Article

Practicing from Theory: Thinking and Knowing to "Do" Child Protection Work

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Abstract: Child protection practice in much of the Western world is performed using some specific models with limited attention paid to the underpinning of informing worldviews, theories for practice (explanatory theories) and theories of practice (intervention theories). Over the past few years we have explored how child protection practice may be undertaken using a child rights perspective and community development principles and practices. From this we have developed a model which we here seek to support with worldviews, explanatory and intervention theories. We hope this theoretical framework answers some of the complexity found in the "wicked problem" of child abuse and provides guidance to the practice of protecting children.

1. Introduction

We are social work educators in Aotearoa New Zealand, Norway and Western Australia (WA) [1] and, concerned that our child protection systems have tended towards investigatory rather than supportive strategies [1] to deal with what has become a "wicked problem" [2], have been exploring the development of alternate approaches. Seeking good practice examples from child protection practitioners we have been encouraged by the efforts practitioners have made to understand the circumstances of the families they work with and design appropriate and diverse interventions to keeping children safe. From these examples we have developed a framework for practice that is informed by child rights perspectives, community development and strengths based principles and practices [3,4]. We advocate for a more nuanced approach than we find exists in the countries in which we work. Importantly, through this framework is interwoven an Indigenous perspective, specifically calling on Maori knowledges, as one of our group is Maori, to reassert the epistemological equality [5] to which we subscribe as educators and practitioners. While our orientation is with Maori worldviews, we maintain that Indigenous worldviews from the places in which social work is practiced are similarly necessary to include. As Russell ([6], p. 10) notes, Native Theory maintains "the right of Indigenous people to make sense of their time and place in this world". Social work theory and practice continues to be culturally invigorated and challenged by Indigenous peoples globally and locally [7–19]. Indigenous knowledges are particularly important in relation to child protection, for in many jurisdictions, Indigenous children and families, as well as children and families from many immigrant minority groups, are the most affected by child protection policy and practice, with, often, minimal attention paid to Indigenous knowledges and practices for protecting children. In seeking to be culturally robust we wholeheartedly accept that theory and practice are not a-cultural and should enhance and support "other" ways of knowing rather than relegating them to being an add-on, exotic or alternative.

Background

Contrary to the policy and societal inclination towards a single solution to child abuse, a contradiction in terms of the nature of "wicked problems", the practitioners whose examples have led to this framework have sought to apply complex thinking, and thus accept the possibility of complex solutions, to the questions of "what is happening, why, and what can/should be done?" in relation to each individual situation. If the "what should be done?" is answered by the decision to remove the child to a place of safety then that is what is done. But in many cases we maintain that the answer can be to co-arrange or co-construct different supports with the family, to engage with families so that they can participate productively in creating safety for their children, to assist families develop missing skills and so on. For it is now well established that, even with the best intentions, there is a limit to how well and for how long the State can be a parent [20] to a child who is removed from his/her family. The long-term intent for social work practice, and indeed society, is to assist families who are currently not looking after their children well enough to do so and to help those children grow into stable and productive adults. However, despite decades of targeted policy and practice, current systems

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[1]   While WA is not an autonomous nation, it is the jurisdiction within Australia with responsibility for child protection for that State under the country's federal system.

are still characterised by growing numbers of children taken into care, increasing numbers of care placements breaking down with consequent instability for children, fewer families being supported to care for their children and fewer families being willing to care for others' children with resultant institutional care. It is not a system which serves societal stability well. How to address the complex and varied needs of this "wicked problem" requires complex and varied solutions, not merely more of the same.

The other side of the equation, the preparation of social workers to work in this complex area, also demonstrates challenges. De-professionalisation, new public management technologies distancing decisions and policy from the lived experiences of both clients and workers, and the increasing use of standardising and quantifying tools for information management in child protection have all affected the practice of social work with child protection. As Bay states: "One of the concerns is that what newer practitioners learn is how to become good at ticking boxes rather than critically thinking about their practice" ([21], p. 94). Bay posits that technologies of the state are replacing critical engagement with the very precarious area of keeping children safe, echoing Arendt's critique of administrative systems in which "nobody rules" ([21], p. 95).

In this article, in suggesting a different way of considering these dual challenges of the lack of complex responses and of practitioners restricted by systems, we return to the definition of social work to reinforce our view of the necessity of theory for practice [22] by maintaining the inseparability of theory and practice. We find it important to counter the view that theory is irrelevant or overused in practice, as suggested in the headline accompanying the release of the Narey report in the UK [23], a debate which has coincided with this, our fourth paper on these matters, and which has particular relevance to the training of social workers.

A further complication is a trend found in new public management which locates *thinking* with managers and *doing* with service deliverers ([21], p. 8) supporting the, to us, quaint, idea that a-theoretical practice is to be more valued. In contrast we are strongly of the view, following Lewin, that there is nothing more practical than a good theory ([24], p. 169). Vankeenstiste & Sheldon [25] summarise Lewin's work in which he maintained there was a joint role to be played by theorists and researchers in trying to ensure that particularly problematic situations are addressed using new ideas or conceptualisations of those problems derived from and tested in practice. In turn, then, theorists should develop "practical" theories, or theories which can be applied in practice. Had Lewin lived beyond 1947 he may well have considered the challenge of addressing the "wicked problem" of child abuse an essential focus for the theory-practice cycle.

In earlier papers [3,4] we have proposed the requirement to build practice upon solid theoretical foundations [3,4] and advocated for child protection practice to incorporate community development approaches which are informed by the rights of the child. In those papers we began to articulate detailed practice principles, developed from practice examples to demonstrate the value of these approaches. The Key Elements developed in the latest work [4] formed the beginnings of a model for practice. However, as mentioned above, we recognise the need to have practice specifically connected to theory so that practitioners are able to provide clear explanations of why they choose the actions they do and what they hope to achieve by them. Theory of practice (explanatory theory) and theory for practice (intervention theory) become central to the practitioners' ability to articulate their decisions and aims. Thus we turn now, in this piece, to further provide underpinning theory for these Elements for practice.

