Practitioner scholarship and civic literacy; Will registration lift the game?

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Abstract

At the heart of the move to social work registration in Aotearoa New Zealand has been the quest to bring social work practice into the professional gaze; to define a level of qualification for social work practice, register practitioners, align membership within a peer review framework, and have a system of accountability whereby complaints can be investigated and measures taken to protect standards for social work practice. This framework creating the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) (2006) (with ANZASW as a major stakeholder), means New Zealand has resolved a process to sanction the credentials and qualities social work practice should maintain in our context. By having this prerogative created in legislation social work is gaining a place in the professional domain akin to other occupational groups; taking its opportunity to engage in what Freidson (2001) calls the ‘professionalising project’ of occupations.

This paper takes two facets of the many intellectual and practical factors (ie, the use of theory, competency and technique, the commitment to ethical care, a concern for social justice) that make up the domain of social work. It asks how they in particular may be influenced by the advent of registration in the local scene. Practitioner scholarship and civic literacy have been coined in this instance to capture two elements that could be added to the list as features of social work’s concern. This paper will offer definitional discussion on the nature and salience of these components to the social work domain and then debate the wider issues.

Practitioner scholarship

Hand in hand with the notion of professionalisation runs the idea that there is a distinct body of knowledge that lies behind the work of the practitioner. Becoming a practitioner carries an expectation of being (critically) conversant with a body of knowledge, adept with the way knowledge is derived, applied, challenged and contested. The way social work is placed in regard to its distinct knowledge is highly debated in social work literature (Boyer, 1990; Parton, 2000; Fook, 2002; Banks, 2004; Payne, 2005). It is increasingly argued that social work should strengthen its disciplinary scholarship (Munro, 1998; Payne, 2005) and that with a variety of approaches to ‘evidence’ (Sheldon, 2001) practitioners at the coalface should be
constantly working to test and verify how knowledge is constructed in the practice environment, how it impacts on stakeholders and how it provides social work with the capacity for renewal (Trinder, 2000; Webb, 2001; Sheldon, 2001; Payne, 2005).

Payne (2005) has summarised the debate, saying ‘practice knowledge’ must be honed and formulated by practitioners to ensure the cumulative development of disciplinary canon. Social work knowledge is not only about the collection of anecdotal experiences. It requires systematic reflection, theory building and the testing of theory. Knowledge formed in practice settings may be imparted to future generations of practitioners through apprenticeship, supervisory models of professional education and the more scholastic forms of pedagogy. Many professions do distinguish their ‘practitioner community’ from their ‘academic membership’ and demand much of the partnership between these two domains to establish qualifications and the credentials required to license practice.

The SWRB has placed a qualification at a pivotal place for social work registration in Aotearoa New Zealand. With that position the Board has brought the notion of scholarship inside the notion of competence. It carries the assumption that a graduate has been exposed to the rigor involved with comprehending knowledge in the discipline and the skills of knowledge analysis required to be an effective practitioner. Graduates would have completed a research methods paper as part of their education, along with tasks associated with critical reflection, theory and analysis, and writing for a professional audience. It could be expected that a graduate (and thereby a practitioner) could be expected to be conversant with ‘the theory of practice’, and able to critically appraise the veracity of knowledge used in applied settings - be it their own knowledge, the ideas of their colleagues or their clients. They should be able to query (even challenge) or test and research knowledge and be conversant with ‘the literature’, and so forth. Then, as we are often reminded, social workers must be capable of understanding policies and systems and how to create change in the often fixed entities many see as intractable.

There is a classic lament often made within the ranks, however, that social work needs to do more to develop its professional scholarship. Munro (1998: 47) cited research that indicated scholarship was not a feature of social work practice in the field, while Smith (2001) commented on the local scene. Dominelli (1997), assessing the place of sociology in social work practice, embellishes the point suggesting social work tends to eschew the disciplinary tenets for data gathering, systematic analysis, critique and theorising embedded in its professional education through a strong and historic tradition of sociological input.

