

Answering the Call: Generating Contemporary Knowledge About Australian Social Work Activism

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Abstract

The contemporary context, characterised by neoliberalism, serves as a backdrop for social work activism. Social work academics, globally and nationally, have incited an urgent call to activism. Despite this exhortation, ways of practising social work activism remain contested and somewhat mystifying. This study aimed to generate contemporary knowledge about Australian social work activism. The qualitative inquiry, guided by pragmatism, used individual semi-structured and paired depth interviews to explore the experiences of 12 self-identified social work activists. Data analysis generated four core themes: i) *Activist Practices Exist on a Continuum*; ii) *Activism Is Contextually Bound*; iii) *Activism Is an Inherently Relational Endeavour*; and iv) *Sustaining Activism for the Long Game*. Together, the findings suggest that adopting multiple, contextualised, and interconnected approaches may enable workers to pursue justice at all levels of their practice. These insights contribute to the profession's understanding of social work activism and may benefit practitioners, students, and educators.

Keywords

Activism; social work; neoliberalism; social justice; Australia

Introduction

Activism is entangled with the history and identity of social work (Bent-Goodley, 2015; Greenslade et al., 2015). Since its inception, the profession has espoused human rights movements and strived to work alongside disenfranchised groups to pursue social justice (Reisch, 2013; Smith, 2015). While definitions vary between schools of thought, activism can be broadly defined as actions intended to engender justice, equity, and emancipation by creating socio-economic, political, or environmental change (Irwin, 2020). The connection between social work and activism is enshrined globally and nationally through professional bodies' Codes of Ethics. The International Federation of Social Work (2018, para. 14) avers that all practitioners have an obligation to work "toward[s] transformational change." Similarly, the Australian Association of Social Work (2020, pp. 6, 12) requires professionals to embody a commitment to human rights and social justice "to bring about social or systemic change".

Though the social work profession has long proclaimed the centrality of activism, it is important to acknowledge that it has not always put this into practice; throughout history, social workers have operated within systems that have perpetrated injustice (Maylea & Hirsch, 2018). Within the Australian context, social work has Eurocentric roots and the discipline has been implicated in the historic and ongoing oppression of Indigenous Australians (Yu, 2019). Despite growing literature that seeks to bridge the gap between the profession's codified ethics and frontline practice, some have argued that contemporary social work is disconnected from its ethos (Ife, 2017; Noble, 2015).

Scholars in the field of social justice and policy have been moved to question "is activism still alive in social work?" (Bent-Goodley, 2015, p. 101). The current context has been referred to as the "dark age" for social work activism, with literature citing neoliberalism as a defining challenge (Noble, 2015, p. 520). Neoliberalism can be understood as "a set of political beliefs, values, and practices that valorise commercialism ... and apportion individual responsibility for structural problems" (Gair, 2018, p. 144). Insidious in nature, it permeates social, political, and economic realms (Watts & Hodgson, 2019). This has impacted the social work landscape, fostering environments incongruous with professional values and hostile towards social change (Abramovitz, 2005; Wallace & Pease, 2011).

The pervasive impacts of neoliberalism are also reflected in the current socio-political climate. Exclusionary discourses and the erosion of human rights have become dangerously emboldened,

exacerbating poverty, violence, and injustice (Giroux, 2015; Noble & Ottmann, 2018). This has implications for social workers tasked with addressing the disquieting rates of inequality and suffering (Ife, 2018). Lundy (2011, p. 39) articulated this poignantly: “social justice is a matter of life and death ... social injustice is killing people on an alarming scale.” These societal conditions have led to a ubiquitous sense of urgency among academics, who have implored social workers to reinvigorate activist practices (Bent-Goodley, 2015; Ife, 2018; Jeyapal, 2017; Marston & McDonald, 2012; Morley, 2020; Noble, 2015).

Despite agreement that activism is needed, there are multiple understandings of how to deliver on this obligation (Williams & Briskman, 2015). Within social work, notions of activism are primarily informed by anti-oppressive practice [AOP] and theory. Briefly, AOP is an umbrella term for numerous justice-orientated and critical theories (e.g., feminist, Marxist, post-modern) that value inclusion, empowerment, equity, and community (Campbell, 2003; Dominelli, 2012). Despite a shared value base, contentions between schools of thought are notable. Radical scholarship, which saw its height during the 1970s, has urged the profession to revive tactics—campaigning, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience—from the “golden age” of social reform (Dillon, 2017, p. 73). However, others have illustrated a shift away from such approaches. Mendes’ (2007) study demonstrated uptake in research, public media, and political advocacy as strategies for effecting change. More recently, covert activism has also emerged as “a new form of radical action” in response to escalations in neoliberalism (Greenslade et al., 2015, p. 434). Similar to ‘deviant’ social work (Carey & Foster, 2011), covert activism involves small acts of resistance—rule-bending, stretching boundaries, or law-breaking—undertaken secretly to resolve dissonance between organisational restrictions and professional values (Greenslade et al., 2015).

Underpinning these multiple perspectives appears to be a binary construction of activism (Ross, 2011). Some emphasise macro—large-scale structural—practices (Ife, 2018; Noble, 2015), while others advocate for micro—small-scale localised—approaches (Carey & Foster, 2011; White, 2009). Despite a general understanding that both are needed, tensions remain between exponents of both viewpoints (Fronck & Chester, 2016). An in-depth exploration and critical reconceptualisation of activism may therefore assist the profession in addressing the defining issues of our era (Ife, 2017; Marston & McDonald, 2012).

A review of literature further revealed that answering the call to activism is no easy feat, with social work activists encountering numerous challenges in practice (Greenslade et al., 2015; Mendes, 2007). Commonly noted were organisational barriers—increased managerialism,

surveillance, and risk-aversion—that limited workers’ capacity to enact structural change or radicalise their practice (Greenslade et al., 2015; Westoby et al., 2019). Personal and professional risks associated with activism have also increased in the neoliberal context, with many practitioners expressing concerns about legal repercussions and job security (Gair, 2017; Mendes, 2007). Gair’s (2017) study found that a lack of clarity and confidence was most hindering for emerging social workers; while almost all their participants believed activism was central to the profession’s ethos, many felt unsure *how* to enact this in practice. Although barriers to activism are well-described in literature, there are scant empirical insights into navigating such challenges and even less so within the current Australian context.

