



# THE WEST AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORKER

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## SOCIAL WORK STUDENT PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES

*This issue contains material provided by the three social work schools which reflects on the experience on students undertaking a practicum. The accounts by students are personal reflections on their own experience and intended to demonstrate the range of learning that occurs for each student. Information which could identify a client or an agency has been removed.*

### Curtin University Students

As third year social work students at Curtin University, a requirement of Research Inquiry 300 unit was to write a 'thick' description of an epiphanic learning experience, encountered during first placement. We hope you enjoy these brief 'slices of life' and warm up to reminiscing about your own practice wisdom.

**PAULA EDWARDS**

**STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE, COMMITTEE OF  
MANAGEMENT**

### Response-ability or I Did It Their Way (Eventually)

**Melinda Misson**

Even now, I can still recall the warmth of the winter sunshine on my skin and the feel and shape of the carefree smile on my lips as I opened the flywire door of the suburban counselling service I was assigned to during my placement. My co-worker bustled up to me - her face strangely stiff and urgent with her whispered appeal "your new client is here and she has brought her husband". The bottom dropped out of my stomach. I wasn't ready to see my first couple, hadn't prepared enough to face the dreaded dyad, to risk terrible triangulation. I began to hyperventilate.

This couldn't happen - not on my perfect placement, the placement I intended to do perfectly. I wanted to be forewarned, prepared and stuffed full of every possible therapeutic interven-

tion for every possible scenario before seeing my first couple. Individuals and families were dynamics I had worked with previously and felt comfortable with, but I had never seen a couple before and had been feeling quite nervous about the experience.

However, the worst was yet to come. "Those are his bags over there - he's leaving if the counselling isn't successful". At this point I stopped breathing altogether. My co-worker smiled gently at me, watching the panicked expressions march across my face. "You'll be fine. You know your stuff". I was not so confident.

With my mind travelling at beyond lightspeed, calculating what could and should happen and trying to figure the cause and effect of every possible permutation, I entered the counselling room. My gut was roiling and I just knew that if this couple left separately it would be my responsibility, my fault. I had to get this right... perfect... the first time. I decided, in my infinite wisdom for the safety of my clients, and myself that a nice concrete, solution-focused approach would be the best approach, given the circumstances (that is, my total state of panic). The strangest thing about this being that I hate solution-focused therapy and would never usually have considered using it while in my right mind.

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One hour later, with the clients not connecting and myself frustrated, I threw my hands in the air, gave a gut-driven moan and said, "Let's try something else". I asked the couple to, individually, talk to me about how they felt about the other, in the presence of the other, to get in touch with how they really felt. It was at this point in time that, in frustration, I actually let go of my responsibility for holding and controlling what should happen in the counselling room and began to access my ability to respond with and to the clients - my response-ability.

Within minutes, I saw magic happen - magic that I had held back in my fear. What I had forgotten in my panic, was that the clients' needs must be central to any therapeutic activity. This counselling session wasn't about me doing it perfectly; in fact it wasn't about me at all. It was about the clients, the clients doing it their way.

Two hours and many emotions and tears later (theirs and mine), they left together with a commitment to continue counselling, to work things out, and a renewed connection to the deep love they felt for each other. Later, in supervision, my clinical supervisor asked me how I would have felt if the couple left separately. I still don't know.

## New Beginnings

Ben Russell

I walk up the stairs of a doss house in inner city to visit Darren, a client I have been working with on practicum, in my capacity as a student social worker. The walls of the doss house are yellow from cigarette smoke and the ceiling is mouldy. The smell of the cooking grease and gravy from the soup kitchen in the building next door is overpowering. Although the building is old it is steeped in history. It was built in the early eighteen hundreds with its distinct European crafted architecture. Like many of the buildings around here the outside was painted a pastel yellow in the eighties for the tourists. Inside these yellow-coated pieces of history, the now elderly children of Portuguese immigrant workers who helped develop this city, reside, I reach Darren's door and knock upon it. Darren slowly opens the door.

"Oh...Hi Ben" he croaks with a tired voice.

This is unusual. Darren is usually brimming with excitement. He usually swings open the door wearing just his boxer shorts, hidden under a pale and furry girth, which has the three-dimensional impact that such girths have. Many well-savoured meals have gone into this girth and it is evidence of great gastronomic passion. Darren usually swings back and forth on the heels of his feet in rhythm to his fast and furious speech. Words and sentences collide in a mixture of excitement and indecisiveness.

Darren usually has so much to say and so little time to say it in our scheduled time together. Today is very different. His face is covered in stubble. He wears a faded red T-shirt covered in holes and his room smells stale and funky as though Darren has confined himself in it for days. And most concerning to me is that he is quiet. Deathly quiet.

"So how's life treating ya Darren?" I ask. "Not feeling too

good today" Darren muffles without his teeth in.

"You feel like a chat over coffee? It's a nice day outside." "Yeah...awright".

Darren slowly drags his feet towards a wardrobe, which takes up half the space of the overpriced room he rents. He puts on his walking thongs and a Hawaiian style shirt. As brightly coloured as this shirt is, it does not reflect his current mood. Darren doesn't wear lace up shoes because he can't bend forward enough over his belly to reach his feet. Darren feels pain in his back because of the weight he carries. Darren also has diabetes and on occasion we cook together in an attempt to encourage healthier eating habits.

This is a challenge as Darren has a taste for junk food and rarely eats fruit and vegetables. Darren is not motivated to cook when I'm not around. So when we do cook we cook as much as Darren can afford so he has a few healthy meals in the fridge when I'm not there. Unfortunately the fridges are communal and at times other residents consume Darren's food.

Darren comes out of his room, locks and obsessively checks the door numerous times before we leave. We slowly go down the stairs, as each step causes Darren back pain. After a short walk we are at a downtown café sipping on tea. I've had so much tea today my bladder is going to burst, but I am more concerned as to what has got Darren down in the dumps. It could be one of many things.

It could be one of a number of symptoms of schizophrenia that Darren experiences. Is it the noise of traffic that is so intense it makes Darren scream? Is it the arguments that Darren has with the voices in his head? Is it the obsessive-compulsive routine of checking his door every time he enters or leaves his room?

Or it could be Darren's physical health that's got him down. Could it be news that Darren's diabetes has not improved and he is now insulin dependent? Could it be back pain? Is Darren feeling tired from carrying all that glorious girth around?

Does Darren have financial woes? Not enough money from the disability support pension to meet his needs? Frustration at living in an overpriced, overcrowded shit hole? Darren opens up after a long awkward pause and a few sips of tea.

"Today is the twenty eight anniversary of my diagnosis of schizophrenia. I have been arguing with the voices in my head for twenty-eight years. The only other company I have are the staff and patients at the psych unit where I go every month to get my injection and medication to stop the ocular crises (side effect causing the eyes to roll backwards). My month revolves around that day. I meet other patients, organise to have coffees with them during the month and chat about what's going on in my head."

"So what has got you down now?" I ask.

"Now they give me Olanzapine tablets to take. I now get up each morning, take a tablet, have nowhere to go so I go back to sleep. The psych says that I am now free to live my life without having to have my jab every month. Is this the price of freedom!"

*Continued on page 11*

# NET WATCH

## AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF FAMILY STUDIES

This issue involves the Australian Institute of Family Studies web site <<http://www.aifs.org.au/>>. This site is one of the premier Australian sites, with a wealth of research material, policy information that seeks to enhance the quality of debate on family issues and consideration of options to improve the opportunities for Australian families.

An example of the high quality of the type of information that can be accessed from the AIFS web site is presented in the text of the following opening keynote address by Richard Eckersley at the 6th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference. This conference was held in Melbourne in November 1998.

"The need to redefine progress is not a new message, but it is becoming more compelling. Whether we look at young people's well being or, more broadly, at the overall quality and sustainability of modern life the evidence is mounting for a fundamental change in our worldview. Fine tuning the status quo simply won't do."

