

Researching poverty to make a difference: The need for reciprocity and advocacy in community research

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Growth in poverty throughout the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] hurts people. The Auckland City Mission Family100 project explores the everyday lives, frustrations and dilemmas faced by 100 families living in poverty in Auckland. This article reflects on poverty in New Zealand, associated welfare 'reforms', the consequences of recent change in exacerbating hardship, and our own efforts to advocate for the rights of beneficiaries. Specific attention is given to a workshop run by the research team with the judiciary, and what such activities foreground in terms of the relational nature of research, reciprocity and advocacy.

Psychologists have a word which is probably used more frequently than any other word in modern psychology. It is the word "maladjusted."... Now in a sense all of us must live the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things in our social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I suggest that you too ought to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself...to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. (excerpted from a speech made by Martin Luther King, April 25, 1957)

This classic call to action is particularly relevant in the context of recent financial crises, increases in social stratification and growth in poverty. In New Zealand over the last two decades, for example, the incomes of the top 10% of income earners increased annually by an average of 2.5%. The bottom

10% had average annual increases in income of just 1.1% (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Over the same period, the proportion of the population officially living in poverty¹ increased from approximately 6% to 12% of households. Concurrently, researchers have observed increased divisions between enfranchised and disenfranchised groups, with the latter having increasingly fewer resources (Mitchell & Heynen, 2009).

Whilst disparities in income and social stratification have increased, many of the interventions aimed at rendering assistance to families in need focus on adjusting 'them' to an inequitable social system, rather than addressing the structural causes of poverty. Scholars have reflected on the growing trend towards the dismantling of state welfare systems and the concurrent introduction of punitive responses to poverty focused on the 'deficits' of individuals living in poverty (Bauman, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998; Dowler & O'Connor, 2012). Using the term psychocomplex, Rose (1985) refers to the ways in which individualistically-orientated psychological discourses and strategies work to pathologise and punish lower class people

who appear maladjusted within the labour market, education and welfare systems.

This article considers the current New Zealand Government's introduction of measures that work to criminalise the poor in an effort to adjust them to a maladjusted system. First, we consider current welfare reforms and associated impacts for families in need. Second, we outline the Family100 project that responds to the present situation of worsening poverty. Third, we outline a workshop conducted for the Judiciary as an exemplar of the importance of engaging with stakeholder groups whose practices shape lives. This workshop responded to the challenge to bring the experiences and lifeworlds of families living in poverty to the fore in making responses to poverty. Fourth, we reflect on the role of advocacy in poverty research and the importance and value of reciprocal relationships between service agencies, researchers, research participants and stakeholder groups.

A 'Reformed' (Dismantled) Welfare System

Welfare reforms introduced within many OECD countries over the past few decades are based on a neoliberal-orientated morality that emphasises self-reliance (Bauman, 2005; Standing, 2011). Scholars have questioned the ideological shift in emphasis within current welfare reforms, which have moved from notions of *interdependence* in society, and the corresponding provision of universal support to people in need, to an emphasis on *independence*, and a corresponding focus on individual responsibility. This shift involves a preoccupation with the 'maladjusted' behaviour of welfare recipients (Dwyer, 2004; Standing, 2011) and the justification of punitive approaches to individuals in poverty. Beneficiary families are subject to intensified scrutiny over the morality of their lifestyles. This serves to individualise welfare dependency, position poverty as a personal deficit, and excuse current

economic arrangements and actors of responsibility for increases in poverty (Barnett, Hodgetts, Nikora, Chamberlain, & Karapu, 2007).

A key concept in understanding recent 'welfare reforms' and the shift from welfare as a rights issue to a charity issue is that of *conditionality*, or the requirement for those who receive welfare to engage in compliant behaviour and undertake 're-education' and other mandated tasks in return for the provision of welfare supports (Dwyer, 2004). Conditionality is central to the efforts of the current New Zealand government to save NZ\$1.6 billion (approximately AUD\$1.33 billion) in welfare spending through an 'investment approach', designed to reduce dependency on government assistance and to produce well-adjusted and economically productive citizens (see *National is reforming welfare* available at <http://www.national.org.nz/welfare-reforms.aspx>). Criteria for state-based support have been tightened and benefit payments are stopped if clients fail to meet 'work readiness' and parenting obligations, including having their children participate in education and health programmes (*cf.* Standing, 2011). Rights to support have been decreased whilst obligations to act in particular ways have been increased (*cf.* Bourdieu, 1998; Dwyer, 2004). Correspondingly, sanctions against beneficiaries have increased two-fold on an annual basis since the current government took power in 2007. These reforms are much like persuading someone to visit a doctor by stabbing them.

