# Homemade Social Work: Starting In The Ontological

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## ABSTRACT

"Ontological" sounds like one of those esoteric and abstract concepts so annoying to those embedded in the "real" world of practice. Ontological questions relate to matters of actual existence and action. In this paper I argue that starting in the ontological or lived experience has been a central thread of social work since the time of pioneering social worker Jane Addams. Her work documenting an interpretive praxis offers an anchoring for the continuous renewal of social work. This paper aims to link the past to the present and further to identify the ontological power of ethnographic methods in continuing these "homemade" traditions. Beginning with a reflection on my practice and subsequent research, the paper considers six interpretive projects I supervised. A common thread is their contextual generation in the lived experience of the always-embodied researcher/practitioner. Setting aside the epistemological debate around qualitative, compared with quantitative, approaches, this paper examines what interpretive research does and explores the power of ethnographic methods in social work research and practice. Seven contemporary interpretive research cases map how located experiences of gender, indigeneity, practitioner-being, migration and other possibilities usefully inform the project of social work. All share generation from a particular practitioner's "local knowledge" and in that sense are "homemade". All differ by virtue of being responsive to each researcher's positioning in time and place. Homemade social work is a way of doing social work research. This way of making knowledge through exploring, demonstrating and publishing responsiveness to the diversity of problematic issues in an always-changing world has the advantage of turning reflected practitioner experience into an asset for a researcher rather than being considered a contaminating deficit. Such theoretically informed projects constitute ways for social work as a discipline and profession to rise to the challenge of being research-informed while building on what it is that social work practitioners do.

**Keywords:** *Ontological; Interpretive social work; Ethnographic methods; Autoethnography; Context*

*People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does.*

Michel Foucault, (cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 187)

## INTRODUCTION

As a beginning practitioner I encountered situations for which I was not prepared and found I needed to do my own research to achieve understanding in the course of taking action. A central claim of this paper is that such scenarios are not uncommon in social work practice. Research has long been integral to effective social work practice but the forms of such research have often been invisible in a discourse that (even within social work) sees research as about "rats and stats".

Useful forms of research in response to encountering problematic situations have a well-established genealogy within social work. In my doctoral research reflecting on the experience of finding myself immersed in unimagined scenarios, I traced connections back to Jane Addams (1860–1935) and the opening of Hull House in Chicago in 1890 (Crawford, 1994). She, too, was faced with the "coal-face" challenge and explored "relational knowing" and a set of values as to what should be. Such relational knowing does useful research work despite the current valuing in university cultures of objectivist forms of knowing (Staller, 2012).

Beginning my professional career in 1976 in the then remote, small, yet cosmopolitan community of Broome, Western Australia, one of the first people I came to know was Paddy Roe (1912–2001) (see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paddy_Roe). He would often come to the welfare office, sit down and, in a mild, but astute, manner educate me about the history and culture of the West Kimberley. He repeated this action with all he considered key to the everyday power dynamics of the time. Not all were willing to engage but I, adrift in confusion and curiosity, was a ready listener to someone ready to paint for me something of the landscape of meaning in which I found myself. Thoroughly Nyigina (a local Aboriginal language and culture) in his knowledge, outlook and ambitions, Paddy was proud of the fact that he and his family largely sustained independence of government and outsiders. Having grown up on Roebuck Plains Station just out of town, he had a full range of station skills to ensure his economic independence. While illiterate in English, he was an intellectual and saw clearly the power of government, the church and colonisation. In engaging with me he was actively working the "social" to improve the wellbeing of his community.

Paddy introduced me to Joe Nangan and shared how Joe had saved his life. The police had arrived on horseback at the station looking for babies who were then termed "half-castes". It was accepted practice that all such children were taken to Beagle Bay Mission (north of Broome) for a "better life" than that afforded "full-blood" natives. Even children knew of, and feared, this practice. When nine-year-old Joe heard the police coming he acted quickly

to roll the infant Paddy in cold fire ashes and put him in a hessian sugar bag that he hung in a tree. Thus Paddy never became part of "the stolen generation" and grew to become an elder of high degree, able to negotiate with people of all backgrounds while retaining his independent vision of the future. Both he and Joe have left texts to continue educating others about the knowledges they embodied (Benterrak, Muecke, & Roe, 1984; Nangan & Edwards, 1976; Roe, 1983).

