

# Telling a new story about “child poverty” in New Zealand

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## About this report

This report is part of an ongoing series on urgent contemporary policy issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. This series is action-oriented and solutions-focused, with an objective of bringing academic research to bear on the economic, social and environmental challenges facing us today.

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### Executive Summary

This is a report for those who are interested in research, and talk about policy solutions for child poverty. Often experts with evidence about what works and doesn't work in the child poverty policy space feel that presenting their evidence should lead to policy change, or changes in public attitudes. This isn't the case. *Telling a new story about “child poverty” in New Zealand* explores common core stories or cultural narratives about child poverty. The report discusses why these stories and narratives may hamper efforts to convince the public and policy makers to accept expert solutions. Importantly, the report highlights the double burden our stories can create for children and parents living without enough.

The key purpose of the report is to help construct narratives that are more effective in promoting policy change. The report presents alternative frames and stories to tell, ones that will help the public and policy makers act on the expert solutions that are needed to ensure all children and families thrive. It is written as a resource for those working in child poverty research and policy.

#### **How do people assimilate and believe new information (and policy solutions) that experts present them with?**

Information assimilation is a more complex process than most assume. Simply plugging an information gap by providing expert evidence does not convey new information, or shift people to believe solutions based on that information. This is because values, beliefs and feelings play a large role in whether new information is accepted or rejected. To be effective, researchers need to consider how communications strategies – narratives, language and messengers – resonate with the values and beliefs of the public and policy makers, instead of focusing on evidence in isolation.

#### **What evidence should our narratives and messages on child poverty be based on?**

Our narratives and messages need to convey the complexity of poverty; that family poverty occurs in the context of a complex ecosystem. This complexity is missing from individual responsibility narratives. Wider social, cultural, economic and environmental conditions have a cascading effect on individual economic, mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing. These wider conditions influence a person's position in society, the opportunities and experiences they receive and can act on, and their physiological, psychological and behavioural responses. There is a feedback loop also, where the

wider cultural conditions (narratives about, for example, the causes of poverty or people who are poor) determine the lens through which the public interprets these individual responses. This influences how willing people are to take action to change the wider conditions through, for example, equity-based policies.

Child poverty is caused by complex actions and reactions across the ecosystem. Evidence shows that the stress that is brought to bear on parents and children living in resource-poor settings impacts on family relationships and dynamics. Parents' cognitive bandwidth becomes limited, and this impacts on how they interact with children during key development periods. Children themselves experience a toxic stress that directly impacts their neurological and physical development. The stress compounds across generations, as skills and resources (interpersonal, cultural, spiritual and material) are stripped away. Conversely such resources can be built up again over generations.

**Do our current narratives engage the values and beliefs that will encourage people to understand the causes of, and accept the solutions researchers present for, child poverty?**

Evidence from countries like New Zealand, and in New Zealand, shows there is a powerful and corrosive public narrative about the causes of child poverty. The dominant story in the public domain is one that draws heavily upon ideas of personal failing and weakness, even laziness, to explain how poverty happens. There are other stories also, more recessive ones, for example ones that identify systemic issues at the heart of poverty. People can believe more than one story and hence hold conflicting beliefs; this means people can "toggle" between individual and systemic narratives when primed. Inaccurate core stories appear also in communications and narratives written by people who make and deliver policy. The effect of drawing on such individualistic narratives, which tend to "other" children in poverty, is to create a gap between the solutions proposed by experts and the public's willingness to consider those solutions. If policy makers inadvertently draw on these narratives it is an "own goal": trying to sell solutions to the public with the frames and language that tell them the solutions will not work.

**What is the effect on children and families themselves of inaccurate narratives?**

Research with children on the experience of living in poverty is lacking, an interesting finding in itself about the lack of importance researchers place on the issue. What research we do have from New Zealand shows that children are very aware of being "othered" as a result of living in under-resourced families. They both experience the

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narratives internally, but also, alarmingly, are bullied by other children as a result. Parents highlight how challenging it is to get assistance from others due to the negative stereotypes about poverty. They also internalise many of the corrosive narratives about family poverty which impacts their health and wellbeing. For Māori parents there is a double burden – the negative core stories told about Māori throughout media and society, as well as the core stories told about poverty. For young Māori parents they suffer another burden – that of how the public perceives young parenting – primarily in the negative, seeing young parents as incapable. This is despite very positive narratives of childbearing and childrearing in Te Ao Māori. Because Māori are more likely to have children at a younger age, and are more likely to experience living on insufficient resources, our core stories are a major barrier to building support for the solutions that are required for parents and children on low incomes to flourish.

### **Telling new stories about children and parents living with insufficient resources in New Zealand**

We invest much energy and time (and money) into researching solutions, yet comparatively little into understanding how to move the public to believe in these solutions. It is a significant and worthy investment to ensure the effort that individuals and organisations have committed to finding innovative solutions to child poverty are utilised and turned into action. This means understanding better what communication strategies and specific language tools encourage receptivity to evidence.

This report finishes with five case studies from around New Zealand. These are organisations and researchers who have sought to engage with helpful beliefs and values and tell new stories about children and families who live with insufficient resources. For example, the work of the Southern Initiative in South Auckland and a kaupapa Māori model of child raising, Tiakina te Pā Harakeke. We discuss the techniques and tools used in each case study to draw on helpful values and beliefs. We look at how each case study is building a new cultural narrative based on the evidence of what leads to poverty and how we can overcome its impacts. There is much to learn, and these examples are a good place to start to tell a new story about child poverty in New Zealand.

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## Introduction

With the rapid deregulation of the New Zealand economy by the fourth Labour government, and the cuts the subsequent Jim Bolger-led National government made to income support for families in 1991, politicians chose to under-resource many parents and children in New Zealand. The impacts of what has been a continued under-resourcing of many families by our elected officials has spanned decades; so has the work of the many dedicated people who have campaigned tirelessly for the children in New Zealand most affected. Individuals, organisations and communities highlighted the plight of childhood poverty. It has been a long road mate, as they say, a road on which the cars parked there house whole families. A road which is overlooked by unaffordable houses falling into disrepair. A road bookended by hospitals filled with ill children. While sometimes it felt like there has been no progress at all, we have moved. New Zealand has slowly changed some of our shared stories about child poverty: where once New Zealanders denied the reality of child poverty, now our stories reflect that we understand it exists. In the 2017 general election all political parties made a commitment to act on it.

And while the country is now moving faster along the road with the introduction of child poverty legislation, it is time to consider a new mode of travel to get to the destination. That destination being a society in which all children are included, can fully participate, and thrive regardless of their material resources. Why do I think a new way is needed?

New Zealand may have changed the story about the existence of poverty (in the main), but what has not changed are the stories about how child poverty happens. And because the best solutions reside in a deeper and shared understanding of the complexity of causes of poverty, the research and policy work gets stuck. Stuck on the wayside of erroneous beliefs.

Effective policy actions draw upon the best understanding of how poverty happens in families and society, but these actions pose a challenge to how many people think about and explain child poverty to themselves. When the evidence presented and the solutions proposed do not align with our beliefs about the issues, we will not accept those solutions and nor will governments move in opposition to the public mood. Presentation of more and better evidence will not work. More facts do not win the day, because it is not a conflict over evidence, it is a conflict over values and beliefs.

How can the research and policy community, while in partnership with people most sharply impacted by issues, change this?

The research and policy community can improve the alignment between people’s beliefs and the quality evidence and solutions proffered. One way to do that is by how child poverty is talked about and framed.

In this report I discuss what is known about how all people (including evidence and policy professionals) assimilate new information and why we are all at risk of getting the wrong idea about an issue, its causes and best solutions. How we can come to believe poor quality information. I cover how the stories the policy and research community tell – the frames, messages, metaphors, words and images used – are powerful tools for engaging people with good information and evidence. I discuss why the language in policy can unwittingly draw on problematic narratives about poverty – ones that have inaccurate information about poverty and its causes at their heart. And how this communication can create a barrier to governments adopting innovative and effective policies that would work to improve family and child wellbeing. Most importantly I explain how ways of framing and talking about child poverty by the research and policy community creates another burden for children and parents living without enough.

Finally, I present alternative frames, language and stories that will help create an environment in which people are more willing to consider the proffered solutions. Messaging that builds narratives steeped in good data and information. I conclude with ideas and examples of new core stories, stories the research and policy sector can use when advocating for effective policies for ensuring all children thrive.

## 1: Words matter in research and policy. More than we know

*We live in story like a fish lives in water. We swim through words and images siphoning story through our minds the way a fish siphons water through its gills. We cannot think without language.*

–Christina Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Knowledge acquisition is complex; evidence is never enough

The language of research and policy making is most frequently concerned with conveying data, good information, what is true, what works, and what action policy makers might take. Researchers and policy analysts talk in facts and evidence and are occasionally heard to say “the plural of anecdote is not data”. If there is a misunderstanding about evidence, plugging the knowledge gap, it is assumed, will translate into greater knowledge and understanding and use of that evidence. Better still, presenting that information in a neutral, unbiased and values-free manner will allow people to rationally see the weight of that evidence and consider it accordingly. What I say and mean you will hear. This technique is known as the *information deficit model* of communication.

Unfortunately, such methods of communication go against the “grain of cognition”. It is an overly simple model of human knowledge acquisition predicated on the assumption that humans simply fail to act because of insufficient information. It is a flawed model.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge is rarely a good predictor of whether people will believe evidence or act on it. Once a range of personal and cultural factors are taken into account there is actually a very weak and, in some cases, a negative relationship between knowledge and attitudes to evidence.<sup>3</sup> Not only that, researchers have found that good information and research presented in a “neutral manner”, is not actually perceived as neutral by those who receive it.<sup>4</sup>

In reality we all use a set of useful features and shortcuts to filter and assess the relevance of new information. Mostly this does not involve undertaking some sort of individualised “weighing up” of the utility of the evidence. None of us – scientists, researchers, policy makers, or the interested public – are exempt from what are normal and complex cognitive processes. We filter information through our existing beliefs, experience, mental models, social group’s beliefs and more. We do this to reduce the “cognitive load” of new information and to deal with complexity efficiently.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, C. (2010). *Storycatcher: Making sense of our lives through the power and practice of story*. Novato, CA: New World Library. p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Rossen, I., Hurlstone, M. J., & Lawrence, C. (2016). Going with the grain of cognition: Applying insights from psychology to build support for childhood vaccination. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7(1483).

<sup>3</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). *Science literacy: Concepts, contexts, and consequences*. National Academies Press.

<sup>4</sup> Kahan, D. M., Braman, D., Slovic, P., Gastil, J., & Cohen, G. (2009). Cultural cognition of the risks and benefits of nanotechnology. *Nature nanotechnology* 4(2), p.87.

<sup>5</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 13(3), pp. 106-131.

It is not that we are irrational when we do not hear evidence that scientists, researchers or policy makers present. It is that when it comes to assessing new information, concepts and ideas of rationality are overly simplistic, biased even by culturally-bound definitions of rationality that focus on the weighing of evidence free from social and psychological factors.<sup>6</sup>

There is a significant body of research exploring the cognitive processes people use to assimilate new information. The research can be roughly categorised into feelings and emotions, sense, credibility and trust, and the thoughts of others. I only cover the very basics below.

### *1.1.2 The role of emotions and feelings in judging new information*

Research shows that people use feelings and emotion to judge the value of new information. This is a way of reducing the cognitive load of new information, and dealing with complexity efficiently.<sup>7</sup> Our feelings in response to new information act like a traffic light, telling us yes, no, or willing to consider, as to whether this information is compatible with our current beliefs.

"Fluency" is the specific term used to refer to this process: when information is inconsistent to what we already know it gets stuck, it doesn't feel right. A lack of fluency can elicit negative feelings leading us to doubt or reject new information.<sup>8</sup>

Running counter to strong narratives that “being rational” involves putting emotion aside, emotions are actually quite useful in the context of new information. Emotion guides us on risks and benefits; it motivates behaviour, e.g. “I feel bad about the idea of getting the flu so I will get a vaccination”; and it helps protect our useful beliefs. Taking emotions out of how people react to new information would be akin to removing our humanity. However, as a mental short-cut, emotions can shape and limit responses to new information when we hold existing beliefs that do not match with the good information researchers or policy makers have available to them.<sup>9</sup>

When a researcher, policy maker or communicator directly challenges a person's existing beliefs (and the values that underlie them), it will elicit negative feelings and emotions about this new information in those who already believe it is a good policy. For example, if I were to “mythbust” a policy proposal like boot camps, saying that the good evidence shows that it can actually make crime worse, this would likely be badly received by someone who believes that boot camps give necessary training to ill-disciplined people. Attempts to convey the good evidence I have available to me

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<sup>6</sup> Lewandowsky, S., et al. (2012); Jaggar, A. M. (1989). Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology. *Inquiry* 32(2), pp. 151-176.

<sup>7</sup> Lewandowsky, S., et al. (2012).

<sup>8</sup> National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Communicating science effectively: A research agenda*. Washington DC. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/23674>

<sup>9</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017).

can even backfire in some situations, further entrenching those beliefs. At a minimum it will fail to move people to believe my facts.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.1.3 Sense, credibility and the role of others in judging new information

Mental models are something we construct to help us understand how the world works, what makes sense; for example, “*c* occurred because of *a* and *b*”. When we receive new information, we will try and place it in that mental model. If new information fits into this broader story we will more likely accept it as true. However, if information seeks to replace a key piece of the narrative chain, and it does not fit with the other parts of the broader narrative, then it causes a failure in the mental model. We no longer have a coherent story and so we tend to reject that information and continue to rely on incorrect information.<sup>11</sup>

For example, we may have a mental model that tells us that if all people work hard at school, and if they apply themselves to their post-school qualifications, then they will obtain a secure job and achieve financial security. If I, a researcher, present research showing that women with the same qualifications, work ethic and skill as men are paid less, promoted less frequently, and achieve less financial security over their life just because they are a woman, this can create a conflict in the tidy narrative – that is, in their mental model. It is easier to reject the single new piece of information that suggests a pay gap exists due to bias against women (and hence hard work and skill is not rewarded with financial security), than to develop an entirely new mental model of how work and pay in society is structured.

Credibility and trust also has an impact on information assimilation. In an information-rich environment, people tend to rely on a communicator’s credibility to assess the relative truth of information. People and groups differ in how credible they find information based on ethnic identity, language, gender, income and education level, for example. Researchers have found the following characteristics appear to matter in how credible we find a person:

- Expertise/Knowledge
- Trustworthiness
- Credentials
- Attractiveness
- Similarity to receiver beliefs/Context
- Likeability/Goodwill/Dynamism<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Wood, T., & Porter, E. (2018). The elusive backfire effect: Mass attitudes’ steadfast factual adherence. *Political Behavior*, pp. 1-29.

<sup>11</sup> Ecker, U. K., Lewandowsky, S., Swire, B., & Chang, D. (2011). Correcting false information in memory: Manipulating the strength of misinformation encoding and its retraction. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 18(3), pp. 570-578; Lewandowsky, S., et al. (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Wathen, C. N., & Burkell, J. (2002). Believe it or not: Factors influencing credibility on the Web. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 53(2), pp. 134-144.