A key component of the Government's stated plan to 'grow the economy' is to force people from welfare dependency by intensifying control over their everyday lives and making it increasingly difficult to survive on a benefit. The latest addition of the welfare reforms includes punishing partners for the actions of their spouse. This policy is sold to the public as an effort to curb benefit fraud worth about \$20 million a year. Opposition parties have raised the point that

such efforts to address fraud ignore the far more expensive \$140 million a year in tax fraud committed by middle- and upper-class New Zealanders, which is receiving much less attention from the current government. Clearly, there is a discriminatory and targeted approach, with beneficiaries who commit fraud facing a \$5,000 fine or 12 months in prison. With its overriding focus on benefit fraud, the current New Zealand government is criminalising the poor through an intensification of control and monitoring that is not extended to more affluent groups in society.

Elsewhere, we have explored how systemic violence is central to the implementation of these reforms (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot, & Tankel, Under Review). Systemic violence involves methodical processes that harm certain vulnerable groups of people 'as a matter of course' (Farmer, 1996). Such violence is often enacted through technocratic and bureaucracy procedures for 'managing' the poor, which have become normalised and taken-for-granted as simply 'how things are done around here' (*cf.* Springer, 2012). Disciplinary technologies (Foucault, 1977), including deceptively simple checklists for texturing interactions in welfare offices and for assessing eligibility for benefit entitlements, have been developed in an effort to ensure compliant behaviour (adjustment) on the part of beneficiaries. In discussing such control measures, Arendt's (1963/1969) scholarship on Germany in the 1930s points to how a maladjusted system of control becomes increasingly dehumanised, mechanised, and unaccountable to the people directly hurt. This results in fewer avenues for redress when welfare entitlements are transgressed. As Arendt (1963/1969) noted:

In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted.

Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. (p. 81)

There is considerable danger in people being rigidly administered by an increasingly punitive bureaucracy with few avenues of appeal. Today, many beneficiaries need to engage advocates in their interactions with the core government welfare agency in order to obtain their statutory entitlements (Hodgetts et al., Under Review).

The Government's reforms reflect how there are more conversations *about* rather than *with* people of modest means. We need research, advocacy and conversations with key stakeholder groups to bring the experiences of beneficiaries and low paid workers into the public realm. Unless this happens, prejudice and misinformation will continue to drive 'reforms' that injure and harm vulnerable families. This is particularly important because controlling welfare reforms exacerbate the dilemmas already faced by families living stressful and inadequately resourced lives (Ballie, 2011; Boon & Farnsworth, 2011; Dowler & O'Connor 2012; Duck, 2012; Green, 2012). To cope, such families go hungry, turn off electricity, or prevent children from participating in sports and other social activities that would otherwise promote social inclusion (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011). We have a situation where people cannot pay for the necessities in life and are then penalised for being in need. For example, the registration of a motor vehicle is a considerable cost burden for many families. However, owning a car is essential in Auckland, a sprawling city with limited public transport, and moreover, it can be difficult to meet compliance conditions for welfare benefits without access to a car. Families often end up being served with

infringement notices for not meeting motor vehicle registration requirements. Because of their inability to pay even small fines, people living in impoverished circumstances find themselves in court as defendants (Saunders, Eriksson, Lansdell, & Brown, 2013).

