

How do you know where you are going, if you don't know where you are coming from?

Learning from trauma informed services after the National Apology

Dr Jadwiga Leigh

Founder and Director of New Beginnings Greater Manchester

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Main aims and objectives:

The aim of this fellowship was to travel to Australia and visit organisations which worked with people who had experienced significant trauma at some point in their lives so that I could learn about the different techniques practitioners were using. The main objective was to utilise this experience by returning to England and applying what I had learned to my own work with New Beginnings Greater Manchester.

Summary of objectives:

By spending time with a variety of services in Australasia which worked with families who had experienced significant trauma, I wanted to find:

- New ways of working by learning new approaches to working with families.
- Bring back my findings and develop and adapt the New Beginnings model so that it could support parents with additional needs to become the parents they wanted to be;
- Keep families together who wanted to be together; and connect them to other parents who were in similar situations.
- By providing parents with the appropriate support, New Beginnings could help reduce the number of children being accommodated and in turn, cut local authority spending.

Main findings

- Despite initially believing the reunification process was focused on reuniting families who had been separated, I came away thinking it was a system that was more punitive than the child protection process in England
- A number of parent advocacy organisations have set up in Australia in an effort to rectify the ongoing issues that have emerged following the implementation of the reunification process and the continuing rise in numbers of children being removed from their families and placed into care
- Narrative therapy is one medium that is being used with parents by practitioners and members of the Stolen Generations.

Recommendations

- Parent advocacy prides itself on working 'with' parents and social work professionals. To provide parents with the time and space they require to turn their lives around, New Beginnings needs to have the 'right' team in place. This team needs to be recruited by the parents who have completed the programme so that they can work alongside professionals they feel have the skills and experience for the role. In addition, peer mentors need to be paid for the work that they do and feel valued for their input.
- New Beginnings can integrate narrative therapy as an approach that enables the professional to hear the story being told to them by the parent with whom they work.
- Funding not-for-profit organisations involves fundraising, training, teaching and applying for larger funds. New Beginnings can grow if it develops its reach and starts to charge for the services it provides rather than relying solely on funding streams.

Introduction to the New Beginnings project

Background

In England and Wales, the majority of court proceedings are started and concluded within 26 weeks as a result of the new Children and Families Act (2014) which is a short time period for families, often with multitude of different complex issues, to turn their lives around and demonstrate change. This is demonstrated through the following data. In 2018, 51.1% of court referrals were made as a result of domestic violence; 42.6% were due to mental health issues and 19.7% as a result of drug and alcohol misuse (Ryan and Cook, 2019).

National data also highlights that children from more deprived areas are more likely to enter public proceedings. In 2017/18 the family courts made decisions about the future family relationships of over 67,000 children in England and Wales. The average age of a child entering public law proceedings during that time period was just 5.4 years old. With the numbers of children being removed into care increasing significantly yearly, it would seem that current UK practice is now more geared towards providing support to families after child removal rather than before. Although it is recognised that various types of support for families is necessary if family problems are to be prevented from escalating and, where

possible, to be resolved so that there is no need for an application to be made to court, the amount of resources being invested into preventative services is being reduced.

New Beginnings (NB) is a 6-month trauma-informed programme¹ which works with adults whose children are known to children's services for abuse & neglect. It is a project that was initially inspired by Flemish part of my research in 2013 which had explored, in part, how a social welfare system carried out child protection practice. However, it was later developed further from and sociologist Imogen Tyler's (2013a; 2013b) on the power of maternal commons and transformational beginnings. Tyler uses the concept of the maternal commons to describe the way in which women have, in multiple historical and social contexts, worked collectively to resist their classification as 'waste populations'. The women referred into New Beginnings have been classified as failing mothers, or mothers who struggle to parent effectively, which is why they have become subject to child protection interventions.

As a social action project which seeks to enable these mothers to support each other, New Beginnings makes common their challenges and struggles in ways which might recast and transform their relationship to state authorities, and to their families and children. The aim of New Beginnings is to keep families together by supporting parents to recognise who they are and why they parent in the way they do, thus preventing their children from entering the care system. With these new skills, parents have the opportunity to become peer mentors for the next cohort of NB families.

In the summer of 2018, I was in the middle of running the first Cohort of New Beginnings Greater Manchester when I noticed an advert for the Churchill Fellowship. I'd been reading with interest Dr Karen Treisman's Churchill Fellowship travels around the USA and was curious as to whether this kind of opportunity could be beneficial to helping me develop the way New Beginnings was working with families. Earlier that year, in May 2018, I had started a pilot of the New Beginnings project in partnership with Stockport Family. Our aim was to work intensively with families in the child protection process so that care proceedings could

¹ Trauma-informed practice is the ability to recognise the prevalence of trauma and its impact on the emotional, psychological and social wellbeing of people and communities.

be avoided, families stepped down to child in need status (providing family support and early intervention) and for social care intervention to end altogether. Although things were going well with the pilot, I was well aware that there was much I did not know and needed to learn if we were to continue meeting families' needs.

It was noticeable that the project was receiving an increasing number of referrals in relation to young care leaver parents as well as pregnant women who had experienced recurrent removals. All required support during the early stages of parenthood. Although New Beginnings was familiar with working with young people and women, it had not been specifically tailored to work with young care leavers who enter parenthood or women who'd had children removed from their care. These two groups of parents are often believed to have more complex needs because of the trauma they have previously experienced being unresolved and continuing to affect their lives in adulthood. As such, I was not aware of a service in the UK which had effectively developed a trauma-informed approach to meet their needs appropriately.

I had heard from friends who had moved overseas that following the National Apology, Australia had become quite radical in its approach to working with families. Children's law had changed and was now focused on reunification rather than separation. In addition, local authorities had taken on board many of the recommendations in the Bringing Home Report (1997), a document which emerged from the National Inquiry into the Stolen Generations, and were changing the way they worked with families. As a result, a wave of new independent organisations had been established, in turn, creating resourceful and imaginative approaches to working with families who had experienced significant trauma.

