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Ideological Dilemmas in Social Work: Justice Social Workers in Scotland Talk about Gender in Practice

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Abstract

It has long been acknowledged that gender matters in social work, not least within justice social work, given the over-representation of men within the criminal justice system. Whilst there is significant theorising about the role of gender in criminal justice, there has been little empirical examination of how social workers understand and address gender in practice. This article sets out to redress this omission by introducing a novel study of the expressed views of justice social workers (JSWs) in Scotland on gender in their work. The findings are challenging. They demonstrate that JSWs talk about gender in complex and, at times, seemingly inconsistent ways; the concept of ideological dilemmas is used as a vehicle through which to interrogate this further. Our conclusions suggest that it is not necessary to resolve the conflicts and complexities that are an inevitable response to, and expression of, the multiple and often competing discourses within which JSW practitioners operate on a daily basis, but we do need to make space for these conflicts in practice. A person-centred approach to gender, and an intersectional approach to understanding personhood, offer a way forward, allowing insight into the complex and demanding environment within which JSWs function.

Keywords: criminal justice, gender, ideological dilemmas, justice social work, trauma

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Introduction

Justice social work is fraught with inherent conflicts as practitioners walk the tightrope between egalitarian and authoritarian discourses, traditionally known as the tension between ‘care and control’ (Day, 1979). Justice social work is also a gendered practice, as are all sectors of social work. Whilst early studies demonstrated that social work was a ‘women’s profession’ practised by mainly female workforce on, and with, a service user group primarily made up of women and children, court social work and probation were exceptions, alongside mental health orderlies in hospital (Walton, 1975; Cree and Phillips, 2019). The impact of gender stereotyping in social work was such that, at the time of the formation of the British Association of Social Workers in 1970, the largely male probation service in England opted not to join a group it feared would be dominated by predominantly female children and families service (Cree et al., 2018). Keith Bilton, former general secretary of the Association of Child Care Officers, explained the thinking at the time as follows:

There was a very strong commitment from the Home Office that probation officers should be qualified in social work, but there was a powerful, largely male older group of NAPO [National Association of Probation Officers] members who thought that probation was an upright, no-nonsense man’s job and social work was a rather soft sort of thing in comparison. (K. Bilton quoted in Ivory, 2010, p. 22)

Fifty years on, the situation remains stubbornly unchanged, and in Scotland, recent workforce data suggest that five out of six social work posts are held by women. Men, in contrast, make up about one-third of the fieldwork services for ‘offenders’ and ‘offender accommodation services’ and residential children’s services (SSSC, 2020).

This study, conducted as part of the Scottish Government’s celebration of the Social Work (Scotland) Act of 1968, represents our attempt to find out how the current generation of JSWs in Scotland feel about gender and their work; how do they manage the tightrope they have to walk within the context of policy and practice that is inevitably gendered? (see also Cree et al., 2018; McCulloch et al., 2020). We will begin by setting the context of our study, starting with the historical picture and moving on to a discussion of ideas, policies and practices that characterise justice social work in Scotland today. We will then introduce the methodology and methods used in the study, specifically discursive psychology, which examines how people construct and use concepts such as gender in discourse (McMullen, 2021). The main body of the article will be an

examination of the findings, using the concept of ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.*, 1988; Weinberg, 2014) as a frame for our analysis. We will end by offering some conclusions for responding to the tensions at the heart of our data, and indeed, at the heart of social work itself. First, however, we must position ourselves within the subject under investigation (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013).

