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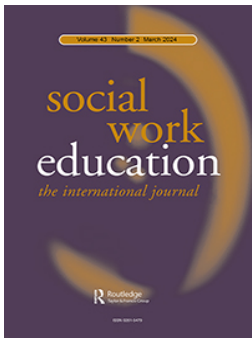
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# Being, knowing and doing: aligning ontology, epistemology, and axiology to develop an account of social work as practice

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## Abstract

This article takes as its starting point reflections from social work academics at a Scottish university around persistent tensions between the nature of social work practice and the ways in which social work students and social workers talk about it. Practice (perhaps by definition) is practical, whereas how it is spoken and written about often betrays instrumental, narrow or dated clinical orientations. Picking up on the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) definition of social work as a practice-based profession and drawing on the literature around the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), we seek to (re)invigorate the case for social work as practice. We argue that this offers students and practitioners a conceptual framework through which they might articulate and validate what they do. We begin by critiquing current orientations to social work. We then come on to propose a broadly Aristotelean concept of practice. We make some suggestions for how this might better orient social work to the nature and demands of contemporary professionalism. We conclude by considering the implications of our argument for social work education and practice.

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Aristotle; social work; practice; theory; scholarship of teaching and learning

## Introduction

Prompted by an upcoming university and regulatory body review of social work qualifying programmes and, more generally, by the authors' interests in professional education and identity, this article offers an account of social work practice and how we might best prepare students for and support practitioners in it. It reflects conversations among social work academics at a Scottish university around the limited ways that students on practice placements seem to feel they are expected to talk or write about practice. Despite exhortations from academic staff to do otherwise, we observe a discernible default toward procedural knowledge, often confused as theory, or dated and individualized psychological theories. In the better assignments, such theories might offer some insights but, often, attempts to apply them can feel bolted on, retrospective and not reflective of what goes on in actual social work practice.

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More broadly, the situation we describe reflects the major theory to practice gaps noted in the social work profession (Askeland & Payne, 2001; Finne et al., 2022; Longhofer & Floersch, 2012; Munro, 2011; Tadesse & Elsen, 2023).

In England Social Work Teaching Partnerships (SWTPs) were developed by the Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care to address this theory to practice gap through facilitating collaborative arrangements between HEIs and service delivery partners. A recent special issue of the journal *Practice* (Cocker, 2023) sets out to take the pulse in relation to how such partnerships are working. Despite the intentions of the SWTPs, Lane (2023, p. 27), in one contribution to this volume, identifies a continuing gap 'between academic input and the realities and challenges of current social work practice'. Against this backdrop, we ask the question of how this gap might be bridged. We suggest that this is unlikely to happen through further structural initiatives but requires a conceptual deconstruction of the nature of practice itself. This takes us into the philosophical realms of ontology, epistemology, and axiology and how the three align (or often don't align) in social work.

To undertake this task, we turn to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). SOTL, as a field of study, involves undertaking systematic inquiry about student learning informed by scholarship. Baume and Popovic (2016) suggest three ways in which SOTL might be practiced: (1) reflecting critically on practice; (2) using ideas from the literature and (3) contributing to the literature, all with a view to informing how student and professional learning might be conceptualized and improved. Consistent with this typology, this article reflects on the tension in social work education identified above, and then uses ideas from the SOTL literature to explore this. The article is reflective and conceptual rather than empirical although, consistent with SOTL's encouragement to look to a range of sources of knowledge, which may be from teaching, research, and the reflection on these (Baume & Popovic, 2016), we draw on some research findings of how social workers talk about knowledge to illustrate our case. Our thesis seeks to link social work's ontology, epistemology, and axiology to bring together what social work *is*, what kind of knowledge it draws on and what kind of values informs its practice so that it might better give an account of itself. In doing so, we draw on the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) definition of social work, to make the case for social work as practice. We argue that this opens possibilities to better articulate a knowledge base that aligns with the profession's sense of purpose and, in so doing, to assert a progressive civic and political agenda for it. We hope it may serve as a precursor to more empirical work around the nature of social work and its knowledge base but also that it is of some current analytic value to academics, practice educators, students, and practitioners.

