wellbeing is conceptualized in collective terms.

Conceptual Shifts

There were multiple presenters, discussants, and participants at the symposium. In order to illustrate the significance of conceptually shifting from an individualized understanding of problems to a contextualized understanding of experience, I will draw first from the work of Dr. Ian Marsh, who is a suicidologist, folding in additional perspectives. Dr. Marsh tracked some changing discourses of suicide over time and cast light on some of the potential implications of these discourses when it comes to prevention efforts (Marsh, 2010).

Assumption one: Suicide is pathological

Suicide and attempted suicide are now often interpreted as indicators of mental illness (White & Morris, 2010). A recent ten-year cross-sectional study in Spain states that “More than 90% of patients who attempt suicide have a major psychiatric disorder, and 95% of patients who committed a suicide attempt had a psychiatric diagnosis” (Alberdi-Sudupe et al, 2011, p. 4).

White and Morris (2010) note in a study that explores classroom-based suicide prevention

programs that students often understand risk of suicide to be “directly indexed to depression” (p. 2190). They observe, however, that this understanding of the connection between suicide and mental illness seems to be informed largely by dominant discourses of suicide, not necessarily the students’ personal experiences. The students and the community educators who enter their classrooms draw heavily from scientific and psychiatric discourses of suicide when making meaning of the event. White and Morris, however, critically engage with this tendency to assume “a causal relationship between ‘mental illness’ and suicide” (p. 2188). They note how this medicalized understanding of suicide, when taken as the singular interpretation, serves to silence alternative conceptualizations and experiences of suicide, and eliminate “socio-political factors and structural arrangements” from consideration (p. 2190) which can restrict a sense of what is possible when it comes to prevention efforts.

As an alternative perspective to the assumption that ‘suicide is pathological’, Hillman (1965/1997) writes that “Any careful consideration of life entails reflections of death, and the confrontation with reality means facing mortality. We never come fully to grips with life until we are willing to wrestle with death” (p. 15). Rather than interpreting suicide as pathological, Hillman posits that “suicide is matter for the psychiatrist only when it is distorted, only when it forms part of a psychotic syndrome. In itself, suicide is neither syndrome nor symptom” (p. 16). In other words, when we construct it as pathological, it becomes so; but this is not the only possibility. Perhaps if we were more open to other possible constructions of suicide, then we might also have access to other possible responses to suicide, as Marsh suggests. However, as Hillman (1965/1997) points out, “openness about suicide is not easily gained. The law has found it criminal, religion calls it a sin, and society turns away from it” (p. 17). The ability to be open

to multiple interpretations of suicide is also made difficult by the relatively new advent of scientific understandings of it, which leads to the next assumption as presented by Marsh.

Assumption two: Suicide is individual

Another assumption about suicide called into question by Marsh is the notion that it is a deeply personal, individual experience. Even though it is commonly observed that suicides and suicide attempts vary depending on social and political factors such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and location (Gangwisch, 2010), it remains largely interpreted as an individual phenomenon. For example, as Gangwisch (2010) notes:

The strongest and most clinically useful predictors of suicide are psychiatric risk factors, especially if other psychosocial and demographic risk factors are also present. Depression, substance use disorders (SUDs), and/or other mental disorders are present in >90% of patients who complete suicide. (p. 114)

Importantly, Marsh pointed out in his presentation that such findings are based on what he calls ‘retrospective certainty’ rather than ‘prospective certainty.’ In other words, once a suicide is completed, such ‘risk factors’ can often be associated with it *retrospectively*, but they do not translate into reliable predictions about the future possibility of suicide. This leads him to question the utility of referring to such factors as indicators of risk at all.

In fact, Marsh continued by suggesting that *social conditions* can serve as far more reliable indicators of risk of suicide. He observes that when rates of the above individual-centered risk factors go up (such as incidents of depression and other experiences commonly described as symptoms of mental illness including fatigue, sadness, and lack of focus), suicide rates do *not* necessarily increase. But, when certain social realities – such as conditions of

oppression, poverty, and abuse – are in evidence, suicide rates do increase in a way that is relatively predictable.

For example, in a recent literature review on suicide and attempted suicide among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations it is noted that even “after adjusting for mental disorders, suicide attempt rates in LGB respondents overall remained two-to-three times higher than among heterosexual respondents” (Haas et al, 2011, p. 21). The authors continued, later, to explain that “consensus has grown among researchers that at least part of the explanation for the elevated rates of suicide attempts and mental disorders found in LGB people is the social stigma, prejudice and discrimination associated with minority sexual orientation” (p. 22). In a talk called *Hate Kills*, Reynolds (2011a) also points to the social dimension of what is regularly called suicide (an individualizing term that obscures social responsibility for these deaths). She notes that certain populations more frequently end their lives in response to oppression, violence, and trauma. It is for such reasons as these that Marsh calls into question the assumption of suicide as individual, and suggests instead that it is largely a social phenomenon – which, like all social phenomena, plays out in the lives of individuals. This offers a concrete illustration of the relational ideas explored in Chapters 14 and 15, whereby individual experiences were presented as socially constituted. Such conceptualizations can render different forms of action and even intervention intelligible. In relation to suicide, for instance, it could mean addressing the social conditions that lead to painful and oppressive experiences for certain populations. So what new possibilities are rendered intelligible by calling these assumptions into question?

Contextualizing Practices Means Politicizing Them

Others speakers at the symposium also conveyed nuanced and contextualized understandings of various experiences often interpreted and ‘treated’ in individualized ways. Dr.

Kathy Teghtsoonian, for instance spoke particularly in relation to depression and mental illness. She began by encouraging us to keep in mind much has been gained from the dominant discourse we so readily critique: individualizing discourses can help to eliminate (or at least reduce) stigma, and they can also contribute to a sense of relief among people who are struggling, as scientific approaches can reassure us that a solution exists – it is just a matter of finding it.

That said, there have been some problematic effects as well: namely that individualizing the origins of distress leads intervention responses to focus primarily on the individual. This causes us to overlook the fact that there are certain social determinants of health, and that experiences of distress are exacerbated by inequities such as racism, sexism, and poverty. It also leads to the exclusion of the possibility that public policies that work to undermine people's wellbeing are not included among possible reasons why distress continues to rise when an individualized and psychological perspective is privileged. Teghtsoonian (2004; 2009) draws links between neoliberal policies and experiences of distress, particularly among marginalized groups, as do other authors (Albanese, 2010; Ismael, 2006; Klein, 2008; Winegard & Winegard, 2011).

So instead of interpreting depression and mental illness in individualized terms, Teghtsoonian understands them as relational and thus, political. In a 2009 article entitled *Depression and mental health in neoliberal times: A critical analysis of policy and discourse*, she notes that during the same period of time that neoliberal policies began to emerge in British Columbia, so too did depression emerge as a growing public health concern. In exploring the areas of overlap between the two phenomena (which of course took place amidst others as well),

Teghtsoonian observes that policies adopted in British Columbia since 2001 that seemed to be driven by a commitment to neoliberalism have included:

... dramatic reductions in government funding for a broad range of social services, tax cuts that have directed the greatest benefit to those who are better off financially, the use of legislation to curtail collective bargaining and roll back wages in the public sector, and strong emphasis on the privatization of service delivery, and downsizing of the provincial civil service. (p. 30)

Although often presented as nothing more than necessary ‘economic’ measures, policy analysts and academic researchers have “documented the extensive social and personal costs that have flowed from these measures” particularly for women and other marginalized groups (p. 30). Teghtsoonian draws a connection between these policies and the increased rates of depression.

She says:

Since poverty, stress, fatigue, and lack of control over one’s environment are all factors understood to be associated with depression, it is arguably the case that these policy directions – and the increased levels of job insecurity, the intensification of work, and the reduced level of public services which they have entailed – have themselves contributed to its widespread prevalence within the province. And the gendered effects of these policies sit suggestively alongside the fact that, as is the case elsewhere, depression is diagnosed twice as often among women as among men in BC. (p. 30)

This is not to be interpreted as a direct causal link; social processes are much more complex than would allow for such an interpretation. For instance, women are also socialized to talk about their feelings and seek help, which could contribute to the high rates of documented depression among women (see Bilsker & White, 2011). It is to say, however, that there is likely

a relationship, and that none of these developments occur in isolation from one another.

Understanding depression and other forms of distress in terms that are socially and politically contextualized in this way means intervening on the level of the individual alone does, as Marsh suggested, seem limiting. Albanese (2010) notes that “when focusing on individuals, families, and communities, it is often easy to forget the wider social, political (public policy), and economic factors that help to create and maintain the ... status quo” (p. 56).

Understanding the complex nature of social processes as they relate with gender, it is also important to look at male incidents of suicide. Bilsker and White (2011), who reviewed a range of Canadian studies, note that “[i]n British Columbia, suicide is one of the top three causes of mortality among men aged 15 and 44. Among men of all ages in Canada, suicide ranked as the seventh leading cause of death in 2007” (p. 529). Men are more likely to complete suicide than women (often choosing more lethal methods, such as firearms), and are more likely to move quickly from contemplating it to attempting it, leading Bilsker and White to refer to male suicide as a silent epidemic. Although there are no clear conclusions as to why this is the case, social conditions as they relate to men’s lives are identified as significant considerations. For instance, “social stressors – family breakdown, overwork, employment insecurity – often combined with alcohol or drug abuse” are potential contributors to male suicide, which are exacerbated by the fact that men are less likely than women to seek emotional support (p. 532). These authors point to the promise of “community-wide interventions aimed at changing social norms” by drawing from the example of a population-level initiative led by the US Air Force in the early 1990s. The effort is understood to have successfully reduced incidents of male suicide by raising awareness, making local resources available, and changing norms around help-seeking (Bilkser & White, 2011).

In a powerful and provocative book called *A Chorus of Stones*, Susan Griffin (1993) looks briefly at suicide in the context of war and social injustices. One of the people she interviewed for her research reflected on the pain people endured during the Second World War:

Mary points out that the suicide rate in Germany was high. And rising among upper-middle-class women, and among Jews. The first one to die in this manner was Charlotte's grandmother's brother. Why? He had shown signs of madness. Unmotivated laughter. Depression. So the family kept him isolated until he recovered. Then his mother pushed him into an unhappy marriage with a wealthy woman. (p. 306)

While of course this pain is *experienced* on an individual level, the above excerpt highlights the inadequacy (and even injustice) of responding to it only at that level; it obscures the social conditions (in this case war, and all that comes with it) to which these personal experiences are a response. Griffin continues by proposing that "the distinction between privately and publicly inflicted wounds can hardly be made. They are blended in one life, one psyche, one body into the same pattern of pain, which can even seem, after a time, to be self-inflicted" (p. 307).

This makes room for the possibility that in addition to (not instead of) supporting individuals through difficult times, there is also room for systemic or structural shifts that may improve circumstances for people, thus alleviating the conditions that contribute to the perpetuation of such difficulties. In this way, a distinct shift from only individualized understandings of problems to collective understandings of wellbeing brings the notion of social justice into the fore when it comes to supporting children and families.

Responding to Struggles without Individualizing Them

Teghtsoonian's (2009) analysis acknowledges the role of temporal, spatial, and embodied (gendered) elements in the experience of depression – an experience that when viewed contextually is seen to particularly effect women in British Columbia during a time of neoliberal policy implementation. Bilkser and White's (2011) analysis suggests the ecological approach also sheds light on male suicide. Acknowledging these trends suggests perhaps individualized and psychological interpretations of depression and suicide are incomplete, and decontextualized approaches are insufficient for effectively addressing these problems, which are growing within certain demographic groups and communities. But what other possible approaches exist?

The second day of the symposium involved creatively engaging with these contextualized and politicized understandings of lived experience. Dr. Ken Tupper shared some of his work in the field of addictions, including the ideologies with which drug education is infused (2008) and harm reduction strategies for prevention; Dr. Michael Kral spoke of his experiences in suicide prevention in the Arctic, which involves community-driven initiatives that foster intergenerational engagement; and Mr. Bill Mussels, Ms. Terry Adler, and Dr. Lorna Williams shared their strength-based approach to prevention that centres healing, the cultivation of relationships, and capacity building. Even amidst the diversity of these approaches, there exists a common refusal to locate problems inside individuals who are facing difficulties, and a deep commitment to respond to these difficulties in collaborative ways. Ultimately, the initiatives these presenters discussed involved focusing on the cultivation of community wellness, instead of the eradication of particular individual problems. Importantly, not only do their experiences indicate that this approach effectively supports individuals who are struggling with suicide, depression, addiction, or other hardships (which, when understood contextually, are not distinct);

it also works preventatively within communities, creating conditions conducive to wellbeing in general.

Recognizing the historical moments during which suicide rates have increased, particularly among young Inuit males, Kral emphasizes the importance of responding to suicide as a social issue, not an individual one. He traces the vast societal shifts that have followed from colonization in the north (and persist in certain practices today) and connects these shifts with the increasing prevalence of suicide in certain communities (Brydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke, & Sabholok, in press; Kral et al, 2009, Kral, in press). Importantly, he also learns from the northern Indigenous communities in which suicide is *not* a significant problem, and it is from *these* places that alternative approaches to prevention are drawn (Brydon-Miller et al, in press).

The ideas Kral shared in his talk offer strategies for learning from and with elders and youth, in context – as opposed to imposing the learning from ‘preventative science’ on communities. He (in press) notes that even though many Indigenous communities are quite successful in nurturing their people in ways that protect against suicide, dominant approaches to suicide prevention have neglected to appreciate the significance of collective practices:

Prevention science is focused on evidence-based programs where program fidelity is highly valued ... Yet the cultural adaptation of these programs has introduced a tension into the field, as many of the associated programmes do not work well when applied in Indigenous contexts or minority groups. (p. ?)

Rather than moving in the direction of specialization (explored in Chapter 13), which can treat different manifestations of shared difficulties as distinct, Kral spoke at the symposium of some strategies for collectively cultivating community wellness. Two of these strategies are worth highlighting, as they were evidenced in the work of the others who presented at the

gathering as well, and can often be identified in human service practices for which social justice is a central priority:

Cultivating healthy relationships

The work of Mussell, Adler, and Williams places the cultivation of healthy relationships front and center – as it both facilitates the process of healing (on individual and collective levels) and contributes to positive political and social change. Importantly, they recognize the significance of healthy relationships as more than human. In their talk, entitled *Making Space for ‘Good Cultural Ways’ in Mental Health*, they reminded symposium participants that “individual wellbeing is embedded in the wellbeing of the community and the non-human world.” They shared with us experiences of community education work they did which simultaneously served the diverse functions of 1) healing, 2) education and capacity-building, and 3) community building, all of which were accomplished by intentionally cultivating meaningful relationships.

The design of the program curriculum about which they spoke was emergent, recognizing that the participants were coming with already valuable knowledge, and (so often overlooked) would be returning to their communities to implement what they learned. Thus, it was important at every step of the way to consider not only what was being taught, but how the learning took place. Teaching their students – through experience – how to cultivate a safe space with participants, how to honour existing knowledges, and how to develop answers together was equipping them not to be experts in their community, but to help other community members to have a platform through which to meaningfully engage as well. Thus, the significance of healthy relating within their work cannot be overstated - it was both the content and the method of their program (see also Lord & Hutchison, 2007).

Importantly, they also shared some of the systemic barriers they faced: funding, bureaucratic processes, and the difficulty in ‘proving’ prevention all posed particular hurdles for them. However, the measures that were most significant to them were the experiences of their participants, which were overwhelmingly positive. The cultivation of healthy relationships is, from this perspective, understood as instrumental to wellbeing in general.

In specific terms, Kral noted in his presentation that in communities where there is a greater level of intergenerational connection, suicide rates are lower (see also Brydon-Miller et al., in press). This is also presented as likely by Leineweber and Arensman (2003) who studied suicide rates among Inuit communities in Greenland. While they are cautious not to make definitive or universal claims about the experience, they do point out associations among loss of love relationships, feelings of alienation, mental health problems, and suicide (p. 49).

This is consistent with an abundance of research in the social sciences, including but not limited to research conducted within Indigenous communities. Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978), most foundational Child and Youth Care literature (see for example Fewster, 1990; Garfat, 2003; Trieschman, Whittaker, & Brendtro, 1969), and research from various human service professions (see for example Hoskins & Artz, 2004; Madigan, 2011; Shimoni & Baxter, 2008) emphasize the significance of safe, loving, and reliable relationships when it comes to wellbeing and positive change. Most human service practices take this as a starting place; thus, it makes sense that for these symposium presenters, strengthening deteriorated relationships is a priority - not addressing problems in isolation or in individualized terms.

Modifying political and social reality

Tester and McNicoll (2004) also offer a nuanced historical view of the contextual realities of northern Inuit communities and how these realities and suicide rates converge. They

draw connections among suicide rates, colonization, systems of support, and other material realities. This means that in order to effectively address suicide, these conditions of oppression must be addressed.

In his talk, Kral insisted “public health should be and is a social justice movement” when such political realities are acknowledged. This means *decontextualizing* suicide or other health matters runs the risk of unwittingly continuing to perpetuate unjust conditions (see also Farmer, 2005). Instead, he recommends rethinking the way we engage politically and socially with/in communities in which people may be struggling. Foregrounding political and social change, rather than individual change, would be a major shift from current practices. This is not a recommendation to neglect supporting individuals who are struggling. It is, however, a recommendation to understand that individual support in and of itself is not necessarily a *preventative* measure; if taken in conjunction with concrete changes to social and political realities, on the other hand, it may be. (This will be elaborated in Chapter 22).

By allowing ourselves to question pathologizing and individualized prevention efforts (as critiqued by Marsh), and to recognize the political and systemic factors at play in individuals’ experiences of distress (as recommended by Teghtsoonian), we can then open up prevention efforts to include such hopeful and promising possibilities as those shared at this event, by Tupper, Kral, Mussel, Adler, and Williams.

The Significance of Form in Relation to Content

When allowing the embodied, temporal, and spatial elements of experience to come into play, then information alone is not all that matters. The *experience* of something, not just the ‘truth’ of it, plays a role in whether or not it holds relevance for participants. So before

concluding this chapter I would like to briefly speak to my experience as a participant in the Symposium from which I have drawn many of the above ideas.

During her introductory words at the opening of the two-day Symposium, Dr. White shared her hope that the gathering would prove to be an “electrifying space” in which possibilities emerge (drawing from Cree scholar, Willie Ermine). This was indeed my experience of it as a participant. The group was multidisciplinary, all participants willingly attended, there were no costs associated, and food and physical comfort were thoughtfully attended to. The room was spacious, seating was around tables rather than in rows, and participants were invited to direct the flow of events (including content) and share facilitation through the creative process of Open Space which took place each afternoon of the event. With all participants standing in a circle, co-facilitator Jonny Morris explained that in an Open Space process, outcomes are not pre-determined. Instead, there is a sense of trust that the right people are in the room, and that people will fall into discussions and roles depending on their passions and skills (see Corrigan, 2011).

And he was right⁸. The richness of the discussions in which I participated filled me with a sense of hope and possibility. I arrived at the symposium wondering if I had anything to contribute and whether or not the learning would be relevant to my studies. I left there feeling that I do have something contribute, but much more importantly I left with a sense that there are many likeminded people - clients, practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and students – who are struggling to work meaningfully within existing systems. From these people, I learned of many initiatives both large and small, both formal and informal, that are contributing to constant

⁸ I would like to caution here that I am not recommending this as a ‘formula’ when it comes to form. Keeping in mind the idea that the pursuit of justice is ongoing (Caputo, 2000), it is crucial to constantly reflect on, and be willing to adapt, *all* practices.

shifts in these systems, reminding me that nothing is static, and giving me the conviction that persevering is not futile.

Dr. White reminded us that “wellness cannot flourish in the absence of justice” (quoting Prilleltensky, Dokecki, Frieden & Ota Wang, 2007, p. 19). This means that if we work in fields for which wellness is an ultimate goal, then the form our practices take - including the institutions in which they are embedded - is no small matter. Unjust means will never bring us to just ends, and the deliberate way in which White and Morris cultivated conditions of justice during the two-day event reflected the very outcomes we are all pursuing through our work – but significantly differed in terms of *form*. What could be learned from the non-hierarchical and relational approach to collective change embraced at the symposium?

Reflecting on my experience as a participant in the symposium, learning about multiple ways of pursuing collective wellbeing, and considering some of my own experiences in the small town in which I live, I am coming to the belief that relating respectfully and intentionally in intergenerational and diverse groups is not merely a means to an end. Much like Linda Hill’s description of the development of Inclusive Leadership Adventures, I am now experiencing relational engagement *in itself* as a significant contribution to the cultivation of collective wellbeing, and to justice in the most general sense of the term (see Newbury, 2012).

PART THREE: LET MANY FLOWERS BLOOM

Multiple Entry Points, Multiple Outcomes

As an entry point into the next section, I would like to introduce you Chris Bratseth. The short answer to the question ‘*What does Chris do?*’ might be that he is a teacher. While that is indeed true, it is both misleading and incomplete. Chris grew up in Powell River, the same community in which he is now teaching (among other things). He lived in Victoria during the years after he finished high school and before he returned to his hometown. I think it is here that I will begin the story of Chris’s journey.

He described to me the intense bouts of anxiety and depression he felt during the four years of his undergraduate degree, which he understands to be connected to both social and academic pressures. Over time, and with the help of several important mentors and supports, he developed his own path towards healing “which included group therapy, individual counselling, learning more about the connection between [his] physical self and mental wellbeing, learning about transcendental meditation,” and incorporating all of these various strategies into his life to help him cope with the difficulties he was facing. A surprising source of strength also came to him through the public speaking classes he was taking at that time, and particularly his professor in that class. Although he graduated with a degree in geography, it was public speaking to which he was drawn. With the guidance of his professor, upon graduation he ended up teaching some public speaking and study skills courses. He was good at it and enjoyed it, but standing in front of a group was not (and still is not) necessarily his passion; he really loved media and wanted to find ways to explore creative uses of it.

In addition to the academic and professional developments in his life at that time, Chris was also undergoing some pivotal personal experiences. His best friend's mother was terminally ill, and during the final months, weeks, and even moments of her life, Chris's life was deeply enmeshed with that of his friend and his friend's family. He described intense experiences of both pain and joy, and the gratitude he felt for being invited into such an intimate time in the lives of these friends who were becoming family. Even now, many years later, Chris reflects on this as some of the most profound learning of his life. Not only did their shared loss draw him and his friends together, it also "strips away your notions of permanency in life. And it gives you a sense of freedom as well. Like a letting go." The learning that came with this experience was embodied, emotional, and experiential. It has played a significant part in the way he now understands teaching and learning, and informs the way he approaches pedagogy at the high school in Powell River. I will come back to that shortly.

Back in Victoria, Chris and three of his friends had been doing a lot of dreaming and planning about what they might do to act as 'social catalysts' – to inspire others on their own healing journeys and to cultivate "communities that are connected and prevent social disease." After the death of his friend's mother, Chris said they realized how short life is and how important it is to take risks; they decided to step into their project completely. Although there were multiple ideas on the table and even a couple of false starts, the project entered the public sphere as "Extreme Kindness", which consisted of four young Canadian college boys ("The Kindness Crew") going out into communities, doing random acts of kindness, recording them and the public response, and encouraging others to do the same.

The Kindness Crew has a web platform, has written two books, did a national tour, continues to do public speaking (particularly for businesses) throughout North America, and has inspired multiple other 'kindness crews' that have been popping up in different places and in different manifestations. Without predetermined 'measurable outcomes', Chris operates from the assumption that, as part of the natural world, we humans can rest assured that our actions *will* provoke responses, just as everything does. But it is unrealistic to assume we can know what the implications of our actions will be up front. Instead of dismissing our expectation for absolute knowledge as insignificant, Chris puts it this way: "Some things are just intangible. They can be measured to a certain extent, but they're never fully grasped. And the attempt to hold onto that is kind of a noble one, but one that never fully captures the layering of experiences in any given activity." If we allow for the complexity of human (and other) life experiences, we can let go of the desire for control and instead enjoy the fact that we will be surprised, and allow ourselves to learn from the *unexpected* outcomes.

And surprised he has been. Eventually, Chris returned to university to do a Master's degree and then began teaching in the high school in Powell River. His struggles with anxiety and depression became less frequent, but didn't disappear altogether or become less intense when they surfaced. Although painful, he sees these hardships as a significant part of his journey: "It was just brutal. But on the other hand, those experiences with suffering are directly connected to why I am in counselling, why I am a teacher, and why I chose Extreme Kindness ... That's why I'm interested in the Compassion Project, in allowing people to rub up against that suffering and to feel some of that heat and that warmth and to carry that with them."

For Chris, wellness and compassion go hand in hand, and as an extra-curricular project at the high school at which he teaches, he has in recent years begun working with a group of about 30 students and two other teachers to try bringing conversations about compassion into the school. Although it is unpaid work that takes place outside of class time, Chris unequivocally sees this as an important part of his job as an educator. Together, the students and teachers have conversations about what compassion means and how to cultivate it in the school and the community. While the hope is that cultivating a culture of compassion could serve to prevent bullying, this is not the focus of the project. It is about *a way of being*, and asks the difficult questions: “How can you be someone who *uplifts* someone else? How can you be someone who is not just civil or cordial, but how can you elevate the experience of someone else?” According to Chris, “that’s what the Compassion Project really is about.”