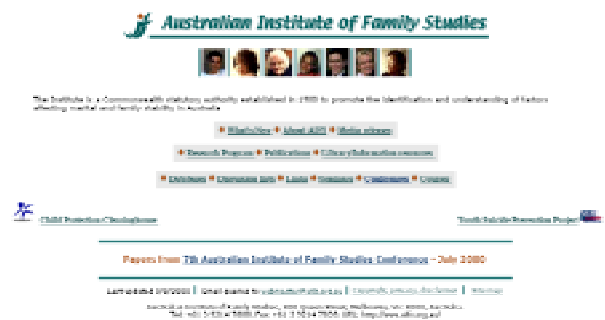
### Introduction

Ten years ago, I wrote for the Australian Commission for the Future a report, *Casualties of change: the predicament of youth in Australia* which analysed the worsening plight of young people, expressed in rising suicide, drug abuse and crime, and also more widely in an increasing social detachment and alienation (Eckersley 1988).

I argued that a range of economic, social and technological changes had combined and interacted to create a society that had become increasingly hostile to our well-being, and especially that of young people because of their social and psychological vulnerability. The changes included increased family conflict and breakdown, youth unemployment, poverty, education pressures and media influence, and also the emergence of a sense of hopelessness about the world's future.

At the time this broad, holistic view of the health and well-being of an entire generation was unusual and the report attracted a great deal of public and professional attention (the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, was even questioned about the report by journalists). Douglas Coupland's novel, *Generation X*, which labelled the generation, was still four years away. Public and political interest tended then to be focused on discrete aspects of the wider picture - drugs, crime and youth homelessness - and political responses targeted each specific issue, as they still do today. Youth suicide, now deeply imprinted on our national conscience, then flickered only occasionally at the margins of public consciousness.

I said in the report that public and political debate about these matters remained far too superficial, and warned that "as a result, the measures we are adopting to combat the problems we face will, if they make any impact at all, never fully succeed." Ten years on, how well has this prediction stood up?



### Recent trends in youth problems

Let's look first at what has happened with some of the relevant social and economic indicators (Eckersley 1988, ABS 1998a). In 1985-86, 811,000 dependent children, or 20.7% of all children, were living in poverty as measured by the Henderson poverty line; in 1995-96, 1,026,000 children (21.5%) were living in poverty - up from 233,000 (6.2%) in 1966. The youth (teenage) unemployment rate in 1987 was 20.3%; in 1997 it was 20.9% - up from 3.3% in 1967. The divorce rate in 1987 was 10.6 per 1000 married males; in 1996 it was 12.9 - up from 3.7 in 1966. (The proportion of divorces involving children has fallen over the ten years.)

Turning to the measures of health and well-being that I considered in the report, none has shown a marked improvement over the past ten years. We are still losing the war against drugs. Crime remains a serious social problem. The epidemic of youth suicide continues.

Opiate overdose deaths (excluding suicide) increased six-fold between 1979 and 1995 (Hall and Darke 1997). The trend reflects a general perception that the drug problem in Western societies has worsened in the 1990s (Fombonne 1998). Recent studies suggest illicit drug use and the health problems associated with that use are increasing (Health Education Unit 1998, Patterson et al 1998, Williams 1998).

Crime is mainly an activity of the young and especially young males. The rates of break, enter and steal, motor vehicle theft, fraud and stealing have levelled off or fallen in the 1990s after roughly doubling over the 1970s and 1980s (Mukherjee and Dagger 1995). The rates of serious assault, robbery and arson have continued to rise in the 1990s, and have increased four- to ten-fold between 1973-74 and 1996-97.

Changes in reporting and recording crimes have contributed to this pattern of rising crime rates, but it is generally believed to reflect, in a somewhat distorted way, a real increase in crime. Criminal activity - although not all of it - is strongly linked to psychological problems such as conduct disorder or anti-social personality and there is separate evidence that these have become more common (Fombonne 1998).

The suicide rate for males aged 15-19 was 13 per 100,000 in 1986 and 17 in 1996; for males aged 20-24, the rate was 29 in 1986 and 33 in 1996 (Eckersley 1988, ABS pers com). Despite these figures, the rise in male youth suicide peaked in 1988 (at rates of 21 and 35), and appears to have plateaued since then, after trebling since the 1950s. Suicide rates for young women, while about double the 1950s rate, have not shown the sustained rise seen in males. This does not mean youth suicide is a male problem. Young women continue to attempt suicide more often than young men, but succeed less often because they tend to use less fatal means, especially overdosing.

It is likely that the rates under-estimate the increase in suicidal behaviour among young people in recent decades. Medical advances and other developments have reduced the lethality of suicide attempts during the past 30 years (suicide rates have fallen in most older age groups). These changes would have particularly affected female suicide.

However, the most significant development of the past decade has not been any shifts in these trends, but in our improved understanding of the extent of the psychosocial problems young people are suffering today, and suffering at a younger age. The evidence suggests the problems are not confined to the socially disadvantaged and marginalised in our society, but are a product of being young in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While less than 0.02% of young people take their own lives each year, they represent only the tip of an iceberg of suffering, with recent studies showing that a fifth to a third of young people today experience significant psychological distress or disturbance (Zubrick et al 1995, Patton 1997, ABS 1998b). A recent survey of university undergraduates found almost two thirds reported some degree of suicidal ideation or behaviour in the previous 12 months, at least to the extent of saying they felt that 'life just isn't worth living', or that 'life is so bad I feel like giving up' (Schweitzer et al 1995). Almost 7% said they had 'made attempts to kill myself'.

The reasons for the worsening trends in psychosocial problems remain to be definitively established. They could differ for different periods and for different disorders. They could include links between problems with, for example, drug abuse being associated with crime and suicide. However, the main underlying reasons are believed to include the following factors (Eckersley 1993, Carnegie Council 1995, Rutter and Smith 1995, DH&FS 1997):

- ◆ Family breakdown, conflict, abuse and neglect - leading to the absence of a close and trusting relationship with a caring, dependable adult.
- ◆ Changes in adolescent transitions - including the emergence of a youth culture that isolates young people from adults and increases peer and media influence; increased tensions between dependence and autonomy; and more romantic relationship breakdowns.
- ◆ Increased inequality, disadvantage and unemployment - creating a perception of a lack of opportunities in mainstream society.

- ◆ Cultural shifts - including increased individualism and higher expectations and society's failure to provide an adequate cultural framework of values, hope, meaning, purpose and belonging - both socially and spiritually.

The evidence for a gradient of distress among young people suggests that while tragedies such as suicide arise from intensely personal circumstances, they also represent the extreme end of a spectrum of responses by many young people to modern life. These range through degrees of suicidal attempt and ideation, depression, drug abuse and delinquency to a pervasive sense of alienation, disillusion and demoralisation (traits more likely to be expressed in passivity than through anger or anti-social behaviour).

Many recent surveys of youth attitudes here and overseas have reinforced the view that many (perhaps most) young people are not comfortable with the broader changes they see taking place in society, even if they remain happy and optimistic about their own personal circumstances (Eckersley 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b). Nor are they inspired by the visions of the future held up to them by society. Like many older people, they regard social institutions, especially government, with growing cynicism and mistrust. While most may continue to work within 'the system', many no longer believe in it or are willing to serve it.

### **A population health approach**

I have attempted in my work to give a sharp edge to an issue that, while clear-cut at its core (suicide, serious mental illness or drug abuse), is very diffuse and ill-defined at its wider social margins (alienation and disillusion). In doing this, I am conscious of treading a fine line between defining a broad, complex situation and exaggerating its seriousness. But this approach has been essential in drawing attention to the links between issues that are usually viewed in isolation, and the extent to which the problems of young people today go to the heart of our society and its culture and economy.

This perspective is consistent with the view in public health, stemming from the work of the British epidemiologist, Geoffrey Rose, that both health problems and their causes are often distributed continuously in a population, and that there is a relation between the mean (average) of a characteristic and the prevalence of deviance (Marmot 1998). A population-health approach involves lowering the risk for a whole population or sub-population, rather than attempting to identify and treat high-risk individuals. In the case of young people and their well-being, this means tackling the social, cultural and economic roots of the problems.