## Social work knowledge

What kind of thing social work is (its ontology) and its knowledge base (its epistemology) have always been plural and contested. Historical accounts of the profession's emergence and evolution from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards make clear that competing ideas about its mission and methods are written into its being, as is evident in the very different orientations of pioneers such as Mary Richmond and Jane Addams (Tadesse & Elsen, 2023). The profession operates not just 'in between' people, groups, and service areas but is also positioned between the individual and state systems and structures.

Tensions around the nature of social work and its knowledge extend into debates about what kind of paradigm should guide practice among a range of possibilities (Garrett, 2013; Howe, 2017; McGregor, 2019; Payne, 1996), oftentimes, escalating into political debates about what and how social work should be taught (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). Unless these tensions can somehow be reconciled, social work is always likely to be a provisional activity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This liminal state may not be a bad thing and could be argued to be a strength (S. Webb, 2006). However, we rarely adequately articulate the nature of this indeterminacy but rather, try to measure ourselves against other professions whose knowledge base seems harder and more scientific. We need to become comfortable in recognizing and claiming the aporetic nature of social work (Daly et al., 2023). We argue, here, that (re)conceiving social work as practice offers a foundational rationale and identity for the profession.

### **Deconstructing existing social work paradigms**

Before making the case for social work as practice, we consider existing paradigms. Of the different schema we refer to in the preceding paragraph, we focus in on Garrett's (2013) typology of orientations: therapeutic; individualist-reformist; socialist-collective or managerial-technocratic, as these seem to reflect recognizable orientations in contemporary social work practice.

The default approach to knowledge in practice settings would seem to be to fall back on Garrett's (2013) managerial-technocratic orientation. In a recent longitudinal study of newly qualified social workers, for instance (Grant et al., 2022), participants listed what they wanted to know to support practice as legislation, risk assessment and risk management, and social work interventions. In each of the five years studied, the least important areas of knowledge among participants included social work theory and research and evidence summaries, reinforcing the theory to practice gap noted above.

In writing about practice, students and practitioners may seek to temper this managerial technocratic orientation with therapeutic or individual reformist claims and to do so, they generally turn to psychology. A default psychological orientation is evident in how students think about the social work task. In one of our programme modules, which, even in its title, explicitly exhorts students to consider the structural context of social work, most students respond to the case study that they are to write about by proposing counseling for the different characters in the scenario, with rarely a nod to the structural determinants of their difficulties (or indeed any awareness of the inefficacy of many counseling interventions). Practice studies describing and analyzing work done on placement invariably draw on old favorites, such as Maslow, Erikson, Bowlby, attachment theory more generally and increasingly Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma, these latter orientations ostensibly and problematically reinforced by claims to neuroscientific provenance (Munro & Musholt, 2014; Wastell & White, 2017).

One might ponder various explanations for this state of affairs: whether college social care courses, which some students have studied before coming to social work, might foreground such theories; whether our own teaching and assessment practices encourage

students to think and write about social work in conventional casework ways; whether professional standards frameworks narrow the range of possible versions of social work or whether practice educators revert to the kind of social work they may have encountered in their own training. At another level, we might consider cultural dispositions among millennials or Gen Z, those born after the mid 90s, which seem to reflect a tendency to look toward individualizing and identity-based rather than structural causes of social problems (Fenton, 2020). Regardless of why they might predominate, both these orientations, the managerial technocratic and the therapeutic often come together—psychological theory can be thought to offer scientific and ‘evidence-based’ solutions to social problems in more measurable and accountable ways than what social workers actually do, which can appear woolly by comparison. Yet, both are problematic in terms of their epistemological bases, which are dissonant with the nature of social work practice.

### ***The problems with a managerial-technocratic orientation***

What Garrett (2013) identifies as a managerial-technical orientation to practice fits with the ‘Third Way’, proposed by the New Labour government that came to power in the UK in 1997 with the intention to take the politics out of policy and instead to focus on a technocratic concern for ‘what works’ (Jordan, 2010). In a context of greater public sector accountability and regulation, a political response to the seeming indeterminacy of social work was to apply medical notions of evidence to measure its effectiveness. S. A. Webb (2001), Sommerfeld (2005), and Gray et al. (2009) attribute social work’s knowledge crisis to the rise of the resultant evidence-based practice (EBP) movement. Critics of EBP point to its positivist orientation, explicitly scientific aspirations, and narrow epistemological assumptions as being incompatible with the messiness, ambiguity, and inevitable political positioning of much social work practice (S. A. Webb, 2001). 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., 2016).