Family 100

The Family100 project is located within the Auckland City Mission, and seeks to develop and share alternative understandings of families in need and to promote initiatives to better meet their needs. Family100 explores how families who have been accessing a food bank with high regularity make sense of, and respond to, their impoverished situations. Households, contextualised within their familial and service networks, are the unit of analysis in the project, which explores how important issues, such as housing, debt, food, income, health, education and exploitation occur in concert and shape family life. We provided food parcels for one year for these 100 householders in return for them speaking frankly with social workers about their experiences every two weeks over a nine-month period. For some readers this may raise ethical concerns about cohesion and conditionality. For us, the primary concern is around reciprocity (see final section of this article) in that we wanted to give something back to families in recognition for their willingness to participate in the project. When we discussed the issue with families they almost universally responded that they appreciated receiving the food parcels, but were not participating for the parcels. They were very willing to participate without the food parcels in order to ‘have their say’.

Participating families were selected to be representative of families regularly accessing the Mission foodbank; the cohort consisted of 40% Māori, 25% Pacific Islander, 22% European, and 13% Asian and other minority groups. Families were matched with social workers so they could

develop a long-term relationship. We used a range of mapping and drawing exercises to document and deepen the conversations between families and social workers. Data for analysis consisted of the social workers’ notes and observations from the on-going interactions with these families, the various mappings they completed, review (recap) interviews held every two months, which were recorded and transcribed, and recorded weekly group discussions between the social workers and the research team. We draw on close and repeated engagements with participating families in order to develop contextualised understandings of poverty, theorise the societal processes at play and promote change at the systemic level.

This research sought to go beyond simply ‘giving voice’ to the poor by drawing on abductive reasoning to inform our interpretation of participant accounts (Blaikie, 2004; Hodgetts, Chamberlain, & Groot, 2010). People experiencing hardship have intimate understandings of their situations that other people lack. The aim was to draw on such knowledge as a basis for conceptualising and theorising issues and developing responses. Family100 involves bringing local insights and exemplars into conversation with conceptual abstractions and then subjecting these experiences and theories to critical scrutiny in order to co-construct actionable knowledge in a similar manner to Freire’s notion of ‘voice’ (e.g., Hodgetts et al., 2010). This relates to Flyvbjerg and colleagues (2012) concept of *phronesis*, practically orientated knowledge that is particularly useful in understanding how to address issues of social concern. As Flyvbjerg et al. (2012) argue, “*phronetic* social science can... speak truth to power, to inform society, improve decision-making and enhance social life” (p. 11). There is a subtle shift that comes with such work, involving a move from academic researchers to activist scholars working in collaboration with research partners (people experiencing

poverty and agencies assisting them) to achieve societal change. This notion of phronesis is central to our methodological approach, involving efforts to access and understand the lifeworlds of beneficiaries, by allowing us to be informed by practical knowledge arising from outside the research team.

A key aspect of the phronetic approach is praxis, involving the combining of theoretical and empirical insights and developing practical strategies for addressing the needs of research participants (see Fryer, in press). Our focus is on taking action through engagements with both the research participants and other stakeholder groups. Our strategy involves moving beyond abstract academic contemplation to active engagements with stakeholders in the field, which in turn involve us in a cycle of further experiential learning. In this way, we not only contribute to our participants' critical reflections on their situations and the development of more humane responses to their needs (Freire, 1970), but also to our reflections on and revisions of our own research practice (see final section of this article).

Lessons from over 80 years of community psychology suggest that we cannot solve the issues faced by people in poverty unless we take action beyond the local community (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1933/1971). Hence, we also extend our dialogues beyond the organisational context to engage the wider citizenry and policy makers through a variety of advocacy work (Murray, 2012). We are involved in various forms of advocacy, both within and beyond the community, from supporting direct action events, fostering service developments, presenting public lectures for wealthier community groups, conversing with government bodies (Treasury, Families Commission, Auckland Council), conducting workshops with key stakeholder groups, writing policy submissions and engaging

with journalists to extend public deliberations about poverty within the mediapolis (Hodgetts, 2012). This work is important because highly politicised discourses beyond the local community constitute a moving landscape open to change, one in which the social contract underlying the provision of both governmental and charity supports for the poor is being undermined (Bourdieu, 1998).