While it has been the subject of many reflective, conceptual, and commentary pieces, there is—to the researchers’ best knowledge—a dearth of recent studies about social work activism. Notions remain contested and somewhat mystifying; despite abstract understandings of activism, there is prevailing uncertainty about how it ‘fits’ within everyday social work practice. Hence, this study aimed to generate contemporary knowledge about social work activism by investigating the question: how can social workers answer the call to activism within the current Australian context? Four objectives guided inquiry: i) explore how the contemporary socio-political climate influences Australian social work activism; ii) identify and analyse strategies Australian social work activists use to address current social issues; iii) explain how Australian social work activists navigate barriers to practice; and iv) demonstrate how Australian social workers can integrate activism into day-to-day practice. This paper reports on the study’s findings and discusses conceptual and practical implications; it contributes to the ongoing dialogue within the profession about activist practice within social work.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a pragmatic qualitative research design and used individual semi-structured and paired depth interviews to explore the experiences of self-identified social work activists. As a research paradigm, pragmatism rejects the epistemological dichotomy of postpositivism and constructivism, providing an alternative lens of inquiry apt for social work research (Hothersall, 2019). Pragmatism aims to “utilise *experience*” to develop knowledge that has value for practice (Hothersall, 2019, p. 863, emphasis in original). This aligned with the study’s aim to generate knowledge by exploring social workers’ experiences practising

activism. Pragmatism also has a “natural connection” to social justice research; it grapples with themes of inequity and is grounded in an “ethics-based pursuit of ... justice” (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019, p. 267).

A multi-method approach was used to elicit insights and enhance credibility through methodological triangulation (Liamputtong, 2020; Roulston & Choi, 2018). Individual interviews were chosen to generate in-depth descriptions of participants’ experiences and perspectives (Liamputtong, 2020). Paired depth interviews, which involve “interviewing two people at the same time ... so that the two interviewees can interact”, were used to illuminate further synergies and contradictions within the data (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 1551).

Sampling and Recruitment

The study utilised purposive criterion sampling to recruit informants who could provide rich and relevant insights (Liamputtong, 2020). As notions of activism vary, selection criteria were kept broad to avoid inadvertent exclusion: Australian social workers aged ≥ 18 who self-identified as activists. Recruitment and data collection spanned approximately four months, from April to July 2021. Social media and a partnership with Australian and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWWER) were used to promote the study. Nineteen people expressed interest in the research. Of these, two were from New Zealand and thus did not meet the criteria. Twelve social workers decided to participate after being provided information and consent forms. Participants chose either an individual or paired interview, depending on preference and availability.

Data Collection

Eight individual interviews—two by videoconference and six by telephone—and two paired interviews via videoconference were completed. Written consent was obtained, and interviews were audio recorded for accuracy. Individual interviews ranged between 45 and 105 minutes; each paired interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Demographic details were collected to gain insight into participants’ backgrounds and enhance transferability (Shenton, 2004). Data collection was considered sufficient upon generating rich networks of categories and satisfying measures of conceptual depth (Nelson, 2017).