My education as a social work practitioner through such encounters depended on the relational knowing allowed by those I worked with being willing to teach and on myself being willing to learn and vice versa. In 1976 Broome was a multicultural town with a rich history of church, state, and a pearling industry. Asian workers interacted with the original inhabitants with a range of results, from good through to bad. As one of the first social workers appointed there to the state welfare office, my constant thought was: "They didn't cover this in the course!"

Becoming an effective practitioner involved immersion in the field, coming to know how local landscapes and histories shaped human conditions and from a value position of engaged scholarship. It required actively observing and talking with people to gain an understanding of their lives from their own perspectives. In all of this I drew heavily on the knowledge gained in my first degree in anthropology as to ethnographic methods and the core value of believing all human behaviour is meaningful if seen from the actor's perspective.

The in-depth interviews, oral histories and participant observations of ethnography are designed to come to know people in their natural settings and lived contexts. As a recent special issue of the *Qualitative Social Work* journal (Floersch, Longhofer, & Suskewicz, 2014) highlights, such methods are also those of social work but they have been practised without consciousness of their research potential and are not widely incorporated in published research.

On first hearing the story of Joe saving Paddy I found it difficult to believe. My grandfather had served in the West Australian police force at the time Paddy was born. Surely my own family could not have been part of a culture that endorsed a routine seizing of infants from their mothers?

My interactions with Paddy set me thinking. One day I was expressing disquiet at working for "the welfare" given all the harm it seemed to have caused Aboriginal people. Paddy, slowly twirling his hat in his hands, let me know that the word for "welfare" in Nyigina meant "shield". The coming of welfare to the area had acted like a shield for Nyigina people compared to what went before. Yet here I was as a new "welfare" with a professional social work degree who was largely ignorant of what had gone before. Australian history and culture were singularly missing from both the social work curriculum and the state welfare agency's orientation. What was covered was the importance of the conscious use of self as a key tool in effective interventions with people. To consciously use myself in an environment that challenged my ontological verities was a big ask.

Seeking to make meaning of such experiences has become over time the launch pad for a consciousness of the importance of critical reflection and reflexivity in relational knowing (Taylor & White, 2000). It led to my doctoral thesis being an autoethnography looking at the nature of social work practice from a practitioner's point of view. Taking such a journey marks a strong thread in the collaborative development of the discipline of social work across time and place. It is a thread that tracks back to Jane Addams' work and writing. She established Hull House in Chicago in 1889 as a neighbourhood space to foster safety, education and creativity for numerous migrants and refugees fleeing political and economic upheavals. Here Addams conducted a form of interpretive research that could be named "homemade social work". It is not the only form of social work, but is an established and useful form of the "many ways of knowing" (Hartman, 1990, p.3) for those "in search of subjugated knowledge" (Hartman, 1992, p.483).

Jane Addams (1990) used her lived experiences filtered through the democratic ideals of the time to seek social justice. A participant with John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and others in the reflection and discussion shaping the articulation of pragmatism, she sought to enact that the truth or meaning of an idea lay in its observable practical consequences rather than expecting that if something is true here it must be true elsewhere (Deegan, 1989). Because reality changes, what works also changes. In her autobiographical and descriptive, value-based writing (see 1990) she emphasises the purposeful use of experience in the field in understanding the social world that is "happening here". In the cross-cultural landscape of Chicago, she wrote from reflected experience of the interactive mutual construction of new knowledge between people in natural settings. From this social work, innovations such as juvenile courts, legislation on working conditions for women and children and new housing forms were instituted (Addams, 1990).

Over time, the credibility of her research came to be questioned, partly because of the inclusion of the personal, while the usefulness of the work she led faded from general knowledge. Deegan (1989) documents the process by which the work of Jane Addams and her fellow practitioners studying the social changes in Chicago, was muted by the rise of university researchers arguing that they did "real" research uncontaminated by immersion in the data and an active relationship with those being studied.