We are a group of three women and one man, all cis-gendered and able bodied. Our ages range from early forties to late sixties. One of us is biracial, Scottish–Iranian; beyond that, we are white Scottish, Irish and from Aotearoa/New Zealand. Three of us worked in social work and criminal justice services as qualified social workers. Although we are each at different places in our journeys in and through gender consciousness and the experience of gender, we share an understanding that gender is best understood as a social construction. Accordingly, we perceive gender to be a fluid, diverse and situated construct, which is produced and reproduced across time and space and through everyday interactions. Our approach is informed by feminist, intersectional and post-structural theoretical frameworks, including, for example, the work of Judith Butler (1990), Patricia Hill Collins (2002, 2019) and Arruzza *et al.* (2019). Equally, it is informed by our everyday social experience and sense-making. Our aim in this article is to reflexively examine social workers' own accounts of gender as a means of exploring how gender is constructed in and through practice. In this respect, our methodology also responds to Hicks's (2015, p. 271) critique of limiting accounts of gender in social work and his call to adopt a focus on gender as practice, as a means of 'opening up the conversation on gender and social work'.

Setting the context

Justice social work has always been gendered in the way it operates. By 'justice social work' (JSW), we mean services provided to people subject to criminal justice sanctions. In the contemporary Scottish context, these are mainly provided by qualified social workers employed by local authorities and include the supervision of people on community sentences and those subject to supervision following imprisonment, diversion from prosecution services and the provision of reports to criminal courts. Justice social workers (JSWs) provide both individual and group work interventions, and work in partnership with other statutory and voluntary sector organisations. In the late nineteenth century, 'police court missionaries' worked with men and women who had committed offences in ways that reflected the then-current ideas about 'acceptable' behaviour for men and women (Goodman, 2012; Worrall and Mawby, 2013). Thus, male officers worked with men to help them reduce their offending behaviours, typically in relation to offences involving violence, theft,

alcohol, etc. Female officers, meanwhile, worked with women in relation to some of the same offences, but also in relation to other crimes that were seen as ‘women’s offences’, including ‘baby farming’, infanticide and prostitution (sex work). They also supported women and children who were the victims of crime, especially sexual abuse and domestic violence. Significantly, women caught up in the justice system tended to be regarded first and foremost as wives and mothers rather than isolated individuals (unlike their male counterparts), and their treatment (and punishment) differed as a result. Two world wars did little to change this characterisation of men and women who commit offences as different, and by the 1960s, the women’s liberation movement provided a new language to support this differentiation, and so the feminist criminology that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s argued that women in the criminal justice system should be treated differently from men; seminal publications by Pat Carlen, Carol Smart and others challenged the government of the day to find a ‘new way’ of recognising and responding to women who offend (see [Smart, 1978](#); [Carlen, 1983, 1985, 1988](#)). More recent policy initiatives continue to bring attention to the situation and needs of women in the criminal justice system in the UK, arguing for a different approach, such as more holistic and multi-disciplinary interventions ([Corston, 2007](#); [Commission on Women Offenders, 2012](#)). The new ‘Vision for Justice in Scotland’ ([Scottish Government, 2022](#)) expresses a commitment to advance a fairer, person-centred and trauma-informed justice services, with attention to the needs, rights and experiences of women and children identified as a ‘priority action’, alongside hearing the voices of victims and shifting the balance between the use of custody and justice in the community. The vision is underpinned by four core principles:

- founded in equality and human rights;
- evidence-based;
- embed person-centred and trauma-informed practices; and
- collaboration and partnership.

The gendered nature of the justice response is explicitly recognised in the vision: ‘We must recognise how the system, as historically designed by men, for men, can perpetuate societal inequalities for women and children.’ (p. 2). The vision highlights the importance of improving the responses to gender-based violence and the treatment of women as victims of crime but makes almost no reference to women who have committed crime. The relationships between trauma and gender, including trauma experienced by men, are also undeveloped. Therefore, some implicit assumptions about the connections between gender, justice and crime remain, and how the vision will be worked out in practice remains to be seen. Until then, as our findings will demonstrate, it is the JSWs who manage the inherent tensions within policy and practice.

