

Dissent against “Definition debates” about Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This commentary dissents against definition debates. I argue that ongoing discussion about what social work is needs to find a common ground of recognition. Arguments about the bifurcation, demise or “end of social work” are challenged. Starting with the position that social work operates on a necessarily contested and contradictory space, the case is made for a shared definition of social work as a “mediator in the social”. To stand up as a foundational definition for the diversity of social work worldwide, “mediation in the social” as described by Philp (1979) requires important updates to fit the complex “socials” of the 21st century. This necessitates a shift from the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge as an add-on to expansively identifying indigenous knowledge as a constant that underpins social work internationally. This definition needs to be founded on shared values and assumptions that capture the essence of social work such as citizenship, relational practices, human rights and social justice as expressed in diverse cultural contexts worldwide.

Keywords: Social work; definitional debate; social work knowledge(s)

This commentary dissents against debates about the definition of social work. I acknowledge my own limitation as an academic from far West in the world. This commentary is intended to contribute to the rich and diverse ongoing dialogue and debates within national and international contexts.

First, some *constants* in social work that provide a beginning scaffolding are identified. This is followed by a critique of *definitional debates*. This leads to an argument to support “mediation in the social” (Philp, 1979) as a scaffold to underpin the diversity of forms of helping within different cultural contexts for social work. The need to problematise mediation in the social from its original iteration (Philp, 1979) to incorporate a global perspective that challenges *universalism* (Gray et al., 2016a, p. 261) is asserted. The importance of a commitment

to shared values shaped by culture, context, critical understanding of state–social work relations, use of authority and role of citizens in problem definition and resolution is emphasised.

Over the past decades, the critical knowledge base for social work educators, practitioners and students has progressed from closed academic paradigms to a vibrant, global body of knowledge. The battleground of opposing ideas is well beyond the traditional gladiatorial duels about social work paradigms (McGregor, 2019; Rojek, 1986). More nuanced critical understandings are available (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2018) based on current constants that scaffold how we theorise social work (McGregor, 2019). Greater potential exists to realise mutual learning through recognition of the diversity of forms of helping within different cultural contexts for social work (Gray et al., 2013;

AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL
WORK 34(3), 84–88.

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Gray et al., 2016b; Ruwhiu, 2019; Sewpaul, 2013).

Some constants are as follows. Knowledge that relies on academic theory only, long established, as “too far away from practice to understand its complexities” (Corrigan & Leonard, 1978, p. 1), is an inadequate starting point in social work education. Instead, citizenship approaches, recognition of Indigenous expertise and privileging of pathways to knowledge generated from practice and direct experience of those engaged with social work are foremost. Hegemonic, Western theory driven, dual-oriented positions are challenged by a decolonisation approach and a commitment to the democratisation of knowledge in, and for, social work. This implies mutual learning, respect and equal value rather than adapting or adding onto dominant Western approaches. Learning about social work worldwide and ensuring resources and opportunities for students to dialogue and debate within different contexts, should be basic expectations of social work education.

Realisation of these constants are often constrained because of external obstacles. Neoliberalism, marketisation of care services, discrimination, oppression, injustice and inequalities are such that social work finds itself in the paradoxical position that *investments in people* come with expectations of return in line with economic investments (Marthinsen 2019, p. 359). However, there are also internal obstacles such as the self-defeating *definitional debates*. These often focus on concerns about bifurcations, decline and death. Consider the following three illustrative examples about what social work is—from revolutionary, functionary and aspirational perspectives.

There are many excellent works on revolutionary, transformative and community social work practices to inform critical thinking and approaches (e.g., Iamamoto et al., 2021; Kamali & Jönsson, 2019; Sewpaul, 2013). However,

in dominant discourses of social work, the bifurcation of social work between *traditional* and *radical*, *individual* or *collective* or *critical* and *non-critical* is too stark and misleading (McGregor, 2019; McGregor & Millar, 2020) and oversimplified around individual (perceived traditional) and collective (perceived radical) discourses (McGregor, 2019). Transformative practice, from individual to collective practice, needs more in-depth mediation, as demonstrated, for example, in debates about balancing regulation and transformative bicultural social work in the professionalisation of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand (Hunt, 2016, 2017). Another obstacle set up with bifurcation is that, while often offering doable possibilities for practice from *outside* of the system (Mulally, 1993), the scope for transformational practice *inside* the system within a statutory context is less clear. Yet, it is here that the most contested and contradictory aspects of social work are mediated as reflected in national debates on social work—be it in Ireland, Aotearoa or many jurisdictions worldwide.