The family sits at the centre of this relationship between young people and the world. If the health of children is a measure of the health of the family, it is also true that the health of the family is a measure of the health of the society. What happens in the world affects what happens in the family. For many, the family is a haven, a sanctuary; for others it is a bear pit where all their bitterness, frustration and anger are unleashed. We hear a lot about the bear pits - the dysfunctional families - and the harm they do to children. We hear much less about the good that good families do: their ability to protect young people from the risks and hazards of life today (Silburn et al 1996, Resnick et al 1997).

In a second report for the Commission for the Future, *Youth and the challenge to change*, I described young people as “*the miners’ canaries of our society, acutely vulnerable to the peculiar hazards of out times*” (Eckersley 1992). I said: “*The health and well being of young people is a critical measure of a society for two reasons: in moral terms, how well a society cares for its weak and vulnerable is a measure of how civilised it is; in more pragmatic terms, a society that fails to cherish its youth, fails. It’s as simple as that.*”

The good news about the last ten years is that the situation - or at least several key features of it - may have stopped getting worse (illicit drugs stand out as a glaring exception). The bad news is that the situation is worse than we realised a decade ago.

The extent to which any success in containing the problems can be attributed to policy interventions is an interesting question. For example, one reason why some crime rates have stopped climbing may be the declining proportion of the population in the most crime-prone age group (Walker and Henderson 1991). The plateau in the male youth suicide rate could be the result of our greater awareness and openness about the problem, so reducing troubled young people’s sense of isolation and personal failure and encouraging them to seek help.

In reviewing what has been achieved in the past ten years, we need to bear in mind that many of the issues I have discussed — youth unemployment, child poverty, drugs, crime and, in recent years, youth suicide — have been high on the political agenda, and the target of sustained policy interventions over many years, even decades. The failure of these policies to improve the situation raises legitimate doubts about the way these problems are conceptualised and addressed - as I warned ten years ago.

Is this judgement supported by taking an even wider view of modern Western societies, and examining ‘macro’ measures of national life and what they reveal about the relationships that are central to our way of life - the relationships between economic growth, quality of life and ecological sustainability? This has been the subject of my work in recent years.

### **Growth and well-being**

In Australia and other developed nations, we have defined progress — how we make life better - in mainly material terms and measured it as a rising per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product). The Prime Minister, John Howard, declared in a speech to a World Economic Forum Dinner in Melbourne in March 1998 that: “The overriding aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual (economic) growth rate of over 4% on average during the decade to 2010” (Howard 1998).

The Government’s strategic economic objectives were pursued not as ends in themselves, he said, but as the means for achieving more jobs, higher living standards and an effective social safety net. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister clearly set the rate of economic growth as the prime benchmark by which to judge his Government’s performance. Four of the six priorities Howard set out in his speech related to the ‘growth’ objective. The other two, dealing with social and environmental issues, were essentially compensatory - that is, they were aimed at offsetting the costs of growth.

The Coalition Government is not alone in placing so much emphasis on growth, in believing it to be a measure of all things (although it appears to be shifting from this position since the 1998 election). Its view is fairly representative of governments the world over. In his day, Paul Keating, too, once said that if you couldn’t grow the economy at over 4% a year “you might as well give the game away”.

If we were to sustain this rate of economic growth, we would be, *on average*, twice as wealthy as we are now in about 20 years (and ten times as wealthy in real terms as we were 100 years ago). On present trends, most of the new wealth would go to those already wealthy. Should this really be our top priority as a nation?

The equation of more with better - of standard of living with quality of life - in defining progress is coming under critical scrutiny in the research literature, but remains largely unquestioned in mainstream public and political debate. The fundamental assumptions about economic growth - that it enhances well-being and is environmentally sustainable - are rarely highlighted or explored. They should be.

In the late 1980s, the Chilean economist, Manfred Max-Neef, and his colleagues undertook a study of 19 countries, both rich and poor, to assess the things that inhibited people from improving their well-being (Max-Neef 1995). They detected among people in rich countries a growing feeling that they were part of a deteriorating system that affected them at both the personal and collective level. This led the researchers to propose a *threshold hypothesis*, which states that for every society there seems to be a period in which economic growth (as conventionally measured) brings about an improvement in quality of life, but only up to a point - the threshold point - beyond which, if there is more economic growth, quality of life may begin to deteriorate.

The hypothesis has been supported in recent years by the development of indices, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator, that adjust GDP for a wide range of social and environmental factors, including income distribution, unpaid housework and voluntary work, loss of natural resources, and the costs of unemployment, crime and pollution (Eckersley 1998, Halstead 1998, Hamilton 1998). These ‘GDP analogues’ show that trends in GDP and social well-being, once moving together, have diverged since about the mid-1970s in all countries for which they have been constructed, including the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

The reasons for this divergence may vary between nations, but include: the growing costs of environmental damage and resource depletion, including greenhouse gas emissions; increasing income inequality; unsustainable foreign debt; the rising cost of unemployment and overwork; the failure to maintain capital investment; and the transfer of (unpaid) household production to the market. The American non-profit, public-policy organisation, Redefining Progress, which developed the Genuine Progress Indicator, argues that much of the current growth in GDP derives from three things: “*fixing blunders and social decay from the past; borrowing resources from the future; or shifting functions from the traditional realm of household and community to the realm of the monetised economy*” (Cobb et al 1995).

Public opinion surveys also support the view that growth may have diminishing benefits and escalating costs. At a personal level, most people in the developed world are satisfied with life and optimistic about their future. However, from a broader, social perspective, most no longer appear to believe life is getting better despite being richer. Even the new alternative measures to GDP do not come close to reflecting the negativity expressed in surveys of public perceptions about the state of society and the future of humanity.

For example, in a national poll last year, 1200 Australians aged 18 and over were asked whether they thought overall quality of life - taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends - was getting better, worse or staying about the same (Eckersley 1998). A half - 52% - believed life was getting worse, a half of these saying it was getting a lot worse, and only 13% that it was getting better. The rest — 33% - said quality of life was staying about the same (Due to space limitations a table with these results has been omitted. *ED*).

The Middle Australia Project, directed by sociologist Michael Pusey, produced similar findings (Pusey 1998). Pusey says of his sample of 400 'middle Australians' (representing the middle 70% of urban householders) that: "Nearly two thirds of them admit that their material standards of living have risen in the past 10 years but, with their next breath, say that their quality of life is declining and that families are in trouble." The results show that the most common ways in which quality of life was perceived to be falling were: too much greed and consumerism; the breakdown in community and social life; too much pressure on families, parents and marriages; falling living standards; and employers demanding too much.

Pusey says Australians are experiencing economic change as harmful pressure on the family. Over 90% of people believed family life was changing, with 54% saying it was changing a lot. Of these, two thirds said the negative aspects of these changes stood out most. These included: the breakdown of traditional values; too much consumerism and pressure to get more money and buy things; a breakdown of communication between family members; and greater isolation of families from extended family networks and the community. (The third who saw the changes as positive cited the more equal relationship between men and women, the sharing of housework and more freedom.)

Thus many Australians are identifying as a *problem* what governments persist in seeing as the *solution* to our situation. There is other evidence that becoming richer should not be our primary goal. For example, wealth is a poor predictor of happiness (Myers and Diener 1996). People who win the lottery are no happier a year after the event than they were before. Even the very rich are only slightly happier than the average citizen, and those whose incomes have increased over a ten-year period are no happier than those whose incomes have not.

People have not become happier as their societies have become richer. In most countries, the correlation between income and happiness is negligible; only in the poorest countries is income a good measure of well-being. In general people in rich countries appear to be happier than those in poorer countries, but

the margin may be slim, and based on factors other than wealth.

Also, recent health research suggests that what is important to health in developed nations is not the physical effects of material deprivation associated with absolute poverty, but the psychological and social consequences of relative deprivation. The British medical researcher, Richard Wilkinson, a leading figure in this work, says that what seems to matter are the social meanings attached to inferior living conditions and how people feel about their circumstances and about themselves (Wilkinson 1994). The health data suggest, he says, that the quality of the social fabric, rather than increases in average wealth, may now be the prime determinant of the real subjective quality of human life.