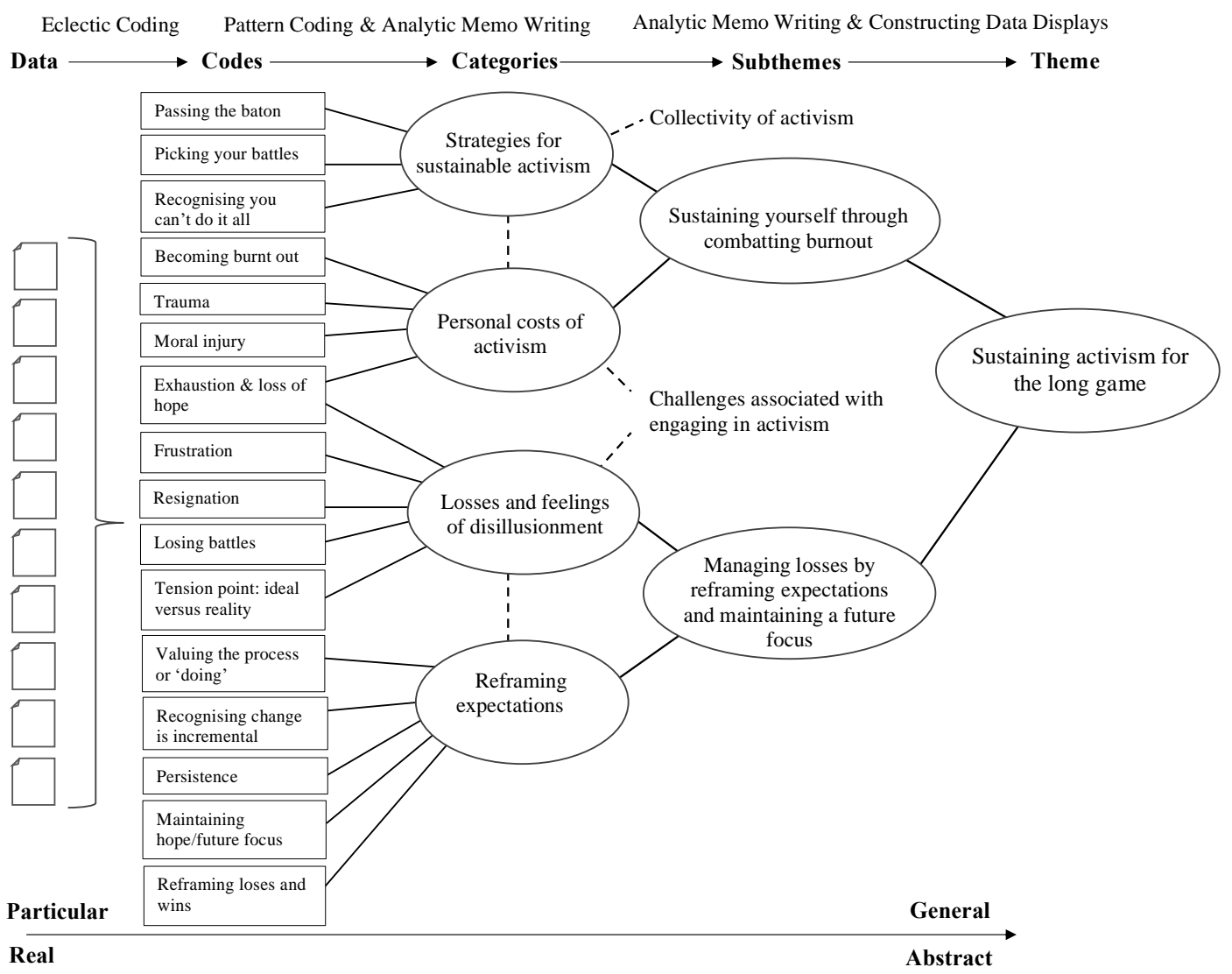
Analysis

Recordings were transcribed verbatim and sent to participants for review. Miles et al.'s (2014) Interactive Model was used for analysis, involving three processes: i) data condensation; ii) data display; and iii) drawing conclusions. Data condensation—"selecting, focusing, abstracting, and/or transforming the data"—was completed through two coding cycles and analytic memo writing (Miles et al., 2014, p. 12). Eclectic coding, which purposefully combines coding methods, was employed first (Saldaña, 2013). Specifically, process coding (coding for actions), affective coding (coding for values, emotions, and tensions), and holistic coding (coding for key ideas) guided analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

Pattern coding and analytic memo writing were then used to synthesise initial codes into categories, with data displays illustrating emerging concepts (see Figure 1) (Saldaña, 2013). From this, themes were generated and critically examined. A portrait of participant characteristics was composed, using descriptive statistics to summarise continuous data (Schreiber, 2008). NVivo software was used to manage data analysis.

Figure 1

Example of Theme Development in the Study



Findings

Four themes and 10 subthemes were generated (see Table 1). These findings demonstrated ways interviewees conceptualised, practised, and sustained their activism within the contemporary landscape. Participant characteristics are presented to contextualise these findings.

Participant Characteristics

Participants were located across four Australian states, the sample including two men and 10 women. Ages ranged from 36 to 67 (mean=52.3, standard deviation [SD]=11.1) and professional experience varied between 10 to over 40 years (mean=21.2, SD=12.2). Informants worked across statutory, non-government, and academic settings. Participants' areas of activism varied (see Table 2).

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Activist Practices Exist on a Continuum	Deconstructing Stereotypes and Binaries
	Reconstructing Activism as a Continuum
Activism Is Contextually Bound	Individual Context
	Organisational Context
	Socio-Political Context
Activism Is an Inherently Relational Endeavour	Making Change Through Relationship
	Engaging Reciprocally With Other Activists
	Working In Solidarity and Lending Voice
Sustaining Activism for the Long Game	Combatting Burnout
	Managing Losses and Disillusionment

Table 2
Participants' Areas of Activism

Area of activism	Number of participants
Refugee and asylum seeker rights	7
Climate and environmental justice	6
Activism targeted towards the social work profession and social work education	4
Violence against women and women's rights	3
Inequality and poverty	3
Animal rights	3
Housing and homelessness	2
Disability rights	2
International humanitarian crises	2
Other	5

Activist Practices Exist on a Continuum: “You don't have to chain yourself to bulldozers”

Deconstructing Stereotypes and Binaries

Among participants, there was a notion that there are stereotypes associated with activism. Many expressed that dominant representations synonymise activism with large-scale efforts such as protests. In contrast, participants described the breadth and depth of their activities, suggesting that understandings of activism should transcend “prescribed views[s]” (Heather) to capture nuances and multiplicities. Participants also indicated that stereotypes might contribute to disillusionment, doubt, and the perception that activism is unattainable or separate from everyday practice. As Christina shared:

A lot of people think that activism is a huge thing. And you have to chain yourself to bulldozers and be arrested and that kind of thing. So, I think the concept of what activism is can be a little bit overwhelming.

Sandra explained this further, suggesting that a narrow view of activism can impact workers' professional identities, particularly students and graduates:

There are a range of different ways of standing your ground. And that's something I've been talking about with a student group ... where they've been talking about how they haven't been brave because they haven't spoken up ... and they've castigated themselves as weak and uncourageous.

The notion that there are many ways to ‘stand your ground’ was unanimous. As Shannon stated: “there’s not one approach... [Activism] doesn’t always have to be loud, and it doesn’t always have to be quiet either”. Participants alluded to this binary between macro and micro practices and were in favour of deconstructing dichotomised perceptions of activism, embracing a gamut of strategies to address injustices.

Reconstructing Activism as a Continuum

The idea of practising along a continuum was recurrent among participants, arising as a way to understand the multiplicities of activism. As Shannon explained:

[Activism] can be done on that micro scale between person to person, and then it can be done at that more organisational level through policies, procedures, discussion papers, conversations in staff meetings.... And then again on a broader systemic scale through our systems of parliament and social change.

These findings were translated into a tentative model illustrating the tactical repertoire used by participants (see Figure 2). In articulating these approaches, interviewees described shared values, emotions, and knowledges underpinning their practices (see Figure 2).

Micro activism is at one end of the continuum, encompassing small-scale efforts towards change at an individual and relational level. Participants reported engaging in numerous tactics (see Table 3) and highlighted the centrality of critical theories and AOP in their work, making explicit the links between structures and individual experiences. Most interviewees described engaging in micro activism, with three identifying it as their main method.