The relationship between credibility and messenger is not simple. There are complicated interrelationships between the message, messenger, the receiver, and possibly the channel through which it is delivered.<sup>13</sup> Perceived expertise (not actual expertise) also plays a role in how credible we find a person and whether we trust and believe their information. Differences in how credible messengers are perceived to be is likely the result in differences in life conditions, experiences, norms and beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Many gaps remain in the literature around credibility and trust.<sup>15</sup>

We also consider what people around us say or think (or how we think they think!). There is an observed frequency effect in the assimilation of new information - the more we hear a piece of information, or even the name of a person who delivers information, the more likely we are to believe a message. The frequency effect also increases people's belief that particular information is believed by many others.<sup>16</sup> Repetition can create a perceived social consensus. Familiarity with widely shared beliefs can become an indicator of truth, regardless of accuracy.<sup>17</sup> We can be led to believe more people believe certain information than actually do (usually incorrect information) and so move to believe that information ourselves - this is called pluralistic ignorance.

We all use any number of individualised cognitive shortcuts, only a few which I have covered here, to assimilate new information. The research helps explain why the research and policy community cannot simply convey “neutral evidence”, fill a knowledge gap, and expect that new information will be assimilated and acted upon. It also partially explains how we come to assimilate inaccurate information into our beliefs. For example, if a “credible” messenger tells a person that climate change is not anthropogenic, and many others appear to believe that also, and if that person had no particular beliefs about climate change, the message would not elicit any emotions that would suggest to that person they should reject the message. However, understanding the cognitive shortcuts all people use to acquire new information does not fully explain why inaccurate information is started, how it spreads and why it endures, and so becomes a barrier through which good information has to try and break through.

### 1.2 The source, strength and enduring nature of false information

As researchers, and policy analysts and communicators, we are connected by our understanding that good information and false information exists. There is, of course, still a lot we do not know, but for now let's focus this discussion on what we do know.

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<sup>13</sup> Roberts, C. (2010). Correlations among variables in message and messenger credibility scales. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 54(1), pp. 43-56.

<sup>14</sup> Viswanath K., & Ackerson L. K. (2011). Race, ethnicity, language, social class, and health communication inequalities: A nationally-representative cross-sectional study. *PLoS ONE* 6(1): e14550. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0014550>

<sup>15</sup> Schmidt, A. M., Ranney, L. M., Pepper, J. K., & Goldstein, A. O. (2016). Source credibility in tobacco control messaging. *Tobacco Regulatory Science* 2(1), pp. 31-37.

<sup>16</sup> National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012).

Take the example of vaccinations. There is excellent evidence that childhood vaccinations are very effective at preventing death and disability from childhood diseases, and that any side-effects of vaccinations are usually minor (though, of course, of concern to researchers and parents alike). False information, however, persists in which vaccinations are said to cause many serious, long term and unreported "injuries" and illnesses. There are parents who hold very strong and unfavourable beliefs about vaccinations based on this information, and other parents who are hesitant or concerned about vaccinations on the basis of it. False information about vaccination (and other issues) starts, spreads and embeds through a complex interplay of factors.

People and organisations who start and spread misinformation have motivations that range from the mundane to the very malign, and all may be operating at the same time. One obvious source of misinformation is our own natural predisposition to enjoy rumours and fiction – both of which can contain false information. We may have personal bias and interests that lead us to share false rumours with others without knowing that they are false. We may simply read a fictional story and come to believe what is in it (we are not great at remembering the sources of information that we receive). Misinformation may start and spread innocently enough between individuals.

Governments and politicians can start and spread false information both intentionally and unintentionally. The dossiers of evidence about weapons of mass destruction prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is one example of false information started by governments and then spread by others.

Vested interests and industry spread false information where it suits them. In *Merchants of Doubt*, scientific historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway found a clear pattern of activities from vested interests in opposing action to key public health and environmental issues. Tobacco smoking, acid rain, the hole in the ozone layer, and climate change were some of the areas where these interests acted to influence public beliefs about evidence and policy making.<sup>18</sup>

The media seek to inform the public and sometimes spread misinformation simply because of the need to be responsive and to provide the news. However, they spread misinformation for systemic reasons also – false balance reporting is a particular problem in areas of research or scientific controversy. In attempting to present differing views of an issue, the media may balance research evidence with the erroneous beliefs of a few outspoken critics with no particular expertise.

And now we have the internet, where information flies at a rapid pace. False information especially moves faster and more broadly than true stories. False news was found by researchers to be more novel and therefore more sharable, and while both true and false

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<sup>18</sup>Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2010). *Merchants of doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*. Bloomsbury Press.

stories inspired strong emotions, false stories inspired fear and disgust and true stories inspired joy, trust and sadness.<sup>19</sup> In addition, internet information is replacing expert information, even though much information on the internet is highly misleading. Most search engine and social media algorithms “learn” to return a search with information that is the most popular or aligned to what we already believe, not the most accurate. For the average user what signals are there to know which sources on the internet are credible and who to trust in this changed information environment?

We may also have a truth bias when it comes to social communications.<sup>20</sup> To assume information is untrue when we first hear it, we need 1) the information to sound totally implausible, 2) to have a deep mistrust of the communicator, and 3) to engage a great deal of mental effort.<sup>21</sup> It is simply socially and cognitively efficient to believe what we hear first time we hear it.

If information is presented in a narrative and story format, studies show we also tend to respond to it more positively and recall it better.<sup>22</sup> Our brains are built for narrative communications, researchers suggest. This puts data and hard facts that are not framed by a wider story at a disadvantage in an information environment that communicates with us primarily through story-telling. Think of information that is communicated outside a formal learning environment, and it is difficult to find something that is not a narrative format, by which I mean a format that frames a particular value or beliefs and aims to evoke emotion. The notable exception is research and evidence.

Considering the motivations of different people and organisations to spread misinformation, the speed and spread of it compared to (slightly less interesting) good information, the probability of information on the internet being wrong, the fact that search engines and algorithms work to direct us to popular but not correct information, our truth bias and our predilection for a good story that evokes feelings – good information, unless very well written, is at a distinct disadvantage. And research shows that, once we assimilate misinformation, it endures because our cognitive processes act to protect it.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Dietz has carried out significant research into climate change and provides a useful summary of what is a now large body of literature on how misinformation starts and endures. His point can be summarised thus:

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<sup>19</sup> Soroush, V., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science* 359.6380, pp. 1146-1151.

<sup>20</sup> Grice, P. (1975). Logic and Conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.

<sup>21</sup> Schul, Y., Mayo, R., & Burnstein, E. (2008). The value of distrust. *Journal of experimental social psychology* 44(5), pp. 1293-1302.

<sup>22</sup> Dahlstrom, M. F. (2014). Using narratives and storytelling to communicate science with non-expert audiences. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111(Suppl. 4), pp. 13614-13620.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, H. M., & Seifert, C. M. (1994). Sources of the continued influence effect: *When misinformation in memory affects later inferences*. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 20(6), pp. 1420-1436.

For most people, technical and scientific issues are incorporated quickly into our thinking using mental shortcuts. Rather than rationally weigh the strength of evidence contained in a scientific claim we analyse it immediately using our values, beliefs and feelings as a guide. Our emotional response is critical to developing the initial impression of validity. Once we have that impression we search for more evidence that is consistent and are either sceptical or simply not aware of any other information that may counter existing values and beliefs... [O]ver time it can lead to a very rigid set of complex beliefs that are quite divergent from best evidence. It is not a process that is unique to lay people. In terms of politics and political systems strong beliefs can create divergence between groups, but more alike within the groups, making it hard to develop good policy based on either science or necessary compromise. In turn, these beliefs can influence the structure of social networks as people's preferences to associate with similar people guide their social behaviours.<sup>24</sup>

Retractions of false information have proven very difficult to embed for all the reasons that I covered earlier, regarding the short cuts that we use to judge new information we receive: corrected information may "feel" wrong in relation to what we already believe (our emotions tell us to reject it), it may not fit the mental model we have built, we may doubt the credibility of the source of corrective information, we distrust the individual, we may have heard the misinformation so many times it is well entrenched, we may forget the source of misinformation and incorrectly attribute it to a credible source, or we may simply not like being told what to do by an organisation telling us that what we believe is now wrong. Numerous experiments show that it is extremely difficult to return the beliefs of people who have been exposed to misinformation to a baseline similar to those who were never exposed to it.<sup>25</sup>

A growing body of research indicates that it is the protection of values and worldviews that are key. As I discussed earlier we respond to new information that is consistent with our beliefs with positive affect, and that which runs counter to our existing beliefs with emotions and feelings that represent our discomfort. Some research has shown our brains actually treat it much as it would a physical threat, and we get all the physical responses that go with that.<sup>26</sup> It is the challenge to our values and beliefs that may create the most significant barrier to changing our minds or that push us further away from the good information and further towards seeking confirmation of the incorrect information.

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<sup>24</sup> Dietz, T. (2013). Bringing values and deliberation to science communication. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110(Supplement 3), 14081-14087. This extract is a slight rephrasing of Dietz' not a direct quotation. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3752165/>

<sup>25</sup> Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., Seifert, C. M., Schwarz, N., & Cook, J. (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Kaplan, J. T., Gimbel, S. I., & Harris, S. (2016). Neural correlates of maintaining one's political beliefs in the face of counterevidence. *Scientific Reports* 6(39589).

If challenging people’s beliefs with facts that do not fit their narrative is problematic, should scientists, researchers, policy makers and communicators give up trying to convey good science? Do facts not matter at all? Not at all. Evidence matters more than ever in the face of fast-moving misinformation and those with malicious intent to corrupt good information. However, the research and policy community must get much more scientific about conveying that evidence in a way that goes with the grain of people’s cognition.

### *1.2.1 Debiasing within the research and policy community*

The first step requires the research and policy communities to address our own bias. Letting go of the idea that others are irrational when they don’t hear facts, or when they believe incorrect information, is an important bias to overcome. A bias that says “experts” hold values-free information that simply needs to be heard. It is a bias that can lead researchers and policy communicators to believe that they are having a conversation about facts, when what is really going on is a conversation about what matters to people. Plenty of evidence shows that “experts” are just as prone to bias as non-experts. There is little evidence that critical thinking in one domain, for example, transfers to others. In research and policy, people are just as prone to group-think, confirmation bias, and the rejection of new information because it “feels wrong”.<sup>27</sup> Systematic reviews of research were invented because medical professionals were ignoring best evidence in favour of how they had always done things.

The research and policy community would benefit from moving on from the practice of the qualified expert telling the unqualified person exactly how they are wrong. It leaves no room for listening to people and it will likely entrench people’s existing beliefs as they seek to protect themselves while experiencing a threat. Trust in science and research is in itself a belief held by some social groups and not others.<sup>28</sup> Researchers and policy communicators can wrongly assume this is a universal belief, which leads back to a focus on “fighting over facts”, instead of understanding values and beliefs.

If the research and policy community can keep potential personal bias front of mind, it will help move them to the productive work of accounting for people’s existing values and beliefs when communicating good information.

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<sup>27</sup> Sterman, J. D. (2006). Learning from evidence in a complex world. *American Journal of Public Health* 96(3), pp. 505-514.

<sup>28</sup> National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017).

### 1.3 We all hold a wide range of values and beliefs

Values are ideas about what matters and what is important in life. They are different from our beliefs about the world and how it works. Beliefs are experiential, content dependent views about how things work in line with our values. For example, I may value curiosity and creativity and may believe that art and science education for children from a very young age develops curiosity and creativity in children. Much work has been done on mapping and understanding the wide range of human values, but I will draw primarily on the work of Schwartz.<sup>29</sup>

Schwartz undertook research on values across seventy countries and nearly 65,000 people, and developed a framework that is helpful to understanding values through ten main groups.<sup>30</sup> These ten values groups are: self-direction, universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition, security, power, achievement, hedonism and stimulation values.

The ten values groups can be organised or grouped together based on various conflicts and compatibilities. One way values researchers have grouped the different values is into those that represent intrinsic goals and those that represent extrinsic goals.<sup>31</sup> Extrinsic goals derive from values centred on external approval or rewards. The values of security, power, achievement, hedonism and stimulation map loosely to extrinsic values. Intrinsic goals are inherently rewarding pursuits. They map loosely to the values of self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition. It is not a matter of good versus bad values, just different types of values lead to differing beliefs and behaviours.

So, given that values and beliefs are critical in whether good information and evidence is seen and believed, how can the research and policy community account for people's values and beliefs to create an environment in which good evidence is believed and acted upon? Schwartz's research, and work from the world values survey<sup>32</sup> show that we all hold a complex array of values, and so hold a varying set of associated beliefs. I may for example highly value taking care of the environment, so believe the evidence that human caused climate change is both real and requires that we change our policies and behaviours in order to uphold those values. Conversely, I may value wealth acquisition and so be more likely to believe that taxing corporations that pollute more will reduce the overall economic wellbeing of a country and myself. I may also hold both of these values but prioritise one over the other depending on the way information is presented to me and the political environment I live in.

<sup>29</sup> Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2(1).

<sup>30</sup> Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25 (pp. 1-65). New York: Academic Press.

<sup>31</sup> Grouzet, F. M. E., Kasser, T., Ahuvia, A., Dols, J. M. F., Kim, Y., Lau, S., Ryan, R. M., Saunders, S., Schmuck, P., & Sheldon, K. M. (2005). The structure of goal contents across 15 cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89(5), p. 800.

<sup>32</sup> World Values Survey. (n.d.). Online Data Analysis. Accessed May 2018: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

The key is to identify and engage the values that are most helpful to the issue being addressed. A growing body of research suggests that the values that are most useful and productive to pro-social and pro-environmental action are intrinsic ones, those in which the good of others and the environment are prioritised over individual personal gain.<sup>33</sup> Examples of such helpful or pro-social values include helpfulness, love, care for the environment, and creativity. Examples of values that have been found to be unhelpful to such action include wealth, ambition, and family or national security. For the rest of this report I will use the term *helpful values* to refer to these pro-social intrinsic values, and *unhelpful values* to refer to extrinsic values.

In engaging helpful values, the research and policy community can create a space for people to feel more comfortable about the information presented – it is less of a challenge if we can see evidence in the context of values that matter to us – and hence consider changing our beliefs, or indeed just changing between one set of beliefs to another. For a fuller discussion of the values literature, and the role of helpful values in helping create a space for people to see good evidence, refer to Berentson-Shaw (in press).<sup>34</sup>

Researchers, policy makers and communicators can engage pro-social helpful values and associated beliefs through the narratives (specifically language and messaging) and the messengers used.