2. A Model for Practice

In our most recent work [4], we proposed five Key Elements for child protection practice underpinned by child rights and using community approaches. These elements are: *child-centred, contextual, collective action, reciprocity,* and *family capital* and they form what may be considered a "model for practice", which we are describing as "*co-constructing social work*" and are represented in Table 1. While we acknowledge that the idea of "constructing" social work appears readily in the literature, especially in those forms which employ social construction as a theoretical base and the notion of "co-constructing" reality is a feature of a social constructivist approach [26], we apply this term here to describe the processes employed *between* workers, families, children, communities, other professionals using these key elements for change. From this short overview of this model, it is clear that a theoretical positioning relies heavily on a constructivist interpretation of the social world. Greene & Lee's ([26], p. 13) description of social constructivism, derived from Gergen, provides a useful summary: "Social constructivism takes a view that both individual and social processes are involved in the social construction of reality; thus it is not a matter of 'either/or' but rather 'both/and'." Greene & Lee go on to state that, therefore, social constructivism is a natural fit for social work employing as it does an extensive use of an ecological theory. We are therefore positioning this model as both constructivist in its epistemology and as a process involving equal participation by relevant people.

Table 1. Key elements for community development and child rights informed child protection practice ([4], p. 149).

Key Elements	Description/Skills and Process	Theoretical Perspective/Knowledge
Child centred	Seeking, listening to and acting on the child's definition of his/her daily life	Children as competent agents
		Resilience
		Human/children's rights
Contextual	Situatedness (time, place, history, culture)	Social constructivism
		Symbolic interaction
Family capital	Family knowledge, history, capability, contacts	Social capital
		Social network
		Strengths
		Family definition
Collective action	The whole is more than the sum of the parts	Power
	The whole has greater longevity	Community development
		Participative democracy
	Distributed leadership	Social justice
Reciprocity	The family as theorist	Learning
	Shared responsibility	Anti-oppression
	Trustworthiness	Cross-cultural

Although the purpose of social work practice in child protection is uniformly to protect children from (further) abuse, there are different practices (models) used by different social workers, employing different processes. We do not intend expanding on the elements we previously articulated here–initial descriptions of both how we arrived at these and some examples where they may be seen in practice formed the major part of the previous paper [4]. However we do acknowledge the difficulties present

in taking a "child-centred" approach where competence and agency for very young children, including babies, for example, must be conceptualised very differently from those of older children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child does not specify a lower age limit of competency and in some jurisdictions, Norway, for example, states that children from the age of 7 and younger who are capable of forming their own views should be given the opportunity of expressing them. While this still leaves adults in the position of assessing capability it reminds adults to include children in the consultation and decision making process according to agency and competency rather than age. This is an area for ongoing development, particularly for those social work practitioners who tend to interpret their concern for children as "child-centred" rather than engaging with children in an attempt to include them in the decision–making process. Greater attention needs to be paid in training for practice into ensuring adults develop fuller understanding of children as on a spectrum of "being" and "becoming" competent agents and what that might mean for inclusive practice.

These brief theoretical considerations, while familiar to our thinking, do both require more explanation and discussion as well as acknowledging other, equally valid, ways of explaining the "why" of the choices made to act in certain ways. For this we use and expand the framework developed by Pat Shannon [27]. Figure 1 presents our theorising using this framework.

Figure 1. Theory for practice. Adapted from Shannon & Young ([27], p. 27).
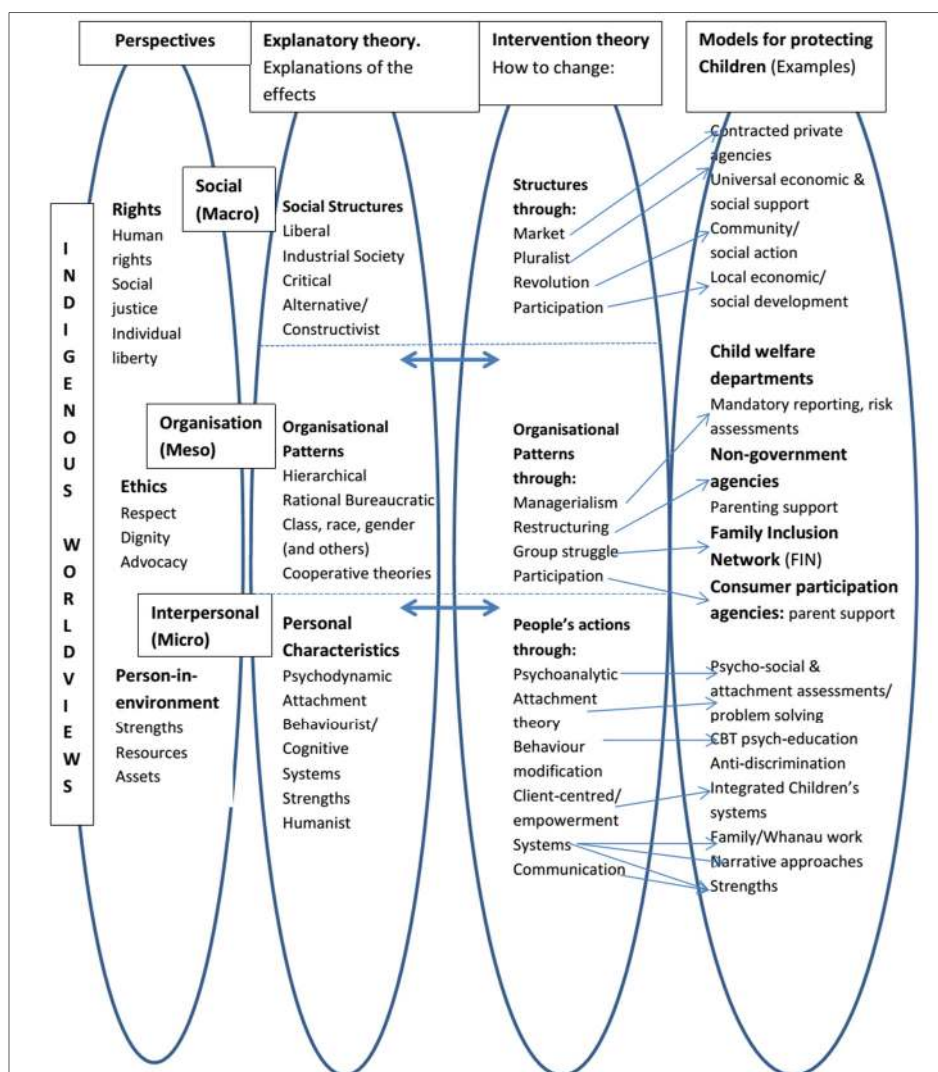
3. A Theoretical Framework

We find the theoretical framework provided in Shannon & Young [27] useful to detail our ideas. A pictorial "eggs" diagram ([27], p. 24) is used in their work to demonstrate the connection between worldviews or perspectives and the models for practice which can be traced back to the worldviews through explanatory and intervention theories. In Shannon & Young's work, the focus is on social problems and social policy with the main attention being on the structural setting. Hence "grand" theories and how they shape responses to social problems comprise the majority of the discussion. While not discussing child protection among these problems, child abuse constitutes one of the additional "wicked" and social problems.