Sociologist George Herbert Mead who worked at Hull House studying the interactions of the multi-cultural residents went on to develop the theoretical approach called "symbolic interactionism". My doctoral supervisor, Norman Denzin (2001) in articulating his own theoretical approach, interpretive interactionism, acknowledges his intellectual genealogy back to Mead. I followed this pattern in my thesis by connecting community development work in the Kimberleys of the 1970s to the community development work at Hull House in Chicago many decades previously. This article is subtitled "starting in the ontological". Within this conceptual concern, anthropology offers an interesting case study of science in action. When the discipline began, the only way of gaining knowledge in a far distant place where language and culture were alien to the researcher was through relationships and relational knowing. Effective relational knowing required reflexivity on the part of the anthropologist and an ontological awareness. Without such awareness of one's own positioning, being immersed in an unknown environment needing "the natives" to be

your teachers, the potential for emic or insider knowing was much reduced. Yet, in the subsequent write-up of such field excursions, the language used was that of objective science with little hint of the relational ways through which knowledge was obtained. The work of Malinowski exemplifies the dynamics of a culture of scientism in operation. Travelling in 1914 to one of the furthest reaches of the colonised world, Malinowski (1950) subseqently published in the passive voice of science, what became an iconic "scientific" text for the young discipline of anthropology. Posthumously his diary of that trip was published telling a very different reflexive tale of the complexities and strains involved in sustaining the relationships involved in gaining knowledge across difference (Malinowski, 1989).

More recently, feminist scholars have analysed such tensions in gaining knowledge from others. They have argued for the importance of transparency as to embodiment, positionality and reflexivity in such research (England, 1994). This has focused attention on the importance of ontologically considering the diverse and always-changing ways of being in the world. Interpretive anthropologist Geertz (1983) points out there are no longer furthest reaches in which natives can be found: rather he argues, "we are all natives now" (p. 151). All of us are cultural beings, and our ontological being is in a constant state of dynamic change through interaction with others. When it comes to understanding the human condition, Geertz argues there is no shared essential truth about being human that transcends time and place. This being so, much social work research needs to be interpretive.

One hundred years ago however, a widespread insistence on scientism and the use of positivist scientific methods was a logic behind an erasure of Jane Addams and her practice researcher cohort from the annals of what came to be called the Chicago School (Deegan, 1989). There was a claim of no relationship between the observer and those observed. The relational knowledge at the heart of Jane Addams' work came to be denied.

This paper argues this denial needs to be revisited. By ethically enacting their purpose in changing contexts, practitioners are not cogs in a machine mechanically applying results scientifically established by researchers. Rather the research they undertake in practice is an active ingredient in the transformational possibilities of social work (Witkin & Saleebey, 2007). While the relative merits of epistemological approaches to research continue to be debated, this paper argues a different case.

By beginning in the ontological and mapping the outcomes of such research, it becomes harder to dismiss the utility of such an approach. Where ways of being in the world are always in the process of social construction and vary immensely, it is clear that, in order to engage effectively with those they would work with, practitioners need to know "what is happening here". There is ontological strength in the signature theme of social work being about the person in environment and "starting where the person/client is at" but the research potential of this framing remains relatively unrealised.

In terms of the places, spaces and time in which such research has happened, the narrative approach of social worker Michael White (2004, 2007) is an Australian example generated by combining both theory and practice in a form of praxis. His work continues to have

global impact across a diversity of contexts and well beyond disciplinary boundaries. A West Australian cluster of interpretive projects similarly start in the ontological. They are detailed here in the hope they prove useful to social work practitioners, educators and researchers in negotiating the changes and politics of social work and social work education.

## THE INTERPRETIVE TURN AND SEVEN PROJECTS

Across a number of disciplines, the terms *narrative, linguistic and/or interpretive turn*, signal a radical shift in academic endeavours to understand the human condition. Such terms encapsulate the turn away from thinking that human knowledge was on an inevitable evolutionary trajectory where all diversity in the world could be arrayed on a ladder of development with the most modern on the top rung. Instead, an understanding developed that difference need not mean deviance from the norm but could be understood in many differing ways—ways that could connect but not in any predetermined fashion. Narrative/interpretive inquiries "are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our own narrative inquiry plotlines" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121).

Elsewhere I have argued that because interpretive research is what practitioners do every day across the variety of contexts shaping the many social works to be found in practice, curriculums need to consciously include ethnographic skills (Crawford, 2006). In practice however, such research often leaves no textual trace in the research literature. This paper now looks at seven social work interpretive studies that have been documented.