### 1.4 “I will see it when I believe it”: Communicating to engage useful beliefs

Science shows that those who talk about research and policy can go with the grain of people’s cognition, connect with productive values, and convey what is true by using the right kind of language, frames and story.<sup>35</sup>

We all process information (facts or data) more accurately, and understand and engage with it better, when it is conveyed through a narrative – whether through story-telling or visual communications. We retain a story long after we have retained a piece of data.<sup>36</sup>

We already swim in an ocean of story because, in an information-rich world, expert and non-expert communicators rely on story, anecdotes, and narratives to cut through the noise.

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<sup>33</sup> Kahan, D. (2010). Fixing the communications failure. *Nature* 463(7279), p. 296; Maio, G.R., Pakizeh, A., Cheung, W.Y., & Rees, K.J. (2009). Changing, priming, and acting on values: Effects via motivational relations in a circular model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(4), 699-715; Sheldon, K. M., Nichols, C. P., & Kasser, T. (2011). Americans recommend smaller ecological footprints when reminded of intrinsic American values of self-expression, family, and generosity. *Ecopsychology* 3(2), pp. 97-104.

<sup>34</sup> Berentson-Shaw, J. (In press). *A matter of fact*. Wellington: BWB

<sup>35</sup> National Science Board. (2012). *Science and Engineering Indicators 2012*. Arlington, VA National Science Foundation. Chapter 7: Science and technology: Public attitudes and understanding, from <https://nsf.gov/statistics/seind12/pdf/seind12.pdf>; Rossen, I., Hurlstone, M. J., & Lawrence, C. (2016).

<sup>36</sup> Scott, S. D., Brett-MacLean, P., Archibald, M., & Hartling, L. (2013). Protocol for a systematic review of the use of narrative storytelling and visual-arts-based approaches as knowledge translation tools in healthcare. *Systematic Reviews*, 2(1), p. 19; Dahlstrom, M. F. (2014).

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Science, research and policy communities can often be concerned about the use of story as non-scientific. Yet that probably reflects deeply held beliefs that science and research information is fundamentally different. While the techniques used to produce evidence may be unique, the techniques required to convey what is produced cannot sidestep human cognitive processes. So, rather than seeing narrative as problematic, it is important to seek to understand the science of message and framing better and use it to help convey good information.

The research and policy community can tell actual stories about facts - for example, a case study that reflects the research findings - but it can also tell stories about facts simply through language and words.

Researchers, policy writers, analysts and advocates are first and foremost communicators and, as such, should never really avoid imagery and story-telling in communications. All language contains deeper meaning and pulls strongly on people's existing values, beliefs and cultural narratives.<sup>37</sup>

Language is the lens through which we peer into our world and find our place (and others' place) within that. Consider our use of analogy and metaphor, for example. Metaphors help us to make concrete an abstract idea and to link our thoughts with our feelings. Researchers suggest that metaphors bridge the gap between the cognitive and affective domains of learning.<sup>38</sup> Language and literary techniques frame our values.

## 1.5 Framing beliefs with words

*We seldom realize, for example that our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society.*

-Alan W. Watts<sup>39</sup>

Communications experts know that we all use language to "frame an issue", choosing the concepts and ideas that we want people to see, and what we want them to ignore, thereby engaging certain values and beliefs about the world.<sup>40</sup> For example, if we talk about going on a "learning journey", we frame education as a process that we do together, with aspects of adventure and discovery. If we talk about learning being "on a level playing field", then the words "playing" and "field" frame education in terms of a competition.

<sup>37</sup> Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987). Culture and cognition. In D. Holland & N. Quinn (Eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought* (pp. 3-40). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Duit, R. (1991). On the role of analogies and metaphors in learning science. *Science Education*, 75(6), pp. 649-672.

<sup>39</sup> Watts, A.W. (2011). *The book: On the taboo against knowing who you are*. Vintage. p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Pan, Z., & G. M. Kosicki. (1993). Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political Communication* 10(1), 55-75; Nisbet, M. C., & Scheufele, D. A. (2009). What's next for science communication? Promising directions and lingering distractions. *American Journal of Botany*, 96(10), 1767-1778; National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Communicating Science Effectively: A research agenda*. Washington DC: The National Academies Press.

George Lakoff and Anat Shenker-Osorio are cognitive linguists who study how the words, language and imagery that we use frame our beliefs about the world. Lakoff researched a particularly powerful and enduring set of frames that influence people’s willingness to consider the information being presented. He called them the strict father and nurturing parent frames.<sup>41</sup> The strict father frames a worldview in which individual responsibility, hard work and achievement are the moral and correct things. It is a frame that prioritises pro-individual values and leads people to believe in tougher penalties working to change outcomes, and too much government support as a moral failure. If communicators and policy makers talk about “getting tough” on young offenders, or the “lifetime costs of the unemployed”, or that parents “slip back onto benefits”, then they evoke the strict father frame and all the values associated with it.

The nurturing parent frame, on the other hand, presents a worldview in which both parents are responsible for children. Children are seen by their parents as innately good and with the potential to be better. This frame engages pro-social, pro-community and benevolent values. Nurturing parents see freedom, economic opportunity and wellbeing as fostered through a sense of relationships and community. If people discussing welfare or poverty reduction policies talk about “adults rebuilding their lives” through job support programmes, then they evoke the nurturing parent frame and the intrinsic values associated with it.

Anat Shenker-Osorio famously discusses the frames used to describe the economy. When natural systems language is used to describe the economy - i.e. it is compared to a weather system, or storm, or a body even (e.g. “the health of the economy”) - we are encouraged to believe that hands-off policies that encourage deregulation and self-regulation are best. If the economy is framed as a machine such as a car (e.g. “steering the economy in the right direction”), then it is viewed as controllable by people, and policies that regulate industry power or redistribute wealth are seen as effective in shaping the society we want. As Shenker-Osorio says, language “toggles” us between different values and beliefs.<sup>42</sup>

For example, about 50% of people in New Zealand believe that child poverty is the result of the personal moral failures of parents.<sup>43</sup> While there are certainly behaviours that occur in the context of stress and insufficient resources that are problematic, the attribution of stress and poverty to moral decrepitude, and the belief that dysfunctional behaviours are widespread across all parents living in poverty, is incorrect.<sup>44</sup> Many find it difficult to see how a complex social and economic system acts upon others.

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<sup>41</sup> G. Lakoff, et al. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant: Know your values and frame the debate*. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company.

<sup>42</sup> Shenker-Osorio, A. (2012). *Don't buy it: The trouble with talking nonsense about the economy*. Public Affairs.

<sup>43</sup> MM Research. (2014). *New Zealanders attitudes to child poverty*. Accessed April 2018. [http://www.cpag.org.nz/assets/MMResearchReport\\_CPAG\\_%2818.7.14%29.pdf](http://www.cpag.org.nz/assets/MMResearchReport_CPAG_%2818.7.14%29.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Berentson-Shaw, J., & Morgan, G. (2017). *Pennies from heaven: Why cash works best to ensure all children thrive*. Public Interest Publishing.

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This is exacerbated by frames and messages that engage unhelpful values and toggle people towards beliefs that are not particularly accurate. (I will discuss this interaction in relation to child poverty specifically in detail in further sections.)

However, it is likely that such people hold a mix of values – from the importance of individual hard work, through to the responsibility of one generation to care for another. Depending on what language and words are used, researchers and policy makers can frame different values, and so trigger differing beliefs regarding how child poverty occurs and how best to overcome it. Some of those frames will lead people to consider the best evidence presented, while other frames will lead to a rejection of that information. For example, take two pieces of information established by research: 1) a large number of parents will go without food for themselves in order to feed their children;<sup>45</sup> and 2) parents on low incomes choose to spend any additional money they have on their children.<sup>46</sup> The language used to frame the child poverty issue will enable people to accept or reject this data and move or entrench beliefs about the role of parental moral failure. I discuss examples that do so in the later sections of this report.

As I covered in *Sense, Credibility and the Role of Others in Judging New Information* (section 1.1.3), as well as the framing of certain values, it is important to keep in mind the role of messengers, complex narratives, and the beliefs of others. Values-aligned messengers are likely to help create an environment where people are more likely to consider challenging ideas. Replacements of entire mental models are more successful than just single components of a model, so telling a good core story that explains an entire chain of events is likely to be more effective than a single message. Being able to see that most others share our values and beliefs is important also. The internet can serve to polarise people very efficiently, because only the loudest and most extreme views get attended to. Reminding people of the shared values of most people is helpful to counter this effect.

In Part One I discussed how we all assimilate new information and evidence. It is a complex process. Existing beliefs and feelings play a large role in how we treat new information – whether we accept or reject it. I discussed why good information is at a disadvantage to misinformation in terms of the motivations of those involved in spreading it, the speed at which it spreads, and the predisposition we have for accepting new information as the truth. I covered some of the theory of using language and framing to engage different values that are either helpful or a hindrance to good evidence and information. Having covered some of the theoretical issues, I will now focus on child poverty in New Zealand: how it occurs, and what the best evidence shows is most effective for improving outcomes for children.

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<sup>45</sup> Graham, R., Hodgetts, D., Stolte, O., & Chamberlain, K. (2018). Hiding in plain sight: Experiences of food insecurity and rationing in New Zealand. *Food, Culture and Society*, 21(3), pp. 1-18

<sup>46</sup> Gregg, P., Waldfogel, J., & Washbrook, E. (2005). *Expenditure patterns post- welfare reform in the UK: Are low-income families starting to catch up?* Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics. Report No. 99.

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## 2. Understanding the science of children who do not thrive: Living with unbearable pressures from multiple sources and across generations

In this chapter, I summarise the evidence that the research and policy community can draw upon to inform the language, messages and stories about how child poverty occurs, and the best solutions to overcome it. I start with a discussion of the systemic causes of resource insufficiency in communities and families with children. I explain why children growing up in such settings often fail to thrive as both children and later as adults.

### 2.1 The conditions in which we live: An ecosystem understanding of wellbeing

Scientists and researchers from many disciplines over many years have emphasised the evidence showing that wellbeing (the inverse of which includes poverty) is the result of interacting and complex factors, with the wider social, economic, environmental and cultural conditions in which we live being a key determinant.<sup>47</sup> The Marmot Review in 2010 in particular drew policy makers’ attention to evidence that the wider conditions of people’s lives either enable or create barriers to our wellbeing. These conditions are often invisible to most people in their day-to-day lives, especially if they are doing well.

It was in this report that Michael Marmot and Jessica Allen (and other team members) coined the term “proportionate universalism”. This is the idea that universal support is required to overcome inequalities, with an increase in the scale and intensity of that support as the level of disadvantage increases. By contrast, targeted assistance fails to address the social and economic barriers that prevent the most disadvantaged from thriving, while giving everyone the same support (universalism) ignores the advantages built into the system for some, and so maintains the inequity between groups.

Much earlier, in 1991, Göran Dahlgren and Margaret Whitehead<sup>48</sup> had already created *the rainbow model* to map the relationship that the evidence showed between an individual’s wellbeing and their wider environment (the ecosystem we live in). Individuals are placed at the centre and surrounding them are various layers of influence: general socio-economic conditions, living and working conditions, community influences, and individual lifestyle factors. The rainbow model showed that the wider social conditions of people’s lives – like the economic model, gender relations, privilege, racism, political ideology, and cultural narratives – have a cascading impact on living and working conditions, communities, and individuals’ behaviours.

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<sup>47</sup> Braveman, P., & Gottlieb, L. (2014). The social determinants of health: It's time to consider the causes of the causes. *Public Health Reports*, 129(1\_suppl2), pp. 19-31; Carey, G., & Crammond, B. (2015). Systems change for the social determinants of health. *BMC Public Health*, 15(1); Marmot M. (2010). *Fair society, healthy lives: The Marmot Review*. Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010. London.

<sup>48</sup> Dahlgren, G., & Whitehead, M. (2006). *European strategies for tackling social inequities in health: Levelling up Part 2*. Copenhagen: World Health Organization.

Both the Marmot Reviews and Dahlgren and Whitehead's work benefit from an example to help us understand how the social determinants of wellbeing play out in our lives.

Williams and Mohammed provide such an example.<sup>49</sup> These researchers describe how different aspects of racism (one of these wider social and cultural conditions of people's lives) affect wellbeing. In analysing a large body of empirical data, they show the cascading effect in which wider socio-economic conditions flow down through to individual responses and wellbeing. Feedback loops are also observed. The wider social and cultural conditions - especially racism in this case - affect the public's willingness to do anything to change those conditions.

First, Williams and Mohammed found evidence that racism at an institutional level leads to policies and actions that limit Black Americans' access to important resources and opportunities; for example, by restricting access to certain neighbourhoods, education, employment and other community resources. Second, racism embedded in cultural narratives (such as media and popular culture) shapes negative emotions about Black people, and leads to stereotypes and prejudice that damage people's wellbeing. Finally, they found a large body of evidence showing that "experiences of racial discrimination are an important type of psychosocial stressor that can lead to adverse changes in health status and altered behavioural patterns that increase health risks."<sup>50</sup> The authors draw our attention to the role that the absence of positive feelings towards stigmatised groups has in shaping policy preferences of wider society. The cultural narratives essentially create a social and political environment hostile to policies that attempt to change the social and economic conditions that drive harm.

Altered behaviours and health status that stem from wider social conditions are interpreted by others through the narratives of discrimination. These narratives posit that it is inferiority, biology and/or individual weakness that determine poorer outcomes, not social, economic, cultural or environmental conditions. This interpretation prevents support for action, such as the introduction of equity policy, to change those conditions.

