

Dissent in social work: Troubling the status quo

Dissent, as the right and capacity to disagree, challenge orthodox views, and articulate alternative ways of seeing and knowing, is the cornerstone of an open society. Dissenting analysis troubles the status quo by questioning the official truths which favour vested interests and perpetuate structural inequality. As the retiring Auckland law professor, Jane Kelsey, reminded us in her recent valedictory address, the liberal legal and political system is built around a particular distribution of rights and freedoms consistent with capitalist social and economic relations.

The common law system, and doctrines of family, taxation, contract, criminal or constitutional law, serves a hegemonic function to normalise and sustain unequal power relations. And while ideological conventions of “equality before the law”, “due process” and the “rule of law” mitigate the excesses of raw power, they also legitimise and institutionalise those inequalities (Kelsey, 2022).

Social workers interact with people who experience oppression in various shapes and forms. They have the opportunity, at least at times, to advocate and agitate for systemic reform: to speak truth to power. This function has become both more challenging and more important as welfare programmes have contracted and political settings have shifted, in various forms, to the political right in contemporary times.

Uncertainty has escalated in the face of global pandemic threat, environmental degradation and geopolitical conflict. This climate of insecurity tends to foster simplistic, racist and, in some instances, neo-fascist prescriptions for social and political reform. It is important to identify the deceptive appeal of far-right ideology in

this context and to recognise it for what it is: a mix of regressive and fear-driven ideas that does not serve the interests of those who are drawn to it.

Narrow and distorted populist beliefs can be comforting in the face of overwhelming angst, but such dogma merely serves the interests of those who produce and market it: it is a product of deception and disinformation as opposed to dissent in the sense of the critical democratic right to name, and explain, social injustice. The articles in this Special Issue speak to the issue of dissenting social work voices in a variety of important areas: consent and dissent and the fracturing of political forces; dissent against public health responses to Covid-19 and populism; our challenging history in social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand; social work dissent about the politics of professional regulation; confronting the climate crisis; arguments about the end of social work; and operationalising of dissent to challenge the “hostile environment” for migrant children and families.

We start this issue with an invited commentary. In 2021, the *International Journal of Social Welfare* described Paul Michael Garrett as “probably the most important critical social work theorist in the English-speaking world”. For many years, he has been a member of the editorial collective of the socialist, feminist, and anti-racist journal *Critical Social Policy*. In 2021, he published an important new book, *Dissenting Social Work: Critical Theory, Resistance, and Pandemic* (Garrett, 2021a). He is a member of the Royal Irish Academy. We are delighted to include Paul’s introductory words for this themed issue.

In a study of the views of executive directors and managers of social services in a large

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WORK 34(3), 1–5.

Canadian city, Donna Baines describes how practices that engage with social justice can emerge within systems that are otherwise hostile to social solidarity. She suggests that dissent is resilient to neoliberalism and that narratives of dissent can contribute to the de-legitimation of oppressive social structures and the promotion of emancipatory ways of working. In the context of the growing recognition of historic harms committed against Indigenous children by the Canadian Residential School system, Baines highlights how the process of indigenisation—“in which Indigenous knowledge systems are brought together with Western knowledge systems in order to transform spaces, places, and hearts”—can be understood as a core component of decolonisation, a practice that is increasingly central to dissenting social work, especially in the context of settler colonial states like Canada, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

Joe Whelan’s article shifts our focus to the climate crisis. In “From dissent to authoritarianism: What role for social work in confronting the climate crisis?” Against a backdrop of huge environmental and political challenges, Whelan poses two questions. Firstly, “what sustainable social policies should social work align with?” The answer to this locates climate justice as core to the task of social work. The second question builds on the answer to the first and asks, “does arriving at an adequate response require dissent?” Whelan examines the possibility of dissent alongside the potential for an authoritarian turn in the context of social work. He presents these ideas as tentative and intended to prompt conversation and debate as the climate crisis requires the profession to have some important and urgent conversations.