A managerial-technocratic orientation toward practice requires what Sheppard (2012) calls a technical instrumental approach to knowledge, which he describes as a framework within which decisions are made and action taken on the basis of technical rules or procedures. Managerialism looks to tools such as targets and key performance indicators, while, relatedly, it has both spawned and been subsumed into regulatory frameworks that produce codes and checklists on the premise that we can measure quality by ticking boxes (Biesta, 2013). The power of this narrative is evident in social workers’ desire for knowledge of interventions (Grant et al., 2022). Yet, when technical instrumentalism predominates, discretion, imagination, or innovation is discouraged or punished (M. Smith, 2020). This has a conservative and foreclosing effect on practice, which is not only misguided but can be dangerous. Merely following the rules can lead to seriously deleterious outcomes for clients (Smith, Cree et al., 2017).

### ***The problems with therapeutic approaches***

As social work academics, we should also be skeptical of assumptions of psychological theory improving practice. The evidence base for the efficacy of ‘treatment’ approaches, generally in social work, is not strong. Attempts to apply attachment theory to practice, for instance, are conceptually questionable (Smeeton, 2017; Smith et al., 2017; S. White et al., 2019) and come across as banal when social workers try to describe how it is used (Bjerre et al., 2023). Similarly, the current vogue for trauma-informed practice lacks a credible evidence base (M. Smith & Monteux, 2023). More broadly, programmatic interventions don’t work; they expose a paradox, demanding program integrity, ie fidelity to the prescribed rules and practices of a programme, yet to make them work, practitioners must adapt them to fit their particular circumstances, thus subverting program integrity (Junker Harbo & Kemp, 2020). Even in those rare instances where programmes might be argued to show some efficacy, their significance in bringing about successful outcomes is at best secondary to the role of the helping relationship.

### **Radical alternatives and their limitations**

Concerns regarding the individualized nature of therapeutic orientations led, in the early years of professional social work in the 1970s and 80s, to radical and/or community-based alternatives, what Garrett (2013) might group as socialist-collective approaches. In their early iterations, these took on structural critiques of poverty. They later moved on to ideas of anti-oppressive practice, which often failed to move beyond the micro level of respecting minorities’ cultural beliefs, to adequately address the impact of broader structural forces (Fenton, 2017; McLaughlin, 2013). More recently, ostensibly radical concerns have crystallized around critical theory, which has seen a shift away from concerns around social class to a focus on group identities, a trend that is subject to critique in terms of its implications for social work (Fenton & Smith, 2019; S. A. Webb, 2010).

In an attempt to reinvigorate a radical spirit, Ornellas et al. (2018) turn to the IFSW definition of social work (2014) as a:

... practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.

Ornellas et al. explore the implications of this definition for the ontology of social work. They argue the need for an appreciation of the macro and structural influences on social functioning, encompassing a collective rather than an individual orientation. While such a prospectus might be instinctively attractive to many social workers and academics, in the current political climate, the strength of individualistic, managerial-technocratic, and therapeutic paradigms can act to crowd out any socialist-collective alternative. Moreover, at an everyday level, social work students and practitioners can struggle to locate the macro in how they conceive of and write about social work, perhaps because the nature of what they do, engaging with the messy lifeworld contexts of clients’ everyday troubles happens mostly in the micro rather than the macro. In this sense, harkening back to previous iterations of radical social work in the current political climate may reflect the

triumph of hope over experience. Perhaps, we need to be more pragmatic and aim toward Fenton's (2019) idea of the 'lazy radical', where social workers at least recognize the political context of social work and aim to ameliorate this in everyday practice, without necessarily adopting an activist position. In fact, Fenton's lazy radical may find a home in the idea of social work as practice that we come on to develop; radical social work perhaps needs to begin with a radical reconceptualization of how we understand social work knowledge.

The point we seek to make in this section is that existing orientations to social work do little more than reflect ideological preferences and none of them manage to capture the essence of what social workers do or how they do it in everyday practice. Before we begin to explore this observation conceptually, we take a slight detour to consider how social workers talk about their practice.