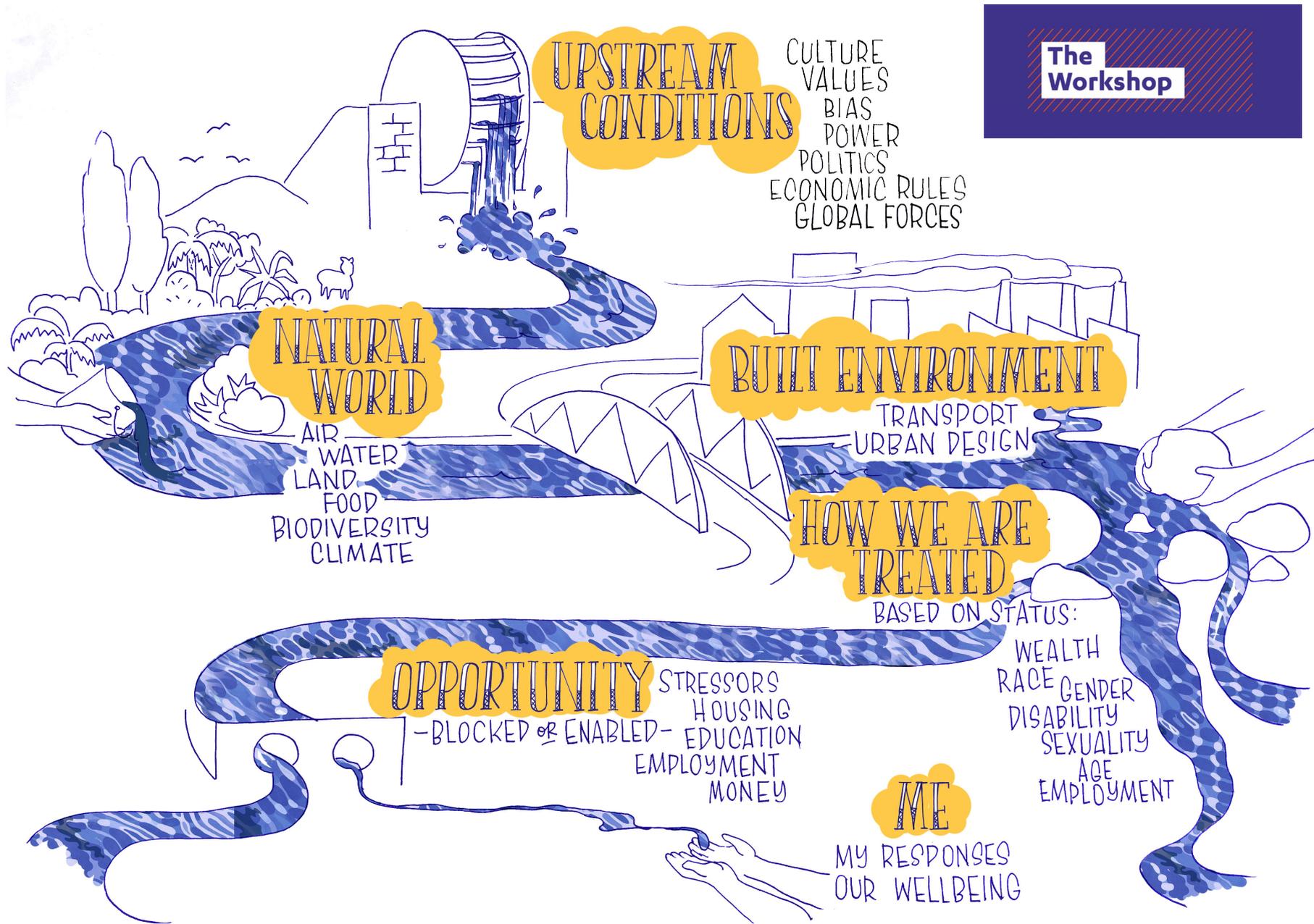
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<sup>49</sup> Williams, D. R., & Mohammed, S. A. (2013). Racism and health I: Pathways and scientific evidence. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(8), pp. 1152-1173.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, D. R., & Mohammed, S. A. (2013).

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Figure 1



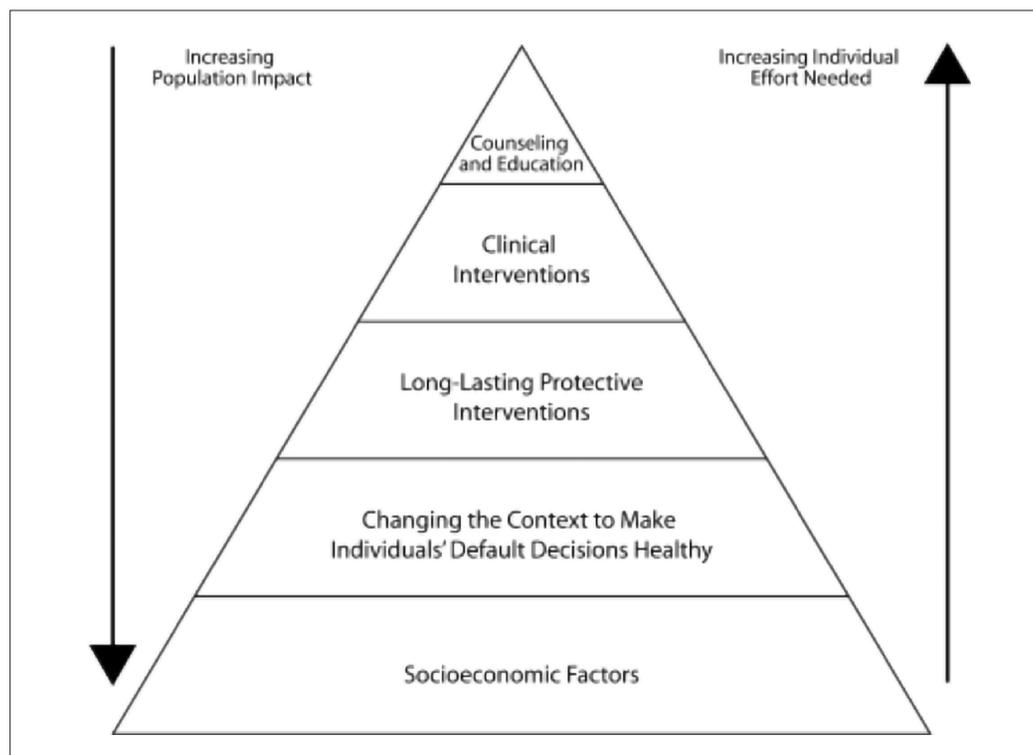
Research from New Zealand and other countries like New Zealand show that discrimination and negative stereotypes about those in poverty act as stressors that cause harm to individuals, as well as embedding social environments hostile to addressing the deeper causes of poverty.<sup>51</sup> Research in Dunedin showed that in cases where those living with insufficient resources accessed additional resources (in this case, capital), they were often unable to translate that into opportunities for themselves or their children. They continued to encounter barriers in the system related to their social position, including social exclusion.<sup>52</sup>

There is also an interaction between poverty and ethnicity driven by cultural narratives, as described in the previous section.

## 2.2 What solutions embrace an ecosystems model?

Understanding the drivers of wellbeing is important to building solutions that are more likely to improve wellbeing over the long term. The health impact pyramid helps to develop specific solutions that work in the context of systems issues in wellbeing.

**Figure 2: The health pyramid<sup>53</sup>**



<sup>51</sup> Hodgetts, D., Groot, S., Garden, E., & Chamberlain, K. (2016). The precariat, everyday life and objects of despair. In Caroline Howarth and Eleni Andreouli (Eds.) *The social psychology of everyday politics* (pp. 173-188). New York: Routledge.

<sup>52</sup> Boon, B., & Farnsworth, J. (2011). Social exclusion and poverty: Translating social capital into accessible resources. *Social Policy & Administration*, 45, pp. 507-524.

<sup>53</sup> Frieden, T. R. (2010). A framework for public health action: The health impact pyramid. *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(4), pp. 590-595.

What the health impact pyramid shows is that interventions designed to change the social and economic conditions of people’s lives – for example, through income support, equity building policies, employment laws, housing infrastructure, and public transport – have the most impact on wellbeing and require the least individual effort. They create a strong base for population wellbeing.

Changing the context – for example fluoridating water; providing clean water, air, and food; improving public transport; eliminating lead and asbestos exposures; and iodization of salt – makes the default option the best for our wellbeing.

Long-lasting protective interventions include immunisation and cancer screening programmes. Clinical interventions treat the symptoms of poor health and wellbeing; for example, food banks for hunger, or treatment of diseases like diabetes. Clinical interventions are clearly important and can reduce disability and improve quality of life, yet the overall impact is limited by lack of access, imperfect effectiveness, and adherence issues. Even in systems like New Zealand where there is health coverage for all, access is limited. Our mental health system is an example of such failures. The societal conditions that I discussed – for example, institutional racism – can themselves be significant factors in limiting the success of clinical interventions.

The final level of the impact pyramid is behavioural change, such as counselling and educational interventions, which, ironically, while having the least impact are usually the most popular intervention implemented. While such behavioural interventions do work and may have a significant impact at a population level if applied consistently, comprehensively and frequently, it takes huge effort and resources to do so (and therefore is not particularly cost-effective). As Williams and Mohammed's work shows, the fact that the public and politicians will frequently urge behaviour change is a symptom of our failure to create the conditions and contexts for wellbeing for most people.

For child poverty, there are clear interventions that follow this model of impact (and these are discussed later). For now, the question is: how are the best stories being told about the causes and solutions of child poverty to ensure action?

### 2.3 The burden of economic stress (family and toxic)

In the next two sections, I will discuss two additional bodies of research that are important to tell an accurate story of child and family poverty in New Zealand. The first is that the negative impacts of the economic conditions of families' lives result in large part from the burden of stress that builds up in families and children themselves. The

second is that the impacts of this stress have an intergenerational impact that leads to a trickling away of wellbeing and resources.

Children growing up in resource-poor families and other care settings lack the material resources to buy or do things that directly impact their well-being. The exact nature of the lack of resources differs between different children and families because different individuals, families, and social groups have different experiences in the world. Some children may go without nutritious food, appropriate clothing, or heating in their home. Others may live in crowded homes or have limited access to transport, while for others they miss out on the enriching activities outside of school. Families may not be able to access health care when they need it and have limited educational opportunities. These material issues have a direct and measurable impact on children's health and well-being.

Scientists also confirm, however, that it is not the lack of material resources per se that means children who grow up without sufficient resources do worse on multiple outcomes than children who are born into families with more resources. Rather the most significant impact results from unbearable burdens of stress.<sup>54</sup> Children who grow up in settings with insufficient resources experience significantly more stress than their peers who grow up with sufficient resources.<sup>55</sup> For an extensive review of this literature, refer to Berentson-Shaw & Morgan, 2017.<sup>56</sup>

Firstly, children are impacted by the stress that their families, whānau and caregivers experience as they work to cope with living and parenting with insufficient resources and in a society that may not understand the root causes of economic instability, leading to negative stereotyping. These stressors mean adults have a reduced mental bandwidth for developing strong social connections with children.<sup>57</sup> Undertaking the key tasks involved in building children's cognitive foundations, laying the ground work for their psychological and mental well-being, becomes very challenging. Babies and children need "serve and return" interactions with the main caregivers in their lives to lay down strong neurological pathways. These interactions, where a child engages and adults respond, help to build the hardware of our brains and set us up for life.<sup>58</sup> Parents' and caregivers' behaviours are part of the puzzle of children not thriving, but the context to understand those behaviours is how stress disrupts relationships.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Cooper, K., & Stewart, K. (2013). *Does money affect children's outcomes? A systematic review*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Duncan, G. J., Magnuson, K., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2014). Boosting family income to promote child development. *The Future of Children*, 24(1), pp. 99-120; Center on the Developing Child. (2010). *The foundations of lifelong health are built in early childhood*. Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

<sup>55</sup> Shonkoff, J. P., Boyce, W. T., & McEwen, B. S. (2009). Neuroscience, molecular biology, and the childhood roots of health disparities: Building a new framework for health promotion and disease prevention. *Jama*, 301(21), pp. 2252-2259.

<sup>56</sup> Berentson-Shaw, J. & Morgan, G. (2017).

<sup>57</sup> Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2013). Poverty impedes cognitive function. *Science*, 341(6149), pp. 976-980; Schilbach, F., Schofield, H., & Mullainathan, S. (2016). The psychological lives of the poor. *American Economic Review*, 106(5), pp. 435-40.

<sup>58</sup> Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Siegel, B. S., Dobbins, M. I., Earls, M. F., McGuinn, L., ... & Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232-e246.

<sup>59</sup> Galobardes, B., Lynch, J. W., & Davey Smith, G. (2004). Childhood socioeconomic circumstances and cause-specific mortality in adulthood: systematic review and interpretation. *Epidemiologic reviews*, 26(1), pp. 7-21.

Children also experience stress directly when they grow up with insufficient resources. Termed “toxic stress”, researchers both internationally and within New Zealand, have found that there are impacts on children’s immune and biological development that occur as a result of the stress they experience when they are living without enough. It is also more likely that they are living in harmful physical environments; for example, with dangerous levels of lead, mould damp, cold air, and traffic pollution. This “toxic stress” can remain with children into their adulthood influencing their health and well-being outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

Family stress and toxic stress and the socio-economic causes of these are therefore key concepts for understanding child poverty and child and family well-being.<sup>61</sup>

### 2.4 Understanding skill and resource acquisition across generations

The Christchurch Longitudinal Study,<sup>62</sup> and other similar studies like the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Study and the Growing up in New Zealand study, involve observing the same group of children and families across their lifetime. These studies draw our attention to the reality that low income and a lack of opportunity can become an intergenerational issue. Popular memoirs such as *Hillbilly Elegy*<sup>63</sup> provide a sometimes bleak insight into the lived experiences of children who grow up without resources, remain there, and go on to have children who will live in similar circumstances. Families become trapped. It has to do with compounding effects of poverty.

Our abilities, personal resources and skills (e.g. education, language, the ability to connect with people) are taonga that build in value over time. Both nature and nurture (biology and the environment) determine the skills and abilities a child is born with. Then we add in opportunities; for example, the time and type of interactions a child has with her parent or caregiver, her exposure to enriching experiences, and the level of stress in her family. These opportunities all influence the skills she develops.

By the time a child is five years old, many foundations for further skill acquisition have been laid. The skills (which include behavioural skills) that a child has early on gives her the opportunity to acquire more skills during her life. For example, children who are read to as pre-schoolers start school with a much larger vocabulary than their peers who are not read to, as they have been exposed to far more words. They can then better

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<sup>60</sup> Noble K. G., Houston S. M., Brito N. H., et al. (2015). Family income, parental education and brain structure in children and adolescents. *Nature Neuroscience*, 18(5), pp. 773-8; Galobardes B., Lynch J. W., Davey Smith G. (2004); Poulton R., Caspi A., Milne B. J., et al. (2002). Association between children’s experience of socioeconomic disadvantage and adult health: A life-course study. *Lancet*, 360(9346), pp. 1640-5.

<sup>61</sup> Cooper, K., & Stewart, K. (2013).

<sup>62</sup> Fergusson, D.M., & Woodward, L. J. (2000). Family socioeconomic status at birth and rates of university participation. *New Zealand Journal of Education Studies*, 35(1), pp. 25-36.

<sup>63</sup> Vance, J. D. (2016). *Hillbilly elegy: A memoir of a family and culture in crisis*. New York: Harper Collins.

take advantage of the school environment and acquire further language, reading and literacy skills more effectively.<sup>64</sup>

The value compounds, because the skill that a child has before a particular investment (like education) is made will make the impact larger. This particular pattern is transferred not just across the life of a single child, but between grandparents, parents and children – it is trans-generational. A person who has a high level of educational skills can, once they become a parent, more easily acquire the important skills that help their children in their critical developing years and these children will, at four or five years old, be in a good position to acquire further skills.

As skill and ability builds, so too can it slip away from a family. The taonga becomes lost over time. Something that started as a symptom of wider socio-economic conditions can be the trigger to maintain a family's situation, trapping them in it. For example, being made redundant during large scale economic restructuring, as happened in New Zealand in the 1980s, may be a trigger for a family's hardship. Further reductions in income support, long-term unemployment, and a skill set that the market no longer requires, kicks in. New skills are not acquired, due to financial instability and the difficulties that adult learners face. A person's confidence takes a hit, mental well-being may slide, interpersonal relationships break down under the stress, and debt may mount as everyday costs can no longer be covered (especially if others in their support, family, or community group are in the same situation). All these issues then maintain the situation, which in turn impacts upon family dynamics, parenting and, ultimately, children's development and well-being.<sup>65</sup>

The erosion of a precious resource of wellbeing, wealth, educational skills, and social connections across generations can lead to behaviours that look, to the casual observer, to be the cause of poverty. In reality the symptoms of multiple deprivations experienced by children are being carried through into adulthood.

