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The Place of Knowledge in Constructing Social Work Identity: Validating Vagueness

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Abstract

Social work, globally, has struggled persistently to justify itself as an academic or professional discipline. Its terrain is not the academic high ground, where principles and concomitant courses of action seem clear, but the domain of practice, where knowledge and actions are plural, ambiguous, situated and contested. A consequence of the diffuse nature of social work knowledge and practice is that workers can struggle to articulate what it is they do by comparison to other professions where knowledge can appear more bounded. In this article, we explore the impact of this on the profession's identity. The article is structured into three main sections: the first sets out some of social work's struggles with knowledge. We then introduce data from a Scottish study on the challenges social workers face to account for what they do. In the final section, we consider what this insecurity about a coherent knowledge base might mean for workers' professional identity.

Keywords: epistemology, knowledge, practice, professional identity, social work

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Introduction

Social work, as a field of practice and an academic discipline, occupies a persistently plural and conflicted space. It is a broad and diffuse field of activity, engaging with people across the lifespan (i.e. children, adolescents, adults and older people), with different social groups and communities (i.e. asylum seekers and refugees, people with disabilities and people who offend), and across an expanding proliferation of categories, specialisms and sub-specialisms (spanning, e.g. care, support and protection; physical and mental health, justice, group work and substance use). Social work's positioning is not just 'in between' people, groups and service areas; it is also positioned between the individual and state systems and structures, which introduces broader questions and conflicts regarding whose interests, needs and rights should take precedence in its practice. One consequence of this diversity is that debates persist regarding the profession's identity, purpose, methods and value (Moon, 2017). Such questions include and extend into debates about what kind of paradigm should guide theory for practice among a range of orientations, from subjective to objective, radical to regulatory (McGregor, 2019).

Fargion (2008) observes that competing representations of the profession and attempts to reconcile them are common across countries and cultures. Higgins *et al.* (2016), for example, describe a 'struggle for the heart, nature and future of social work', arising from a conflict of paradigms and different perceptions of what the profession is or ought to be in the early twenty-first century. Relatedly, Ioakimidis (2018) argues that identifying what is core in social work is one of the most urgent questions for the profession in the twenty-first century. While it is tempting to suppose that this is a particularly modern struggle, historical accounts of social work's emergence and evolution from the mid-nineteenth century onwards make clear that competing ideas about the mission and methods of social work are written into its origins and being (Foucault, 1980; McCulloch, 2018). For some, social work's plural and contested identity is amongst its many strengths, making it both distinctive and progressive (Webb, 2017). For others, its pluralities can make it difficult to assert a confident professional identity, particularly when embodied in increasingly regulated contexts of welfare retrenchment, public service reform and fiscal austerity (Grant *et al.*, 2022).

The difficulty in pinning down just what it is that social work is and does can lead to a sense of perpetual crisis. At an earlier point of 'crisis', less than two decades ago, Asquith *et al.* (2005) identified the source of this as 'mainly a matter of professional identity' and argued for social work to clarify its professional identity and its distinctiveness compared with other professions. Since Asquith *et al.* (2005) made this argument,

questions of social work's identity have attracted considerable attention, not least in [Webb's \(2017\)](#) edited volume on the subject.

What is professional identity and why is it important?

[Ibarra \(1999\)](#) summarises professional identity as the 'relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role'. Identity is important in fostering a sense of connection and belonging to a group ([Ashforth et al., 2008](#)). It also determines how individuals build and maintain a sense of themselves as distinct from others ([Oyserman et al., 2014](#)). In a professional context, the capacity to identify what is distinct about their profession in relation to others is posited to confer a sense of value among its members ([Elvey et al., 2013](#)) and enables practitioners to practise ethically, practically and with confidence ([Wilson et al., 2013](#)). Conversely, a lack of professional identity has been linked to poor retention in some professions ([Cornett et al., 2023](#)).