In “Pūao-te-Atu-tu and dissenting voices of change at New Zealand’s oldest school of social work”, Tamati Cairns and Leon Fulcher reflect on the learnings that can be taken from their intimate lived experience of Māori-centred, Ngāi Tūhoe endorsed, social

work education initiatives developed at the Victoria University School of Social Work. It is argued that teaching and curriculum reforms arising directly from the groundbreaking Pūao-te-Atu-tu of 1986 represented a deeply dissenting approach to the then status quo. It is further argued that vital lessons for current and future education practice, particularly for Māori, can be taken from the innovative nature of this programme and from the process by which it was eventually shut down, particularly in relation to a lack of appropriate fidelity to the relationship with Ngāi Tūhoe.

In “Social Work England: A regulator that has earned or collective dissent”, Joe Hanley critiques social work regulation in England. It is argued that regulatory developments, spanning over a decade, have been ideologically driven and focused on narrowing the focus of the profession. Critical emphasis is directed at the make-up, mandate and performance of the current regulator: Social Work England (SWE). It is argued that this body has favoured an individualised interpretation of social problems and social work. Examples of the regulator seeking to manufacture consent and to appropriate professional representation are set out. Specific criticism is directed at the distorting effect of prescribed continuing professional development (CPD). Hanley proposes that widespread discontent could be mobilised into collective dissent in order to challenge the destructive influence of politically motivated regulation.

Christian Kerr and Nick Watts explore the very practical application of dissent in practice in “Against a bitter tide: How a small UK charity operationalises dissent to challenge the ‘hostile environment’ for migrant children and families”. In the context of the work of a small UK Charity, Together with Migrant Children, the authors apply key facets of the theoretical basis for dissent, using case studies and practice-based reflections on challenges in practice under a very hostile immigration policy. Kerr and Watts explore both the challenges

and opportunities for dissent in social work practice, whether in statutory, non-statutory and wider community development settings. They explore, through practical examples, how dissent can bring *wins* situated in an approach of “cumulative structural and tactical change” that favours dissent as essential to democracy and human rights.

The commentary by Liz Beddoe highlights the complexity of the concept of dissent, noting that it can manifest in forms of resistance to state action founded on populist neoliberal, individualism. The example she explores is the opposition to vaccine mandates introduced by the Aotearoa New Zealand government in August 2021. Beddoe argues that, while mainstream social work values embrace and support collectivist public health measures that offer social protection, social workers must also try to make sense of the angry, anti-vaccination/anti-mandate protests and occupations that emerged in 2022. She mobilises social theory to explore how two different neoliberal tropes were at play during the pandemic: a government-led, pro-science, social democratic version that was as much about protecting the economy as the population; and another more populist, libertarian, anti-authoritarian version—mixed with some far-right, Neo-Nazi and religious zealots—that argued for freedom and human rights enveloped in a mass of public health disinformation. At the same time, in the context of the settler colonial state of Aotearoa New Zealand, Beddoe also considers why some Māori people may have been caught up in the anti-vaccine movement. Beddoe’s commentary is a wake-up call to social workers, not only to cleave closely to the progressive, collectivist, social work values that define us, but also to stay alert to the continuing challenge of a far-right, fundamentalist populist movement that may emerge in other sites of social struggle.

In a viewpoint piece, Caroline McGregor explores what we mean by *social work* and by *dissenting social work*. The context for

her commentary includes the recent debate between Maylea (2021) and Garret (2021b) concerning whether social work has passed its shelf life as a progressive profession, “... is beyond repair and must instead be pushed into the sea” (Maylea, 2021, p. 773), or whether it can be reframed as a *dissenting profession*, committed to social justice and social change (Garret, 2021a,b). McGregor’s position is to argue against what she sees as an unhelpful bifurcation between *radical* and *traditional* accounts of social work practice which she views as oversimplistic and misleading. Instead, she argues (borrowing from Philp, 1979) that we need to frame social work as *mediating the social* in a way that recognises the intimate connectedness between micro-level individual and family issues, and macro-level issues of social structure. In this way, she considers, social workers can also elucidate the connection, and maintain the balance, between the necessary work of social regulation (such as in child protection domains) and more rights-based practices.