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<sup>64</sup> Bus A.G., van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Pellegrini, A. D. (1995). Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy. *Review of Educational Research*, 65(1), pp. 1-21.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (2016). What is poverty? Available from: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/our-work/what-is-poverty>

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### 2.5 What interventions will have greatest impact on child wellbeing?

In the context of the research discussed, it will come as little surprise that a large body of research shows that interventions that address the socio-economic conditions of families’ lives, that both lift stress and avoid adding stress to families in the delivery mechanism, are very powerful at overcoming the negative impacts of living with insufficient resources.

Unconditional income support has the greatest power to improve multiple outcomes for children and parents, including the mother’s mental wellbeing, children’s behaviours, educational skill, criminal justice involvement, and long term economic wellbeing. Housing interventions are important in improving health, and while parental education and intensive pre-school skill acquisition programmes are effective, they have less power. Such behavioural interventions affect only one or two outcomes for children and would need to be implemented population-wide for a significant impact,<sup>66</sup> making it very expensive.

To conclude, it is useful to consider the six specific actions that, in 2010, the Marmot Report recommended to reduce inequality, based on an ecosystem model of wellbeing:

1. Give every child the best start in life
2. Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
3. Create fair employment and good work for all
4. Ensure healthy standard of living for all
5. Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities
6. Strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention.<sup>67</sup>

Is this the story being told about child and family poverty in New Zealand?

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<sup>66</sup> Berentson-Shaw, J. & Morgan, G. (2017).

<sup>67</sup> Marmot, M. (2010).

### 3. What story are we telling about child poverty?

*Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.*

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie<sup>68</sup>

In Part One I covered some of the extensive research on communicating with beliefs and values using story-telling, messaging and framing. In Part Two I covered the evidence about what is known about the causes, feedback loops and solutions that can help to overcome child poverty.

I will now discuss the story being told about child poverty in New Zealand, whether it reflects that evidence, and the impact that it is likely to have on public support for effective policies. I start with a discussion of the broader cultural narratives about poverty and then look at some of the language used in the research and policy community. Policy makers are, after all, people who are also influenced by the narratives of society.

#### 3.1 The cultural narratives about poverty

Research undertaken in the United Kingdom by the Frameworks Institute, a research organisation that specialises in effective ways to frame evidence and policy discussions, highlights what they call “a corrosive narrative” about families and individuals living on insufficient incomes. Mainstream media and entertainment reinforces negative stereotypes about those in poverty, using language like “benefit scroungers”.<sup>69</sup> The public conversation is one that frequently “others” and excludes the least privileged members of society.

Focus group research went on to identify the cultural models - that is, the implicit shared understandings, assumptions and patterns of reasoning<sup>70</sup> - that people draw upon to think about how poverty comes about (as distinct from whether they think poverty is a problem or not). They found that the main cultural models involved personal blame of those in poverty for their circumstances. The models drew heavily on negative stereotypes that attributed poverty to problematic values or lack of ambition.

What about New Zealand? Do these narratives occur here?

<sup>68</sup> Adichie, C. N. (2009). *The danger of the single story*. TedGlobal. Available [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en)

<sup>69</sup> Volmert, A., Pineau, M. G., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016). *Talking about Poverty: How experts and the public understand poverty in the United Kingdom*. Frameworks Institute. [https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/JRF\\_UK\\_Poverty\\_MTG\\_2016.pdf](https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/JRF_UK_Poverty_MTG_2016.pdf)

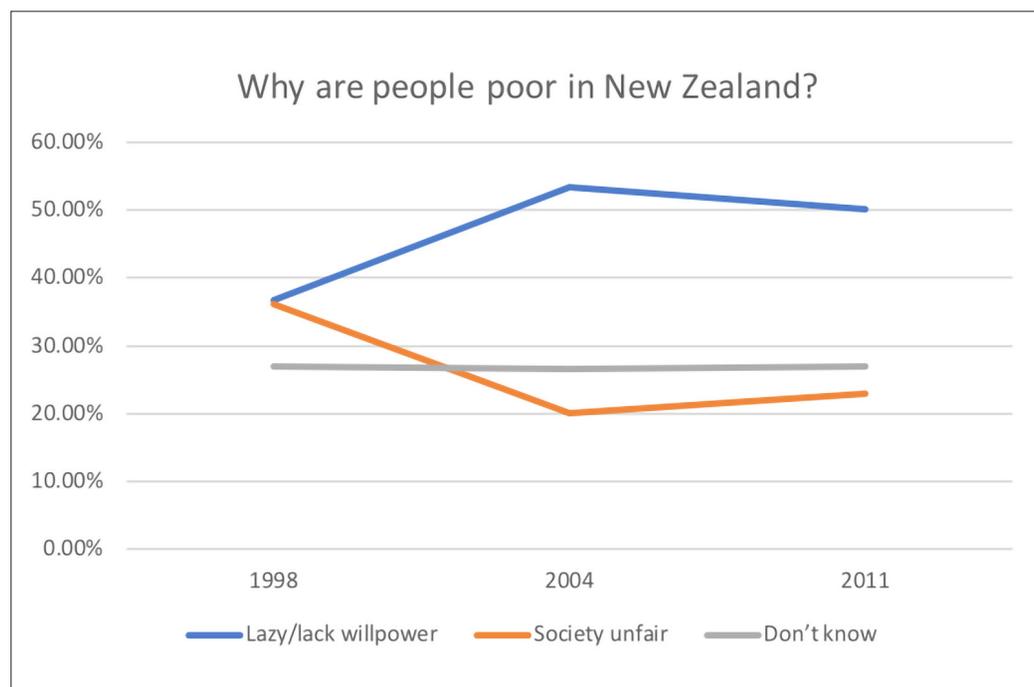
<sup>70</sup> Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987).

## Telling a new story about “child poverty” in New Zealand

In 2014 the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) commissioned a representative survey of public attitudes to child poverty. Forty percent of those asked identified wider conditions, including unemployment, low wages and rising living costs, as the cause. Another forty percent thought it was caused by poor parenting: neglect, lack of budgeting, and not prioritising children ahead of spending on alcohol, smokes, drugs. Ten percent identified a combination of systemic issues, low educational attainment and people having too many children.<sup>71</sup>

The World Values Survey,<sup>72</sup> which New Zealand participated in until recently, shows a strong cultural narrative in New Zealand about poverty. They found that the main cultural models involved personal blame of those in poverty for their circumstances. I shall call this the individual-cause-of-poverty explanation. In 2011, 50% of people thought poverty was due to laziness or lack of will power, and nearly a third of people (27%) did not have any understanding of why people are poor (see Figure 3). This change over time is interesting, with an increase in the individual cause narrative.

**Figure 3. New Zealand Results of the World Values Survey**



<sup>71</sup>MM Research (2014).

<sup>72</sup> World Values Survey. (2011). Findings and Insights. Accessed April 2018 <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

Research into wealth and poverty in New Zealand found that similar explanations were supported for why people were wealthy or poor.<sup>73</sup> Most people attributed wealth to individual talent of people (71.6%) and attributed poverty to a lack of effort (64.2%). About half of people thought of beneficiaries as being responsible for their own situation (48.7%).

In 2006, an analysis of media portrayals of poverty in New Zealand concluded that “journalism about poverty fails to recognise structural causes of poverty”.<sup>74</sup> Information from the powerful in society (e.g. politicians and large organisations) was privileged over other types of knowledge, with few experiential accounts.

It is likely that media discourse has changed in some ways since this time, most notably with respect to housing affordability as a source of family poverty – but the author is not aware of any more recent empirical research.

Qualitative research offers a few more insights. The dynamics of conversations about poverty in New Zealand, in both spoken and written language, were explored in research in 2013. This identified narratives about poverty similar to the more recent work in the United Kingdom. There was a distinct “othering” of people who lived on low incomes and were in receipt of welfare, including negative stereotyping and ethnicity-based bias directed at Māori and Pacific people. While there were a range of conflicting beliefs, common narratives drew upon bad habits, dependency, lack of responsibility, and monetary mismanagement.<sup>75</sup>

In interviews with New Zealand women parenting alone and living on low incomes in 2016, participants identified strong negative cultural stereotypes, noting that they were depicted as “bludgers and second-class citizens”.<sup>76</sup> Alicia Sudden’s interviews with those in receipt of welfare highlighted the many negative frames that have been used to explain welfare use in New Zealand.<sup>77</sup>

In 2016, Peter Skilling undertook interviews in New Zealand to explore how people understood and explained inequality. In facilitated discussion groups, Skilling noted that people were aware that economic inequality was a problem. Some members of the group did identify structural and potentially controllable causes for that inequality; for example, low wages and labour laws. However, when these beliefs were countered by narratives that explained inequality as inevitable, unavoidable or immutable – for example, it was simply “how market forces worked” – the counter narratives in response were not strong.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Skilling, P., & McLay, J. (2015). Getting ahead through our own efforts: Public attitudes towards the deservingness of the rich in New Zealand. *Journal of Social Policy*, 44(1), pp. 147-169.

<sup>74</sup> Summers, J. H. (2006). The Poverty of News Discourse: The news coverage of poverty in New Zealand. Masters Thesis. University of Canterbury.

<sup>75</sup> Bourke, S. R. (2013). Perspectives on poverty. Doctoral thesis. Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.

<sup>76</sup> Todd, C. (2008). Are single mothers modern society’s ‘miner’s canary’? <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/business/about/our-research/research-groups/public-policy-group/single-mothers.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> Sudden, A. (2016). The plight of the beneficiary. Policy Observatory Briefing Papers. <http://briefingpapers.co.nz/the-plight-of-the-beneficiary/>

<sup>78</sup> Skilling P. (2016). Neoliberalism, public policy and public opinion. *New Zealand Sociology*, 31(7), p., 159.

In focus groups that I was involved in for a group of not for profit organisations interested in understanding the dominant narratives about inequality and poverty in New Zealand, we spoke to people about how they thought about inequality and child poverty.<sup>79</sup> We found a strong narrative of individual causes for poverty, but some of those we interviewed held contradictory ideas and beliefs. Notably, some people shifted between beliefs that, on the one hand, there were wider systemic issues at play and, on the other hand, that poor parenting was the cause of poverty. There were also differences between genders. More women than men in the group talked about and drew upon systemic explanations for poverty.

What I draw from this group of studies about cultural models, and beliefs about inequality and poverty, is that New Zealanders do appear to strongly prioritise individualistic or extrinsic values in our explanatory narratives about poverty. This leads to beliefs that tend to reject the data showing parents in poverty work hard, but struggle to overcome the barriers created by the wider social and economic conditions. It is a difficult environment in which to present evidence about the impacts of complex systems, stress, and loving parents without risking a direct challenge to many people’s worldviews.

However, the story about individuals being responsible for their own poverty is not the only story being told. There are clearly people who understand systems causes and the data that sits alongside this construct. Perhaps what Peter Skilling’s work suggests, however, is that those with a systems narrative don’t have a particularly strong mental model to draw upon, and so easily shift their beliefs when challenged. Possibly what is occurring is a toggling back and forward between different values and beliefs, as the international framing research shows to occur in those people who do not hold strong beliefs. Ultimately, this points to an area that is ripe for research exploration, especially for understanding what different people value, the differences among group beliefs about poverty, what language frames work to engage pro-social values, and what contexts could help people to consider the complex causes of poverty without a sense of threat.

### 3.2 The story from policy

If the research and policy community are unaware of the potency of language to create a narrative, efforts to be factual may inadvertently frame and reinforce unhelpful values and beliefs. Alternatively, language and messaging may set up a direct challenge to people’s sense of identity and so entrench unhelpful or incorrect beliefs.

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<sup>79</sup> Elliott, M. (2017). Words Means Things. Presentation for the Equality Network drawing on research conducted by UMR, funded by the Morgan Foundation, AUT, Equality Network, UNICEF, JRMT and ActionStation, with advice from Common Cause.

While effective stories can engage those beliefs that are productive and move people towards the actions that evidence shows will improve outcomes for children, other stories can embed problematic ideas and actions.

There are indications that the language in research and policy on poverty is problematic. For example, Aboriginal Australians and Māori working in different domains of research and policy have made a strong call for researchers, policy makers and communicators to reassess the negatively couched or deficit language, that is used to frame indigenous people's lives.<sup>80</sup> An example of deficit language would be using statistics to describe Māori health which outline the higher risk of poorer health for Māori, rather than the advantages that non-Māori experience in health.

Although I could not locate any published analysis of the frames used in research and policy language with regard to child poverty in New Zealand, this is research which would be very valuable. For this report I have selected two pieces of text produced by policy makers in both the previous National government and the current Labour-led coalition, and under-taken framing, language and metaphor analysis utilising those methods used by cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff and Anat Shenker-Osorio among others to analysis language and discourse. I did this to explore how the language used by research and policy makers across governments can reinforce unproductive values and incorrect beliefs about the causes of child and other poverty. The following extract is from the recent child poverty reduction bill:

The Government is of the view that no New Zealander wants to see children growing up in poverty and hardship and that every child should enjoy a good start in life. There is robust evidence that growing up in poverty can harm children in multiple, predictable, substantial, and often sustained ways. These effects are particularly evident when poverty is severe and persistent, and when it occurs during early childhood.

The experience of poverty and material hardship can have negative impacts on many aspects of a child's well-being and opportunities and leave lifetime scars.

Evidence indicates that the harmful effects of child poverty not only have an adverse impact on the experience and life chances of each affected child, they also have a further damaging effect on the country's social fabric and economic performance.

Governments have a responsibility to act to improve the lives of the most vulnerable, with reducing child poverty a central concern. Measurement is an important starting point. Child poverty rates are, however, contested, with policy makers and commentators using and citing different measures with different methodologies, often as if they were directly comparable.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Fforde, C., Bamblett, L., Lovett, R., Gorrings, S., & Fogarty, B. (2013). Discourse, deficit and identity: Aboriginality, the race paradigm and the language of representation in contemporary Australia. *Media International Australia*, 149(1), pp. 162-173; Borell, B., Moewaka Barnes, H., & McCreanor, T. (2018). Conceptualising historical privilege: The flip side of historical trauma, a brief examination. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 14(1), pp. 25-34.

<sup>81</sup> New Zealand Government. (2018.) Child Poverty Reduction Bill. Draft for Select Committee.

This is not an atypical policy commentary on child poverty. And on the surface it appears benign, or even caring. But what frames are unintentionally being engaged. What beliefs are being either supported or challenged?

In the above extract, children in poverty are framed as damaged and different from others; for example, the reference to “lifetime scars”. The metaphor of “scarring” frames children growing up in poverty as physically marked, fundamentally different, and “other” to children from wealthier circumstances.