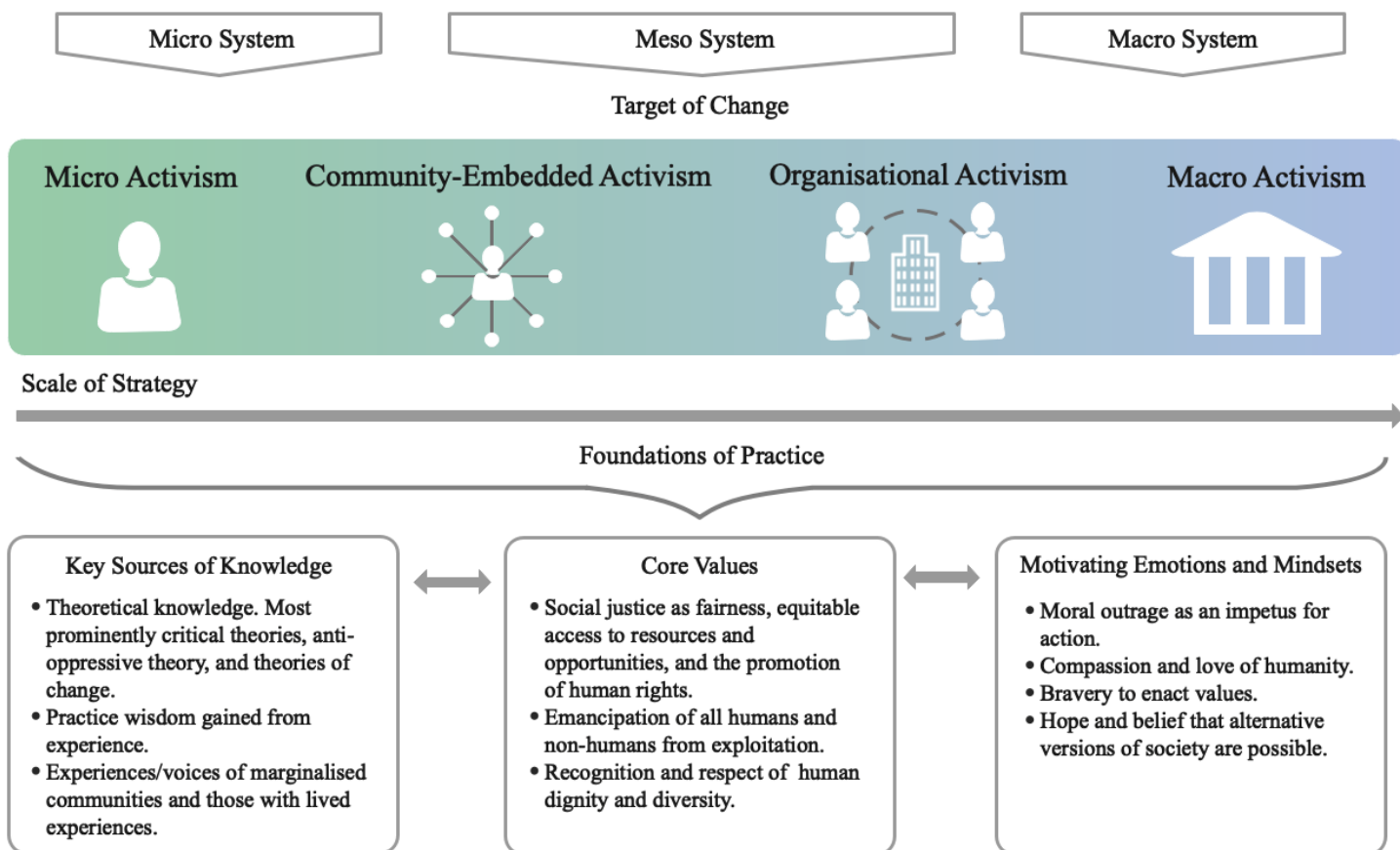


Figure 2

Continuum Model of Social Work Activism

Table 3*Examples of Activities Used to Practise Activism Across the Continuum*

Classification	Examples of Activities
Micro activism	<p>Promote tolerance, empathy, and understanding by challenging exclusionary discourses in one-on-one conversations.</p> <p>Influence others and raise awareness through respectful dialogue and role modelling.</p> <p>Resist neoliberal ideologies in practice by recognising the impact of structures and systems on consumers.</p> <p>Find spaces for resistance in everyday practice (e.g., advocating with consumers, bending/circumventing rules, over-servicing).</p>
Community-embedded activism	<p>Organise or participate in local initiatives (e.g., organising events or using media to raise awareness on community issues).</p> <p>Create spaces in the community to promote dialogue and amplify voices of those with lived experiences (e.g., hosting events with lived-experience speakers to raise awareness and challenge dominant narratives and discourses).</p> <p>Lobby local decision makers (council or members of parliament) through letters, meetings, or community demonstrations (events or campaigns).</p>
Organisational activism	<p>Challenge organisational policies that contribute to exclusion.</p> <p>Partner with colleagues and leverage organisational mechanisms to make changes to internal programs and processes.</p> <p>Listen deeply to service-user experiences and use workplace networks and resources to facilitate consumer-led changes within the organisation.</p> <p>Blow the whistle on unethical and dehumanising practices.</p> <p>Collaborate with other organisations to raise awareness and consciousness about an issue.</p>
Macro activism	<p>Organise or participate in public demonstrations (e.g., marches, rallies, protests).</p> <p>Conduct and use research to inform policy submissions and political advocacy.</p> <p>Use public media (e.g., newspapers, cartoons, art and literature, social media, television) to raise awareness about issues and injustices and promote change.</p>

Participants also practised *community-embedded* and *organisational activism*. Interviewees described the former as “grassroots” activities that leverage community strengths and skills to address local issues. At its heart, community-embedded activism was inherently place-based and focused on uniting people to pursue a shared cause. Similarly, organisational activism involved teams with diverse skills agitating for change. While some targeted internal structures and policies, others used the organisation itself as a mechanism: “[it] was a matter of using the combined weight of organisations to put pressure on the state government and the local council to increase services” (Lawrence).

Interviewees also recognised the place for *macro activism*, larger-scale activities used to address issues on a systemic level. Over half of the participants reported engaging in macro activism, with three describing changes made to state or federal legislation: “we made a recommendation in that [research] ... and it’s going into legislation now. ... And that’s *huge*, you know, that’s an *enormous* thing” (Cody).