Practitioners should be recognised for the studies they mount on the circumstances they find in the real world. Their systematic procedure should challenge orthodoxy. Social work often negotiates the diverse realities that clash in social systems. It is plausible to expect from social work robust attempts to characterise and gather learning from these accounts. They can underline publications, social commentary, professional innovation, conferencing etc. The body of work can be as much about patterns, percentages and statistics as it can be about meanings and the qualitative lessons to be drawn from systematic analysis. It is reasonable, for instance, to be looking for patterns in the domestic violence cases seen by an agency. It is important to understand how these events are dealt with by the many staff involved in the response environment and it can helpful if the narratives used by different actors in a response process are congruent and consistent or frustrated by naiveté or
prejudice – for example, could it be said that all services adopted a feminist approach? (Fook, 2002). Practitioners need to make the veracity of their observations apparent, placing them in the context of appropriate method, ethical care, analysis and advocacy. This paper is not designed to chronicle all the angles of inquiry but it can be added to the critical rumblings that are calling for more scholarly principles in social work practice.

The key point here is the question: Will registration increase the practitioner scholarship expected from social work practitioners? It asks social workers to account for the veracity and tenacity that lies at the heart of their decision making. Their view of the world is unique; they see events and circumstances in repeated and possibly patterned ways that confound and frustrate others. People in positions of power, or caught up in the trauma and distress in which social work enters their lives, are reluctant to see what is present in any situation and at times may not acknowledge the complexity and complicity of many variables. Social work can generate theory and test strategies. Social work practice pivots on observation, analysis, intervention and review. Practitioners take these actions on some of the most intransigent and intractable issues confronting society. Their case work is a window on such matters. The cumulative depiction of the observations and lessons learnt from working in these locations is the stuff that may inform us how not to repeat the risks in another generation.

Research is an essential response to developing strategies in settings in which social work required to act and passing the learning on to another generation of practitioners. It can be applied to evaluate programmes and test theory and to explore the many narratives that make up the voices contingent on practice. Registration places practitioner scholarship under the spotlight. The credentials that registration is based on are not solely about competency with case work. Registration increases the odds that inertia, frustration or resistance cannot linger as hazards to the growth of practitioner scholarship. Practitioners have every reason to show how much it is an implicit part of their practice.

Developing civic capacity

When social work asserts its historical and disciplinary identity and thereby frames an imperative about best practice, it traditionally affirms its role to improve the civic character of contemporary society. Consider the recent definition of social work:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IFSW, 2000).

Although the word civic is not in this hefty statement, the essence of this statement is about civic change. Social work is an occupation emboldened by its commitment to transform the civic culture of the environments where people live their lives. The goal is to achieve a just society. Where social work was fashioned, the likelihood of inequality, social dislocation, discrimination or injustice prevailed (see also Hare, 2004). It prevails still. Professions generally tend to state their purpose in civic terms. Social work has made the claim a part of its vocational profile. Good practice should lead to gains in the civic capacity of all individuals. Contact with a practitioner increases the ability of people to realise and voice their influence
on the world. The critique of such a ‘role’ is that professions occupy and work in the more pervasive and influential locations in any civic order. They are themselves an elite. They are intimately networked with those who have civic strength, influence and power. Social work happens to be an occupational group that understands this irony better than most. It is a profession intent on using its position and the networks that go with it, to create the space for greater inclusion in a wider world. A systemic analysis suggests social work will have an impact on civic society by increasing participation and increasing the space available for different identities. Do we ever ask if these goals have been achieved and, if so, how?

It might be expected that this question could become one of the matters pursued by practitioner scholarship. If something is valued, it tends to be prioritised; if the issue is critical we might expect it to be subject to conceptual rigor and some degree of appraisal. It’s the old chestnut about something being real only when it is measured. Civic practice has too great an implication to be left in the ‘too hard basket’.