Chris admits to being surprised at the fact that the students are genuinely excited to talk about compassion and extend the conversation to really difficult and complicated places. In addition to their weekly lunchtime meetings, they also entered the elementary schools and shared their ideas and learning with younger students, eliciting from them stories about meaningful experiences that evoked compassion. At the end of the year, the Compassion Project participants hosted an evening gala at which they shared with the community a documentary (which they produced) and a photography exhibit showcasing diverse local people and their ideas about compassion. The event also featured live performances by students, opportunities for informal intergenerational dialogue, and celebration of the cultivation of compassion in the school and community setting. As an audience member that night, I was amazed at the energy and the sheer number of people who enthusiastically showed up to

support the initiative – both young and old. Chris agreed: “There was a Canucks game that night – and I still think it’s so profound if you think about what it really is. Those students are coming out not to go to a party, not to a hockey game. They’re choosing to ... come and be part of a night where they’re going to talk about and celebrate compassion.”

The project wasn’t without its challenges. Despite the fact that students were very excited, passionate, and interested, there is also a certain level of disengagement which, as a teacher, he does not find surprising. “The model we have set up for education is a very passive one and it is very similar to a consumer experience. Unfortunately students have to buy whatever you’re selling in the classroom ... And they consume it, and then they throw it out at the end of the exam.” This larger systemic issue is part of why Chris sees initiatives like the Compassion Project to be important curriculum, not simply side projects. Although he does it on a voluntary basis, this is not something he views as separate from his role as a teacher – facilitating this kind of learning is an important part of being an educator of young people. Critical thinking, civic engagement, and leadership are important learning which he experiences as often overlooked, although significant dimensions of the core curriculum. Thus, he doesn’t judge the students for the disengagement, but sees it as an understandable response to the type of training they currently receive in the public education system at large.

Another challenge he noted was the fear and tentativeness many of the students experienced when coming in contact with elders. Compassion involves sometimes reaching to connect across vast differences, but today’s students have very little experience with this as their world is increasingly age-segregated. When he envisions future directions for the Compassion Project, Chris anticipates not only going to elementary schools with the

participants, but also to an elder care home. While a great deal of joy can be experienced with this kind of intergenerational interaction, there may also be some pain, including coming face to face with illness or even death. Recalling the significance of his earlier experience with his friend's mother's death, Chris wonders if perhaps we do a disservice by protecting children and youth from this important aspect of life. He wonders what might happen if we instead invite young people to witness suffering,

to come towards it, move against it, feel it, and then move away from it and come back to it again. Like a stone moving through the river and bumping up against something on the bottom. It slowly becomes smoother and smoother. And it's the same thing with our ability to move through life, to move through these little bumps along the way and to be smoothed by it rather than being broken by it.

Much of the hardship Chris experienced in his younger years was heightened by his belief that he *shouldn't* be suffering, and his inclination then to hide his emotional struggles. Now he understands that "the caring for the other *is* the caring for the self, and learning how to be compassionate is seeing the self in others." In his experience, facing the pain of others is facing one's own pain, and the reverse may also be true. Wellness and compassion cannot be disentangled. If we allow ourselves to let go of individualized notions of wellness we might instead see them as collective, embodied, and emergent processes. This in turn might promote the cultivation of social conditions in which individual wellbeing can flourish. This is what fuels the Compassion Project, Extreme Kindness, his approach to teaching, and life in general for Chris; indeed, these are not separate aspects of his life. They are simply some of the multiple

ways he pursues his life journey, and how it unfolds from here is yet to be seen. While he highlights the significance of intention, there is no knowing precisely how this will play out.

Might being open to multiplicity make space for exciting possibilities to emerge, possibilities which otherwise may not have been anticipated or pursued? For instance, technology and the medium of film allowed meaningful intergenerational learning to take place comfortably, despite the fact that there is not currently a familiar form of relating between young people and elders. “Instead,” Chris explained, the elders told their stories

... in a private setting, and then the conversation is extended back to the community that was there [at the gala event] ... So going back to the idea of the hospice model of coming in contact with someone who’s suffering. You know, the film allowed them to do that, to come in contact with someone that was closer than what media allows them to typically get.

In this way, the elders and the youth were *each others’* teachers, as they all participated in, watched, and discussed the film. This was not planned in advance, but reflexive engagement throughout the process allowed those who participated to recognize this unexpected outcome, and to begin considering how it might pave the way for new approaches to intergenerational learning and teaching that otherwise may not have presented themselves. There is no way to precisely measure the implications of these experiences, but thus is the nature of social processes. In the time that has passed since the evening gala, Chris has heard exciting stories in unlikely places about the ripple effects that evening has had, which support his belief in the importance of that “ephemeral kind of movement that isn’t connected to any

structured organization” which “you can never fully measure”, but leaves “an indelible imprint” regardless.

Being open to hearing the multiple stories of how the Compassion Project *has* made its way out into the community (rather than trying to predict or determine in advance how it should happen) means next steps for Chris’s teaching and community engagement can be developed in response to that which follows from previous ones ...

... And so it goes ...

CHAPTER 17:

Discourses of Multiplicity: The Spaces in Between

In the first part of this book, I critically engaged with individualizing discourses and the implications they have for human service practices. Part two offered an alternative way of conceptualizing human experience (and in turn, intervention) by exploring relational discourses.

In this, part three, I hope to consider some of the possibilities that remain unexplored. I also hope to complicate the notions of individualizing and relational discourses in such a way that precludes them from being understood as oppositional, but rather interprets them as mutually constitutive. (For instance, as mentioned in part one, individualizing discourses are in fact cultivated through relational processes). When we understand these are not merely two options, but two possible ways of making meaning amidst a plethora of unexplored and simultaneous *additional* possibilities, then space is made to move in directions previously conceived of as impossible. What new avenues for positive engagement present themselves when we begin to speak in pluralistic terms about practice, policy, ethics, and justice? What might discourses of multiplicity have to offer the human services?

Postmodernism and Post-structuralism

Discourses of multiplicity are often embedded within the ‘posts’: postmodernism and post-structuralism. Although often used interchangeably, Lather (1991) explains her own distinction between the two as follows: “I sometimes use *postmodern* to mean the larger cultural shifts of a post-industrial, post-colonial era and *post-structural* to mean the working out of those shifts within the arenas of academic theory” (p. 4, emphasis in original).

Shedding more light on the distinction, Wendt and Seymour (2010) explain each approach in a little more detail by drawing greatly from Foucault. If modernity is “linked to the

enlightenment and the movement towards scientific, rational, logical knowledge” through which “universal categories of experience are articulated as the truth” (p. 674), then *postmodernism* involves movement beyond fixed notions of truth and power, based on an understanding of such ideas as modernist fantasy.

Post-structuralism falls within the more general movement of postmodernism, and is a particular way of approaching the world which assumes there is no underlying structure. As stated by Wendt and Seymour (2010), “post-structuralism can be seen as a response or critique to structuralism, which is a search for invariant structures or formal universals which aim to explain the nature of humanity and society” (p. 676). They point out that although Foucault did not identify himself as post-structuralist, he is understood to be a foundational post-structuralist thinker. Elsewhere, Foucault (1984) himself actually refers to his perspective as “*anti-structuralist*” (p. 56, emphasis added). His interest is in preserving the notion of ‘the event’ without reifying it (as has previously been done with ‘structure’, in his estimation) and he cautions that

it’s not a matter of locating everything on one level, that of the event, but of realizing that there is actually a whole order of levels of different types of events, differing in amplitude, chronological breadth, and capacity to produce effects. (p. 56)

While I do not intend to conflate postmodernism and post-structuralism, I also do not want to get caught up in drawing lines between schools of thought when I am quite interested in moving away from such categorizing practices. Those who identify as both postmodernists and post-structuralists generally believe “individuals are created by texts or discourses” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 36), both assert that “‘reality can be interpreted in different ways” (p. 184), and both resist the tendency to try “finding a singular holistic meaning” (p. 183). St. Pierre

(2000) has expressed “a certain exhaustion with trying to fix [the] meanings” of these terms and observes that “some rhizomatic hybrid seems to have appeared and continues to become” (p. 477). She warns that getting too caught up in trying to clearly define categories may distract us and indeed move us towards those very practices the ‘posts’ are intent on challenging. For my purposes, I will speak primarily to postmodernism here, which is the more general of the two terms.

Although sometimes criticized as being ‘groundless’, postmodernism presses us to ‘unpack’ that which we think we know, largely through dialogue, in order to uncover the dynamics that have brought it into being (rather than assuming it simply ‘is’) (Rose, 1998). Postmodernism also encourages us to decenter the human subject, in order to consider what other elements of a situation might be at play (Clarke, 2005). Finally (well, certainly not finally), it reminds us to attend to what remains absent, unsaid, unacknowledged, and even impossible in a given situation (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Clarke, 2005) as a reminder that other possibilities do exist, as a way of unveiling the processes by which they were rendered unintelligible, and as at least a hint towards what some of them may be so that we might be so bold as to pursue them (Caputo, 2000). In these ways, rather than being groundless, postmodernism might be understood as an approach that encourages us to recognize that the ‘ground’ on which we stand is constantly shifting. This can serve as an important and pragmatic reminder to be vigilant when it comes to cultivating actions that are responsive to these ongoing shifts.

The intentions behind all of this vary: for some it may rest in critique, although this is usually a starting point, not an ending. For others it is a matter of opening space for alternatives to be made possible (not always for the first time). And for most, there is an underlying ethic of social justice that can be felt throughout the work (Denzin & Giardina, 2009; 2010). St. Pierre

(2000) speaks of feminist post-structuralism as a way of engaging with ideas that “trouble[s] both discursive and material structures that limit the ways we think about our work” (p. 477). This is not simply a matter of playing with ideas; these thinkers acknowledge there are very real effects that spring from movement in the direction of the ‘posts’.

It is to these that I wish to turn in the following chapters. The challenge has been (and continues to be) finding a way to persist without succumbing to the paralysis that threatens to set in when complexities are acknowledged (Caputo, 1997).

Deconstruction

Deconstruction provides me with a sensation of hope in its insistence of opening up present understandings in order to render alternatives intelligible and thus, possible. As stated by Caputo (1997), “... far from being nihilistic, deconstruction is deeply and profoundly ‘affirmative’ ... deconstruction does not affirm what *is* ... On the contrary, deconstruction affirms what is to come” (p. 41). Importantly, such a perspective holds no pretence of knowing *what* is to come, for that would limit potential in the same way positivist understandings of our current state of affairs sets limits. Rather, it is the trust, openness, expectation, and readiness for the unknown that makes deconstruction so powerful and promising (Caputo, 1997).

Why? Because the responsibility it implies is not only current, but constant. It requires that we accept, or affirm, the multiple possibilities of what lies ahead *and* that we continuously check in with ourselves and re-affirm this willingness to shift in light of what may come. In other words, when we accept that what is to come is completely unknown (at present, impossible) then we are required to reflect on how to conduct ourselves in the meantime. For (as Caputo reminds us), “it is *always* the meantime, the in-between time, just because what is coming is always to come” (p. 70, emphasis in original).

The Third Space

A common practice among postmodern thinkers is working towards the disruption of binaries. This is not only a matter of rendering multiple alternatives possible (although this, too, is an important goal); it is also a political move. As St. Pierre (2000) notes, "... women are usually on the wrong side of binaries and at the bottom of hierarchies" (p. 481). Of course this is not only the case for women, but for minorities and all groups that have historically not benefited from existing power structures. Importantly, it also allows consideration of power dynamics even *within* the poles of constructed hierarchies, inviting critical engagement with multiple ways power relations play out rather than limiting ourselves to fixed notions 'who is on top'. Thus, disrupting binaries also serves to disrupt power structures by toppling the hierarchies that are implied by them. Doing so opens up what some have referred to as a 'third space.' This is often spoken of when striving for something other than simply *reversing* a power dynamic, by rendering something more imaginative, emergent, dynamic, organic, and democratic than power-over or power-under relations (St. Pierre, 2000).

A common experience of students toying with postmodernism is the development of a hopeless sense that nothing remains when 'The' story has been deconstructed (St. Pierre, 2000). In fact, although not exploring postmodernism directly, Richardson (2004) identifies a similar phenomenon among people who do not have a 'grand narrative' to help them make meaning of their lives: she proposes the absence of a unified Metis story as a potential explanation for the lack of belonging experienced by many of the Metis people she interviewed for her research. When describing the dance between the White world and the First Nations world, she explains "how Metis people have straddled these worlds and existed in in-between spaces" (p. 10). With contrasting accounts of the same stories from within each of these worlds (such as Louis Riel

presented on the one hand as a villain and on the other as a hero, or the Red River battle described on the one hand as a “rebellion” and the other as a “resistance” [p. 30]), this exhausting process can feel groundless and directionless. Such binary constructions render the Metis experience of in-betweenness invisible (Richardson, 2004).

Identifying fully with neither one nor the other, self-construction can be a difficult task from within this space. This challenge of living in the in-between spaces is understood to be a central part of Metis identity. As stated by Richardson (2004), “the formation of a healthy Metis self is challenging, and this challenge is characteristic of being Metis” (p. 16). This in-betweenness, while not aligning with either side of a dichotomy, does not reject the presence of the dichotomy, and in certain ways it can be seen as emerging in response to each side. Thus, existing alongside it can be understood as existing in ruins (Lather, 2007) – and in such a space there is often little sense of hope, belonging, or agency. Without hope, belonging, and agency, the potential for problems to not only arise but grow is exacerbated, as illustrated in Richardson’s (2004) account of Metis experiences.

However, postmodern thought is a tool for reconceptualizing this third space in a way that introduces possibility and hope (see Bhabha, 2005). From this perspective, when ‘The’ story is understood as just a *story*, the restrictions that it imposes disappear (or lessen). With that, comes not nothingness, and not only one newly constructed possibility (or binary opposition), but an infinite number of directions in which one *may* travel. Thus, agency may be amplified, not erased, in this third space (St. Pierre, 2000). As suggested by Davies and Gannon (2006), the spaces in between can be understood as “contemplative moments where something else, something surprising, can come to the surface and disrupt our thinking-as-usual” (p. 2).

According to Bhabha (2005), we can take comfort in the ‘slowness’ of these contemplative moments, and understand it as a strategy by which we can more fully engage with and in this in-between space. He says slowness “is a deliberative measure of ethical and political reflection that maintains tension rather than resolves it” (p. 375). He continues by noting that slowness articulates the movement that exists between the space of words and the social world, and it strengthens our resolve to make difficult and deliberate choices relating to knowledge and justice – ‘how, and how not?’ – in the face of contingency, silence, and mortality. (p. 376)

This can provide the opportunity to take comfort in this *in-betweenness* and regard it as a space in which the pursuit of justice might occur. Being in between does not have to mean there is nothing to grasp; it can mean we have at least some freedom to choose where to hold tight and where to let go. This can contribute to a sense of agency when it comes to *how* to engage moving forward, as possibilities can appear both multiple and incomplete. In Lather’s (2007) metaphor of ‘ruins’, she reconceptualises the ruins as a starting place from which to draw as we proceed – quite the opposite of nothingness, in fact. In Richardson’s (2004) study, some of her Metis participants began to experience *in-betweenness* differently as well. Being Metis does not have to mean no story belongs to her participants. Rather, it may mean they can construct a meaningful story in which they can draw from other stories without being limited by them. Or, as suggested by Bhabha (2005): “even more than the sheer plurality and virtuosity of voices, polyphony provides us with a figurative vision of the possibilities of fairness and freedom” (p. 380).

Postmodernists do not urge us to *abandon* our grounding; they argue that, in fact, notions of foundations as ‘firm’ are illusions. Or, as Lather (2007) suggests, we are all lost already

amidst multiple possibilities. When following the maps created by others we simply deny that fact and, in turn, deny our own potential to make choices differently (Rose, 1998; St. Pierre, 2000). From this perspective, ‘getting lost’ is not a choice. Acknowledging our disorientation, however, gives us the freedom to engage with our conditions more attentively and responsively. This presents us with the possibility of changing them and our places within them, and presents a wider range of choices in how to do so. Rose (1998) suggests that this does not reduce our *ability* to effect change, but – on the contrary – it increases our *responsibility* to do so. Davies and Gannon (2006) and Caputo (2004) concur. They caution that it is not in the discovery of a story that learning occurs, but in the constant struggle towards it (which we can never fully achieve) that ethical engagement lies.

A Story of Multiplicity

My mother is a quilter, a seamstress, a rughooker, and a knitter. The fabrics she uses for one project inevitably find themselves in another: old sweaters are unravelled to be hooked into wall hangings. Old items of clothing are quilted into blankets and handbags. Skirts are cut into strips and hooked into a mat that goes under the piano stool. From my parents’ house in Newfoundland, to my sister’s in Nova Scotia, to mine in British Columbia ... the same fabrics and colours appear, but in new patterns and arrangements. The effect it creates is a sense of familiarity as I move from the first space, to the second, and then the third, even as my experiences within these spaces differ from one to the next.

The first space – the very one in which I spent the first 17 years of my life – was a space that did not require questioning. It simply was ‘The’ story. Stable. Reliable. Unchanging. Supportive. These are the words that come to mind when I reflect on those years. And even now, time does not seem to have altered the first space for me too much. A few more splatters of

colour from new quilts and wall-hangings, but the fabrics that comprise them are still the old familiar textures I know as part of the very world itself. ‘The’ story does not even know it is a story. It is that strong, that sure of itself. I enter that first space and I know exactly where I stand.

The second space – my sister’s house – exposed me to a new interpretation of that old familiar story. Pieces of the first space made the trip across the Gulf of St. Lawrence to be reassembled in combination with pieces found on the other side upon arrival. Interestingly, while it offered me a sense of possibility, entering this second space also did something else: in some subconscious way it seemed to restrict my sense of the possibilities that might lie beyond ‘The’ story. On one level I took great comfort in the familiar tapestries as I set my sister’s table with my mother’s placemats, or tucked myself in with a quilt I had never seen before but unquestioningly recognized because of the fabrics. But on another level I shrank as I observed the penetrating impact of ‘The’ story upon this second space. Rather than an entirely new creation, this space could also be seen as a response – a reaction – to the first. In many ways it was a new version of that which I had known (and, make no mistake, loved) all my life. But when such symmetry was not the case, it was a polar opposite: so much so that it still felt somehow to be a reflection of that first space. Is that what exists in terms of alternatives?

The third space is my space. Until recently, I have identified myself as transient, and still do in some ways. The notion of the third space (or in-betweenness) has given me the comfort and courage that propels me to make the choices I have made and continue to make. A few of years ago, however, we bought a house. I removed contents from the boxes I had carried around for 15 years but never entirely unpacked before. Out of them came old familiar fabrics, colours, and textures that are such an integral part of who I am. I give my mother’s rughooked

wallhanging of my father's childhood home a place of honour, where it can be both seen and protected from the damaging rays of the sun. I take note of how my husband and I create this third space, incorporating pieces of the first two and others in yet another combination. I recognize that while I had previously understood the other two spaces as static and feared the sense of stagnating that might come with standing still, I am now aware of something I had failed to recognize before ...

Movement, responsiveness, and freedom of choice do not exist in the third space alone. This third space is not somehow superior because it favours activity and movement over being stationary. Once established, this space *is* as stationary as the others – just as they *are* as dynamic as it is. But that is the danger: replacing one Story with another. Just as modernism was a response to what came before it - and postmodernism a response to that - the other spaces (my mother's, my sister's) are also constantly responding, shifting, transforming, too. Because of my position within them, I could not see that. I still sometimes struggle to see that.

But *the process of storying* does not exist in any one space that we can simply occupy and rest in. Once we do ... once we rest, make it a home, unpack the boxes ... it ceases to hold that same verb quality in that same emergent way. There is no one space - first, second, or third – in which ideals manifest once and for all towards which I can strive, assuming the work can ever be done. On the contrary, *the process of storying* is what can be accomplished when the three spaces are understood in the context of each other, in the context of all that came before, all that exists simultaneously, and all those that may follow, yet unknown and unanticipated.

I glance at the cushion cover crafted by my mother out of silk scraps she collected while we were in Vietnam together. A space – first, second, *or* third - can only be understood in

relation to those spaces that both surround and comprise it, and which it both surrounds and comprises. And when it is, the possibilities may be endless.

The Possibility of Impossibility

Whereas the modernist tradition emphasizes certainty, prediction, and control (Taylor, 2007), postmodernism emphasizes fluidity, uncertainty, and multiplicity (Hoskins, 2011). Now, after what is often referred to as ‘the postmodern turn’, Hoskins (2011) notes that “within much of the practice literature there has been an interesting shift in the scripting of professional identities from that of ‘expert knowing’ to one that is more tentative and collaborative” (p. 124). Instead of finding possibilities within what has taken place previously (anticipating outcomes based on prediction and repetition), this perspective instead seeks possibilities in what may still be yet to come. Chris Bratseth’s creative use of film to facilitate connections among elders and youth is an example of the potential that can follow from such a shift in approach.

This position assumes we do not have to be all-knowing before we can engage meaningfully in the world. Instead, we might strive to recognize the limits to our ability to know. Caputo (2000) claims that

... the more we learn about ourselves, about our several histories, traditions, languages, and cultures, about the multiple ways in which human lives are constituted, the more we will conclude that, in the face of such polymorphic, prolific, and positively dizzying diversity, our best bet is to ... say yes ... to a happy minimalization about what we think we are, or who others are, or what history or nature or sexuality is, or who God is. *That minimalization will maximize the possibilities and keep the door open to results that have not come in yet; it will multiply the opportunities ...* (p. 6, emphasis added)

Rather than limiting us, this minimalization might broaden the scope of what is possible to *also* include what has not yet been made possible. It encourages creative engagement with current conditions, in the hopes of fostering those that are more equitable - more just - and to never stop or settle for what is, but to continue working towards the impossible, even as new possibilities are cultivated (see for example, the work of Lord & Hutchison, 2007). Caputo (2000) further explains the possibilities that rest in impossibility by saying that “deconstruction settles into the intricacies of the situation ... in which it always already finds itself, and looks around, parergonally, alternistically, for the possibility of something different” (p. 147).

Thus, it is not a matter of defining what is being sought and setting out to attain it, but quite the opposite type of movement forward. In this way, although ethically motivated, Caputo (1993) boldly claims he is “against ethics” and favours instead a more tenuous relationship with obligation, responsibility, and ‘the good.’ Letting go of ethics as a set of rules allows more possibilities to flourish, since, according to Caputo (1993), ethics “hands out maps which lead us to believe that the road is finished and there are superhighways along the way” (p. 4). He sees the world differently, and instead claims that the situations in which we find ourselves are much more precarious than we might like to believe. As such, moving forward with an awareness of the partiality of our knowledge is the most ethical – and optimistic – way to proceed (I will return to this shortly with a discussion of Braidotti’s notion of nomadic ethics).

The Risks of Not Knowing

The freedom and hope this approach allows is enticing. We can let go of the assumption that we could ever be ‘experts’ in the life of another person, and instead move forward towards as-of-yet unrealized possibilities. This approach is also promising in that it feels much less

hierarchical, and can contribute to more collaborative and democratic ways of engaging within human services practices (Skott-Myhre & Skott-Myhre, 2007). Relational work, many argue, should be emergent, not prescriptive (Madsen, 2007), and here is a theoretical foundation that allows us to remain open to the unexpected. Discourses of multiplicity can enable practice to be more equitable and less coercive.

However, Hoskins (2011) cautions that they can also be quite dangerous. When presenting the possibility of assuming a ‘not-knowing’ stance to child and youth care students, for example, she says:

I am concerned that there is an inclination to relax a little too much. What I sometimes observe in my students’ counselling tapes is the kind of neutrality or ‘not-knowing’ that appears vacuous, where silences tend to go on for too long, where there are lots of nods and smiles but a little too much disengagement. ... We have an ethical obligation to do so much more than this. (p. 129)

That said, Hoskins (2011) makes clear that the situation described above represents a misinterpretation of the notion of ‘not-knowing’. Evoking Levinas (1982/2003), she recognizes the importance of tentative and responsive engagement with clients, and the importance of recognizing we can never know what it is like to walk in the shoes of another. She believes “there is nothing more dangerous than sending practitioners into the field believing they know exactly what to do in every situation” (Hoskins, 2011, p. 129). The ‘all-knowing’ stance is even more frightening than the ‘not-knowing’ stance; but this does not mean the risks of the latter should not be taken seriously.