There is no clear definition of a social work professional identity ([Webb, 2017](#)); it is said to be subjective, reflexive, contextually dependent and socially constructed ([Zufferey, 2012](#)). We do, however, have some starting points. The International Federation of Social Work's global definition emphasises the profession's practice-based features and suggests that it borrows its knowledge base from a number of disciplines ([IFSW, 2014](#)). Values of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are widely regarded or at least claimed as its most distinctive features.

Social work has had to contend with societal and professional fluxes that have dichotomised and often polarised its approach and functions, for example, person–environment, science–art, technical–moral and care–control ([Gitterman, 2014](#)). External economic, social and political forces have been most influential in shaping the profession's identity, and several writers debate the impact of neoliberalism, new public management, and its attendant marketisation, bureaucratisation and managerialism on the profession ([Gray et al., 2015](#); [Ferguson et al., 2018](#), [Pascoe et al., 2023](#)). Social workers' understandings of their professional identities are also inextricably linked to various practice changes within their employing organisations ([Oliver, 2013](#)) and to their relationship with other professionals in increasingly integrated work environments ([Moon, 2017](#)). The landscape is further troubled by recent critical and radical perspectives ([Levin and Lieberman, 2019](#)) at the same time as younger generations of social workers appear to adopt increasingly de-politicised perspectives with a more individualised and controlling approach to clients ([Fenton, 2020](#); [Brandt et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, the emerging ideas from post-anthropocentric perspectives ([Bozalek and Pease, 2021](#)) open

a new front on matters of social work identity, which we recognise but cannot develop in this article.

Moon (2017) suggests that social work can better represent marginalised people when it can articulate its unique contribution. A sense of identity is also said to be important for the psychological well-being of those in the field (Beddoe *et al.*, 2019) and for professional socialisation—the internalisation of values, norms and performative rituals (Webb, 2017). It is also thought to support the retention of social workers in the workplace (Moorhead, 2021). An understanding and promotion of a sense of identity is therefore a rightful concern for a profession.

Our aim in the article is to contribute to the development of a more practical scholarship for social work, which might allow for richer understandings of professional identity and practice. We begin by giving an account of the connection of knowledge to professional identity. We then introduce interview data from a study of social workers' professional identity to consider how they account for what it is they do and the knowledge they draw on to do so. We use these accounts to discuss the impact on workers' professional identity and to consider ways in which social work education and practice might develop this.

Knowledge and professional identity

A central feature of a profession's identity, identified in early writings on professionalism, is its claims to a discrete knowledge base (Greenwood, 1957). More recently, Mackay and Zufferey (2015) suggest that we need to understand how knowledge is validated within it. This article explores 'social work's continual knowledge crisis' (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012, p. 499), specifically the linkage of knowledge to professional identity, which is said to be underdeveloped in social work (Beddoe, 2013).

Any exploration of social work's knowledge base takes us into questions about its epistemology alongside those of other professions. Debates around the integration of health and social care, for instance, proceed as though this were a technical, managerial endeavour, without reference to the respective epistemological roots of the professional groupings involved (Cootes *et al.*, 2022). While there is inevitable cross-over, understandings of need can be problematic when the medical model to pathologise predominates (Pearson and Watson, 2018). Similarly, the legalistic epistemology of justice systems can sit uneasily with the plurality and ambiguity of the world that social workers inhabit and the different practice imperatives that stem from these different ways of seeing the world (Garrett, 2004). The tensions inherent in different forms of knowing create stumbling blocks that often go unrecognised, but which get in the way of confident disciplinary practice and effective cross disciplinary working.

Knowledge and identity are conjointly linked in accounts of social work professionalism. [Abbott \(1988\)](#), in his account of the struggles between occupational groups for ‘jurisdictional’ control over a given field, argued that formal knowledge is important to defend a profession’s position in the context of the ongoing power struggles among professions. The trouble, as some of the accounts we introduce below suggest, is that social work’s ‘formal’ knowledge can appear somewhat less ‘formal’ than that of other more established professions, which are imagined to possess more discrete, secure and powerful knowledge bases and identities. [Beddoe \(2013\)](#) suggests that this weakens the profession’s identity and leaves social workers feeling maligned, isolated and undervalued.