**Project One: Frances Crawford (1994) Emic Social Work: A Story of Practice**

The first considered was my doctoral research "Emic social work: A story of practice" (Crawford, 1994). In this, the concept of homemade social work was articulated.

> *It is homemade in the sense of emerging from where I found myself and from my … reading of that particular context. Homemade in the sense of my deciding what is to be done given the purpose of my engagement in the local setting.* (Crawford, 1994, p. 38)

Nimmagadda and Martell (2010) in their chapter, "Homemade social work: The two-way transfer of social work practice knowledge between India and the USA" have taken up the concept. Their work led me to reflect on the many projects I have supervised which also have elements of homemade social work driving them. The six projects described have been purposefully chosen with the aim of evidencing the range of ways in which such interpretive research can happen. Included are two projects by non-social workers to demonstrate the permeable interdisciplinary boundaries around what we do.

The authors of all works are practitioners as well as being actively involved in education. All were contacted and readily agreed to have their work considered for the purposes of this article. All studies are culturally responsive, collective, connected, collaborative and, at the same time, individually achieved scholarly works. They all work the social involving personal/political/policy research.

**Project Two: Dr Jacqui Dodds (1992) Collaborative Group Inquiry: A Blend of Research and Therapy**

Dodds was passionate about doing an Honours project on the usefulness of meditation amongst cancer patients. This came out of her lived experience as a meditator with knowledge of the limits of prevailing cancer treatments. She successfully negotiated the politics of knowledge when the ethics committee queried why there was no permission from the treating doctors to allow their patients to be involved in such a study. Dodds (1995) published from this research in *Australian Social Work*. She currently works in private practice in Queensland after many years in the WA Country Health Service.

The abstract for her Australian Social Work publication (1995, p. 37) reads, in part:

*A collaborative group inquiry that successfully combined the separate goals of research and social work practice in the same project… [the] approach used to explore the impact of meditation on the lives and health of six people diagnosed with cancer. …The paper …focuses on the group's use of a post-positivist, open-ended and empowering inquiry mode that participants reported as more relevant, supportive and stimulating than the other cancer support groups they had attended.*

Since Dodd's research there has been much evidence as to the usefulness of meditation in supporting those with cancer. Cancer Research UK (www.cancerresearchuk.org), the American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org) and the Cancer Council NSW are just three of the cancer support organisations that provide information on their websites as to the potential usefulness of meditation in supporting those with cancer. Dodds describes some of her research journey on her website (http://eastwestwisdoms.com/?page_id=726).

*I sought to explore how using meditation to work with the mind might influence the physical, psychological and spiritual health of people suffering from a cancer diagnosis… The success of this research led me to my doctoral research . . . in which I took a broader look at how the meanings people made of cancer were influenced by professional mainstream biomedical, alternative natural healing, and holistic healing assumptions about illness and healing. . . . I collaboratively researched how these assumptions influenced research participants with a cancer diagnosis and led them to choices of startlingly different healing treatments and strategies.*

Dodds' work engaged with how change happens by researching with people as to the meanings they made of the situations in which they found themselves. It was an effective translation of the axiom of "starting where people are at" into research practice.

**Project Three: Ian Percy (2003) Spirituality in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Exploring the Narratives of Professional Practitioners**

Percy completed this project at a Master's level and received a Chancellor's Commendation for the quality of the work. He is currently completing a doctoral project developing the methodology further with regard to a comparison of Bhutanese and Australian practitioners' understandings of "mindfulness" in counselling. Both research projects were generated out of his lived experience as a social work practitioner in a variety of settings. With a growing list of publications (2006, 2007, 2008), Percy is also a social work educator, a narrative therapist and presents narrative therapy workshops in both Australia and Bhutan.