Caputo (1993) recognises and addresses this risk. Stepping into the postmodern, third, in-between space; inviting impossibility; and resisting essentializing statements certainly does not mean ‘anything goes.’ He says, “Events make requirements on us” (p. 99), and in particular, concrete, situations - in the right here, right now - I must do something. I must make a judgement, and take an action (even if that action is inaction). The anti-ethical, impossible posture that Caputo advocates does not mean we need not engage, nor does it mean all forms of engagement are equally valid. What it does mean is there are multiple possibilities, and that this multiplicity comes from the fact that events cannot be replicated or universalized. Similar to the exploration in the previous section about relational discourses, this approach assumes “each event sets its own requirements, its own idiom, demands that we invent a new idiom, not an absolutely new or absolutely idiosyncratic idiom, but new enough, idiosyncratic enough” (p. 99). Amartya Sen, (2009) concurs. He says, “a theory of justice that makes systematic room for incompleteness can allow one to arrive at quite strong – and strongly relevant – judgements” (p. 103) and insists that “it is not defeatist for an approach to allow incompleteness of judgements, and also to accept the absence of once-and-for-all finality” (p. 89).

It is this type of skilful and attentive practice towards which Hoskins (2011) directs us as she expresses her concern with how the postmodern seems to sometimes be mistakenly taken up in practice. She advocates equipping students “to engage in meta therapeutic encounters in order to consider multiple options” without necessarily “knowing what to do in advance so that a step by step plan can be laid out like a four course meal” (p. 132). There are risks, but perhaps if we are informed about them and mindful of them, these are risks worth taking.

CHAPTER 18:

The Ethics of Sustainability

In Chapter 12 I explored some of the implications of human rights discourses, which underlie much of what takes place within human service practices and dominant understandings of what social justice looks like. Notions of human rights (including children's rights and extending to animal rights) make sense from within an individual-oriented, modernist paradigm. From within such a tradition, human rights provide a moral foundation from which we can move, and towards which we can aspire. According to Braidotti (2006), however, they are infused with "the atomistic individualism and rationalism of the liberal tradition" (p. 108), which entails "a very deceptive picture of what counts as independence and autonomy" (p. 106) by obscuring the exploitation of people, animals and planet that is required in order for *some* individuals to achieve a 'sense' of self-actualization. Once we have unpacked individualized notions of being, human rights discourses can begin to feel paradoxical. It may thus be necessary to consider alternative ethical and moral frameworks to help us move forward. This will be the focus of the current chapter.

Braidotti differentiates morality from ethics as follows:

Morality is the set of norms and normative conventions that are operational in a given social context; it deals with the negative or restricted sense of power as *potestas*. Ethics, on the other hand, is the inquiry about the role, position and relationship that subjects entertain to alterity. (p. 115)

By recommending that "the ethics of sustainability replaces the moral philosophy of rights" (p. 123), she is inviting us to move from the epistemological approach of morals to an

ontological way of living, experiencing, and pursuing ethics. I will return to this later in this chapter.

Situational Analysis

I explored the situatedness of narratives and relationships in Chapter 15, where the roles of time, space, and sensory experiences were folded into relational understandings of being. Once these dimensions are taken into consideration, relationships can no longer be understood in dualistic and rationalistic terms and are instead experienced in terms of multiplicity and embodiment. Clarke (2005) offers *situational analysis* as a methodology by which research can be conducted in such a way that acknowledges and accounts for these fluid and multidirectional dynamics. Clarke does not present this as a model that should be followed strictly, but the approach does a good job of drawing postmodern conceptualizations into research. As such, situational analysis might begin to move us towards the ethical posture Braidotti (2006) is advocating. After briefly introducing the approach, I will explore notions of subjectivity that emerge from discourses of multiplicity. I will then consider the implications this can have for human service practice.

Clarke (2005) studied under Glaser, who was one of the minds behind ‘grounded theory’ as a research methodology. Clarke’s situational analysis is – as her book title indicates – an effort to bring grounded theory beyond the postmodern turn. In general, it involves the development of various kinds of maps (positional, relational, messy, ordered, situational, and more) that enable researchers to explore connections among various dimensions of a situation. Rather than focusing on those dimensions as if they are static entities, situational analysis emphasizes the spaces in between them, that is, the relational dynamics through which they are constituted. Very importantly, it also pays close attention to that which is missing. By

continuing to visually represent a situation through maps over time, researchers can begin to notice when new dimensions appear, when old dimensions disappear, and what conditions are in place that may contribute to those shifts. Clarke (2005) also emphasizes the importance of mapping not only that which is readily apparent, but also the more nuanced aspects of a situation – including discourses, narratives, and the non-human world. Rather than encouraging researchers to use maps in order to narrow things down to understand a situation, this process is one in which researchers can generate “thick analysis” (p. 29).

In these ways, it allows for the fact that “a situation is always greater than the sum of its parts because it includes their relationality in a particular temporal and spatial moment” (p. 23). Although Clarke presents this as a qualitative research methodology, it is for this reason that I see great relevance to her ideas beyond this function, as I have explored in detail elsewhere (Newbury, 2011a). Because of the fact that it so fully embraces complexity, situational analysis sets the stage nicely for considering ethics and human service practices that favour multiplicity and fluidity.

Nomadic Subjects

Beyond reconceptualising the situation in which an individual is embedded (via situational analysis), discourses of multiplicity lead us to a place in which we might reconceptualise the very notion of the subject itself. In part two, I began this journey by exploring relational notions of the self. Within that discussion, the possibility of the relationship as primary, rather than the individual, was put forward (Buber, 1923/1970; Gergen, 2009). And relationship in this sense extended beyond interpersonal dynamics to include embodied experiences, relations with the natural world, and more. Here, I will continue down this path, by asking the question, “what *is* the subject, if not an individual?” Doing so will hopefully prepare

us for the next chapter in which I wish to reconceptualise human service practices and social justice work with ‘the ethics of sustainability’ in mind.

Gergen and Gergen (2000) use the term ‘polyvocality’ to refer to the “multiplicity of competing and often contradictory values, political impulses, or conceptions of the good” (p. 1037). Resisting the pervasive tendency to presume a coherency of the self, they cast light on the fact that within a polyvocal subject, there are necessary contradictions. When we return to the earlier discussion of the relational nature of the self (Gergen, 2009), this makes a great deal of sense. If it is through relationships that subjects are constituted, then the multiple relations in which we are all involved will cultivate multiple responses from each of us. Embracing the complexity of being polyvocal subjects means congruence, consistency, and predictability cannot be the basis for determining identity. Instead, there must be a way of conceptualizing the subject beyond such tidy representations.

In addition to competing values, impulses, and conceptualizations, Braidotti (2006) reminds us that subjectivity is also comprised of biological, technological, and informational dimensions. The subject is constantly transforming as it moves through time and space, thus making it a ‘nomadic subject’. The nomadic subject must be recognized in its embodied form; but the body, too, is in a constant state of becoming as it is “a multi-layered material entity that is situated at the intersection of biological, genetic, social, cultural and endless other levels of codes of information” (p. 96-97).

I want to resist the urge to describe the nomadic subject in terms of what it is not, but this is difficult, as Braidotti (2006) notes that “non-unitary subjectivity here means a nomadic, dispersed, fragmented vision, which is nonetheless functional, coherent and accountable, mostly because it is embedded and embodied” and thus cannot be removed from its political, historical

and geographical situatedness (p. 4). Such a subject does not only reside in, but is comprised of, the ‘third’ or middle space, as described in the previous chapter. Braidotti (2006) importantly points out that “nomadic subjects are not quantitative pluralities, but rather qualitative multiplicities” (p. 94), highlighting again the fact that this is indeed an ontological shift.

Braidotti (2006) extends this argument even further to bring us to a place in which the subject need not be understood in human terms alone. She believes the anthropocentric nature of current conceptualizations of subjectivity are based on an arbitrary distinction, privileging human experiences, with dangerous implications. Nomadic subjectivity, on the other hand, erases the lines between the human and non-human world, allowing for the fact that much of ‘human’ subjective experience directly involves and incorporates the non-human world and vice versa. The relational construction of the self, as explored earlier, does not refer only to interpersonal relationships (Abram, 1996; Gergen, 2009). The concept of the nomadic subject highlights the fact that our movement through time and space bring us in intimate contact with (and dependence upon) all kinds of ‘others’. Braidotti (2006) says, “Such a vision of the subject ... does not restrict the ethical instance within the limits of human otherness, but also opens it up to inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces” (p. 45). Thus, the significance of reconceptualising subjectivity when it comes to ethical practice begins to become evident.

The Ethics of Sustainability

Weaving together the learning from the above discussions of situational analysis and nomadic subjectivity brings us to a fresh way of understanding ethics, which may in turn creatively inform human service practices.

Braidotti (2006) insists that “a nomadic, non-unitary vision of the subject, far from preventing ethically relevant statements, is a necessary precondition for the expression of an

ethics that reflects the complexities of our times” (p. 43). Nomadic subjectivity thus gives rise to a nomadic approach to ethics. Attending to “the spaces in-between and their interconnections” opens us to “encounters with others” (p. 139) which can never be replicated and are always in motion. Whereas rights-based discourses rely on (or at least strive for) a certain degree of consensus, a nomadic approach to ethics moves in the direction of the possibilities that emerge when the *impossibility* of consensus is embraced. Instead of searching for a shared starting place, this approach can be considered a pragmatic response to polyvocal and nomadic experiences of subjectivity.

By referring to her approach as ‘the ethics of sustainability,’ Braidotti (2006) also draws attention to the temporal and situated nature of ethics-in-process. The discussion of situational analysis, above, is an important contribution in that it locates the subject, and the wider phenomena, relationally. The word *sustainability* builds on this notion of situatedness with both its temporal and affirmative qualities. It is these aspects of the nomadic perspective that greatly inform Braidotti’s (2009) ethical approach to practice (in her case, activism), and I believe they can help us consider human service practices as alive, embedded, and full of exciting potential.

In terms of the *temporal* nature of sustainability, Braidotti (2006) points to the fact that sustainability instills a sense of responsibility towards the future (evoking a non-linear notion of time). This is to be contrasted with a decontextualized notion of ‘limitless growth’ as we see, for example, in our current capitalist economic system which “tends constantly to stretch its limits and play with the idea of over-reaching itself” (p. 159). In contrast, the temporal dimension of a sustainable ethic draws our attention forward while attending to natural limits. Braidotti suggests it is only by recognizing the material limits of bodies, resources, energy, and (in a nutshell) the world that we might find ways of moving forward together. It is when we remove such limits

from consideration, acting *as if* we can proceed indefinitely, that our actions risk moving in the direction of that which is *unsustainable* and thus unethical.

Importantly, Braidotti's (2006) notion of subjectivity construes humans as indecipherable from anything else, so it is important to bear in mind that this notion of responsibility in the direction of the future is not about 'preserving' humankind or hanging on to life. It is, on the contrary, about living in the present in such a way that instills "a sense of responsibility for 'passing on' to future generations a world that is liveable and worth living in" for humans and non-humans. This temporal dimension of sustainability allows us to consider death, then, "as merely a point, it is not the horizon against which the human drama is played out. In and through many deaths, *bios/zoe*⁹ lives on" (p. 247).

In response to the question "How does one know if one has reached the threshold of sustainability?" Braidotti (2006, p. 158) says:

This is where the non-individualistic vision of the subject as embodied and hence affective and interrelational, but also fundamentally social, is of major importance. Your body will tell you if and when you have reached a threshold or a limit. (p. 158-159)

Just as was illustrated earlier by Abram (1996), time and space collapse in the material world, and cannot be considered independent of one another. Thus, an ethic of sustainability is a situated ethics.

In terms of the *affirmative* quality of sustainability, Braidotti (2009) offers something quite radical by resisting the all-too-present force of the negative in the critical philosophies. Rather than working *against* the status quo, an ethic of sustainability implies working *with* or *towards* a sustainable way of being, and is in this sense reminiscent of Caputo's (1993) notion of

⁹ This is a term Braidotti (2006) uses to depict an ever-changing human/non-human life force.

justice. The ethic of sustainability recognizes “an encounter with otherness as a generative or affirmative force”, and posits that such encounters are all around us and *all* we experience (p. 48). Instead of resisting this otherness (be seeking consensus, universal norms, or laws, for example), what might happen if differences were engaged with in terms of their potential to generate new, locally situated realities?

There are tensions within this aspect of the concept of sustainability as affirmative in that it “allows the subject to differ from oneself as much as possible while remaining faithful to oneself” (2006, p. 169). This seeming contradiction can only be intelligible from within a concept of the non-unitary, nomadic subject, but within it there lies a great deal of potential when it comes to social change. It suggests we have freedom to move outside pre-determined identity categories, and enables us to be much more responsive to changing conditions as a result. Doing so requires balancing between the generation of alternative possibilities and acknowledgement of current material realities. Importantly, it does not preclude the likelihood that in such a dynamic state of affairs we will be bumping up against natural limits, and struggles and losses will also occur. This, too, can be embraced as an affirmative part of an ethic of sustainability, as demonstrated by Chris Bratseth’s story. Affirmation thus does not mean the absence of pain (Braidotti, 2009).

The affirmative aspect of the ethic of sustainability is both descriptive and prescriptive. It is descriptive in that Braidotti (2009) observes how such an approach renders intelligible new possibilities that otherwise did not enter the plain of the possible. It is prescriptive in that ethics can pragmatically be defined as “the practice that cultivates affirmative modes of relation, active forces, and values” (p. 46), making this a call to action. The approach is also affirmative in that

it is an intentional shift away from critique alone to a fruitful combination of critique and creativity.

As noted above, the nod towards the cultivation of that which is ‘not yet’ is reminiscent of Caputo’s (1993) ideas as explored in his book entitled *Against Ethics*. In it, he speaks in affirmative terms of the vulnerability that comes with being ‘of the flesh.’ He says, “This vulnerability does not strike the I down, leave it limp and sighing, but mobilizes its active forces and swings it into action” (p. 218). This is what Braidotti (2006) refers to as *potentia*, or a positive, dynamic, productive form of power (which will be addressed in greater detail later). It is also what Butler (2004) draws on in her book, *Precarious Life*. Butler urges us to “furnish a sense of political community of a complex order ... by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (p. 22). This, it seems to me, is precisely what Braidotti has offered with her notion of an ethic of sustainability. By taking contingency, multiplicity, embodiment, embeddedness, vulnerability, and interdependence as rich starting places, we may a) really begin to get creative when it comes to what we imagine to be possible, and in turn b) realize it into being.

This is No Utopic Vision

When it comes to human service practices, it is exciting to consider what might be possible if we accept Braidotti’s (2006) invitation to move forward with ‘the ethics of sustainability’ in mind:

Instead of falling back on the sedimented habits of thought that past tradition has institutionalized, I would like to propose a leap forward into the complexities and paradoxes of our times ... What is ultimately at stake in this ... is the very possibility of a future, which is to say a sustainable present. (p. 36)

However, with this comes a responsibility to be diligent, as these reconceptualizations of the situation, the subject, and ethics along the lines of multiplicity do not suddenly mitigate the possibility of exploitative power dynamics. Just as they provide new avenues for us to move forward in the direction of justice, these dynamic perspectives also provide new and unforeseen avenues for all kinds of interpretations and ways of engaging with/in the material world, some of which may in fact strengthen the injustices and inequities these theorists are aiming to resist.

For instance, Braidotti (2006) draws attention to the ways we are already ‘capitalizing’ on multiplicity and difference. In fact, she describes modern capitalism as the practice of constantly “making ‘differences’ proliferate to ensure maximum profit” (p. 44). Here it becomes crucial to attend to the distinction between multiplicity in qualitative and quantitative terms. When difference is understood in quantitative terms alone, it becomes the means by which the “consumerist or vampirist consumption of ‘others’” is made possible (p. 44). For example, women’s bodies are farmed for their ova, the nurturing capacities of their uterus, their generative powers ... the bodies of animals, just like black or native bodies, are ‘farmed’ for their productive, reproductive and generative powers; for sexual services in the global sex trade; for spare parts in the organ transplant industries ... (p. 132)

The negative power (*potestas*) that also finds its way into the concepts of multiplicity, difference, and fluidity creates the conditions in which bodies can be treated as ‘disposable’ in this way (Braidotti, 2006). Thus, notions of nomadic subjects and the ethics of sustainability are not entirely safe. Just as the ‘third space’ was earlier described as just as vulnerable to the dominant norms as is any other space, so must discourses of multiplicity and the ethics of sustainability remain vigilant and reflexive. This is why, if social justice is an ultimate aim, it is worth remembering Caputo’s (1997) assertion that justice is *always* ‘yet to come’. This posture

towards justice ensures we are reflexive about each and every step we take along the way, which (while it cannot *guarantee* we are moving in our intended direction) will increase the likelihood that this is the case.

The Ethics of Sustainability and Human Service Practices:

University Curriculum as a Case in Point

In her discussion of natural limits and the importance of attending to thresholds, Braidotti (2006) reconceptualises bodily responses such as physical pain or mental illness. She says, “Whereas the semiotic-linguistic frame of psychoanalysis reduced these manifestations to symptoms awaiting diagnosis, I see them as corporeal warning signals or boundary markers that express a clear message: ‘too much!’” (p. 159). It is here that I see some very real implications for human service practices – and social justice in general – emerging from this work. Rather than diagnosing individuals on the basis of embodied responses to lived experiences, might the ethics of sustainability enable us to find less ‘vampiristic’ ways of supporting people?

The key aspects of Braidotti’s (2006) conceptualization of ethics, in my understanding, are that it a) is situated, b) is responsive, c) is affirmative, and d) assumes the subject is non-unitary. This may seem to be quite a stretch from current practice, and in many ways no doubt it is. We do generalize ‘best practices’ and assume their universality; we do diagnose young people and base interventions on those labels which then become part of their identities; and we do often resort to punitive and coercive approaches to change (Artz, 2011, Madigan, 2007). Taking that as our starting place, it may seem that we have a very long way to go before we reach Braidotti’s ethic of sustainability.

But, returning to the earlier discussion of narrative ways of understanding experience, I submit that this is not the only story at play, and not the only starting place from which we can

proceed. Taking a look at the curriculum for an introductory undergraduate Child and Youth Care course at the University of Victoria, for example, I see a great deal of overlap between an ethic of sustainability and the training entry-level Child and Youth Care students are receiving. I hope to make the parallel evident by revisiting the four key aspects of the ethics of sustainability I identified above. By translating them into CYC language, it becomes possible that the leap to a more sustainable ethics is not so far, and in some ways, perhaps we are already embracing the approach Braidotti is advocating.

Discourses of multiplicity allow us to acknowledge the individualization of struggles and supports that take place within the human services *while at the same time* also acknowledging the ways in which alternatives manifest. Rather than assuming this is a linear progression from one way of being to an idealized other (which risks becoming dogmatic), perhaps we can understand the polyvocality of our fields of practice as well – including the contradictions that exist within them.

Situatedness

As discussed in detail above, a critical aspect of Braidotti's (2006) ethics of sustainability involves acknowledging the situatedness of experience. Rather than developing ethics in abstract or universal terms, such a perspective reminds us to consider temporal, spatial, and embodied aspects of experience. This approach treats every situation as particular and unique, which is an ethical posture promoted also by Gergen (2009), Caputo (2000), and Levinas (1982/2003), among many other theorists I have drawn from thus far.

In CYC 251¹⁰, which is an introductory Child and Youth Care course at the University of Victoria for students who are bridging into the program from a human services diploma, students

¹⁰ Courses undergo revisions periodically. Here I am drawing from CYC 251 as it was offered in the Winter of 2011.

are taught what is now presented as a foundational CYC concept: the therapeutic milieu.

Drawing from one of the required readings in this course, it is said that in its most traditional sense within the field, “the therapeutic milieu is a strategic use of physical and social environments to promote positive outcomes and therapeutic interactions among young people” and it comes from an awareness of the profound impact of space and place (Griffin, 2008, p.21). Griffin continues, however, to caution against manipulating environments in order to manage or control the behaviour of individuals (much like Braidotti’s warning not to manipulate conditions to proliferate difference for capitalist gains). Instead she reminds readers that the notion of a therapeutic milieu requires an awareness that we cannot understand the young people we work with, or their experiences, without also understanding their environment, their relationships to it, and the many dynamics that take place within it. (In Braidotti’s language, the emphasis here is on the qualitative aspects of the space, not quantitative). Through Griffin’s work with street-involved youth, she strives to “incorporate spatial knowledge” into her research and practice (p. 24).

Griffin’s (2008) emphasis on the importance of space and place within CYC practice builds on work that has contributed to the field for over 50 years. Indeed, most foundational CYC literature draws on concepts such as the therapeutic milieu (Trieshman, Whittaker, & Brendtro, 1969), life space intervention (James, 2008), and the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), all of which situate children and youth within time and space. CYC students are encouraged always to remember that, as practitioners, they must not simply focus on an individual or an event, but concern themselves “with how the specific event is connected to the situational, global, and especially, the individual context of each child’s own life history” (Garfat, 2003, p. 5). Although expressed in language that differs from Braidotti’s, this emphasis

on the fact that all events are *situated* leads me to see a distinct and important connection between the preparation of CYC practitioners and the ethics of sustainability.

Responsiveness

Youthwork as Modern Dance by Mark Krueger (2004) is a widely read article among Child and Youth Care students and practitioners, and is included in the CYC 251 course readings package. In it, Krueger uses modern dance as a metaphor for good, relational CYC practice, highlighting the responsiveness required. With an artful combination of choreography and improvisation, both modern dancers and youth workers must attend to nuances and subtle cues in order to effectively proceed together. Neither can be done well if a blueprint is followed too closely, nor can either be done by a subject who is completely individually and internally driven. Rather, there is a dynamic, emergent, relational, and fluid nature to the interaction – a responsiveness.

Continuing the metaphor, Krueger (2004) highlights several themes, which include such things as “moving with and in time” (p. 10), “listening, hearing, and seeing” (p. 11), “curiosities” (p. 12), “rhythmic interactions” (p. 15), and “transitions” (p. 17). Within these themes is an underlying assumption that both modern dance and effective CYC practice develop in the doing; they cannot be laid out in advance. This quite strikingly resembles Braidotti’s (2006) notion of an ethic of sustainability, which is process-oriented and requires a constant checking in (on one’s own limits, for example) and responding to the very real conditions in which one finds herself. In the same way Krueger emphasizes the intimate nature of relational practice, an ethic of sustainability is engaged; it does not come from on high or from without.

Although this may be misinterpreted as a haphazard ‘anything goes’ approach to being, both Braidotti (2006) and Krueger (2004) caution that it is in fact quite the opposite. It is highly

attuned and attentive, and demands that the subject cannot enter a situation blind. Much like Hoskins' (2011) earlier discussion of the posture of 'not knowing', Braidotti draws on Zen Buddhism to illustrate that "what looks like absentmindedness on closer scrutiny reveals itself to be a qualitative leap towards a more focused, more precise, more accurate perception of one's own ... capacity to 'take in' the world" (p. 173). Importantly, although Krueger's (2004) article highlights the improvisational nature of modern dance, he also draws attention to the significance of choreography. Without some notion of where the partners intend to go and how they might get there, their success would be unlikely. In these ways, the responsive element of both CYC education and the ethics of sustainability can be seen to complement one another.

Affirmation

Braidotti's (2009) ethic of sustainability is inherently affirmative in that it strives to "engage with the present in a productively oppositional and affirmative manner" (p. 42). In other words, rather than resting in critique, this approach attempts to draw on the *creative* potential of critical thought. It does this, in part, by transcending present conditions in its quest for more just conditions. It draws from possibilities that may in fact lie somewhere just ahead on the time-continuum. An ethic of sustainability, then, embraces the possibility that we can "mobilize, actualize, and deploy cognitive, affective and collective forces which [have] not so far been activated" (p. 45). In other words, Braidotti (2009) states simply, "we have to learn to think differently about ourselves" (p. 45).

This is precisely what entry-level CYC students are taught about engaging with children and youth from a strength-based perspective. Rather than resigning ourselves to the dominant story that a particular youth might be 'high risk', 'deviant', or 'resistant', practitioners are taught to seek the potential that lies within that young person's experience. This is not a matter of

viewing a difficult situation through rose-coloured glasses. It is, in fact, a complicated but pragmatic approach to the very real difficulties within a situation. When strengths are recognized, they can be more intentionally cultivated. For example, in a CYC 251 reading, Bender, Thompson, McManus, Landtry, and Flynn (2007) adopt a strength-based approach when it comes to homeless street youth. With this as their lens, they describe resilience, adaptability, attentiveness to detail, ability to network, and support of one another among the many strengths exhibited by street involved youth. These strengths are clearly very transferable skills, and useful in nearly any situation. But perhaps more importantly, they also provide a significant counter-story to the powerful narrative that youth who live on the streets are “lazy and no good” (p. 37).

Great potential can come from nurturing this alternative, affirmative story. It does not negate the hardships young people experience on the street, but a strength-based approach is perhaps more likely to mitigate these hardships than would an intervention that perpetuates problem-centered narratives. With its affirmative perspective, an ethic of sustainability can be observed in the strength-based approach to practice as taught in CYC curriculum.