Methodology and methods

The aim of our study was to explore how current JSWs in Scotland experience gender in their work. We used a mixed methods approach, involving literature-based research, surveys (at the national level) and focus groups (in two local authorities). The rationale for the survey was to gain a wide variety of views across the country, on the assumption that experiences and opinions will vary across practitioners and locations. The focus groups were intended to facilitate more in-depth discussion and debate regarding the role of gender in practice. Ethical approval was sought and granted by The University of Edinburgh, Social Work Scotland and the two local authorities where focus groups were conducted. All participants gave informed consent and the data have been anonymised and kept confidential. All data analysis was conducted alongside group discussions between the researchers, enabling us to interrogate each other's understanding of the data as the analysis unfolded (Siltanen *et al.*, 2008).

In the first phase of the study, archival, documentary and recent research from across the community justice literature in Scotland were examined, as well as wider theoretical literature. In the second phase, an online survey was designed and distributed among the thirty-two Scottish local authorities. Two hundred and one responses were received, 78 per cent from women and 22 per cent from men, comparing favourably with the then reported workforce population of 938 social workers, 67 per cent of whom were women and 33 per cent of whom were men (SSSC, 2018). Ninety-two per cent of the respondents were identified as White, and 6 per cent identified as Asian, Black, mixed-ethnicity or other ethnic groups. The survey consisted of twenty questions and included a mix of closed, multiple-choice, rank-order and open-text questions. Topics were led by the research questions and covered demographics, employment patterns, motivations for JSW, career progression, nature and distribution of work, approaches to practice, professional support and perceived impacts of gender in practice.

Three focus groups were conducted with JSWs from two urban local authorities. Managers were asked to invite social workers in their teams to participate in a one-off focus group to discuss gender and JSW. Nineteen JSWs were self-selected to participate. One group had three women and two men; the second group had three women and four men; the third group was for women only and had seven women. Focus groups allowed us to tease out some of the areas identified in the literature review and the survey. The focus group facilitator asked participants about the gender make-up of JSW, the extent to which people of different genders end up in certain positions or take on certain responsibilities, views on roles or tasks in JSW where gender is important, awareness of gender

equality issues in JSW and their views on the causes, implications and potential responses to these issues.

For the present article, we analysed the qualitative survey responses and the focus group data using discourse analysis, specifically taking a discursive psychology approach. Although often applied to ‘naturally occurring’ data, discursive psychology is routinely applied to focus group and survey data to explore how social phenomena are constructed and enacted through language and interaction (Huma et al., 2020). Given our approach to gender as socially constructed, we have an interest in how it is produced and sustained through discourse at micro and macro levels, and examining the way practitioners grapple with gender in their talk and text provides insight into how gender as a phenomenon is understood, evolves and is treated in practice. Our interest was therefore in what the participants were doing with the language they used; in other words, the social function of language and its consequences (McMullen, 2021). We began by examining how participants talked about gender and identified a pattern of persistent tension where participants often expressed seemingly contradictory positions around the role of gender. We re-examined this tension using the concept of ideological dilemmas, that is the expressions of contradictory views based on common sense understandings of certain phenomena, which construct and re-specify the phenomena, supporting meaning making (Billig et al., 1988).

Findings

Our main research question asked whether and how gender plays out in justice social work. In the survey, 80 per cent of the respondents agreed that gender featured in their approach and practice, and 20 per cent said it did not. However, the qualitative responses of the survey and the focus group discussions illustrated a more nuanced picture as participants grappled with the dilemma of whether gender should or should not be relevant to JSW practice, presenting contradictory arguments around being gender neutral versus recognising gender difference. This dilemma pivots around the issue of what gender equality means. First, we demonstrate the dilemma respondents are evidently tackling around the relevance of gender to justice social work. Secondly, we present and examine examples of three strategies we identified for how respondents tackle the apparent contradiction of remaining gender neutral whilst also addressing gender difference within their talk: locating the issue with the type of offending, locating the issue with the client and drawing on the concept of ‘trauma’ as a reason for a gendered approach. Following conventions in discursive psychology, we present extracts from our data to demonstrate how participants dealt with the topic and dilemmas in their text

and talk, which both ‘gives voice’ to the participants and allows readers to judge our interpretations (Huma *et al.*, 2020).