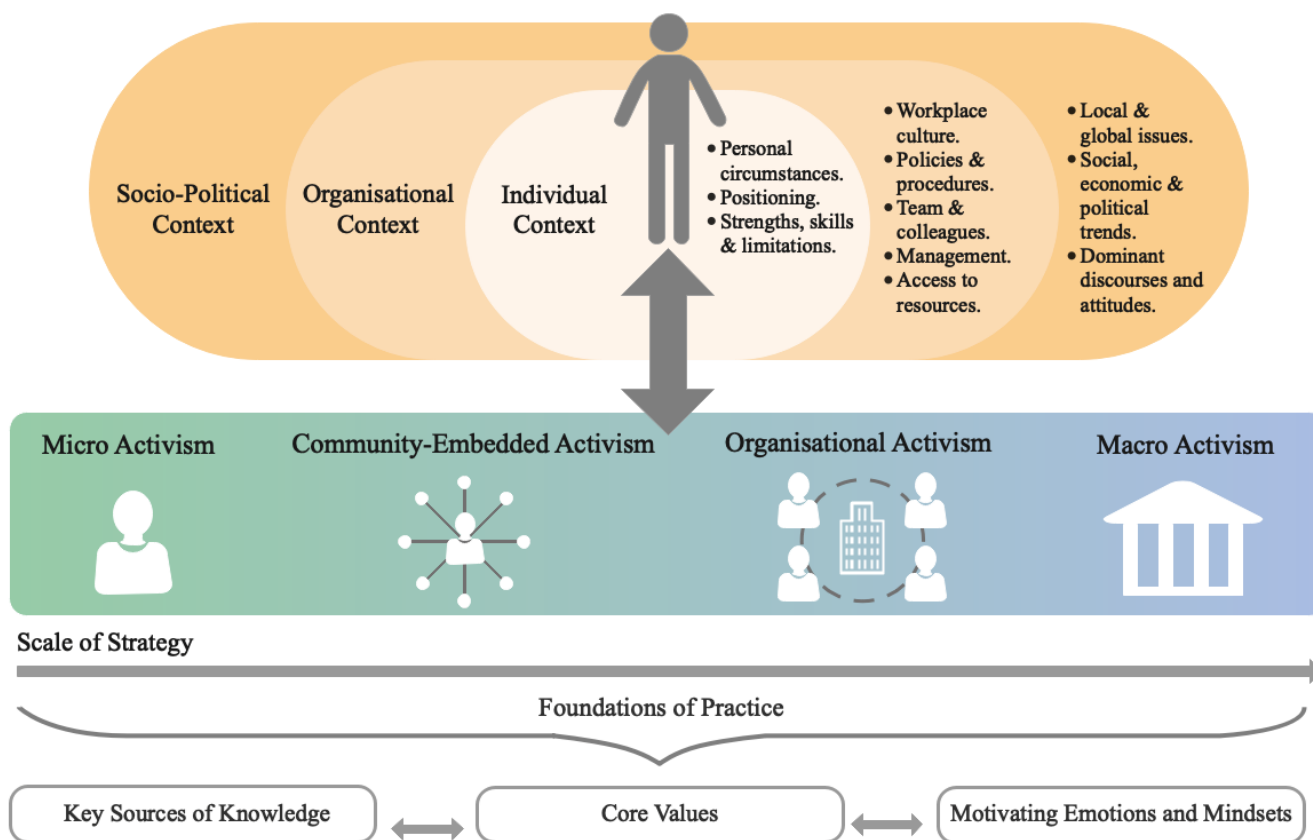
Reflecting on these approaches, all participants agreed there was no prescribed way of ‘doing’ activism. Instead, they drew on strategies from across the continuum to pursue change. Interviewees believed that this enabled them to be agile, creative, and responsive in practice.

Activism Is Contextually Bound: “It’s going to vary from person to person, from context to context”

Participants described their activism as being mediated by a range of contextual factors that informed, limited, or supported their engagement with approaches across the continuum (see Figure 3). These factors fall under the following sub-themes: i) individual context, ii) organisational context, and iii) socio-political context.

Figure 3

Contextual Influences on Social Work Activism



Individual Context

Participants suggested that personal circumstances, positioning, and strengths and limitations shaped their activism. Tanya reported: “[activism] changes as you change ... it waxes and wanes with what’s going on personally”. Most notable was the impact of caring responsibilities. A third of interviewees discussed how parenthood influenced their activism, with some taking a hiatus and others shifting to ‘less risky’ practices. As Tara explained, “I was a sole parent, had three jobs.... I couldn’t afford an arrest”.

Interviewees also discussed the impact of their personal and social positioning. Intersecting factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and cultural background mediated opportunities to practise activism. Cody considered this, stating:

I'm a cis white guy, so I don't really have barriers.... I just say whatever I want, and people are like 'hmm that sounds good' [laughing].... I have this voice because of my power, and I have this education because of my privilege.

It was evident that gender disparities, inter alia, positioned participants differently and influenced their strategies for enacting change. Further to this, some participants reported that their positioning and lived experiences were motivating factors and informed their areas of activism; Bonnie stated that, alongside her social work background, her experiences as a woman and victim-survivor of domestic violence have shaped her activist practice and involvement in issues such as violence against women and family law processes.

Participants also described their activism as being shaped by personal and professional skills and limitations. As Christina commented: "we have to realise what our instruments are ... and what we can bring to the table. We're not all extroverts, and we're not all amazing public speakers". Self-awareness was a common thread; interviewees reported engaging in ongoing reflection to select approaches suited to their strengths and skills.

Organisational Context

All participants felt that organisational settings impacted their activism, identifying neoliberalism as an overarching challenge. Interviewees reported that censorship, risk aversion, and marketisation restricted their ability to practise overt forms of activism. For some, organisations were sites of hostility. Christina recalled the intimidation she experienced within one statutory setting:

We were asked to sign lifelong nondisclosure agreements, and it meant that [activism] was really tricky. People that did speak out were threatened with multimillion-dollar lawsuits ... it was *really* scary. I mean, they said, 'we're monitoring your phone calls, we're going through your emails'... it was very Orwellian.

Within such contexts, participants described needing to consider their approach carefully. Some shifted activities to their personal sphere, working "off the books" (Bonnie) or practising outside work hours. Others adopted covert strategies such as circumventing organisational processes that were perceived as unfair or unjust. For several participants, micro activism became their main avenue for effecting change. As Sandra noted: "there may be a lot you can do in small actions even within a restrictive organisational context".

While all participants acknowledged the challenges borne from neoliberalism, not all found their organisational contexts to be hindering. Shannon described “lots of pockets” of activism within workplaces: teams, departments, and colleagues. Participants perceived these ‘pockets’ as affording them a degree of safety, supporting engagement in more overt strategies.

Socio-Political Context

Participants discussed the significance of the current socio-political context. Some described feeling a sense of urgency to respond to broader socio-economic and political trends. As Tara explained:

The features of fascism are here ... and it's *absolutely* urgent. Capitalism is teetering ... and that makes a lot of us more determined to tip it on its ass.... This is not a choice to me; this is not a choice to a lot of us. What else can I say? There is no choice.

Others perceived societal conditions as being in constant flux, with Cody stating: “it feels bad now ... but I don't think things are worse than they were 20 or 30 years ago. They're *different* ... it's always changing, and you have to be really agile”.

