

# Stepping into the unknown: Reflections and learnings from the journey from social worker to researcher

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## ABSTRACT

Whilst social workers have skills and experiences that could be well suited to a research environment, moving from frontline social work to research can be daunting. Drawing from my own journey, I reflect on initial misconceptions and provide potential reflection points for others interested in undertaking research. I also suggest a selection of resources which may be relevant to social workers. By sharing my experiences, I offer an example of a journey from social worker to researcher. Future opportunities to expand this conversation are necessary and could be pursued by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers.

**KEYWORDS:** Social work; practitioner-researcher; PhD journey; research; reflection

Taking the step from frontline social work to research can be an unfamiliar and daunting process, especially for those with limited access to people who have worked in a research environment. Reflective papers by social workers turned researchers can offer a good starting point, although they are limited in number. Exceptions to this include the work of Cleaver (2020) and Moyle (2016), who share their perspectives as Indigenous Māori researchers within Aotearoa New Zealand. Overseas experiences from Australia and Ireland are offered by Brydon and Fleming (2011) and Lotty (2021) respectively. These authors provide encouragement and first-hand insights to others on undertaking Master's degree or PhD research. Having recently celebrated the award of my own PhD, I take the opportunity to build on this existing knowledge by reflecting on the *entire* process of becoming a researcher. This article outlines, thereby, my journey from a social work undergraduate to a PhD degree. I start by providing some personal context before

sharing the seven misconceptions I had about research. Each misconception focuses on my own experiences and provides some reflection points based on my learnings. I finish with some useful websites for further information. By writing this paper, I hope to contribute another resource for social workers who are considering starting (or continuing) their own research journeys.

## My background and personal journey

Before I share my own research journey, it is important to recognise that the current dominant model of academic research is based on an Eurocentric, colonial, neoliberal knowledge system and practices including in Aotearoa New Zealand (McAllister et al., 2022; Pacific Early Career Researchers Collective et al., 2022). These structures continue to affect disproportionately the opportunities and experiences of under-represented groups, such as Indigenous and Pacific peoples. Considering my own cultural

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identity as outlined later, I had privileges which cannot be taken for granted (for example, I was never questioned about why and how I got admission into university).

I would like to acknowledge who I am and the context in which my research journey was undertaken. I am a female, white Pākehā and the first generation in my family to attend university. I began my undergraduate social work degree several years after finishing school and returned to postgraduate studies years after working as a social worker. Hence, the university considered me as a 'first generation' and 'mature' student. To enable fair access and participation in higher education, many universities recognise potential challenges such as issues around academic preparedness and work pressures and offer specific support to navigate the academic environment.

When I finished my social work undergraduate degree, I entered the workforce without any research skills. I worked as a social worker for over a decade. During this time, I was involved in a practice-based research project and built on my limited research experience by completing a Master's degree. I continued to practise social work until I went on to do a PhD. So, whilst academic research is not the only way to develop your research interest and skills, my journey mainly took place within universities which is reflected by my experiences and learnings.

I strongly believe that social workers bring professional knowledge, skills and experiences which are useful and highly relevant within a research environment. Social work is based on building trusting relationships with different people and communities, working with their strengths, dealing with often complex situations, facilitating societal change, and improving lives. However, the journey from social worker to researcher is often not straightforward. Until I began my Master's degree, I had never considered moving into research for reasons which I will discuss in this paper. I fell into research, supported by encouraging supervisors who I was fortunate to meet at the right time. Hence, this article

does not offer *the* right way, but an example of undertaking such journey.

### Personal misconceptions

International evidence shows that social workers recognise conducting research as an opportunity for reflecting and improving their practice (Vincent & Hamilton, 2021), or taking part in a collaborative, real-life project to create change (Chhetry et al., 2022). However, research uptake amongst social workers can be hindered by, for example, a lack of confidence and time constraints due to a high workload (Beddoe, 2011; Donley & Moon, 2021; Wakefield et al., 2022). Several personal misconceptions impacted my journey from social worker to researcher. I now unpick these misconceptions step by step and include reflection points to facilitate thinking and decision making processes.

#### ***Misconception 1: research is for a few selected social workers***

The curriculum of my social work qualifying degree did not emphasise learning research skills. Where research was discussed, a focus was placed on *numbers*, with qualitative research being not mentioned at all. Role models in the form of social work researchers were also missing. As a result, I finished my degree without any research skills or understanding of its potential for social workers. I saw research as something for other people.