The far left (in non-political terms) "egg" contains the values and beliefs a worker brings to his/her work: the lenses through which to view the world and what sort of change is desired. What is placed in this location will vary from worker to worker but be fundamental in guiding choices of what to do and how, but more importantly why, as these positions are starting points for the work. The next "egg" contains the theories which seek to explain the world that is seen and experienced, known as "theories for practice". Despite the caution of conflating "explanatory" theories with a positivist position [28], we take explanation as one of a sequence of steps to identify what is happening and posit why that might be before seeking to apply some predictive elements to create change. Payne and others [29,30], for example, reinforce the value of explanation emerging from a value base about how the world is or should be and leading to a set of practices designed to create that change.

In Shannon & Young's ([27], pp. 28–33) work four "grand" theories are identified as being Classical Liberal, Industrial Society, Socialist and Alternative: theoretical positions which have variations elsewhere, but are claimed here to incorporate four basic and widespread approaches to understanding the social world. For our current purposes we are less concerned with theories at the Macro level, except inasmuch as they provide for the policy setting within which child protection practice occurs, than those at the interpersonal level. However, the "grand" theories of Classical Liberalism, associated with the "free-market, individualism and the invisible hand"; Industrial Society with "state-guided technological change"; Socialism with the allocation of resources according to needs and ability; and Alternative/Constructivism to include the relatively newly emerging theoretical explanations which uphold the local, contingent, contextual and diverse differentially give rise to different policy formulations. It must be stressed that even though these theoretical positions are "ideal types" they do offer distinct starting points from which to analyse and work in the social world. They differ according to the "foundational unit of society, and the mechanism through which people interact in society" ([27], p. 28). As such they can provide both analyses of what is currently happening in society and what changes may be desirable.

Intervention theories, or practice theories, emerge from or are the same as the explanatory theories. So, for example, a Classical Liberal explanation of the structural world would lead to using market forces to create change in the policy context. This may involve the private sector being contracted to provide child protection services on the premise that efficiencies and better effectiveness may be guaranteed. The models which are then designed and applied put into action the principles of the perspective (valorising individual autonomy and his/her choices and condemning poor choices) mediated through the explanation of individual failure and the need for correction through coercion

and application of a market approach to the delivery of social service. Individual failure assessed through non-attached or inadequately attached children, for example, could then lead to a model to protect those children through contracting a private agency to manage the adoption of those children. For meso practice an Industrial Society theoretical position has led to parenting support programmes for example in the belief that parents can learn alternate strategies of disciplining their children, with the help of expert advice.

The Micro section includes some generic illustrations of the explanatory and intervention theories that relate to the "grand" theories. So for example, an explanatory theory at the micro level which could relate naturally to both Classical Liberal and Industrial Society theories is one of what Healy [29] refers to as the "psy" theories: psychodynamic theories which operate on the premise that the mind stimulates behaviour ([31], p. 72). Intervention theory could employ ego psychology or a psychosocial study which then leads to the particular form of casework method promoted by Florence Hollis. Problem solving as a social work method can be directly related back through these intervention and explanatory theories. Explaining the world may be here through individual predispositions which lead to inadequate social performance (a premise of Classical Liberal grand theory) or failure to adapt the individual responses to a changing environment (a premise of Industrial Society grand theory). Having these positions to explain the world leads to particular forms of social policies and institutional structures, policies and operations: through private or funded agencies contracted to provide appropriate and expert services with coercive or therapeutic aims.

The models which derive from these are directly informed by the way in which problems are explained and the choices which are made as appropriate interactions. There are a range of possibilities, but it is important to reiterate that there are some direct connections and congruence between how the situation is explained and the choice of model to apply. The converse applies also. Some models cannot be used with certain explanations. For example CBT would likely be ineffective as a model of practice with a discriminatory situation/explanation.

3.1. Worldviews for Community Based Child Protection Work

The first "egg" deals with worldviews, and here we present the underpinning values and perspectives we take to inform the approach we recommend. We will focus most of our paper on this section as we find it important to tease out and be clear about what worldviews mean for our practice. It would be easy to rely on the "taken-for-granted" tenets of social work in the expectation that "we all know" what is meant.

We have developed our "model" from the following understandings of the world. First, people have the capacity and potential to be active and competent agents in their own lives and those of their families; second, the social nature of humans means that collective activity can make a positive contribution to keeping children safe; and third, humans interact with each other and their environment in ways that can be both positive and negative–a rights perspective enables a complex response to assist in change. Rights, Ethics and Person-in-Environment describe our worldviews. While these are no strangers to social work, we find it important to re-emphasise their value in the ways they give rise to how we work with the "wicked problem" of child abuse. These dimensions must be set in relation to Indigenous worldviews.

3.1.1. Rights

Our particular elements for Rights focus on Human Rights, Social Justice, and Individual Liberty.

Promoting and upholding *Human Rights* is one of the foundations of the social work profession, and increasingly practitioners are being required to articulate more explicitly how the work they do fulfils this mission. The framework for social work's use of Human Rights derives predominantly from the various UN Conventions, the articles of which provide for protective, provision and participatory interventions as referred to in our previous work [4]. And here, as elsewhere, we maintain that the practice of Human Rights must, by its very nature, specify that children's rights are also included in social workers' practices.

We have argued previously [4] that a much more nuanced approach to how social work practice engages with understandings of Rights is necessary to enable child protection to be expansive and not reductionist in its application. By this we mean that a "best interests" approach to child protection would incorporate provisions of: sufficient state resources to ensure the child's development (Articles 18, 19 & 27); parental participation in decision making (Article 9); family care (Article 7); retaining cultural identity (Articles 8 & 30); instead of, as a first response, removing a child from a situation assessed as presenting a risk and later seeing what reparative resources may be provided. The rights for children contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child specify many more than these (54 in all) but it seems apparent that "best interests" (Article 3) has almost monopolised the attention of policy makers and practitioners alike. Further, we take the Rights framework in its entirety to refer to more than the individual as specified in Article 5, and so invoke the notion of collective responsibility. This not only refers to the collective nature of Indigenous communities at the micro level but also at meso and macro levels where it is necessary that governments ensure the provision of those goods and resources which are considered necessary within Western welfare states for the adequate development of the individual through health, education and housing.