The abstract for his thesis reads, in part:

*This study explores the place of spirituality in the personal and professional lives of six counsellors and psychotherapists in Perth, WA. … An interpretive and reflexive narrative approach was adopted in this project to draw attention to the relational and negotiated aspects of storying lived events … All respondents witnessed each other's performances of meanings around the central topic with opportunities to explore and comment on shared and differing viewpoints. . . The researcher… situates himself as co-author of the storytelling… By embracing an inclusive view of spiritualties, group members encouraged complexity and reciprocity in their relationships guided by notions of human dignity and environmental sensitivity.*

In his methodological development, Percy has crafted ways of skillfully combining the thought and action of practice in a manner that invites the involvement and collaboration of practitioners interested in exploring the question at hand. It owes much to traditions of cooperative inquiry (Reason, 1994) but is enhanced by the advanced levels of practitioner skill in interviewing that he and his co-researchers share. The layering of the feedback between all participants thickens the richness of the landscape of understanding developed. There is no suggestion that a "final truth" is to be established. In this, his work has considerable links with the work of Dodds, Gray and Turnell who also worked in such a recursive manner with research participants framed as co-researchers.

**Project Four: Dr Jennie Gray (2008) Living With a Label: An Action-oriented Feminist Inquiry into Women's Mental Health**

The thesis abstract reads, in part:

*Dorothy Smith (1987) says investigations often begin with "a feeling of uneasiness". Smith's insistence of the importance of starting with women's standpoint, to redress the way in which women's lives have been negated or neglected in research, informs the methodological premise of this inquiry. The unease that prompted this project emerged in conversations I had with women diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder whilst working as a practitioner at a women's health centre. The frequency with which the discourses of biomedicine figured in these women's narrated experiences engendered a collective commitment to make problematic "living with a label". . . . the women I researched with are often positioned as "subject" to an objective medical gaze. Disrupting dichotomies that these women are accustomed to in clinical settings, and destabilising notions of neutral and detached research, our investigations were contingent, reflexive and relational. ...This project was cast in the feminist "with", rather than the "on".*

Gray's work became a book (2008) and she was actively sought out to publish in journals. One article eventuated before she was consumed with her everyday life as a practitioner. The abstract from (Re)*considering Voice* (2007) indicates her reflections on the research process.

*This article considers some of complexities around a feminist imperative of "voice" …follows the possibilities and problematics encountered in a social inquiry aimed at creating space for the women who participated to "give voice" as a collective. Our explorations about the ways that these women, diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, come to experience their everyday worlds as they do, involved identifying the social processes and practices shaping their lived*

*actualities. Speaking together and back to the discourses of biomedicine that work to position these women in fixed and universal ways was also central to our researching. That the woman's voice goes largely unheard when spoken from "madness" made such work more urgent.*

Jennie Gray practised in Broome from 2004 to 2013. In that time she received numerous nominations and awards for the quality of her work with the community. These include: Partnerships 2010—West Kimberley Family and Domestic Violence Project; Billard Blank Page Summit, Stand Up for Life 2011; Suicide Prevention Australia, Communities 2011; Anglicare Australia, Innovation 2011—Kununurra Women's Fishing Group; Department for Child Protection Community Awards 2012 and the Australian Crime Prevention Award from the Australian Institute of Criminology, 2005 for the Broome HYPE Project.

Illuminating this list is unsolicited feedback from a citizen:

*Thanks very much for all your hard work. You bang every nail in the right board. … We thank you for your good manners. It was the proper way. Thank you for not being bossy and taking us for granted. You got a very good history with our people.* (J. Gray personal communication, 24th September 2013)

Gray's career trajectory illustrates the bifurcation and tension between the worlds of practice and the worlds of theory. She embodies the skill of working the tensions between theory and action while also documenting this in disciplinary texts that leave a genealogical trace. In her present position as a social work educator she also embodies that it is possible to keep the connection between theory and practice alive.

**Project Five: Andrew Turnell (2007) Enacting the Interpretive Turn: Narrative Means Toward Transformational Practice in Child Protection Social Work**

This fifth project differs from the others examined in that it was achieved by publication with an exegesis providing the theoretical framing to the combination of published books, articles and videos. Turnell had previously published *Signs of Safety* with Steven Edwards in 1999 (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Both authors drew on practice experience to highlight the importance of looking for positive signs of potential strength in people and their environments in child-protection investigations. The thesis, by publication, extended these beginnings. Turnell's abstract is produced in full here to convey a sense of his embodied positioning in the work:

*An ongoing interpretive inquiry exploring constructive frontline child protection social work undertaken by the author in collaboration with practitioners in Europe, North America and Australasia that has given rise to the publications and DVDs. Taking the lead from Geertz's ideas of interpretive anthropology the aim of this inquiry and publication work is to develop descriptions and theories of practice drawing upon insiders' local knowledges and sense-making of what constitutes good child protection social work. 'The natives' or insiders toward which this interpretive project directs its attention are first and foremost, frontline child protection social workers and wherever possible the child protection service recipients who have experienced the practice of those workers. The usually overlooked, often deemed 'tacit' knowledges of service deliverers and recipients are brought into the formal domain and made accessible to others. This*

*project is undertaken with transformative intent. The first intent being to distil the wisdom of insiders' knowledges into richly detailed formal accounts of good practice that speaks directly to the practitioner's condition thereby enhancing their professional reflexivity, hope and capacity. The second intent is to provide constructive on-the-ground "news of difference" for a child protection field that is over-organised by anxiety, worst-case outcomes and an obsession with managers' measures. The exegesis is formulated around the research question[:] What potential does interpretive social theory have for transforming child protection social work? My conclusion is that while interpretive social theory offers significant epistemological and methodological resources for transforming the practices and orientation of child protection social work, this potential will not be realised until the social work displays renewed ontological commitment and faith in the knowledges and everyday experience of frontline practitioners.*

A book review on one of the publications commented, "The basic premise of the resolutions approach is not that there is a definitive truth 'out there' but rather on the principle that a process of 'truth telling' among the community of family, friends and professionals involved in the dilemma has the potential to transform the . . . situation" (Bacon, 2008, p. 329). This echoes the truth-telling of pragmatist philosophy enacted by Jane Addams (Crawford, 1994).

It is this focus on enacting understanding in interaction with people who all have the democratic right to be heard that marks the core of homemade social work. It captures the sense that, in the discipline, there is a working of the social not on people but with them. Turnell has evidenced the potential of this interpretive approach with compelling video demonstration of how these ideas work in practice. This, together with his ability to articulate the logic behind the interactive style of working with families, makes his approach attractive to managers of child-protection services such that Turnell and Edwards' *Signs of Safety* copyrighted approach is now in use in child-protection jurisdictions around the world. This engagement extends to practitioners themselves in that the approach positions their agency and skill as central to effective outcomes being achieved.

Turnell (see www.signsofsafety.net/) incorporates in his approach the conduct of regular conferences as sites in which practitioners and those they work with share stories (in person or via video) of good practice experiences. These are held at both local and global levels. Such a conference was held in the United Kingdom in 2014 and is entitled: "Keeping the rumour of good child protection practice alive!" It is the seventh such international *Signs of Safety* gathering and includes presentations from the leading *Signs of Safety* practitioners and agencies around the world, including the more than twenty English and Welsh local authorities implementing the approach. A presentation by Terry Murphy reflects Turnell's emphasis on the integral importance of management and organizational process to the focus on practitioner agency. Murphy was the Director General of the Western Australian Department where Turnell's child-protection approach was early implemented and now works in partnership with Turnell. The concluding session was led by Eileen Munro, an advocate of the importance of practitioner reflexivity and author of the recent review of child protection (2011) in England. Munro's report connects with Turnell's thesis by arguing for the importance of centring and valuing practitioner agency and judgement in shaping an effective child-protection service.

**Project Six: Dr Marilyn Metta (2009) Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory: Lifewriting as Reflexive Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice**

Marilyn is a counsellor in private practice and an academic in a university humanities faculty. Born in Malaysia, of ethnic Chinese parents, she has also lived in Singapore and Australia. The abstract for her thesis reads, in part:

*An exploration of the processes of writing personal life narratives as a way of doing critical reflexive feminist research. Using reflexive feminist modes of lifewriting as the research methodology, the thesis focuses on three life narratives written in different narrative styles: my mother's biography, which I have written from oral sources; my father's biography, which I have written from my own memory and imagination; and my autobiography/autoethnography. I will be exploring the reflexive, creative and imaginative journeys in writing my parents' lives and my own life as ways of doing reflexive feminist research. As a Chinese-Australian woman engaging in reflexive, creative and imaginative lifewriting, my aim is to create new spaces and add different voices to the small but emerging Asian Australian scholarly literature. …This thesis aims to challenge and problematise some of the prevailing Orientalist assumptions.*

The book developed from this thesis received the 2011 Outstanding Qualitative Book of the Year Award presented at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Illinois. There have been several reviews of this work and I quote from one to give some sense of how her work connects to the the "homemade".