### **How social workers talk about practice**

While reiterating that the article is not an empirical one, we draw here on some illustrative examples of how a sample of 19 Scottish social workers of different levels of experience and from a range of diverse fields of practice, talk about that practice. The examples are taken from the findings from one of the authors' PhD (Daly, 2018) and are elaborated in a previous publication (Daly et al., 2023). The wider focus of the study was on professional identity but given the connections between identity and knowledge (Greenwood, 1957), participants, understandably, referred to their knowledge base.

Almost all of the social workers interviewed struggled to adequately articulate their role and function in a way that they felt might sit alongside that of other professions, given what several called its 'complexity', 'vagueness', and 'fuzziness'. This fuzziness was compounded by a sense that workers needed to be a 'jack of all trades' or 'a bit of a social work handyman'. They recognized and gave examples of the impact of managerialism on their practice. In the context of social work knowledge, participants felt that the push toward EBP reflected attempts to remove complexity from practice and that claims to evidence brought an illusion of greater certainty to what are often aporetic problems. But when it came to actual direct practice, the tasks undertaken were described, not so much in 'evidence-based' but in practical terms, involving things like procuring carpets and helping clients buy TVs, help them unpack and to put pictures up on their walls. Amidst this tension of engaging in practical tasks against a backdrop of managerial-technocratic demands, there remained for most participants a sense of moral purpose and an evocation of an idea of service, a point we return to. One participant spoke of social work in terms of a gift relationship. A concept of care was evident and often explicit in how participants understood and conceived of their role.

So, what might these brief and admittedly partial accounts of knowledge and identity suggest about the nature of social work? The first thing that struck us was that practice has a teleological dimension to it, informed by a sense of moral purpose to care or serve. Interestingly, in the context of the increasing push toward psychological interventions, practitioners never described what they did in clinical terms. Respondents saw themselves as generalists, doing practical, everyday tasks for and with clients. Such practice happened in the course of quotidian encounters. The work might be thought of as



situated and relational, happening not on the academic high ground but in the ‘swampy lowlands’, where knowledge is messy and ambiguous (Schon, 1983).

Despite the seeming indeterminacy of social work’s knowledge base, one of the messages that was apparent from the study, was that those interviewed across different domains of practice, felt confident that they knew what social work was and felt comfortable in their identities as social workers. However, they could find it hard to articulate what it is they do in theoretical terms. Yet, in the absence of a conceptual framework within which to locate their knowledge, social workers feel they need to do so through the sort of scientific or technical rationality that other professions can call upon (Taylor & White, 2006). Green (2009), however, makes the case that social work operates to a different rationality or logic to many other professions; the practical, moral essence of their job requires a practical, rather than a technical rationality. In the next section of this article, we develop an argument for such a practical rationality, seeking to articulate an epistemological position that is consistent with and validates what it is that social workers do and the kind of knowledge they describe. To do so, we return to the IFSW definition of social work. While others have used this to make the case for the definition’s more high-level possibilities, (such as human rights and indigenous knowledge) we home in, not on its macro levels but on its baseline identification of social work as ‘a practice-based profession’ (IFSW, 2014), a phrase that can seem so taken-for-granted that it doesn’t require any further examination. It is this idea of practice that we now explore.

## Social work as practice

The idea of practice requires an understanding of the form(s) of knowledge that might allow one to elucidate such practice. Our focus here is ontology (the nature and being of a thing) and epistemology (its knowledge base), a discussion that by its nature also incorporates an axiological (or value) dimension. There is little discussion in the social work literature around the connection between ontology and epistemology, Hothersall (2016) being one of the few authors to have done so. The two become difficult to separate if we conceive of social work as practice; the profession’s knowledge base emerges out of and through what it is social workers do and how they do it.

There have been occasional, though not sustained, attempts to conceptualize social work as practice. In an early example, Whan makes a case for the profession to be seen ‘as a form of practical, moral engagement, and not primarily as a matter of technique’ (1986, p. 243). It is ‘a form of service to others’ enacted through daily encounters. He goes on to give a broadly Aristotelian account of the nature of practice, which we come on to describe and develop. There is a clear teleological aspect to Whan’s (1986) understanding of practice. He states that ‘Implicit in the act of service, of helping the other, is some version of the good. When asked to account for what one does, when asked to justify one’s actions, it is to an idea of the good that we turn’ (p. 244).