In the second part of this issue, we present three additional articles and two research briefs. In an engaging article, the voices of social workers with criminal convictions are heard. In “Social workers with criminal convictions navigating the social work profession”, Suzette Jackson and Ian Hyslop report on a 2019 study where 11 social workers with one or more criminal convictions were interviewed about their experiences with gaining registration in Aotearoa New Zealand. A consistent aspect of participant accounts was the need for clarity and consistency in the way social work education programmes, employers and the Social Workers Registration Board approach educating, registering, and employing people with criminal convictions.

We are pleased to include two very useful articles on the need for improvements in supporting autistic people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Both article authors note that the Aotearoa New Zealand literature on social work with autistic people is fairly sparse.

In “Environmental accessibility for autistic individuals: Recommendations for social work practice and spaces”, Megan Malcolm presents a focused review of the literature to explore the role of social work with autistic individuals, and what is known about autism-friendly approaches, and accessible architecture. Malcolm uses the social model of disability and critical disability theory to make a case for social work advocacy for environmental accessibility for autistic individuals. Malcolm presents *The Environmental Accessibility Infographic* which aids the development of a built environment that is accessible for autistic people and others with sensory processing needs. Malcolm contends that accessibility strategies have the potential to positively impact social workers’ practice with autistic people as they can guide change that will ensure their practice is autism-friendly and anti-oppressive.

In “The impact of individualised funding on the wellbeing of mothers raising an autistic child in Aotearoa New Zealand”, Racheal Priestley, Polly Yeung, and Lareen Cooper present findings from a qualitative study of seven mothers in 2020 who were interviewed about their experiences of raising autistic children and how individualised funding has impacted on them. Key findings indicated that caring for an autistic child has an ongoing negative impact on mothers’ overall wellbeing and the individualised funding did not seem to ease the stresses of caring. Priestly and her colleagues found that mothers raising an autistic child in Aotearoa New Zealand face complex funding systems. Current disability funding frameworks which focus on individuals rather than the family as the unit of care create barriers to support and family wellbeing. Priestly and colleagues urge social workers and policymakers to support more flexible and holistic support systems to meet the unique circumstances of each family.

In the first of two research briefs addressing aspects of self-care, “We need to talk about self-care (but not in the way you think”,

Allison Berkowitz explores the current literature for what it reveals about the frequency and methods by which social workers and students are engaging in self-care. Berkowitz discusses the benefits of, and barriers to, self-care. Through this review, a research gap is highlighted regarding the thoughts and feelings of social workers and students about self-care. Berkowitz urges the profession to talk more about self-care but it must also address the barriers faced by students and practitioners that may prevent full engagement in self-care, and the systemic reasons that lie behind these circumstances.

In a research brief, “The wounded social work student: A strength-based enquiry of personal loss experience and its impact on social work students’ professional practice”, Kathrin McInnerney and Sarah Wayland report on a phenomenological study that explored the *wounded healer* concept amongst Australian social work students who had experienced the death of a loved one. Using semi-structured interviews, final-year social work students were asked to reflect on the positive and negative impacts of their personal loss experience on their emerging professional social work practice. McInnerney and Wayland report a lack of understanding among social work students on how to safely navigate their own loss and suggest responses to address a current gap in the Australian social work curriculum.

Finally, Liz Beddoe reviews a new research text, *The Politics and Ethics of Representation in Qualitative Research: Addressing Moments of Discomfort*, edited by The Critical Methodologies Collective which consists of nine, early-career feminist researchers.

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Liz Beddoe

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