I gained hands-on experience with the research process during my first social work position. My team undertook a survey, which was led by an experienced social worker. My tasks included collecting questionnaires and data entry. This project was influential in securing funding for a new social work role. Whilst I enjoyed this new experience, I could not picture myself (as capable of) doing more research in the future, let alone leading research activities. Years later, I became interested in research after starting a role as a social worker within an interdisciplinary primary healthcare practice.

*Reflection points:* Research involves many stages and aspects, from planning a project, collecting data, to writing up and sharing the findings. Even if you are unsure whether you want to do research in the future, there are endless ways to develop valuable skills and experiences as part of your social work role. These include, but are not limited to, presenting social work data from your role, evaluating the process or impact of your work, presenting on social work topics to others at work, community events or professional forums, and networking for knowledge exchange or collaborative work projects. Another option you might want to consider is, for example, an Atlantic or Churchill Fellowship. These international fellowships foster partnerships and support research-related capacity-building by enabling people to undertake an intensive course or travel overseas. The aim is to bring about long-lasting connections and societal change.

### ***Misconception 2: academic writing is the most important communication skill for researchers***

I always assumed academic writing is an important skill for researchers to have. However, I never considered academic writing as one of my key strengths and believed that my other experiences, such as writing social work notes, were irrelevant in this context. This misconception proved to be wrong. I later found out that my published practice reflections helped me secure a PhD position.

During my PhD, I came across the competition “Images of Research”, which the university had advertised via email. This competition challenges postgraduate students to describe their research with a self-created, single image, accompanied by a 100-word description.

My reason to take part was simple: I wanted to bring awareness and enable discussions about a stigmatised long-term condition I had researched about. However, this also started me on an additional path of exploring illustration as a means to communicate my research more widely.

*Reflection points:* A key learning for me was that academic writing can be learned. Developing this skill takes practice and discipline for most people. Publishing the work from your summer research scholarship or your research Master’s is a great opportunity to gain practice in academic writing. You can further hone your skills by asking for regular, constructive feedback. Professional development activities also offer an avenue for learning. For example, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) recently hosted a webinar about writing for publication. There are three further important learnings I took from my supervisors which have helped me improve my writing: 1) keep in mind who you are writing for; 2) tell a story with your data; and 3) use plain language.

Academic writing, however, is just one part of the bigger picture. Researchers need to be able to communicate (complex) information to a range of different audiences. Writing journal publications and preparing conference presentations may be important, but so is communicating beyond academic settings. Using diverse approaches ensures that research is accessible, inclusive and relevant. So, think about the different ways you could build up your experiences, reaching and engaging a range of people in different contexts. Examples include writing a blog or viewpoint; sharing practice-informed reflections (Eketone, 2016); participating in community events or public engagement activities such as Pint of Science; and using art/traditional approaches such as animation, comics, dance, photography, music, poetry, stitching, storytelling, or theatre (which can lead to important collaborations).

### ***Misconception 3: research training options are not flexible***

I started my part-time Master’s degree as a way to meet some of my professional development requirements whilst working full time as a social worker. Initially, I chose

to undertake a coursework programme instead of doing a postgraduate degree by research. This format felt familiar and more achievable to me due to its clear course structure with written assignments, presentations and set attendance dates during study terms. Additionally, I did not know how I could manage a research project due to my full-time job and was not sure how to meet supervisors whilst living in a different part of the country, far from the university. I was also convinced that I did not have the skills needed to do a Master's by research.

I moved from a coursework to a research Master's, which was prompted by my health social work course. As part of the course, I had to undertake and present a literature review on a topic of my choice. My review focused on the integration of social workers into primary healthcare practices. This topic was inspired by my own role at that time; working in primary healthcare I regularly encountered healthcare colleagues and social workers with little understanding of this specific role. The assignment enabled me to explore the untold history of these roles and to provide a more *evidence-informed* approach to my own work. Whilst I increasingly thought that this could be an important research topic, I did not consider undertaking further research on this myself. However, my lecturer suggested that I move to the research pathway to write my dissertation on this topic (Doebel et al., 2017). She then became my research supervisor, and suggested her healthcare colleague as co-supervisor. We discussed my concerns and found adequate solutions. I was also fortunate that my past employer granted me a few study hours for undertaking the research interviews during my working week.

*Reflection points:* There can be various (multiple) barriers for social workers considering taking up research. You might be concerned about becoming a mature, or distance, research student, or fitting research around caring responsibilities, work and

other commitments in the community. Whatever your own concern(s) and barrier(s) are, I encourage you to discuss these with potential supervisors and members of staff, including support services at the university, as well as your employer. There has been an increasing understanding, partly driven by the Covid-19 pandemic, about the different needs and circumstances of research students. This knowledge has brought a shift towards providing more flexibility and support in addressing these needs. It is also worthwhile to remember that your potential supervisor(s) may have similar life experiences or understand that you bring important skills and new perspectives.