Children in poverty are framed as independent from other structures and institutions in society, especially from their families, when there is no explicit reference to a child’s ecosystem (e.g. “There is robust evidence that growing up in poverty can...”). Children grow up in families, whānau groups, communities, schools, and civic institutions. In failing to frame children’s wellbeing as embedded in social groupings, it becomes difficult for people to see how acting to remove barriers in social and economic systems matter or could work. Inevitably, by leaving systems out of the frame, the individual and individualistic values are prioritised.

Society, life, and the economy is framed as a competition or game that some children are not performing well in, and even holding others back in the wider competition. For example, note the use of positional and game frames: “every child should enjoy a *good start* in life” and “damaging effect on the country’s ... economic *performance*” [emphasis added]. This frames unhelpful values about achievement and wealth, and it engages beliefs and narratives about individual success, hard work and achievement being core to overcoming poverty. These are values and beliefs that are not helpful in presenting evidence showing the complex social and cultural causes of poverty or that communitarian actions work.

Note also the sentence: “they also have a further damaging effect on the country’s social fabric.” While this phrase does frame some collective values – for example, the social fabric metaphor suggests that society is a collective – the suggestion that the collective can be taken apart by children’s poverty ultimately frames the children themselves as problematic. It is the children in poverty causing the problem, not poorly constructed, unfair, and ineffective policies.

Throughout the excerpt, the words “damage”, “harm”, and “scars” – all metaphors that come with their own bundles of negative associations – persistently appear in reference to children in poverty. It makes it hard to escape the strict father frame that children are failing, and that harm is being done to society (as well as to children) by those who are poor.

It is helpful that a general change agent is identified with the words, "Governments have a responsibility to act" However it becomes much more action-based if specific people are identified; for example, "ministers" or "elected officials". Naming an amorphous "government" can serve to undermine people's confidence in all government. The move into a discussion of measurement problems and in-fighting between commentators, however, shifts the frame away from positive action that can be taken by specific agents, and instead describes a fractured and discordant community who cannot work together.

Language and framing can work against creating an environment in which people are comfortable supporting systems change. The framing and language in the above extract may undermine public support for the policy initiative, even though it is clearly motivated by concerns about child poverty. Overall the above extract does not engage shared helpful values and beliefs, and hence will fail to help people to see and support the effectiveness of breaking down social and economic barriers and wide systems change.

This second excerpt is from the New Zealand Treasury on social investment and the unemployment benefit:

#### **Helping former recipients of unemployment benefits to stay in work**

Traditionally governments have focused on getting newly unemployed people back into work, as unemployment is one of the biggest welfare costs. But analysis of lifetime costs of people who receive a benefit found that one of the most expensive groups is people who have recently returned to work from being on a benefit. This is because they are likely to slip back onto benefits. In any given month, 70 percent of people who sign up for a benefit have been on a benefit before. This indicates that the government needs to do more to help those people stay independent.<sup>82</sup>

The narrative is blunter here. There is a very strong strict father frame, alongside an engaging of unhelpful, more individualistic values. Those in receipt of welfare are problematic to government as being both a "cost" and "one of the most expensive groups". "Government", the frame suggests (again no agent or person is identified), needs to apply a tough love approach to prevent further individual failure of effort (e.g. "slip back onto benefits" and "help those people to stay independent"). Entirely absent from this excerpt is any language relating to complex causal factors and any helpful pro-social value in supporting people. The language and narrative frames unhelpful values about cost and achievement, and engages beliefs about personal failure and responsibility, not about complex causes. It will sit well with those who feel comfortable with such a narrative, while continuing to strengthen a cultural narrative that ignores complex causes and pro-social solutions – those we know to be most effective.

<sup>82</sup> New Zealand Treasury. (2015). Case Studies of Social Investment. Accessed April 2018 <https://treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/guidance-state-sector/social-investment/case-studies-social-investment>

These are two examples of some of the many frames, messages and stories told by the research and policy community about poverty. While I have used two central government examples, it is not an issue limited to central government. Local government, the not-for-profit sector, and researchers (myself included) are all prone to engaging unhelpful frames and so maintaining an environment in which unhelpful beliefs are supported. When I, for example, have framed child poverty in a cost-based frame (e.g. child poverty costs our country \$12 billion a year), I have inadvertently been engaging unhelpful values in an attempt to talk the language of cost-benefit analysis. Money frames inevitably prevent people from prioritising necessary communal and social action, and instead support people to focus on evidence of different ways to save money, which does not centre the wellbeing of people. Another impact of engaging money frames is that it can guide people towards considering any or all solutions that save money. For example, if child poverty is expensive, then we could theoretically make it less expensive by removing social support altogether.

It can be difficult to reframe language to tell stories that engage people’s pro-social helpful values, and to create environments which are more receptive to considering good information, high-quality data, and research about causes and solutions to family and child poverty. Yet it is more than achievable and totally necessary, because it stops the research and policy community from achieving traction on action that the evidence indicates is required. Part 5 of this report is the counterpoint to this discussion of unhelpful frames, with a focus on useful strategies and positive case studies.

### 3.3 The effect on public attitudes of the research and policy community framing unhelpful values

Some of the especially problematic language and stories that I've observed to recur in child poverty framing include the following:

1. Deficit framing: children living in poverty spoken of mainly in the language of damage or othering (e.g. “lifetime scars”, “broken families”).
2. Framing of children as independent or separate from their community including their parents and whānau. Either overtly (e.g. “hungry children need our help”) or because the research and policy community does not clearly frame children’s lives and wellbeing within the broader family, whānau and community, social and economic conditions, including the role of stress. The term “child poverty” is itself a frame that does this.
3. Framing poverty as the result of individual parental responsibility (e.g. “children do not choose their parents”, “the children are not guilty of anything”).

4. Framing that suggests poverty is inevitable, immutable and natural (e.g. "poverty will always be with us", "children should not be punished"). This framing suggests there are no actions or policy decisions that create social and economic barriers to families thriving. It is framing that draws on unproductive values around individual action.
5. Language and messages that frame child poverty costs as a reason to act. Again, it frames unhelpful extrinsic values, which ultimately equate children in poverty as another cost to be minimised.

Using these types of language and frames, telling these stories in research and policy discussions can prevent researchers and policy makers gaining traction with the public and ultimately politicians (who are also affected by such cultural narratives). It is difficult to gather support for the type of action that the evidence supports - pro-social policies that address the socio-economic and cultural conditions of society - if the language helps people prioritise unhelpful values and individualistic action. Prioritising these values encourages a focus on ideas of individual responsibility and individual behaviour as the sole cause and the solution. It tends to lead to a focus on targeting and behaviour change.

The CPAG attitudes research indicates that the stories people draw upon to explain poverty do affect how they think about solutions. When asked to freely comment on child poverty in New Zealand, the majority of the respondents who commented (around half of the survey) chose to discuss ways to change parents' behaviour, and in-kind provision of goods (e.g. food, clothing).<sup>83</sup> Few mentioned the systemic solutions that the literature suggests are needed. This is not entirely surprising: it can be difficult to see systemic issues, social and economic barriers and enablers in everyday life. What we can see is people responding and behaving negatively to invisible barriers. However, for people with no direct experience of families and children in poverty, their beliefs and narrative will be drawn by the language and frames in wider society. In other focus group interviews, similar ideas were expressed: the best solutions for child poverty were suggested to be hard work and changing parental attitudes.<sup>84</sup>

In United Kingdom research, the public's core stories about poverty were compared to researchers' analysis of the problem. Large differences were found between the public's narratives and the solutions that good evidence supported. Some of the gaps identified are summarised in Box 1.

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<sup>83</sup> MM Research. (2014).

<sup>84</sup> Elliott, M. (2017). *Words Mean Things*.

### **Box 1. Gaps between Public Stories about Poverty & Expert Understanding (UK research)<sup>85</sup>**

#### **Definition of Poverty: Relative vs. Absolute Deprivation.**

Researchers define poverty in relative terms (understanding needs in relation to social context), whereas the public defines poverty in absolute terms (as a lack of what is needed for basic subsistence). The difference constrains thinking about what poverty is and what should be done.

#### **Causes of Poverty: Systemic and Structural Factors vs. Individual Choices and ‘Culture’.**

Researchers find that poverty occurs due to failures of social systems and aspects of economic structures that limit opportunities, constrain choices and depress outcomes. The public does recognise, at a high level, that the economy disadvantages lower-income people in some important ways, but when non-researchers think about why poverty happens they tend to focus on individual and group character traits, such as personal laziness and poor values. These flaws are, the dominant narratives suggest, perpetuated through family norms and community culture.

#### **Benefits System: Insufficient vs. Rife with Abuse.**

Everyone agrees that the government should provide benefits to help people stay out of poverty, yet there are very different assessments between researchers and non-researchers of the current benefits system. This is due to different understandings of both poverty and how the benefits system actually works. Researchers stress that the current system is not sufficient to keep people out of poverty, because benefits are simultaneously too low and too difficult to access. While the public’s assessments of benefits inevitably differ to some extent depending on personal ideology, there is widespread concern among the public about abuse of benefits, with a belief that many people who could work choose to live off the system instead.

#### **The Economy: Complex System vs. Black Box.**

Researchers and policy experts understand the economy as a complex system that produces outcomes through a dynamic interplay of factors. The public, by contrast, has a more simplistic understanding of economic relations, attributing economic outcomes to either elite manipulation or vague “market forces”. Inaccurate beliefs about the economy limits public thinking about both the causes of and solutions to poverty.

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<sup>85</sup> Volmert, A., Pineau, M. G., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016), pp. 34-5.

The UK research concluded that the public's core stories and beliefs were likely undermining support for a strong and effective welfare system. It was difficult for the public to see and believe that there are solutions that could work.

Interestingly, the Child Poverty Action Group made this statement in its submission of the child poverty reduction bill in April 2018:

A lack of value currently given to parenting politically compromises any value given to children. As a result of this we have a deepening crisis of poverty that impacts most severely on children in families that are in receipt of a welfare benefit, in particular sole-parent families where there is a full-time caregiver. The principle of value for the unpaid role of the caregiver, alongside paid employment should underpin the design for a successful Child Wellbeing Strategy.<sup>86</sup>

CPAG recognises that the core stories that the public has about parents and child poverty - that is, the way poverty is framed - creates barriers to implementing effective systemic solutions. I will discuss how to tell new, more accurate core stories in the Part 5. However, it is important to consider the impact of these core stories on the people most affected by child poverty.

If the research and policy community frame child poverty in a way that supports inaccurate or problematic core stories, either intentionally or unintentionally, it harms children and families. The framing of child poverty becomes an additional stressor for the families and children living with insufficient resources. Peers and adults (teachers, health workers, etc.) can internalise the messages and behave differently towards children that they identify as "at risk". Children themselves internalise the messages of their future trajectory. The language and framing become a stressor associated with poor health and wellbeing. For people belonging to collective and indigenous communities, there are wider group harms that occur. In the next section I explore how families and children experience these narratives and discuss the burden placed on Māori in particular.

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<sup>86</sup> Child Poverty Action Group. (2018, March). *Submission on the Child Poverty Reduction Bill and changes to the Vulnerable Children Act 2014*. Accessed April 2018 <http://www.cpag.org.nz/assets/180322%20CPAG%20Submission%20on%20the%20Child%20Poverty%20Reduction%20Bill%20v14%20FINAL.pdf>

## 4. Children and parents’ experiences of the poverty narrative

### 4.1 Children’s voices

There is evidence that children living with insufficient resources assimilate problematic frames and messages about both themselves and their parents. It speaks volumes that “limited attention has been paid to the problem of poverty and in which extremely little attention has been paid to the lived psychological experience of life in poverty – for children or, for that matter, for adults.”<sup>87</sup> Researchers themselves are not immune to issues of bias and stereotyping, including ignoring the lives of children and those who are under-resourced.

In a systematic literature review by Heberle and Carter on how children experience and interpret the messaging of economic disadvantage, the evidence suggests that children are aware at a very young age of the external markers of economic disadvantage (as young as 2 years old). They can also identify the psychological effects associated with poverty. Children who themselves experience poverty, or are members of racial minority groups, have complex ideas about poverty and people in poverty at a younger age than other children. They appear to demonstrate more compassion at all ages than their peers.<sup>88</sup> Heberle and Carter surmise that given this evidence, it is likely that:

young children who are poor will become susceptible to stereotype threat and other processes related to stereotypes and stigma earlier than might otherwise be expected. It is also likely that poor children will come to recognize social class as a salient aspect of their own identities earlier than their non-poor peers.<sup>89</sup>

Research with children in New Zealand shows that they are well aware of the stereotypes, and in fact experience the impacts of those stereotypes viscerally.<sup>90</sup> Consultation with a group of children experiencing economic disadvantage found that social exclusion and bullying were major issues. Children highlighted the differential treatment and physical and psychological bullying that poorer children experienced:

“I reckon they are [treated differently] but they should be treated the same. If they are poor, people don’t care about them, they get bullied.”

“They get called names.”

“They get bullied.”

“They get picked on.”

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<sup>87</sup> Heberle, A. E., & Carter, A. S. (2015). Cognitive aspects of young children’s experience of economic disadvantage. *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(4), p. 723.

<sup>88</sup> Heberle, A. E., & Carter, A. S. (2015).

<sup>89</sup> Heberle, A. E., & Carter, A. S. (2015).

<sup>90</sup> Egan-Bitran, M. (2012). Our views matter: Children and young people talk about solutions to child poverty. Office of the Children’s Commissioner. <http://www.occ.org.nz/assets/Uploads/EAG/Consultation/Our-views-matter.pdf>

“Kids have to put up with put down.”

“They get mocked by other people for having nothing.”

The research highlighted that this exclusion was exacerbated by clear differences in clothing and material possessions:

“You get bullied because of your appearance - they look at your clothes and mock you.”

“Because of their looks - their clothes, they get judged, backstabbed.”

“Yes, hard out. They get looked at 'funny' e.g. clothes they wear, they get judged.”

“They are judged by the clothes they wear, the state of their clothes, the house they live in.”

“[Children who don’t have much money are treated differently] because they don’t have a computer or flash stuff.”

“Because you can’t afford the cool stuff like iPads, phones and they have to have old stuff so you might get teased.”

It is worth noting that any interventions designed to help children in poverty, may simply further stigmatise them if it further marks them out as being “different” or “other”.

The children in the research clearly highlighted the social judgement that they experience from their economic status:

“[Children who don’t have much money are treated differently] Because they are richer and are judging poorness”

“Don’t think the worst of us. We can achieve a lot with a little bit of support and encouragement. People think just because you’re from [name of place] you’re no good, you’re trouble but we’ve got lots of ideas, energy, gifts and talents. ”

Children and young people are very concerned about the negative impact that poverty can have on their friendships and other social relationships.<sup>91</sup>

In participatory research with Māori and Samoan children, clear themes emerged with regard to the harm that society wide messaging and framing created. Negative public representations of Māori in the media and elsewhere were identified by tamariki and rangatahi Māori as contributing to ideas of Māori inferiority.<sup>92</sup> Most wanted to be able to identify more strongly as Māori and to be accepted by others as such. For Samoan young people who lived in south Auckland, many were very positive about the cultural diversity of their environment and the positive influence of their community in their life,

<sup>91</sup> Egan-Bitran, M. (2010). *This is how I see it: Children, young people and young adults’ views and experiences of poverty*. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner, New Zealand.