Social work’s formal knowledge is diffuse. It includes, but is not limited to, community development, social pedagogy, administration, anthropology, ecology, economics, education, management, nursing, psychiatry, psychology, public health and sociology ([IFSW, 2014](#)). The uniqueness of this disparate social work knowledge is that it is applied, emancipatory, co-constructed with service users in a dialogical process and draws on indigenous knowledges ([Ornellas et al., 2018](#)).

[Flexner \(2001\)](#), in an influential and arguably premonitory article early in the profession’s history, asserted that, in the absence of its knowledge base being sufficiently scientific and possessing limited techniques, social work reverted instead to a model of administrative professionalism based on linear career lines, rationality, technical competence, a hierarchical ordering of power and scientific objectivity ([Camilleri, 1996](#)). [Kremer and Tonkens \(2006\)](#) observe a further logic of professionalism for social work, in which knowledge and skills are the objects of a democratic dialogue with clients who possess experiential knowledge, thereby cultivating collective or co-produced knowledge. This ‘democratic professionalism’ frames relationships differently and raises questions about how social work should be (co)produced, the nature of its knowledge claims, and how it is researched and evaluated ([Beresford and Croft, 2004](#)).

In a context of greater public sector accountability and regulation, a political response to the persistent indeterminacy of social work was to apply medical notions of evidence to measure its effectiveness. On the other hand, [Webb \(2001\)](#), [Sommerfeld \(2005\)](#) and [Gray et al. \(2009\)](#) attribute social work’s knowledge crisis to the rise of evidence-based practice (EBP). Critics of EBP point to its positivist orientation, explicitly scientific aspirations and narrow epistemological assumptions as being incompatible with the messiness and ambiguity of much social work practice ([Gray and McDonald, 2006](#); [Jacobsson and Meeuwisse, 2020](#)). Certainly, in the current managerial climate, there is concern that reductive approaches, procedural knowledge and technical competence are privileged over critical analysis, moral reasoning and a commitment to social justice ([Grant et al., 2022](#)).

Understandably, social workers struggle to negotiate this conflicted and shifting terrain, which can result in professional uncertainty around, and even dismissal of, academic and critical learning in the day-to-day realities of practice (Grant *et al.*, 2022). In such circumstances, the lure of procedural and EBP, reduced to positivist envy, recourse to scientism and abstracted empiricism, is strong (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Like other professions striving to be recognised as scientific, social work has often resorted to using pseudo-scientific concepts to assess, manage, treat, evaluate and regulate problems and interventions, in order to assert itself as knowledgeable (Gray *et al.*, 2009).

Research methodology

Against this backdrop of social work knowledge being diffuse, plural and contested, we now turn to a study of how social workers talk about knowledge in relation to professional identity. The data are from one author's PhD study on the social work professional identity. Participants for the study were recruited through one of the profession's leadership bodies, who advertised and acted as a gatekeeper for the study. They were selected purposively from those who expressed a willingness to be involved to ensure a broad range of social work experience, from front line workers to senior managers, from across Scotland, from a range of practice domains (children and families, adult services and criminal justice), from varied practice sectors (statutory and voluntary) and from different practice bases (fieldwork, residential, housing and advocacy). Semi-structured life-history interviews (Andrews, 2013) were conducted with nineteen social workers. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, and all were audio-recorded, transcribed and uploaded to NVivo where they were coded. Thematic analysis was conducted with a reflexive and iterative lens (Braun and Clarke, 2019), recognising the subjectivity of the researcher, a practitioner of 30 years' experience.

