

Defining, teaching, and practising diversity: Another hegemonic discourse?

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Respect for diversity is a primary principle of the social work profession; however, the term *diversity* has been critiqued as meaningless and is often linked with cultural competence. Gaps in terminology, education, and knowledge about how to practise diversity have been identified in health and social practice literature, while attempts to teach diversity have uncertain results. The research question guiding this master's study was "What are the factors that inform Aotearoa social workers' practice when engaging with diversity?"

METHODOLOGY: Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of four practising social workers to explore what informed their diversity practice. An inductive thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken. Numerous themes and sub-themes were identified and grouped into seven thematic categories.

FINDINGS: For research participants, the term *diversity* exists only in the discursive; and it "gets in the way" of practice. While acknowledging the importance of education and practice with Te Tiriti, participants could not seem to connect this knowledge with diversity and associated practices. The authors suggest that the definition of diversity for the purposes of social work education and competency frameworks requires a more critical approach: its associations with power, and its tendency to describe and classify otherwise complex, fluid, contextual identities. Aotearoa New Zealand social work education must also engage in critical analysis of monocultural, hegemonic discourse and power relationships through te Tiriti frameworks to prepare all students for practice with diversity in a bicultural context.

Keywords: Diversity; social work profession; professional practice; competencies

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Overview

The term *diversity* presents complexities for practitioners at the conceptual and practice levels. The practitioners in this small study clearly identify that while their social work education supported reflection and critical thinking, it has not prepared them specifically for engaging with diversity. For them, diversity is simply a term that often gets in the way of practice. This study raises the question of whether

it is possible that diversity is just another hegemonic discourse? It may be that critical, in-depth analysis of the term is insufficient in social work education curricula, leaving practitioners with incomplete or ambiguous understandings which potentially impede the profession's commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and social justice-based practice.

It is considered that professional bodies, employers and educators need to provide more support for social workers so that

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they can demonstrate responsiveness to the diverse range of clients in their practice. As Kelly et al. (2020, p. 51) stated:

...these practitioners are aware of the impacts of what they characterize as oppressive power on their diverse clients and are suspicious that the term diversity may be a tool of this oppression but without the conceptual tools to shed a more critical and sociological light on diversity, what it is, and when and how it came about, these practitioners' default to narrow interpretations of diversity.

We suggest that social work education on diversity would benefit from the application of a more critical lens, one which extends beyond the limited definitions currently provided.

Social work's stance on human rights, social justice, emancipatory and anti-oppressive practice establishes the professional responsibility in helping to cater for diversity and the various challenges this may impose (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] & International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], 2014; 2018; Pack & Brown, 2017; Saunders et al., 2015). However, the profession has historically viewed diversity through a positivist lens, with a focus on individualistic self-determination and equal opportunity for all (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019). Such a focus has not served indigenous communities seeking collective self-determination and social justice through access to equitable human rights. Social work educators and students alike have also reported limitations within the curriculum and teaching on diversity (Kelly et al., 2020; Olcoñ et al., 2020).

Diversity is not defined, but generalised, by governing social work bodies, with its meaning simply "assumed to be known" (Featherstone, 2009, p. 11). Phrases such as "other circumstance" (IASSW, 2018, para. 1) and "other forms of diversities" (IFSW, 2012, para. 9) are used by professional bodies

to portray the many expressions of human diversity. The current IFSW and IASSW's Global Definition of Social Work (2014) and Global Social Work Statement of Social Work Ethical Principles (2018) have emerged from intensive problematisation of social work's responses (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019) and prompt reconsideration on how the profession responds to, and teaches, diversity.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, national legislation and professional obligations set the context for social workers to uphold human rights regarding diversity (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Work [ANZASW], 2019; Social Workers Registration Board [SWRB], 2016). For instance, of the SWRB (2021) Core Competence Standards, three of the 10 relate directly to diversity; these include competence to work with Māori; competence to practise social work with different ethnic and cultural groups, and competence to work respectfully and inclusively with diversity and difference in practice (SWRB, 2021). Within these competencies, several terms are used: one standard includes the term *diversity*; another the term *divergent*; two include the terms *different* or *difference*; two include *ethnic* or *ethnicity*; and all three include the terms *culture* or *cultural*. The term, diversity, is not defined in any competence standards but is listed in standard three as including "ethnicity, disability, social and economic status, age, sexuality, gender and transgender, faiths and beliefs" (SWRB, 2021, para. 6). Without a critique, the application of social work's foundational values (e.g., self-determination) can work against the wellbeing of those groups who may hold different beliefs, practise different customs, and hold ideals that differ from the majority group.