Our involvement with the Family100 project requires us to build close relationships with stakeholders and to problem-solve how to best meet the needs of real people. Our partnerships with Mission staff and clients situates us within a broader project of change that draws on community and scholarly capacities to allow us to engage with participant experiences of poverty whilst working to theorise these situations and support change (Hodgetts et al., 2010). We seek to demonstrate how a myriad of structurally-patterned practices and relationships are interconnected and embedded in the everyday lives of families in need, and in the emplaced practices of agencies responsible for helping them. Relevant here is Simmel's (1903/1964) *principle of emergence* of social phenomenon and his orientation towards looking locally in order to understand systemic elements of the socio-cultural world within which people reside. Central to this is an understanding that micro-level systemic relations are reproduced within community settings through everyday interactions and that documenting and conceptualising these interactions systemically provides the basis for action. Family100 thus moves beyond the classic researcher-initiated model of research involving end-users towards a more open, responsive orientation involving on-going dialogue between researchers, agency staff and clients.

We have had some success in this work. Key messages we have promoted have gained traction within major political parties

in opposition. These parties and journalists have taken on tropes such as ‘poverty is New Zealand’s growth industry’ and ‘being poor is hard and frustrating work’. Such tropes, and the examples we use to illustrate the everyday situations of families, increase public recognition of poor people, enhance understanding of the complexity of their lives, warrant efforts to render assistance, and challenge punitive responses that are central to welfare reforms in many countries (Hodgetts, 2012). Essential to our efforts is to challenge the current tendency to treat poverty as a charity issue because this does not lead to structural change, and can foster victim blaming whilst absolving the economic drivers implicit to increased social inequality from consideration.

Our preliminary analytic work on the Family100 data raised a wide range of issues around poverty. In this paper, we focus on issues relating to the criminalising of the poor. We engaged with conversations about imposing fines on parents who cannot afford to feed their children, about families having children returned to them from detention facilities without funds to look after them, and, more positively, how being sentenced to community service could produce more progressive and just outcomes. Consequently, when approached we responded positively to an opportunity to engage the New Zealand judiciary in a dialogue about these issues arising from the Family100 project. In the next section, we discuss this engagement as an illustration of how community advocacy can work. Following that, in the closing section, we use lessons gained from this to inform a wider discussion about advocacy in community research aimed at addressing poverty. In this discussion we raise the need to reconsider issues of reciprocity and gift exchange in such work.

A Workshop with the Judiciary

We are continually seeking and responding to opportunities for advocacy and

dialogue. In this case we were approached by staff of the Judicial Institute to contribute to their annual professional development event for the judiciary. This arose out of our engagements with stakeholder groups and mass media in our previous work on homelessness and urban poverty and demonstrates how engaging in advocacy activities can lead to further opportunities. Below, we discuss how we developed and presented the workshop, provide one of the cases used within it, and consider the key points that emerged from it.

Developing the workshop. In response to the invitation, the first author met with Institute of Justice staff and developed the idea of using case studies from Family100 in an interactive workshop for the judges. We drew on insights from case-based research foregrounding the usefulness of exemplars in community research and for grounding knowledge about complex social issues in diverse societies (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012), since human action, particularly in communities under pressure, is complex, contradictory, and full of ambiguity. Exemplars can illustrate this complexity, and avoid the presentation of overly simplified models based on generalised interpretations of little practical utility. To understand human action we need to understand the nuances of what people do in their everyday lives within particular locales; case studies provide a means to this end.

The research team then discussed the workshop at length and selected material from the Family100 project to develop three case studies, each illustrating different perspectives on the relation between impoverished people and the justice system (Figure 1 gives an example of Case 2, one of the cases presented). The cases were kept as brief as possible while highlighting the complex and contradictory situations in which families find themselves. They were intended to contextualise family

engagements with the courts, to stimulate discussion about the relational impacts of sentencing individuals, and open discussion

of alternative sentencing strategies. The cases were extended by Institute staff with a variety of supporting documentation, such as

Anita and family

Background of the person (monetary values are in NZ\$)

Anita, a 36-year-old Māori woman, lives in Mangere with her long-term partner Luke and eight children. Anita and Luke have a tense relationship at times primarily due to financial hardship. Luke currently lives in Tauranga three nights a week because he could not find a job in Auckland. Luke found part-time work (20hrs a week) driving a bread truck and sleeps in a relative's garage when in Tauranga. He hopes the job will become permanent and full-time so that the family can move south. Anita has also re-entered part-time work (25 hours a week) as a cleaner at a nursing home. This creates additional pressure by her having to coordinate child care with an older aunt, as the children are aged between 2 and 15 years of age. Additionally, their 15-year-old daughter has a 6-month-old baby.