The relevance of gender to practice

One of the survey questions was ‘How does gender feature in your approach and practice as a criminal justice social worker?’ In response, some respondents directly rejected the relevance of gender to their work, for example, one said ‘Gender is not a feature in my practice as a criminal justice social worker’ (Respondent 118). Maintaining this gender-neutral position is interesting given the wider understanding that gender is a feature on how people experience the social, political and institutional structures around them, and a core element of social work practice is to engage with wider structures (IFSW, 2014). As such, we need to consider what does rejecting the relevance of gender in practice achieve? What is at stake for the respondent?

For some, gender was treated as something that only applies to female clients:

It doesn’t as my team only works with male clients. (Respondent 36)

Previously worked at the [service for women] therefore very aware of differential needs of female offenders and trauma-informed practice. (Respondent 109)

This positioning of gender reflects wider cultural norms, where man is the default gender or the non-gendered option (Spender, 1990). Justice social work ‘with’ men is positioned as a neutral practice where gender is absent or ignored. It may also reflect the development of justice social work services in Scotland over the last decade where there has been an increase in female-specific services primarily centred on recognising and addressing trauma (c.f. Commission on Women Offenders, 2012). This focus, however, is increasingly extended to working with men, drawing on research that recognises the impact of trauma on men (see, e.g. Maschi *et al.*, 2011; Levenson, 2017). We will see later how the discourse of trauma is drawn on by the participants in this study in discussing the relevance of gender to JSW practice.

Some respondents suggested that gender was relevant in terms of staff characteristics, such as the value of co-working in pairs with a male and female social worker, particularly in relation to working with men who have committed stereotypically gendered offences such as sexual offences or domestic abuse. One said:

Gender is an important aspect of my role as a CJSW. As a group-work facilitator co-working a domestic abuse group with a female co-worker we have a responsibility in demonstrating positive role-modelling, social

learning and equality to the men we work with. Gender therefore features heavily in the approach and work we undertake. (Respondent 99)

In this characterisation, gender is presented as relevant not in terms of inherent dispositions, skills or abilities, but rather in terms of how social workers and their gender roles are ‘perceived’ by the men they work with (i.e. being seen as men or women engaging in certain ways).

Gender was also noted as relevant in relation to staff skills, for example,

I don’t feel that it explicitly features. However I do probably adopt quite a ‘motherly’ caring approach with young people and I think most of them respond well to this and that it enables me to form good relationships with young people who know that I care about their wellbeing. However that’s not to say that a male in my team would not utilise the same approach but it’s possible that young people, males in particular, would not respond to this in the same way. (Respondent 201)

This respondent characterises her approach in an overtly gendered way—‘motherly’—and suggests this can be particularly effective. However, suggesting gender differences, that is traits associated with women, linked to practice effectiveness is problematic, as it implies that men might be less effective at their jobs. However, this respondent manages the sensitivity of this suggestion through hedging (‘probably’, ‘possible’), downgrading the argument by denying that it ‘explicitly features’ and orienting to the possibility that male social workers might adopt a similar approach. Seemingly contradictory talk suggests that people are managing a dilemma (Billig *et al.*, 1988), evident in the use of opposing points preceded by ‘however’ or ‘but’. Specifically, the speaker is managing the dilemma of, on the one hand, suggesting that the gender of a practitioner is important for their ability to do the job, which may be treated as a form of sexism, and, on the other hand, the denial of the relevance of gender, which may suggest a lack of awareness or understanding of difference.