Why Australia? And why now?

I applied for a Fellowship and in March 2019 discovered that I was fortunate to be awarded one. I planned my journey around Australia and started my journey in Perth before moving onto Darwin, Nambucca Heads, Newcastle, Sydney, Tasmania and then finally, Adelaide. Although my main objective was to visit independent providers I wanted to begin in a local authority type setting so that I could see how social work practice was being carried out in

accordance with the new Reunification Policy (2012). What I liked about this policy was its timescales. Unlike in England where the majority of proceedings were started and concluded within 26 weeks as a result of the new Children and Families Act (2014), in Australia timescales had been extended to 12 months for children who had entered care at less than 2 years of age and 24 months for all other children and young people (Reunification Policy, 2012).

By spending time with a variety of services in Australasia which worked with families who had experienced significant trauma, I wanted to find out new ways of working; learn new approaches to working with families. I wanted to bring back my findings and develop and adapt the New Beginnings model so that it could support parents with additional needs to become the parents they wanted to be; to keep families together who wanted to be together; and connect them to other parents who were in similar situations. I hoped that it would enable better relationships to be built between professionals and families and reduce isolation for these groups of parents. By providing parents with the appropriate support, I hoped that our service would help reduce the number of children being accommodated and in turn, cut local authority spending.

Current UK practice is focused on providing support after child removal. I hoped that this Fellowship would provide me with the opportunity to challenge that way of working by developing New Beginnings, a model which already draws specifically on international methods of care, into a relationship based approach that aims to break the cycle for all families, no matter who they are or where they have come from. Children need to have trusting, meaningful relationships with the adults who care for them so that they build emotional and social confidence for other aspects of their lives.

Australian Context

National Apology

On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples, particularly to the Stolen Generations whose lives had been scarred by forced child removal and Indigenous assimilation. The term 'Stolen Generations' is used to describe the children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who had been removed from their families between approximately 1905 and 1967 by the Federal and State government agencies and church missions, under acts of assimilation by their respective parliaments. Rudd became the first Australian Prime Minister to formally apologise and after he had been elected he made it the new parliament's first order of business.

The national apology came about as a result of the Bringing Them Home report (1997) which shared the findings from an inquiry which had been instigated by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1995. It marked a crucial moment in the healing journey of many Stolen Generations' members because it was the first time their stories were officially acknowledged. Yet despite being a pivotal piece and probably the first turning point in the history of the Stolen Generations, the report is still difficult to read; simply because it is laced with tragedy and injustice from the first page until the last. It is nonetheless a report that I urge everyone to read because this report will not do it the justice it deserves.

The report is 524 pages long and includes visual, oral and written testimonies from over five hundred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other agencies. What I particularly like about the report, is the way in which it has kept many of the testimonies intact. Below is an extract from just one of the confidential submissions:

Jennifer's story

Early one morning in November 1952 the manager from Burnt Bridge Mission came to our home with a policeman. I could hear him saying to Mum, 'I am taking the two girls and placing them in Cootamundra Home'. My father was saying, 'What right have you?' The manager said he can do what he likes...They would not let us kiss our father goodbye, I will never forget the sad look on his face. He was unwell and he worked very hard all his life as a timber-cutter.

That was the last time I saw my father, he died within two years after.... Some of the staff were cruel to the girls. Punishment was caning or belting and being locked in the box-room or the old morgue.... I look back now and see we were all herded together like sheep and each had to defend themselves and if you didn't you would be picked on by somebody that didn't like you, your life would be made a misery. I cannot say from my memories that Cootamundra was a happy place. I still can't see why we were taken away from our home. We were not neglected, we wore nice clothes and we were not starving. Our father worked hard and provided for us and we came from a very close and loving family. I feel our childhood has been taken away from us and it has left a big hole in our lives. (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997: 46)

Jennifer's story, and those of others, highlight that contrary to the common belief that children were rightly removed from their families because they were being abused and neglected, many children were wrongfully and illegally removed for no real reason other than assimilation. The 'protectionist' legislation, which was used in preference to the general child welfare legislation to remove Indigenous children from their families, provided government officials acting under the authority of the Chief Protector, or the State Board, the power to remove an Indigenous child without having to satisfy the court that the child was neglected. Government officials theorised that by forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families and sending them away from their communities to work for non-Indigenous people, they would be able to erase the Indigenous people's existence, by merging them with the non-Indigenous population. As Brisbane's Telegraph newspaper reported in May 1937:

Mr Neville [the Chief Protector of Western Australia] holds the view that within one hundred years the pure black race will be extinct. But the half-caste problem is increasing every year. (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997: 24)

In Neville's view, skin colour was central to absorption. By keeping 'pure blacks' segregated Neville believed that children with lighter skin colour would automatically be accepted into non-Indigenous society and so lose their Aboriginal identity. Together with other officials, he estimated that it would take one hundred years to wipe out the entire race (Bringing Them Home Report, 1997:24). Although the assimilation policies did not, fortunately, meet their overall objective, the Inquiry estimated that over 100,000 children had been forcibly removed from their parents. A figure they felt was an underestimation rather than an overestimation.

The report acknowledges that many members of the Stolen Generations will forever be affected by the traumatic experiences they encountered as a result of being separated by force from members of their families. What was also recognised was how this form of trauma was intergenerational because the pain experienced had travelled through children to grandchildren, and as a result had contributed to many of the issues Indigenous communities faced, and continue to face, such as family violence, substance abuse and self-harm (Healing Foundation, 2017).