The family lives in a 3 bedroom state house (rent is \$415 per week) that is in very poor condition and scheduled for demolition as a result of the government transfer of state housing provisions to the private sector. The family's housing future is uncertain as there are simply fewer state houses available and they cannot afford private rental. The local church is helping Anita to obtain a washing machine because she was declined further financial assistance from Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) due to the family's high level of debt. Washing clothes by hand for 11 people is unsustainable.

Luke earns \$22,880 and Anita earns \$14,560 per annum. They also receive \$520 a week in Family Tax Credits, and \$130 a week in In Tax Credits. The family does not have a living wage or the income necessary to obtain adequate food, clothing, shelter and recreation. Most weeks they are short by \$100 to \$200.

Anita is \$40,000 in debt. This debt was accumulated through Anita using clothing trucks and fringe lenders to cover basic necessities, purchasing a car for a sick uncle, funeral costs, WINZ arrears, and Chrisco Christmas hampers. Anita also owes \$19,000 to the Ministry of Justice. Anita says that if she was debt free there "*wouldn't be any unexpected visitors*" (debt collectors), and "*she could stop looking over her shoulder*". She prioritises rent above all other expenses. After her bills are paid Anita is often in deficit each week, which means food and power becoming discretionary items.

Over the last year, Anita kept her children home from school on 70 occasions because she could not provide them with lunch. Anita finds Mondays and Fridays the hardest days for food. She does not send her children to the breakfasts provided by their school because she "*is too proud to admit she cannot feed her children*". Some nights the family just eat potatoes, rice or fried bread. Anita is no longer eligible to access a food grant from WINZ due to increased restraints on eligibility criteria.

Key relationships

Anita has little support. Her parents are deceased and she does not have a close relationship with her siblings.

History with justice

Anita has approximately \$19,000 worth of fines for vehicle related issues, including driving without a registration or warrant of fitness, and various parking violations. Her budget advisor has negotiated for her to pay back the fines at \$80 per week. Anita needs a car to enable her to get to and from work. Without it she would lose her job. She also needs the car to take the children to

school and in order to access food and healthcare.

Her children's school is aware that she is often unable to send them to school due to lack of food; however they have still involved truancy officers with the family. Last week the school notified Child Youth and Family (CYFs). To add further stress to the situation Anita has been arrested on several occasions for shoplifting meat from local supermarkets.

The sentence and consequences

Anita has received fines for not having warrant of fitness or registration for her car. She is also waiting for her court appearance on charges of shoplifting.

Anita's financial situation, \$19,000 in fines with the Ministry of Justice, and inability to upkeep the payments for registration and warrant of fitness for her car are impacting on her relationships within the family. Her children are aware that she would rather go to prison than pay anymore fines. Anita says that the children "*wanted me to take the fine. I said, don't you think I've got enough debts? I'd rather go to prison*".

Paying the fines means that the children have less food to eat and that she may have to access funds from fringe lenders again. Further, Anita's financial situation has contributed to her resorting to stealing food to feed the family. Anita says that:

"It's important for the kids to be fed no matter what. My bottom line is if I can't get help then I take the situation into my own hands. The stuff that I steal shows that I'm doing it. I'm not in there stealing fancy cheeses and wine and stuff like that. I've been into a fruit shop and stolen a bag of mandarins so that my kids will have some fruit in their lunch boxes... Stealing doesn't come easy to me. You have to work up the courage. I deal with the guilt of it. I do know what's right and wrong, but when push comes to shove, my kids come first. I steal because I have to. It doesn't give me a rush or make me feel good, like a lot of thieves. It worries me if I go inside. That's not going to be good for my kids, either. But when I weigh things up, I don't have anyone to ask for help. I have to steal probably at least once a fortnight, but it could be three times a week at some points."