Ethical approval was obtained through the researcher's university at that time. Participants were provided with full information about the nature and purpose of the study and how data would be used and stored on a secure server. The interview schedule was provided in advance so participants could reflect somewhat on the questions. All participants provided written consent; names and other potentially identifying details have been changed.

Limitations of the article are that it focuses on the views of a small sample of social workers in Scotland and therefore presents a Eurocentric position that might not reflect conceptions of knowledge and professional identity for social work globally. As asserted by IFSW (2014), a legacy of colonialism is that Western knowledges have been valorised and indigenous knowledges devalued. The data strongly

indicate, however, an ambivalence about social work knowledge that has been found to be evident in different cultural settings (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008) and a wish for a discrete knowledge base, which incorporates local norms, customs and needs (Nilsen et al., 2023). It is likely, therefore, to have relevance internationally.

Findings

Social workers' conception of knowledge in relation to their sense of professional identity was, unsurprisingly, one of the themes that emerged from the interviews, and this forms the basis for this article. Participants shared a frustration at what they perceived to be their low social capital compared to other more traditional professions like law and medicine, but increasingly, also, to the police. They struggled to adequately articulate their role and function in relation to other professions, given what several participants called its 'complexity', 'vagueness' and 'fuzziness', summed up well by Laura, a senior social work manager:

there's not a particular knowledge base or skill set that you point to and say 'that's what social work does'. Engaging people, advocating, promoting, thinking about things holistically. None of that is unique but is probably more apparent in social work, those are the fundamentals as opposed to just good practice... that makes it really hard to claim things as ours.

Key messages in relation to how participants conceived of the profession's knowledge base are grouped into four themes: (i) boundary issues in relation to other professionals; (ii) the search for 'hard' knowledge; (iii) the breadth of knowledge required; and (iv) the iterative nature of knowledge.

Boundary issues

Laura confirmed Flexner's (2001) view that being a social worker is 'probably always to be a little bit on the outside of things... we're pulled in lots of different ways, all things to all people'. She believed that social work occupies space which is always a bit of somebody else's: 'We don't gate-keep enough to be really clear about our unique contribution as a profession'. She went on, though, to make the case that: 'we deliberately don't do that, because we see that this is actually a really, really important ethical place for us to be active'.

Alice, a front line worker in adult services, described social work as having no boundaries and, unlike other professions, it will undertake whatever is required to get the job done: 'So, we aim to be knowledgeable, to be jack of all trades if we can be, and to get on and do whatever is needed to

get the outcome that either we want or is for the client'. This boundary crossing was not necessarily seen in negative terms and is something that Alice 'really valued'.

Josh, also a front line worker in adult services, picked up on the 'jack of all trades' depiction (see also Zufferey, 2012; Cootes *et al.*, 2022), describing himself as 'a bit of a social work handyman', particularly in situations of complex hospital discharges describing: 'loads of things, organising carpets and helping folk buy TVs and helping them put pictures up on their wall and unpack'. Like Alice he believed social work differs from other professions 'because on the job-description you've got this kind of catch-all "and will do anything that's required", which is just everything. None of the other professions seem to think it's their job to do everything'.

Donny, a front line worker in homelessness, echoed this, describing social work as doing 'all the bits, all the things that nobody else wants to touch, that's what we do'. Jack, an experienced children and families worker, summed up the view of all participants that knowledge for social work in this context is difficult to articulate except in very specific tasks:

...we can't define very clearly what we do - to medical colleagues, to legal colleagues, even to the police except in a very narrow channel of activities that's to do with child protection, or the action of mental health officers in certain circumstances. It all gets very vague...

