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# **Social Work Practice Knowledge**

**An enquiry into the nature of the knowledge generated  
and applied in the practice of social work**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree  
of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**Social Work**

**at Massey University, Albany Campus, New Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is concerned with the development of social work in Aotearoa / New Zealand and in similar jurisdictions. It is argued that in order to envisage social work's future it is necessary to develop a clearer understanding of its nature and function. The findings of this thesis are informed by interviews with twenty one experienced social workers currently practising in Auckland, New Zealand. The focus is on the knowledge which social workers learn and apply in practice. The fieldwork research design and subsequent analysis is informed by a process of engaged theoretical enquiry. This enquiry is influenced by critical social theory and by the scholarship of Foucault concerning the relationship between knowledge and power. The configuration of knowledge in and for social work is critically examined in relation to wider discourses of modernity, contested postmodernity and nascent neoliberalism.

The research methodology is informed by a critical realist theoretical lens which posits that underlying generative influences underpin the form of social work practice knowledge. There are also elements of grounded theory within the fieldwork design. It is argued that the research approach mirrors the process of situated contextual understanding which is native to social work. The view of social work practice knowledge which emerges is illustrated by practitioner accounts of social work experience. Analysis of the research data suggests that the process of relational engagement which structures knowledge production in social work practice is inherently different from the rational-technical understandings of knowledge which influence much of the design and measurement of contemporary practice. The knowledge form commensurate with social work practice can be related to the discourse of social humanism and an associated commitment to equality and social justice. The findings of this thesis indicate that this knowledge form is resilient and is reproduced in the practice of social work. In this sense links between the daily practice of social work and the emancipatory intent of the critical enlightenment are suggested. The thesis concludes with discussion of the implications of these findings for the practice of social work and for the role of the social work voice in challenging times.



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Saluté

Ian Kelvin Hyslop, June 2013



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