The belief that material progress equates with a better life is so ingrained in our culture we are overlooking the importance of other factors - in particular, the personal, social and spiritual relationships that give our lives a moral texture and a sense of meaning - of self-worth, belonging, identity, purpose and hope. Positive life meaning is related to strong religious beliefs, self-transcendent values, membership in groups, dedication to a cause and clear life goals (Zika and Chamberlain 1992). In their book, *Understanding Happiness*, Bruce Headey and Alex Wearing (1992, p191) note that: "A sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with life satisfaction."

### Growth and sustainability

What about the assumption that economic growth is ecologically sustainable? While I can't answer the question in detail here, it is important to stress that any considerations of quality of life and well-being must take into account environmental issues.

The link between the quality and sustainability of life - between human well-being and environmental health - is pervasive, and includes spiritual, cultural and aesthetic dimensions as well as physical. The physical aspect is being brought into closer focus by the analysis of the implications for human health of environmental changes, including global warming, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution and land and water degradation and depletion. These implications range from increased conflict and natural hazards, through increases in infectious diseases and cancers, to disrupted food production.

Advocates of economic growth argue it is good for the environment (Eckersley 1998). As countries grow richer, consumer preferences and the structure of the economy change, technology becomes more efficient and cleaner, and the countries can afford to invest more in environmental improvements. While this is true of problems such as urban air and water quality, the evidence suggests this relationship is less likely to hold for the major, global-scale environmental issues such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of resources such as soils and forests. It also fails to account adequately for the transfer of polluting industries to other, poorer countries.

A recent analysis says that where environmental costs are borne by the poor, by future generations, or by other countries, the incentives to correct the problem are likely to be weak (Arrow et al 1995). The report states that empirical findings do indicate

economic growth may be associated with improvements in some environmental indicators. However, “they imply neither that economic growth is sufficient to induce environmental improvement in general, nor that the environmental effects of growth may be ignored, nor, indeed, that the Earth’s resource base is capable of supporting indefinite economic growth”.

As things stand, a wide range of environmental indicators shows that, globally, we are still moving *away* from sustainability, not towards it (Eckersley 1998). A new report by the World Wide Fund for Nature includes a ‘Living Planet Index’ based on an assessment of forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems (WWF 1998). The report notes the index declined by about 30% between 1970 and 1995, “meaning that the world has lost nearly a third of its natural wealth in that time”. The final statement of the 1997 United Nations ‘Earth Summit’ stated that participants were “deeply concerned that overall trends for sustainable development were worse today than they were in 1992” (the year of the previous summit) (*The Canberra Times*, 29 June 1997, p4).

### Limits of growth

The need to question prevailing assumptions about economic growth, quality of life and ecological sustainability is also demonstrated by the trends in five indicators of Australia’s development over the past 100-150 years - per capita GDP, life expectancy, unemployment, per capita energy consumption and population (Eckersley 1998). Australians are, on average, almost five times richer (in real terms) now than at the turn of the century. Per capita energy use, a broad measure of resource consumption and waste production, has increased correspondingly. The population has also increased about fivefold, so that total economic activity and energy use are about 25 times greater now than 100 years ago.

While Australians are materially much better off than ever before, some of the improvements in well-being are less directly linked to economic growth than is widely believed. Growth was stagnant before the Second World War, but life got better for most people because public policy initiatives improved education, health, housing and working conditions and, for some of this time, wealth and income were becoming more evenly distributed. Reflecting these changes, life expectancy, which has increased by about 30 years or 60% since the 1880s, was rising steadily when per capita GDP was not. With employment, the nature of the relationship with economic growth appears to be shifting; despite relatively strong growth, unemployment in the 1990s is at its highest level outside the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s.

The crux of the debate about progress is the direction of change. Will we improve the quality and sustainability of life by continuing on our present path of progress - increasing average wealth to give the average consumer greater choice? Or do we need to find a new path that leads in a different direction, towards new personal and social goals? Both expert analysis and public opinion suggest the need to canvass more openly the possibility and feasibility of new directions.

The rationale for economic growth as we pursue it today seems flawed in several important respects: (1) it overestimates the extent to which past improvements in well-being are attributable to growth; (2) it reflects too narrow a view of human well-being,

and fails to explain why, after 50 years of rapid growth, so many people today appear to believe life is getting worse; (3) it underestimates the gulf between the magnitude of the environmental challenges we face and the scale of our responses to them; and (4) it neglects the social costs of growing inequality.

The issue of contention is not simply a question of growth versus no-growth. The main political justification for promoting growth is jobs. Economic expansion may be better than contraction in increasing employment, but it is also now creating more overwork and underwork, more job insecurity, and a widening income gap. All these things, like unemployment, put pressure on individuals, families and the whole fabric of society.

We need to focus not just on wealth creation but also on the distribution and conservation of wealth, not just on the rate of growth but also on the content of growth. We need to look much more closely at *what* is growing, *what effects* this growth is having, and *what alternatives* might exist. Improving both our current personal well-being and the long-term quality and sustainability of life require the same shift: from an economy characterised by high growth, increasing inequality and conspicuous consumption, to one directed towards safeguarding the natural environment, increasing social cohesion and equity, and enriching human life.

The task, then, is not simply to abandon growth; it is to move beyond growth. To suggest this is not necessarily to be ‘anti’ the economy, business or technological innovation, but to argue that these activities need to be driven by different values towards different ends.

### Culture and values

The Australian biologist and theologian, Charles Birch, once said that: “*What we do in the world flows from how we interpret the world*”. Making life better must involve re-examining our worldview and values. The magnitude of the challenge we face can seem overwhelming, but viewing it in terms of values re-establishes the links with our personal lives. Values matter because they are essentially about how we get along with each other and manage our affairs; they define our relationships and shape our identities, beliefs and goals.

There are several characteristics of modern Western culture which powerfully influence our values. They include: economism, consumerism, postmodernism, pessimism and individualism. These cultural qualities don’t act in isolation. They are all inter-related to a greater or lesser degree, and they interact with structural changes in society - for example, the growth of large cities, with their increasing anonymity, and the growing infiltration of technology into our lives.

**Economism:** Economics is amoral - that is, it is not concerned with the morality of the choices consumers make to maximise their utility, or personal satisfaction. The more economic choices govern our lives (individually and as a society), the more marginalised moral considerations become. The market may be an efficient way of allocating resources - of deciding *how* something is done - but not *what* we do and *why*.

**Consumerism:** Most if not all societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. For example, according to the 13th Century theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, the seven deadly sins are pride (self-centredness), envy, avarice, wrath, gluttony, sloth and lust; the seven cardinal virtues are faith, hope, charity, prudence, temperance, fortitude and religion. Consumer society has effectively reversed these lists, making the vices virtues and vice versa. We cannot quarantine other aspects of life, including those most important to well-being, from the moral consequences of the economic requirement for ever-increasing consumption.

**Postmodernism:** Postmodernity, or late modernity, describes a world coming to terms with its limitations, including the end of the 'modern' dream of creating a perfect social order through the rational instruments of science, technology and bureaucracy. It is world characterised by relativism, pluralism, ambivalence, ambiguity, transience, fragmentation and contingency. Its danger is an 'anything goes' morality, a belief that values are just a matter of personal opinion, and that one set of values is no better or worse than another. Values cease to require any external validation, or to have any authority or reference beyond the individual and the moment. 'Personalised' values become another aspect of moral marginalisation and individual isolation.

**Pessimism:** While most people are personally optimistic, they are socially pessimistic. That is, we are hopeful about our own personal futures, but concerned about the future of society or humanity. The significance of this pessimism remains conjectural. But it seems likely that it affects, perhaps subtly and indirectly, people's attitudes to many aspects of their lives - personal relationships, education, work, citizenship - once again, increasing the risks of 'distancing' the individual from society.

**Individualism:** Expressed as an acknowledgement of human dignity and the rights to freedom, self-determination and political participation, and as a celebration of human potential, individualism has been a powerful force for good in human history. Expressed as self-centredness and greed, a pre-occupation with entitlements, an abrogation of responsibilities and a withering of collective effort, individualism can be destructive to both personal and social well-being.