The present plight, in terms of health, employment, education, living conditions and self-esteem, of so many Aborigines must be acknowledged as largely flowing from what happened in the past. The dispossession, the destruction of hunting fields and the devastation of lives were all related. The new diseases, the alcohol and the new pressures of living were all introduced. True acknowledgment cannot stop short of recognition of the extent to which present disadvantage flows from past injustice and oppression ...

(Sir William Deane, Governor-General of Australia in his submission to the National Inquiry, 1995)

Sadly, although a large amount of evidence was submitted to the Inquiry, there were many people who could have provided evidence but did not do so because they were either unable to travel; felt uneasy with the public nature of the inquiry, or felt too afraid or traumatised to speak of their experiences. But for those who did share the stories, the report provided survivors with a space to tell their stories in their own voices whilst also having their pain publicly acknowledged, for the first time in history by an official government body. For many Indigenous people, the act of telling their stories was an important step in their healing journey.

There is some good news I would like to pass on to you. Everyone I have spoken to has said it is like the world has been lifted off their shoulders, because at last we have been heard. For me I have grown stronger and now am able to move forward. You have played a significant part in my journey back ... (letter of thanks to the Inquiry from a witness).

Findings Section

Emerging themes from the Churchill Fellowship

1. Utopia? Or dystopia? One thing is certain, all is not what it seems

Something that I took for granted before I left for Australia was that the Australian child protection process operated in a similar fashion to the one in England with families often receiving support for issues relating to neglect, for example, at the Children in Need stage, before perhaps moving into Child Protection if concerns became more serious and then, if after three years no improvements were being made, the pre-proceedings process would be considered. What I learned rather quickly was that many families jumped from the receiving support stage (Child in Need) to the care proceedings and/or child removal stage. Once a child was in care, the process for reunification was then expected to be followed but was not, as I had previously assumed, a mandatory form of practice.

Although this information was initially shared with me by Senior Practice Development Officers from the Department of Communities (also known as SPDOs- many of whom were from England and told me they wished they were still in practice there!), this data is supported by research that has been carried out by Andy Bilson and colleagues (2015; 2017). Bilson et al. found that when neglect was assessed early in the lives of children it was the major precipitant for entry to care, particularly so for Aboriginal infants. Between 1997 and 2015, the number of children in out-of-home care in Australia had trebled. Even more concerning was the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were also 10 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children (AIHW, 2016).

Despite concerted efforts being made therefore to reduce the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care over the past 20 years, the likelihood of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being removed from their families these studies show it has actually increased since the Bringing Them Home report was released. While I expect there were serious situations from which children had to be removed for their own safety, the recommendations made in the report to help families break free from the intergenerational impact of past assimilation policies do not appear to be working as expected.

Kylie's Story (a parent who had her children removed from her care as a result of domestic violence):

While with one of the Department of Communities in Western Australia I was fortunate to be introduced to a parent who had direct experience of this kind of approach and who wanted to share with me what it was like to be "on the other side of the fence". For purposes of confidentiality I will call her Kylie. Kylie told me that she was in a violent relationship with the father of her youngest child. She wasn't able to ask for help as she was frightened but what she didn't properly appreciate was that her children were frightened too. One day, one of her children went to school and told her teacher about the violence she and her siblings were witnessing in the home. The school informed 'the Department' (Kylie's terms for Children's Services) and they came and interviewed the children without Kylie's consent.

This is something we can also do in England under the Children Act 1989 Section 47 when there is reason to suspect that a child is a risk of significant harm. However, we only use it in very serious situations, when for example, seeking consent from a parent to interview a child would mean that child's life would be in jeopardy. I qualified as a social worker in 2005 and in the 8 years I practised as a statutory social worker I never once interviewed a child without the consent of his/ her parent.

Although I am not sure that Kylie's children's lives were at risk if the social worker had sought Kylie's consent to interview the children, I do appreciate I was not present at the time and that the Australian social worker in Kylie's case was concerned enough to seek approval from the District Director to remove Kylie's children immediately into foster care without telling Kylie. Kylie only found out that her children had been accommodated when she went to collect them from school at the end of the day. She found out that her children had been taken into care by the school. She said that the way the school told her was awful. She said, "They were not nice and they were not polite".

Kylie called the Department to find out where her children were but they would not tell her at first. She said her social worker was rude and abrupt. She later found out that social workers like parents to come into the office so they can talk to them about the chain of events that had occurred as they cannot verify parents' identities over the phone. Whilst Kylie appreciated this protocol was in place for a good reason, at the same time, she was

terrified and extremely distressed. No one had called her to tell her that her children were in care and she had never been apart from her children or had Children's Services involvement before. She therefore did not know what to expect or what she needed to do to get her children home. She also felt she was being treated as a suspect when she was actually a victim. She said that this was confirmed to her by the police who later arrested her. They said to her "doing nothing is just as bad as doing nothing". Meaning that because she did not protect herself or her children, she was as much a risk as her partner.

Fortunately for Kylie, she was assigned a new social worker who was a friend of mine who had emigrated to Australia a few years ago. For the purpose of confidentiality, I will call my friend Lina. As soon as Kylie met Lina she felt reassured. Although Lina was new to the case and was not part of the initial decision-making process, she was aware that Kylie would benefit from a clear, upfront and informed approach. Lina provided Kylie with the information she required and what she needed to do to turn the situation around. Lina also made sure that other professionals did their job properly. She challenged the police on the way they managed the case and the Department on issues relating to contact between Kylie and the children. She worked well with Kylie and they have a good relationship which Kylie said she was grateful for in this 'crazy system'. Kylie's children were returned to her two years after they were removed.

Reflections

I had travelled all the way to Australia in the hope of finding a system that acknowledged it had made serious errors and was now actively trying to work in partnership with parents for the benefit of their children. Instead I found social workers who were only concerned about the welfare of the child; parents who had been ignored and scarred by the child protection process.