The significance of civic activity at the heart of social work gathers renewed zest from the shift in thinking that occurred about the role of social services from our recent ‘experiment’ with welfare reform. The demise of ‘the welfare state’, and then of the neo-liberal ascendancy, both relied to some extent on a critique that social services, constituted as state agencies or markets, failed to meet the needs of many sector interests. Citizens as beneficiaries, voters, lobbies and ‘markets’ and taxpayers took issue with the idea that they were getting an adequate service from the available services. They contested the social conventions built up in defence of the welfare state and emphasised various unifying identities in the positions they were taking. Women, Maori, the elderly, the young, those with different abilities, sexual orientation etc, saw flaws in the generic systems and wanted services akin to their own view of the world. These were critiques over equity and claims for self determination. Identity, once constructed easily on broad bands of income (wages, salaries, shareholders or self-employed) and class (with status and occupational nuances), diversified (in a period also referred to as the end of ‘modernity’, Leonard, 1997) into personalised identities based on self in relation to other. Solidarities formed, with tangible images of strength and risk. Our civic culture was taking a different form.

At risk of making too broad a sweep, social services and social work practice found in this discourse capacity for considerable practice development. The particular Social Development Approach in New Zealand sought to establish ways social services and social practice could be more closely allied with communities concerned with their own development. The new social work environment is increasingly associated with contracts of service to achieve outcomes through roopu teams, iwi social services, Pacific agencies, localised agencies, targeted services to women, children, men, gay youth, etc in ways that are compatible with the distinct nature of these communities and identities. These are not changes to the name over the door, these sites are expected to work in a distinctive manner with appropriate practice and demonstrated outcomes. They harbour commitments to unique approaches to self determination and emancipatory ideals. They impact on the generic services, by characterising difference as a meaningful element, not to be ignored, and are often posed as the organisation’s other ‘partner with’ in order to bring about greater effectiveness in social service provision. Generic agencies are nowadays prepared to define their work in civic as opposed to generic terms so that bilingual, multicultural, age specific, accessible and hospitable services exist for diverse populations.
We have discovered as well that there are some who will react negatively to services and practices shaped on the basis of identity. The 2005 election made this a central argument in a conservative response. Developments in the delivery and practice of partnerships for social services have also been subject to academic critique (Larne, 2004). The new environment remains subject to contestation, a debate begging for rebuttal, not only from the resilience of people who gain strength from these services, but also from the professions that find this environment a more effective location for practice. The regimen of contracting, surveillance and evaluation that has accompanied these developments, of which registration could be seen as a component, creates a context where the civic achievements made in these environments should be demonstrated.

As a result, a significant amount of social practice in New Zealand is now expressed in settings such as roopu teams, iwi social services, victim support, child advocacy, protection from violence, risk aversion, social development, thus improving civic participation. In this environment, how one’s practice sustains civic development is an item of conjecture and professional reflection of which certain outcomes are expected.

**Civic literacy**

The advent of a civic dimension to social service provision is an issue of particular relevance to social work. On the one hand, social workers operate beyond the generic, acknowledging the particular for the person. On the other hand, the complexity of the service apparatus they work in means they are networked into roles and tasks within institutions that address, but in all likelihood constrain and possibly control, the civic options individuals have at their disposal. They must have an oral and written literacy to work with individuals, and another often quite distinct literacy equally susceptible to vernacular and nuance, to work with organisations and structures. The latter, of course, is still a dialogue with individuals.

Practitioners are often members of other disciplinary traditions, engaged in some role and bound by certain responsibilities. They are not reified systems but people who have knowledge, values, customs and powers with which they can act upon the world. Their ‘world’ consists of different discourses. The social worker is an agent brokering the outcomes between the different competing narratives. As employees of a service, professionals cannot be captured by one or any dominant discourse. They cannot be reluctant to seek gains for individuals, by challenging institutions that have pervasive powers to meet the needs demanded by a diverse and particular community. It follows that the civic narrative required of social work, of social workers toiling hard at the coal face, must be both client centred and institutionally capable. Knowing the narratives that influence organisations is as critical as the conversations that enable the client to have influence.