Questions

1. Read the information about Anita and Luke, then reflect upon and discuss the issues for this family. What are the issues of particular relevance to your role as a judge?
2. In light of the background information about the family, would you take a different approach when Anita appeared before you on theft charges? What do you think is an appropriate sentence?
3. The fines are putting significant pressure on the family; if the matter came before you is there anything you could do about this? How would you deal with the debt matter?

Figure 1. Case 2 for the Judges symposium

fictional, but realistic, letters from government agencies, criminal records, financial statements and other such reports, since such documents would normally form part of sentencing considerations for judges.

Conducting the workshop. The 90 minute workshop was implemented in three major parts. The first 20 minutes involved an introduction to the session and overview of the Family100 project, why we are doing it, what we are finding, and how it relates to the justice system. We used a number of images

(such as maps of the various services that clients are in contact with and the nature of the relationships involved) and quotes from the research alongside relevant theory and research.

We considered many of the points covered in the introduction to this article relating to increased inequity and poverty in New Zealand today, harsh responses from government, and issues around *conditionality* and time-wasting for families in need. We also considered the violent and dehumanising

implications of welfare reform and how these manifest in particular places and interactions between families and the state benefit agency, Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ). A key point was how, from the outside, chaos is often taken as characteristic of families in need. Less attention is given to how families have to operate in a landscape of diverse, uncoordinated and disordered services due to the lack of a liveable income. This landscape encompasses government agencies, non-government organisations, and free market 'entrepreneurs', who run clothing trucks and finance companies charging exploitative rates of interest. This cluster of services does not constitute a coherent welfare system; rather, it is the clients who create a 'functional' system through their efforts to navigate the variety of agencies and to link these into some sort of coherent provision of resourcing and support (Hodgetts et al., Under Review). It is useful to consider everyday life for these families as an 'obstacle course' that must be navigated (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011). We noted how practices central to managing the poor increasingly infantilise people in need and consume their time with demeaning and trivial activities, such as repeatedly having to present household budgets when it is already clear that they do not have enough income to meet their basic needs for food, shelter and electricity (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011; Dowler & O'Connor, 2012; Duck, 2012).

The presentation was concluded with the need to challenge the dehumanising language central to the Government's promotion of the welfare reforms and to remind judges of the importance of circumstance when making decisions that affect the lives of beneficiaries. It was emphasised that contemporary interactions between poor families and government agencies can function to dehumanise them, rendering them as 'problems' to be regulated and managed at a distance, rather than as citizens with rights and whose actions need to be contextualised.

At the completion of the presentation, the audience split into three groups and each group read one of the cases, with some guiding questions in mind (see Figure 1). The judges discussed the case for their group and its implications for their work for 25 minutes, and prepared a report back to the larger workshop. The first author and a colleague moved around the groups offering insights into the social context. A representative from each group took 10 minutes to discuss the case and the key points arising from their group discussion. In the closing session, we summarised key points and rounded off the workshop with a general discussion. This structure gave the judges enough time to work through and reflect on the material within the context of their work and current developments in New Zealand society. It also provided for an interactive session where the situations of families in need were given due consideration by a key stakeholder group with considerable power to influence lives when members of impoverished families appear in court.

Key discussion points arising from the workshop. We asked the judges what they would do if this person appeared before them in court and to address the questions we had set out for each of the three cases. The discussion included issues around the broader relational impacts of sentencing individuals. Here we discuss the points raised across the cases, with a particular focus on Case 2. It is necessary to note that we need to exercise some discretion about what we can disclose regarding examples and points raised by the judges and their specific response strategies due to confidentiality around court processes. It is, however, useful to note that, from the outset, the judges were very receptive and alive to injustices reflected in the materials we presented. They openly criticised fines and other unrealistic sentences as unjust.