Without drawing explicitly on Aristotle, Parton (2000, p. 450) also picks up on the idea of practice, arguing that ‘a commitment to something called practice is central to the profession’s *raison d’être*’. Like Whan, and building on Jordan (1978), he draws out the tension between scientific and humanist orientations. Parton echoes Sheppard’s (1995) view that in considering knowledge, we need to be concerned not just with theoretical validity but practice validity—ie knowledge that is consonant with the nature and

purpose of social work. More recently, Smeeton (2017) has made the link between Aristotle and Hannah Arendt's writing on practice, which might rightly be considered neo-Aristotelian, to assert that social work is distinctly practice.

But what is practice? We now come on to explicate this through offering a brief account of Aristotle's forms of knowledge and how these might provide a conceptual grounding to an understanding of social work practice, through explicating an account of its epistemology and linked axiology.

### Grounding practice in Aristotle's intellectual virtues

Aristotle's ideas have been brought to bear on several of the 'people professions' (see Biesta, 2013; Bondi, 2011; Dunne, 1993; Jones et al., 2013; Kinsella, 2010; Mercieca & Mercieca, 2020; R. Smith, 1999) but their application to social work has been intermittent (Gray & Schubert, 2013; Lovat & Gray, 2008; Papouli, 2019; Smeeton, 2017; Whan, 1986; J. White, 2007).

Aristotle's ethics converge around an idea of virtue. They are teleological in the sense that they are oriented toward an end point and encompass a moral purpose. The end point or *telos* for Aristotle is his concept of *eudaimonia*, which can variously be translated as human flourishing or 'the good life' (Knight, 2007). Crucially, *eudaimonia* is not a state of individual self-fulfillment as contemporary therapeutic culture might profess but emerges in the social sphere or *polis*. Human beings are mutually dependent, existing in a network of relationships (MacIntyre, 1999).

Aristotle's understanding of what was good and right lay, not in rules and principles, which form the basis of social work codes (Clark, 2000), but in the character of a human actor. He identified broad moral virtues, such as courage, generosity, justice, and gentleness. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009), he also set out a range of intellectual virtues, three of which are commonly drawn on to explicate his view of knowledge. Kreber (2016) makes the case that Aristotle's intellectual virtues need to be augmented by his wider virtues—so knowledge cannot be purely cognitive or intellectual but should also be informed by and embodied in wider personal virtues or character traits.

Aristotle's most commonly cited intellectual virtues are (based on Flyvbjerg, 2001):

- *Episteme*: which is scientific or theoretical knowledge that is universal, invariable, and context-independent
- *Techne*: which is pragmatic knowledge, variable, context-dependent, and governed by a conscious goal, and
- *Phronesis*: which is practical knowledge that is ethically based and involves deliberation about values. It is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented toward action (or practice)

*Techne* involves making or producing something in a process that Aristotle called *poiesis*; it requires skill but not necessarily character or moral judgment (M. Smith, 2020). It might draw upon theoretical (epistemic) knowledge to inform the technical skill required to complete a task. One might think of a skilled surgeon who draws on the latest scientific knowledge to inform his surgical skills (although even here the connection may not be entirely linear). But as Bondi (2011) has noted, such a model of applying theory to

practice is unsuited to ‘people-work’; we are dealing with the wrong, or at least partial, forms of knowledge. Put simply, episteme and *techne* alone do not align with the nature or purpose of social work as practice and while necessary they are also insufficient as intellectual virtues for the profession. What we want from students and practitioners, is a coming together of a range of insights and judgments deriving from different sources, to inform what they do with clients, infused with a sense of moral purpose and social responsibility.

This kind of knowledge is better understood through Aristotle’s intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, variously translated as practical wisdom, practical reasoning, or practical judgment (Knight, 2007). While *techne* results in a product through the process of *poiesis*, *phronesis* happens in the domain of *praxis*, which requires that a practitioner demonstrates a commitment to wise and prudent action in a concrete and historical space and in conditions of uncertainty (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

From such a perspective, knowledge emerges in and through practice and through the types of knowledge generated within communities of practice and is transformed by it. MacIntyre (2013) identifies such communities of practice as sites of knowledge construction within which what constitutes standards of excellence in a particular field of study are co-constructed among practitioners and, as we come on to suggest, social work clients. To achieve the kind of practice validity that might render such knowledge useful and suited to social work cannot rely on theory alone but requires that this is augmented by committed moral action.