Non-Unitary Subjects

White (2007) notes the central role notions of ‘self’ have played in the curriculum at the School of Child and Youth Care for a long time. In her article (which is the focus of one module in the CYC 251 course), she traces this history of centering ‘self’, and in response she offers what she calls a praxis-oriented approach to child and youth care. Noting the KSS (knowledge, skills, self) model that was once central to curriculum as well as the work of the North American Certifications Project (which is currently considered core curriculum for CYC students as well), White acknowledges the importance of self-reflection and awareness but critically engages with

the instrumentalist view of practice propagated within existing curriculum. In my view, her critique of practice can be strengthened and supported by drawing also from Braidotti's (2006) critique of the unitary and bounded vision of the subject. White (2007) is concerned about the fact that existing conceptual models implicitly convey "a rather flat view of practice whereby knowledge is *acquired*, skills are *mastered*, attitudes are *adopted*, self-awareness is *gained*, and then these *things* are applied to children, youth, families, and communities" (p. 230, emphasis in original). Instead, she offers a more active, verb-like orientation to practices which she presents as the dynamic overlapping of knowing, doing, and being. Such a shift in approach requires – or at least works well with – a non-unitary view of the subject in that they allow the generative potential of this action-oriented ontology/ epistemology to manifest in the individual, eliminating the arbitrary distinctions between self and other.

Although this work has made its way into core CYC curriculum, notions of the individual as discreet are still pervasive within the field – perhaps an understandable reality given their pervasiveness within Western cultures in general. However, I believe this work – and the receptiveness to it – points to the potential of the ethics of sustainability to inform CYC curriculum when it comes to complexifying understandings of subjectivity.

What we Teach and What we Do

There is hope in the fact that Braidotti's (2006) radical proposition is, in many ways, already being taken up within professional schools of human service practice, such as the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care. However, I would be remiss not to mention the difference between what is taught in the classroom and what takes place in the communities of this province. Power dynamics were hinted at in this section, and will be

addressed in more detail later. At this point I simply wish to acknowledge that in some ways – not all – our actions have some catching up to do in relation to our conceptualizations.

Returning to the story of Chris Bratseth and the Compassion Project that opened this chapter: there are opportunities in the in-between spaces. Although he teaches at a high school within the mainstream education system that is fraught with politics and hurdles, he has fused critique with creativity and seized the affirmative potential of what *else* is possible. In relation to the ethics of sustainability, the fact that for him it has manifested, this time around, as ‘the Compassion Project’ is also significant. Braidotti (2006) notes that

It is the capacity for compassion, which combines the power of understanding with the force to endure in sympathy with a people, all of humanity or civilization. It is an extra-personal and a trans-personal capacity, which should be driven away from any universalism and grounded instead in the radical immanence of a sense of belonging to and being accountable for a community, a people, a territory. (p. 179)

Discourses of multiplicity allow us to experience a situation – and a subject – in non-unitary terms. The connections that are then made possible furnish both the commitment to and accountability towards all else we encounter. In this way, the ethics of sustainability require the intentional cultivation of compassion. How can this be meaningfully brought into the fold of human service practices, rather than relegated to one lunchtime meeting per week among the many other competing demands young people face? Particularly when practitioners are working within systems that may not be informed by the theories and ideas taught within their professional and academic training programs, how can such an approach be meaningfully and sustainably incorporated into the work they do.

CHAPTER 19:

Erasing the Line between Self and Other

Chris Bratseth described his experience of personal wellbeing (care for the self) and compassion (care for the other) as being one and the same. This is a perspective which aligns well also with a number of growing practices related to the human services, but perhaps existing just outside of how they are taken up in the mainstream - practices such as Nonviolent Communication (NVC) (Kashtan, 2002), Solidarity Group Practice (Reynolds, 2010) and Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 2007). The current chapter will explore these ideas and practices more fully, with an emphasis on action. This, I hope, will contribute to a better understanding of how discourses of multiplicity and an ethics of sustainability can inform justice-oriented human service practices.

From Individualized to Collective Understandings of Wellness

When wellbeing is understood of as the care for oneself, the concept (and its related practices) draws on individualized notions of what the self is. My dictionary's definition of wellbeing, for instance, defines wellbeing as "a happy, healthy, and prosperous state or condition; moral or physical welfare" (Bisset, 2002, p. 1197). Understanding wellbeing as a 'state or condition' in this way implies a static state of being to which we all, as individuals, might aspire – or that we might, as practitioners, hope to help others achieve.

But a relational, non-unitary understanding of the subject (Gergen, 2009) coupled with an ethic of sustainability (Braidotti, 2006) opens space for others approaches to wellbeing. In fact, such a perspective points to some problems that emerge with the above, individualized notion of wellbeing, but these problems can remain obscured until this shift in perspective is invited.

Vikki Reynolds (2010) for example, who draws on relational understandings of subjectivity, challenges individualized notions of wellbeing by resisting dominant discourses of burnout, particularly among activists and those in helping relationships. She says:

Burnout, as the term is used generally amongst community workers, is an idea that is inherently individualistic, and is repeatedly presented to us as the inevitable outcome of work with people who are exploited and marginalized. Burnout is sometimes spoken of in disease-like language where clients are positioned as the agents of hopelessness ... Self-care is often offered as the only antidote to avoiding burnout ... Concepts of burnout are shortsighted in terms of focusing on the self-care of the individual worker while invisibilizing and obscuring the structures that uphold the problems clients struggle with. This emphasis on the self of the worker isolates us from each other. (p. 65)

Reynolds continues, stating that she is “interested in our collective care, and our collective sustainability, which is relational, reciprocal, and communal” (p. 65).

McKnight (1995) also considers wellbeing to be a collective and systemic process, rather than something that can be provided for oneself, or by some for others. Both Reynolds and McKnight, with their collective understandings of wellbeing, suggest that from this perspective the distinction between caring for oneself and caring for others is nonexistent. And – just as Chris Bratseth observed when reflecting on his own experiences – when the interrelatedness of the two are embraced, new and sustainable paths to collective wellbeing become possible.

Compassion as Integral to Wellbeing

Ironically, in my attempt to move away from the individualization of social problems, it is to the *particular* subject that my focus is now drawn. Perhaps a word of explanation is required here:

As explored in the first section of this book, this inquiry was propelled by a concern that intervening as though the individual is the unit through which change needs to occur may be less than helpful. As I described earlier, I do believe supporting individuals is an important and worthy aspect of our practice. The problem comes when we decontextualize or isolate the individuals involved, which “absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events” (Butler, 2004, p. 5). It also perpetuates conditions in which help-seekers and professionals continue to play the respective roles of “afflicted and deliverer” (Szasz, 2002, p. 169). Moreover, reducing ‘interventions’ down to what is understood as essential (for the sake of legibility and practical ease) strips away the “particular, situated, and contextual attributes” of a given situation (Scott, 1998, p. 346). Derrida (1995) helps me to make sense of the fact that there is a difference between *the generic individual* (for whom current practices seem to be designed) and *each unique person*, “whose secret remains hidden behind the social mask” (p. 36).

Thus, rather than presuming the existence of a generalizable or universal individual experience, I hope to make space for consideration of unique and particular experiences (as presented by Derrida, 1995, in Chapter 12), and the implications these in turn may have beyond a single individual. Perhaps in doing so our practices can be more responsive to the unique individuals with whom we come in contact, rather than manifesting as responses to abstract

conceptualizations of individuals (generated from statistical averages, for example) who may not, in fact, exist.

With all of this in mind, perhaps it should not have been surprising that the focus of a two-day Nonviolent Communication (NVC) training in which I participated in June 2011 was inward. This two-day course, facilitated by Raj Gill, taught me more about the process of bringing together wellbeing and compassion in the hopes of constituting a more peaceful and just world. Even though most of the participants in the training were human service practitioners or activists with *social* change in mind, and even though most of us attended with a desire to create a more just and inclusive community, the reflections, discussions, and activities required us to consider our *own* beliefs and behaviours. This was a difficult shift for many of us to make, but makes sense when we begin to erase the lines between self and other.

Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication is a growing movement, founded by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. There are currently over 200 certified trainers offering NVC training in multiple countries (The Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2009), one of whom is Raj Gill. One part of Gill's work takes place within the prison system, equipping inmates to use the skills she refers to as 'Communication with Compassion.' Another is training youth and adults through Inclusive Leadership Adventures (as discussed earlier through the story of Linda Hill) to use nonviolent communication strategies in addressing racism and other forms of discrimination. Although the training involves intimate exploration of and re-engagement with intra- and interpersonal experiences, the intention and implications of the practice extend generally to peace and wellbeing on a large scale, leading to many applications ranging "from intimate

relationships, work settings, health care, social services, police, prison staff and inmates, to governments, schools and social change organizations” (The Center for Nonviolent Communication, 2009).

Informed by relational theories of change (such as those explored in detail in part two of this book), NVC is a dialogical process (Kashtan, 2002). The premise underlying it is possible for us all to get our needs met peacefully, making it a non-violent approach to conflict resolution on both interpersonal and systemic levels. But learning to engage with the world this way is not easy. NVC outlines skills for listening to, requesting of, and relating with others in an effort to both effectively make one’s own needs known, and effectively understand what someone else’s needs may be. When such mutual understanding is facilitated, then the likelihood that both parties will peacefully achieve what they need is greatly increased (R. Gill, personal communication, July 2-3, 2011; Kashtan, 2002).

According to Kashtan (2002), however, many people “think that NVC can only be applied in the context of equal power” (p. 28). On the contrary, this is where the promise of such an approach is made most evident, and perhaps switching to Gill’s preferred name for the practice – Communication with Compassion – can help clarify what I mean. When power is understood as *something* that is possessed and wielded by certain groups and not others, interventions for change often take the form of striving to either retain or obtain power (over). But when power is understood as a *dynamic*, then there is a substantial shift in the types of interventions that are embraced (Foucault, 1980). NVC approaches power in this way, and as such can be understood as a democratic means of shifting problematic dynamics.

For instance, traditional ‘bullying prevention’ programs that are delivered within school systems have been informed largely by individualized and static understandings of power and change (see for example Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011). Bratseth’s ‘Compassion Project’ strives (among other things) to reduce bullying within the school system as well, but is informed by relational understandings of power dynamics. Such an intervention disperses the onus for change and promotes a relational understanding of self and other (whereas traditional bullying programs may in fact deepen this distinction between the two). Similarly, Communication with Compassion (or NVC) draws on interconnectedness and shared human experiences with the intention of increasing opportunities for further relational connection. Rather than striving to acquire power, this approach works from what Caputo (1993) describes as the power of powerlessness: qualities such as curiosity, attentiveness, reflection, openness, and vulnerability are nurtured within NVC practice in order to set the groundwork to “meet both parties’ needs” (Kashtan, 2002, p. 29) in nonviolent ways and increase avenues for meaningful connections.

From this perspective, focusing only on one’s own needs is counterproductive to the ultimate aim of a peaceful outcome; there must be an equal commitment to the exploring the needs of others. Allowing for a degree of vulnerability, then, can allow forward movement “in respectful and mutually supportive ways” (R. Gill, personal communication, June 2-3, 2011). The goal, then, is to focus on the encounter between self and other. The process - creating the kinds of conversations, relationships, or dynamics that others will want to stay in (R. Gill, personal communication, June 2-3, 2011) – is also the desired result.

NVC and systemic change

A further complication is highlighted by Kashtan (2002):

When we try to bring the use of NVC to the context of power-over relations, the challenge is even bigger than in the personal encounter. The social processes and social structures around us continually reinforce the premises of domination. The task of using and modeling NVC in such systems is to imagine power-with relationships into being regardless of what the systemic conditions are. (p. 31)

Unfortunately, many forms of institutionalized human service practice (such as child protection, education, health care, family support, and early childhood education) are just the sort of social structures that do indeed “reinforce the premises of domination.” This can make it very difficult for practitioners to imagine how to implement such a drastic “shift in consciousness” (p. 28) as NVC into their practice. However, according to nonviolent theory, these are precisely the contexts in which it is most important to do so (Gorsevski, 1999).

By learning how to *be* differently as we engage in our work, we may find new ways to represent and even transform the systems with which we are involved. This brings to mind the experience I had as a participant in Gerry Oleman’s workshop (discussed in Chapter 14) in which a group of human service practitioners gathered in order to consider practice differently by reflecting on our *own* ways of being in community. When our energy and intentions were focused on ourselves rather than on trying to change clients through our interventions, new and exciting possibilities for change emerged. The remainder of this chapter will explore some of the other ways these perspectives can help us reconceptualise and engage in human service practices and social justice work with the *ethic of sustainability* in mind - that is, Braidotti’s (2006)

concept by which we might cultivate and sustain “the desire for change and in-depth transformation of the dominant, unitary vision of human subjectivity” (p. 5).

Solidarity Group Practice

As discussed above, Reynolds (2010) challenges common notions of burnout and individual accountability and instead is working towards the cultivation of practices for collective accountability and wellness. Her central area of focus is with community workers (human service practitioners and/or activists) who regularly engage with people who have experienced torture or other traumas and injustices. She aims to find sustainable ways for these workers to continue their important work which contributes to the creation of more just societies.

According to Reynolds, the intention of Solidarity Group Practice is “promoting collective sustainability” (p. 110), which in my interpretation is an interesting fusion of both individual and collective wellbeing/compassion. Sustainability here literally means, “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability to meet future needs” (p. 112) and according to Reynolds, collective sustainability is fostered when we are “acting in solidarity with an aim of creating an experience of community while contesting isolation and individualism” (p. 112). Although there are many ways to do this, she offers Solidarity Groups as one that often works well in her practice community.

Explained in more detail in Reynold’s (2010) doctoral dissertation, this practice is a way of connecting individual and collective experiences, with attention paid to cultivating the time and space for deep reflection. Generally, Solidarity Groups look something like this:

To begin, Vikki spends a great deal of time establishing safety – or at least, what she refers to as “enough safety” (p. 116). This is not something to get out of the way before starting the ‘real’ work, but is approached as an important aspect of relationship building, which is a significant part of any solidarity initiative. Then, as the facilitator, Vikki ensures everyone is clear on their roles and the intention of the process they are about to enter into. The roles include: an interviewer (who guides the process), and interview partner, reflecting witnesses, and listening witnesses.

The interviewer asks deliberate questions, eliciting experiences from the interview partner that can also resonate for others in the group. In order to ensure the connection is made between individual and collective aspects of what is shared, the interviewer will also ask contextualizing questions and other types of questions that enable the interview partner to identify areas of strength in collective action, instances of resistance, ethics in action, and additional resources. The idea is not to deeply explore an individual ‘case’, but to engage in transformative dialogue that enables participants to tap into the potential that lies in solidarity practices.

While this dialogue is taking place, the witnesses are all attending to which aspects of the conversation draw them in, which ones they feel reactions and responses to, and what those reactions are. They are engaged fully in the experience of witnessing, which requires more than being passive audience members, but also witnessing their own embodied, emotive, and experiential responses. Once the first interview or dialogue is over, the Reflective Witnesses are invited to engage in a reflective dialogue in which their reactions are explored, so that connections can then be made to their own practice. The intention is not to broaden the

conversation, but to narrow it down to focus only on those aspects of the initial interview that drew them in or provoked a response. During this reflective dialogue, the interview partner is now playing the role of witness, as are the Listening Witnesses. She will be provided the opportunity to share her responses to hearing the accounts shared by the group, and the Listening Witness will also have the opportunity to share their reflections in written form, in what Reynolds (2010) refers to as “Solidarity Notes” (p. 122). These can be given to the interview partner following the Solidarity Group exercise.

Although the conversations become tighter and tighter, focusing on increasingly particular aspects of the dialogues that are taking place, they also have an expansive effect as participants and witnesses find themselves opening up to perspectives and possibilities that were previously obscured by taken-for-granted norms, practices, power relations, language, and assumptions. Solidarity Group Practice is a process of deconstruction, which makes possible that which was previously understood as impossible. This practice can 1) enable participants to move more “in line with [their] own commitments for *just* practice” (p. 124, emphasis in original), 2) “make oppressive contexts visible” (p. 127), 3) “make space for the celebration of small acts of justice” (p. 128), 4) attend to “significant experiences where their work has enriched their lives and their relationships with others” (p. 130), and 5) consider their experiences from other points of view. In a nutshell, Solidarity Group Practice “promotes communalizing dialogues, expanding in unpredictable ways” (p. 137).

Part of the intention behind Solidarity Group Practice is to critically engage with the way “burnout is constructed as a story of personal deficit” (p. 129) and instead to cultivate collective ways of sustaining selves and practices by constructing new narratives which historicize,

contextualize, and politicize experiences. By recognizing the connections between individual experiences and collective group process, participants in Solidarity Groups can witness and mobilize strengths that may have previously been obscured by individualizing and deficit-based discourses.

Asset-Based Community Development

Reynolds' (2010) work focuses on wellness and sustainability for community workers, but it translates well to efforts to sustain all citizens – whether they are practitioners or not. The six guiding intentions of her work – which include “Centering Ethics, Doing Solidarity, Fostering Collective Sustainability, Addressing Power, Critically Engaging with Language, and Structuring Safety” (p. 108) can effectively inform community engagement on any level. Situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) and the ‘ethics of sustainability’ (Braidotti, 2006), in fact, suggest there is not one ‘best’ or ‘right’ entry point into a situation, but discourses of multiplicity encourage multiple levels of engagement with a particular phenomenon.

With this in mind, I would like to keep the principles of NVC and Solidarity Group Practice in mind, and consider how they might also be at play in what Kretzmann and McKnight (1997) refer to as Asset-Based Community Development. Taking the three together could enable a reconceptualization of what human service practices entail.

Before doing so, however, at this point I would like to re-engage with the word ‘community’ which has been surfacing throughout this discussion. Whereas community is often described in terms of areas of sameness and commonality, Asset-Based Community Development comes from precisely the opposite perspective, but one which I believe highlights

the value of discourses of multiplicity in our work in that it allows us to consider how we might move forward together without striving for sameness or consensus.

When community is identified on the basis of sameness (the soccer community, the Aboriginal community, the spiritual community, or the community of activists, for example), it can cultivate a sense of belonging for those who identify as members of it. But Cameron and Gibson (2001) remind us that this may inadvertently exclude people who do not quite fit the ‘belonging’ criteria of communities when they are defined in this way. They observe that “sometimes the value that is placed on sameness and belonging means that differences between people are silenced or hidden” (p. 15). This observation led them – and others who draw from asset-based notions of community – to explore what it might mean to create and sustain communities on the basis of difference as opposed to sameness.

“Communities of difference” do not insist on fixed or static ‘different’ identities; rather, they are about ways of engaging (through such things as celebrations, gift-giving, and conversation) that are “open to and inviting of differences that unsettle their unspoken norms and rules” (p. 17). In this way, communities of difference do not only honour differences that already exist within and among groups of people, but they also create “space for new ways of being to emerge” continuously (p. 15). This notion of community and of community members fits well with Braidotti’s notion of nomadic subjectivity, and does so in a way that can play a concrete role in on-the-ground practices. Asset-Based Community Development is one such practice.

In a keynote presentation entitled ‘Everyone has a gift: Building communities of capacity’, John McKnight (1996) shared what was learned when, instead of studying the

problems that exist in communities, he and a group of colleagues at the Asset-Based Community Development Institute decided to study communities that were doing well. What they quickly discovered (and continued to discover, the more communities they visited) was that a principle ingredient in every activity or initiative in places where people thrive is “the identification and magnification of the *gifts* of the people who are there.” ‘Gifts’ here refers to the capacities from which we draw strength such as skills, abilities, talents, interests, and experiences (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997).

Of course it is possible to identify problems, weaknesses, or deficits within all of us as well, and McKnight (1995; 1996) asserts that modern professionals have become proficient in identifying our problems, turning citizens into service recipients. This, he argues, further weakens communities and the individuals who comprise them. Asset-Based Community Development takes precisely the opposite approach to community development. Rather than beginning by identifying needs (conducting ‘needs assessments’) and trying to fill in gaps, this is an approach that begins by identifying assets (asset-mapping) and finding ways to expand upon them. McKnight proposes that if we could become as organized and proficient at identifying strengths as we have at identifying problems, major systemic changes would take place and communities would thrive.

His experiences doing asset-based community work have shown him that a) people do better when they are giving or participating than when they are passively receiving, and b) healthy communities are built on the basis of gifts, not needs. Returning to the earlier discussion of discourses of multiplicity, an asset-based approach to community development assumes that the more gifts or strengths that can be identified, the more avenues for further strengthening

communities there are. McKnight (1996) says, “It is about the mobilization of *diverse* capacities, without which we would all be weaker.” As part of the natural world, the human world also relies on diversity for sustainability.

As a concrete example of Asset-Based Community Development in action, the Family Support Network (FSN) of Seattle supports families by drawing on the diverse resources that exist among them (see Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997 for more detail). Recognizing that no family has everything to offer, but all families have something to offer, this Network was initiated by one working mother who realized other families were probably struggling to balance life’s many demands just as she was. The FSN is membership run, and begins by conducting a ‘capacity inventory’ of each new member family. These capacities are then catalogued in order to facilitate an “exchange of resources among its members” (p. 11). This enables families to participate in reciprocal relationships with neighbours – both giving and receiving – in a way that meets their needs, reduces stress, and builds community. Even though resource sharing is the focal point of this Network, the interdependence it fosters also contributes to advocacy and mutual support, increasingly the likelihood that families get the support they need before reaching a point of crisis; it is thus a preventative approach to supporting children and families, and also a democratizing practice that contributes to the cultivation of healthier societies. By diminishing the barriers between self and other, this is also a very concrete example of the connection between wellness and compassion.

McKnight (1996) does point out, however, that certain institutions (including the media, government, and universities) and practices (such the shifts towards specialization and professionalization) can undermine asset-based initiatives by incentivising the emphasis on

deficits and by individualizing social problems. Many of the ideas, practices, and possibilities explored in this chapter are indeed marginalized in part by existing dynamics which are heavily informed by modern neo-liberal capitalism. The following section will engage directly with these and other obstacles and consider how to realistically participate in systemic change processes, given the complications that come with existing relations.

PART FOUR: PLAYING WITH POWER

Two steps forward, one step back?

Nicholas Simons is the MLA for Powell River – Sunshine Coast, and has been since May 2005. His current experience in provincial politics, combined with his past experience in child protection, gives him a unique perspective on the relationship among social justice, human services practices, and social and political realities. In fact, the connection between intervention and social justice first became clear to him before he was a child protection worker: it was while he was a young criminologist working in Canada's far north. He said, "The government wanted me to do crime prevention; and ultimately I realized crime prevention was social development." It is this understanding of the relationship between individual and social problems that I am curious about, as well as the pressures he felt coming from 'above'. I think his perspective can shed light not only on why we tend to individualize social problems, but hopefully also some of the possible alternatives, given existing social dynamics.

Nicholas grew up in Montreal, and went on to study criminology at the University of Ottawa. Upon graduation, and after a series of other events, he found himself flying around to remote communities in the north, charged with the weighty task of preventing crime. Nicholas realized the expectation was that he would devise a list of recommendations that included such precautions as installing deadbolts, putting children's toys in the yard, and keeping the lights on to prevent vandalism. But this was not what he discerned was needed. Instead, he observed a growing disconnect between the Inuit people of these communities and the system of law that was being imposed upon them with the stated aim of protecting them. Rather than further

contributing to the disconnect among community members by means of locked doors, Nicholas figured what was really needed was less outside intervention and more opportunities for connections among community members.

Following his time in the North, he completed a Master's degree in criminology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Despite never having taken a social work course, he then entered a career in Child Welfare, beginning as liaison for the Sechelt Band, moving to North Vancouver to work as a social worker, and then returning to Sechelt, upon request, to help the Band there develop their own child welfare system. During his nine years in Sechelt, Nicholas experienced the feasibility and effectiveness of *another* way of doing things. In fact, he explains that during all of those years, "there was only one family whose kids had to be removed, which is far below the provincial average. We had no suicides; ... graduation rates went up."

How were such astounding successes made possible? According to Nicholas it was simple: "Parents would phone us when they were having trouble. They weren't scared to." Whereas, generally, "people do not smile when a social worker comes to your door," a trusting and healthy dynamic was established between the people who worked in Nicholas's office and the people who sought support from them. This trust was established over time and in a number of ways: He ensured there was no political interference in his office. He advocated for and implemented relatively unlimited respite for families so that they could reduce the stress they were under, thereby *avoiding* crisis rather than reactively dealing with it. He assigned social workers to each of the schools, so that children who needed support could be identified and responded to before serious child protection issues were at play. Meals on Wheels,

Wheels to Meals, a Baby Welcoming Program, and literacy programs were also put into place. Basically, the focus became prevention rather than reaction, and universal support rather than targeted.

Successful as the approach seemed to be, this was not the norm when it came to child protection practice at that time, and it is even less so now. During his time working in Child Welfare in Sechelt, the risk assessment was piloted through Simons' office. As one of the first social workers to use a risk assessment form, Nicholas insisted it was a movement in the wrong direction. He isn't critical of the items that appear on the assessment, *per se*, but rather the fact that it diminishes a social worker's ability to discern what is the best thing to do in a situation. Instead of relying on a list of checked boxes to tell them what to do (which, Nicholas says, are "things that you'd better be considering anyway as a social worker"), he believes workers need opportunities to engage with families and communities in order to determine the best way to support *them* – as this may look different from one family or community to another.