<sup>92</sup> Edwards, S., Jensen, V., Peterson, V., Moewaka Barnes, H., Anae, M., Watson, P., & McCreanor, T. (2003). *Themes in young people’s accounts of wellbeing in their lives*. Whariki Research Group. Massey University, Auckland.

but clearly identified the negative perceptions held by wider society about them and South Auckland in particular.<sup>93</sup>

International research into the experiences of children in poverty shows that they are worried about being excluded and seen as different, or “othered”, and the result is anxiety and insecurity.<sup>94</sup>

Yet it is not inevitable that children on low incomes, or indeed with other risk factors, will go on to experience difficulties in their adult lives.

Many children with risk factors for poor outcomes go on to thrive as adults. In 2015, the New Zealand Treasury undertook analysis using the integrated data infrastructure in an attempt to identify which factors put children at greater risk of “costly” outcomes as young adults, such as involvement in the social care and justice system, and unemployment. These outcomes are also associated with living with insufficient resources.

The analysis identified a cluster of factors in childhood associated with future involvement in the social care and justice system, and unemployment. Treasury officials noted that there was a large number of false positives and negatives. For example, over 50% of those people who show up as young adults with poor outcomes will not have more than one or two identified risk factors present as children (the greater numbers of children with fewer risk factors have an impact here), while 35% who have all the risk factors present will go on to have no negative data reported.<sup>95</sup>

### 4.2 Parents’ experiences

As discussed earlier, parents also feel the burden of these narratives acutely. In the research by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, children highlighted how important their parents' support was to them: “Just cos people are poor doesn’t mean that they can’t be strong. Support from your family and supporting families helps.”<sup>96</sup>

Yet research with New Zealand parents living with insufficient resources clearly identifies how cultural models about poverty and sole parenting create an additional burden of stress for parents. In interviews with women who were sole parents receiving income support, nearly half reported psychological and physical health issues as a result of the stress of being in receipt of welfare payments.<sup>97</sup> In particular they highlighted that the negative feelings were a result of being depicted as “bludgers and second-class citizens.”

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<sup>93</sup> Fa’alau, F., & Jensen, V. (2006). Samoan youth and family relationships in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Pacific Health Dialogue* 13(2), pp. 17-24.

<sup>94</sup> Willow, C. (2001). Bread is free: Children and young people talk about poverty. London: Save the Children; Ridge, T. (2007). Negotiating child poverty: Children’s subjective experiences of life on a low income. In H. Wintersberger, L. Alanen, T. Olk & J. Qvortrup (Eds.), *Childhood, generational order and the welfare state: Exploring children’s social and economic welfare* (pp. 161-180). Vol. 1 of COST A19: Children’s Welfare. Denmark: University Press of Southern Denmark.

<sup>95</sup> Crichton, S., Tumen, S., & Templeton, R. (2015). Using integrated administrative data to understand children at risk of poor outcomes as young adults. New Zealand Treasury. Available at <http://www.treasury.govt.nz/publications/research-policy/ap/2015/15-01>

<sup>96</sup> Egan-Bitrán, M. (2012).

<sup>97</sup> Todd, C. (2008).

Echoing the findings of many international studies, the women interviewed said that these cultural stereotypes affected how willing even their own friends and family, as well as government support systems, were to provide material and emotional support. The women in the research rejected the negative stories and highlighted the value of parenting and their own hard work.

In other New Zealand research with people who were receiving, or had been receiving, income support, the negative frames were reported to have a significant impact on the subjects' wellbeing.<sup>98</sup> Stress and social isolation was a particular issue resulting from the internalising of these negative messages.

### 4.3 On being Māori, a parent, and living on a low income

For parents who are Māori and living with insufficient resources in New Zealand, there is a significant additional burden experienced in relation to the prevailing narratives. Analysis has shown that the media representation of Māori is largely a negative one. There is a focus on the disproportionate representation of Māori in negative wellbeing statistics, interpreted as the fault of the Māori individuals.<sup>99</sup> The narrative occurs in multiple settings from media<sup>100</sup> through to research, policy language, and actions. Researchers highlight in particular the negative framing of Māori that informs the policies of sole parent income assistance.<sup>101</sup>

The representation of Māori as "lesser than" and "other" to non-Māori in multiple domains reinforces the negative narratives and beliefs about Māori by the general public and even by Māori themselves (through internalising these messages). Which, as previously discussed, embeds further disadvantage throughout our social systems.<sup>102</sup>

For Māori parents, the additional stigma of young childbearing (the median age of Māori women having a first baby is 25 years) comes to bear. For many younger Māori parents, especially those below the age of 21 years, the stereotypes associated with young parenting are primarily negative. Stereotypes that emphasise a lack of capability, irresponsibility and inability to care for children.<sup>103</sup> Yet there is increasing evidence that it is not youth per se that is associated with poor outcomes, but a lack of economic and social resources that are available for young parents.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Sudden, A. (2016). The plight of the beneficiary.

<sup>99</sup> Hodgetts, D., Masters, B., & Robertson, N. (2004). Media coverage of "decades of disparity" in ethnic mortality in Aotearoa. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 14(6), pp. 455-472.

<sup>100</sup> Nairn, R., McCreanor, T., Moewaka Barnes, A., Borell, B., Rankine, J., & Gregory, A. (2012). "Māori news is bad news": That's certainly so on television. *MAI Journal*, 1(1), pp. 38-49.

<sup>101</sup> Ware, F., Breheny, M., & Forster, M. (2017). The politics of government "support" in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Reinforcing and reproducing the poor citizenship of young Māori parents. *Critical Social Policy*, 37(4), pp. 499-519.

<sup>102</sup> Houkamau, C. A., Stronge, S., & Sibley, C. G. (2017). The prevalence and impact of racism toward indigenous Māori in New Zealand. *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation*, 6(2), pp. 61-80.

<sup>103</sup> Ware, F., Breheny, M., & Forster, M. (2018). Mana mātua: Being young Māori parents. *MAI Journal*, 7(1), pp. 18-30.

<sup>104</sup> Breheny, M., & Stephens, C. (2010). Youth or disadvantage? The construction of teenage mothers in medical journals. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12(3), pp. 307-322.

For Māori who are young parents, there is a rich cultural narrative underscoring the positive nature of child bearing and parenting. It can be difficult to align Te Ao Māori beliefs of parenting with the dominant Western cultural narratives of being young and Māori. Kaupapa Māori research has found that Māori-specific narratives of parenting can act to resist or counteract the negative stereotypes and the associated behaviours from professionals, whānau and others. However, these positive cultural narratives are constrained by Western ideas of what makes a “good” parent. That is, young Māori parents will judge themselves and their parenting by Western cultural narratives.<sup>105</sup>

For Māori who parent while under-resourced, choosing to not identify as poor is important, qualitative research shows. Many whānau interviewed about their experiences of being poor, struggled to cover their basic needs for food, clothing and housing. Yet in not calling themselves poor, they could feel more positive about their circumstances and focus on what they did have.<sup>106</sup> Regardless of this positive view of their own lives, the families also identified continual stress resulting from the insufficiency of their resources. Throughout the research, there were strong themes of wanting the best for their children, continually pushing themselves to deliver that, and a distinct pride in the job of parenting. A key aspect of coping was embracing and following tikanga Māori.

What the kaupapa Māori research highlights is how very different (and more positive) Māori narratives of parenting while living on low incomes are from mainstream narratives. There is a barrier to the public seeing the true potential of Māori families. It is a barrier that also makes it difficult to see the effectiveness of solutions for Māori by Māori, of which one example is the Whānau Ora policy.

Research with children and parents indicates that the stories about child poverty, parents living on low incomes, and the underlying issues, are not frames that will help people to see, and believe, the most effective solutions to ensure all children thrive, and hence will not demand elected officials to act upon. What needs to change? How can we in the research and policy community change our narratives and create an environment in which it is easier for people to see the best evidence we have about changing and improving systems to overcome child poverty?

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<sup>105</sup> Ware, F., Breheny, M., & Forster, M. (2018).

<sup>106</sup> Houkamau, C. (2016). Māori narratives of poverty. Whakawhetū. Accessed April 2018  
<http://hps.tki.org.nz/News/Maori-Narratives-of-Poverty-2016>

## 5. Telling new stories about children and parents living with insufficient resources in New Zealand

In Part One I discussed using frames and language to engage the types of values that makes it easier for people to consider good information, information that may challenge what they currently believe. Finding which values that different people hold is helpful for designing a story. The values that we as researchers and policy makers hold cannot be assumed to be the values that will usefully engage others. Research to understand public values and the various public narratives - both dominant and recessive ones - is required first. Recessive stories are the stories that can be heard when we ask people to explain why child poverty exists, but have a lot less popularity, power and detail associated with them (e.g. systems explanations). Using messengers that people trust and see as aligned with their values helps to establish the credibility of the message. Other useful techniques, that values framing experts recommend, include:

1. Starting with what values we have identified as being helpful, and that we share and hold in common with each other, there is work to do to ensure that Māori values are neither assumed nor subsumed in such a process;
2. Articulating the problem simply, and offering the chance to create solutions;
3. Drawing a picture of the positive future being sought: don't focus on problems or the details of the method to get there.<sup>107</sup>

People can access different frames and values through effective language and messaging. A good message "toggles" people between frames and values. To come back to the strict father and the nurturing parent frames, the strict father frame is frequently activated in stories about poverty and welfare, for example, which toggles us to extrinsic values such as achievement, wealth, and success. Even where such things matter, we may be less likely to see the evidence of systems barriers and overwhelming stress as true. In a nurturing parent frame, we are toggled into values such as innovation, self-determination, and benevolence. The nurturing parent frame is more likely to create an environment in which the evidence on stress in parents and families aligns with what we see as mattering.

This work is not about manipulating people; rather, as Dan Kahan argues, "the goal of these techniques is ... to create an environment for the public's open-minded, unbiased consideration of the best available scientific information".<sup>108</sup> In other words, it is about creating a cognitive environment in which we become more willing to consider information that may otherwise be outrightly rejected as not fitting with current beliefs.

<sup>107</sup> Holmes, T., Blackmore, E., Hawkins, R., & Wakeford, T. (2011). *The common cause handbook*. Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC).

<sup>108</sup> Kahan, D. (2010). Fixing the communications failure.

To accept the usefulness of these techniques does require the research and policy community to accept that no one undertakes a value-free process of weighing up new information and evidence, that all of us filter evidence through our values.

### 5.1 Engaging productive core stories about poverty

*Unproductive cultural models sit alongside more productive ones, which can be leveraged and expanded to shift thinking about poverty.<sup>109</sup>*

In the research that I have reviewed on poverty, there are clear indications that there are a wide range of values and beliefs held about poverty, which is positive as it means that there will be existing, albeit recessive, narratives that draw upon helpful values which can be amplified. The Frameworks research gives us some suggestions on how exactly to engage helpful productive values through language, with the caveat that more research and local research is needed.<sup>110</sup>

### 5.2 Useful strategies for talking about poverty

- Avoiding talking about “needs”, or be very explicit about what “needs” mean in terms of why resources beyond basic needs (like trips for children, holidays, education, internet) are important for everyone’s wellbeing in a country like New Zealand. Do not assume that the public understands “needs” in the same way as researchers.
- Link the provision of sufficient resources to self-determination. There is a strong core story called the Spectrum of Self-determination that focuses on choice. Resources are important, not because they satisfy needs or wants, but because they empower and enable people to choose freely, to innovate, and to determine their own path. If we link sufficient resources to self-determination we may “inoculate” people against the idea that providing more than the very basic needs is overkill.
- Avoid engaging consumer frames, because this may toggle people to romantic views of poverty; for example, people who survived in the Depression without all the “stuff” that children and families “want” these days.
- Make New Zealand-based poverty real for people, providing examples from here. Avoid references to the deserving nature of people; rather highlight systems and policies that create and drive poverty. Do not compare poverty with other countries, because it may trigger beliefs about “real” poverty.

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<sup>109</sup> Volmert, A., Pineau, M. G., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016).

<sup>110</sup> Volmert, A., Pineau, M. G., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016).

- Tell a story about the system. To help overcome the individual-cause-of-poverty explanations, set up broader story about the systems, and then tell a person's story within that system. Without that systemic basis, individual stories reinforce individualist thinking. To tell this story:
  - Make the systems a character in the story. Systems need to be characters who both act and are acted upon.
  - Explicitly highlight how poverty constrains choice by putting it in the context of opportunity. Link limited opportunities to the system.
  - Explain the sources of economic inequality. Discuss how, for example, markets are shaped and challenged by institutions and people. It will avoid triggering something called "economic naturalism" where people tend to believe the economy is a natural force that we cannot control, as opposed to made and shaped by people's decisions.
  - Provide concrete solutions on how to restructure opportunities and prevent poverty.
- Avoid painting politicians as bad people with nefarious motives; it can trigger beliefs that the game is rigged and that reform through government impossible. Focus instead on the actions that people in power have or have not taken.
- Put numbers in context and explain them. Context-free numbers get interpreted through existing cultural narratives. Left unframed, numbers are interpreted in ways that can diverge totally from a communicator's intent. Use numbers to tell a story and do not assume the story is the numbers.
- Avoid repeating problematic cultural narratives, because it may have a backfire effect and reinforce the message. For example, starting with the idea that there is a social contract between those on welfare and society to work hard, while intended to defuse an opponent's point, reminds people of problematic narratives. Instead start with the systemic issues.

Frameworks conclude that more understanding of framing processes is required, including how to counter negative benefit frames, deepen understanding of economic and other systems, foster concern for vulnerable groups, and cultivate a sense of collective efficacy (to name a few). In New Zealand, we are missing a lot of this research. This matters especially because what is needed is a better understanding of the interface between core stories about Māori and Pacific people in poverty, as these are likely to be different and more problematic.

### 5.3 Using a variety of communications tools

I have discussed the need to draw on shared values as one of the tools to use. Understanding what values people hold and what values are most productive to engage requires research with target groups. Likewise, using frames, metaphors and examples is important. Another tool to make complex information simpler is to use an explanatory chain, a simple series of explanations that join up to deliver the more complex message. A good example of this is a core story video made for the Alberta Family Wellness Programme on how stress and poverty impacts on children's brain development and ultimately their adult wellbeing.<sup>111</sup>

Research is also a very important tool. The research and policy community invests a lot of energy, time and money into researching solutions to problems, yet comparatively little into how to persuade and move people to believe these solutions. It is a significant and worthy investment to ensure that all the dedicated hours and effort that individuals and organisations have committed to finding innovative solutions to child poverty are utilised and turned into action.