The point about these five cultural traits is that they each have, or can have, positive dimensions. The inalienable right of individuals to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' is at the core of modern democracy. The loosening of social constraints and obligations can enhance personal freedom and creativity, and bring a greater social vitality, diversity and tolerance. Yet taken too far, and expressed as material indulgence and moral licence, rather than social and political engagement, these cultural trends deliver, not liberation, but a new enslavement. In particular, they threaten democracy because political power comes from a sense of collective, not individual, agency - from pursuing a common vision based on shared values, not maximising individual 'utility'.

And it seems to me that in recent times, we have reached the point where the cultural negatives are reinforcing each other, and we now lack the necessary cultural balances. Thus, far from

providing a moral counter-weight to economism and consumerism, the moral ambiguity of postmodernism and the loss of faith in a better world strengthen their celebration of the individual and the gratification of personal needs and wants that are never sated because new ones keep getting created.

Even so, we still see a mix of benefits and costs, gains and losses. In some respects we have improved as a society: we have become better educated, more tolerant and aware, less sexist and racist. There is no single current of social change or progress, and different streams can flow at different speeds. Some of the contemporary improvements may be the result of social and political processes that began long ago and reflected different values. And it may be that we are yet to experience the full costs of what we see happening today: the creation of a society in which growing numbers of individuals are being alienated and social institutions are increasingly failing to meet people's deepest needs.

The Australian human ecologist, Stephen Boyden, has listed the universal psychosocial conditions of life that are conducive to health and well-being (Boyden 1987, p. 79). They include an environment and lifestyle that provide a sense of personal involvement, purpose, belonging, responsibility, interest, excitement, challenge, satisfaction, comradeship and love, enjoyment, confidence and security. It is clear that for more and more people modern life no longer offers these qualities.

### Flames of revolution?

There are three ways we can respond to our situation. We can attempt to show things are not as I have described them; as the economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, said: "*Given the choice between changing and proving that change is not necessary, most people will get busy on the proof*". Or we can divert ourselves in distractions; as Woody Allen said: "*Don't underestimate the power of distraction to keep our minds off the truth of our situation*". Or we can change; as the anthropologist, Margaret Mead, said: "*A small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*"

There are now more and more conversations taking place about the issues I have discussed here. There are a thousand brushfires of revolution breaking out as more people re-assess their priorities and explore different ways of thinking about and living their lives. However, it is not yet clear that these fires will grow and spread. Other evidence suggests most people are responding to perceptions that life is getting grimmer by turning away from engagement with the wider world and inwards on their own existence.

Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, says the big theme of Australia today is insulation (Mackay 1998). "*We are 'tending our own patch' and becoming absorbed in our own concerns....our focus has narrowed to an extent that allows us to exclude some of the 'nasty stuff' which has become too unpalatable to think about.*" This withdrawal might be an understandable response, but it comes at a price - one which is being paid mostly by young people, and one which will become even higher for future generations.

The more fundamental issues I have raised are not the issues that governments are concerned with. There seems to be a disjunction between our broad social experience and a narrower political agenda, as if they exist on different planes of perception. Somewhere in the translation of social concerns into political issues an awful lot gets distorted or lost altogether.

So the impetus to change will not come from our leaders, but from ordinary people. This is where the 'big picture' I have been discussing and our personal lives intersect. This is from where we draw our power. Change will come about from choices, individually taken as citizens and consumers, which reflect a collective will to think and do things differently.

### Conclusion

Shaping the future to human needs means redefining what we mean by 'progress'. Do we continue to equate progress with increasing standard of living and material wealth, which is ecologically unsustainable? Or do we equate progress with improving quality of life and total well-being - physical, mental, social and spiritual - which can be sustainable?

Changing the definition might seem a simple task, but it is immensely difficult. Growth is central to our economic system, and material progress lies at the heart of our culture - a culture powerfully reinforced by the mass media, marketing and advertising. To redefine progress means posing and discussing, much more openly and critically than we have, questions like:

- ◆ What do we want from life? (What is its purpose? What makes a better life?)
- ◆ How do we best get what we want? (Is it through continuing economic growth and material progress of the sort we now have?)
- ◆ What values will promote what we want, and discourage what we don't?

We will have to work out the answers to these questions ourselves, personally and as a society, before we can expect government, business and other institutions to reflect them in their policies, programs and products. Ultimately, how effectively we address many of the issues currently dominating public and political debate hangs on our answers to these questions.

Whether we look at the progress of nations very broadly, or focus on the well-being of young people, the evidence suggests the need for profound change, for a new view of ourselves in the world. The decades ahead promise 'tectonic' shifts in global civilisations - possibly cataclysmic, maybe drawn out, so that their true significance will only become apparent from a future, historical perspective. To borrow from chaos theory, how we respond in little ways today could have big outcomes tomorrow. How we choose to live affects the world - there is no escaping that - so we should choose to live to change the world.

*Richard Eckersley is a visiting fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University, where he is working on aspects of progress and well being. (Note: The references have been omitted for space reasons. They can be found with the article on the AIFS web site.)*

## STUDENT PLACEMENT DATES FOR 2001

### *Curtin University*

Final placements: 19 February - 11 June  
Second year: 30 July - 19 November

### *University of WA*

Final placements: 26 February - 15 June  
First practicum: 18 June - 7 September

### *Edith Cowan University*

Final placements: end of April - 3rd week of August  
First practicum: end of May - mid September

### *Note*

Supervisors seminars to be advised

## A PEACEFUL PROCESSION FOR RIGHTS OF REFUGEES

### A rally and march to raise awareness of refugee issues, Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> October 12.30 - 2.00 pm

It is planned to raise issues of temporary protection, mandatory detention, human rights violations, racial vilification and access to services.

### Program

- 12 12.15 Assemble at Perth Esplanade (near corner of Barrack Street)  
12.30 March to Forrest Place  
1.00 Rally with speakers
- ◆ Tony Cooke (Secretary of Unions of WA)
  - ◆ Rosemary Miller (Uniting Church Social Justice Consultant)
  - ◆ Tim Muirhead (Coordinator of Australians for Reconciliation)

This event is organised by the Student Social Work Committee of the University of Western Australia as part of AUSTCARE Refugee Week in conjunction with AUSTCARE, Community Aid Abroad, Amnesty International and TEAR Australia. For more information contact Erica on 9379 0678, Melanie on 9312 1275 or Lynne on 9317 1414.

### Local and Global Practice

### Relocating social work as a human rights profession in the new global order

### The 2000 Eileen Younghusband Lecture

### Presented by Professor Jim Ife

### Wednesday 20 November 2000 at 7.30 pm

This is a lecture Jim Ife presented in Canada in June 2000 at a plenary session of the joint conference of the International Federation of Social Work and the International Association of Schools of Social Work. This is only the second time an Australian social worker has been invited to present this lecture and it is recognition of Jim Ife's substantial contribution to international human rights and social justice issues. Further details will be circulated with the November issue of the newsletter.

# New Members

The WA Branch welcomes the following new members:

- ◆ Nathan Laird (Education Department WA)
- ◆ Elizabeth Sullivan (Centrelink)

*Continued from page 11*

## **Narrative on a learning experience: Lear revisited Louise Clarkson**

No sooner than we were seated than he barked "Where to begin?" and launched into a monologue that sounded rehearsed, as if he repeated it a thousand times in his mind. But then I saw his story had a malignant life of its own, that it grew with the telling; spilled like smoke from a rank bonfire into the room where we sat; curled tendrils of words round the chairs, clutched at the computer in the corner, dragged across the floor, pooled stale in corners. He would have his revenge, he would kill them all, all. I saw him squatting like a toad with hot, red-rimmed eyes as he spelled out his hate for his wife, for his sister-in-law for his daughters for his mother all whores, all bitches, all sluts, all filth, his fluent Elizabethan contempt for women, all women.

I was a woman, sitting close, sitting, in fact, directly in front of him, almost knee to knee. My heart knocked with tension and I must have grimaced nervously because he said: "Don't you smile at me, Missy".