At the same time the risk assessment was making its way into practice, there were also increasing audits taking place in Nicholas's office, reducing his freedom to provide opportunities for respite unless a child protection concern was *already* identified (whereas according to Nicholas, avoiding such concerns is where the real value of respite lies). There were also new administrative responsibilities coming into play, including the documentation of every 15 minutes spent with a child or family. These practices seemed to be more driven by concerns for liability than by concerns for the welfare of children.

Nicholas Simons was becoming increasingly frustrated with what seemed to be hypocritical behaviour within the system he was representing, so in 2003 when he was approached to investigate the death of a little girl from Port Alberni, he accepted. While it was clear to him that the government was hoping he would find individuals to blame for her death (such as a particular negligent social worker or administrator), what he found was a series of mistakes that he understood as symptomatic of larger systemic problems. Some of the problems included things such as: larger chains of paper, which removed decision makers from direct contact with families; increased pressure to cut costs; a renewed interest in keeping children with families coupled with what he felt were sub-par background checks; and the fact that political decisions seemed to be increasingly made on the basis of public relations.

Just as he was finishing this investigation, and noting the political nature of Child Welfare practice, Nicholas was approached to run as an MLA for the NDP party. Although he hadn't previously been politically involved, the very real impact of public policy on the lives of children and families had become clear to him. So he decided to run, and he won.

As an MLA, he is concerned with cultivating more equitable social conditions for his constituents, which means shrinking the gap between rich and poor in terms of opportunity and wellbeing. Interestingly, in many ways he sees everything he does now in the political arena as a form of social work: advocating for the social conditions that would cultivate healthy families and communities prevents the stress and crises that lead to child protection issues. In fact, Nicholas goes so far as to say: "child welfare has everything to do with poverty." When clarifying what he means by this, he explains:

It isn't poverty in and of itself; the problem is inequality ... if our society was more equal, we'd have fewer problems. ... Most people living in poverty don't have child welfare or crime problems. Most don't. But I will say that most people in the child welfare system are poor. Most people in jail are poor. And poverty doesn't have to be family income; it can also be the ability of family members to provide support.

When the relationship between poverty and involvement with the child welfare and justice systems is recognized, a re-engagement with common assumptions about those who struggle in this society becomes necessary. For instance, Nicholas explains that even though First Nations communities are commonly described as having disproportionately high rates of social problems such as suicide, alcoholism and drug use, it is rarely publically acknowledged that "they're the most proportionally victimized as well." Thus, according to Simons, responsibly addressing child protection and crime issues requires the consideration of social justice and an adjustment of the way society is currently configured, so as to address the ways certain populations are repeatedly systemically disadvantaged.

While this may sound like an insurmountable challenge, Nicholas Simons insists it is not: "Take half of the child welfare budget, throw it into education, and you've got a better system." Rather than continuously shrinking the net of who is served by social programs, he advocates broadening it, and he figures the school system is the most realistic way to do this since most kids move through it. Providing healthy meals, ensuring all kids can get transportation to school, additional teacher supports and social workers, accessible extra-curricular activities for all students (not just those who can pay), and reaching out to families before real crisis hits –

these are the types of things that he is sure would help address conditions of inequality which contribute to child protection issues. He is sure, because these are the kinds of things that were successful in doing just that during his time working in Sechelt.

He also proposes gradually developing a system whereby university education and childcare are freely attainable for all citizens. These, he insists, are realistic and feasible measures which would have long term equalizing effects within our society. While they may be expensive up front, he is sure they will save money down the road since the alternative (reactive intervention, after the fact) is much *more* expensive. Besides, why not try? The track record of our current system is nothing less than dismal:

We've seen cut backs to social programs for the last 20 years. Are we that much better off now? How is it that 20 years of austerity, of cut backs, in order to fix things has actually led to a place where the quality of life isn't significantly altered? The average family take-home income is not keeping up with inflation. Our prisons are swelling – we've got quadruple bunking in provincial institutions ... I just think we've been kind of misled with this idea that lower taxes will make life better.

His perspective is convincing. Why is it, then, that our policies seem to be moving farther away from the ideal picture he is painting, rather than towards it? What are the dynamics at play that are moving us in the direction of individualized interventions, targeted programs, budget cuts to social services, and measurable outcomes? Nicholas himself admits that his ideas are, in fact, "not electable." The individualization of social problems is not only happening on a policy level; it is occurring at a cultural level as well. Although Simons is one of

85 elected Members of Legislative Assembly, he acknowledges a sense of powerlessness in the face of partisan politics and public relations. There is a “fine balance between saying what would be a good idea and saying what you can convince other people is a good idea.” These complicated power dynamics seem to inform decisions at every level.

Tracing Nicholas’s career, one can see how even as he has moved into what may seem to be increasingly ‘powerful’ positions, he has experienced limitations to his agency within those various roles. In the following chapters, I will enter more fully into considerations of power, which until now have not been given central consideration. I hope that by better understanding the complexities inherent in power relations, we might learn how to more realistically engage in systemic change processes of the scale being discussed here.

CHAPTER 20:

Power Relations

Nicholas Simons' story makes it clear that social change in the direction of justice requires more than good ideas. There are larger dynamics at play, which must be taken into consideration when alternatives are being sought. The title of this book, *Contextualizing Care*, suggests that not only do human service practitioners need to understand the complex social dynamics in which the children and families with whom we work might be nested; we must also understand the complex political dynamics in which we ourselves are nested. Only by considering power relations can we hope to realistically enact alternatives to what currently is.

In the current chapter I will consider various conceptualizations of power and how it unfolds. I will then explore its implications within human service practices, with a particular focus on child protection. Child protection is a field wrought with multiple tensions: tensions between practitioners and clients, tensions between practitioners and funding bodies, and tensions between what practitioners hope to accomplish and what they feel capable of accomplishing, among others. As such, I think it is a fitting site for further inquiry into the dynamics of power. My hope is that this investigation will provide insights into how we might differently go about our work in a way that can better satisfy clients, practitioners, governments, and citizens in general.

What is Meant by the Word 'Power'?

Drawing from Foucault, Caputo (2000) insists that 'power' cannot be properly defined, as it has no substance in and of itself. He explains power in this way:

Power is only a descriptive category for Foucault and it means many things, in keeping with the plurality of historical situations in which it is deployed. There is no power as such; we can only describe the ‘how’ of ‘power relations.’ (p. 27)

Quoting Deleuze directly, Winslade (2009) offers a similar appraisal of power. He says, “Power ... is less a property than a strategy ... it is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege,’ acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic position” (Deleuze in Winslade, 2009, p. 337). Braidotti (2006) concurs. She says, “the choreography of constraints and entitlements, controls and desire is the hard core of power. This core is void of any substantial essence and is a force, or an activity – a verb, not a noun” (p. 36).

We sometimes mistake *technologies* of power as power itself: things such as policies, social standards of conduct, money, and educational institutions and practices (and other ‘nouns’) are technologies through which power operates. But these technologies do not ‘hold’ power. According to Foucault (1980), power is a constantly moving dynamic that is not located in particular institutions or particular individuals, although this is how it is perhaps most often spoken of (Caputo, 2000). Jovchelovitch (2008) reminds us that power cannot be an intrinsic quality or possession of agents; for nothing can be ‘powerful’ if it is not somehow recognized or experienced as such by others. This observation demonstrates the appropriateness of the term ‘power *relations*.’ Such a fluid conceptualization of power, however, makes it much more difficult to address, since we are all participating in it (albeit differently), and power itself cannot be located in the hands of an individual or institution.

Nikolas Rose (1998) explains that neo-liberalism has contributed to our social and political life in many ways, one of which is to place an emphasis on individual responsibility,

individual agency, and individual choices around engagement in civic and personal life. It has come to a point, he observes, in which “freedom is inextricably bound up with certain ways of exercising power” (p. 167) over ourselves, others, and that which we encounter. Foucault believed that it is through the expansion of the idea that we can be autonomous that inequitable relations intensify. It is, ironically, by trying to reduce our dependency on others that we become more susceptible to the negative effects of power relations (MacIntyre, 2006). According to MacIntyre, (2006), Foucault’s hope was to “enable us to disconnect ‘the growth of autonomy’ from that intensification of power relations” (p. 173).

Paradoxically, despite our emphasis on self-reliance, and through complex “procedures of power” (to borrow a phrase by Blades, 1997), we are also now “governed through the choices that we will ourselves make, under the guidance of cultural and cognitive authorities, in the space of regulated freedom, in our individual search for happiness, self-esteem, and self-actualization, for the fulfillment of our autonomous selves” (p. 166). Rose (1998) refers to this dynamic (by which we keep *ourselves* in line) as the “conduct of conduct” (p. 155). This type of governmentality, driven from within, creates a situation in which conditions of inequality are upheld not only by those who benefit from them, but by *all* who are enmeshed in them.

Our conduct is thus ‘conducted’ not in opposition with government or other institutional technologies of power relations, but it in fact serves as an instrument to further enable power to continue moving in particular ways. We learn to regulate our own behaviour in accordance with the ‘powers that be’ (whether that means buying more stuff, becoming more compliant, flattening emotional responses by taking prescription medications, or enacting particular gender relations) so as to contribute to smoothly running power relations that nevertheless serve the

interests of some while marginalizing others (Rose, 1998). We also learn to close our eyes to the effects of our actions, instead fragmenting our understanding of the world and our place in it. According to Griffin (1993), on a certain level we take comfort in bureaucratic systems of organization and other elaborate procedures by which we separate ourselves from others, as they allow us to ignore what we know about the many ways we all contribute to inequitable conditions. These are among the mechanisms that allow us to participate in what we do not condone (Griffin, 1993).

If it is indeed the case that power is an ongoing dynamic in which we all participate, then power cannot simply be removed in order to create a just, fair, and free society. Since we are all always enmeshed in power relations, perhaps the best we can hope to do is alter them in such a way as to contribute to a dynamic that is *more* just (Caputo, 2000). But how? Here it is useful to consider that power relations are not simply a matter of social domination (which is a perception that comes from more essentialized notions of power as something to be wielded). When we recognize that power relations are dynamic, then the opportunity emerges to consider additional qualities of power, such as those that might in fact contribute to justice and collective wellbeing, rather than detract from it. Conceptualizing power as a dynamic and not a static entity is a promising possibility; after all, any dynamic is always in an unsteady state, which means it is susceptible to change.

Power Potential

Drawing on the notion of power as a necessarily relational dynamic, Hannah Arendt (1958) notes that “while strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men [*sic*] when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (p.

200). Here, she is describing power as something that has the potential to collectively move us in new directions – the power to make things happen. This stands in contrast to popular notions of power, in which it is often spoken of synonymously with what Arendt here refers to as individual strength. She sees possibilities arise with this more generative way of seeing power:

For power, like action, is boundless; it has no physical limitation in human nature, in the bodily existence of man [*sic*], like strength. Its only limitation is the existence of other people, but this limitation is not accidental, because human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with. (p. 201)

I believe it is worthwhile at this point to return to the earlier discussions of narrative. In popular culture, we continue to propagate a singular narrative about power – what it is, who has access to it, and how it can be changed. It is a polarizing narrative, and one that leaves few with hope that alternatives arrangements are possible. But, as Said (1993) points out, such uncritical acceptance of a dominant narrative can actually serve to perpetuate current power relations quite well. He observes how culture and imperialism unfolds as it does because certain narratives are promoted while others are “blocked from forming and emerging” (p. xiii). Griffin (1993) describes her experience of how this dynamic takes place on an intrapersonal level: “To tell a story, or to hear a story told, is not a simple transmission of information. Something else in the telling is given too, so that, once hearing, what one has heard becomes a part of oneself” (p. 161). In order to ensure we are not unwittingly enabling and embodying the very injustices we seek here to overcome, it is crucially important to make space for other narratives about power to enter our consciousness. To do this, we must ask critical questions, including: What possibilities are being excluded by existing narratives? (Said, 1993).

Braidotti (2006), who repeatedly asks such questions, deepens and complicates notions of power. She embraces the complexities that arise with the concept of power relations, and insists that we need to consider power in ways that account for “the paradoxes and contradictions of the era of globalization, and which do not take shortcuts through its complexities” (p. 31). To her, power involves not only what is already included in common representations (*potestas*), but also the more relational and generative aspects of power (*potentia*). Before getting into the interplay of these seemingly incommensurable understandings of power it is useful to get a clearer understanding of what they are.

According to Braidotti (2006), power as conventionally understood – as the ability to control, or as “self-aggrandizement” (p. 176) - is referred to as *potestas*. She suggests we are mistaken to believe that it is synonymous with power in its entirety; it offers only a partial understanding of how power relations might unfold. *Potentia*, on the other hand is the generative, non-linear, and responsive notion of power. Whereas *potestas* limits freedoms – of self or other – and is thus understood in terms of lack, *potentia* is an ongoing dynamic, and manifests affirmatively.

Opening conceptualizations of power to include *potentia* helps to convey a more nuanced way of understanding power relations. Harkening back to the earlier discussion of the relationship between compassion and wellbeing, Braidotti (2006) insists that “the binary opposition of Self to society is too narrow to account for the complex workings of power in our culture” (p. 36). Instead, she sees *potentia* as the untapped aspects of power relations – those that are affirmative, creative, and connecting. Embracing *potentia* means acknowledging the “endless vitality of life” (p. 41) so that we can then engage with *this* power in a way that

constitutes alternative futures by transposing “negative into positive passions” (p. 88). As a reminder, this is “not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost and dispossessed” (p. 84). It is about generative possibilities, rather than ‘lack’.

In order to understand what Braidotti is opening up here, it is worth returning to the discussion in Chapter 15 about relating with/in the non-human world. In this chapter, fresh possibilities became visible when the interconnectedness among all beings (human or otherwise) was acknowledged. Braidotti (2006) takes this interconnectedness as a foundational condition for her ethic of sustainability (see Chapter 18). *Potentia* springs from this interconnectedness which is what - in a circular way - also contributes to the possibility of a more just world in which the sense of community is enlarged. This affirmative way of engaging in power relations is advocated by those approaches to social change presented in Chapter 19: initiatives such as Nonviolent Communication, Solidarity Group Practice, and Asset-Based Community Development.

Braidotti (2006) takes these notions a step further by also recognizing the importance of embodiment to our experiences of power relations. She insists that “methodologically, the return of the real body in its thick materiality” is required in order for this affirmative power to be effectively mobilized (p. 50). We cannot remain in the world of language and letters for such power to be activated. Instead, the vulnerability that comes with an awareness of our corporeal reality is required (see also Butler, 2004 who notes both our inherent vulnerability and its uneven distribution). Indeed, such vulnerability is always in play even within power relations as *potestas*, particularly for those on the losing end of such relational dynamics: “The difference

between the winners and the losers of the present economic world order is that winners only put their money on the line, while the losers risk their bodies” (Braidotti, 2006, p. 53). What *potentia* requires of us then is the humble acknowledgement that, in fact, *all* of our bodies are on the line already. When this truth is faced, the denial that has been driving current power relations can be released, and the opportunities that present themselves with embodied interconnectedness can be embraced, thus actualizing different potentials that have previously been stifled.

Change as a Question of Being

When investigating how change takes place (within the particular context of curriculum development) David Blades (1997) noticed something interesting: Even where alternatives were being actively sought and critical perspectives were embraced, there was an underlying assumption about change itself that remained un-critiqued. This was the belief that “change is essentially a technical problem to be solved” (p. 2). Because of the way power operates, it was very difficult even for those who sought curriculum change to step outside of dominant discourses in the pursuit of something new.

He explains that the technical stance being taken towards change “springs from the assumption that we act freely when proposing solutions to problems” (p. 2). This assumption ignores the fact that our actions and choices are constrained by larger discourses that inform what can and cannot be said, as well as how things can be said. These larger discourses are constituted by our actions and words, just as our actions and words are constituted by these discourses – making change a cyclical, not linear, process (see also Braidotti, 2006).

A technical stance towards change makes sense when power is understood as *potestas* alone. But once the generative and creative power (*potentia*) enters the picture - when the relational matrix in which we are embedded is considered (Gergen, 1998); when the entirety of a situation is brought into the fold rather than only the human actors (Clarke, 2005); and when subjects are no longer understood as static and unitary (Braidotti, 2006) – at that point a technical stance towards change seems naïvely simple at the very least, not to mention impossible to adequately put into play.

Blades (1997) observed that when curriculum change was approached as a technical matter of problem solving, the attempts to change the content of the curriculum were heavily informed by the larger discourses in which the existing curriculum was already embedded. This led to a frustrating process of returning to square one again and again, as it was impossible to step outside of these discourses; the curriculum change process simply contributed to the strengthening of the status quo. This is a telling example of how power relations play out: not at the hands of a particularly ‘powerful’ individual or institution, but as a relational process in which all players unwittingly contribute simply by engaging. But, as discussed in the previous section, perhaps by engaging *differently*, power relations may be altered. Importantly, this is not merely a matter of doing different things, but of *being* differently.

Blades’ (1997) observation that the reliance on technical understandings of change persisted, led him to believe that perhaps a different understanding of how change takes place might facilitate different ways of pursuing it. This might in turn alter the power relations that were in play and be more likely to bring about the different ways of engaging with curriculum that were being sought. His challenge then was to find ways of “somehow breaking free from

the enframing nature of well established, technological approaches to curriculum change” (p. 89). But breaking out of the very systems in which we are entrapped in the pursuit of new systems is clearly no simple task.

While traditional notions of power readily lead to blame, Blades (1997) notes that once power relations are understood in all their complexity,

... blame becomes pointless in the failure of change; there was no conscious conspiracy toward maintaining the status quo, no group or individual had power over the events that led to the demise of the original program and subsequent devolution of the new program towards an amalgam of what existed before. The events themselves were expressions of power. But from this realization springs the discomfoting thought that we are all trapped in a curriculum-discourse, destined to fail at change before we start by the technicality of our systems of thought and action. (p. 101)

The notion of *potentia* affirms this idea that blame is a misguided approach to problematic power relations, as it disperses the locus of power. While it eliminates blame as a worthwhile response, it opens up other possibilities, particularly when we recognize that “we humans are not apart from nature but instead are part of it” (Blades, 1997, p. 200). Whereas blame points to a need to change the ‘other’, *potentia* and nomadic subjectivity point to change as a collective process (Braidotti, 2006). Throughout the course of his research, Blades (1997) came to the position that “change is not, can never be, a question of technique. Change, true change that makes a difference in lives, must explore the *question of being*” (p. 195, emphasis in original). Although these words were written well over a decade ago, they continue to emerge in sometimes unlikely places – and (it seems to me) increasingly.

On July 17, 2011 I attended a public conversation with Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis. While they have both been very public with their concern over the status quo when it comes to social, economic, and environmental justice (see for example Klein, 2008 and Aljazeera, 2009), I experienced a different quality to their talk that day. They were speaking to us – about 500 people from Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast – about the urgency of responding to climate change, and about what is at stake if we choose not to respond. Rather than a ‘doom and gloom’ perspective, however, they presented their experience of this global predicament as an *opportunity*. Drawing from Foucault, Blades (1997) states that “where power is exercised, so too resistance can be found” (p. 218), and this seems to be precisely what Klein and Lewis were noticing – and drawing strength from - as well. The acts of resistance they have been tracking, when taken collectively, have been changing the course of events in concrete ways. They suggested that the biggest obstacle standing in the way of this change happening on an even larger, systemic level is not the heavy hand of a power coming from on high, but a ‘crisis of confidence’ – or in the language of Braidotti: the fact that we are yet to be convinced of the power of *potentia*.

As Blades (1997) observed: when a technical stance is assumed, the discourses we resist infiltrate our very acts of resistance, damning them to fail from the beginning. But if a critical posture is taken even towards our own actions and language, we may slowly nudge these meta-narratives in the direction of something else. As an example, during the Question and Answer period following the talk with Klein and Lewis, a motivated but concerned citizen asked them, “What can I do as one person?” As an audience member that day, I expected to hear the response that often follows this question: something that contains ideas about every small effort

helping, examples of how one person *has* made a difference, or metaphors of ripple effects. I expected to hear that because I could not think of what else they could say.

I admit to being pleasantly surprised at the response that was in fact given. Klein and Lewis told this person he was asking the wrong question. They said, definitively, we can do very little as individuals. But collectively, we can do quite a lot. They continued by providing examples not of technical approaches to change, but to ontological changes within communities: where priorities shift from making government do something to collectively enacting the type of community people wished their governments would create. They provided examples of initiatives like community radio stations, foodshare coops, and other collective and compassionate efforts that alter the community itself. This was not an effort to depoliticize change. On the contrary, I experienced it as an effort to raise critical awareness about *every* aspect of civic, social, and family life. When we recognize the political nature of all we do, we shift from trying to problem-solve our way to change to living it every step of the way (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1991).

Individualizing discourses have so penetrated our understandings of agency, power, and change that it is difficult to step outside of them – even when the very thing we wish to do is to step outside of them. My surprise at Klein and Lewis’s response was an important reminder for me that we are all deeply embedded in such discourses, and approaching change from entirely outside of them is not possible. It is possible, however, to practice engaging in new discourses, such as those that have been explored throughout these chapters. By doing so, instead of pursuing change, I might *participate in it* in a non-technical, but embodied way.

CHAPTER 21:

Child Welfare Policy and Child Protection Practices in British Columbia and Beyond

Nicholas Simons shared some examples of how he negotiated complicated social and political realities during his time doing child protection work on the Sechelt peninsula. He described some of the time intensive informal relationships that needed to be established in his community in order for the people most in need of support to genuinely feel supported. Here I would like to spend some time looking more closely at the context of child welfare in British Columbia, Canada, in order to better understand the dynamics in which child protection work (in particular) is enmeshed. I will begin by looking at child welfare policies more broadly speaking, in order to contextualize such practices. I will then extend my gaze even further to include the implications for children that spring from national and global economic policies. In the chapter that follows, I will focus on child protection practice in particular and consider how workers negotiate these and other power dynamics within their scopes of practice.

By taking child protection as a case in point, perhaps the concrete implications of the power dynamics explored in the previous chapter can be better understood. My hope is that setting the stage in this Chapter will provide some footing for an exploration in the next chapter of how change might take place in systems designed to support children and families. Attending to the micro- and macro-realities of this work might equip us to then consider how power as *potentia* can realistically contribute to positive change.

Child Welfare Policy in British Columbia: Philosophical Tensions

Brian Wharf (2007) identifies a number of conflicting philosophies and ideologies that exist within the scope of child welfare policy in British Columbia. He observes that there is not a clear, causal relationship between policies and practices, because – as we shall see – policy development itself is fraught with tensions that complicate matters when it comes to implementation.

First, Wharf (2007) suggests there remains a lack of clarity about the relationship between public and private issues, and the interventions needed to address them. Public issues include such issues as poverty, housing, and unemployment, and are seen to require intervention by the state, whereas private troubles are understood as things such as marital breakdown or mental health problems, and are seen to require individual intervention – with state intervention being a last resort. Despite a vast body of research pointing to the fact that the wellbeing of children is deeply intertwined with public issues, the wellbeing of children continues to be treated as a private matter. Positioning children’s wellbeing within the private realm leads to interventions that include individual case work, psychological diagnoses, and crisis management – reactive rather than preventative measures which also serve to individualize social problems due to their “blind[ness] to collective injury” (p. 2).

A second tension within child welfare policy in BC exists between the priority of supporting families and that of protecting children (Wharf, 2007). Although these need not be seen as mutually exclusive positions, Wharf draws our attention to the different assumptions that underlie each of these priorities, and the different practices these assumptions are likely to support. Those who suggest the purpose of child welfare is to support families are more likely to advocate universal programs and community development: They argue that health, education,

and social services should be available to all families, serving to level the playing field and nurture children and families preventatively, thus reducing the need for crisis intervention. Those who prioritize child protection, on the other hand, are likely to advocate targeted programs: They insist allocating resources to those in the greatest need is the responsibility of the state, and saving children from abuse or neglect should be a paramount priority. Although different political contexts foster different social priorities, Wharf (2007) notes that our current political climate is one in which ‘child-saving’ is certainly the favoured approach.

This emphasis on ‘child-saving’ is intricately connected to the third philosophical conflict worth noting, which is “the dominance of the Western/white view of the world” (Wharf, 2007, p. 3). This view includes the tendency towards residualism (the philosophical position that focuses on private troubles), and culturally specific assumptions about what appropriate care of children looks like. Ethnocentrism as it relates to ‘child-saving’ continues to play a role in child welfare policies, and can be particularly felt in Aboriginal communities (including the legacies of residential schools, the sixties scoop, and current high rates of institutionalization of Aboriginal children). An awareness of the devastating impact this has had and continues to have is developing, and efforts are being made for Aboriginal communities to establish control over child welfare services and “provide them in culturally appropriate ways” (p. 3).