Linked to what Webb (2017) described as boundary conflicts and competing claims to jurisdiction, the profession has been pushed (not always against its wishes) into new domains of practice. Laura described an area of joint work with the police—the reassurance of parents who were 'vying for blood' in the wake of a nursery worker being charged with online pornography—which, arguably, takes social work onto new ground, hitherto was the domain of police. She continued: 'we could have quite easily said "it's not a social work issue. You'll have to front that". But we didn't'. Expectations that social workers should work closely with the police was a bone of contention for other participants. Andy, a criminal justice team leader, expressed similar sentiments about being 'forced to work with the police':

the number of people who are being recalled to prison from CPOs (Community Payback Orders) that we don't agree with, we've had a right clash recently and it's almost as if we are being forced more and more to play a policing role and we're slowly, as time goes on, almost losing that social worker identity. And I'm trying to say as a manager 'that's not your job, we're social workers. This is what we do' Are we ... slowly being taken over, slowly buying into it?... In some ways our role is changing, the value system's changing.

Garrett (2004) links some of the motivation for closer working with the police to an assumption that the police's pursuit of 'hard' evidence is

thought to provide a greater certainty than the contingent and provisional nature of social work knowledge.

The search for 'hard' knowledge

Linked to the focus on EBP in recent years, several participants described attempts to bring the lustre of science to issues that might, more appropriately, be considered social scientific terrain (Wastell and White, 2017). The general belief was that trends in this area reflect attempts to remove complexity from practice and that claims to evidence bring an illusion of greater certainty to what are often aporetic social problems. Helen, who worked in foster care and with refugees, alluded to politicians' and policy makers' demands for certainty, even when they know it is impossible, in relation, for example to child deaths; the call of 'enough is enough', the promise it will 'never happen again'. She described the 'misunderstanding that social workers cure the world', and the need to ensure blame can be appropriated when things go wrong (Ayre, 2001; Keddell and Stanley, 2017). Laura also saw children and families social work as 'trying to be too many things to too many different masters' within a system that is 'impossible to navigate'. She felt that social work has 'over-promised' as a profession that it can keep children safe, adopting 'scientific' ideas to do so:

Why would we think a worker who sees somebody for once a week or whatever would have any better chance of seeing that, or predicting it and challenging it than somebody else? If you really peel it back it doesn't make sense. But I think in a world where we're trying to be quite scientific, and we see that kind of approach working in relation to a lot of medical interventions and a lot of things that were hitherto unfixable are now fixable through the wonders of medical science and there's that kind of thinking that we should be able to apply it to... It's the arrogance of mankind, I think. And I don't know how we peel back from that.

Jack highlighted the challenges of having a knowledge base which is practical-moral and relational rather than scientific (Parton, 2008) and similarly reflected on the challenges of social work defining the valuable work done in relationships that is about 'being present and understanding the ecology of peoples' lives' but that:

to say these things sounds very airy fairy in a court, it's not something that Health Improvement Scotland can very easily measure with a control group... it is so difficult to give a definite answer to what is the right thing to do in a certain set of circumstances and why 30% of cases work better if you do this rather than that, it's very difficult to say that. And that is unsatisfactory, particularly to medical professionals.

Jack continued in this vein with the contention that knowledge for social work first and foremost should be underpinned by ideas of care:

caring in the broadest sense, it should be a core expectation, and any technique or knowledge application or research application that is separated from that attitude is going to flounder in the experience of the service user ... it's about people being reliable, listening and appearing to care. These sorts of things, in a world where you're not going to get exactly what you need, are the difference between light and dark ...

Laura echoed the sentiment that knowledge gained by specific qualifications needs to be underpinned by a 'need to care, they need to be interested, they need to want to make a difference'. These views might be argued to reflect [Tronto's \(1993\)](#) notion of care as both an activity and a disposition, in a context where the concept of care has an ambiguous relationship with social work ([Meagher and Parton, 2004](#)).