Such an understanding of knowledge renders practitioners accountable not primarily to administrative procedure or regulatory code but to the clients and colleagues they work with. This does not absolve them of accountability but requires that they articulate a credible and justifiable account of how and why they reached a particular decision and took a particular action in a particular set of circumstances. Such justification requires deliberation and reflexivity. Clark describes this as a hermeneutical (interpretive) process ‘demanding a repeated and progressive quest to reconcile the detailed particularities of the case with complex, competing and evolving moral imperatives’ (Clark, 2012, p. 115). Such an understanding of how practitioners operate or ought to operate is antithetical to managerial—technocratic ways of thinking.

### **Features of 21<sup>st</sup> century professionalism from the scholarship of learning and teaching (SOTL)**

We now come to develop some of the implications of adopting the kind of practical rationality outlined above, drawing heavily but not exclusively on Kreber’s (2016) utilization of broadly Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian ideas in her scholarship of professional education and identity. Her ideas are set out in a series of articles and brought together in her book ‘Educating for civic-mindedness’ (2016). Harkening back to Aristotle’s idea of the *polis*, her writing essentially reframes professionalism beyond solving the technical problems that arise in practice, to locate it as centering around civic engagement, exemplified in working alongside others in a search for greater social justice.

This is a rich seam of scholarship that merits further engagement in terms of its implications for social work, and we can do no more here than touch on a few different

ideas. Such ideas, we believe can, if developed, contribute to the better alignment of the ontological, epistemological, and axiological features of the profession and suggest some directions of travel for social work education. But firstly, it is helpful to recognize a context to these discussions in the fundamental ontological tension between a managerial culture of performativity and a philosophical concept of strangeness, which the philosopher of education Ronald Barnett (2004) identifies as being central to professionalism.

### ***Performativity versus strangeness***

This Aristotelian idea of knowledge as contextual and dependent on practitioner judgment is dissonant with a managerial logic, which is primarily interested in standardization and control. Indeed, there is a disincentive for practitioners to exercise professional judgment, to bend the rules even, in a regulatory climate that is seen to punish such initiative (Simpson et al., 2020). Furthermore, while *phronesis* is directed toward a morally informed end point, managerialism, being interested primarily in ideas of economy and the efficient execution of a task, casts aside any idea of a wider moral purpose or telos. As Bauman (2000) observes, surrounding notions of care with rules and regulations, dissipates the call to serve, which Whan (1986) argues, provides social work with its foundational logic. The accounts of practitioners, which we introduce above, suggest that a teleological call to care and service is still present. But it can be ground down and subverted when standardization, control, technical efficiency, and metrics become the drivers of practice. But it is also hindered by pedagogical assumptions of the kind of linear connection between theory and practice that we can continue to promote in social work education.

Barnett (2004) counterposes the seeming solidity that managerialism seeks but rarely achieves, with what he identifies as the core disposition to be acquired through contemporary higher education, namely a capacity to cope with epistemological uncertainty and complexity, which, together, he asserts, result in an existential experience of ‘strangeness’. The capacity to cope in conditions of strangeness, to do more than just follow the rules, is argued to be central to the moral commitment and social engagement that Kreber (2016) places at the heart of professionalism. This is her idea of civic-mindedness, through which professionals work alongside others, contributing to their local and global communities toward a common good. It involves doing practical things toward this end but is also grounded in and enacted through the dispositions, ideals, types of knowledge and political emotions of professionals. In this sense, it involves critical thinking but also, relatedly, the development of a certain kind of person, one ‘disposed towards questioning and criticizing for the sake of more informed and responsible engagement’ (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008, p. 76).

This process of self-development of a questioning and critical professional requires what Kreber calls authenticity, a process of formation that provides one with a story to live by. It involves what Mollenhauer and Friesen (2013) describe as the mutual engagement of self and world and self and others. The implications of this are profound for they take us away from conceptions of practice as being concerned with the demonstration of particular competencies toward practice as a ‘way of the self’, within which the personal qualities and dispositions of practitioners come to the fore. This is transgressive; it

challenges the entire regulatory and pedagogical edifice of social work education and practice.