#### ***Misconception 4: social workers need to fund their own research training***

Working full time as social worker whilst conducting my research part time was the best solution for me. I was lucky that my past employer provided good professional development support which helped me to partly finance my degree. However, I decided after this experience that I wanted to have the ability to focus fully on my research and hence decided that I would only do a PhD if I could find appropriate funding. Years later when I started looking into PhD opportunities, I secured a competitive overseas scholarship for a PhD project.

*Reflection points:* Undertaking postgraduate research has financial impacts which constitutes a genuine concern for many and raises challenges that need to be navigated. Part of this process is to think about financial, professional, caregiving and other commitments when considering options around whether to embark on research training, when, and through what route.

There are various ways to fund your research journey, each with their own benefits and challenges. I will focus here on paid scholarship and employment opportunities going beyond the usual work–study route and professional development support from employers.

Universities offer various postgraduate scholarships, including summer research, Master's and PhD scholarships. They often provide mainstream and targeted funding for students including from Māori, Pacific, refugee and other under-represented communities to widen access for everyone. Further financial support opportunities may come from sources such as the Health Research Council as well as Māori or iwi-based organisations.

You can extend your university searches to different PhD-related websites which advertise funded research projects across the world. Securing funding is nonetheless a challenge and even a full scholarship can make for a difficult financial situation (Soar et al., 2022). You may also face tough decisions as to a potential relocation as your options can widen substantially if you are able to consider going overseas. There are academic fellowships which enable you to undertake fully funded research training within your existing social work employment. Whilst these paid dual social work–research roles are relatively rare within social work, they can often be found within healthcare (although opportunities vary among professional groups). However, there is an increasing recognition to support social workers to be part of advancing important research. For example, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) offers paid pre-doctoral and PhD fellowships for social workers based in social and healthcare in the United Kingdom (UK). In comparison, some countries, such as Norway, offer PhD positions in which students are employed as research fellows and paid a full-time salary. In these roles, students often undertake their PhD project and carry some teaching responsibilities.

#### ***Misconception 5: social workers can only do research on social work topics***

After graduating with my Master's by research, I knew that I wanted to do a PhD at some stage to further my interest and skills

in research. I was keen on undertaking a project within a healthcare or health services research field. This decision was based on three reasons: first, I enjoyed working within mental health and primary healthcare settings; secondly, I believed (and continue to do so) that social workers can offer important new perspectives, knowledge and skills which can improve healthcare delivery for all people (and not only those who access (mental) health social work support). Indeed, my hope was to create a positive impact at a system level. Finally, I felt that this choice would open up more research/work opportunities within healthcare and social work in the future.

Up until this point, I had not met a single social worker with a PhD undertaken in a discipline outside of social work and did not know whether such opportunities were available. In searching for funded PhD positions, I mainly found laboratory-based health sciences scholarships. Nevertheless, over time I found additional opportunities, including my own PhD project.

*Reflection points:* Sharing my experience is by no means a call to skip social work research but rather an attempt to show the wide range of (funded) opportunities available. There is also, increasingly, the option to have supervisors from different professional disciplines. So, talk to specific departments, researchers or professionals working in the field. Most importantly, you will be able to develop professionally and gain relevant experiences independent of your decision to undertake research within or beyond social work.

#### ***Misconception 6: social workers need to have their own research idea***

Before I started looking into PhD opportunities, I always thought that I would have to have my own research idea, as I had for my Master's. I discovered a PhD-related website which advertised (funded) project ideas during my internet searches. These proposals are conceived by researchers who



will supervise future students to undertake this work. Whilst some people might have an idea in mind or prefer to develop their own PhD idea, these advertised projects are not a shortcut and may be worth considering. They have their own benefits and challenges. Luckily, I was able to find one I considered a perfect match to my interests and experiences. I undertook my PhD as part of a larger programme of work called “Patient-centred Care for Fibromyalgia: New pathway Design” (PACFiND) (Doebel et al., 2020; Doebel et al., 2021). The project gave me the opportunity to use my (health) social work experiences to move forward thinking around community-based healthcare provision for a common, but often stigmatised, long-term pain condition.

*Reflection points:* If you consider a proposed PhD project, clarify with the supervisors if there is scope to shape and develop the project to your interests and experiences. As an anecdote: healthcare provision is complex, which is a reason why many avoid doing such research as my PhD supervisor once told me. Hence, he welcomed getting a social worker because “social work is all about complexity” (G. J. Macfarlane, personal communication, May 2019). There is interest from other research fields in social workers joining their teams.