I had believed that 'reunification' meant that professionals would not rest until the family was reunited. Professionals would work hard to ensure that the family have received all the support they need before children are removed from their care- not the other way around. I left wondering why they called this a process of reunification when it sounded more like a process of separation. I started to realise that language is important. Impressive words can

act as propaganda. They can replace good intention with feelings of good will. The Australian social workers I met all felt their system was greatly improved. The British social workers I met all felt that the system was better in the UK than in Australia. Rather than discovering a version of Utopia, I learned that the system at home was flawed but was more family focused than the one in Australia. I also realised that it doesn't matter where you are in the world, there are a mountain of invisible rules for families subjected to child protection processes

John Berger (1972) said 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe'. Although Berger was talking about the way we interpret images, the same quote can be applied to this situation. I needed to be away from England to detach from my familiar place and have the space to look back and see it properly. I realised that systems in which social workers operate in may indeed be different depending on the context but good practice could be found in spite of the system. Kylie's story resonated with me because she talked of being ignored; accused and failed. All aspects of social work practice that are oppressive and destructive. But she also explained what good practice looked like and that came in the shape of my friend Lina. As a new social worker in Australia, Lina was able to challenge parts of the system that she found created barriers, negatively affected the children and Kylie and prevented the family from being together and thriving together.

Picture of a memorial erected by the Association Representing Mothers (ARMs) who had been separated from their children through forced adoption. Read Park, Victoria, Perth, Western Australia. ARMs estimates that over 200,000 women have been affected by forced removal.



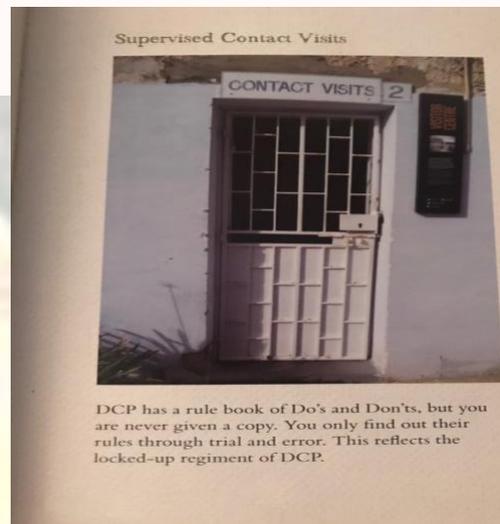
2. From Pariahs to Partners

There are a number of advocacy and parent support services active in Australia and I was fortunate to meet both FINWA (Families Inclusion Network, Western Australia) and FISH (Families Inclusion Strategies in the Hunter, Newcastle) on my travels. The family inclusion networks have all, in some shape or form, been connected to and motivated by the work of David Tobis (2013) who wrote the book 'From Pariahs to Partners' about his journey in helping New York City turn their child protection system around. As the title suggests he and his team worked closely with parents who were in the child protection process so that they could work in partnership rather than opposition.

In a similar vein, parent advocacy organisations have taken off in Australia. They have been developed in response to the National Apology in order that respectful inclusion of parents in the decision-making processes of the child protection system could be ensured. An important element of their work is to inform families of their rights to fair and just procedures and to encourage and assist in developing considerate relationships between families and statutory authorities.

The parents and workers I met shared stories that were not dissimilar to the ones that I had encountered in England. Some of those stories were reflected in a book compiled by Debbie Henderson (2015) (Director of FINWA) called 'Our Life, Our Journey: A parent's perspective of

the child protection process'. Parents talk about feeling like they were sinking in quicksand because no matter what they did, they felt they were never going to get their children home. Others talk about trying to navigate the invisible rules of the child protection process that are never made explicit and which they only learn of through trial and error.



In Newcastle, NSW, I met two parents who had been through the child protection process and lost children through it. They also had children at home- children who had been returned to their care after a fight with the local authority or because the children voted with their feet and returned home themselves. Both are powerful and passionate parents, eager to remain involved with FISH despite it paying them little. They are true advocates and they want to help others who find themselves in a similar situation. They work alongside professional advocates who have worked hard to include parents and family members in child protection decision-making processes that have life changing consequences.

Funding

Something that I have struggled with since I began New Beginnings is funding. I am fortunate in that the local authority provide me with staff, premises and a creche. But to fund the therapists, rent for the building, insurance, contact sessions with children and everything else, I need to apply to funders. There is a skill to doing this which I am learning as I go along but I do dream of a day when our service charges for the work we do. FINWA is fortunate in that they have managed to secure permanent funding from the government. This was agreed at the time of the National Apology and from what I gather, they are the only advocacy organisation which is secure enough to not have to apply for additional funding.

FISH on the other hand have developed their own ways of raising money. They carry out training for Universities and deliver workshops to local authorities which they do well and get paid well for it too. In addition, they do fundraising activities together and they also carry out research. Inspired by what they have learned from the parents they work with, Jessica Cocks (Australian WCMT Fellow 2017) and her colleagues applied for some funding to explore the impact advocacy can have on those who are going through the court process. This is an area that I am interested in developing with the parents at some point in the future.

Reflections

Meeting FINWA and the FISH team was inspiring. It taught me a lot about what passionate people can achieve together. The main message I took away from my meeting with them was that parents do not need to be peer mentors; they do not need to graduate from New Beginnings to then go on and teach other people. They can, if they prefer, become advocates where they support other parents to navigate the child protection process or they can become parent leaders where they train professionals on how to work with parents. In addition, I have learned that funding does not need to come in from funding applications and benefits-in-kind support. We can earn money by charging for teaching and/or training. We can do fundraising activities together and in doing so, can build stronger relationships with each other.