The breadth of knowledge required in a boundaryless profession

While there is an element in the responses above of practitioners having to justify the crossing of disciplinary boundaries to do what is required in response to the exigencies of practice, what they described is the kind of boundary spanning which organisational theory recognises as a key professional skill ([Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018](#); [Mannsåker and Vågan, 2023](#)). This level of boundary spanning, however, requires a breadth of knowledge. Rita, a children and families manager, reflected:

There's something about the breadth of our work, which is a strength... education will comment on school, health will comment on health and the social worker is the one with the holistic overview and more multi-faceted responsibility... the only person who bridges all that, brings it together... the downside of that is people don't know where you begin and where you end.

One outcome of the breadth of knowledge that is required is that it is often misunderstood by other professionals and even by other social workers. Donny described the difficulty in articulating what he does so people can 'grasp the nuances and the intricacies and the restrictions'. He reflected further on the profession's internal challenges in expressing what it does: 'I don't think my department understands it, so what chance has Joe Bloggs?' Margaret, a children and families social worker, agreed that the misperception is 'not surprising since we're so confused ourselves!'

The increasingly bureaucratic nature of social work ([Parton, 2008](#)) was alluded to by all participants, with Jackie, an older people's social worker, pointing to a level of knowledge of accounting and IT required to calculate convoluted budgets for care packages, which she did not

expect as a social worker: ‘I didn’t think that I’d be doing that, they just expect you to easily be able to do that but we’re social workers not accountants’. Bill, a children and families worker, similarly reflected that form-filling practices undermined his knowledge and skills in decision-making, and ultimately his identity:

You lose some of the professional identity then, filling in bits of paper and stuff, it’s like the forms try and make the decision for you... it’s a bad indicator if you have that many forms, you can’t just trust somebody to go and just do an assessment and just write it down, forms have to be related to everything... the managers fall back on paperwork...

The iterative nature of knowledge

Participants referred to knowledge acquisition as iterative, acquired over time and not something that could necessarily have been taught. Stuart, a children’s residential worker, equated that knowledge with a constantly growing sense of purpose:

I probably get as much enjoyment out of it as I did when I started, because I think I have a much deeper, impactful, relevant knowledge base in terms of how life and changes impact on the people I work with. Year on year I’ve developed a much stronger sense of purpose...

In addition to the knowledge gleaned during practice, participants described their learning from their own lived experience as service users or observers. Andy, who had been in care and in prison described the ‘big role’ that his social worker played in his own career trajectory. Emma similarly rooted her motivation to become a social worker in care experience, feeling she had experienced so much, both positive and negative, that would inform her practice. Helen believed that reading her grandfather’s diary account of his time in a concentration camp where he died, motivated her to use that knowledge to work with refugees. Donny recalled helping at a centre for people with learning and physical disabilities and seeing social workers who had no real understanding or knowledge of their clients which made him ‘determined that I was going to be a social worker but a better social worker than them’. The wealth of knowledge derived from personal experience, what Bourdieu (1999) would term experiential capital, is significant in social workers’ development and, in the context of the contemporary turn to ‘lived experience’, is being written about separately.

Despite the indeterminacy that they identified in their roles and the elusive nature of knowledge, participants nevertheless regarded themselves as knowledgeable; for most, a sense of moral purpose and an idea of service was evident. Helen described it as ‘a very helpful profession,

a very skilled profession, a difficult profession, a misunderstood profession, all of that’.

Discussion

We now turn to consider the implications of how social workers’ conception of knowledge might impact on their professional identity. Uncertainty about a profession’s knowledge base might be thought to compromise its sense of identity and to diminish some of the advantages claimed to derive from a strong identity as outlined earlier in this article. It may also feed into some of the negative consequences of shortcomings in identity around, for instance, recruitment and retention (Moorhead, 2021). In a context of clear difficulties around retention one might be justified in making the link, as Asquith *et al.* (2005) do, that the crisis facing the profession is one of identity. Indeed, social workers themselves can internalise some of this existential angst over their identity, expressed in a sense that they lack public appreciation (McCulloch and Webb, 2020).