*The book is a highly sophisticated compilation of issues vibrant in the feminist, postmodern, and minority group cultures regarding voice, representation, and reflexivity. …It brings to the forefront many difficult questions concerning what it means to do narrative research from a feminist–postmodernist position and what it means to be labelled as a minority group member (such as Asian Australian).* (Gergan, 2011, p. 638)

Metta blends the worlds of practice and academia though, in her case, the worlds themselves are quite separate. In her academic work she is not seen as a counsellor and in her work with clients she is not seen as an academic. Despite this, her homemade approach of writing from her positioning in the world has achieved resonance with a global audience. In her thesis she articulates how writing has informed her practice with women of similar multicultural backgrounds struggling to understand how they are, and could be, positioned in the world.

**Project Seven: Liz Caddy (2011) Correlations Between Participating in a Creative Activity Group and Mental Wellbeing**

Caddy, with a mental health nursing background, was an experienced practitioner with an art therapy group in a private psychiatric clinic when she completed this project as part of a Master's degree in counselling. Keen to use a narrative approach in her research she found a roadblock to progressing this idea. Her employer was prepared to support only quantitative research, considering it the only research to be both valid and credible. Then it emerged that the clinic had an extensive collection of useable, de-identified data on patient progress available to those doing quantitative research. As Caddy hoped to pursue art therapy in the future it would have been useful to have evidence as to the effectiveness of this approach

in working with those with mental health issues. Caddy also realised that, as a practitioner committed to a narrative approach in practice and research, it would be useful to learn to speak the language of those committed to quantitative approaches.

Mastering the skills and knowledge involved Caddy, with her supervisors, published the results as "'Painting a path to wellness': Correlations between participating in a creative activity group" (Caddy, Crawford, & Page, 2011). Positive correlations between participating in an art therapy group and improved mental health were quantitatively established.

This final project has been chosen to demonstrate the linkage possible between traditional quantitative approaches and the no-less-traditional interpretive approaches. Both have parts to play in the ongoing development of social work and other practice disciplines that are about working in interaction with people in ways that respect and research our common humanity, our deep cultural and individual differences and our disciplinary commitment to social justice and human rights. The discipline of social work is subject to all the forces that come with being a "native of its time". In the history of social work there have been ideas and initiatives that were appropriate (or at least accepted as such at the time) in context but which either changed or faded with time. Homemade social work is an approach that enables the ongoing revisiting as to the contextual appropriateness of any specific practice.

All seven projects share beginnings in the lived experience of the researcher, researching *with* not *on* people, combining research with practice, depending on relational knowing, positioning the researcher and being autoethnographic. They offer resonance with an audience rather than reproduceability. In varying ways all have achieved this resonance.

As to research, they demonstrate that practitioner experience can be an asset in undertaking higher degrees through research. As a doctoral student, a peer informed me that, on applying for entry to the program, she had been asked how long she had been in practice. She answered: "Almost two years." The response was: "That's lucky. Any more and you would have been useless for research". The seven projects evidence in contrast that useful research can happen through relationship with the subject and beyond rats and stats. They offer ways in which it is possible for the field and the academy to work in fruitful partnership.

## CONCLUSION

The seven projects described here were conducted over the last two decades and documented through supervised research studies. They have been presented in evidence of the usefulness of interpretive research to the discipline and practice of social work. This usefulness can be mapped back in time over a hundred years and in space around the globe. Given the nature of the territory social work occupies as a value-based practice discipline it is important to name and claim what such research does. A homemade approach starts in the ontological by beginning where the practitioner is positioned in the world and always incorporates aspects of embodied selves, shaped by gender, race, class and personal histories

in interaction with others. There is no certainty as to what the outcome of homemade social work might be beyond the hope that it be responsive and respectful of context.

Jane Addams' insistence on starting locally where people are at, and researching with them where they sought to go, has produced a form of knowing for social work that is widespread in its applicability. The ethnographic methods suited to this purpose are strongly resonant with the social work skills of in-depth interviewing and participant observation. It is possible to reproduce this homemade approach just about anywhere by starting in embodied experience and researching outwards, collectively and collaboratively, to transformational ends.

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