The concept of civic literacy, therefore, might begin with a consciousness of the need to achieve civic gains. It should mean that a diverse community receives equitable outcomes from their contact with a suitably robust and effective institution. The language of the client, their age, ethnicity, gender, for example, provide no reason for outcomes to be skewed or vary – except that it may be precisely the reason outcomes are appropriate and different. The goal of social services provision is equity as distinct from equality. The organisation, its workforce, the practitioners who are the real face of the service, should possess that degree of civic literacy that enables the different narratives to enrich the overall civic milieu.
Banks (2004) draws attention to the ‘special ethics’ that run alongside the standard expectations of professionalism. She argues social practitioners must have a facility for advocacy. In turn they must have an acute understanding of the ethical basis by which individuals are entitled to their rights, even in a contested domain. This, however, does not negate the expectation that social service practitioners understand the stakeholders’ interests that impinge on the options available. This is not an argument for capitulating in the face of stakeholder resistance, privilege or inertia, but rather an expectation that practitioners know the operating principles and procedure by which ‘service’ is rendered and the constraints and boundaries that exist. It is an obligation to be accurate and clear, not accept faults and failure; to learn and initiate appropriate interventions. It also comprehends how, in any given environment, change can be contemplated – social systems do have a malleable existence. Finally, Banks suggests social service practitioners must place at the centre of their professional relationship the maintenance of enduring trust as a feature of their practice.

Competencies of social work civic literacy

The value of Banks’ pointers is that they highlight competencies we could expect in social work. Each is an area of literacy, a knowledge domain with particular languages, meanings and patterns. Each one has significant civic implications. Advocacy, ethical care, brokering and maintaining trust across the critical relationships, translate into skills concerning conversation and listening in several different discourses, reporting and advocacy, analysis and strategy, decision making with reliability and consistency. They emphasise how it’s not just the *personable* skills that are critical to social work practice, but also the *disciplinary* skills of analysis, theory building, observation and evidence for advocacy, policy critique and development. An outcome of the adaptation of services and the associated growth of skills and confidences in communities that access social services is that these communities are better able to take control of their own destiny. Here, social practitioners and social workers as a pervasive occupation in that domain are influencing civic culture. Their civic literacy (the ability to work with the discourses of clients, services, analysis and guidance to instil civic innovation) is the capacity for any particular group – an identity, community or even a cohort – to gain from the skill sets of an effective practitioner.

These skills might lie in the energy and initiative a social worker’s character brings to the job. They can rely heavily on the attributes of intuition and empathy, patients and composure etc. They can also be tested and assessed in the business of professional education and, one could imagine from time to time, be subject to peer review, be it in supervision or team training. It is not difficult to ask what was the ‘voice’ of the client? How well did you communicate with the client(s)? What have been the outcomes for others of a similar nature in your case load? How well did available services respond? What innovations may be necessary? How could the community be better served? These are elementary queries designed to create a reflective cycle essentially about civic development. In a sense these questions highlight how one may work with individuals but the responsibility of the professional perspective more critically is to effect an outcome for ‘individuals as a whole’, to recognise the ‘community within a wider community’.

The chances of effective performance on these matters are significantly increased if the scholarship of practitioners is fostered as a component of best practice. Lessons learnt from the systematic appraisal of past practice improves assurances that the practice trajectory
is sure footed. Sound social practice may well have some degree of intuition or even artful creativity running through it, but it must also be held together by the scholarship steeped in reflection and practice wisdom. We must appreciate in the heady nature of working at the coal face that such tasks are tackled and not sidelined by the constant pressure to just ‘process the case load’!