A fourth philosophical conflict that plays out in child welfare policy is the seeming incompatibility of bureaucratic organization with innovative practices. As we will see shortly (and as was demonstrated by Blades in relation to curriculum change in the previous chapter), there has been widespread and long-term agreement that the child welfare system could benefit from innovative developments, but the system is designed in such a way that it seems to be

inherently resistant to change. Although many efforts have been made over the past several decades to restructure the child welfare system in BC, they have been met with limited success.

The tendency towards focusing attention on private troubles (individualizing practices), the emphasis on child protection (crisis response), the ethnocentric nature of the system, and the bureaucratic organization of services come together to narrow the wider goal of child welfare down to manifest largely as the more particular practice area of child protection. It is for these reasons that I will be taking a closer look at a child protection practice in particular. But first, what is it that has led to *conditions* in which child welfare policy in BC has become thus oriented?

Change is Hard; Not Changing Even Harder

The many contributors in Foster and Wharf's (2007) edited volume entitled *People, Politics, and Child Welfare in British Columbia* provide thorough and well-researched accounts of the various transitions child welfare has undergone in this province since the earlier 1900s. While it is beyond the scope of the current inquiry to outline all of these efforts towards systemic change in detail, I would like to take note of the dynamics and conditions that at times facilitated change and at other times restricted it, and attend to the kinds of changes to which these systems have been most responsive.

In this volume, Foster (2007) and others note that trends in child welfare practices – and in particular the number of children who find themselves ‘in care’ at a given time – are impacted by at least three (related) factors. Significantly, when Foster's chapter is taken in the context of the others in the book, it becomes evident that some of the most drastic systemic changes have taken place not when changes were *sought*, but as a result of unintended and unpredictable circumstances.

Changing demographics

Perhaps it goes without saying that the number of children in care will be impacted, in part, by the number of children in the province at a given time, as well as who those children are, demographically speaking. When the child population is controlled for, Foster (2007) observed that spikes in the institutionalization of children have historically occurred within certain groups at times when immigration and political contexts were particularly challenging for these groups. For instance, starting in 1948 there was an influx of Jewish children in care, and starting in 1956 an influx of Hungarian children in care. Both of these groups of children ended up in care in Canada largely due to political strife in their home countries. Starting in 1955 there was an increase in the number of institutionalized Doukhobor children, as it was at that time the Canadian government removed them from the homes of families whose parents refused to enroll them in public school.

In addition, the child welfare system has always had, and still has, a disproportionately high representation of Aboriginal children in care. According to Callahan and Walmsley (2007), “child welfare for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children developed in two separate worlds” (p. 28). There was an underlying bias which favoured the development of “more humane and family-based services” for non-Aboriginal children in the early years of the development of the system, while Aboriginal children continued to be institutionalized at alarming rates (p. 29). It is necessary to be cautious when interpreting ‘data’, so as not to misinterpret the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care as simply reflecting greater needs within that particular demographic group. The systemic institutionalization of Aboriginal children via residential schools has been formally acknowledged as a means of “erasing Aboriginal identity

by separating generations of children from their families, suppressing their Aboriginal languages, and re-socializing them according to the norms of non-Aboriginal society” (p. 18). That said, the systemic nature of the oppressive conditions that contributed to what is now known as ‘the 60s scoop’ have been less directly acknowledged (see Foster, 2007).

There were rapid increases in the rates and numbers of children in care in the 1990s, and there was a significant decline in the number of children taken into care in BC in the decade that followed (Foster, 2007). Demographic information alone cannot account for these shifts, nor for those noted above. Perhaps taking a look at changes in financial policies at these times can shed further light on these trends.

Changing financial policies

Neoliberal economic developments were addressed in greater detail in Chapter 11 and will be revisited shortly. For the current purposes, however, it is worth noting that financial and political priorities have very real effects on the state of child welfare in British Columbia, but that these have not always played out as one might expect. Without going into a complete history of the child welfare system, perhaps focusing in on a particular period of transition can serve to illustrate the relationship between financial policies and child welfare.

Scarth and Sullivan (2007) track the changes that took place in BC’s child welfare system in the 1980s, in part as they relate to economic shifts in the province. Beginning in 1983, programs were significantly reorganized and cut in response to a major budget deficit. The Ministry at the time – the Ministry of Human Resources – drastically reduced full-time staff and eliminated several programs such as child abuse teams and family support workers. These cuts

particularly impacted children who were already at risk, and critics at the time became concerned that these tactics would lead to an increase in the number of children in care in the province.

To the surprise of many, the number of children in care continued to decline throughout the 1980s. While this might be seen as a sign that perhaps the needs of children were being met, this trend must also be interpreted in context. At that time, there was a significant economic downturn which was impacting families on a personal level as well. One explanation put forth by Scarth and Sullivan (2007) for the continued decrease of the number of children in care at that time was that due to economic constraints, families that might have split up chose to stay intact, for the immediate term at least. (They note that single female-led households are among those most likely to experience their children being apprehended). Whatever the reasons – and surely they were multiple – the fact that children were not taken into care at increasing rates did not mean all was necessarily well.

In fact, taken in the context of the rest of the country, British Columbia had a relatively high rate of children being taken into care even during those years, and children in care in BC were more likely to spend more years of their lives in care. Scarth and Sullivan (2007) note that these trends were likely related to the fact that, compared to other provinces, the British Columbian government spent less money on each child living in care.

In the latter half of the decade, community-based non-profit agencies began to fill the void left by the cut government services, as research was indicating the efficacy of providing social services for vulnerable families (Scarth & Sullivan, 2007). Thus, the province began to see shifts from centralized to decentralized services, which eventually moved back in the direction of centralization when concern grew that workers were becoming less able to respond

promptly to child protection concerns. This change brings with it, of course, other concerns about workers' ability to exercise discretion, as described earlier by Nicholas Simons.

What this cursory look at the 1980s indicates is that, while they are anything but predictable, economic realities do have concrete implications for how child welfare is implemented. It also underscores the possibility that, although it might be expected that policy changes occur in relation to research and evidence around 'best practices', there are other factors at play in determining which policy changes are embraced, which are not, and when certain changes might be more likely to occur within child welfare systems.

Changing child welfare policies

As mentioned earlier, over the decades there have been a great many attempts to reform child welfare services in British Columbia so as to better serve children and families. In addition to the conflicting philosophies outlined above, there is perhaps an even more significant tension that impacts changes in child welfare policies: the tension between prevention (which is generally a proactive, population-level intervention) and crisis response (which is reactive and largely individual-focused). It is arguably in relation to this tension that power dynamics can most viscerally be felt, and it is most certainly also connected to the above theme of changing financial policies. An example drawn by many of the authors in the volume by Foster and Wharf (2007) is that of "the death of a child, the subsequent public inquiry, and the resulting government response" (p. 62). This series of events more often than not leads to "increased public scrutiny of the child welfare system, making workers more risk-averse and ending with more children entering care" (Foster, 2007, p. 62).

A particularly telling example can be drawn from the time following the shifts in the 1980s, noted above. Joan Smallwood was appointed Minister within the Ministry of Social Services in 1991, which at that time was unaffectionately referred to in the media as the “Ministry of Misery” (Hern & Cossom, 2007, p. 118). Since she had publically criticized Social Services prior to her appointment, the expectation placed on her (by others and herself) was that she would make meaningful changes to the child welfare system, thus improving the lot for children and families.

Although she had ideas of her own, in order to ensure due diligence was done Minister Smallwood underwent a protracted community consultation process in order to “bring about a new practice vision” and find realistic ways to bring it to life (p. 123). The process successfully contributed to the development of a series of recommendations based on two panels in 1992 (*Making Changes* and *Liberating our Children, Liberating our Nations*), which moved the philosophical pendulum from an emphasis on protecting children to an emphasis on prevention and support for families. However, the transition was short-lived and the concrete recommendations, as well as the ideological shift to family support, were relegated to the shadows for reasons entirely outside of the intended transition process.

There were, of course, multiple factors at play, but by far the most significant in shifting the priorities of the Ministry of Social Services was the untimely death of a young boy, Matthew Vaudreuil (Callahan & Swift, 2007). While the recommendations compiled by Minister Smallwood addressed such preventative measures as eliminating poverty (as an example) in addition to individual-focused interventions, Justice Gove’s 1995 recommendations after the review of five-year-old Matthew Vaudreuil’s death insisted that “the safety of the individual

child [be] the paramount concern of child welfare” and this suggestion was almost immediately implemented (Callahan & Swift, 2007, p. 163). While of course concern for a child’s safety *is* of paramount concern, this led to individualized interventions (such as risk assessments) which served not only to overlook important systemic inequities and the role of poverty in conditions of abuse and neglect, but actually – in effect – increased the number of individual children identified as ‘at risk’, thereby even defeating its own mandate of freeing individual children from abuse and neglect. Moreover, limited resources were drawn from other community and family supports in order to uphold these interventions of child protection (Callahan & Swift, 2007). It also pitted the needs of children against the needs of families, creating an adversarial role for child protection workers, rather than a relational one. This example underscores my overall interest in exploring *alternatives* to the individualization of struggles and support, as it demonstrates how highly individualized approaches may move us farther from just conditions and practices.

Furthermore, Armitage and Murray (2007) suggest that the Gove Inquiry “like other death reviews (and despite its own attempts to defy the trend), led to a reassertion of the traditional ‘child saving’ role at the expense of other broader and more structural family and child service objectives” (p. 154). Very few of the recommendations Smallwood’s panels had delivered were acted on in a concrete way, and “despite their range and depth of important content .. [t]he cabinet had no political choice but to incorporate many of the Gove Report recommendations into new policy and legislation” (Hern & Cossom, 2007, p. 137). Thus, changes in child welfare policies are not always entirely deliberate but can be reactive responses to realities that lie somewhat outside the scope of policy development. This provides an example of power, as understood by Foucault (1972; 1980).

Changing global priorities regarding poverty alleviation

Although not addressed by the authors in Foster and Wharf's (2007) volume, I believe it would be remiss not to address here the global trends in relation to poverty alleviation, how they are influenced by the neoliberal priority of economic growth, and how they influence child welfare practice and policy locally and abroad. Taking a look at poverty alleviation policies in the context of larger economic trends can illuminate the relationship between intervention and politics.

As I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (see Newbury, 2011f), 'economic growth' has somehow made its way into the mandates of CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency), and its Australian and American counterparts (AusAID and USAID respectively). In other words, these organizations take economic growth as a core strategy in their efforts towards poverty alleviation in other countries (AusAID, 2012; Canadian International Development Agency, 2012; USAID, 2012). Given the discourses commonly employed around fiscal matters, this may seem to be a logical approach, but given existing research around the connection between economic growth and increasing gaps between rich and poor, this relatively new development is alarming indeed.

Albanese (2010), for instance, observes that since our 1989 commitment to eliminating child poverty in Canada, we have actually seen an increase in it. And in British Columbia, the province which has experienced the greatest economic growth, child poverty rates have increased the most. In fact, all over the world, Albanese observes similar trends: in times and places when economic growth increases, so too does child poverty. And yet we continue to pursue the former as a means to avoid the latter.

She is careful not to simplify the complex issue of poverty, and highlights a number of important dimensions such as gender, family, geography, age, community, and more. But, just as Butler (2004) cautioned earlier, even while focusing on these more intimate aspects of the experience, it is important to maintain a commitment to attend to broader dynamics, lest we “forget the wider social, political (public policy), and economic factors that help to create and maintain the low-income status quo” (Albanese, 2010, p. 56). To resist this tendency, Albanese tracks the ideological shift towards neoliberalism in Canada and its relationship to these economic priorities and child poverty. Ismael (2006), who engages in a similar analysis, also comes to the conclusion that the current ethic of liberal individualism is connected to extreme market capitalism and the growing gap between rich and poor. Currently child welfare policies and practices in Canada such as those described above (Foster & Wharf, 2007), can be seen as intricately connected to these ideological shifts.

But by insisting on contextualizing our practices among larger global political realities, Albanese (2010) clearly demonstrates that there *are* other alternatives at play, and local realities do not comprise the only possibility. In particular, she points to countries which are less ideologically driven by neoliberal priorities and embrace policies that do not “reflect the perspective that a main cause of poverty is the individual and his or her personal choices and actions” (p. 103). For instance, even though the European Union and Canada spend approximately the same amount of money on social services, the way they distribute resources differ greatly. Canadian programs are increasingly targeted at ‘high-risk’ individuals and families, whereas countries in which poverty rates are lower are more likely to provide universal supports. According to Albanese (2010), social democratic regimes in Western Europe are more likely to

support programs promoting the material, educational, emotional, and physical well-being of all its citizens – to prevent poverty ... This is done through the implementation of generous parental or maternity leaves, paid health and family related leaves, employment supports, accessible child care programs, national housing strategies, etc. (p. 104-105)

This is quite a contrast to Canadian programs (with Quebec being an exception), which are increasingly targeted in their approach and often require that people are truly in dire straits before support can be offered (and sustained support is often contingent on their ongoing ‘need’ of intervention). This individualized approach to support keeps people trapped in a state of dependency, leaving little room for proactive decisions on either an individual or policy level.

Due to existing power dynamics, changes in practice and policy are unlikely to be successful unless understood as both comprising and comprised of social conditions, which means such shifts cannot be pursued in isolation. But first, it is necessary to explore what clients and practitioners are currently facing in our existing systems of child protection.

CHAPTER 22:

Practice with Children, Youth, and Families: Power as *Potentia*

Lest we get too caught up in the abstract nature of policy development, the death of Matthew Vaudreuil (noted in the previous chapter) serves as an important reminder that indeed, child welfare policies and practices exist because there are real children and families – and practitioners – trying to get by in these muddled circumstances. Keeping the larger contexts of policy and politics in mind, I would now like to step towards the ‘on the ground’ reality of practice with children, youth, and families. I will begin by taking a closer look at child protection practice in British Columbia in particular. By considering how workers negotiate the complex demographic, economic, political and other realities (addressed in the previous chapter) as they strive to a) protect children, b) support families, or c) manage both amidst competing demands, the power dynamics in which they are enmeshed may be better understood. With an intentional foregrounding of power as *potentia*, I will then draw from scholars, researchers, activists, and practitioners who see social justice as a central (but often missing) feature of ethical practice with children, youth, and families. I will conclude this chapter by presenting some hopeful and pragmatic possibilities that emerge from their work (which takes place in diverse fields of practice).

Child Protection Practice in British Columbia

Child protection in BC falls within the mandate of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), and is governed by the dictates of the *Child, Family, and Community Services Act* (Bennett et al, 2009; Patten, 2009). The two most common reasons for children to be apprehended from families are an inability or unwillingness for parents to care for their

children (47%) and neglect (25%) (Bennett et al, 2009). While tools for assessing the need for apprehension exist, it has been noted that for practitioners,

deciding what belongs in the category of ‘child neglect’ is often one of the most challenging tasks facing child welfare practitioners. This is due in part to the fact that it relies so heavily on making interpretations and value-laden judgments within highly ambiguous and contested contexts – all while attending to issues of identity, diversity, relations of power and local cultural and social norms. (White & Hoskins, 2011, p. 175, emphasis added)

In his Master’s thesis, Patten (2009) describes child protection as a culture of negotiation. He acknowledges the significance of the financial and political transitions that have occurred within child welfare as having an impact on how practitioners respond in particular situations, but also suggests that the “interactive, social context is often omitted in portrayals of child protection and incorporating more of this context will produce a more accurate understanding of the work” (p. 6). Recognizing practitioners as situated, embodied beings (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 15), Patten observes that “workers draw from multiple sources of knowledge, some of which is learned through formal training, some is generated through practice experience, and some is grounded in personal history” (p. 12).

Unfortunately, existing inequities are part of this context of negotiation, and as noted in a report on child protection practice in BC (entitled *Hands Tied*), Aboriginal children experience the effects of this uncertain practice more than others in British Columbia. The report, published by *Pivot* (a Vancouver-based legal aid society), states:

While Aboriginal children are 3.7 times more likely to have a protection concern reported than a non-Aboriginal child, that concern is 4.7 times more likely to be investigated and the child is 6.0 times more likely to be admitted into care. Once admitted into care, Aboriginal children are less likely to be returned to their families resulting in Aboriginal children being 9.8 times more likely to be in care than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. (Bennett et al, 2009, p. 5)

The report also states that, at the time of writing, half of the children ‘in care’ in the province were Aboriginal (Bennett et al, 2009). While this may be enough cause for concern, we are cautioned that even the slightly higher rate of ‘protection concern’ among Aboriginal families as compared to non-Aboriginal families (noted above by *Pivot*), must also be critically considered. According to de Finney et al (2011):

... leading national studies in child welfare have found that Indigenous families do *not* have higher rates of physical and sexual abuse than other families ... Rather, the majority of Indigenous children are taken into care under the “neglect” category – a category that is particularly difficult to assess and that involves more chance of bias than the assessment of abuse. Further, neglect is inextricably tied to poverty because it relates to issues such as frequent moves and the lack of a suitable bedroom, supervision when parents are working multiple jobs, safe housing and adequate clothing and food, and consistency. The fact that these are some of the leading indicators of neglect in Indigenous families points to ongoing practices of social injustice where racialization and systemic inequities are conflated with contemporary middle-class conceptualizations of abuse and neglect. (p. 370, emphasis in original)

The relational processes of discernment and negotiation noted by Patten (2009) are part of the reality child protection workers face when operating within uncertain conditions. As he observes, “child protection is a *human* service, and humans do not always act in reliable or predictable ways: Life happens, and in the child protection world workers must respond to this fluid state” (p. 52). But what contributes to responses being collectively weighted in certain directions (ie. the over-representation of Aboriginal children in residential care) and not others?

Practitioners face competing and increasing demands in times of so-called limited resources (Bennett et al, 2009). An often overlooked but important feature of these demands is that they are value-laden. White and Hoskins (2011) draw attention to the fact that although the child protection workers they interviewed for their study are committed to the anti-oppressive and other principles that underlie their practice, they also draw on “shared resources” – which include, for example, current socio-legal and/or bio-medical understandings of child welfare. But deFinney and colleagues (2011) remind their readers that our shared resources also include biases, judgements, misrepresented histories, and oppressive assumptions and practices which – if not critically engaged with – can inform practice with dire consequences.

White and Hoskins (2011) employ the metaphor of ‘walking the tightrope’ to convey the tension that exists when workers attempt to “walk the line between received meanings of neglect and [their] actual encounters in practice.” Patten (2009) submits that one of the means by which workers negotiate this tension is through narrative measures (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 14). He says,

[W]orkers smooth out the rough edges of a client’s narrative until, in a simplified form, the client’s life fits into an organizational framework seeking to exert authoritative control

over clients. This institutional reality of child protection is the legislation, policies, and directives that give workers their mandate to intervene in clients' lives. (p. 15)

The implications of this extend not only to how practitioners negotiate these contexts, but how clients do so as well. Patten (2009) suggests that “through practical child protection activities clients also begin to see their lives through the terms of this same institutional reality” (p. 15). White and Hoskins (2012) note other similar linguistic and narrative measures that are taken by practitioners, in order to reduce the dissonance between their institutional mandate and their practical experience. Using psychological labels and appealing to bureaucratic processes are two such examples.

But doing so is not without consequence. Through such means, the dynamic nature of power relations begins to make itself apparent. Drawing from research interviews with child protection workers who have left their jobs, *Pivot* reports these workers expressed “dismay about a feeling that they were not able to do the type of preventive and supportive work that they thought they were signing up for when they were hired by the MCFD” (Bennett et al, 2009, p. 8), which is cited as one of the main reasons for high rates of burnout and turnover within such practices. This in turn has negative implications for clients, for whom relationships with workers is an important part of their experiences of service.

Patten (2009) notes that while the educational preparation experienced by the child protection workers he interviewed centred around “legislation, policy, practice standards, and ideological approaches to practice,” they did not have the “cultural repertoire” required to do their jobs effectively (p. 125). White and Hoskins (in press) share this concern, noting that the socio-legal and bureaucratic discourses from which many of their participants draw “are

characterized by increased procedural regulation and legal accountability and decreased professional discretion.” The potentially dire consequences of strict adherence to protocol are pointed out in a recent piece of writing by Gharabaghi (2011). In order to fill in the spaces that exist between their practice experience and their bureaucratic mandates, workers do what they can to make meaning from the world around them. But without adequate preparation or a professional context that nurtures the ability to discern in practice situations, they can unwittingly replicate the very power dynamics they are striving to support their clients to work against (Bennett et al, 2009).

Power as *Potentia*

What is suggested by Braidotti (2006), Blades (1997), and many of the other thinkers from whom I have drawn so far is that we must substantially alter how we *conceptualize* power relations in order to better understand how they might in turn be substantially altered in practice. In the previous chapter it was noted that there have been a series of failed attempts at meaningful transformation within (what is now called) the Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Columbia. Although some hopeful possibilities hinted at shifting from a technical-rational approach to change, for the most part these attempts addressed one dimension of power (power as *potestas*), but overlooked the transformative potential of power as *potentia*. Broadly speaking, attempts at systemic change to date have been pursued from within what Braidotti (2006) describes as “[a] hierarchical fantasy of vertical perfectibility.” She says, “the technologically mediated quest for immortality and for disciplined and acquiescent subjects, has gained widespread currency” (p. 3). Even when those changes have been pursued by way of relational, democratic, and respectful means, underlying the efforts has been what looks like a

desire to ‘this time, get it right’. In other words, relational, dynamic processes have been used *as techniques*. This not only undermines the integrity of these processes (Gharabaghi, 2008), but it undermines the entire effort towards transformation by using these approaches strategically *within the existing system*, rather than taking them up as fruitful processes by which new ways of relating can be collectively, relationally, and dynamically co-constructed.

But inviting this additional dimension of power into serious consideration is difficult. For instance, despite the attention Patten (2009) dedicates to the nuanced aspects of negotiation within child protection work, and despite the fact that he acknowledges there is more at play in decision-making than intention alone, when it comes to seeking alternatives he too relies on improving techniques. He says, “the problem of curing child mistreatment is technological, not ideological” (p. 3). Our shared resources (White & Hoskins, in press) seem to be limiting our imaginations when it comes to the workings of power, allowing us only to see *potestas*. I am in no way arguing that this is an inaccurate understanding of power, only that it is incomplete (Grondlin, 2011, evoking Foucault). I submit that technological and ideological approaches are not all that are available to us. Once power as *potentia* is invited into our repertoire of shared meanings, then additional possibilities present themselves (which are both promising and challenging).

Although I have been insisting that change within one system is very difficult to enact without the larger systems within which it exists also changing, this is not to say that one must precede the other. In fact, an important component of the affirmative, generative aspect of power is the fact that it is non-unitary, meaning it cannot be thought of in a singular sense. Thus, the change that happens in one location must (indeed, it will) impact the larger conditions in which it

occurs, but at the same time the nature of such change will also be informed by existing conditions.

Our mistake, by focusing only on *potestas*, is in believing in a ‘zero-sum’ conceptualization of power, the implication of which is the belief that “there exists a finite or limited amount of power in society for which individuals and groups compete” (Pon, Gosine, & Phillips, 2011, p. 396). This leads us to believe lines must be drawn around a small enough area of influence for power to be felt. Drawing lines (around areas of expertise, of practice, or of consideration) and narrowing our gaze, we limit the possibilities of power to do its generative work. By silo-ing ourselves off into specialized areas of practice, believing we need to identify and regulate our areas of expertise lest we somehow ‘lose power’, we are – in effect – missing opportunities to engage differently by fragmenting ourselves and removing possible avenues for connection. If, instead, we *allowed for* the possibility that power operates in multiple and dynamic ways, we might better engage in systemic transformations. There *is* vulnerability that comes with acknowledging our interconnection, but such vulnerability is not a weakness (Butler, 2004). As Caputo (1993) poetically conveys, there is immense power in powerlessness (in the sense of *potentia*, that is). In order to access this, we need to recognize the complexity of the power relations in which our lives are enmeshed. Caputo (2000) says,

Power implies freedom, since without freedom power is just constraint or force. Power and freedom belong together ... in an ongoing struggle ... If power is cunning or pervasive enough, it will coopt freedom; if freedom is resistant and persistent enough, it will cause power to tremble ... A society is essentially a network of power relations that are more minute than its larger institutional structures. (p. 32)

Institutional structures are comprised of minute relations, just as relations are informed in part by institutions. But we would be mistaken to believe that institutional change will substantially alter power relations in and of itself, or that changes in daily behaviour are all that is required. As previously stated, this is not about a technological fix, on whatever level. Caputo (2000), who suggests there is great power in letting go of the quest for power (as something to possess), urges us to recognize: “the secret is, there is no Secret” (p. 40).