The SWRB's Code of Conduct (2016) mandates that respect for diversity should be embedded in practice, while the ANZASW Code of Ethics (2019) maintains that social workers "do not tolerate discrimination" (p. 9) (based on the categories listed in the previous paragraph). The failure to

comply with the Code of Conduct (2016) is considered a breach of professional conduct, therefore the profession needs to clearly define the term 'diversity' and establish guidelines for practice.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Within Aotearoa New Zealand, the social work profession views a commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi as vital to maintaining professionalism and competent practice (SWRB, 2016). The importance of understanding te Tiriti o Waitangi in social work practice is exemplified by its place as the first-named competency of the SWRB (2021). The groundwork for this modern competency standard which recognises the status of tāngata whenua and te Tiriti can be traced back to the 1980s where growing discontent over monocultural practices sparked debate about how social work policy, competency standards, and registration, specify anti-discriminatory responses to human difference (Fraser & Briggs, 2016). Criticisms of racism in the ANZASW were raised at the 1986 Turangawaewae Conference alongside discussions of minimum competency requirements that aimed to set higher standards of social work practice that countered mono-culturalism and oppressive practices (Fraser & Briggs, 2016; New Zealand Social Work Training Council, 1984). These critiques resulted in a unique bicultural social work association in Aotearoa New Zealand that had a direct focus on partnership based on Te Tiriti (ANZASW, 2014; SWRB, 2021 Fraser & Briggs, 2016; McNabb, 2019).

The competence requirement for working with Māori states that practitioners must articulate how the "wider context of Aotearoa New Zealand both historically and currently can impact on practice" (SWRB, 2021, para. 4). Colonisation is the backdrop for this wider context that has resulted in historic and current marginalisation and discrimination against tāngata whenua (Hobbs et al., 2019; Stenhouse, 2021). Failure

to honour te Tiriti through equal partnership has deeply impacted otherwise well-functioning whānau, iwi and hapū social and wellbeing systems (Came et al., 2018). Wellbeing disparities and disproportionate access to resources between Māori and settler populations are now documented as generationally entrenched facts (Came et al., 2018; Hobbs et al., 2019; Ministry of Health, 2015). Māori identities are fluid and changing (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010; Kelly, 2002; McIntosh, 2005; Stevenson, 2001). Professional and educational approaches to Māori identity fail to recognise and protect diversity within the Māori population (Hetaraka, 2019; Ramsden, 2002). A Tiriti based social work response to disparities must go beyond diversity's focus on individual difference and equality for all people. Te Tiriti based social work focuses on the rights of Māori to achieve equity through reallocation of power and resources. ANZASW (2019) stated, "people may be given preferential treatment to address inequities caused by discrimination, colonisation, economic policies, violence or exploitation" (p. 15).

This research aimed to explore social workers' understandings of diversity and how they practise with diversity. The overarching question guiding the research was: "What factors inform social workers' practice when engaging with diversity?" A further aim was to examine what critical, reflective, and competent practice looks like when interacting with diversity, as well as how these findings may inform social work educators.

Method

Qualitative, semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews were chosen as the method of data collection. A qualitative research approach was chosen because of the ability to capture detailed stories, while at the same time recognising that the interaction between the researcher and participant/s impacts on the data collected

(Bhattacharjee, 2012; Bryman, 2016; Padgett, 2017).

After approval was obtained from the Whitireia and WelTec Ethics and Research Committee (WWERC, reference 133-206), the process of participant recruitment began. A convenience sample of four practising social workers experienced in engaging with diversity were recruited through the first author's professional contact networks and the subsequent practice of chain sampling. Inclusion criteria were that participants must have held a social work qualification (to the eligibility level to practise social work in Aotearoa); had more than two years of professional practice experience; and were not known to the researcher.

The participants were all New Zealand European females with social work degrees; three participants graduated between 12 and 20 years ago and one was a recent Master of Social Work graduate. Three participants were employed in social work positions (one in the health sector, and two in non-government, non-for-profit agencies), while the fourth had a church-based role that utilised her social work skills. Given the focus of the study was diversity, the homogeneity of the participants' ethnicity and gender was troubling; however, given the time constraints on the research (this article draws on a Master of Professional Practice thesis) as well as a recommendation from the WWERC and supervisors regarding participant numbers, further participant recruitment was not possible. Recruitment criteria did not specify culture or ethnicity as a participant inclusion criterion to avoid pre-empting what are traditionally seen as diversity categories.