In terms of research, we can explore a theme that has emerged at home and is also evident in Australia. We can examine how parents negotiate a system they become subjected to. All of the parents I have worked with often talk about having to traverse a system they do not know or are familiar with. Our findings could be developed into a radio play performed by the parents who have been interviewed and/ or made into a book that is given free to all parents who enter the child protection process.

3. Listening to people's stories: The benefits of narrative therapy

I've got everything that could be reasonably expected: a good home environment, education, stuff like that, but that's all material stuff. It's all the non-material stuff that I didn't have – the lineage. It's like you're the first human being at times. You

know, you've just come out of nowhere; there you are. *How do you know where you are going if you don't know where you are coming from?* [italics own emphasis]

(Bringing Home Report, 1997: 11. Part of a submission made by an Indigenous man who had been adopted into a non-Indigenous family at 3 months. He was still grieving at the time of the submission because he had never been able to meet his birth mother who died before he found her)

Wherever I went in Australia, I met people who had been directly or indirectly affected by the Stolen Generations. And every story I heard from those who had been directly affected by this event was as powerful as the one before: heart-breaking, moving and incredibly poignant. And yet, a noticeable theme that connected them all, was the loss of identity.

Helping parents discover who they are and where they have come from is something that we have been trying to achieve when working with families on New Beginnings. It is a practice that started, quite organically, when the parents began sharing their stories of pain and survival. Drawing on my knowledge of Catherine Kohler Riessman's narrative theory work, I had recognised that some parents found it easier to tell their stories orally whilst others found it easier to write their stories. What I hadn't realised was that what they were doing was an approach that has been identified in the therapeutic world as 'narrative therapy'.

The first time I discovered how narrative therapy worked was when I met Lucy Van Sambeek in Nambucca Heads. Lucy is a mental health social worker and trauma therapist. Lucy was the second person to tell me about the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide which runs a Masters in Narrative Therapy and Community Work. It is linked with the University of Melbourne and Lucy was in the process of doing their online courses.

Lucy told me the story of Alicia- someone who had reached out to her and who she subsequently worked with. Alicia told Lucy her story, Lucy wrote it down and then added it to her website. She then asked people for Outside Witness Perspectives- that is people who read Alicia's story and whose comments can help Alicia move forwards. This is a similar activity to what we have been doing on New Beginnings with the blogs on the website. I had noticed it was a positive driver for women to have people comment on their stories and

praise their progress as they felt the feedback helped them move forwards. However, I had not realised that this was already a proven theory in another part of the world.

Lucy told me that she uses narrative walks to carry out her work- something that she learned from Chris Dharmody². Lucy takes her clients to Shelley Beach or to a nature park and she begins by asking her client: 'What are you noticing?' Lucy said that it has to be the present tense as it is all about connecting the person to the present.

While the client tells their story, Lucy ensures they keep returning to where they are in that moment. Lucy talked about giving them a stick to hold while they talk, walk and tell their story. All walks are two-fold. This means they walk in one direction, holding a stick and telling their story. When they have reached their destination, Lucy throws the stick away, asks the client to pick up a pebble or stone and then they turn around and walk back. On the return journey, they hold the stone and talk about the strategies they have used in the midst of the trauma they have experienced. This stone they can keep as it acts as a symbolic gesture, one which helps them remember that day on the beach or the nature trail and the strategies they already have in place for managing difficult situations. They can use the pebble to remember what these were, to help them refocus, connect to the present, to the smells, the visual imagery they saw that day with Lucy. It can help them feel calm when they are anxious. Lucy's role in this walk is to listen for doorways into people's lives. Rather than just listen, she actively listens, and reflects back what she hears. She looks for patterns in what they are saying and in doing so, she helps connect the person to the themes that are emerging so that they can understand how and why things have turned out the way they have.

In Adelaide I was fortunate to meet the two narrative therapists that Lucy told me about- Cheryl White (Director) and David Denborough (Community Worker) from the Dulwich Centre Foundation. This organisation aims to support workers who work in communities in different parts of the world which have experienced significant trauma. One way in which they do this is through narrative therapy- which they state is a respectful, non-blaming approach to working with people which centres individuals as the experts in their own lives.

² (Dulwich Centre website: <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/narrative-walks-by-chris-darmody/>).

I was fortunate to visit Cheryl and David at their writing retreat and I asked them both what life had been like after the National Apology. I had previously looked at their website and so was aware that they had been heavily involved in supporting Indigenous people to tell their stories and find their lost identities. But what I hadn't expected to learn was how closely connected David's ancestors had been in contributing to their pain.

It was not until David had started working with an Aboriginal Australian woman whose extended family had been profoundly affected by the Stolen Generations that he was asked about his family history and ancestry. David admitted he knew little about his origins but promised to find out and so he traced his own story back through time. David discovered that the histories of his family could not have been more different. His father had not been forcibly removed from his family, nor had his siblings nor his cousins. Instead, David learned that it was his great-great-grandfather, Sir Samuel Griffith, who had been instrumental in drafting the Australian constitution. He not only went on to become the first chief justice of the country but he was also considered to be one of the "founding fathers" of modern Australia.

David has written about that moment in a book chapter called 'Where does our story fit in the bigger picture?' It is a beautifully written piece of work as he takes time to recognise how our own stories can help in the way we make connections with others.

It's similar to what I understand to be 'relational activism', where individual agency can be realised through our ability to connect to others, from the micro to meta (Dove and Fisher, 2019). Like Dove and Fisher (2019), David acknowledges that our lives start before our birth because of the legacies and burdens of our ancestors. It can therefore be said, that our lives do not end with our death because those with whom we are connected will carry on our vestiges long after we have gone.

Narrative therapy is not just about helping the people we work with tell their stories, it is about considering the ways our own lives have been influenced by those with whom we have connected; how those we connect with are impacted by our presence; and in turn for us to understand 'together' how our lives can create outcomes which affect others with whom we

interact. Joining the storylines of our histories with the storylines of those we support, can create different perspectives which add new meaning and understanding (Denborough, 2014). It is also a practice that can connect us all to different futures, hopes and dreams.