Overall, there were four very different answers to the question of whether gender is relevant to JSW: (i) gender is not relevant; (ii) gender is only relevant in relation to practice with women; (iii) gender is relevant in addressing some offences committed by men, predominantly those stereotypically gendered and (iv) gender can be relevant to staff skills. These answers lie along a continuum from taking a gender-neutral position to highlight gender differences, and we can begin to see the issues these positions present. For example, a practitioner’s gender may be treated as enabling engagement with clients, yet such arguments may suggest other practitioners might, therefore, be deficient due to their gender, or stereotyped categorisations of gender may impact the services client receive. By implication, these arguments may be treated as potentially misrepresenting the abilities of practitioners or the needs of clients.

The focus groups and longer survey responses demonstrated how participants oriented to the sensitivity of understanding and discussing gender in JSW and formulated their talk to manage these dilemmas that arose. We examine examples of these dilemmas and how people discussed, managed and attempted to resolve them.

Strategies to manage the dilemma

Locate the issue with the type of offending

One way to manage the dilemma is to position gender as relevant to the type of offending behaviour. Respondents noted gender as particularly relevant in relation to domestic abuse and sexual offences, offences primarily perpetrated by men against women and are considered under the violence against women agenda in Scotland ([Scottish Government, 2018](#)). Here, having a man and a woman practitioner co-working was highlighted as valuable:

I have to be mindful of gender issues when working with Domestic violence and sex offender cases. I believe a male and female working together can model appropriate and respectful relationships. I have no issues with two men or two women co-working but think the pro-social opportunities of mixed gender co-working is excellent. I also feel as a man that I can challenge and address discrimination shown by clients occasionally in a way that female workers could not, as some clients are so dismissive of women they can regard the female workers approach as being driven by an agenda against men. As a man with pro-social attitudes and values I am able to challenge ideas directed and model the behaviour I deem appropriate. (Respondent 113)

Here, gender is linked with offending behaviour, and other aspects of clients' attitudes and behaviour, which justifies gendered approaches to practice. The respondent orients to the problematic inference that other arrangements would be ineffective ('I have no issues with two men or two women co-working') but emphasises that some men's attitudes towards women mean having a mixed-gender pair offers the opportunity to respond directly to the men and role model appropriate behaviour. This means when he argues that 'as a man' he can practice in some ways that 'female workers could not', this is not because men are inherently better at this type of social work practice, but rather because of the specific and problematic attitudes of some (male) clients. This positioning does not undermine the abilities of practitioners based on gender differences, and it links to the second strategy we identified to manage the dilemma of gender: locating the issue with the client.

Locate the issue with the client

A related strategy is to locate the relevance of gender with clients, as evident in the following survey response:

As a worker in the women's justice service, I am aware of research which indicates that women require a different approach due to the nature of their offending and contributors towards their offending. Women are often survivors of trauma which has a negative impact on their mental health and I believe it is extremely important to be aware of this. I believe a strengths and trauma focused approach is important in working with women. (Respondent 198)

Here gender is relevant to practice due to the specific needs of women, where the characteristics of women's offending, notably in relation to trauma, justify gender-responsive practice. Such evidence-based arguments inoculate against accusations of prejudice.

However, gender-responsive approaches were not restricted to the gendered characteristics of women. For example:

In my experience, some male and female clients can be particular with regards to info they share with a male/female worker depending on sensitivities and experiences. It can possible be a positive feature in relation to domestics in that having a female challenge attitudes which have been held by the male perpetrator can encourage them to reflect. Services appear to have specialist supports for women whereas men may also have specific needs or vulnerabilities which aren't supported by specialist services due to the proportion of men in the criminal justice system. (Respondent 3)

Here, gender is made relevant due to the gender differences between social workers and clients. However, rather than a generalisation of the needs and characteristics of men, the argument is hedged and softened through words such as 'some', 'can', 'perhaps', 'depending on' and 'possible'. In this way, gender is made relevant but blanket claims about the attitudes of males or females are avoided; instead, the relevance of gender is refracted by individuals' inclinations or experiences. Here the role of gender is acknowledged whilst the pitfalls of positions based on the nature of men or women as clients or workers are avoided. By locating the issue with the client, respondents avoid offending their male or female colleagues and skirt towards the gender-neutral end of the continuum in considering staff effectiveness.