Many of the above human rights are also recognised within the 46 articles of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, for example: Article 1, the right of Indigenous peoples to *all* human rights individually and collectively and Article 2—to be free from discrimination in the exercise of those rights. If we are not able to use theory that derives from Indigenous peoples' world views unintentional discrimination can be an outcome of child protection theory and practice. Article 3 specifies the right to self-determination economically, socially and culturally. Article 5 refers to the right to maintain and strengthen their cultural and social institutions. Article 7 mentions rights to physical and mental integrity and not removing children forcibly to another group. Article 8 emphasises the right to not be subject to forced assimilation and destruction of their culture, and Article 11 specifies the right to practise and revitalise their cultural traditions and customs. Child protection processes, theory and practice must respect Indigenous peoples' integrity as distinct peoples and their cultural values and ethnic identities.

All of these provisions and protections fall within the broad spectrum of a *Social Justice* perspective to provide the environment in which humans, including children, may grow and develop. Where these provisions and protections are not present, it is incumbent on signatories (governments) to provide restitution, recompense or rehabilitation. Further, if the social work profession is committed to social justice its practitioners are required to ensure through their actions that they both contribute directly to

provisions and protections, and where they are missing advocate for their provision. Social Justice as a concept is not subject to codified definition as in the UN Conventions, nor do many of the professional Associations specifically define it. One exception is the NASW which states: "Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities" [32]. An examination of social justice published immediately prior to a Social Work International Conference dealing specifically with Human Rights, in Stockholm in 2012, presented a much more complex view of Social Justice. Payne [33] wrote that three aspects of the work of social workers contribute to it being considered a Social Justice profession: it deals with the "social" as distinct but also inclusive of the individual; it focuses on those people who "miss out" on provisions or resources; and social workers do not hesitate to intervene in social relations, even when it makes them unpopular. While still potentially a reductive definition, Payne's presentation allows for a more multi-faceted understanding of, and ability to "do" Social Justice.

An examination of Social Justice also necessitates considerations of Justice. A major contributor to understandings of Justice in social work has been John Rawls whose notion of the social contract was mediated through the two principles: (1) *equal liberty*; and (2) *equality of fair opportunity and the difference principle.* Arguing that fundamental basic liberties should be equally distributed, Rawls also maintained that if there were to be inequalities in how goods and resources were to be distributed they must advantage the least advantaged people in society. It is not *just* to have "those who are better off have a veto over the benefits available for the least favoured" ([34], p. 80). Not only, then, should equality be upheld as a principle, but equity or fairness must be as readily upheld. Social Justice, according to a Rawlsian interpretation, emphasises both equality and fairness: that is, unequal treatment in the form of greater provision of the already disadvantaged is *just*. Social justice in the setting of child protection invokes the provisions, as well as the protections, of a rights perspective as noted above. A recent snapshot of comparative costs of undertaking the investigatory and placement of children at risk compared to intensive family support for children at risk in Australia found disproportionate spending with only 12% of total expenditure on family support services indicating the continuing disparity between provision and protection. Social justice for these children in care is therefore questionable.

Individual liberty forms the third of our elements under the Human Rights dimension. Much of the focus of the Convention is on the protection from offences against the person, such as freedom from torture, and the ability of the person to engage with societally provided goods, such as the freedom to choose a political representative. These "freedoms from" and "freedoms to" signal the importance placed on the person as an individual while also noting that "Human" of course is a collective. Our emphasis here is on what having rights as an individual who is considered to be free and equal means for the notion of equality as proposed by Rawls in the two principles mentioned above. If the individual is both free and equal and participates in society according to these principles, then Rawls considers that the idea of the free and equal individual as a co-operator is bound by the practice of reciprocity ([35], p. 49). This idea of reciprocity can be extended by Levinas' notion of responsibility to the other [36], for acting in recognition that the difference principle requires differential treatment in certain circumstances necessitates the individual to regulate self-interest in the interests of others. Contrary to the individualistic ideology so characteristic in western democracies in which the individual is all that matters, this position brings us closer to the mission of social work practice of

social justice informed by human rights in which the individual is recognised as the most important person to attend to in relation to other individuals. This has long been recognised in Indigenous societies and it is to Aotearoa New Zealand's credit that such acknowledgement was enshrined in law in 1989 with the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act. As Ife signals it is how the "links between the individual and the collective, or the personal and the political, across all social work, and an integration of the 'macro' and the 'micro' approaches to social work practice" ([37], p. 60) that is central to social work human rights practice. This is particularly important in child protection practice where the tendency has been, as we have discussed, to isolate the child, as individual, for attention thereby restricting the possibility for cooperative and reciprocal work.

For social workers, along with others of the "caring professions" [38], justice, or what is just, is inseparable from what can be judged to "good" or "bad". Having an ethical perspective is the way workers assess the morality of what to do and how to do it. *Ethics* thus constitutes the next dimension in our worldview.

3.1.2. Ethics

Social workers subscribe to the idea of having an ethical grounding and to be bound to codes specifying ethical practice. Yet all social workers know that maintaining adherence to the codes or even to "being" ethical in their practice is far from the seemingly simple practice suggested in the first sentence. Procedural or prescriptive ethics, as are found in Codes, offer only scant direction when faced with having to make decisions involving value conflicts, as are commonly found in ethical dilemmas. Not only is the daily world of social work practice one in which arise dilemmas begging ethical decision making, there are no hard and fast rules to assist with those decisions: social workers will have no certainty in their decisions. The legacy of ethical traditions and their divergences, for example, deontology and utilitarianism; the postmodern "turn" giving rise to alternate ethics, "of care", "of life", "of love" for example; and, for our purposes here, the potential incommensurability of ethics and some social work theories [39] to say nothing of an Indigenous ethics, produce an ethical impossibility. This emerges in several ways. Some value bases of social work such as self-determination find themselves contradicted by some of the underlying assumptions about the human condition of particular theoretical positions, psychodynamic theory, for example ([39], p. 77). A postmodern notion of ethical subjectivity challenges the idea that workers can make ethical decisions which call on an idea of a moral universe ([21], p. 40). Conflicting principles in codes or standards render prescriptive ethics meaningless ([40], p. 31). Adhering to the "social mandate" of social work almost certainly will contravene one or more organisational and political policy directives and bring into question the professional role ([38], p. 46), and so on. Ethics, therefore, as a worldview, is immediately confronted by this impossibility. How to provide an Ethics worldview requires making theoretical and value-based choices which can disenfranchise other positions.