We had an open conversation about the

inequities of fines and the brutality of recent government welfare reforms. The issuing of fines is outside the judges' control and was a point of frustration; fines were discussed openly as an impractical punishment. This led to a more general discussion of concerns about justice in society and wealth concentration that current government policies do little to address. The judges were very informed about economic and political debates and international reports on poverty, and so we could make useful progress in exploring what needed to be done as a country and what was possible for judges to do.

Contributors not only pointed to the problems of the current system, but also to what can and should be done to develop different strategies. These included converting fines to community service, wiping fines rather than trying to enforce them on people with no ability to pay or imprisoning people for not paying fines, directing legal aid council to advise clients on their rights, obligations and ways in which they might exit loan agreements with finance companies with parasitic levels of interest (up to 200% per annum), advising families on bankruptcy options, and resisting the implementation of unjust policies that could lead to partners being charged for their spouses' activities. Considerable attention was given to how judges might implement strategies for ensuring families could get to court (many do not appear as they cannot afford the costs of travel) and the introduction of social work supports within the court process.

Where possible we informed the discussion by literature relating to each case. For example, considerable research has documented how fixed-rate infringement penalties have a disproportionate impact on financially disadvantaged groups. Saunders and colleagues (2013) explored the consequences of infringement notices and spot fines for minor offences. They found in

Victoria, Australia, that infringement notices work well for those who have the money to pay, and that this is a reasonably efficient system for such citizens. However, they also found that lower socio-economic status groups, as a result of their inability to pay fines, came into unnecessary contact with the justice system and imprisonment. Inequity occurs through such fines because everyone does not have the same ability to pay, making the punishment for the same crime disproportionate according to income. The *principle of proportionality* posits that a punishment should reflect both the severity of the crime and the impact of punishment for it, with the outcome having an even impact on people across the social spectrum. Saunders and colleagues (2013) noted that compliance with the law is thought to be heightened if the legal system is perceived to be legitimate and fair, and recommend extending consideration of special circumstances as a means of addressing the inequities of standardised fines.

This point was illustrated clearly by one of our participants (case 3 in the workshop). Tere, a 42-year-old Samoan single father raising two children aged 8 and 10 years, compared his experience of receiving a community service sentence to his previous experience of imprisonment for common assault and robbery. His community service was undertaken at a local Marae, and he felt that this sentence provided him with a worthwhile experience enabling him to "get out and meet people. And it was beneficial for our community, it was something different". Community service brought him into contact with a local building contractor who is exploring the possibility of employing Tere part-time.

In summary, our project materials were well received by the judges for providing useful information that can inform how the courts might operate and the need for broader structural reforms in society. There was no discussion that considered families as

maladjusted problems. The judiciary appear to accept the structural nature of poverty and seek to avoid victim blaming and the criminalising of families in need. The proposition that the courts are not just there to punish individuals and can actually work to improve a person's situation was accepted throughout the workshop. Informing the actions of a courtroom to take poverty into account as a factor in understanding how the person arrived in court is an important demonstration of the dialectics of knowledge production (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2012) and efforts to bring some synergy in understandings of poverty between stakeholder groups (Hodgetts et al., 2010).

Advocacy, Research Relationships, Reciprocity and Gift Exchange

Psychology has a long history of working in partnership with communities to challenge inequitable social structures (Fryer, 2008; Murray, 2012). Family100 activities reflect efforts made during the great depression in the early 20th century by scholars to engage with the complexities of politics, praxis, advocacy and justice. Jahoda and colleagues (1933/1971) engaged in participative action research to the point of providing clothing, food, medical consultations and medicines in exchange for community members' participation with researchers (Fryer, 2008). Such research practice is emancipatory, promotes inclusion and equity in knowledge production (Fryer, in press), and foregrounds an ethics of reciprocity in research. Family100 activities are also informed by traditions within the human sciences that foreground the obligations of scholars to share knowledge with the wider citizenry and to contribute to the development of more equitable societies (Cohen, Lee, & McIlwraith, 2012) through public intellectualism (Posner, 2001), liberation psychology (Martin-Baro, 1994), participative action research (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007), and scholar-activism (Murray,

2012).