He was consumed by thoughts of revenge for the business dealings with his brothers that went sour forty years ago; devoured by hate for a mother who left him sixty years ago. He had married his wife when he was fifty, to have someone to look after him in his old age, when he was sick, that was what women were for, he had a right, he had his Rights. His wife gambled it all away, they all did, the bitches, she took everything and he had nothing. She had abused the children when they were small, left them, slapped them, he had complained, nothing was done. I was to fix it so that he would get, into his own private account, a Carer Allowance that she would be eligible for, because he was a sick man, and she should be looking after him. She was not to have this allowance, he would, a small secret redress for his terrible wrongs, the sins against him. He was, he said, and angry man.

I looked and found not only an angry man, but an unlovely man, limp pajama pants hitched around a beer belly, sad paisley dressing gown gathered across dead-white chest, four days of stubble showing on his face under a black woollen beanie jammed to his eyebrows. He was an uncontrolled diabetic, he had heart disease, and he needed oxygen. For two days the hospital security guards had held him down at night as he trashed and swore in delirium after a fall from his bed at home, cause not determined. His anger was so tangible to me, it felt like a third person in the room. I said very quietly: "I respect your Anger"; and I gave it a capital for importance.

His head jerked back in surprise. "Nobody says that" he said. It was true though. His anger was a living thing, feeding off him, possessing him, stripping him to his bones: by God, I respected it. I repeated "I respect your Anger; I also respect your anxiety", for in his eyes I had seen a desperate fear.

So he told me more of himself, his scientific mind, his research into heredity, his grand theory of everything. He alone had the class, the style, the erudition, the intelligence to make these connections. He would be published, then they would see, those others, the mediocre minds. I focussed on his own mind, and asked him how he felt. "Those nights", he whispered, "I was afraid I was mad". I attempted to create a safe, peaceful space for that mind, just for a few minutes, something he could refresh himself with, but cursed my inexperience in counselling.

I promised him the information he wanted on the allowance, but warned him that his own doctor had to fill out a separate section; must justify his incapacity and care. I rang Social Security, and they told me the carer nominated the account and signed the form: his small sharp viper revenge may not find its mark. Later I dropped off the Carer Allowance Pack and saw him the next day, when he was about to go home.

The Pack had its protective plastic clawed at, and then it had been thrust hastily back and shoved to the extreme edge of his bedside cabinet. We both tacitly avoided mentioning it.

We sat side by side on the bed. He was still wearing the beanie, but his mood was much subdued. He told me about his attempts to give his daughters what they wanted; the separate flat, the rumpus room and how they had repaid him with trashy behaviour, staying out till all hours, boys in their rooms, kisses and worse in the dark. I ignored all the sound parameters for counselling and talked about teenagers, safe behaviour, school counsellors and communication. I said "Don't let your anger build a wall", and his eyes, sad bewildered eyes, told me he understood. When I left to go, he smiled and for the first time shook my hand. "You helped" he forced out, then turned abruptly away. I went to his chart and wrote up my notes: Carer Allowance Pack given; patient appeared more settled but psychiatric assistance recommended.

I was left with not the rank and sour weeds of his anger, but the melancholy - dignified, validity of his terrible inner life that spilled over and poisoned his days. I had not liked him, but still I had felt a connection with him: a latter-day Lear with a conniving wife, ungrateful daughters, and demons stalking him in the dark: let me not be mad, sweet heaven, let me not be mad. And I wished I had the experience and time to help him create a space where he could confront the anger and fear in safety and peace, but I was a student on my fieldwork placement, and he was a client going home without the psychiatric referral.

## **Never to be Forgotten Amanda Calaghan**

I walked through the door apprehensively. Today was the first time I would be allowed to observe and help in an interview setting. I was unsure as what to expect, but I was soon to find out.

It was a dismal day, the clouds hung forlornly in the grey skies and an air of despair seeped through the aura. The ancient offices were moderately furnished, an attempt to hide the peeling paintwork was thinly disguised by colourful posters exuding hope and cheer.

The interview was about to begin. My colleague and I took our places at a rickety wooden table and our first client walked in. Dressed in a drab shapeless dress, she took her seat and proceeded to empty her bag of a mountain of documents. They spilled onto the table, crumpled torn and dishevelled. I was so eager to appear to be doing the right thing, that I hadn't really looked at the client. Her face was drawn and I could see that she had been crying. In a soothing tone my colleague asked, "What are you here for?" "I don't know where to start?" came the reply, "Let's start at the beginning".

"Well things started to go really wrong about a month ago, when members of my family died". Time stood still. Words spilled out of her mouth but I wasn't listening any more I was desperately trying not to cry. What am I doing this for? I was thinking, I can't cope with this. Her words were still resonating in my head when I realised my colleague was ushering me into the food parcel room to make up a package.

As I entered the room I turned and gazed at my colleague, tears were streaming down her face as she fumbled with the bags of groceries. We looked at each other realising each was feeling such an indescribable helplessness. "I can't go back in there" I said. "Yes you can, come on it'll be all right". We dried our eyes and with enormous reticence I seated myself down at the table. There was nothing else we could do for this lady, so off she went with her bag of groceries, so grateful that someone had helped her.

My colleague and I went to the tearoom. We both sat, unable to move or speak. I felt like I had been hit by a bolt of lightning, all I could think about was my own children. What was happening to me? Why was I feeling like this? I had this burning desire to go home and cuddle my kids.

To this day, actually as I am writing this, I still shed a tear for the lady who had so much courage, and all we had to give her was bag of groceries. Quite ironic really, like the posters on the wall, in time I came to realise, all we were doing was patching up the women, rather than looking at why the paint work was peeling behind the posters.

## **UNIVERSITY OF WA STUDENTS**

### **A survey of field placement experience from a student perspective.**

**LYNNE RIDGEWAY, STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE**

#### **Introduction**

The survey was designed to explore the issues social work students most often referred to in their conversations about placements. It seeks to give current fourth year students from the University of Western Australia the opportunity to voice opinions, thoughts and ideas about their placement experiences. From these it is hoped common themes might be identified and a sense of the collective experience drawn.

For students, the field placement component of their course is often the most critical aspect of social work education in that it aims to integrate the academic knowledge base and develop practice competence. Students often find this to be an intensely personal experience which is played out in professional relationship.

Moreover, it is often undertaken in personal and financial circumstances which makes surviving placement a trial in itself. In addition, the literature suggests it is becoming progressively more difficult to secure enough placements, (Slocombe 1993, Patford 2000) awareness of this increases student anxiety. Despite the fact that students are the consumers of social work education, there is little research which explores their perspective, and even less written by students (Spencer & McDonald 1998).

Some 50 students were surveyed of whom 34% responded. A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken whereby themes were coded and categorised. This type of analysis was chosen because it is a direct representation of individual's own points of view, beliefs and experience (Luborsky 1994). Though the study is small and the sample from one institution, it is a beginning representation of the student perspective of field placement which sheds some light on the particularities of the student experience.

## **Discussion**

### **Living the placement experience: Finding a balance between needs and commitments.**

*Can you describe how you managed these issues and what, if any, effect this had on your placement experience?*

For all but one student, the management of financial matters was the major and most difficult concern. The principle issue was to maximise available time in order to meet placement requirements whilst maintaining an income. Those students who had additional "non negotiable" commitments, in particular, children and home mortgage repayments, expressed the most difficulty in managing this aspect of their placements. A variety of strategies were employed in managing competing commitments, and the degree of choice around these was dependent on the resources available to each student. Mature age students who were also single parents, reported the most difficulty during the placement, and more residual effects after placement (increased debt due to loans, exhaustion, lost employment, relationship stress). This type of experience was illustrated by one student: "I can only marginally begin to explain the increased stress levels associated with this, and in reality by the end of the placement I was behind in the mortgage and had lost the job."

Students who commented on high levels of stress in their personal relationships, tended also to have experienced financial hardship.

Typical strategies employed by students were: to return to their family home and live with parents; to negotiate loans from parents, friends and institutions; to negotiate extra time added to placement to allow time for paid work; to "just do without"; to manage on Youth Allowance or Austudy benefits. The difficulties cited with the last option were meeting the stringent eligibility

criteria for Centrelink allowances, and being “barely able to exist” or “the ‘benefit’ doesn’t meet living expenses, I’ve gone more and more into debt.”. 70% of the respondents were in paid work during their placement, and 70% also reported undertaking voluntary work during the course of their studies.