We do not seek to provide a theory of ethics, although in the very stating of that, this becomes a theory for ethics. Unremarkably, the elements to be included here are *Dignity*, *Respect* and *Advocacy*, mirroring, in part, most other social work ethics frameworks. The provisions of the Human Rights Convention emphasise that all persons have rights irrespective of the various distinctions which are found within the human collective. Respect for those distinctions is at the centre of the consequent

anti-discrimination legislation of signatory nations. *Respect* forms a central part in common frameworks for moral thinking and depending on the proponent can be found to lead to the value positions upheld by the social work profession of non-judgementalism, the promotion of user's welfare and challenging inequalities and working for social change ([39], p. 60). A Human Rights practice, then, is an ethical practice which recognises the individual to have the right to be distinct, not to be judged, to be self-determining and to attract support and resources for his/her welfare. Complicating this in child protection practice is weighing up the (usually) child's right to protection from any harms that might emerge from an (usually) adult's exercise of self-determination and so on. Here the additional provisions of the Human Rights convention as argued above come into play where a complex interweave of the child's rights to family, culture, and government supportive resources are invoked to ensure that the "best interests" of the child are met. Challenging and changing damaging behaviour should be conducted through this prism. And while overt discriminatory behaviour may attract sanctions, the tendency to collapse normative expectations of family systems, child rearing practices, and so on continues. *Respect* due to the human person in circumstances of wilful harms to children is more difficult to defend. For the majority of situations, however, irrespective of the behaviour, the person who offends through his/her behaviour is still in relation to the child. There should be little to explain here or attract argument from others, unless they would seek to expand this list. We maintain, however, that *Dignity* and *Respect* and *Advocacy,* encompass necessary value positions for practice, irrespective, and possibly because of, the cautions identified above. Embedded in these cautions is the impossibility of the "generalised" moral world in which, irrespective of value positions, all people embody the same ethical position. Such is the reason for Critchley's [41] argument for an ethical subjectivity in which ethical experience is at the heart of ethical actions, or to put it another way–ethics requires an acting ethical subject. However, *Dignity* and *Respect* and *Advocacy* are themselves embedded in the Human Rights Convention, whether directly stated (Article 1), implied (e.g., Article 2 requiring respect for difference) or as a necessary activity for participation (e.g., Article 29 in relation to duties to the community). Ife's [37] discussion of the three generations of human rights which include additional declarations, treaties and other conventions make clear that these three are central to how people's rights should be upheld, with advocacy being a central and driving activity for social workers.

Advocacy is a central factor of ethical practice as illustrated in various social work codes, for example that of Aotearoa New Zealand ([42], para. 1.6) which states:

> Members actively promote the rights of Tangata Whenua to utilise Tangata Whenua social work models of practice and ensure the protection of the integrity of Tangata Whenua in a manner which is culturally appropriate.

Not only here is the requirement to act for rights but to respect the particular Indigenous models of work which are culturally appropriate. For example, working in Aotearoa New Zealand is always informed by core concepts of Maori care and protection social work practice: restoration of *tapu* (being, restriction and sacredness) ([43], p. 287) is central and *mana* (spiritual power and authority, influence, control, prestige and status) ([43], p. 283) of the children and families. Therefore, in Maori social work practice and theory there are three guiding ethical principles for this work. *Pono* is seen as social workers being true, genuine, unfeigned, honest, integrity and faithful ([43], p. 285).

Tika is understood as being right, correct, appropriate, proper, just, straight and direct, and is a societally agreed value or action ([43], p. 288). *Aroha* requires workers to be people who act with and are motivated by affection, love, compassion, mercy, empathy ([43], p. 281). *Aroha* recalls us to the Rogerian "unconditional positive regard", noted by Banks ([39], p. 37) in her justification for subsuming "respect for persons", a core belief in social work, into any precondition for ethical acts. Generalised "love" (agape), or, here, *aroha*, require these ethical principles be indivisible from practice.

For many Indigenous peoples *protection of integrity* is indissoluble from the natural and spiritual environment and so an ethics for practice is inclusive of the wider ecological system [44]. While social work internationally is starting to explore what the relatively newly emerging eco-social work practice might include and within that attention is being paid to Indigenous models [45], the extent of an ethics of and for practice which is informed by Indigenous worldviews is yet to be established.

3.1.3. Person-in-Environment

The Person-in-environment is the third of the principles which comprise our worldview and succinctly incorporates and represents much of what we have proposed in the previous sections. While this is a taken-for-granted maxim of social work, it bears a little reaffirmation here of its intrinsic meaning, especially in relation to who constitutes the "person" and what constitutes the "environment". Early social work theorists, such as Mary Richmond, emphasised that worker responses to the problems confronting clients needed to not only focus on individual issues but also on the contributing factors in the environment. Greene & Lee ([26], p. 9) note that Mary Richmond's diagnostic work included identifying "strengths, resources and assets of clients and their environment", even though the social work adoption of the medical model is often credited to Richmond. Possibly the most common representation of a model to describe the interaction between person and environment has been Bronfennbrenner's [46] bioecological systems theory particularly in relation to child protection [47]. However useful this has been we propose that an additional essential aspect to the systems approach to understanding the relationship between the individual and the environment is the necessity to invoke a cultural perspective. This may be done using Congress' [48] Culturagram. In the Aotearoa New Zealand setting, as in many Indigenous systems, the person is considered holistically alongside his/her relational responsibilities and the environment inclusive of the natural and spiritual world, and here an appropriate systems model may be Mason Durie's [49] *Te whare tapa whā* model.