The ability to recognise how one’s practice can enhance civic capacity and the ability of communities to act upon the world is the gain from civic literacy. It requires a capacity for analysis, a search for detail, making professional judgement based on an evidential line of deliberation. For any field of social work practice, in health, child protection, habilitation, victim survival, social workers see cases on a regular and cumulative basis. The client goes through the ‘event’ essentially as an episodic experience, the social workers experience the predicament as a repeated occurrence in the lives of many, each to some extent a variation on a ‘pattern’. As accumulated wisdom, such knowledge gained from observation of client predicaments must be used to reduce the risk to others. The scholarship of practice might turn the personal wisdom into canon of practice, the kind that informs a wider community of practitioners, particularly students of future practice. It becomes the stuff of team meetings, case symposia, and in more rarified forms but no less relevant to clients, of conferences and contributions to the literature.

For example, a social worker working with young people may be very aware that a young person’s take on their circumstances is loaded with risk both on a personal level and in terms of their ‘life chances’. The young person staunchly defends their sense that they have a right to their current existence, so for any gain to come from their relationship, the practitioner has to be accurate with their appraisal that some action is necessary. They must keep the trust of the person, remain ‘attached’, and then build from this an effective response using existing services and responses that can be arranged or negotiated, or advocating for new services.

**Anticipating registration**

So to return to the central question of this paper, to what extent might the registration of social workers in New Zealand extend the significance of practitioner scholarship and civic literacy in the practice of social workers?

The SWRB (2005) statement of intent document makes the point; their role is to add lustre to the identity of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. To this end, the SWRB has created a framework that integrates qualifications and competency. The former is specified and the latter is defined as an ongoing component that can be achieved by ANZASW as a provider. Both registration and confirmation of competency are voluntary options beyond the statutory sector, at this stage. The framework is the result of government legislation. The bulk of those in the social work occupational category are state employees or depend on state funding of services and agencies. Each of these ‘players’ has a role to promote and encourage standards for the profession.

The SWRB spells out the outcomes expected of social work. They see the role of social work as:
…working on the symptoms of poor social development … promoting change, … helping tackle the root causes of poverty and alienation … creating the conditions required for successful social development … break[ing] down the barriers to better social outcomes (SWRB 2005: 5-6).

To make direct reference to the risks in the civic fabric of New Zealand society the document goes on to state social workers work, in particular, with “… children and young people, working age people, older people, family / whanau, communities / hapua / iwi.” (ibid: 6). There is a real sense in which the die is cast. Social work will be judged by its ability to make the gains.

It must be said that the acumen of social work is not created by fiat, registration or otherwise. It depends on competencies at the coal face. These, however, continue to be closely dependent on the work and focus of colleagues/peers, professional educators including fieldwork staff, office holders in the various social work organisations, who each represent and address issues of social work performance, and set any credentials, terms of employment, policy or programme, resource or expectation in which social work finds itself an active part. The Board does seek to improve the public profile of social work and through the mechanisms at its disposal build up the evidence that social work is achieving its promise. Developing practitioner scholarship and civic literacy are salient elements to this role, suggesting that social work performance is not based on case work alone. It could be expected that within these parameters, social work should continue to recruit from the diverse interests that make up our social heritage. It follows that the processes involved in membership of the association, registration, the renewal of practice certificates and the deliberations that emerge from any consideration of complaints, that support and defence of practice in these terms will be ongoing. Each party in the interest groups that make up the ‘community of social work practitioners’ has the ability to intercede with queries about the veracity and effectiveness of a skilled practitioner.

Three particular sites of reflection and engagement could well be utilised to sustain deliberations on the scholarship and civic adeptness of professional practice. They are noted here briefly as: the use of evidential principles in the content and deliberations of supervision; the creation of localised practitioner communities; and thirdly the use of technology to create tools of analysis, theory building and dissemination so that the social work profession has a constantly renewable capacity to expand its efficacy.