Reflections

Listening to people tell their stories in the way they want to, is an important part of carrying out narrative therapy. Lucy does this well by taking her clients to a place where they can walk and talk. In doing so, clients are out in the open and do not feel the pressure that often is associated with being in a therapy room and talking to a therapist. They do not have to look Lucy in the eye but walk side by side someone who wants to support them. What I particularly like about the narrative walks is the use of symbolic gestures in practice; an activity which resonates with the Flemish approach. I like the way the stick (brittle and lifeless) is used to talk about the negative detrimental impact the trauma has had and the stone/ pebble (earthy and solid) is used to identify the strategies the person used. Everyone has strengths and this approach helps the person identify and build on those strengths which is not only empowering but also self-fulfilling.

I learned from meeting David and Cheryl that it is as important to understand our own stories and histories before we try and understand the lives of those we are working with. As practitioners we can often distance ourselves from the problems of others and think that they are nothing to do with us. Or we can neglect the fact that we too are humans and also have experienced difficulties, struggles or challenges at some point in our lives, and perhaps continue to do so. We often lie to ourselves that as long as we focus on the here and now, and do that as well as we can, everything will be just fine. But Sir Samuel Griffiths, David's grandfather, did just that. He focused on what he thought was best for the non-Indigenous people of his immediate world. What he failed to consider was the lifelong ramifications his actions would have on the people of Australia. A factor they are still coming to terms with and are still trying to digest.

4. Different models of group working with adults who have suffered significant trauma

Healing Foundation, Darwin, NT

Visiting Steve and Nancy was an important part of my travels because it is here that I received an in depth historical and contextual overview of life prior to and following the National Apology. The message I took away from my visit was that the National Apology is a contentious subject. Not everyone in Australia agrees with offering an apology- many still deny it happened. What can happen is that Australians make excuses for it such as, “Why should I apologise for something I didn’t do? Did you know that many of those children were abused anyway?”

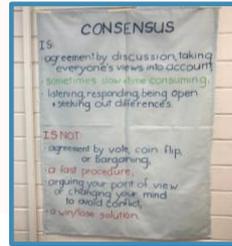
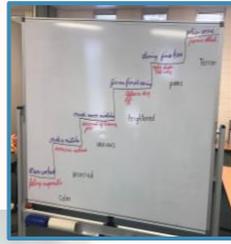
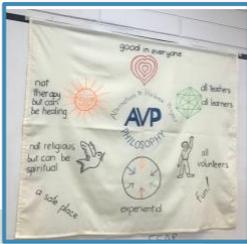
Despite these empty protests, and I heard more than a few during my Fellowship, my personal belief is that an apology is important because it acknowledges that damage has been done; trauma has been caused and pain has been inflicted. It recognises that although such actions may not have been caused by ‘me’ per se, I am one person, amongst many, who will learn from the actions of my ancestors and ensure that I will not do the same to those I work with, live beside and may never meet.

What has happened in Australia is shameful for those who live there and whilst it may feel easier to pretend it didn’t happen, it is more shameful ignoring the pain of those who were subjected to policies that changed, and damaged, their lives forever. No matter how long ago. And something else I have learned is that the National Apology was only for the thousands of children who were forcibly removed from their parents for no reason other than genocide; it is not an apology for the stolen land or denigration of aborigine culture. This is an apology, I believe this is still yet to come.

Alternative to Violence project, Darwin, NT

This project was run by volunteers who are Quakers. I learned some innovative techniques from the way in which they run their groups (see photos below). I particularly liked the way they de-constructed simple concepts such as ‘listening’ and ‘communication’. I also liked the way they displayed their work as it helps those who are visual learners (me being one of

them). The use of 'steps' also makes theory more practical and more easily applicable to everyday life situations.



Stretch a Family, Sydney, NSW

It was here that I learned more about two well-known models that have been introduced by some local authorities in England in an aim to help turn their organisations and practice around for the benefit of families: Multi systemic therapy and Family Functional Therapy.

Multi systemic therapy (MST) was a model one of the previous organisations I had worked for had bought in to help revolutionise stagnant practice. I left before it was fully implemented but I was aware that a lot had been invested in the programme. I learned in Sydney that MST is indeed a very expensive service for a number of reasons: it works intensively with families for 6-9 months; Practitioners need to be educated to degree level; Psychologists and psychiatrists are also involved.

The MST website is impressive and their course material is glossy and striking. However, when I looked at the content in more detail, it appeared as if it delivered similar subjects and theoretical content in the same way as New Beginnings does. Some weaknesses were that it does not bring families together; they do not graduate from the programme nor do they move on to do peer mentoring training and in turn, embrace an opportunity that can help them move from 'user' to 'expert'. They do however practise with the whole family and they do appear to turn families around.

MST state that they have a 94% success rate but when I looked into what this 94% actually related to it was:

1. Child at home;
2. Child in school;

3. No new reports of child maltreatment and
4. No new referrals for parent or child.

In comparison, New Beginnings success rates are:

10 out of 11 families step down from child protection plans and/or children are returned home from care. With clearly different outcomes, our current success rates are also high at 91% but for a fraction of the cost of MST.

Functional family therapy (FFT) is an approach that is carried out with the whole family. There is no hierarchy involved which means that children are treated as equals; the whole family is given the same speaking time; children are able to voice their views without being overlooked or belittled; and parents have to listen. FFT lasts for around 9-12 months and families are divided into two tracks: low track- families that are still with their children; high track- families that are separated from their children.