In focus group discussions, the complexity of these issues was deepened, as participants worked through the dilemmas regarding the relevance of gender as evident in the needs and preferences of clients, and the match with social workers' characteristics:

I: So...what are some of the roles and tasks then within criminal justice social work where the gender of the practitioners is important?

R4: Co-working. Co-work, the joint...yeah. That usually...usually it helps if there's a balance, doesn't it, of male/female.

R1: Yeah. Unless people have had specific trauma stuff that makes that productive, but...

R3: And there's all these really good...obviously the domestic abuse stuff.

R4: Yeah. Or if somebody...quite a lot over my time when I was main grade was people requesting, can I have a female worker. [...] I've had even males...a male who was really traumatised. I'll never forget him saying he only wanted to be interviewed by a female social worker for his...just for his report even and stuff and...so being able to accommodate that and...

R1: Yeah. And I think it's really healthy to look at guys' views of women but also the...as you were talking about, the healthy male role modelling about having men there consistent, about men that are able to express emotion and encouraging that and, you know, all that...you know, and it's good having both of those around. Yeah.

R2: I think in the converse of that, being that, you know, you do get some guys who would probably respond better to a male supervisor and having...like, having a younger guy who's just very traumatised or very...you know, horrible, kind of, upbringing and horrible relationship with his mum and he had, kind of, three consecutive social workers in [Young People's Service] and then myself who were all, sort of, a similar age and all female and...it just seemed like he was just not...he was just brushing us...you know, he just didn't take any of it seriously and...so that idea that actually having a male figure for him could be beneficial. So being able to try both really.

R3: Yeah. Well, yeah, goes both ways...

Participants put forward arguments about the position of the worker's gender in relation to the client's needs, including co-working in mixed male/female pairs, and the merits of a female or male social worker. As noted previously, the use of conjunctions such as 'unless', 'but' or 'in the converse of that' (a variation of 'on the other hand') indicate a dilemma being negotiated. The main dilemma here is around claims about social workers' suitability for certain roles or tasks based on gender differences. This is negotiated through delicate arguments and counterarguments. For example, R4 emphasises the value of having a mixed male and female co-working pair, where describing this as a 'balance' constructs it as reasonable. Whilst R1 agrees, they add a caveat regarding clients' 'specific trauma stuff' indicating that a worker of a particular gender may be more suited. This is picked up in the context of clients requesting female workers, bearing the implication that women are better suited to engaging with clients who have experienced trauma and to justify the gender-based allocation of workers. R1 and R2 manage the apparent

problems here justifying gender-based worker allocation as to the client's needs and highlighting the benefits of male workers. The focus group allowed participants to debate how gender is relevant, reinforcing the relevance of gender to social work practice, and providing specific examples of how they operate in practice whilst managing the tension between broad stereotypes based on gender and accounting for individual needs and contexts by moving between positions of gender neutrality and gender difference. This discussion illustrates how the dilemmas around gender and social work practice cycle through arguments and counter-arguments without necessarily coming to rest on a settled view, even within individual social workers.

Trauma as focus for gendered practices

Trauma was referred to in several of the extracts above and featured in many survey responses and within the focus groups. As is evident above, trauma was often associated with women, drawn on to justify gender-specific practices, services and arrangements. However, trauma was also tentatively discussed in the survey and focus groups as relevant to men, leading to discussions around the dilemma of having gender-specific services.

R6: I think, obviously what we know about women in criminal justice is that a lot of women experience trauma and a lot of that trauma is related to...

R7: Men.

R6: ...sexual abuse or domestic abuse.

R2: But interestingly a lot of the men as well. I was really shocked coming from [inaudible] I had a very rigid idea of what the men were like and that's been turned on its head about the amount of trauma hearing from the guys that they've had from...

R3: Women, mothers, yes.

R2: ...women, mums, grannies, dads as well.