A common method of managing the dissonant feelings associated with juggling time, finances and the placement, was that of students assessing their own degree of hardship by comparison to other students. Nearly 50% of students commented on being “lucky” or “fortunate” in some way which made their own experience easier: “I am lucky that I don’t have children” and “I had to take on a loan (from family luckily for me)” also, “fortunately my supervisor was flexible about my need to start late and leave early in order to work”. There was a broad expression of gratitude for the flexibility and understanding most supervisors and employers demonstrated. This was critical in allowing students to manage their commitments.

Though students differed in their responses to living the placement experience, there was an underlying sense of a quid pro quo of balancing needs and commitments. The effects of which were complex, multilayered and generated strong feelings three months after completion of placements. Several students suggested changes to placements, for instance: “placements paid at some reasonable level would greatly relieve the financial stress”, or “their should be some way of finding a compromise” such as longer placements but for only two or three days a week. The personal effects most commonly expressed were tiredness, stress, time pressure, having limited choice and being overwhelmed - “it was simply too much”.

### **Integrating theory and practice**

*Can you comment on your experience of the process of integrating theory and practice, in (either or both of) your field placements?*

The majority of responses (88%) indicated that students felt they had engaged with this process, if not on their first placement then on their second, though to varying degrees. Several felt the use of theory was not made explicit in their agencies:

“I observed various theories being used...and I was aware of using theory in my own practice at times, but generally I felt a gulf between theory and practice. I thought theories would really ‘land’ - but not so much. Theory was not in the forefront of practice... the forefront was values”.

For these students there was a sense that something was missing: “I think I needed a bit more help (ie. teaching.)” It was also this category of response which indicated less confidence in their practice competence. For some students a sense of hindsight was required in order to make sense of the integration process: “It was difficult to see how the two combined, I can see more now when I look back.

The students who expressed high degrees of satisfaction with this aspect of placement (41%), also indicated a strong sense of congruency between their own expectations of themselves and the agency, and how the agency met those expectations. That is, there

was a fit between what the student expected and valued, and how the agency’s own discourse on theory also reflected its practice, whereby mutual role expectations were met. For these students, there was also a sense of completeness: theory was both “heard and seen”, it was “drawn upon in both formal and informal processes,” there was time for both “discussion and reflection” of practice, it was “fully integrated and acknowledged” and finally “there was always an attempt and expectation that theory would support practice.”.

Students who commented on their first and second placements (29%), all indicated a difference in the two placements in their integration of theory and practice. Some because it appeared less available to them in their first placement, as illustrated by these students’ experiences: “My first placement was irrelevant to social work practice...spent the time doing administrative work... The second placement was the ideal integration of theory and practice” also “so busy doing, there was little time to reflect during supervision, it was about your management and personal feelings not how theory relates” For others the difference was because of their own development: “I found this process quite difficult in my first prac but easier in the second. Partly this is because I was more confident I think.”. For all of these students, there was a sense of progress between the first and second placement: “First placement was sink or swim... Second placement presented more opportunities to use theory to help my understanding”.

Whether or not the students saw themselves, their supervisors, or a combination of both as the source of their learning, the most significant indicator of satisfaction with the process, was that the students’ expectations of learning were met at some level, and the student felt this was acknowledged.

### **The supervision relationship**

*In what way was your placement influenced by your relationship with your supervisor?*

For all of the respondents, the relationship between student and supervisor was a pivotal one. Students indicated there was a connection between how they felt about themselves as developing social workers, and the qualities of the supervision relationship.

Student experiences fell broadly into four categories:

- 1) Those who had very satisfactory relationships, and attributed their learning, at least in part, to this relationship (58%).
- 2) Those who valued the relationship, but were less satisfied with their learning (11%).
- 3) Those who found the relationship unsatisfactory but were satisfied with their learning (11%).
- 4) Those who had unsatisfactory relationships, and who believed this contributed to unsatisfactory learning (17%).

Amongst the respondents, 23% reported combinations of the categories between their two placements (1 & 3 and 1 & 4).

The common themes which emerged from the first category were a sense of inclusion and belonging: “I was treated like a worker, given the responsibilities of a worker and made me accountable”, and “If your contribution is valued, it made it easy to give all the energy you had.” Professional identity and

confidence: “I was challenged to learn and explore my identity” and “being openly respected...helped me become part of the agency.”. Independent learning: “...allowed a great deal of independence which meant I had to think on my feet” and “I made mistakes, I learnt a lot about working with people” and thirdly open communication: “Feeling supported and listened to was fantastic” also “I felt able to talk about my difficulties with clients and receive reassurance and guidance”. For these students there was a strong link between the quality of the supervision relationship and their sense of progress and competence: “I can imagine having great difficulties if my supervisors hadn’t been as good as they were”. This group placed the emphasis on the supervisor’s contribution rather than their own.

Where students were less satisfied with the learning experience (category 2), the concern was around the availability of work. These students were happy with their supervision on the whole. However, they indicated their supervisor was not able to offer the practice experience they sought: “I had a great working relationship...however, an inability to advocate learning opportunities on my behalf...limited my learning.”.

In category 3 the shared theme was the “unavailability” of the supervisor, either because rapport was not established, or because the supervisor was literally not present for lengthy periods. “...devoted time to me however, was a different character and harder to gain a really good rapport with” and “I had four supervisors, the primary one was never there. Although well supervised, my learning was initiated by me.”. For these students, the supervision experience was technical rather than personal.

Where students felt they had not developed either a positive relationship, or achieved satisfactory learning outcomes (category 4) the unifying theme was a sense of “exclusion”. That is, they experienced either being “invisible” or, as for one student, their expectations of “good” supervision and role modelling were not met: “I do not feel the supervisor was a good role model nor should they be a student supervisor.”. Here, the student expressed concerns with an authoritative manner, professional work ethic and ignoring agency policy. Students in this category expressed the most dissatisfaction: “I felt a burden, was kept somewhat invisible” and “I was operating in survival mode with little support from the organisation and university.”.

In general, the quality of the supervision relationship, however it was perceived, tended to colour the placement experiences.

### Stakeholder relationships

*Involve the student, the university, the supervisor, the professional association, and the placement agency, and has implications for clients. Having completed your placements, can you reflect on the stakeholder relationship, and whether, if at all, it affects the way students manage their placements?*

Unlike the other sections of the survey, this question elicited few positive comments about the placement experience. It was also the only question which a number of respondents chose not to answer (29%). The principle motif which emerged from this section was power.

Power was discussed in three contexts: Firstly, where power, in the form of intervention by the university, was seen as unnecessary (25%). Secondly, where students sought increased intervention by the university in the form of support or protection (33%). In the third place, the students’ sense of personal power in their education (41%).

In the first category, comments were related to field supervision, where the university’s field supervisors were seen as “interfering”, as with this student’s comment: “I had great supervision, hence not needing any interference from uni...their motivation appears to be to stay on the side of the agency at all costs.”. One student indicated tension existed between the field supervisor and placement supervisor “this wasn’t bad, but could have been...my uni supervisor’s agenda was very explicit - sometimes dominating over my experiences.”. Another comment from a mature age student: “I didn’t appreciate being spoken to like I was just out of school...but in every other way...was supportive.”.

Where support was sought from the university, (2) it was in response to students’ sense of limited power to influence a placement situation. Three students offered these comments on their experiences: “Sexual harassment should not be tolerated...the university field supervisors need to step in and offer more than merely ‘moral support’ or worse, blame the student for something which is out of their control.”. And on complaining about supervision: “I was given no support, and asked why I thought I had the authority to judge my supervisor or the placement.”. “Given the power imbalance, uni needs to listen and help.”