An interview guide was developed by the first author, which was informed by her reading in the field; however, other questions were asked "on the spot" in response to the participants' accounts, which highlights the role of researcher-as-instrument in the data collection (Padgett, 2017, p. 2). All interviews were conducted in

a private location and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The audio-recorded interviews were manually transcribed verbatim by the first author and checked alongside the audio-recordings for accuracy.

Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was undertaken based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) model as well as Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) adapted form of constant comparison method. Step one involved the first author becoming an expert on the content of the data by listening to the audio-recordings and transcribing them, as well as reading and rereading the transcripts. From this process, initial codes and themes that were identified in the data and, through the process of constant comparison (comparing passages of text that were seen as highlighting a theme), were further refined. After the themes were identified, a rule was created, whereby the passages of text coded as belonging under a theme were compared and if they were too dissimilar, they were recoded and grouped under a different theme. This coding and classification process was completed numerous times as the data were shaped into coherent themes. It should be noted, however, that the overarching themes were partly shaped by the research aims and questions as well as by reading in the field.

Findings

Definition

When asked for their understandings of the term, diversity, each participant gave a different answer. For instance, "disability" (P2, in the context of their current work focus), "I am still confused about the word" (P1), a "Pākehā perspective" (P3) and "uniqueness" (P4). Moreover, two participants explained that they looked up the word before coming and another explained how she was confused about its meaning. One participant incorporated her own understandings of diverse identities

into her own interview responses and asked why people think Māori, gay, and even European people are diverse. She also questioned whether it was “okay with [these people] that they are considered diverse?” (P1).

Numerous terms were used to describe the forms of diversity the participants engaged with in their practice. These included “elderly” (P2), “mental health [consumers]” (P1, P2, P3, P4), “lesbian” (P1), “faith” (P2, P4), “age”, “ability”, “two parent families”, “single unemployed”, “transgender” and “cultural”. The participants questioned if diversity was “political” (P3), “politically correct” (P1, P2), “about funding” (P1), or “caused harm” (P1). One participant questioned whether the term was limitless (P2), while another said the word was “code for anyone who is not Pākehā” (P3).

Social work “basics”

When the participants were discussing what informed their practice when working with diversity they named interpersonal skills, referred to as fundamental social work skills, including “empathy” (P1, P2, P3, P4), “rapport” (P1, P2, P4), listening” (P1, P2, P3, P4), “trust” (P3, P4), “relationship[s]” (P1, P2, P3, P4), “empowerment” (P2, P3), “[social work] role” (P2, P4), “client centred frameworks” (P2) and “respect” (P1, P2, P3, P4). Two participants spoke about how the social work role informed their work with diversity, for instance, Participant 2 maintained that, at the start of a social work relationship, she and her team are “not thinking about diversity at all”. Instead, she was informed by her team, medical aspects related to her organisation’s service, the person’s issues, and social work concerns. She and participants 1 and 3 spoke about being upfront about their role as a social worker, and the services that can be provided, “regardless of the diversity” of the service user.

Participant 3 was upfront about her social work role with service users due to her immersion in Asian “ways of being” and languages. She stated that Asian norms meant she “hold[s]” and “claim[s]” the social work role, and instead of asking what service users want, she offers choices of services, which is at odds with “Pākehā ways of working”; however, it helped build the relationship and ensured the productivity of the relationship in the long term.

One participant said that she was informed by personal/professional values that aimed to support service users with achieving their goals. Two participants said they tried to be on the same level as service users instead of taking an “elevated” position (P4). Participant 1 said this in relation to working with Māori, while another said she was aiming to achieve “engagement, rapport, no signs of discrimination or unease, and to be a genuine person” in her practice with diversity. Participants 2 and 4 stated that, when working with Māori, they knew the “basics” of respecting culture. Participant 1 gave examples, such as ensuring Māori whānau know about Māori providers; removing her shoes; being mindful that she is entering their home and that whānau will likely be present; and being open to karakia.

Participant 2 reported how listening informed her practice and gave the example of working with people with learning disabilities. She acknowledged that she had prior prejudices about the “diversity [the participant] comes with” but listening to the person with a disability reduced her prejudices so she could hear what is being said.