This approach sounds similar to Family Group Conferences which is part of the Restorative Practice Approach but with a more intense focus on 'healing for the whole family' rather than 'family resolving their own issues'. There are some positives to this way of practice:

- Practitioners need to prepare their sessions in advance
- They then submit these to their supervisor before the visit
- They reflect on the engagement afterwards
- Practitioners take the lead on cases from social workers
- Contextual factors are taken into consideration and do make a difference
- The overarching aim is to reunite families (if separated) and for social care intervention to end
- It is also about building relationships with families; if parents make a mistake, the practitioner will report in with the family, not without them.

There are also some disadvantages connected with this approach:

- It does not focus on the practical aspects of people's lives such as housing; routines; benefits; home conditions etc
- It does not advocate for parents so they still attend child protection conferences and other meetings alone
- A practitioner may drive the parent to a meeting or court but cannot go in with them.
- Practitioners cannot make decisions for families despite taking the lead- social workers still oversee the case and make those life changing decisions.

Peaceful Pathways with Xavier Mullins, Hobart, Tasmania

Xavier managed to get 3 years funding to run a version of the Alternative to Violence Project (Darwin) which runs workshops with bi cultural workers. It is called 'Peaceful Pathways' a name he chose because he wanted to remove 'violence' from the title, a word he feels is stigmatising.

Xavier told me something that I was learning a lot about on my travels: not everyone can run a group for people who have experienced significant trauma or make a good project facilitator even with lots of training. Xavier believed that this all comes down to power. In life, we might meet someone who has done counselling; social work; psychology or who has lots of experience of working with people but if they try to exert power or believe in the structure of power in group work the programme will collapse. The whole purpose of Peaceful Pathways is to build relationships; enable reflection and provide space for discussion without people feeling stigmatised; condescended and ignored.

Xavier also talked about having a strong team and spending a lot of time on team building activities. He believes that as much time should be spent on training the team as training participants. His theory is quite simple: If you don't support your team, the people we work with will not be supported.

Melaleuca, Darwin, NT

Melaleuca belongs to the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT) which is a network of Australia's eight specialist rehabilitation agencies that work with survivors of torture and trauma who have come to Australia from overseas. Most clients of FASSTT agencies have come to Australia as refugees or humanitarian entrants. Melaleuca therefore works with survivors of torture and trauma who have come to Australia as asylum seekers. There is one FASSTT member agency in each state and territory of Australia and Melaleuca is the agency situated in the Northern Territory.

Although Melaleuca carries out important work with survivors of torture and trauma, what I found fascinating was the way in which the organisation functioned. When I arrived, the team were all present; they were bright and fully engaged. They all came from a variety of backgrounds and they all enjoyed debate. They liked to problematise every single issue, in turn spending time deliberating the smallest of issues as they provided the foundation for the largest. In fact, their approach and practice brought back fond memories of when I visited the Belgium agencies which had inspired the inauguration of New Beginnings.

There weren't many moments when the Melaleuca team agreed with one another but what I liked was the way they disagreed. They began with "Can I ask you a question?" which meant in reality, "I'd like to put a different idea to you". One of the counsellors was research bright, always looking for themes in the discussions, pulling out threads and pushing new ideas forward for discussion. This approach created an intellectual haven which was vibrant and yet still passionate about working with families. It felt like the kind of place I would have liked to work. In fact, it felt like I had come home. This is the kind of practice I would like the New Beginnings core team to practise and feel inspired by.

One thread that created a lot of discussion was mandatory reporting. 'Mandatory reporting' is a term used to describe the legislative requirement for selected groups of people to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect to government authorities. Parliaments in all Australian states and territories have ratified and implemented mandatory reporting laws of some description. However, the way in which these laws have been enacted are not the

same across all jurisdictions. The main differences relate to a) who has to report and b) what types of abuse and neglect have to be reported. There are also other differences, such as the "state of mind" that activates the reporting duty (i.e., having a concern, suspicion or belief on reasonable grounds) and the destination of the report (Australian Government Website, no date).

In the Northern Territory, the state of mind is 'belief on reasonable grounds' which means the referrer needs to report in any significant detrimental effect caused by any act, omission or circumstance on the physical, psychological or emotional wellbeing or development of the child. The legislation generally contains lists of particular occupations that are mandated to report. The groups of people mandated to notify cases of suspected child abuse and neglect range from persons in a limited number of occupations (for example Queensland), to a more extensive list (Victoria., Western Australia), to a very extensive list (New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania), through to every adult (Northern Territory and Victoria for sexual offences). The occupations, most commonly named as mandated reporters, are those who deal frequently with children in the course of their work: teachers, doctors, nurses and police.

Whilst the Melaleuca team recognised the importance of mandatory reporting what they were concerned about was how they felt they had to report 'on' families and that the families they worked with needed to know this. However, what this also meant was that the team did not think they could report 'in' with families. Therefore working 'with' families authentically was difficult especially as they had cultural differences to work with.

Reflections

For any service to succeed a good, strong team is needed- one which is ideally underpinned by experience and knowledge as practitioners are educated to degree level (at least). Once a good team is in place, they can be reminded that building relationships must focus on:

- Making connections before issuing corrections- this does not mean that problems are ignored. Rather the connection is made first and then the parent is led to understand that the situation could have been approached in a different way.

- Parental engagement- if parents do not engage, practitioners need to stop and question what is wrong with their approach or practice. Saying something is 'wrong' with the parent or that the parent is the issue actually highlights that there is an issue with the practitioner's approach
- I also learned that I should start planning training workshops for my team in advance. I need to space them out and make sure there is time for reflection in between. I need to include food- food is at the heart of any good programme. The agenda needs to be well organised and clear and cover everything that is required before the parents begin the programme.
- Before recruiting practitioners, I need to observe them doing the role, watching how they interact with parents and how they contribute to the activities.
- Once they have been recruited, I need to keep them inspired by allowing and promoting active debate.