### **Implications for practice and for social work education**

The thrust of this article thus far has been to engage with a philosophy of education as it might relate to social work. We now come to consider some of the more practical implications of this for social work education.

To be clear, our argument for the need to focus on the development of a certain kind of person is not a call for introspection or a wholesale shift away from traditional sources of knowledge or intellectual virtues. In some respects, we would like to see more and better theory. However, if we accept the ontological grounding of social work as a moral practical endeavor, then there is a need to look beyond recourse to attempts to apply the old favorites of psychology and sociology to social work practice and to bring in philosophical and other perspectives from the humanities (Kreber, 2016) and the arts (Schubert & Gray, 2015) and to consider connections across them—essentially to remove the tramlines that can constrain much current social work education. Looking to the arts might engage students at the emotional and political levels required to create the kind of cognitive dissonance that might take them to a place where they become more comfortable in strangeness. This is consistent with contemporary calls for a more reflexive professionalism for social work (Van Beveren et al., 2023). It requires pedagogies that provoke students to critically reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and values so that they might move beyond frames of reference that limit how they make meaning of their own experiences and the experiences of others. Moreover, teaching ought to require and encourage students to take risks, take a stance and ‘go public’ with their knowledge claims, subjecting these, willingly, to the critical scrutiny of others (Kreber, 2014). Phronetic and reflexive learning processes are likely to be as important as epistemic content in encouraging a capacity to cope with the kind of strangeness they will encounter in practice.

In writing this paper, it has become apparent that the social work profession and its various professional and regulatory bodies are aware of the fundamental theory to practice gaps that have beset the profession throughout its history. But they rarely know what to do about these and embark down wasteful dead-ends of structural and managerial initiatives which invariably fail because they are not grounded in the required philosophical and pedagogical thinking; the process reverts to technical instrumentalism. The social work academy could do more to remedy this deficit through greater engagement with the literature on the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SOTL).

The centrality of civic-mindedness and civic engagement identified by Kreber (2016) as being at the heart of professional practice suggests that this process of engagement with SOTL cannot be advanced within the academy but needs to engage dialogically, dynamically and critically with community partners, both professional and experiential. Moreover, in a context where social workers describe the source of their knowledge, not so much as theoretical as emerging from work experience, colleagues, supervisors, and clients (Daly et al., 2023; Finne et al., 2022) the location of excellence as emerging from practice itself perhaps shifts the focus of professional education toward MacIntyre’s (2013) account of practice as emerging out of communities of practice. This might lead us less to seek to apply theory to practice as we so often attempt to do but to look for

theory in accounts of practice. Pedagogically, this might support learning approaches such as Problem or Enquiry and Action Based Learning, within which practitioners and clients become co-producers in the design and delivery of learning experiences. We might even go further than this and consider initiatives such as academics being co-located in practice settings and vice-versa.

In many ways, we have set out an agenda for a radical reconceptualization of social work practice and education. We have argued that radical change in how we conceive of social work needs to happen not initially or primarily through structural analysis and political action; this has rarely happened. Rather, the radical spirit has to be evident first at the level of ontology, axiology, and epistemology. This is where Fenton's lazy radicals come in—radical social work is practiced, not on the high ground of clinical programmes or political dogma but in seeking to do the right thing and in the right way in everyday practice situations in all their messiness and ambiguity.

## Conclusion

We have sought in this article to make the case for a scholarship of social work that is ontologically, epistemologically and axiologically aligned. The central questions we asked were: what kind of thing is social work and how best do we know about and practice it? This led us to consider the idea of practice itself, which we identify as a moral-practical and situated activity that finds its form and value in everyday experience and through collaborative social action.

Asking and engaging with such questions highlights radical implications for how we might approach social work education, shifting its focus beyond epistemic knowledge and attempt to apply this in practice situations toward the development of a particular kind of person, one motivated by civic-mindedness and self-development and comfortable in strangeness. It is only through such a radical reconceptualizing of the nature of social work knowledge that we might begin to make inroads into the persistent and growing theory to practice gaps that continue to undermine the profession and its capacity for good. While there have been various attempts over the years to develop what might be termed a practical rationality for social work, these have been intermittent. It is our wish to encourage a more sustained engagement and to suggest that the SOTL literature can provide important insights into how we might do so.

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