Family upbringing and influence

All participants said that family values informed their social work practice with diversity. For instance, participant one described how she was brought up with a mother who was socially minded, interested in social justice, and described how she

had discussions about social issues with her mother. She described growing up as a Pākehā in a Māori community where her parents looked out for the “underdog”, and she learned to “treat people as people”. In the interview, this participant stated that she was confused about diversity because her practice is underpinned by this belief that all people should be treated as people regardless of diversity. She also stated that when she moved to a Pākehā community she was treated as diverse and/or different because she looked and acted differently. She learned from this experience not to look to their colour or sexuality/gender diversity.

Another participant (P3) stated that social justice was a family topic and a part of her. She said the nation’s questioning of “why things were” (from the 1970s to 1990s as seen by the Springbok tour protests and so on) influenced her social justice focus when working with diversity. Participant 2 said her sister learned te reo Māori and she, in turn, learned from her. She described living in other countries, learning about the culture, and that becoming proficient in many languages, informed her practice with diversity.

The remaining participant said she had a “chronically legalistic” upbringing and was expected to “fit in a box” (P4). She said her childhood experiences and later personal relationship with God informed her understanding of diversity as uniqueness, and that the source of the definition for her is Psalm 139 from the *Bible*. She said that “God made us all unique” and this belief informs her practice with diversity and her passion to help others thrive in their uniqueness. The participant stated that she experienced racism in her family of origin, which contrasted with the messages about how she was meant to behave. She illustrated this with an example of a Christian song, “Red and yellow, black and white all are precious in His sight”. She said she “screamed rebellion” at this racism and was ashamed of her family who were anti-Māori.

Like this participant, two others said they had a religious upbringing and reflected on how their upbringing informed their practice with diversity. One said she had a Catholic upbringing that provided strong social justice values that were discussed at home and these constant messages about helping and social justice informed her social work practice. The remaining participant was brought up in a non-religious environment and as such, she learned how to be different in distinct contexts because of her family’s religion. She described how the ability to change informed her work with diversity as she drew from different parts of herself according to the service-user she was with. This participant said she was treated differently by Protestant children because of her Catholic uniform, which taught her how other people can act on the wrong information about difference.

Foundations of social work practice

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

All participants were asked if, and how, te Tiriti o Waitangi, social work education, and self-awareness and reflection, informed their practice with diversity. Two participants said te Tiriti o Waitangi is the “founding document” (P2, P4) of Aotearoa New Zealand and therefore, bicultural frameworks should guide the way for social work practice in multicultural Aotearoa. Of these, one participant said that biculturalism means “letting go of taken for granted ways” (P2) and that it provides better practice for diversity. The second said people need to “engage deeply with one form of difference” (P3) to know what difference is. She stated in Aotearoa, engagement should be with te ao Māori to break down the “stranglehold that Pākehā norms have on our profession” (P3) and open social workers up to diversity.

Another participant said te Tiriti o Waitangi is “about respect and...acceptance” in her practice and she added that working with Māori service users is “not a biggy” (P4). She also said that this respect and acceptance

applies to working with Māori and all people alike. Later, she stated “we” (although not specifying who “we” referred to) work with numbers and are therefore in conflict with uniqueness (her definition of diversity) and respect. She said respect underpins te Tiriti, and that if “they don’t acknowledge it and... have to legislate it” then that is not respect.

Social work education

When asked if social work education informed their practice and/or skills working with diversity, one participant said yes, it “helped to frame...reframe” and “sense about what [I am] thinking” (P4), while another said it “sharpened me up” (P2), that is, her existing life-experience skills. The second participant went on to explain that she knew how to listen before social work schooling but learned about the “mechanics” of listening through her social work education. However, another participant said “no” because her social work school held a “presumption that people of some cultures have religious faith which, I think is quite othering and off-putting” (P3). She said it was particularly off-putting because this understanding was at odds with Asian culture/s. She said there was poor emphasis on what diversity meant and especially when working with people from diverse backgrounds and when drawing on cultural knowledge in their courses. She stated that social work education tries to teach about diversity and learning from clients, but that there is “a laziness in that” (P3). She went on to explain that anyone from a particular culture does not say “I’m diverse”, but says, for example, “I’m Samoan” (P3). She said there are no shortcuts, and social workers must learn about diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Reflection