R1: [Voices overlapping]

R2: So it's not as simple as [voices overlapping]. I think [women specific service] should be a service that's available, it will eventually I think for men as well because the trauma needs to be dealt with...

R3: Trauma, yes, trauma services.

R2: ...before, you know, unpick it all and it seems weird and we've had this conversation with somebody else but it's focused on women just now and I can understand why but it's actually men are more risky so they're the ones we should be targeting. If we're looking at risk and danger to

the world or [area], it's really the men really that we're focusing on because if we manage to fix them then there'll be less trauma.

R6: Yes, and I don't think it's an either or approach, is it?

Although much of the discussion regarding trauma focused on women, here the discussion broadened to include men. The discussion remains gendered—for instance, starting with women's experiences of trauma due to violence committed by men, and terms that highlight gender (e.g. 'mums, grannies, dads')—but shifts to include trauma and 'trauma services' more generally, as well as providing an argument that addressing men's trauma could prevent offending and traumatic experiences. For example, R2 argues that 'it's actually men are more risky so they're the ones we should be targeting', which presents a focus on men as a preventative approach to addressing trauma. This discussion brings together several key dilemmas: assumptions about gender differences between men and women versus a focus on individual needs and characteristics; the provision of gender-specific versus generic services; gender-specific versus gender-responsive services; a preventative versus corrective response to harm and trauma. In brief, R6 summarises the nature of these dilemmas: 'Yes, and I don't think it's an either or approach, is it?' Affiliating with the argument in favour of dealing with men's behaviour, whilst extending it encompasses the other proffered responses—such as gender-specific services and approaches that focus on trauma—provides a way of cutting through and managing the dilemma. That is, approaches that are preventative and corrective, responding to individual and gender-specific needs, understanding and dealing with trauma, provide sensitising practices that engage with and through the dilemmas, and more critically suggest that framing them in terms of either/or dilemma is problematic.

Concluding discussion

Our findings show that gender-based justice social work intervention presents a dilemma for social workers. Ethical principles include 'equal access to wealth, health, wellbeing, justice and opportunity', 'respecting diversity', 'treating the individual as a whole person' and a commitment to social justice ([Scottish Social Services Council, 2019](#)). So, do gender-based justice social work services promote social justice through addressing structural inequalities, or do they threaten the principle of equal treatment? We argue that this can be treated as an ideological dilemma ([Billig *et al.*, 1988](#)). By focusing on how practitioners formulate and discuss their views, we see how they invoke and manage this dilemma in the real world of practice. A key finding was the invocation of trauma as a way of resolving this conundrum. For example, references to the trauma experienced by women functioned to justify services and approaches tailored to their needs. However, whilst

the specific vulnerabilities of women could be invoked to explain the nature of gender-based violence and related needs, people orient to the potentially problematic nature of such generalisations (see also [Venäläinen, 2020](#)), in this case providing examples of trauma suffered by men and their related needs. In some instances, rather than operating as a substitution for or alternative to gender-responsive practice, respondents argued for a trauma-informed gender-responsive approach, thus managing both aspects of the dilemma. That is not to say that the matter is then resolved, but rather we can see how these discussions actively work through the dilemmas relevant to practice; the dialectical nature of the issue means that services and practice have the potential to continually evolve. But we can also see in our findings some of the enduring conflicts at the heart of the justice project. Specifically, how to do justice to women in a system and service that continues to be constructed on the logic of patriarchy? And how to do justice to people of all genders in a system and service constructed on a neoliberal capitalist worldview and associated patterns of domination, exclusion and oppression (see, e.g. [Arruzza *et al.*, 2019](#))? These remain significant conflicts across justice work and social work, and history makes clear that dualistic frames of analysis, much like essentialist and binary accounts of gender, can only take us so far.