Participants spoke of agility as the capacity to critically examine broader contexts and adapt strategies as needed. As Heather explained: “it's important to be able to read the room, not just in a meeting.... But read the greater environment and know what's happening in your country, in your state, in the world”. Doing so informed participants' approaches and helped them respond to challenges, complexities, and fluctuations within the contemporary space.

Activism Is an Inherently Relational Endeavour: “In activism, the people are the most important thing”

All interviewees, directly or indirectly, referenced the centrality of relationships in their practice. Participants spoke about this in three main ways: i) relationships as the basis for change, ii) the value of reciprocal relationships with other activists, and iii) the importance of solidarity.

Making Change Through Relationship

Participants detailed using relational approaches to foster and maintain change. This involved developing networks and organising groups with diverse skills and experiences. Tara described the significance of this during her recent coordination of a large-scale protest:

My biggest skillset has got to do with my huge networks. I broker relationships *all* the time.... I know lots of people from different age groups and cohorts, and I bring those people together in appropriate ways.

To form these connections, participants relied on their social work training and interpersonal skills. As Lisa said: “it’s all that classic social work stuff ... building rapport with people, engaging with them, [and] having respectful discussions”.

Interviewees also emphasised the importance of relationships when influencing ‘upwards’ or engaging those with differing views. Participants critiqued ‘us-vs-them’ thinking as counterproductive to change and instead promoted respectful dialogue. As Shannon explained: “if you find yourself in a head-to-head argument, you’ve lost.... You’ve got to work on that relational element. And it’s through relationships that change can happen.” To do so, participants described making efforts to understand others’ worldviews and tailor messages accordingly: “understanding who it is you’re dealing with and speaking to them in their language ... [that’s how] you get a better outcome” (Bonnie).

Engaging Reciprocally With Other Activists

Participants discussed the importance of forging reciprocal relationships with other social work activists. Angela described this dynamic: “there are friends I draw on ... who steady me, and I hope I do them.... We’ll lift each other up when we need it”. Many interviewees reported feeling sustained by such relationships. For example, Tanya stated:

Having like-minded networks [is] ... the only thing that’s got me through and kept me sane.... Like when things were getting really tricky ... about eight of us started having external group supervision together, and it just helped.

Other participants also described benefiting from formal and informal group supervision. This offered them support and provided opportunities to critically examine issues, possible approaches, and risks. Lisa emphasised the importance of this, stating: “find people you can talk to ... [and] have those conversations about, ‘Well, hang on a minute, what risk am I

actually placing myself and my clients under by doing this?’” Interviewees felt strongly that this collaboration was necessary for decision making and ethical activism.

Beyond other social workers, participants also spoke of engaging with activists from various personal and professional backgrounds. Interviewees described being involved in local groups as well as broader social movements. For example, Heather recalled her partnership with young people engaged in school strikes for climate action, stating “the youngsters I met were just amazing, they were so passionate and engaged”. Participants emphasised the importance of collaboration, supporting community-led initiatives, and learning from other activists.

Working In Solidarity and Lending Voice

Six participants identified “allyship” as central to their activism. While notions of allyship have been critiqued in activist literature (Carlson et al., 2020), interviewees used this term to broadly describe acting in solidarity with marginalised groups. Participants detailed strategies for practising allyship, including adopting collaborative methodologies (e.g., participatory action research), building relationships with persons with lived experience, and creating spaces to amplify marginalised voices. For example, Christina described using her bookshop: “we’ve got publishing services, and we’re ... encourag[ing] young asylum seeker and refugee writers to have a voice through that.”

Interviewees also described working in partnership with people from “behind the scenes” (Tara). As Shannon explained, “[it’s about] handing that space over to people with lived experience ... but without dropping them in it either. You’ve got to work *alongside* ... as an ally”. In line with other literature (Carlson et al., 2020), interviewees believed allyship requires lending voice and acting on behalf of marginalised groups when activism is perceived as risky. As Christina explained:

I think that’s important, especially when you look at ‘the other’, because with asylum seekers, if they speak out, they can be forcibly returned to their countries or locked up.... The risk is *so* huge that a lot of people *can’t* speak ... So trying to *be* that voice.

Sustaining Activism for the Long Game: “Take care of yourself, know that this won’t be easy and that some things won't work”

Interviewees, including Tanya and Sandra, likened activism to a “long game”, requiring endurance and perseverance. Participants described encountering challenges in their practice and detailed strategies for combatting burnout and managing losses and disillusionment.

Combatting Burnout

Burnout was spoken of as a state of emotional and mental exhaustion, often coupled with feelings of cynicism and hopelessness. Interviewees identified two broad approaches to managing burnout. Firstly, they suggested activists “pick [their] battles”. By moderating their involvement in activities, participants were able to maintain energy and focus. Christina explained that adopting this strategy enabled her to practise activism long-term:

I realised early on that I needed to be *really* selective about what I’d get involved with.... If I joined every single cause ... I would burn out within six months, and then I’d be no good to anyone.

Secondly, participants used the metaphor of “passing the baton” to discuss temporarily detaching from activism. Interviewees suggested that ‘stepping back’ was sometimes necessary to promote wellbeing and sustain engagement. As Shannon explained, “people can take a break from it ... and that doesn’t mean your passion has gone away, and it doesn’t mean you can’t pass that to somebody else for a period of time”. Notably, both strategies relied on a collective notion of activism, which constructs pursuing change as a shared responsibility rather than an individual obligation.

Managing Losses and Disillusionment

All participants described experiencing losses in their activism, with Angela remarking: “there’s so many you don’t win, or you win in a piecemeal way”. Participants identified this as a considerable challenge, particularly for graduates who may be disillusioned by a lack of tangible progress. As Lisa explained: “social work students are so passionate.... And then when you get out there, you realise, ‘Okay, so change looks a *lot* different than I expected’ [and] that’s a *really* big fall”.

To manage disillusionment, participants detailed reframing their expectations in two distinct ways. Firstly, they described becoming more attuned to small gains, reframing them as successes. Participants felt this was particularly important when engaging with seemingly insurmountable issues such as climate change, income disparity, and justice reform. For instance, Shannon explained:

It comes back to recognising the importance of incremental change.... It's important to understand that those things *are* significant.... They might not feel like it in the moment, but in all of history, I can't think of anyone who made a very quick, huge change. It doesn't happen like that.