The participants were asked to provide examples of what informed them of work with diversity. One participant replied, “What informs me?...It is my Christian belief and my belief in the uniqueness of the

individual ...[this belief] gives permission to everybody and anyone” (P4). Participant 2 questioned what informed her engagement with diversity, but ended with an example of how she did engage:

It is listening and hearing what is happening for that person, where the issues might be and...exploring those... And again, that can be as diverse as anything because...I was with a couple today in their 80s and this gentleman had had a stroke 17 years ago, but he has now become more frail and his wife was in her 80s...if I had gone in assuming that she [was] not coping because of his disabilities or frailty...and assumed that [then] I would not have heard what she was saying. (P2)

Participant 1, who was confused about the meaning of diversity, explained how she approaches diversity in practice, “I wouldn’t necessarily think ‘oh shit ... why they are lesbian?’ ...I just see them as who they are, you know, women, men” (P1).

All participants also thought about their practice experiences of engagement with diversity *as* they discussed the experiences. Two participants shared thoughts about their own position in the practice example. For instance, after sharing an experience of burnout in her practice, Participant 1 said, “I suppose my value was that these other people needed social work input a lot more than this side needed it. The well-off side just seemed to want to chit chat...that might be something I need to work on.” Another participant reported how she had not thought about diversity in multidisciplinary teams before the interview and paused during the interview to reflect.

Sometimes we might be working with that person, and you have the rest of the team saying “no this, this and this” and other times you might not. So...we have boundaries within that, and it is about safety, so how far do I go as a social worker in that safety argument?...So,

there is a responsibility within that as well [pause]. I hadn't thought of it like that, but we do have to be responsible. (P2)

organisations...and so over time people can't bring difference into the space, which means it stays white. (P3)

Challenges to diversity

All participants expressed concern about how their current or past employment organisation catered for the diversity of service users. For example, after noting that student social workers were recruited only from mainstream universities in her organisation, Participant 2 endeavoured to identify why. She wanted to ensure that new social workers were bringing different models and ways of working that were "not squashed...especially for Māori social workers working in health". Another participant said that as it was her role as a social worker to challenge her organisation; however, she acknowledged that she had to "choose her battles" (P1). She gave an example of how she challenged her organisation's referral system and found alternative ways to accommodate people in need.

....someone might have a history of bipolar, the team would freak... "Oh they are mental health, they're mental health". So, these people who were diverse, were put into that mental health category... if it weren't for me fighting for them and getting a lot of them in the backdoor because it wasn't a mental health issue. It was a past history of it. (P1)

Participant 3 described her perception that organisations expect social workers to be "white" at work, but authentically "other" when engaging with clients. She stated that this expectation placed stress on workers:

So the expectation that...puts on me is that in my relationship with Pākehā colleagues, I will be 100% Pākehā and yet I will turn around and be 100% [pause] right in how I deal with this person... Making that transition all the time is exhausting so I think that the pressure on to people that bring diversity into our

Discussion

Definitions

As stated previously, practising with diversity is one of the core social work competencies; however, the participants seldom used the term and when they did, they used it without a clear definition and with suspicion. The social workers in this research could not define diversity. They framed diversity as belonging to different "backgrounds" (P1), having "different ways of being" (P3), "[people] who cannot speak English" (P3), "uniqueness" (P4) and even, "individuality" (P4). The term was used to denote individuals, groups, work practices, people's backgrounds, their experiences, a client's pace of speaking, socio-political and organisational conditions, and to refer to themselves and their upbringing. Such a finding supports other studies that have found the term is problematic and generally goes unexamined (Featherstone, 2009; Sinclair & Evans, 2015).

These social workers' understandings of diversity were reflected upon as constructed through their interactions during their formative years (e.g., the only Pākehā in a predominantly Māori village or being teased for being Catholic). Through these reflections on their own personal experiences, they tended to frame diversity within the limitations of social identity categories (e.g., ethnicity and religion). This, in turn, glosses over the complexity and fluidity of identities and runs a risk of promoting the notion that there is some fixed identity underpinning these categories (Kelly et al., 2020). Identifying others as Māori also narrows identity and plays to political ideologies that assume to know what Māori is (Hetaraka, 2019). Critical approaches to diversity problematise fixed categories of identity and object to a homogeneous or microlevel focus

(e.g., self-reflection) on diversity as meaningful. Instead, critical approaches centre on the fluid and contextual nature of identity and structural power analysis (Kelly et al., 2020). What is needed is a more thorough understanding of how societal forces come to construct some factors / identities and practices as the norm and others as diverse or different (Southwick & Polaschek, 2014). It is therefore necessary to unravel how the term diversity itself is utilised and understood in social work education, policy, and practice.

