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A CIRCULAR SOCIAL WORK IDENTITY: YOU ARE WHAT YOU WRITE, PUBLISH, AND READ

Over the years the pendulum has swung between social work's dual focus on the individual and the social. The tension between social work's concern with method – social casework – and mission – social change – has its beginnings in the Charity Organisation Society and Settlement Movements with home visitors and settlement workers regarded as the forerunners of professional social workers. From these historical origins, social work has struggled to find its professional identity and this derives as much from its dual focus as from the diverse sources from which its knowledge base stems. A key factor in the evolution of professional social work has been the context in which it is practised. Chameleon-like, social work has drawn from the knowledge pool in its surrounding context to carve out a niche and an identity for itself. Thus social work practice in hospitals, prisons, communities, or family services came to adopt and adapt knowledge from related professions, such as medicine, law, civil society, and family therapy respectively in the examples cited. From its inception social work had an interdisciplinary flavour and some still debate whether or not it is a profession in its own right despite the evolution of its own knowledge base and identity linked strongly to the poor and marginalised in society. Social work continues to be heavily moulded by its context and there is a persistent diversity of knowledge informing practice in contemporary neoliberal welfare environments. This paper is based on a study which examined knowledge production in social work in Australia through a critical review of high-impact publication outputs to determine who the major knowledge producers were and the nature of the discourse being produced. Preliminary findings indicate: (i) the main knowledge producers are university based; (ii) a continuing therapeutic influence from psychology, and medicine and an emerging influence from welfare economics; (iii) a clear indication of interdisciplinary networking in practice; and (iv) a strong focus on ageing, health, mental health, and issues relating to social work and welfare practice followed by child protection, family therapy, and out-of-home care.