Concluding reflections of the Fellowship

It dawned on me that despite being thousands of miles away from my home country, the profound injustices I was learning about were directly connected to my British ancestors. I did not know Australia very well and I still do not understand it. But my life is not as disconnected and separated as I had originally thought. The National Apology may have taken place elsewhere but I have realised that no matter who we are or where we are, we are all connected. Our stories are often intertwined with those we think of as strangers whether we want to recognise it or not.

For more than two centuries the Indigenous people of Australia have been subjected to relentless pressures of family destruction and there is evidence that it is still ongoing (Bilson et al, 2017; 2015). But are things that different in England? There are many instances, and infamous examples, where we have also failed to include parents in decision making processes and failed to acknowledge the impact we, as professionals, have on the lives of those we work with (see Broadhurst and Mason, 2019; Morriss, 2018).

I came away from my travels learning something I already knew and had absorbed in the UK but had travelled a long way to properly understand. Good practice is simple. It is about listening to the people we work with and hearing their stories. It is not just about building relationships but making connections before issuing corrections. It is about saying 'sorry' when we make mistakes. It is about leading and empowering a team and its partners to ensure 'relationships and outcomes for the families' we work with are prioritised. It is about working inclusively with communities, families, governments and service providers so that children and their families benefit from the work that often goes on behind the scenes.

I also realised that the power of maternal commons is underestimated and underused. I had to travel a long way to understand that part of the magic of New Beginnings is the relational activism part which involves creating a common space for women with similar backgrounds to come together, share words, deeds and accomplish transformational beginnings (Tyler, 2013a) or materialise the *hidden* but constitutive grounds of biopolitical protest (Tyler, 2013b: author's own emphasis). As Tyler and Baraitser (2013: 6) contend, from birth onwards we are fundamentally dependant on others for our life story and hence our changing understanding of 'who' we 'are'. In short, our fundamental sense of ourselves is always already narrative, relational and subject to change. These stories matter when women who are subject to child protection process are rendered powerless, shamed and stigmatised by professionals for failing as a mother; ashamed for being the mother that has failed their child (see Tyler, 2020).

If we bring this knowledge together and enact it in practice then it is possible to spend quality time with families we support; inform them of their rights; make the rules of the child protection process explicit and include them on their journey every step of the way. By partnering proactively with service providers, the sector, government and families, we can improve and move towards a 'better' (rather than 'best'- after all, who knows what is best for everyone?) form of practice. And what we must always keep in the forefront of our minds, is that we should never underestimate the impact we, or our ancestors, have had on the system we are located in.

Application of Fellowship findings:

This section highlights how the findings from the Fellowship have been applied to New Beginnings since I returned to the UK in September 2019:

1. Getting the right team in place

I realised that I needed to ensure the interview process for recruiting new staff was robust and rigorous. Applicants needed to be experienced and qualified in working with adults who have experienced significant trauma. The interview process would also be threefold. Application; first interview and then presentation. Applicants would have to be interviewed and selected by the parents who have been through New Beginnings.

In October 2019, these findings were applied to New Beginnings interview process and the parents played an integral part in the recruitment of three members of staff they chose.

2. Training & supporting the team

Once the team is in place they need to be supported and nurtured appropriately by senior staff. This will involve creating a safe space for practitioners so that they can benefit from individual and group supervision. Time to reflect on their own contributions in group work sessions and the impact these sessions have on them. By supporting the team appropriately and effectively, and doing so in partnership with the local authority, influencing change in families and in social policy will be easier to accomplish.

The new team are due to start on 6th January 2020. I have a training plan in place and it includes individual supervision, group supervision, reading of plenty of relevant texts (not just policies and procedures!) and space for us to learn from each other and with the peer mentors. The team is not just seconded staff but peer mentors. Together we will also have the opportunity to share their learning with the parents from New Beginnings by teaching social work students at Lancaster University (my main place of work).

3. Funding

Fundraising is an important function for a not-for-profit organisation. Seeking appropriate funding is important but charging for services is important too.

The fundraising activities that have already taken place since I returned in September are a sponsored walk and a sponsored run. We have also been teaching social work students at University. We are now working towards developing a training package. We have also been successful in being awarded further funding from National Lottery and Stockport Local Community Fund. We are currently in the process of putting together an application form for a 5 year funding grant that would secure two permanent part time positions for two of our peer mentors.

4. Carrying out narrative walks

This is a technique that I picked up from the Dulwich Centre. It has been implemented into the 1:1 work we do at New Beginnings.

I used this approach with a parent and I brought my dog with me. She told me that she liked learning a little bit about me (my dog) as it made me feel more human. We also used this as an activity with the social work students on their skills day. The feedback we received from them that day was also positive.

5. Research

Something that emerged on my travels was the lack of knowledge or understanding parents have of their rights or the child protection system. This is no fault of the parent, rather the fault of services who are not as open and transparent as they want the parents they work with to be.

Together with a parent on New Beginnings we have started carrying out interviews with parents who have been through the child protection process. The parent is interviewing parents about the invisible rules they have encountered and I will carry out interviews with social workers.

The Future

Up until now New Beginnings has only ever worked in partnership with Stockport but as we have grown and news of our service has spread, we have started to receive more referrals from other areas around the country. Of interest, the majority of the referrals received have been from parents who have heard about us from friends and family or via the internet. However, we have also started to receive an increasing amount of interest from professionals and recently we were asked to meet with two neighbouring local authorities in the hope that we might develop a version of that which we have in place in Stockport in these communities. These are early days but nonetheless still exciting times especially as our team and our peer mentors grow in confidence and feel ready to spread their wings and reach out to other families in need. The possibility of us therefore developing new relationships in new neighbourhoods whilst undoubtedly a huge challenge seems a more realistic option than ever before.

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Peaceful Pathways, Hobart

Dulwich Centre, Adelaide

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