Appreciating the power of powerlessness requires that we allow for this possibility, and then consider how we might proceed from there. If there is no ‘right way’, what do I do ‘in the meantime’? Such an approach requires that we attend more closely to the dynamics in which we are enmeshed *at whatever level*, and respond to them in their particularity, as situated manifestations. Returning to the earlier notion of situatedness, power as *potentia* allows for decision-making and action in the midst of uncertainty. Rather than having to chart out territory, identify professional boundaries, and manage risk by eliminating that which is unpredictable, *potentia* insists that amidst fluid power relations these are impossible tasks. Instead, this aspect of power invites us to step in with both eyes open and with a curious mind in order to make decisions based on what confronts us, not based on our expectations of what will or what should unfold. And importantly, it allows us to intentionally alter what practice looks like, thereby debunking “the myth that front line workers are powerless to generate broader forms of social change” (deFinney et al, 2011, p. 377). The distinct line between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ systems vanishes, as we begin to recognize all actions as relevant at every level (Newbury, 2011a). This also means that practitioners who feel ill-equipped to intervene on a socio-political level may find fresh opportunities for engagement within and outside of their practice, or may recognize that they are doing so already.

While this may sound haphazard, it is not. In terms of the child protection workers to whom Patten (2009) referred, perhaps if they had the skills and the confidence to embrace this creative approach to practice they might avoid the narrative and discursive pitfalls addressed earlier, which have the concrete effects of systematically privileging certain groups of children and families over others. And in terms of the policy transformations to which Foster (2007) referred, perhaps this generative and responsive approach might mean more success in implementing *intentional* system changes (such as those pursued by Smallwood), and less vulnerability to those *reactive* changes discussed previously (such as those implemented following Matthew Vaudreuil's death, or those that take place when economic conditions change). Inviting *potentia* into the conversation and nurturing it as a legitimate shared resource might allow practitioners, policy makers, and families to respond in line with the complexities they are facing, instead of with idealized notions of what might be 'manageable'. Drawing from Caputo (2000) once again, "[t]he idea is to liberate us not only from the state, but from the sort of individualization that the state produces" (p. 32). That is, understanding our work as highly contingent and related to other social, political, and material realities might enable us to work in a more deliberate and responsive way.

Power Relations, Social Justice, and Child Welfare: Possibilities Abound

In recent years, the topic of social justice has been finding space at the forefront of professional discussions within child protection and other practices aimed at supporting children, youth, and families. It would appear that the practitioners interviewed by *Pivot* (Bennett et al, 2009), Patten (2009), and White and Hoskins (in press) are not alone in their experiences of incongruity between their intentions and their actions within systems that continue to uphold

existing inequities. Discussions on the online CYC-Net forum have repeatedly returned to the topic of social justice and an entire special issue of the *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies* (Volume 2, Issue Number 3/4, 2011) has been dedicated to social justice as it relates to research, teaching, and practice.

It should be acknowledged that there are practitioners who do not welcome the recurrence of this theme, stating in online forums that it has already been sufficiently addressed or that an emphasis on critical engagement detracts from their ability to respond (see also deFinney et al, 2011). Those who interpret power relations as fluid, however, emphasize the importance of ongoing critical reflection in the pursuit of justice (see for example Caputo 1997, hooks, 2009, Sen, 2009). Indeed, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10, Caputo (2000) underscores the danger in assuming a just state has been reached. With such a belief comes complacency, with which any gains in the direction of justice risk being lost.

The concepts of *potentia*, the power of powerlessness, and power relations (discussed previously) lead me towards these emerging dialogues about social justice as it relates to the welfare of children, youth, and families. My sense is that these conversations move away from negative, static, or possessive notions of power which permeate dominant discourses, and in so doing open doors to possibility. I will conclude this chapter, then, by sharing the implications for practice I see emerging through these discussions, by drawing from the perspectives shared in the social justice-themed special issue of *The International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies*, and other sources. The possibilities which follow are explicitly linked to affirmative, non-unitary, and dynamic notions of power. My intention in turning to them is to demonstrate

how this shift in perspective can bring forth a multitude of possibilities where previously the focus was more readily placed on limitations.

Before I proceed, I would like to provide two small caveats: First, these possibilities may read somewhat abstractly. That is because the potential that resides within power relations (when power is understood as dispersed rather than unitary) comes about with *collective ontological changes*, not autocratic technical adjustments (Blades, 1997). Second, some of these possibilities may be seen as contradictory. Since this is not an ordered list of recommendations, but rather an emergent presentation of possibilities, such contradictions can be both expected and invited. Contradictions are an inherent part of the complex realities with which these possibilities strive to engage (Pon, Gosine, & Phillips, 2011). This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but simply aims to demonstrate that when a situation is creatively engaged with and power is understood as dynamic, there may be no limit to the potential directions that can be pursued in response.

Moving beyond disciplinary boundaries

Moore (2011) defines social justice as “the act of raising awareness of injustice, and taking action to address inequities with the aim of creating a world with less suffering” (p. 354). She insists that reaching across disciplinary boundaries is an important strategy for doing that. Inter-, multi-, or trans-disciplinary approaches to knowledge construction can enable us to avoid parochialism and consider productive paths outside of what might otherwise be considered. She suggests that when professionals charged with the care of children and youth “hold tight to disciplinary knowledge” their clients are “more likely to ‘fall through the cracks’ of service

delivery”, but collaboration and knowledge exchange on the other hand contribute to social justice (p. 356).

Sen (2009), a Nobel Prize winning economist and philosopher also emphasizes the importance of transcending “the limitations of our positional perspectives” (p. 155). He says, “[L]iberation from positional sequestering may not always be easy, but it is a challenge that ethical, political and legal thinking has to take on board” (p. 155). Importantly, this should not be confused with believing we can ever assume a completely detached (or omniscient) position. Rather, it is about seeking the perspectives of those who occupy other positions in order to help develop a more (albeit never fully) complete picture of the nuances of a situation. Sen (2009) reminds us that since we can never occupy all positions drawing from the knowledge of others is crucial if we wish for our knowledge and practices to move beyond existing boundaries. There is value in widening one’s gaze to include multiple areas of concern in relation to children and families in order to contextualize them aside one another, to see possibilities for knowledge exchange, and to learn from what others are doing.

Embracing the political dimensions of practice

Once the commonalities that exist across disciplines begin to be recognized, then the political dimension of whatever practices we are each immersed in becomes more apparent (Reynolds, 2010). deFinney and colleagues (2011) encourage practitioners not only to bring social justice into all the work they do, but to also move beyond “individualized justice-doing” (p. 377) and recognize their potential for contributing to positive social change on a broader scale. The particular context of residential care, because it has a history steeped in colonial practices and ideologies, is one which these activist-scholars identify as being suitable for

“radical advocacy and social change” (p. 361). They encourage practitioners and clients in such settings to actively resist the concern that “critical analysis detracts from practice” (p. 363). Instead they remind readers (who work in a variety of contexts) that if we do not critically reflect on practice we run the very real risk of reasserting “the dominance of Euro-Western psychological norms and inevitably reproduce[ing] processes of minoritization that are so harmful to the communities we work with” (p. 363). Moreover, they contend that allowing the political nature of work with children and youth to be incorporated into practice enriches it by enlarging notions of what it means to move in the direction of justice.

Ajandi (2011) also advocates attending to the political nature of work. In her research with single mothers who attend university, she notes the fact that her participants could not (and did not wish to) separate their experiences as mothers on the one hand from their experiences as students on the other. Acknowledging their multiple positions politicized their experiences in meaningful ways. In fact, for many of them it was the birth of their child that led them back to university in order to resist dominant discourses about the meaning of single motherhood for women and for their children. This perspective is useful when working with others as well – including fathers. Politicizing experiences can lead to us to seek and activate the opportunities for resistance that exist in troubling or unjust circumstances, rather than simply learning to cope with them (Wade, 2007). In this sense, it can be argued that politicizing work with children and families is an important part of the process of cultivating more just systems of support.

Naming injustices

An important strategy when it comes to politicizing the work that takes place within human service practices of any kind is that of naming injustices. Too often “the link between

social inequities and lived experiences of children and youth in care” (deFinney et al, 2011), for example, is concealed. While it is sometimes argued that oppression, discrimination, and colonialism are too complex to address directly with children and youth, the young people interviewed by deFinney and colleagues (2011) assert that naming these processes validates their realities, with which they are already all too familiar through experience. Naming injustices confronts unjust circumstances, making it an important tool in the pursuit of justice.

Pon, Gosine, and Phillips (2011) believe that in order to effectively address the anti-black and anti-native racism in our systems of child welfare, white supremacy in particular must be named and confronted. From their perspective, “the nation’s exalted subject is inseparable from the welfare state” (p. 402) and deFinney and colleagues (2011) note that child welfare is intimately tied to the colonial project. Leonardo (2004), who studies critical social thought in education, agrees that the discourse of ‘white privilege’ is not adequate for addressing systemic racism, as it does not acknowledge the active means by which such privilege is bestowed upon some and not others. Understanding inequities as more than ‘privilege’, but the effects of particular ways of engaging, we are then encouraged to re-examine those practices that produce and reproduce inequitable conditions (Pon et al, 2011).

Recognizing our own complicity

Recognizing the ways in which we are complicit in the propagation of injustices is not about pointing fingers at individuals. It is about understanding that our inherited knowledges and practices are not benign, and they come from particular histories and traditions with particular implications. deFinney and colleagues (2011) point out, for example, that “the residential care sector sustains an entire industry of programs and policies designed to help

colonized populations cope with colonialism, rather than challenging its very premise” (p. 372). If we continue to apply inherited Euro-western knowledges, relying on such individualized practices as diagnosis, we will continue to perpetrate this injustice.

An important tool to help us individually and collectively move in more just directions is the incorporation of reflexivity in practice, research, and citizenship (deFinney, et al, 2011; Grondlin, 2011; Madan, 2011; and Pon et al, 2011). Madan (2011) demonstrates how doing so enabled her to recognize the “potential for injury” that existed in some of her practices working with a particular woman who moved to Canada from Rwanda as a refugee (p. 432). Deeply reflecting on their time together provoked consideration of alternative ways of engaging which may have been more productive and less harmful. Grondlin (2011) similarly demonstrates the value reflexivity plays in practice by questioning the role diagnosis plays in the lives of those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. Reflexivity, these authors assert, is not peripheral to practice, but a central feature of ethical practice for which justice is a priority.

Including personal narratives in one’s research or practice is another way to reflexively engage with presuppositions and their implications. Grondlin (2011) for instance demonstrates how thoughtful inclusion of personal narratives can prevent dogmatism and heighten reflexivity, thereby enabling practitioners to be more responsive to that which is unexpected in their practice. Ajandi (2011) suggests that doing so can challenge notions of expert positioning and objective knowledge. By intentionally muddying the lines that divide us (researcher/subject or practitioner/client) by reflecting on personal narratives, practices which pathologize and marginalize certain individuals or populations will become less tolerable.

Speaking about the pursuit of justice in more general terms, political philosopher Amartya Sen (2009) reminds us that “to prevent catastrophes caused by human negligence or callous obduracy, we need critical scrutiny, not just goodwill towards others” (p. 48).

Seeking counter-narratives

Another way to disrupt dominant narratives is seeking counter-narratives. In her study with single mothers Ajandi (2011) noted that although the women she interviewed certainly faced hardships, this was an incomplete representation of their experiences. In addition to their difficulties managing time and money, for instance, many of them experienced a welcome sense of freedom and autonomy when it came to child-rearing, several of them were finally free of abusive partners, and some of them cherished the opportunity to explore new sexual identities. Single parenthood for them was something they had actively chosen, and they appreciated the gifts that came with the experience. Intentionally shining light on these counter-narratives is an important practice for practitioners who wish to affirm and cultivate alternatives that may not currently be represented in dominant discourses (in this case about what motherhood looks like).

Grondlin (2011) also sees value in intentionally nurturing counter-narratives. In his case, he notes the totalizing effects of diagnosis. He observes that exploring counter-narratives with people (including himself) who find their identities entrenched in diagnostic categories can facilitate a way of understanding past events through another lens besides pathology. Excavating storied resistance can de-sediment totalizing discourses and enable previously unappreciated strengths to emerge. He is cautious, however, to avoid cultivating a new totalizing discourses – one in which diagnosis serves only negative functions. Through his own reflexive practice, Grondlin notes that his experience with diagnosis was multi-faceted, and while on the one hand

the label of PTSD provided him with some relief as it validated his struggles, on the other hand it “explained away those elements of myself that I was proud of, the strengths I believed I could fall back on” (p. 466). Thus, counter-narratives are not to be thought of as complete, preferred alternatives, but rather as additional dimensions within the complex unfolding narrative of one’s experience.

This active practice of fostering a counter-narrative can have profound impacts not only on how children are perceived socially, but on their ability to be meaningfully included in decisions about the services that directly impact their lives (Mitchell, 2011). The connection between the cultivation of counter-narratives, social justice, power relations, and child welfare in particular is evidenced in Mitchell’s insistence on inviting youth voices into public health policy discussions.

Identifying strengths

Oftentimes, the counter-narratives that are intentionally excavated are those that focus on strengths (Ajandi, 2011; deFinney et al, 2011; Mitchell, 2011). This is largely because dominant discourses within human service professions focus heavily on the identification and eradication of deficits within individuals (see also McKnight, 1995). Identifying strengths, then, can be seen as useful both as a means of resistance and as a way to incorporate more dimensions of lived experience into consideration (Ajandi, 2011). A strength-based perspective does not gloss over hardships, but provides a more thorough account of what is happening. In doing so, it provides opportunities for positive change, and legitimates ‘other’ ways of being by opening up avenues by which people can pursue “more enabling discursive constitutions” than might be available to

them via deficit-based understandings of their experiences (Grondlin, 2011, p. 462; see also Lord & Hutchison, 2007).

Identifying strengths is taken up as a central component of several initiatives committed to positive social change. For example, Asset-Based Community Development (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10) encourages the development of ‘capacity inventories’ instead of ‘needs assessments’ as the basis of community change processes (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997). Appreciative Inquiry is an approach used in organizational change that emphasizes working towards a shared aspiration, rather than working out of a dilemma or problem situation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). In both cases, the possibilities for positive transformation are intimately connected to establishing a firm sense of strengths as a starting place. This – as we saw in the previous chapter – is quite far from current practices within child protection, for which ‘risk assessment’ plays a central role.

Refusing to conform

An important critique of child welfare work and other human service practices is that what is offered as ‘support’ often seems more like guiding children, youth, and families to become compliant with dominant norms (Gharabaghi, 2008; Skott-Myhre & Skott-Myhre, 2007). For example, de Finney et al (2011) critically engage with “the child welfare system’s inherent goal to ‘rehabilitate’ children and youth who do not meet normative standards” (p. 368). These authors insist that residential care workers must not understand their role as involving the encouragement of deviant individuals to conform to current social arrangements, as this will simply replicate colonizing practices.

Instead, if practitioners work on their own ability to identify the processes of ‘minoritization’ that exist within our systems, they can better support individuals who bear the brunt of these injustices and simultaneously take on the task of shifting them (both within and outside of our institutions). Through the course of her research, Ajandi (2011) celebrates those women she interviewed for the strength they exhibited in *not* conforming to established norms around motherhood. Charting their own paths often meant these women took on additional responsibilities and great risks. But by refusing to conform to gendered expectations about marriage, for example, many of them also stepped more fully into meaningful roles as mothers and citizens. In turn, they also created opportunities for their children to see alternatives to the dominant narrative about what family looks like, thus contributing to social justice by opening up the social repertoire from which a next generation can now draw.

This is one concrete example of what is meant by a collective ontological approach (as opposed to a technical approach) to systemic transformation. By nurturing and affirming those who – for the sake of their own integrity - refuse to conform, practitioners can play important roles in such transformations. Importantly, refusing to conform still allows for the fact that the path these women took is not the *only* ‘just’ path; it is about allowing for a multiplicity of approaches, which include but are not limited to those which are currently experienced as dominant.

Considering the cultural relevance of all practices

Although much of the inherited knowledge of those who work in counselling situations, for example, is presented in a de-contextualized way, Madan (2011) reminds readers through a highly poignant case study of the cultural specificity of practices with their “genesis in

Eurocentric, patriarchal, enlightenment thought” (p. 432). She insists that when we neglect to acknowledge the cultural nature of our knowledge and the practices informed by it, this negligence can have very real and damaging effects. By sharing her experiences as a counsellor with a former client named Nteza (who is a genocide-affected migrant and who had experienced multiple traumas), Madan highlights the risks associated with implementing services that normalize one way of being while pathologizing other, equally relevant ways of being.

Since Canada is an increasingly common place for those who are politically displaced from their home countries to migrate, Madan (2011) insists the cultural relevance of practices be seriously attended to, lest others undergo the pathologizing process Nteza experienced. In particular, Madan recommends not only that attention be paid to the cultural frames of reference of those seeking support (over those offering it), but also that “[i]nterventions need to be designed appropriately to recognise the complex realities of a group, including attachments, networks, interrelationships, and experiences” (p. 437). At a minimum, this means being very cautious about attributing psychiatric interpretations to any behaviour.

deFinney et al (2011) emphasize the fact that certain groups are repeatedly minoritized because of our systemic refusal to accept the fact that existing practices are grounded in Euro-western norms. They assert that until we critically engage with these inherent biases “we will continue to walk through the doors of residential care settings and see the same faces staring back at us” (p. 377).

Advocating for personal agency

In order to disrupt this hierarchy in the quest for more socially just practices, Madan (2011) reflected that her client “deserved better advocacy for her personal agency” (p. 442).

Rather than treating Nteza's 'sadness' with medication, Madan is sure that better dialogue and an appreciation for her own interpretations of her experiences would have fostered Nteza's "strength in her own time, and in the language of her own resiliencies" (p. 442). This requires a degree of professional humility and a willingness on the part of the practitioner to implement services in a flexible and responsive way.

Stevens (2011) suggests that one way practitioners and researchers can advocate for personal agency is by making a point of writing about, representing, and responding to who children *are* - in the here and now, and in all their diversity - rather than writing and speaking primarily to either the norms or the 'extraordinary' exceptions. Doing so can better support children to exercise their own agency (to whatever capacity exists) without instead compelling them into zero-sum power relations in which possibilities for them are reduced to either conforming or resisting. She asserts that this has wider implications for policy development as well, since "[w]hen a social group is absent from the discourse, it is difficult then to begin to address their particular rights from a viewpoint of social policy or provision" (p. 490). Similarly, as mentioned above, Mitchell (2011) evokes the Convention of the Rights of the Child to support his advocacy of engaging children and youth as citizens in their own right when it comes to addressing the matters that affect them.

Creating more inclusive spaces is another creative way to advocate for personal agency. Drawing from Moss and Petrie (2002), Stevens (2011) discusses the possibilities that arise when an emphasis is placed on children's spaces, not children's services. The major difference in these two approaches is that the creation of children's spaces is a response to who children are at a given time (in all their multiplicity), whereas the development of children's services is so often

about encouraging children to develop in a certain, normative direction. The creation of children's spaces, Stevens suggests, can honour the fact that there is "no fixed way of being a child" (p. 491).

Exploring more than superficial meaning

Madan's (2011) story about her work with Nteza demonstrates some of the risks involved when behaviours are read off the surface. Stevens (2011), who studies Asperger's syndrome, claims that by deepening our understandings of the meanings of behaviour and by exploring discourses beyond the obvious, we can better understand and address the complexities at play. There are several ways we can do this. Attending to cultural frames of reference, as mentioned above, is one (Madan, 2011). Another is including critical race feminism and anti-colonialism as frameworks that inform practice, as suggested by Pon and colleagues (2011). They believe this is a necessary step in the direction of deepening the meanings we draw from events, experiences, or behaviours.

Stevens (2011) also advocates honing critical reasoning capacities in order to attend to the dynamics of power and knowledge and see beyond what initially presents itself. As noted earlier by Patten (2009), practitioners tend to fit their observations (of clients) in with their understandings and preconceptions in order to construct a narrative they can comprehend, and sift out those that do not fit. Incorporating critical reasoning into this meaning-making process, and intentionally inviting the perspectives of others in the co-construction of this narrative, are important ways of moving practice in more just directions (Stevens, 2011).

Participating in collective social action

In Chapter 12 I referenced Doherty and Carroll (2007) who said,

Missing from our discourse is a way to think of ourselves as citizens, not just providers, as people engaged in partnerships with other citizens to tackle public problems. Also missing is the idea of our clients as citizens with something to contribute to their communities ...

The provider/consumer dichotomy leaves out a third alternative – citizen partnerships where we are neither providers nor consumers – which our world sorely needs in an era of widespread disengagement from civic life. (p. 225)

This is a perspective that seems to be shared by many who pursue social justice within child welfare and other human service practices. In fact, the cultivation of such partnerships is increasingly offered as an important contribution to social justice in general, and socially just practice in particular. For instance, Ajandi (2011) notes that many of the single mother students she interviewed

were also involved in on-campus initiatives, programs, and activist groups that sought to challenge oppressive systems in society, such as anti-ableism, anti-racist, anti-heterosexist, and union groups. These venues gave women a space to validate their life experiences and contribute to social activism in an educational setting. (p. 422-423)

Ajandi (2011) also makes the important point that due to their life experiences (which included being marginalized), these women's perspectives are crucially important for the activist work they were doing. In a study with adolescent girls who use crystal meth, Dr. Marie Hoskins and I made a similar observation. The unique perspectives of the girls we interviewed were valuable contributions to their efforts towards social justice precisely because of the hardships they had experienced (Newbury & Hoskins, 2010a). Thus rather than positioning clients in the

passive and objectifying role of being only ‘recipients’ of services, there is great benefit – for individuals and society as a whole – in partnering with them to participate in collective social action.

In support of this possibility, in his work with victims of childhood sexual assault Grondlin (2011) challenges the notion that their struggles are entirely individual matters. He says “individualizing effects are those that situate the genesis of a problem and accompanying solutions within an individual” (p. 455). Perceiving struggles – even the trauma that comes with abuse – in an individualized way can serve to blame and totalize victims (see also Wade, 2007). And perceiving solutions in an individualized way can place the onus for change squarely upon their shoulders (see also Newbury, 2011a). Alternatively, Grondlin (2011) promotes the idea that problems and possible solutions are in large part discursively constructed. In this sense, intentionally cultivating empowering discourses (including notions of mutable identities) can be considered a form of collective social action. It makes space for the possibility that if “identities are in fact interactionally constituted, then [all individuals] are able, in this sense, to exert power in the same way as do ‘experts’ driving the process of discursive formation” (p. 462).

Participating in collective social action is central to Mitchell’s (2011) work. Particularly when it comes to youth he notes a “systemic resistance” to meaningful partnerships (p. 521), but insists that it is the responsibility of those who work with youth to insist on altering the status quo by reconceptualising youth as competent and engaging them as such. This means resisting a patronizing model of service which is hierarchically organized and instead recognizing the tremendous societal and personal benefits that come with meaningful youth participation in social action, such as health policy development.

Prioritizing diversity

There are two important ways in which diversity can be prioritized in our work. The first involves the potential that exists in *diversifying notions of what is taking place*. For instance, Ajandi (2011) makes a point of complicating binaries (such as the ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ mother). By looking in the spaces around dualistic notions of good and bad, or normal or abnormal approaches to motherhood, she is able to consider more dimensions of experience and legitimizing more kinds of experiences. This offers a more complete picture from which to draw conclusions and reduces the likelihood that responses will operate prescriptively.

Similarly, Grondlin (2011) suggests a more supportive way of working with victims of childhood sexual abuse might be to emphasize the multi-faceted nature of the *sum* of their experiences as well as their ability to move among them (rather than resting in diagnosis or victim identities). Inviting diverse interpretations into meaning-making processes is an important way of advocating for personal agency as well, since it presents avenues for choice where a singular dominant narrative does not. In the same way, Stevens (2011) suggests popular representations of Asperger syndrome are not necessarily inaccurate, but incomplete. Ignoring the diversity of experiences among those effected means rendering some people invisible and in turn basing interventions on expectations rather than experience. Seeking diverse notions of what is taking place, therefore, is an important route to more just practices.

The second way we might better prioritize diversity involves the potential that exists in *diversifying notions of what is possible*.

Taken collectively, the possibilities presented above point to an approach to change which is non-unitary. When change is conceived of as a technological problem, it typically

involves attempts at orchestrating it by policy makers and service providers, for example (as explored in the previous chapter). An ontological approach to change (Blades, 1997) on the other hand demands collective responsibility for change, with a diversity of approaches and a diversity of entry points. Particularly when clients are struggling in large part due to unjust social conditions, it is crucial that the onus for change not be placed entirely with them (de Finney et al, 2011 and Madan, 2011). Instead, by prioritizing diversity, we can all recognize the various roles we can play by engaging reflexively with our practices.

Diversifying our concepts of what is possible requires that we cease seeking a singular adjustment to existing conditions in order to ‘solve’ the problems we face once and for all. Instead, by engaging with “a Foucauldian conception of power in which power is conceptualized as ‘diffuse, chaotic, contradictory and multidirectional’” (Pon et al, 2011, p. 396), we might strive to open space for us all to step into existing conditions in myriad ways to engage differently. By letting go of a perceived need to control outcomes, and by inviting diverse modes of engagement and their diverse outcomes, space is made not only for the possibilities I have presented here, but – perhaps more importantly – for creative engagement with existing conditions that invite new possibilities yet unanticipated.