Again from the Aotearoa New Zealand setting is Leland Ruwhiu's [13,14] model, Te Mahi Whakamana (a mana enhancing social and community work practice indigenous theoretical framework) in which there are three central recognition points: Maori understandings of well-being; historical developments; and the role of narratives. Te Mahi Whakamana draws upon the cultural metaphor of "he Ngakau Maori" (a Maori heart). Six key thematic concepts are used to examine wellbeing among Maori families and their relational and environmental circumstances. These are: wairuatanga (ideology, philosophy, paradigms, theoretical conceptualisations); whanau (relational development); tikanga matauranga (protocols of engagement); hauora, renamed mauri ora (levels of well-being); mana (respect); and ko au (identity and interconnectedness). Te Mahi Whakamana–mana enhancing theory and practice are premised on tangata whenua (people of the land, indigenous, native) epistimologies and ways of viewing the world. Tangata whenua inherantly "recognise the human

(he tangata), natural (te ao turoa) and the ideological (wairuatanga) dimensions of their worldview as being held together by the 'cultural adhesive of mana'" ([13], p. 134). Briefly, Te Mahi Whakamana practice is restorative and seeks to: build on inherent strengths, facilitate emancipatory strategies, enhance positive self-worth, demystify and deconstruct oppression, promote wellness, service and love for others [13].

Social work has always operated between the terrain occupied by the individual in the private world and the social, or external, world in which the state intervened to a greater or lesser degree, depending on particular ideological positionings in different locations, to ameliorate the circumstances affecting people's lives. Strengths, resources and assets of both the individual and her/his environment, then, characterise this worldview as presented here.

3.2. A Rights, Ethics and Person-in-Environment World View for Child Protection Practice

If we take these three elements together—rights, ethics and person-in-environment—our worldview can be summed up thus: the human condition is one of hope and potential even in the face of individual and environmental, or situational, adversity. A *Human Rights* perspective maintains that people (generally) and children (in particular) by the very nature of being human have recourse to the privilege of being regarded as capable, autonomous, and self-directing agents in their own right. It is the natural inclination of humans to be able to manage themselves and arrange their affairs in ways that are productive and contributive to the wellbeing of others. The social nature of the human environment provides the often realised opportunity to use their social interactions to the benefit of each other. This view of the human condition is tempered by deficits present in the environments around them and by individual and collective failures, all of which can affect people's ability to meet their potential. A Rights perspective assumes active and productive participation along with responsibilities to meet societal obligations. An Ethics perspective requires that people are to be treated with dignity, fairness, and respect, and that ethical practice demands workers advocate for these when they are absent or denied. And a Person-in-environment perspective assumes people have the capacity for positive growth and development to contribute productively to their own and their families' lives, and they have resources which they can use to this end.

4. Explanatory Theory for Child Protection Practice

The way workers seek to explain the circumstances and situations of those people with whom they work and then how they respond, using what methods, need to have substantial and well-articulated rationales. This is the role of theory of practice or explanatory theory. There are several writers of social work theory who have long made the distinction between explanatory theory and models of social work practice. Malcolm Payne ([28], p. 23), for example, at the same time as he explicitly takes a social construction approach to social work theory, also states that "a major feature of any acceptable model of social work 'theory' is the extent to which it can offer explanations of and guidance" and David Howe ([30], p. 10), characterises social work theory as needing to "explain [and] predict". Explanatory and intervention theories are closely linked, to the extent that there seems sometimes no need to differentiate between them. For example Attachment Theory, as deriving from ethology or survival mechanisms in the animal world [50], is both an explanation of why secure attachments for young children (or goslings from whence came Bowlby's insights) are essential for survival as well as

providing guidance for how to both recognise insecure or faulty attachments and how to restore them through programmes or processes employed with the birth parents or alternate care givers. The distinction drawn here between Explanatory theory and Intervention Theory is perhaps unique to those seeking to not only explain why problems occur but also to seek ways to theorise congruent interventions which can lead to the development of on-the-ground practice models required for the day-to-day practice.

It will be evident from our previous discussion where in this framework our theoretical sympathies lie, and we will expand on these in this section. However, it is also evident that Classical Liberal, Industrial Society theoretical explanations of the social world are used, quite effectively, to explain child abuse, and, leading into Intervention theories provide directions as to what sort of change is required and how to try to effect that change. So, for example, child abuse may be explained by the failure of parents and the family to provide adequate care such that children fail to thrive and, in some cases, families employ deliberate actions to damage children. These children must be removed to places of safety and their parents punished for their acts. Investigative measures are usually taken by governmental authorities in most Western jurisdictions, but consequent actions, such as supervisory and other treatment programmes may be undertaken by the private sector, funded for those purposes by the State. Taking a Classical Liberal explanation of failure and deficit, the State seeks to change behaviour through punishment or coercive means and contracts private agencies to assist. Or, taking an Industrial Society theory position which explains "failure" through lack of knowledge or skills, would look to such theories *for* practice as Attachment and those emerging from the Neurosciences, such as the importance placed on early brain development [51] which identify the early years of brain development as crucial for stable and productive adulthood. These theoretical positions are used widely in child protection policy and practice, albeit with others, to assess whether or not children should remain with their parents.

We have further refined the Socialist form of explanatory theory to one using Critical Theory on the grounds that this enables a much wider inclusion of approaches than the traditional class-based explanation, and one which we believe is much more applicable to the issue of child protection. So, in seeking to explain the phenomenon of child abuse, using a Critical Theory approach can argue that the widespread over-representation of minority (predominantly black but also inclusive of other minorities) children in Western child protection systems (see [52]) can be explained by racism, oppression and discrimination, for example [53–55], while still being congruent with the earlier positions of the perspective. While focusing on minority difference may leave relatively unscrutinised the protection needs of children from majority settings, the concern of this theoretical approach is of the tendency to increase surveillance on the "other" [4]. Strategies, or models to redress this, focus largely on organisational and structural change as well as child placement principles in force in some jurisdictions which specify that children removed from families should be placed, wherever possible, within their own cultural milieu [56]. Here we see the intersection of the principles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRoC), in which Article 8 specifically refers to the child's right to cultural identity.

Our perspective for understanding child protection leans more towards what Shannon & Young [27] have identified as the Alternative group of theories, which they also note is "constructivist" ([27], p. 33). In this interpretation we do not deny the existence of deliberate or willful damage to children by their parents, nor the prevalence of negative socio-economic indicators which often lead to allegations

of neglect [57]. Taking our lead from Gergen [58] we understand social constructivism to be the interaction between the knowing subject and the external environment. Parton & O'Byrne ([59], p. 14) expand by illustrating what is distinctive in constructionist thought: audience ascription. Accordingly, not only does a problem not exist *until* the audience, or the claims-maker, assert it to be so, the type or characteristics of the problem become those which are asserted in the claims that are made about it. Parton & O'Byrne are not alone in the social work world in believing that social work has an affinity for a constructionist perspective because of its change-oriented ethic and purpose. If social work seeks change, whether that of individuals, families or communities, then there must be an inherent belief in the possibility of change rather than the inevitability of a taken-for-granted consequence to a specific set of circumstances. They sum up their view of social constructionist social work as being one which centralises the problematising and criticising the social with a view to change and transform ([59], p. 26). Hence constructivism "emphasises process, plurality of both knowledge and voice, possibility and the relational quality of knowledge" ([59], p. 2).