**Supervision**

The first of these sites concerns the role of supervision as a way to bring into professional discourses a formal commitment to the development of practitioner scholarship and appraisal of practice demonstrating a civic literacy. Supervision is an increasing asset in the social work tool box, enabling both professional development and personal revision of practice demands. In so far as supervision raises debates about social work knowledge and practices it must also ask that such items be systematically defined, elucidated and tested. The diverse literature on supervision (Kadushin, 1976; Beddoe, 2001; Davys, 2000) provides a forum for the theory of practice to be perused and the practice of theory to be pursued. It is a setting where the veracity of the claims and conclusions social workers make in the course of their conversations can be galvanised into forms of inquiry and research. Supervision itself should be judged in addition to other criteria by the contributions to professional
scholarship it generates. If there is theory in practice how do we test it? If there are anecdotes or observations how do we make them more systematic, reliable and accurate? How do we clarify in some robust way the language used in practice so that it is consistent? Social work supervision might address the risks associated with sweeping generalisations, the use of stereotypes and mythologising about practice. A little probing in the more reflective moments of social work conversation may yield value of this kind.

**Practitioner ‘communities’**

The second site involves squeezing out of the professional work day, week or month some peer driven multi-sectorial discussion by practitioners who are interested in debating and elucidating the various insights and abstractions that can be drawn from the world of practice. This group must have its ethical code on privacy and rather commit itself to not being about ‘cases and case work’, in favour of debating the lessons learnt from patterns of practice. Such a group would theorise, conceptualise and test the assumptions that so often furnish the minds of those that have such a distinct window on the world. While debate in such groups may be drawn into chaff about personal wellbeing (and suggest wine and food may be present!) the focus could be boosted by the use and trial of professionalised forms of reflection and imagination. It can amount to mentoring and practice review. Having seminars and colloquia may be the more formalised forms of such events, providing training for the development of wider exposure to professional conferencing etc, but the critical element is that practitioners begin to explore the value of a shared professional experience. A form of praxis becomes a professionalised opportunity; thesis and anti-thesis can be out there for the tentative construction of synthesis and trial.

**Information technology**

Finally, technology is a feature of a contemporary practice environment. This is a big domain for conjecture and we ought to consider using the data management tools available (for example, clinical data-mining techniques, Macdonald and Sheldon, 2005), the aggregates of numbers and patterns, similarities and differences, the things that can enable professionals to create dependable arguments for the work they do. Technology does not in itself stop practitioners from doing anything their normal operating codes of ethics and care already control. It has the potential to mean the communities (commons) we participate in are digital if not local (Ballantyne, 2006). The capacity of a file system on any hard drive to summarise data, produce reports and generate graphs and so forth is not something to be left to business or management. Technology can enhance practitioner scholarship and can give us details on civic outcomes.

**Conclusions**

Registration is a significant event in the development of social work as an occupational category in New Zealand, and enhances its claim to be within the professional domain. Within this development, expectations that social work can perform and maintain a scholarly role and achieve civic goals become plausible criteria on which we may want to assess the work its does. Scholarship within the social work tradition is not only the preserve of the academic wing of the discipline. Practitioners at the front line need to be known and recognised for their scholarly contribution and any canvassing of the journals will show their presence is
increasing. There is a panoply of contexts now in existence – the scrutiny of social work education, credentials, registration, renewal of practising certificates, the workforce and with it the ability to test the boundaries of appropriate conduct, all within the province of the SWRB. They sit alongside the traditional oversight made in membership of the ANZASW and the other sites for peer review and supervision. All these exist as contexts where the capacity of social work scholarship and the ability of practice to meet civic goals can be worked over. I am reluctant to say they will always and constantly be ‘addressed’ or ‘met’; this is not an argument for social work to be under any boot.

In conclusion, we cannot let these aspects of the job slip away from our grasp. They are the things that will be looked to as a means to draw confidence from the veracity and competence of social work.

References