Implications for justice work and social work

Looking forward, we propose a re-centring of gender across justice work and social work, which should be understood as part of the profession's longstanding commitment to equality and social justice. As social work has become embedded in and, at times, subservient to the local and global state's neoliberal capitalist project, and its illusion of social progress, issues of gender, much like issues of race and inequalities, have become dangerous territories. The rise of identity politics and the culture wars associated with it have added to this unease. If we no longer ignore issues of gender, race and inequalities as part of a pretence of getting it 'right', we are now at risk of doing so for fear of getting it 'wrong'. Relatedly, the profession needs to find its way through binary and abstract accounts of gender towards more plural, intersectional and practical accounts and methods.

Person-centred approaches to gender, and an intersectional approach to understanding personhood, offers justice and social work practitioners one way through. Person-centred approaches have a long history in social work theory and practice and are arguably experiencing a renaissance in current professional discourse ([Armstrong, McCulloch, Weaver & Reed, 2020](#); [Santana *et al.*, 2018](#); [Scottish Government, 2022](#)). Person-centred practice rests on principles of equality, recognition and representation and is understood to be critical to the progression of both

individual and social change, outcomes that lie at the heart of gender and justice work. Intersectionality is a more recent frame and promotes an approach to personhood that recognises the intersections, and pluralities, of social identity and experience. As [Collins \(2015, p. 2\)](#) explains:

The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities.

Put simply, from an intersectional lens, personhood is never the product of single, distinct factors. Rather, it is multi-dimensional and shaped by different factors and social dynamics working together. Analysis of social experience, privilege and oppression, therefore, cannot be assumed or pre-determined but must be uncovered through interactive processes of enquiry, relationship and dialogue ([Paik, 2017](#)). This has significant implications for social work in neoliberal capitalist economies, wherein workers are routinely required to navigate often conflicting professional discourses of personalisation, regulation and control. As importantly, intersectionality is explicit in its attention to power relations and social inequalities and to the progression of social justice through building coalitions between different groups and communities. In these respects, intersectionality presents a direct challenge to individualising and responsabilising accounts of and approaches to justice work and social work. In sum, person-centred practice, located within a frame of intersectionality, offers a possible path through limiting approaches to gender premised on difference, towards what [Burman and Gelsthorpe \(2017\)](#) imagine as a more plural and humanistic stance. Further, as is evident in many of the extracts presented in this article, intersectionality applies not only to people who use social work services, but also to those who deliver such services, providing a way to consider one's own position, as well as relationships with colleagues and clients.

Linked to the above, we join with other feminist scholars in calling for the explicit integration of care ethics as a moral and theoretical frame for justice work and social work ([Tronto, 1987](#); [Gelsthorpe, 2004](#)). According to [Tronto \(2010\)](#), in an institutional context, good quality care has three central foci: attention to the purpose of care, a recognition of power relations and the need for pluralistic and particular tailoring of care to meet individuals' needs. Tronto goes on to note that good quality care also needs 'political space', reflecting the fact that care is almost always enacted in contexts of conflict. Far from being antithetical to contemporary notions of justice, the co-location of an explicit ethic of care *alongside* ethics of justice presents opportunities for more integrative consideration of what it means to care well and act justly in modern democratic societies. As [Tronto \(2010, p. 168\)](#) explains:

No caring institution in a democratic society can function well . . . without an explicit locus for the need-interpretation struggle, that is, without a 'rhetorical space' (Code, 1995) or a 'moral space' (Walker, 1998) or a *political space* within which this essential part of caring can occur.

For the researchers and the participants in this study, the research process provided a rare space for both expression and deliberation of this struggle. We conclude, with our participants, with Tronto (2010) and Hicks (2015), that we need more of this space. As citizens, practitioners and researchers, we need more deliberative public and professional space through which we can grapple with, reflect and learn from how gender plays out in justice work, social work and society more broadly, and what this means for how we conceive of and progress matters of gender, justice and care in modern societies and their institutions. Only then will we come any way towards realising the aspirations of social work as set out in the 1968 Social Work (Scotland) Act and in more recent policy visions.

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