It will be seen here that *constructionist* and *constructivist* have been used interchangeably, despite Gergen differentiating on the basis of the individual and the social constructions of reality. For Gergen ([60], p. 60) *social constructivism* advances the view that "while the mind constructs reality in the relationship to the world, this mental process is significantly informed by influences from social relationships". It is this emphasis on the person in environment that makes a social constructivist approach so appealing to social work.

Yet, despite the evident rejection of a realist or even subjectivist [59] position in social constructivism, this does not mean eclecticism should go unchallenged. While Gergen ([58], p. 26) contends: "constructionists establish no transcendent grounds for eliminating any theoretical formulation [and so] there is implicit in constructionism a strong pluralist ethic", this plurality is less about opposing theoretical explanations than it is about different interpretations of reality. A constructivist standpoint, therefore, accepts people in their environment will construct their own realities and social workers can engage with them about those realities. Nevertheless it is still incumbent on the worker to have ways to explain his/her own constructions of what s/he does and why without collapsing into an unexamined and eclectic selection of disparate and possibly opposing models.

An additional challenge arises here which demands attention. Rather than eclecticism, relativism may be a greater danger as one outcome of a constructivist position in which the end point may be "anything goes". In developing a proposed framework for practice we maintain that inclusion of all the key elements, with all their internal features, provides an opportunity to explore a range of opportunities and possibilities in working with the complexities of protecting children. While inevitably there are likely to be different interpretations, some of our previously cited examples [3,4] show that hearing the explanations that families have of their world; with shared responsibilities (Reciprocity) with their knowledges and capabilities (Family capital) alongside the distributed leadership of Collective action may assist in the arriving at solutions which do not descend into binary positionings.

It should be apparent now why the term *Co-Constructing Social Work* is the preferred description of our emerging model. We will elaborate on this in a later section, but the social constructivist definition offered above locates worker, client and the social environment in a triad of relational exploration, meaning-making and dialogue to arrive at co-constructed and collaborative actions and processes. This, we propose, is informed by the congruence between Explanatory Theory and practice approaches

which are co-constructed and collaboratively employed with clients and their support systems to be useful in the business of keeping children safe from harm.

5. Intervention Theories, or Theories for Child Protection Practice

Writing in social work for child protection practice is prolific, with much offering particular practice guidance, or in other words, models for practice rather than intervention *theory* for practice, for example [61,62]. Among the most common theoretical perspectives presented however, where they do appear, are Attachment Theory and Ecological Theory which are used extensively in child protection practice. With their emphasis on the importance of relationships, either between intimates or between the parts of the environment in which children live, these two theories are found to be explanatorily useful as well as providing guidance for practice. While deriving from different foundations, with Attachment Theory located in what Healy ([29], p. 47) calls the "psy" disciplines and Ecological Theory in the biological sciences ([31], p. 137), these two theoretical positions occupy a significant role in social work generally and in child protection practice specifically [50,63–65].

However, we maintain that the practice of child protection informed by child rights and using community development principles requires different Intervention theories to assist in the work. Community development is perhaps the most obvious, given its location in the overall aim of our work. In Figure 1, we provide a selection of Intervention theories relevant to the work inclusive of some Indigenous approaches, such as *Te whare tapa whā* [49] from Aotearoa New Zealand and *Raising our heads above the mountains* [66] from WA. There are of course others, and the suggestion here is for practitioners to engage with local Indigenous people to explore with them their Intervention theories, and asking permission for their use.

6. Model to Theory: Co-Constructing Social Work

In our present work, we are interested in how the worldviews and their corresponding explanatory and intervention theories can be applied to child protection practice using community development approaches. This means adapting somewhat the "eggs" and their contents for this purpose, and in particular paying more attention than those authors acknowledge they do to the Interpersonal ([27], p. 28).

We do this by taking our model [3,4] developed for practice with child protection using community development principles and practices framed within a child rights perspective and populate the micro section of the "Eggs" with the connections between the model, intervention theory and explanatory theory. We also reiterate that for us, these particular theories emanate from an Alternative or Constructivist "grand" theory. As such our presentation does not attempt to make similar connections to Industrial Society Theory, or Classical Liberal Theory, although it will be seen in Figure 2 that these connections are made between some models for practice and intervention and explanation in these theoretical positions. For example a managerialist (connected to hierarchical explanation) intervention leads to risk assessments as a model in child protection.

The key elements of the model we propose as *Co-constructing social work* are child-centred, contextual, family capital, collective action and reciprocity. How these arose as elements and some examples of how they operate in practice are described in the previous two articles [3,4]. In this article we are interested in linking the practices with their theoretical underpinnings. In Figure 2 we identify a

range of intervention theories which contribute to the particular practices. These are not exclusive but include: Systems, Standpoint, Mana-enhancing, Anti-discrimination, Child competence (liberationist theory), Strengths, "Person-in-environment" ecological, *Te whare tapa whā*, Habitus (social capital), Community development, *Raising our head above the mountains*, and Social network theories. While discussing these in detail would take at least a separate article, the common explanatory theories which link these are what Healy ([29], p. 197) refers to as the "post" theories. As well as critiquing "grand" theories and some of the previous ways of understanding the world as having uniform or universal application, "post" theories offer the opportunity for an interpretation of the human environment and its inhabitants which emphasises the contingent, contextual, multiple and diverse dimensions which may assist in uncovering or displaying alternate "truths" or discourses which, often unseen, affect the social world. All of the intervention theories named above allow for alternate from "mainstream" interpretations of the social worlds of those people with whom social workers work, and, importantly, the possibility of alternate strategies. We find this important, as, in concert with other writers such as [62,67,68] we believe the established child protection models as they are currently used in our settings to be insufficiently nuanced, targeted or effective.