Participants also described reframing losses by looking beyond outcomes as the only measure of activism. As Lawrence stated: "I've probably lost more battles than I've won, but sometimes the *battle* is just as important." Ultimately, participants found meaning in the 'doing' of activism, ascribing significance to the pursuit itself. Angela articulated this: "the successes that come aren't often what was intended, but they're successes of sorts.... A lot of things don't work. But you've got to keep trying because otherwise, what do you got left?"

Discussion

Together, the findings suggest that multiple, contextualised, and interconnected approaches are needed to pursue justice within the contemporary context. Indeed, it appears that social workers practising activism do so by engaging in a range of tactics, adapting their practices to varying contexts, and forming strong connections.

One of the most prominent findings was the notion that activism cannot be reduced to a single strategy. The research builds on existing literature, suggesting that there are multiple ways of 'doing' social work activism (Benjamin, 2011; Marston & McDonald, 2012). As such, a pluralist approach may help practitioners address injustices within the contemporary neoliberal space. This assertion aligns with others who argue that "neoliberalism is not a single monolith and it cannot be met with a monolithic response" (Palumbo & Friedman, 2014, p. 97). The current study contends that expanding conceptualisations of activism to embrace multiplicity may assist social workers in engaging more fully with an array of practices.

The micro/macro dichotomy is longstanding, not only amongst activist scholarship but also within the profession more broadly (Austin et al., 2005; Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). While classification is not problematic per se, binary thinking can lead to implicit hierarchal assumptions, which view

some ways of ‘doing’ as paramount (Hugman, 2012; Robbins, 2015). This lends itself to an exclusive construction of activism, a notion that there is one ‘right’ approach for pursuing change (Morley et al., 2014). The current study indicates that this can contribute to feelings of doubt or uncertainty among practitioners—particularly newcomers—whose activism may not ‘fit’ with this perceived ideal (Marston & McDonald; 2012; Morley et al., 2014). The present findings also suggest that dominant representations, which are often limited to overt public demonstrations, may complicate understandings of activism (Ross, 2011).

Rather than maintaining these binaries and stereotypes, this study expands on Ross’s (2011, p. 255) depiction of activism as “a big, broad tent” and proposes a continuum model of social work activism. Acknowledging the value of different forms of activism and demystifying its nature and scale may better equip practitioners to cope with doubt (Lynch & Forde, 2016; Morley et al., 2014). Previous studies have found that many “shy away from using the term activism” due to its perceived exclusivity (Ross, 2011, p. 254). Thus, this model may offer a starting point for workers to develop their activist identities, serving as a tool to locate and make meaning of their practices. On a day-to-day basis, this also could assist practitioners in identifying spaces for resistance and strategically drawing on a repertoire of approaches.

Conceptualising activism as a continuum may further benefit the broader profession by providing a framework that holds space for multiple perspectives. When activism is constructed in binary terms, academics and practitioners risk dismissing or devaluing others’ practices (Austin et al., 2005). Labels of being ‘too radical’ or ‘conservative’ maintain divisions and construct potential “allies as inadequate” (Ross, 2011, p. 251). Given the importance of reciprocal relationships, a shift towards an inclusive model is potentially significant and may help facilitate dialogue between those engaged in different approaches across the continuum.

The findings also indicate that though neoliberalism may be an inescapable backdrop, there are spaces in which social workers can and do practise activism (Morley et al., 2014; Stanford, 2011; Turbett, 2013). Critical thinking, political awareness, and creativity may enable responsive practice within the ever-fluctuating contemporary climate. Additionally, the study found that organisational and personal contexts were significant. This resonates with others who assert that practitioners’ workplaces and individual circumstances can influence their opportunities for activism (Baines, 2011; Godwin, 2019; Turbett, 2013). These findings emphasise the importance of critically ‘reading’ one’s multiple contexts to adapt approaches depending on the time, space, and place (Benjamin, 2011).

In addition to being inherently contextual, the findings highlight the collectivity of activism. This resonates with existing literature, which discusses the importance of building relationships with other activists to clarify issues, unpack dilemmas, and maintain hope (Baines, 2011; Godwin, 2019; Lynch & Ford, 2016). Swank (2012, p. 259) posits activist networks as “a cornerstone to activism”; the current study reflects this notion, demonstrating the centrality of reciprocal relationships for effective and sustainable activism. These findings support the assertion that activist practice groups at both student and professional levels may help crystallise understandings of activism and facilitate engagement (O’Connor et al., 2017). The study also suggests that social workers should look beyond their profession and engage with community-led movements. The findings resonate with others who have commented on the need for social workers to collaborate with and proactively support other activist groups and service user movements (Cloughton, 2021). The study further indicates the significance of solidarity with marginalised peoples, proposing that authentic partnerships are key for justice-orientated practice (Bent-Goodley, 2015; Watts & Hodgson, 2019).

Moreover, the findings suggest that workers may be able to draw on the collectivity of activism to navigate challenges, such as burnout. The strategies identified in the study—‘picking battles’ and ‘passing the baton’—resonate with existing literature, which contends that envisioning activism as a collaborative endeavour can foster sustainability and hope (Reynolds, 2011). In line with previous work, disillusionment was another pressing challenge within the contemporary context, where change often occurs in a ‘piecemeal’ way (Marston & McDonald, 2012). The findings indicate the potential value of reconstructing measures of activism with a renewed focus on ‘doing’. This builds on counter-discourses that aim to move away from outcome-orientated conceptions and empower workers to practise activism in the face of adversity (Morley et al., 2014; Van Soest, 2012).

This discussion should be considered in the context of the study’s limitations. First, participants indicated they were familiar with existing literature. This may have influenced their accounts, leading them to echo established concepts or viewpoints; in other words, it was unclear at times whether responses were grounded in participants’ experiences or knowledge derived from literature. Although this was reflected on during analysis to reduce bias, discretion should be used when considering the findings’ resonance with broader research. Second, using the term ‘activist’ may have limited recruitment, as some practitioners do not identify with this label

(Ross, 2011). Future research may benefit from altering selection or recruitment methods to explore perspectives not captured by this study.