### **Misconception 7: doing research means loss of connection to people and communities**

I was able to keep working closely with people and communities during my research in two different ways. Whilst I only focused on social work and healthcare professionals for my research Master’s, I continued working as a social worker. This situation, whilst out of financial necessity, enabled me to continue a role I enjoyed. The situation changed for my PhD. This time I had a full scholarship and my research focused solely on people with fibromyalgia. Whilst I stopped my frontline social work, I continued to work with people and communities, albeit in a different capacity.

I worked both with research participants and *patient partners* (Doebel, 2021). The term patient partner refers to members of the public (although there are a range of terms). They are not participants, but people with lived experience—in this project—of fibromyalgia who are involved throughout the research and in various capacities. The opportunity to work with patient partners was one of my key motivations to apply for the funded project. Additionally, I participated in public engagement activities such as Soapbox Science and visited a long-term pain support group to share my research more widely.

*Reflection points:* Generally, you work in a different though important capacity when you undertake research with people and communities. It is crucial, nonetheless, to remember that research has often meant that something was *done to* people or communities, potentially with grave consequences; especially when focusing on Indigenous populations or groups who have been historically marginalised. However, Indigenous approaches and frameworks (Smith, 2021), participatory action research (Flanagan, 2020), co-production, and patient and public involvement (PPI) (National Institute for Health Research, 2021) have opened conversations on power imbalances in research—although there is still a long way to go. These approaches facilitate varied levels of involvement of people with lived experience and communities in research. Such research also recognises people’s expertise and is grounded in their needs. Importantly, people and communities are enabled to create their own solutions or develop more appropriate cultural models/theories.

### **The next step**

Having finished my PhD, I now work in mental health promotion and suicide prevention. The new role enables me to use my diverse knowledge, skills and experiences, including research.

*Reflection points:* The decisions surrounding your research journey do not stop after

finishing a PhD. Questions continue—such as applying for a postdoctoral fellowship, conducting research or other work outside of an academic setting, or returning to social work. It might be that you are able to follow a blended work model. As outlined throughout the article, there are many different ways of undertaking your research journey.

## Conclusion

In spite of the challenges involved, moving from social work to research can be a rewarding process. Social workers have much to contribute to research and facilitating research in social work is key to advancing knowledge and practice in a range of areas. This article contributes to the limited published work on research experiences by social workers, offering a starting point for others. I hope that sharing my personal misconceptions and experiences provides encouraging and useful reflections for others thinking about starting (or continuing) their own research journeys. The ANZASW could provide a valuable platform for encouragement, information, exchange of experiences, and discussion on the outlined issues and opportunities outside of academia (for example, via community events or webinars) to make this more accessible, especially for those (currently) not engaged in academic settings.

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## Further information

There are many opportunities across the world which can enable social workers to gain research skills and experiences. I provide a small selection of resources here:

### *Atlantic Fellowship*

Seven programmes with different foci are available across the world (<https://www.atlanticfellows.org/programs>). Melbourne offers an Indigenous-led social equity programme (<https://www.atlanticfellows.org/program/social-equity>).

### *Churchill Fellowship*

Aotearoa New Zealand: <https://www.wcmt.co.nz/>

Australia: <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au>

UK: <https://www.churchillfellowship.org>

### *Potential funding opportunities*

Worldwide: <https://www.findaphd.com>

Aotearoa New Zealand:

<https://www.hrc.govt.nz/grants-funding/funding-opportunities>

<https://www.hrc.govt.nz/maori-health/funding-opportunities>

<https://www.hrc.govt.nz/pacific-health/funding-opportunities>

England:

<https://www.nihr.ac.uk/health-and-care-professionals/career-development/social-care-practitioners.htm>

### *Examples of social work research and/or journeys*

Podcast episode with Professor Jioji Ravulo speaking about his life including his research journey in Australia: <https://anchor.fm/2brownishgirls/episodes/S3-E11---Australias-First-Pasifika-Professor--Prof--Jioji-Ravulo-e1akitl>

Two social workers sharing their experiences in mental health research in the UK: <https://mentalhealthresearch.org.uk/case-studies/>

Podcast hosted by Ben Joseph in which he talks with social workers about their research in Australia: <https://swdiscoveries.com/>

*Public engagement activities*

Soapbox Science worldwide:  
<http://soapboxscience.org/>

Pint of Science:  
 Aotearoa New Zealand:  
<https://pintofscience.nz/>

Australia: <https://pintofscience.com.au/>  
 UK: <https://pintofscience.co.uk/>

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