### 5.4 Case studies from New Zealand

In this final section I present five case studies from New Zealand. These case studies provide alternative core stories, attempt to engage with productive values, and create an environment in which it is easier for people to see the solutions offered with regard to child poverty and family wellbeing. While not perfect, these examples can provide new ideas, and more evidence-based ways to communicate with the public and politicians about child poverty.

#### *Case Study 1: A Universal Child Payment*

In 2017 a group of not-for-profit research institutions came together to develop and test new core stories on child poverty and inequality. Drawing on research into the power of unconditional cash assistance, the group explored how to frame this particular solution for child poverty. Focus groups and literature reviews were used to identify existing frames, and possible narratives that showed promise. The final message was tested with a representative group of New Zealanders. The construction of that group included those who would respond positively to the story regardless (the base), those who were likely to oppose it regardless (the opposition) and a group of people who had no fixed ideas about causes and solutions (the persuadable).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. (2018). *How brains are built: The core story of brain development*. Accessed April 2018 <http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/how-brains-are-built-core-story-of-brain-development>

<sup>112</sup> Elliott, M. (2017). *Words Mean Things*.

This was the story that was told. It drew on a system-based broader story, self-determination frames, and presented the solution in that context:

Being a parent can be rewarding, but it's also hard work. And while being a good parent is about more than providing for your family financially, not being able to afford the basics makes everything harder. With rising rents, less secure jobs and mounting costs of living, many families are pushed to breaking point. It's not parents who control the property market or the price of petrol, but things like those do affect whether their kids get a decent start in life. To decrease the pressure and give kids a fair start, the government should introduce a universal payment for all families with kids, with extra support for those doing it the most tough.

The effectiveness of that message in helping people accept the evidence was tested using a methodology called dial testing. In dial testing people physically respond to the story by turning a dial to agree or disagree as they listen. The persuadable group responded positively to this message and to most aspects of the solution, with the exception being the words "universal payment". More research is required on why universal payment was responded to in this way. In a New Zealand context, the bundle of specific associations attached to it "universal payments" need teasing out.

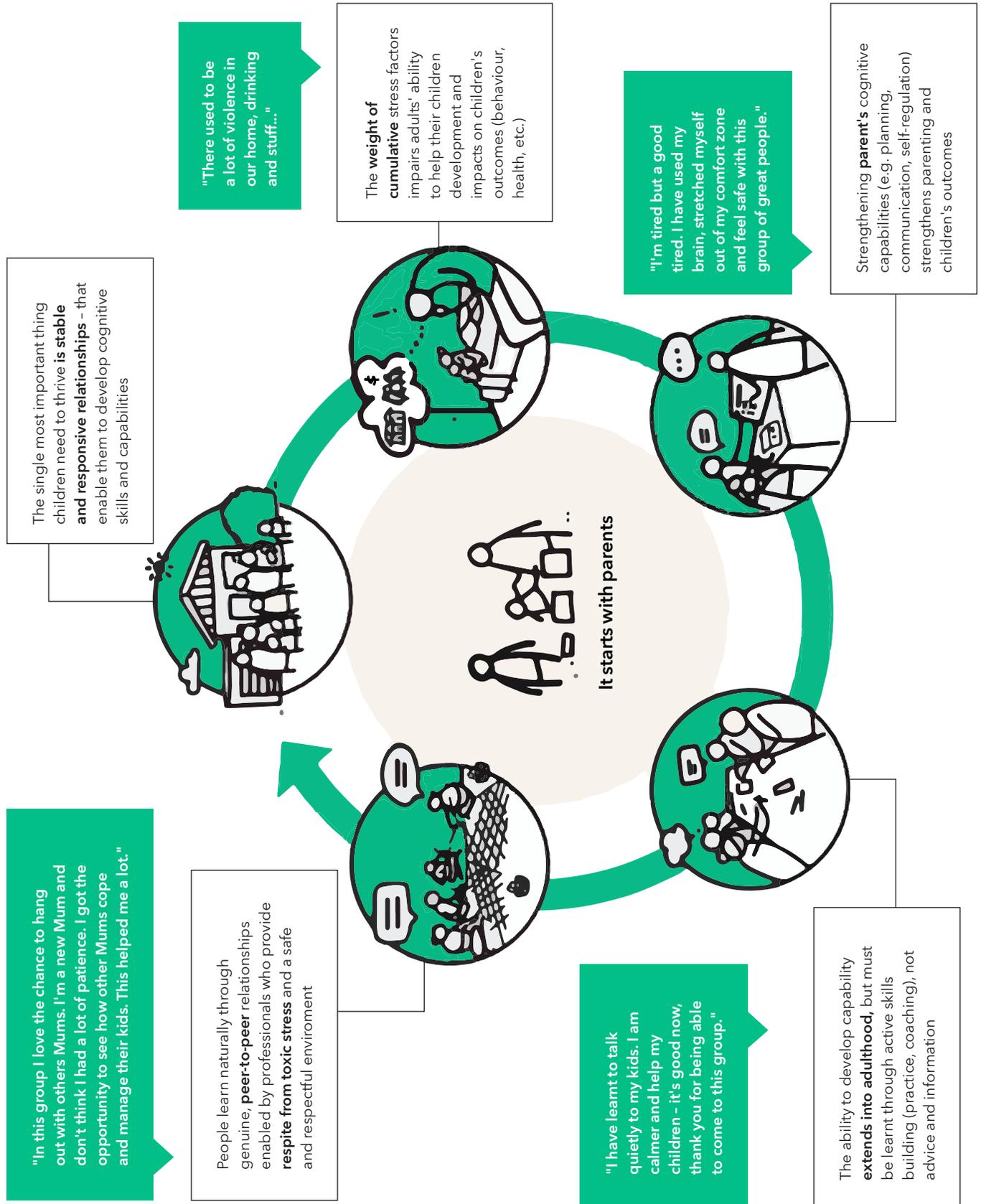
#### *Case Study 2: The Southern Initiative - The Early Years Challenge*

The Southern Initiative and the Auckland Co-Design Lab is a place-based initiative of the Auckland Council. The Early Years Challenge is a project exploring how to improve outcomes for young children, families and whānau in South Auckland.<sup>113</sup> Drawing on best evidence, and whānau-centred co-design principals, the Early Years Challenge tells effective stories about children and whānau in South Auckland and what they need, by using frames such as nurturing parent ideas and engaging values of self-determination, benevolence, and compassion. For example, "parents as brain builders", providing "respite from toxic stress", "unleashing skills and capabilities", "ripples of impact" and "sense of identity and belonging". Such language and communication draws on a systems perspective of parental stress and engages self-determining frames to highlight barriers to parental choice and the ability of families to thrive.

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<sup>113</sup> The Southern Initiative and Auckland Co-design lab. (2017). *The Early Years Challenge: Supporting parents to give tamariki a great start in life: Summary report*. Accessed

Figure 4: Early years Challenge - The Southern Initiative



*Case Study 3: Liz and Sam's Story. A pick-a-path: The Morgan Foundation and Action Station*

In this case study, an interactive pick-a-path story was designed to help draw a wider picture of the systematic issues that limit parents' choices and lead to child poverty. Using the story of one New Zealand family living on a low income, their experiences were contextualised within broader social and economic barriers. The imagery and the frames chosen were intended to help players of the pick-a-path to see how difficult it is for families to thrive when insufficient resources and systems limit the choices they can make. There were multiple choices and paths that a player could take the family down, most of which left the family in no better circumstances than previously.

The pick-a-path highlighted how difficult it is to self-determine when the wider conditions create barriers to doing so. What this story did not do was frame the positive outcomes that are possible in quite such obvious ways. It would be interesting to further develop this work and present a possible future where wider systems allow for more choices to be made.



*There's more to being a good parent than financially providing for your family. But with rising rents, high childcare costs and less secure jobs, many parents of young children are forced to make difficult choices to ensure the health and happiness of their children.*

Screenshot from Liz and Sam's Story: <https://pickapath.actionstation.org.nz>

### Case Study 4: Child Rich Communities

Inspiring Communities is “an organisation that catalyses locally-led change”. In 2015 it sought to connect and learn from those people working in community-led ways to improve the lives of children and families. They called the communities, groups, and organisations that were working in such ways as “Bright Spots”. The language and framing of the work that is being undertaken in what are more often referred to as “poor communities” is markedly different. The issues are still the same, but the messaging is profoundly different. The narratives are clearly focused on building positive core stories of communities who are insufficiently resourced. The language frames values of self-determination, intergenerational responsibility, and develops narratives around complex causes and solutions. The language builds a case for positive and achievable change, without drawing on traditional narratives of child poverty at all.

Extract from: Inspiring Communities, *Child rich communities: Aotearoa New Zealand's bright spots*:

#### **Box 2: Learning story: Raurimu Avenue Primary School<sup>114</sup>**

What does this story tell us?

The story of Raurimu Avenue School in the last two years tells us that primary schools are important places for social change. Here, “disadvantaged parents” benefitted from a different approach. The approach was not one of “social service delivery”. Rather it was an approach of having a trusted person “believe in them” and instil in them “a sense of self-belief”. Being positive and non-judgemental was key. It was important that there was no stigma with receiving help/support from the Kaiārahi.

The Kaiārahi’s work is somewhat hard to quantify or explain, but its effects can be clearly seen in the positive changes at the school.

This story also tells us that when “disadvantaged people” “give up at a young age” it is both because of how others see them, and how they see themselves. It is both internal and external prejudices at work. Shifting this self-belief is a powerful way to break intergenerational patterns.

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<sup>114</sup> Inspiring Communities. (2015). Child rich communities: Aotearoa New Zealand’s bright spots. Report available at <http://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/child-rich-communities/>

*Case Study 5: Tiakina te Pā Harakeke*

The final case study is a kaupapa Māori model of childbearing and child raising. Te Pā Harakeke draws on indigenous stories and narratives of the place of children in society and the role of parents. The harakeke (a native New Zealand plant) is used by Professor Leonie Pihama and her team to explain the precious nature of children as taonga (precious), and the role of parents and the wider whānau in protecting, respecting and nurturing children.<sup>115</sup> It should not be treated as a metaphor, however. It is a literal understanding from Te Ao Māori.

The harakeke plant grows in clumps with multiple fan structures. There is a central new leaf with multiple supporting leaves. The child is the rito, the central leaf. The awhi rito, the immediate supporting leaves, are parents. And the tūpuna rau are the wider whānau, including multiple generations. The harakeke plant needs tending to ensure that the unnecessary structures or leaves are removed to keep it healthy.



<sup>115</sup> Pihama, L. (2012). *Tiakina te Pā Harakeke: Māori child rearing within a context of whānau ora* [Video file]. Accessed <http://mediacentre.maramatanga.ac.nz/content/tiakina-pa-harakeke>

Running strongly through Te Pā Harakeke are nurturing parent frames, and values of care, deep love, and intergenerational responsibility. (This is my Pākehā interpretation of some of the values I see, Māori values will be different). As well as positioning the broader systems issues, what in society needs moving along because it causes harm? In this case study, the focus of the narrative is very much by Māori for Māori, rebuilding positive core stories about parenting, where the process of colonisation has stripped them away. It contextualises child wellbeing and child poverty within the ongoing effects of colonisation, which are the wider cultural causes.

At its core, Tiakina Te Pā Harakeke is a project focused on tikanga and mātauranga Māori models of wellbeing for whānau. It supports the wellbeing of children and their families by identifying how they can first learn, and then practice in the true sense, the positive cultural approaches to childrearing as practiced by the tūpuna.<sup>116</sup>

What this work has the potential to do is broaden the promotion of Māori knowledge, identity and practice in the context of child and family wellbeing; and to provide different, positive core stories about Māori and children that may help to build a greater value of things Māori by wider society. The wider acceptance of these positive Māori narratives of child and family wellbeing can, researchers say, influence mainstream policy and action to be more responsive for Māori.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ngā Pae O Te Māramatanga. (2018). *Tiakina te Pā Harakeke: Raising a treasured child*. Accessed April 2018. <http://www.maramatanga.co.nz/project/tiakina-te-p-harakeke-raising-treasured-child>

<sup>117</sup> Ware, F., Breheny, M., & Forster, M. (2018).

## 6 Conclusion

*Words [are] like eggs dropped from great heights; you can no more call them back than ignore the mess they leave when they fall.*

- Jodi Picoult<sup>118</sup>

As researchers and policy makers working to overcome child poverty, it is very important that the tool we use - in this case, our words and language - is building the whare we need. We must not waste our good intentions by using the tool in the wrong way.

There is great enthusiasm for using research and science to inform policy across the political spectrum. However, this enthusiasm for being evidence-informed has not translated into how we talk about the solutions that are most likely to improve families and children's lives. Without understanding the impact of language and words the research and policy community may do harm. Words, language and framing can become one of the very burdens that children and parents are forced to shoulder, including those we want to do better by.

In this report, I have presented ways to tell new stories about child poverty in New Zealand. However, plugging the knowledge gap alone will not move the research and policy community. As I discussed at the very start, knowledge is not a great predictor of behaviour change! The values framing story needs to be told by different messengers, in different ways, and repeated often. To resonate with the research and policy community, the research should be presented in the context of shared values. Without doubt, a great place to start the conversation is a deep concern for the children of the next generation and those that follow, for their potential to live the lives they choose and to flourish doing so.

Ngā mihi.

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<sup>118</sup> Picoult, J. (2001). *Salem Falls*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 133

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### **About the Author**

Jess Berentson-Shaw is a New Zealand researcher, writer and communicator with an interest in how we build public and political support for more inclusive and evidence-based policy. Her current work focuses on the role of values and beliefs in the development and implementation of inclusive public policy. Jess was awarded a PhD in Health Psychology from Victoria University in 2003 and has worked in the United Kingdom and New Zealand applying evidence to achieving equity in a variety of settings. She reviewed maternal and perinatal deaths at the Confidential Inquiry of Maternal Health in the United Kingdom and led the research team at the New Zealand Guidelines Group for some years. Her work spans the spectrum of health, wellbeing, social care and economics policy. In 2017 Jess published *Pennies from Heaven*, a book that investigates the most effective policy actions for moving families and children out of poverty. She is co-director of the not-for-profit research and policy collaborative The Workshop.

### **About The Workshop**

The Workshop is a not-for-profit research and policy collaborative co-directed by Jess Berentson-Shaw and Marianne Elliott. At The Workshop we use values, research, and the science of story in partnership with government, academia, civil society, and philanthropy and business sectors. We focus on achieving traction on good evidence in order to build a kind, inclusive and innovative New Zealand.

### **About The Policy Observatory**

Based at Auckland University of Technology, The Policy Observatory provides a lens on public policy in Aotearoa New Zealand. We both conduct and commission research on economic, social and environmental policy issues, with the intention of publishing results in a form that is accessible to the general public. We work in a collaborative, networked way with researchers across institutions and in the private sector. Ultimately, we are concerned with how policy advances the common good.