Figure 2. Perspectives, explanatory and intervention theories and models for child protection practice at the interpersonal level.
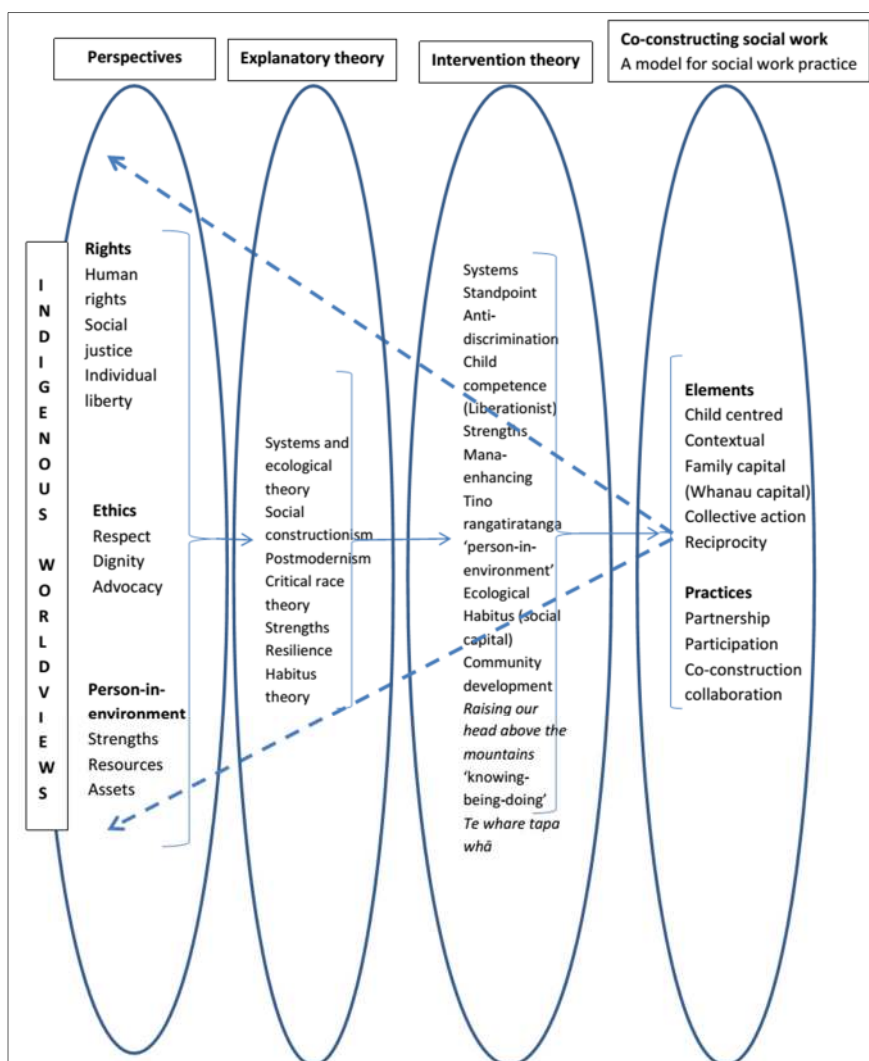
This paper acknowledges and seeks to bring together the "colours and humanness" of social work practice and theory. Our working together on this paper is a combination of our different starting points regarding child protection theory and practice. The "Eggs" diagram (Figure 2) which we have further refined is not exclusive or complete. They do however combine our understandings of what is needed to develop good child protection outcomes. This paper encourages us to be "open to learning" and have conversations with those we work with in order to co-construct the social work narrative, practice and outcome. We are privileging particular knowledges in this paper that between the five of us, in our separate countries, agree on. But we believe you will have your own eclectic nuances and your "Eggs" may be different. Useful child protection outcomes require an integrated approach: it is our belief that this starts with you and I.

When you are standing there about to undertake a piece of social work with another human being:

- What is your puku (stomach) saying to you? (Physical response).
- What is your ngakau (heart) saying to you? How have you connected with them and what they are saying and doing? (Felt response).
- What is your wairua (spirit) saying to you? (Sensed response).
- What does Te Ao Maori/Pakeha matauranga (mind) theory say to you? (Thought response).
- What are the whanaungatanga (family making) issues that resonate here? (Relational response).
- What kind of fabric is being woven? It includes distinctiveness that comes from a number of variants in this cultural context. (Integration response) ([69], p. 26).

Perhaps some of these questions may not seem to have any relevance for you as an educator, manager, policy writer or practitioner but they may be relevant for the worldview and meaning making frameworks of your audience. A co-constructing social work practice such as we propose relies upon our ability to incorporate viewings other than our own.

We are human beings who want to treat other human beings as fully human. Mauri ora!

7. Conclusions

Whakawhanaungatanga (family making) in the social work context refers to relationship making, which is standard social work practice in terms of the planned change process *i.e.*, engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation. But is it valued in child protection social work in 2014. Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd [70] use the term "open-to-learning" conversations when we are thinking about the quality of the thinking and information we use when making judgements about what is happening and what we are going to do about it. Are we only interested in the validity of our views and imposing them or are we searching for "other" viewpoints that may improve our thinking and practice. The real test is in the co-construction of the social work narrative (in both explanatory and intervention theory) and in the models for practice. The people we work with do have ideas about protecting their children and improving their lives. The outworking of our sometimes eclectic and sophisticated perspectives, explanatory and intervention theories and models of practice should reflect these lived experiences and worldviews. Otherwise we are repeating what Freire ([71], p. 21) would refer to as "false generosity", in that "any attempt to soften the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed the

attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their generosity the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well". The path forward in a child protection case must come out of the heart of the oppressed; anything else is just false generosity, and perpetuates the myth of equality. Young [72] when discussing "whiteness theory" would see this as an insidious form of white power and privilege under the guise of child protection of the "other". If the aim of a child protection intervention is to protect children and families long term it must be undertaken within their meaning making frameworks (perspectives, theories and practice) which are grounded in their own pukorero (real narratives from within) [9,17].

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Author Contributions

All contributors were responsible for the design and content of the paper, workshopping the ideas and theory in July 2013 and February 2014 which brought together each person's stories, experiences and knowledge. Susan Young was responsible for preparing and submitting the paper, with Margaret McKenzie writing sections, providing some of the Aotearoa New Zealand material and editing. Liv Schjelderup and Cecilie Omre provided the Norwegian material and reviewed and amended the draft document. Shayne Walker provided the Maori material and reviewed and amended the paper. All contributors reviewed and made suggestions to the final document.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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