In the third category, students pointed to the need to be clear about power relationships: “It’s critical to know who has what role...I know what I had to do to acknowledge these.”. “Students have the least influence and need to remain flexible to make the best of a bad lot if they have to.”. “Politics play a large role, what’s best for students is probably not a big consideration.”. Those students who had felt “disempowered” saw a need to “... aim for balance and look out for their own interests.”. also to be aware of being made a “scapegoat” and “taken advantage of” and the importance of agency support in this case.

### Other comment

Six students made further comments, these were mainly in the form of recommendations based on reflecting on their own experience of placement. On the topic of getting work: “It’s important students be able to network for gaining suitable employment ie. by choice...out of interest.”. “Placements are too significant in getting a job...a bad placement and you appear to be stuffed.”. And conversely: “It should be stressed that it is a good supervisor you want, not a good placement.”. And this comment in response to feeling pressured to date a supervisor who also recommended dating clients: “There needs to be a better process for screening supervisors...I don’t think my experience was acceptable. It was an extremely difficult time.”. And finally, “Uni needs to be extra vigilant that the organisation does not use you for non social work because they are too busy to supervise you for social work tasks.”.

### Summary

The nature of the student experience of placement is complex and contested, each student comprehends their outcomes in the light of their own hopes, expectations and goals. The shared meanings form clusters which serve more to illustrate the differences in interpreting meanings than a sameness of experience. In the absence of a "student voice", there is a need explore the meanings students themselves attach to their experiences of placement. As is reflected in the broader community, there is a need also for the social work profession to find new ways to respond to change. The challenge for social work students, educators and the professional association is to form a co-creative endeavour which is inclusive of, and acknowledges all of the stakeholders.

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the time-poor students who gave up some of it to complete the survey. Thanks also to the academics, field supervisors and psychologists who helped guide me through the research process.

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## Edith Cowan University Students

The social work programme at Edith Cowan South West Campus at Bunbury particularly encourages students to undertake rural and remote placements in addition to the current regional settings which provide placement opportunities. We invite practitioners and agencies to consider the possibilities of collaborative and cooperative placement arrangements, such as cross agency student placements or student units in larger agencies. The programme is able to offer peer support to both students and supervisors and limited subsidies to students for their location in remote, regional and rural placements.

**SUE YOUNG**

### Wise Choice De Spackman

After having seen the light two and a half years ago and taken on all that was, is, and will be social work as a career, I was filled with excitement at starting my final placement for Field Work studies 2, knowing that come November I would be released onto the community as a fully fledged social worker and to this I owed

my full attention to learning as much as I could from this practicum. Being a mature age student and ex teacher provided a solid base in workplace environments, teamwork and interpersonal relationships. As well I had come to the placement with no preconceptions or mental baggage about Family and Childrens' Services and "the welfare" tag that accompanied such a statutory organisation. In addition, my first placement at a community health agency gave me a taste of what a social work practice entails.

My studies consisting in part of frameworks, models, theories, readings, role-plays, agency contexts and concepts had well prepared me with a knowledge arsenal in order to arm myself and practice as a social worker. Personal practice models were high on the social work curriculum agenda, so my thinking was well and truly focused around forming a framework as to how I would practice, which acknowledged the use of self, reflective skills and the worker-other interaction.

So it was set. I was prepared, primed and ready to fix whatever problems came my way. And then it hit. The suffering, the despair, the hopelessness, the ineptness of words and the reality of it all filled my days. Hours of talking, listening, advocating and organising only to have the conversation and contact terminated... until the next crisis. The seemingly endless hours of reflecting on what happened, deliberating as to what might happen and how to do it differently. The note taking, the word-processing, the reports were the evidence of the responsibility, the accountability and the creditability which underpinned every interaction and activity.

But then there were the uplifting moments of friendship, laughter, appreciation, thank yous, support, advice, breakthroughs, YES! times and workmate comradery which would seem to bring the balance of emotions back to even kilter. The knowledge and learning I have gained has surpassed all my expectations as did the professionalism, the caring, the commitment and the response to crisis situations of the workers to whom I am indebted for their patience, stories, experience, good humour, enlightening discussions and sharing of information. I go forward into practice knowing that I have chosen wisely for my future career.

## NEWS FROM CURTIN UNIVERSITY

Kathy Logan, administrative officer of our School for many years and wife of Geoff Logan died in July this year after a long illness. We have been saddened by the event. Curtin alumni in particular will have known Kathy as a major part of the head, heart and hands of our School over almost twenty five years. The School is planning to develop a fitting tribute to Kathy's part in developing social work education in this state and would be appreciative of any inputs from the field on this.

Curtin has a new professor in the School of Social Work and Social Policy. Professor Jim Ife will be joining us as Head of School on April 2nd, 2001. Professor Richard Hugman has accepted an appointment to the University of New South Wales as from July 2000. Dr Frances Crawford will be Acting Head of School in the intervening months. Ann Oliver, School Secretary retired in September after many years with Curtin. At the farewell function students from across the four years made presentations that recognised Ann's great kindness and support.

On the field education front Phil Connors and Valerie Sollis have finished placing ninety first placement social work students. Sincere

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thanks must be extended to all practitioners and agencies for your assistance and cooperation in this mammoth process. This first placement is such an important entry point into our profession and we really value the importance that field practitioners place on it. The seriousness and commitment with which field education supervision is approached by our profession is gratifying. Being well aware of how many requests you receive each year for students placements from the various universities and professional disciplines, we appreciate that this must be very taxing for you and can cause “student placement burnout”.

For us, a concern that arises from this increase in demand for practicums is the growing perception that students ought compete for placements. There have been instances where students have had to undertake a formal interview with the prospective placement agency to compete against other students from other disciplines for the position. Traditionally our students have met with members of the prospective placement agency prior to placement being finalised. Both members of the professional body and social work educators have regarded this not as a formal interview for a ‘position’ but rather as a ‘conversation’ to establish that the student’s learning needs could be met at that agency. Only after this ‘conversation meeting’ has taken place and feedback received from both student and prospective field educator is the placement confirmed. The primary goal, for both first and second placements is that it is an educative experience. We would hope to preserve this student focus into the future

The Western Australian Schools of Social work (Curtin, UWA and ECU) are considering creating a combined field placement unit to co-ordinate the field placements of all social work students. It must be stressed that at this stage this a proposal only and remains in the discussion stage. You will be notified if any such unit does actualise. Until such time each University continues to place students separately (though of course in a spirit of cooperation). Again, thank you for your assistance, support and input in this vital part of student social workers’ education.

**FRAN CRAWFORD AND VALERIE SOLLIS**

## **NEWS FROM UNIVERSITY OF WA**

The BSW programme at the University of Western Australia acknowledged the vitally important contribution of the field supervisors of current students at a social gathering in University House on Tuesday, 12 September. Over 100 supervisors had made themselves available to supervise a first or a final placement this year and all were invited to a special event by the Department of Social Work.

Mike Clare and Tom Barrett had reviewed the Department’s placement records since the early 1970’s to identify 23 experienced social workers who had offered at least 7 placements to UWA students. Some were found to have offered over 20 placements before Mike and Tom stopped counting! These 23 special guests were presented with a Certificate of Appreciation by the Vice Chancellor, Professor Derek Schreuder and their names are now on an Honour Board that will be on display in the Department. Professor Schreuder acknowledged the importance of the University’s links with the professional community and congratulated the following social workers for their outstanding contribution to professional social work education :

Moresca Almeida, Tom Barrett, Wendy Butler, Ennio Cicchini, Jutta Condos, Gay de Haume, Chris Gardner, Neville Grimson, Pat Hansen, Nic Hastings-James, Shirley Kohn, Maxine Lawn, Rae Lindsay, Gill Macfarlane, Beth McKechnie, Helen McMillan, Pippin Margaria, Marian Maughan, Sorrel Mayer, Dianne Moran, Ken Posney, Ian Vaughan, Adrienne Wills

The Department hopes that this will become an annual event in which supervisors and teaching staff can meet to celebrate another successful round of placement teaching and learning opportunities – and to honour others who achieve the magic number of 7 placements. We also hope to explore the possibility of some recognition of outstanding professional supervision in relation to post-qualifying taught courses in the Social Work Department. Finally, if anyone can help us to locate Jutta Condos, we would be delighted.

**MIKE CLARE**