Education and the fundamentals of social work

To produce competent practitioners, it is essential that social work education effectively teaches diversity (IASSW, 2020; Olcoñ et al., 2020; SWRB, 2021). Educators' comfort and competence when teaching diversity are pivotal in students' understandings and practices with diverse service-users (Saunders et al., 2015; Walker, 2012). Consequently, educators need to reflect on, develop their own practice, and their comfort with teaching diversity. Furthermore, institutional barriers preventing tutors from teaching about various diverse populations also need to be identified and remedied (Lenette, 2014; Saunders et al., 2015).

The use of reflection in social work practice is necessary when engaging with diversity (Payne, 2020; SWRB, 2021). Awareness of one's own cultural, gender, sexuality and other biases are necessary for effective social work practice (Lenette, 2014; Pack & Brown, 2017; Testa, 2017). We suggest that, even more important, is critical analysis of the term, utilising critical and post-structuralist theoretical frameworks. The participants' lack of critical reflection through use of conceptual or theoretical frameworks, on the impact of formative experience with diversity raises questions about how far their education has prepared them for critically understanding and practising with diverse service users.

Social work values such as acceptance, respect, genuine interest, and patience were identified as central in the participants' developing relationships with diverse service-users (Adelowo et al., 2016; Danso, 2016; Lenette, 2014; Stirling et al., 2010; Testa, 2017). All the participants were also aware of, and spoke against, structural inequalities relating to diversity (Jeyasingham, 2012; Olcoñ et al., 2020). Of these, three offered a strong critique of the "white" nature of the term diversity, in which they stated their understandings were embedded. It is suggested that exploration of white privilege, relational space and intersectionality would deepen critique of practitioner engagement with diversity and Māori (Boulton & Cvitanovic, 2021; Hobbs et al., 2019; Stenhouse, 2021).

These social workers identified that the knowledge of te Tiriti gained in their education did support them in their engagement with diversity on an interpersonal level; however, they could not seem to connect this with understandings or practice with diversity (McNabb, 2019; Walker, 2012). According to Walker (2012), often social worker graduates may not know how to take their knowledge of te Tiriti and embed a bicultural approach in practice. Educators can be tasked to teach about biculturalism and other concepts they do not have sufficient knowledge of or are comfortable to teach (Hetaraka, 2019; McNabb, 2019). We suggest that social workers may also be ill equipped to also connect this knowledge with diversity.

Culture, te Tiriti o Waitangi, and social justice

Research studies have highlighted how social workers either align themselves (or not) with the backgrounds and values of culturally diverse service users (Testa, 2017). This was evident in this study when one participant stated that she adapted herself to meet diverse service-users' needs and utilised her knowledge of Asian cultures and language in her practice. However, some culturally

diverse social workers have maintained that, when interacting with an unfamiliar culture, other social workers should position themselves from a standpoint of “not knowing” (Testa, 2017). Modern social work practice also stresses learning from the client, that is, listening and giving prominence to the client’s unique story (Johnson & Munch, 2009). Three participants reported learning from their service-users and disclosing personal information only once they had deemed that the disclosure would support relationship building (Testa, 2017).

Based on their experiences of social work education, reading of literature, as well as student feedback on engagement with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, Pack and Brown (2017) maintained that centring practice on service user’s worldview is an essential requirement for practice with diversity. The intention to give minority groups space to claim their own self-defined “reality or state” (Southwick & Polaschek, 2014, p. 249) has been framed as central to effective, culturally diverse practice. Results of this study show that a desire to advocate for the right to self-determine how one lives also informed the participants’ practice with diversity.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi should underpin social workers’ practice with diversity and the dominant/subordinate power relationships arising from Aotearoa’s colonial history need to be recognised (Hetaraka, 2019; Richardson, 2010; Southwick & Polaschek, 2014; Walker, 2012). The participants spoke about the rights of Māori service-users and their own responsibilities as practitioners under te Tiriti to respect Māori, while one stated that te Ao Māori should be included in all social work practice. Nevertheless, most failed to report whether they included significant *te reo* or *tikanga* in their practice, which could be seen as a signifier of a bicultural approach (although they may have).

