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EMBRACING THE ART OF SOCIAL WORK: VISUALISING ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES

A professional identity is a social identity derived from collective interests and social roles. Intermingled with personal identity, professional identity is shaped by our interactions with others. The personal, social, professional and our relationships interact with and influence each the other. The identity of the social work profession has often appeared contested and indistinct (Payne, 2006). In the face of social, structural and economic ruptures wrought by growing neoliberal influences, concerns about social work's identity have reignited (see Lorenz, 2005, for example). This has occurred amidst the transformation of public policy and an increasing focus on principles of individual responsibility and marketisation. This international phenomenon has led to concerns regarding powerful external forces and the way in which they have limited traditional definitions of social work. This external narrowing of how social work is defined has in turn led to an internal limiting of the profession's view of its own nature (Payne, 2006). The processes by which identities are shaped are changing. Payne (2006) noted a shift from the influence of dominant social organisations and interests establishing identities for the purpose of maintaining authority and control, to one focused on a set of relationships in which people participate and the boundaries between professions have become more complex and disciplines more porous (Abbott, 1995). Payne (2006,141) argued that identities are 'no longer so strongly controlled and ascribed, but are patterned by how we understand the whole set of relations in which people participate'. He proposed social workers challenge this narrowed view through the incorporation of 'resistance identities' (Payne 2006, 143), which integrate clear political content into social change projects. This approach opens space for a more creative, participatory, political engaged social work identity. The 'Safe at Home' project, the intervention phase of my PhD study, is an example of social work, which pursues a resistance identity through a reengagement of the profession's art. As a cross-disciplinary social intervention research study examining the effectiveness of art as an intervention in raising awareness and changing negative attitudes that support domestic and family violence, it brought together a number of organisations influenced by neoliberal policies, to address this issue of shared concern. By operating at the margins of traditional organisational structures, the project was less subjected to efficiency measures or managerialist practices while remaining attentive to the impact and effectiveness of the interventions. This presentation will overview recent interventions and present the key findings of the study.

References:

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Lorenz, W., 2005: Social work and a new social order - Challenging neo-liberalisms erosion of solidarity. *Social Work and Society*, 3(1), 93-101.

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