Despite its limitations, the study adds to the profession's understanding of contemporary social work activism and may have utility for workers, students, and educators. Although the current practice landscape poses significant challenges, social workers have found ways to pursue justice through their various systems and networks. To those who have called on the profession to revive activist practices, this study offers reassurance that activism is alive and well – though perhaps not in its anticipated form. Indeed, diverse and nuanced strategies are being used to counter injustices and engender change. This study has attempted to deconstruct binary notions of activism and reconstruct a continuum that validates multiplicity. This study concludes by issuing a new call to the profession – we must consider a shift away from our longstanding binaries and towards a more inclusive understanding of activism. It is hoped that such a shift may empower workers in their pursuits for justice amidst the complex conditions of the twenty-first century.

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Ethics Approval

Curtin University's Human Research Ethics Office (HRE2021-0145) approved this research. The voluntary nature of the study was made explicit and informed consent was obtained. Those interviewed in pairs were advised that confidentiality could not be guaranteed.

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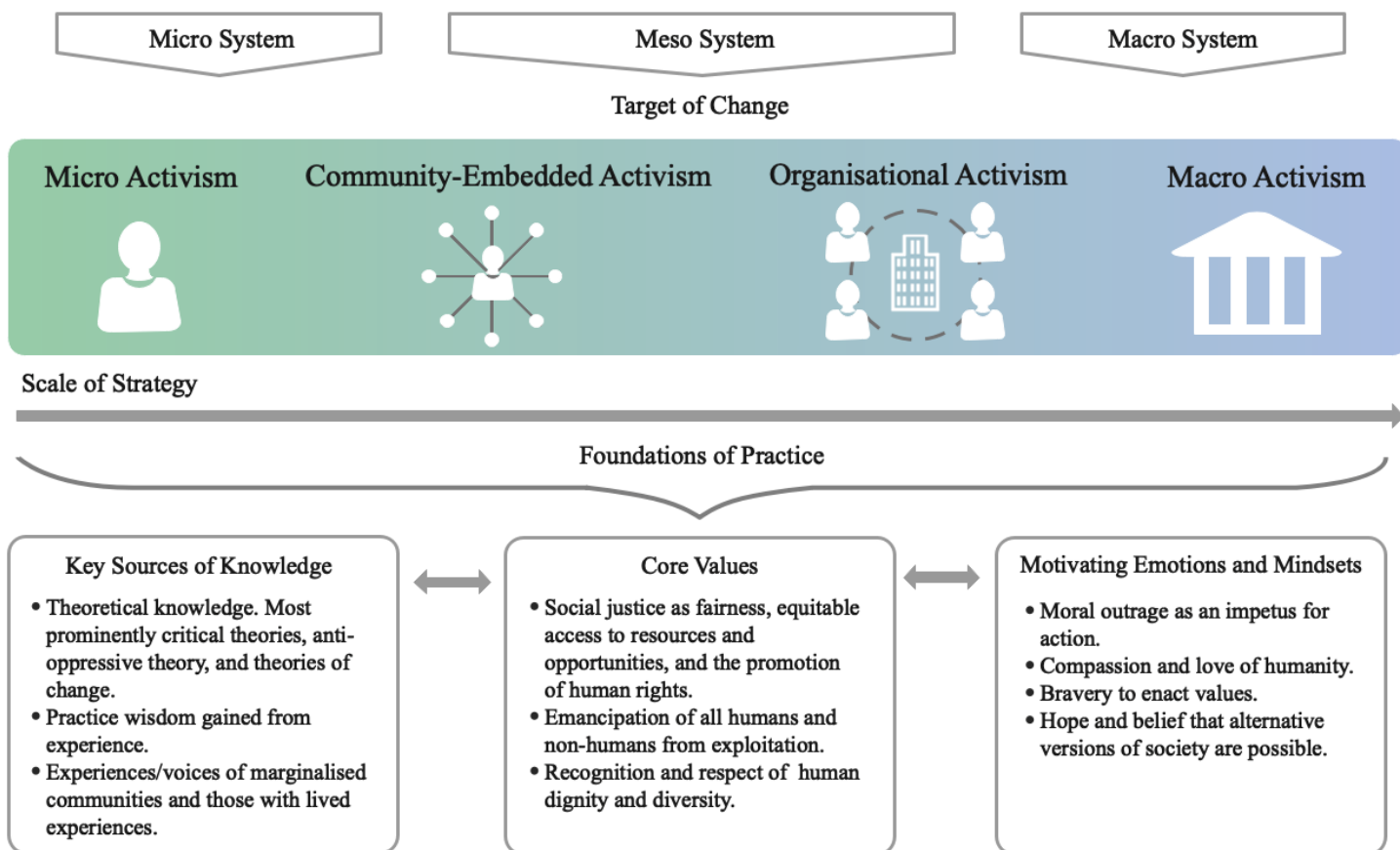


Figure 2

Continuum Model of Social Work Activism

Table 3*Examples of Activities Used to Practise Activism Across the Continuum*

Classification	Examples of Activities
Micro activism	<p>Promote tolerance, empathy, and understanding by challenging exclusionary discourses in one-on-one conversations.</p> <p>Influence others and raise awareness through respectful dialogue and role modelling.</p> <p>Resist neoliberal ideologies in practice by recognising the impact of structures and systems on consumers.</p> <p>Find spaces for resistance in everyday practice (e.g., advocating with consumers, bending/circumventing rules, over-servicing).</p>
Community-embedded activism	<p>Organise or participate in local initiatives (e.g., organising events or using media to raise awareness on community issues).</p> <p>Create spaces in the community to promote dialogue and amplify voices of those with lived experiences (e.g., hosting events with lived-experience speakers to raise awareness and challenge dominant narratives and discourses).</p> <p>Lobby local decision makers (council or members of parliament) through letters, meetings, or community demonstrations (events or campaigns).</p> <p>Challenge organisational policies that contribute to exclusion.</p>

Organisational activism	<p>Partner with colleagues and leverage organisational mechanisms to make changes to internal programs and processes.</p> <p>Listen deeply to service-user experiences and use workplace networks and resources to facilitate consumer-led changes within the organisation.</p> <p>Blow the whistle on unethical and dehumanising practices.</p> <p>Collaborate with other organisations to raise awareness and consciousness about an issue.</p>
Macro activism	<p>Organise or participate in public demonstrations (e.g., marches, rallies, protests).</p> <p>Conduct and use research to inform policy submissions and political advocacy.</p> <p>Use public media (e.g., newspapers, cartoons, art and literature, social media, television) to raise awareness about issues and injustices and promote change.</p>

Figure 3
Contextual Influences on Social Work Activism