The data we present above suggest that the difficulties social workers have in articulating a discrete professional identity does have implications, around, for instance, situations where the profession felt it was pushed into new areas of practice, particularly in its association with a ‘policing’ role and resultant tensions in achieving balance between supportive and safeguarding activities (McKendrick and Finch, 2017).

On the other hand, things may be rather more complicated than this. The social workers interviewed, while they almost all commented on the vagueness or fuzziness of their knowledge base, nevertheless felt very confident in their sense of identity—they were all clear in their own heads what social work was and of the ‘relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, values, motives, and experiences’ (Ibarra, 1999) that held them together as a profession across their diverse domains of practice. They invoked a clear teleological dimension with regard to the profession’s purpose, one underpinned by an idea of care.

What they struggled with was how to articulate the fuzziness and indeterminacy of what it is they do by comparison to other professions, where knowledge can appear more bounded, reflecting Beddoe’s (2013) findings that social work claims for knowledge can come across as weak, particularly in multidisciplinary or interprofessional settings.

We suggest here that a stronger assertion of social work knowledge requires a different epistemological base or rationality. Other professions, such as medical science or engineering, might draw on what might be described as a scientific or technical rationality, while the police can lay claim to a legal and procedural rationality. Bondi *et al.* (2011), however, argue that technical or procedural rationalities are unsuited to people professions. Green (2009) makes the case that social work operates

to a different rationality or logic; the practical, moral essence of their job requires a practical rather than a technical rationality. This conceptual shift requires an explication of the idea of practice itself. Whan (1986, p. 243), in an early contribution to the nature of social work knowledge conceives of practice in teleological terms as a form of service to others, described as the act of ‘do[ing] things with, to and for other people’. Practice recognises the contingent and contextual nature of doing things with people and hence of social work. In this regard, Garrett (2021) has asserted the importance of material practices, underpinned by shared values and a sense of purpose (Moorhead et al., 2019).

We go further, however, in suggesting that this kind of practical rationality, which foregrounds a sense of moral purpose and is comfortable with context and contingency, is better suited to twenty-first century professionalism, than attempts to emulate the ‘harder’, more scientific and bounded knowledge to which other professions might lay claim. We now proceed to discuss three features of such professionalism: the capacity to work with strangeness, to span professional boundaries and to co-construct knowledge with service users.

Without diminishing the need to continue to draw on knowledges from different academic disciplines, we would argue that this needs to be as generalists. It is this epistemological generalism that perhaps equips social workers to cope with what the philosopher of education Ronald Barnett (2004) identifies as the core disposition to be acquired through higher education, namely the capacity to be comfortable with epistemological uncertainty and complexity, which, together, he suggests, results in an existential experience of ‘strangeness’. The everyday experience of social workers invariably takes them into the heart of strangeness, where what to do is rarely amenable to technical rational solutions but needs to be negotiated with due attention to the values that inform questions of ends and means. Secondly, the generalist nature of social work knowledge perhaps also contributes to the kind of boundary spanning across professional groups as described in participants’ accounts and recognised as a key contemporary professional skill (Oliver, 2013; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos, 2018; Mannsåker and Vågan, 2023). The third feature that the idea of practice allows for is to offer a conceptual rationale for the kind of ‘democratic professionalism’ central to the argument that knowledge should be co-created with people who use services (Beresford and Croft, 2004; Kremer and Tonkens, 2006; Maglajlic and Ioakimidis, 2022).

Conclusion

We set out in this article to explore the link between social work knowledge and professional identity, drawing on the accounts of social workers in the field. We conclude that the difficulties that social workers

described in articulating their knowledge base, when compared with other professionals does not necessarily detract from the profession's identity but may, in fact, offer what is unique to it. Its very vagueness might be re-framed as its strength, facilitating a capacity to feel comfortable with strangeness and to operate in the spaces other professionals do not, and to do this through material and face-to-face practice. What is perhaps required to validate this possibility is opportunities, through education and reflection in practice to deliberate on the idea and nature of practice.

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