Another definitional problem relates to the thesis that social work is being diminished. Reflecting on social work in the UK and concerns about “Descent or dissent?” Parker (2020) expressed concern that UK social work, post-Brexit, is becoming parochial and less international. Social work in highly regulated contexts like the UK has led to regulators and politicians strongly influencing the very definition and prescription of social work. Such instrumental and reductionist approaches demand our dissent. Hyslop et al.’s (2018) review of the top papers read in this journal illustrates the range of critical practices refusing to allow such an instrumental (and destructive) construction of social work in Aotearoa:

A common theme of recent social policy critique—developed in response to policies of targeting, use of data and talk of social investment—is to shift the

discourse back to practices that are anti-oppressive, promote social justice and place the families and communities we work with at the centre of social work practice. (p. 1)

Another debate is about the *end of social work*, which arises at different points in time. For example, recently Maylea (2021) called for the end of social work because of an incoherent theory base, issues with professionalism, a history of abuse and an inability to respond to current challenges. Garrett (2021) responded to this paper to propose dissenting social work. Whelan (2022) added to the debates within both papers to argue that: “rather than dismantling the profession and before imagining a new social work paradigm, we would do well to examine how social work is currently defined and whether or not this definition is reflective of contemporary social work practice” (Whelan, 2022, p. 1168). While acknowledging that there is a place in the literature for definitional debates, he argued that the focus should come back to definitions that “more accurately describe what social work is now” (p. 1175).

This echoes the argument by Philp (1979), whom Whelan also refers to, regarding the distinctive nature of social work. Philp situated social work as a practice of *mediating in the social*, as others such as Parton (1991), Skehill (2004), Hyslop (2013, 2016) and McGregor and Dolan (2021) have considered. I would argue that many decades on from Philp, in a very different social context, this central role of mediation between complex objective and subjective forces holds firm. However, the form of knowledge we base this practice on needs to be based on shared values and assumptions that capture the essence of social work such as citizenship, relational practices, knowledge from Indigenous and community-based approaches, human rights and social justice as expressed in diverse contexts worldwide. There is an irrefutable link between many individual and family issues (e.g., child

welfare and neglect) and wider socio-economic factors (see, for example, Bywaters et al., 2018; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018) which must inform how we mediate the social from micro to macro levels.

Furthermore, we need to situate Philp (1979) in the context of time. While he referred to social workers *creating subjects*, in the present day, we talk about *creation with subjects* or citizens in line with a partnership and citizenship-oriented approach. While Philp referred mostly to academic knowledge, today, the centrality of knowledge generation from direct experience of citizens is key. In this, we need to prioritise diverse Indigenous populations who share common experiences of colonisation, discrimination and marginalisation (Sewpaul, 2013; Walsh-Tapiata, 2016). In addition, critical engagement of practitioners in mediating and explaining the complex and contradictory social is essential (Hyslop, 2013; 2016, McGregor & Dolan, 2021). Knowledge by social workers is mediated in specific social, economic and political contexts (Hyslop, 2013, 2016) and practices of research and knowledge production need to be decolonised (Eketone & Walker, 2013). Skills of mediating social and public policy are crucial (McGregor & Millar, 2020).

Mediation in the social as a definitional constant is particularly relevant to the dual mandate of regulation and support amid social contradiction (Hauss & Schulte, 2009). This socio-legal role and expertise needs to be more clearly asserted within the IFSW 2014 international definition of social work (McGregor & Dolan, 2021). We need to balance regulation with rights-based practice as opposed to seeing them as competing entities (Jones, 2014; McGregor, 2015). Social work is intrinsically connected to social protection, child protection and safeguarding and we cannot and should not, refute this core purpose. If we think we need to get away from “regulation” and the legal role, we are getting away from the fundamental role of social work as mediator

of support and protection. Instead, we need to ensure that regulatory practices of social protection and safeguarding are developed in participatory ways that mediate the social to: maximise protection from abuse, harm and trafficking; support and protect across the life course and promote fundamental rights to safety, justice and welfare.

Hyslop (2016) argued that “[I]t is the knowledge form of social work that sets it apart – and if this is ‘left behind’, so too will the rights and freedoms of the clients whom we serve” (2016, p. 34). The case is made here that mediation in the social has wide definitional adaptability to explain our complex practices and the social contexts they operate within. It is an overarching frame around which we can come together globally to reframe it, decolonise it, fight for it, work it out, complicate it and communicate it widely.

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