Central to our own advocacy work are the reciprocal relationships between researchers, participants, partner agencies, and broader stakeholder groups in society who have the power to make a difference to the lives of families in need. Engaging in research activities like this has led us to reflect on the need for community psychology to understand research relationships and action from the perspective of gift exchange. For us, this is preferable to more utilitarian models of research that are foundational to economic models for human relations and which drive our increasingly maladjusted society. The enactment of research relationships invokes issues of gifting that challenge the systems of monetary exchange and economic rationalism that increasingly pervade contemporary society and scholarly life, and which promote exploitation and dehumanising and criminalising of the poor (*cf.* Bourdieu, 1998; Murray, 2012; Standing, 2011).

Community research involves a variety of relationships. Proximity and distance in enacted relationships between researchers, participants and broader stakeholder groups is the product of the research strategies and methods employed in any given project (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). Those drawing inspiration from the physical/natural sciences tend to engage in more distant relationships with research 'subjects', and to seek neutrality and objectivity in their assessments of the lives of others, even though these are based on engagements with real social actors. At the other end of the research spectrum, case-based researchers engaged in community action foster much closer relationships with research 'participants'; an approach that involves doing research *with* rather than *on* people and raises issues of obligations and expectations that come with closer relationships. Reciprocity then becomes central to forging closer relations

with research participants. This orientation to research is of particular relevance here, given the high number of Māori and Pacific participants in this project. As noted in recent publications in this journal (e.g., McLachlan, Hungerford, Schroder, & Adamson, 2012; Seiuli, 2012), these communities hold reciprocity as an expected element of research practice. In Family100 reciprocity was immediate, in that we provided food and other basic supports to participating families in exchange for their fortnightly meetings with us. Reciprocity was also involved over longer timescales when we engaged stakeholder groups, such as the judiciary, on behalf of research participants. Through such activities, the various relationships of the research involved dialectical sense-making processes and inter-connected levels in society in ways that benefit both the participating families and society at large (Simmel, 1903/1964).

Gift exchange theory (Mauss, 1950/1990) offers one useful way of considering close relationships and the ongoing reciprocity and advocacy linking the actual needs of families with the practices of social agency and the actions of stakeholder groups. Mauss proposed two polarised forms of social relations. The first is concerned with commodified relations associated with the formal economy and the exchange of money and goods. The second is concerned with gift relations associated with the informal economy, reciprocity and more humane exchanges that foster cooperation and interdependence, rather than competition and independence. Inter-related obligations to give, receive and repay constitute the oldest known form of human exchange. As an essential human practice, gifting links both givers and recipients within relationships that define and bind them, and raises obligations for respect, openness and cooperation rather than exploitation and distancing. Gifting is a dialectical process that can involve sharing one's story, offering food in exchange,

devoting time to a systematic analysis and the sharing of participant stories with stakeholders who have power to help. Gifting is imperative for rehumanising beneficiaries and low income families, and for supporting their voice and participation in knowledge production and decision-making. Through gifting, people share parts of themselves, bond with each other and develop social contracts that are foundational for society (Mauss, 1950/1990). Gifts of time and expertise are manifest in the use of research material to promote change. Scholars thus become active participants in responses to adversity and in brokering dialogue between different levels and groups in society.

It is appropriate, therefore, that we end with a typical reflexive account from our participants regarding Family100 and our efforts to promote dialogue. This extract comes from a group discussion concerned with oral health. It reflects the ways in which reciprocity and advocacy is appreciated and normalised among participants when they reflect on their own lives and the dilemmas of poverty:

We're quite lucky because you guys have actually come out. This is a chance for us to speak our minds. We are looking around, what we might start now it could help later because we have gone through quite a lot... When I first started with Paul [social worker] I was reluctant to talk, but as we got on to about six weeks into it then I started to feel free and started talking. I had all these pressures sitting on my shoulders, my life and this and that. We worked it out and now I've been relieved, my bills' been paid because working out through with him. You guys are there trying to sort it and helping us... This is what we needed – somebody to get out there and talk with us, to give us the confidence to talk. You guys look further out into getting more help

(Marina).

Note

¹Poverty is defined for the OECD data as 50% of equivalised household disposable income after taxes or transfers or 60% of the medium household income.

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