Practitioners need to recognise that dominant societal groups, and the subsequent narratives these groups produce, serve to perpetuate

power inequities (Stenhouse, 2020). Social workers need to provide “analysis of the social identities that produce oppression on a societal level” (Dominelli, 2002, cited in Pack & Brown, 2017, p. 113). In this study, three participants evidenced this by critiquing diversity as a Pākehā term that is placed on those who do not conform to this ideal. Such a finding supports many studies that focus on how dominant societal groups label others as diverse which, in turn, constructs these people as *other* to their taken for granted or dominant position (Sinclair & Evans, 2015; Pack & Brown, 2017; Richardson, 2010; Southwick & Polaschek, 2014).

Discourses of social justice, human rights and equity were also evident in the participants’ accounts. According to Craig (2002), social justice is the pursuit of fairness and equality, a meeting of basic human needs and the acceptance of diversity. This can be seen by the participant who stated that the removal of funding from one client was a breach of their human rights and self-determination.

Organisational barriers to practising with diversity

The increasingly diverse and complex environments social service practitioners work in presents challenges for organisations and practitioners alike (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Often social service practitioners have trouble expressing their values within an organisation that adheres to clear operating priorities that differ from their own morals and beliefs (Fook & Gardner, 2007). The hierarchical structures and inflexible processes within organisations often cause practitioners frustration, disillusionment, and premature exiting of employment (Pack & Brown, 2017). In this study, participants also reported that they felt constrained by their employer to engage in effective social work practice with diversity and address such macro aspects as the “stranglehold [of] Pākehā norms” (p. 3) in their organisation as well as society in general. More research is needed on the nature of the relationship

between social workers' personal values, their practice with diversity, and employer organisational requirements that may hinder their practice with diversity.

Evaluating the study

This small master's study adds to the research base reporting on social workers' understandings of diversity and their work with diversity in practice. This study was a snapshot of what informs social workers' engagement with diversity and did not require participants to self-identify as diverse. This may be seen as a limitation; however, the participant profile of this study does provide insight into how these particular European social workers engaged with diversity at the time of the research. Areas to improve te Tiriti based practice have been identified. Future studies exploring diversity in social work practice in an Aotearoa New Zealand context should endeavour to seek the experiences of Māori social workers, and those who self-identify as diverse in relation to sexuality, gender, ethnicity and dis/ability, amongst others.

Conclusion

The term *diversity* has been critiqued as "hollow" (Featherstone, 2009; Kelly et al., 2020), arising out of the neoliberal business management models of the 1980s. A small sample of experienced social workers identified how the word is ambiguous and warrants investigation by the social work profession. The findings of this research show that for these social workers, diversity only exists in the discursive; and it gets in the way of practice. While the social workers in this research also acknowledged the importance of education and practice with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, they could not seem to make a connection between this knowledge and the term diversity and its associated practices. Individualistic assumptions about identity through a social identity lens tend to prevail. These assumptions can impact practice and need to be explored. The process of self-reflection is fundamental

to social work competencies, obliging practitioners to be cognisant of self and explore their personal knowledge, values, and beliefs. That this was the first time the experienced social workers had reflected on the term and how it impacted on their practice is possibly surprising. Therefore, the authors suggest that attempts to define diversity for the purposes of competency frameworks is considered more critically and the education curriculum and advocacy has a role to play in this.

Social work education would benefit from providing critical theoretical and conceptual frameworks for depth of understanding of what diversity is and how to practise with it. Educators can stress the importance of self-reflection in teaching as it is a critical underpinning competency, but without real critical analysis of the term diversity (where it came from, who defines it and why) reflection may be inadequate for working with diversity. Aotearoa New Zealand social work education must also engage in robust critical analysis of monocultural, hegemonic discourse and power relationships through te Tiriti frameworks to prepare all students for effective practice with diversity in a bicultural context. Is it possible that the vagueness of *diversity* is just another form of such discourse?

Organisational challenges are also attributed with hindering practitioners' work with diversity. Professional bodies need to investigate how they can support members who face such challenges in their work to better meet the needs of their diverse client base. We also suggest that SWRB explore more analytically critical and flexible use of the term diversity in line with the profession's commitment to decolonised practice. In addition, competency requirements to work with diversity would benefit from the addition of the critique of structural inequality and inequity as needed skills alongside self-awareness and personal reflection.

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