‘Prioritizing diversity’ in this way is thus one of the many important possibilities which can have significant implications for child protection and other practices related to children, youth, and families. It has also been my overall intention in drawing together this list of possibilities. This has not been presented as an exhaustive list of what is possible, but has been presented as an effort to demonstrate how this shift in perspective can enable diverse possibilities to emerge where previously they may have been concealed. The title of the report by Pivot

Legal Society from which I drew previously (Bennett et al, 2009) is *Hands Tied*, but perhaps the lack of possibility experienced by the child protection workers interviewed for the report was due in part to our *potestas*-oriented society. The possibilities cited above – and others – that come from power as *potentia* might in fact serve to untie our hands.

Prioritizing diversity in this way is my response to the dilemmas currently faced by the systems of child welfare that were discussed earlier and to the larger issue of social justice with which I began this entire inquiry.

PART FIVE: CONTEXTUALIZING CARE

Throughout the years I spent researching and writing this book, I was also going about life as usual. As mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, my life outside of academia is largely spent in a fairly small and isolated coastal town called Powell River. In Powell River, which is situated on Sliammon (Tla A'min) territory, I participate in a variety of community initiatives and attend a lot of public events. At many of these events I have had the opportunity to hear the words of Elsie Paul, who is an Elder from the Sliammon First Nation and has spent all of her life serving her community. Sometimes she offers opening prayers at public events, sometimes she provides opening remarks, and sometimes she is an invited feature speaker.

I always value hearing her perspective, regardless of the topic. But it was not until I heard her speak as an invited presenter at a community forum in May, 2011 (which focused on putting our town's Sustainability Charter into action) that it occurred to me I would like to hear more of her perspective in direct relation to my research. In particular, what I appreciated about her words that evening was her ability to respectfully hold multiple stories simultaneously. For instance, she acknowledges and honours the pain of past and present injustices towards her people and towards the land. At the same time, she speaks convincingly of the importance of collaborating across vast differences (even across the divide of colonized and colonizing peoples) in an effort to construct a more peaceful and sustainable future.

I wanted to understand more about her lived experiences with change – on both a personal and systemic level – and how she understands positive social change may take place, given existing power relations. I decided to ask her if she would be willing to be interviewed.

The interview finally took place in October, 2011 and her stories and opinions effectively and seamlessly pulled together all of the learning I had been trying to synthesize up until that point.

Situated Learning

Elder Elsie Paul told me about her past, and the role residential schools played in her life.

Her mother attended one until she was 16 years of age, and her youngest aunt was taken to the same school at a very young age, fell ill, and died only a few short months later. Her name was Elsie. So, when Elder Elsie Paul was born (the third of three children very close in age) her grandparents stepped in, named her Elsie after the daughter they had lost, and raised her as their own. They were determined to protect Elsie from the residential school experience, so every year in August they would leave the village and head up the inlets where they would live off the land. The representatives from the residential school would take children only until they reached their capacity, so if Elsie and her grandparents were away at that time, they would generally be left alone for the year after that.

But when she was ten years old, the authorities caught up with her, and she was taken to Sechelt Residential School. Her memories of the two years she spent there are grim. She remembers a lot of praying, strict rules and routines throughout the day, and a great deal of responsibility for such a young girl. She remembers being forbidden to speak her language – the only language she had ever known – and being forbidden from playing with or acknowledging the boys, even if they were relatives. She remembers the lack of familiarity with

the place, the food, the faces, the language, everything. And she remembers feeling very homesick and missing her grandparents.

Fortunately, when she returned home to Sliammon during the summer after her second year there, her grandparents managed to protect her from going back – by going up the inlets again – and her experience at the Sechelt Residential School was (relatively) short. She is very grateful for the fact that she was not there long enough to forget her language, in which she is still fluent and which she still teaches. For the most part, life returned to normal at that point, as she recalls it.

But the oppression of her people did not end there. After the great disruption of the residential schools, when the Sechelt school finally closed, the community of Sliammon was deeply impacted. Some of the parents had died or could no longer care for their children effectively after the years apart, so they sent their children to residential schools in Mission (for high school students) or even Kamloops. And although not the case for all, many of the people who had spent much of their childhoods in loveless institutions where they were never comforted or treated as valuable were not equipped to parent when the time came that they had their own children. With this generational disruption and the pain that came with experiences of mistreatment and separation, families now experienced their children being apprehended by social services under a different guise: child protection. TB (tuberculosis) hospitals were also built – as far away as Nanaimo – and some specifically to house Aboriginal people. The uprooting of First Nations children from their communities and families continued.

On top of this, there were other major systemic challenges taking place within the community: The Sliammon people had once lived on the land; they'd had effective ways of

organizing; they had governed themselves and developed a highly functional justice system. They had leaders who could heal and who could teach, by drawing medicines and lessons from the land where they lived. Now, however, a completely foreign form of government was imposed on them and integrated into law. They were bound to a small patch of land, called the reservation, and were not permitted to leave it after 5:00 in the evening. Nor were they allowed to have non-native people visit them in their homes. If they wanted to go to the town of Powell River, they had to have a 'valid reason'. The police could enter their homes at any time without a warrant and search for alcohol, which they were not permitted to possess or drink. In this context, problems - not capacities - were cultivated, and Elsie commented on the fact that even now too many of her people are living institutionalized lives: in jails and penitentiaries.

During our interview in which she shared these experiences, I found myself reflecting on the sense of hope and possibility I always experience whenever I hear Elder Elsie Paul speak. I decided to ask her how she copes with the pain of the experiences she'd shared. She told me this:

Ahms Tah Ow ... That means 'the elders' teachings.' All those *Ahms Tah Ow* are so important. So very important. How to take care of yourself, how to take care of your children, how to respect mother nature, not to be wasteful, ... and to respect the spirit world. How you conduct yourself in time of loss.

If you've lost your child or your children, your spouse or your parents, that's a time that you've got to do all these things with yourself: your spiritual cleansing. Because if you don't you're going to go downhill. You're going to be depressed, you'll get sick. It's

really important that you do your cleansing and take care of yourself first thing in the morning, so you don't carry that through the day.

My grandmother had 16 children and she lost 10. Six of them survived to adulthood and had families of their own. But, I used to hear her crying when I was just a little girl, a young girl. I'd hear her wailing outside in the morning, when it was breaking daylight. And she'd come in and say, 'if you heard me crying out there, I'm just letting go that heaviness, offering it up to the universe, to the creator.' And then she'd wash her face out there and say, 'OK, I'm ready for the new day.'

It's very important for people. And she would use that, she'd have cedar in a basin of water out there. We didn't have running water so these things took place outside even when it was cold. So we always had cedar and you brushed yourself with that, and let go: 'Take my burden, take away my heaviness.' It was really important to do that. And she'd come in ready to start the day. And she'd say, 'OK time to start the day. Everybody up and having breakfast. Lots of work to do today.' That was her attitude. She would explain that, 'if you heard me crying out there I had to do that to release my pain. I have to let it go, but I'm not going to cry all day every day. I do it when I need to release that pain.' Whatever heavy stuff she's carrying, because life has to go on ...

And I really try to pass that on to young people, because I see such a difference today. When someone is lost – a family member, a close friend or a spouse – people tend to 'oh let's go to the doctor and get you some tranquilizers.' People never used tranquilizers. You lived with that. You can embrace that pain, but you need to release it. You acknowledge that pain – it's painful – but don't let it hold you down because you're

going to lose your spirit and your will to live if you allow your sorrow and your grief to get a hold of you. So it's important to do that cleanse and brush with the cedar, and move on with your life ...

Yeah, it's painful when you lose someone. It's very painful. And again, it was a time for self-discipline, when you lost ... someone that was so connected to you. It's a powerful time; it's a very important time in one's life to change your bad habits. It's a time for discipline. If you were a drinking person, don't touch that. You set it aside. This is a time for discipline. If I was a gossiping person or an angry person, whatever it may be, bad habits that I have, then I need to discipline myself. For a whole year you do that. If you do it in a year, you're free of it. You've changed your life. It's a matter of adjusting.

I've tried to share that with some people, you know – but you can only say so much. You can't tell people not to grieve because you know they're hurting. So it's a delicate balance. I share with them, because I quite often go to families when they lose someone. And I listen and I try in a subtle way to pass on some of the teachings and they'll listen but still you see a lot of - when they're at a funeral you see them being just really sedated. One day you're going to have to face it without that medication, so you've got to deal with it right away.

It was interesting for me to hear how the teachings that enabled her to cope with hardship were those she witnessed and experienced during her time living on the land with her grandparents. It was also interesting to note that hardship itself is considered a very important avenue for learning – a life without hardship is a life without lessons. The goal then is not to avoid pain, but to find out what to learn from it and how to live peacefully with it. This kind of

learning was described earlier as 'situated' learning: it was intricately connected to the time and place in which the lessons were taught; and *how* the lessons were shared was as important as the messages themselves. She explained this further:

Because in our own way, in my grandparents' way and the other elders that I saw around me growing up, they taught you right and wrong. We weren't just running around out there with no teachings, no values, no respect for anything. It was a big thing for the elders, the grandparents of the day: appreciation of one another, and of nature, and everything in nature. Be thankful for what you have, and be respectful of other people, kindness, all of those things – in listening to stories you learned those things.

It was a ritual almost, every night if you could, to listen to stories. That was like your bedtime reading time for children today – without the book. And you just looked forward to those stories. And in each of those stories was a lesson. What did you learn from that? See, that's what happened to this – what he did was wrong. They always used the creatures: animals and birdlife, and you know – all those things that are in nature. There was one in particular that was always getting into trouble. So they always made reference: you see what happened to him when he didn't listen? See what happened when he was careless or reckless? So it sticks in your mind.

So there were those teachings. And there were some more serious teachings about spiritual stuff and a lot of things that are very sacred and very important. To thank the creator for what the creator gives you. Thank the creator for your health. Do your cleansing. When you go out, wash your face in the morning. Go outside and wash your face. Breathe in the day. Thank the creator for giving you this new day. Always pick a

place where the sun comes up, and you wash your face. If you're carrying anything heavy, or you're burdened with something, maybe a loss or whatever that may be. Just don't wash your face and carry on. Wash your face with the thoughts in mind that, you know, gargle some of the water and you spew it out there, four times. And it takes away forever whatever's inside that you need to let go.

But Elsie Paul recognized that she was fortunate to have had the consistency of these teachings in her life – and unconditional loving support – from her grandparents. Others were not so fortunate, and the personal and community costs of this continue to be felt by many. I asked her what she thinks is needed for others to experience this kind of wellbeing. How can positive change be realistically pursued, given all the hurdles and injustices she described?

How can you mend that? You can't mend that; it's done. We need to find a way to get away from that and to change the lives of people. We need to take on more responsibility for our people and the care of children. It's very difficult with how our people are, especially the ones that hold the resentment. We still have a lot of discrimination ... It has to come from inside ...

It's a gradual thing. I think that applies to any culture, any ethnic group. I'm sure all over the world it's happening. Just do the best that you can. Try to educate people and promote education and wellness ...

But things are improving, they are. We can talk to our MLA now. We couldn't before. At least we're talking ... Police didn't need a search warrant to come kick your door in and search your house. You can't get away with that today ... Now I can sit down and have my glass of wine with my dinner if I choose to ... Our old chiefs couldn't read,

they couldn't write. But a lot of deals went on that they didn't know they were signing. You know, just put your X here, put your X there, without fully understanding. Now a lot of our leaders are looking into being more prepared, being proactive. Looking at the big picture ...

Little steps.

I have it within my own family. They know how I believe; they know what teachings I have. And I'm hoping that with my offspring that it'll grow from there. That they will – and there's other families that carry that, and talk to their children about it. We lost a lot of our elders in the last few years.

You know Mary George in that picture there? She was my cousin. She was full of teachings; she was a very spiritual woman. But yet she was so interested in development, or she was always at a Band Council meeting, the general meetings, open meetings. She'll be there, early, sitting right at the front close to where our Chief and Council sit. There with her blanket and taking it in. Listening to what they're talking about, what the future holds. What are they doing? She had a lot of concerns; she had a lot of teachings; she had a lot of life experiences. But yet she was interested in wanting to know more about today. She was such a sweetheart. So her family carry on her teachings, so I can see that her family will carry on and will utilize her teachings, her way.

In this way again, Elsie seemed to effectively hold space for seemingly incompatible realities at the same time: reverence for the past, and active engagement with the future. I asked her about it and she tells me that she sees it happening with her grandchildren. The tools are different, but the values and the underlying ethic are still relevant. So now formal

education is important to prepare them for the world they live in, for example. But the lessons she shares with them when they are gathering roots together for baskets – those are relevant too.

And in her own life, Elder Elsie Paul is also evidence of the compatibility of seemingly irreconcilable realities. Just as the teachings of her grandparents were contextualized in the material world of their life in the inlets, now the teachings Elsie shares with her grandchildren are contextualized in the material world of today's society. As one very concrete example, Dr. Elsie Paul received an honorary doctorate from Vancouver Island University, and now she spends two days a week serving as the Elder in Residence at the Powell River campus:

I'm still adjusting to this title of Doctor because it's very new to me. I was quite shocked to get that title. It came from the university in Nanaimo. I guess in my work here, my name was put forward because of my traditional teachings as an elder and what I share. When I got a phone call from Nanaimo that asked how I would feel about accepting this doctorate degree, I was really shocked. What do you mean? I said I thought that only applies to people with a bachelor's degree and master's degree and whatever – an educated person.

He said, 'No, because you are fluent in the language, the history, and you are able to talk about the history. That is a totally different category of education. You are qualified and you are educated in your history.' So therefore I was awarded that. And I was really honoured, but at the same time I didn't know how my community would take that. Because sometimes there's resentment, and I know there's resentment ... and I knew that

would happen. But I thought 'Oh well, let it be.' So if people want to call me Dr. Elsie Paul, that's fine.

From her early days with her grandparents, to the two years at residential school, to a career as a social worker (during which time she upgraded her formal education from grade four to grade ten and received a social work certificate) to being an elected council member in Sliammon, Elder Elsie Paul has been consistently and responsively engaging in community life. All of her hard work has been done with a view to contributing to the cultivation of a more peaceful world for her grandchildren, their children, and future generations – and with a belief in the possibility of such change:

So I'm not telling my story out of self-pity ... I just want to see equality and recognition, and to acknowledge who we are as a people. We are the first people of the land. ... Whereas prior to contact our people had self-government ... All that was ripped away ... I am resentful of that. But *you* didn't do that to me. So now, we're trying to work together to make things better ... Whether it's my kind of teaching or teachings from some other kind of group that helps you and gives you peace, we can learn from each other. And that's a good thing: to be open, to listen, and to learn from one another.

CHAPTER 23:

Living Life as if Justice is Yet to Come ... Always

I hope our conversation in which Elder Elsie Paul shared these experiences will be the first of many. Before concluding, though, I would like to share the ways in which *Ahms Tah Ow* – this Elder’s teachings – have helped me to integrate what I have been learning throughout the process of writing these pages.

The Power to Narrate

According to Said (1993):

stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. ... The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (p. xii-xiii)

Elsie Paul demonstrates with her own story some of the ways in which narratives – both dominant and counter – have significantly altered power relations in her lifetime. With her intentional foregrounding of peace and collaboration she is participating in the co-construction of a new story, one in which several of the possibilities highlighted in the previous chapter can be seen to find footing. She concluded by offering an invitation for me to draw from her story in whatever ways I find meaningful, but also reminded me that hers is one of many. Perhaps, she suggested, I will also draw important lessons from the teachings of others, and it is up to me to seek those out and draw possibilities from wherever I can. The authors in the social justice issue of the *International Journal of Child, Youth, and Family Studies* also demonstrate the potential that lies in actively seeking stories other than those which are most readily presented.

In Jennifer's story, which opened this book, we could see how overarching individualizing narratives can serve to render us immobile, inactive, and apathetic. Even when relational processes are acknowledged (Gergen, 1999), if we live and organize our interventions 'as if' we are discreet individuals, avenues for action are significantly constrained. Braidotti's (2006) notion of a non-unitary subject, taken in combination with Abram's (1996) insights about situatedness, Caputo's (2000) ideas about multiplicity, and Foucault's (1972) concept of power relations, allow us to embrace new narratives which open space for different kinds of meaningful social engagement to be rendered intelligible and thus feasible, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The individualizing story – if taken as the *only* story – may lead us to believe that if we cannot effect change as single persons, then to try is futile. Alternatively, perhaps by recognizing interconnectedness we might instead ask how we might live as meaningful parts of something larger – considering our actions as participation in ongoing processes that are much bigger, older, and longer lasting than us, which we cannot measure, control or predict. This possibility is unpacked gradually in the exploration of the various personal stories shared throughout this book. These include: 1) the story of Jennifer, whose experience of and response to support depended not only on the 'what', but the 'how' of the interventions she received, 2) the story of Linda, who sees the process of connecting across differences as part of the path to a more just and equitable society, 2) the story of Chris, who seeks personal wellness and collective wellbeing concurrently, and understands compassion as being a significant part of the process, 3) the story of Nicholas, who refuses to separate the plight of marginalized children and families from broader political and economic processes, and 4) the story of Elsie, who embraces an

approach to social justice in which an ontological, not a technical, understanding of change is embraced.

The value of prioritizing a diversity of approaches was discussed previously, and this can be felt in all of the above stories about pursuing change on both individual and systemic levels. On this note Said (1993) says,

In our wish to make ourselves heard, we tend very often to forget that the world is a crowded place, and that if everyone were to insist on the radical purity or priority of one's own voice, all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife, and a bloody political mess ... (p. xxi)

Adhering tightly to individualizing narratives thus strengthens current power relations and restricts possibilities in the direction of justice. But if social justice is indeed the motivation for this inquiry, then seeking one right and final alternative way to move forward seems to lie in contradiction to the overall aim as well. In the pursuit of justice, an effort must be made towards attending to multiple stories in order to participate in shifts in power relations that are responsive to what *was*, what *is*, and what *may be possible*, as Elsie Paul articulated above. Elsie also offers an important reminder that the pursuit of justice is not always about finding new ways of doing things, but also involves re-learning teachings that have never gone away.

I concluded the previous chapter by presenting multiple possibilities for social justice within human service practices, all of which intentionally muddy the distinctions between practice and policy and between individual and systemic change. These possibilities include: 1) moving beyond disciplinary boundaries, 2) embracing the political dimensions of practice, 3) naming injustices, 4) recognizing our own complicity, 5) seeking counter-narratives, 6) identifying strengths, 7) refusing to conform, 8) considering the cultural relevance of all

practices, 9) advocating for personal agency, 10) exploring more than superficial meaning, 11) participating in collective social action, and 12) prioritizing diversity.

Keeping these in mind – and inviting the inclusion of additional possibilities - I would like to conclude by returning to the concept of justice in general terms in order to speak specifically to the implications of this emerging list for *institutional* change in the pursuit of justice.

Concluding my Story: A Theory of Justice

The failed attempts at transformational change within British Columbia’s Ministry of Children and Family Development (explored in Chapter 12) have previously been explained largely in terms of a series of technical and strategic mistakes (Foster & Wharf, 2007).

However, I am inclined to believe it might perhaps be better understood by drawing from Sen’s (2009) theory of justice. I also believe this may shed light on my ultimate aim here: contextualizing care in order to move away from the tendency to individualize struggles and support.

Sen (2009) identifies two general approaches to justice that have traditionally been pursued: *transcendental institutionalism* and *realization-focused comparison*. Transcendental institutionalism is an approach based in the identification of what a fully just society would look like. With its focus on “getting institutions right”, it “is not directly focused on the [imperfect] actual societies” in which they exist (p. 6). Realization-focused comparison, on the other hand, is an approach to justice which Sen describes as relational in that it is about looking at actual societal arrangements in the contexts of one another, and with consideration of actual human behaviour. The intention of the realization-focused approach is not to identify or create an arrangement that perfectly resembles justice, but rather to identify *more just* possibilities that

realistically present themselves, in an effort to gently nudge systems (which include both institutions and human behaviour) in the direction of justice. Drawing on earlier discussions, I would suggest this is a ‘situated’ approach to justice (see Clarke, 2005) in that it takes materiality, power relations, and other dimensions of existing situations into account when determining how to proceed. Rather than identifying pure justice as a starting place (or end point, for that matter), this approach is procedural in that it focuses on what activities or institutions we might pursue in the meantime (see Caputo, 1993).

Sen (2009) observes:

The distance between the two approaches, *transcendental institutionalism*, on the one hand, and *realization-focused comparison*, on the other, is quite momentous. As it happens, it is the first tradition – that of transcendental institutionalism – on which today’s mainstream political philosophy largely draws in its exploration of the theory of justice. (p. 7, emphasis in original)

He goes on to argue, however, that despite our current emphasis on a transcendental approach to justice, we might do well to consider the potentially transformative implications of embracing a more relational approach. In acknowledging the materiality of human experience – including the pursuit of justice – Sen (2009) advocates including such considerations in institutional development as well. Just as was discussed by Merleau-Ponty (1964) and Abram (1996) earlier, Sen (2009) observes that

Our thoughts as well as our perceptions are integrally dependent on our sense organs, and our brains, and other human bodily capacities. ... Our very understanding of the external world is so moored in our experiences and thinking that the possibility of going entirely beyond them may be rather limited. (p. 170)

With this in mind, he suggests that a transcendental approach to justice might lead us astray when it comes to systemic change, since it requires that we dis-embed ourselves from the concrete, embodied experience of what is and put blind faith in an institutional structure designed on the basis of what may be. In this way, the transcendental approach to the pursuit of justice does not take into account the material dimension of experience, and is thus likely to lead us to a collective sense of futility in the face of this kind of institutional transformation.

Another possibility for institutional change exists, however, and a realization-focused approach to justice can help to make sense of it. This approach is one which does not understand institutional transformation as *the* route by which just conditions will be created in and of itself. By engaging a dynamic sense of power as relational (instead of zero-sum), it recognizes the fact that change cannot effectively be realized if planned and dictated from on high. When power is understood as diffuse (Pon et al, 2011), the notion that the answer to the question of justice lies with institutional change alone ceases to make sense. Rather, from this perspective, institutions are understood as an important consideration among others within the pursuit of justice, which is necessarily ongoing. Sen (2009) asserts that institutions “can hardly be the entirety of what we need to concentrate on, since people lives are also involved” (p. 82).

Thus, Sen (2009) argues that institutional organization need not be about the creation of ‘just’ institutions (an impossible task in constantly changing social conditions). Each time we approach it as such, we will likely experience disappointment. Instead, “we have to seek institutions that *promote* justice, rather than treating the institutions as themselves manifestations of justice” (p. 82, emphasis in original). Here is where I see a great deal of untapped potential within human service practices in general, and with the institutions within which they take place in particular. But what does an institution that *promotes* justice look like?

According to Sen (2009) institutions that promote justice allow for it to be rediscovered anew in ever-changing contexts. Such institutions have organizational structures that do not emphasize end states but place priority on the processes used, and the incompleteness of these processes must be acknowledged. This requires a great deal of contemplation around the practices employed. Sen says, “to ask how things are going and whether they can be improved is a constant and inescapable part of the pursuit of justice” (p. 86). By incorporating this process of critical engagement not only into individual human service practices, but into institutional organization as well, we might better provide the means by which such critical scrutiny can be employed. Importantly, embracing incompleteness does not preclude making conclusions, judgements, or decisions as to what should or should not take place in a given situation. On the contrary, it invites deeper engagement with such processes, so that conclusions, judgments, and decisions can be made through thorough processes of discernment, since they can never be provided at the outset (see also: Caputo, 2000; hooks, 2009).

As such, developing and engaging in institutions which foster the possibilities presented above may inch us towards justice. What this means for BC’s Ministry of Children and Family Development, for instance, is yet to be seen. But I submit that if such ontological possibilities for change were embraced (instead of responding to the tragedy of the death of a child by increasing protocols around risk assessments, for example), then the *social* nature of the struggles experienced by a given family would be further revealed. This could in turn render more avenues for engaging preventatively and productively in the lives of children and families intelligible, so as to cultivate conditions of wellbeing that protect against such tragedies. In this sense, *how we engage in our practices and institutions will directly inform what those practices and institutions can potentially become.*

We know that targeted approaches to social services do not lead to healthier children and families overall (Albanese, 2010). Continuing to narrow our gaze, locating problems and solutions within individuals who are among our society's most vulnerable is moving us farther from justice, and instead towards crisis and reactionary measures, as conveyed by the child protection workers interviewed by Patten (2009), White and Hoskins (in press), and *Pivot* (Bennett et al, 2009).

Institutions do not exist outside of any of us; they are comprised by us – socially constructed, if you will. Thus, by engaging differently with(in) them - by refusing to allow our work to be driven by decontextualized and individualized conceptualizations of children and family's experiences - we will in turn alter them in substantial ways. In this sense, social constructionism can be understood as not only a valuable theoretical perspective, but a pragmatic and liberating way of engaging in existing conditions in the ongoing pursuit of justice.

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