

# Towards a Post-Conventional Philosophical Base for Social Work

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## Abstract

The need for social workers to use a range of theory to inform their practice is well established in contemporary critical social work literature. However, it is argued that the ontological base of the profession has not received enough attention, despite innovations in social work theory in recent years. In the absence of a clearly articulated ontological base, there is a risk that there will be a persistent over-reliance on conventional paradigms in mainstream social work theory. In order to develop a truly holistic knowledge base, social work needs to further reflect, re-imagine and reform its ontological base to move to a clearly articulated post-conventional paradigm. Based largely on the work of Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Margrit Shildrick and Charis Thompson, a post-conventional paradigm that adequately accounts for interconnectedness, participation and co-operation is proposed. Such a re-envisioned paradigm would arguably be a better representation of the social work domain, including social work theory, practice and core values. The conventional paradigm grounded in positivist, linear, biomedical notions is far too narrow a base to adequately underpin the social work domain.

**Keywords:** Social work theory, post-conventional philosophy, feminist post-structuralism, critical theory

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## Introduction

There is a substantial body of social work literature describing the development of the profession from its traditional foundations in individualised practice in the positivist mode through to contemporary approaches that capture the multidimensional nature of mainstream social work in the twenty-first century. Many writers have explored the shortcomings of conventional Western paradigms in social work and have argued for a broader knowledge base to better reflect current social work practice and to ensure the sustainability of the profession (Ferguson, 2008; Rogowski, 2010). For example, Ife (1997), Peile and McCouat (1997), Parton and O'Byrne (2000), Fook (2002), Dominelli (2004), Healy (2005), Banks (2006), Mullaly (2007), Cameron and McDermott (2007), Trevithick (2008), Allan (2009), Pease (2009), Green and McDermott (2010) and Payne (2010), *inter alia*, have established how central it is for the profession to work from a conceptual framework that encompasses a range of formal theory, practice wisdom and the experiential knowledge of clients. In general, these writers argue that the purpose of contemporary social work is to work towards social change for improved human rights and social justice outcomes and that a broad knowledge base is required to perform this work. Various terms have been used to describe these approaches, including structural social work (Mullaly, 2007), anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 1996), critical social work (Ife, 1997; Allan *et al.*, 2009), constructive social work (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000), radical social work (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Fook, 1993), Body Cognizant social work (Cameron and McDermott, 2007) and new engaged practice (Jones *et al.*, 2010), amongst others. While the terminology varies, a recurring motif in this literature is the plea for the social work profession to be clearer and more assertive in its articulation of the professional knowledge base, as a key aspect of professional identity and purpose in the current socio-political context.

The literature largely establishes relevant and worthy epistemology and methodology for the profession but typically stops short of articulating the profession's ontological base in detail. Several writers have identified this as a significant gap in social work literature. Fook (1993, p. 10) writes about the risks of unsystematic eclecticism in social work and the need for 'a clear and systematic base'. Dominelli (1996, pp. 154 and 158) refers to the philosophical base of the profession as being 'found wanting' and describes the progress made in articulating the profession's knowledge base as 'slow and patchy'. Like Ife (1997), Fook (2002) and Healy (2005), she also notes the inappropriateness of traditional, individualised, modernist theory for social work purposes and identifies a need for a collectivist, inclusive ontological foundation for social work, particularly in the marketised context of contemporary practice. Parton and O'Byrne (2000, p. 7) describe this gap as 'a hole at the centre of the enterprise' and agree that

theory underpinning social work needs further articulation. They also note that post-traditional times require more than a rational–technical, traditional approach to social work.

Aymer and Okitikpi (2000) advocate for a move from surface level theory to the philosophical level to explicate social work philosophy in terms of ontology as well as epistemology and methodology. They argue that, without this depth of analysis, the capacity for students, practitioners and academics to credibly engage in effective critical thought is adversely affected. Pease (2009, p. 45) states that an alternative knowledge base is required for critical social work to ‘fulfil its emancipatory aims’ and to convincingly move away from theory and practice based on positivism and ‘predominantly old paradigms’ (Green and McDermott, 2010, p. 2418). Jordan (2007, p. 7) adds that social work could experience a ‘further decline in public esteem’ if its strengths continue to be underplayed and that mainstream social work must reassert its contributions to society ‘on its own terms’.

The need for an inclusive, post-conventional critical knowledge base is argued to be a key factor to enable social work to move beyond unsystematic eclecticism and its ‘untidiness’, ‘incoherence’ and ‘weakness’ (Beddoe and Maidment, 2009, p. 13). This point is echoed by Cameron and McDermott (2007, p. 9), who describe the conceptualisation of the social work domain as ‘relatively weak’, especially in terms of its theorising of embodiment. Payne (2010, p. 246) also describes social work as inadequately researched and ‘under-theorised’. Borden (2010) writes about the need for more attention to ontology in social work to enable the profession to coherently articulate its knowledge base and to incorporate complex contexts, technical skills and reflective practice ideals of the profession. He argues that ‘distinct visions of reality and world views . . . help practitioners appreciate the implications of certain ideas’ (Borden, 2010, p. 5). Further, Gray (2010, pp. 1797 and 1800) writes about the centrality of interrelationships in social work and about ‘relational ethics’ and ‘connectivity’ and the ‘deeply problematic’ principles of conventional theory and ethics for the profession. Bowles *et al.* (2006, p. xvii) advocate for ‘fluid boundaries’ to frame the virtues, skills and knowledge base of social work as an ethical profession and Hugman (2005) argues for discursive, ethical practice based on grounded theory and relational approaches.

If ontology is taken to mean *ways of being* or *worldview* and if epistemology is taken as meaning *ways of knowing* (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000), then the importance of focusing on ontology is clear; without adequately exploring the ontological orientation of social work theory, we risk (knowingly or unknowingly) using theory inappropriately and uncritically in our work. As most ‘critical assumptions’ underpinning any model are implicit and ‘buried so deep’ that we are ‘often not aware of them’, it is necessary to afford more attention to this level of theory so the very foundations of the profession can be strengthened (Stermann, 2002, p. 513). Without an

articulated ontological base, there is a risk of implicitly relying on an inappropriate ontological base taken from the traditional, positivist paradigm. The traditional paradigm reinforces oppressive hierarchies and, as such, it is inappropriate for social work. Peile and McCouat (1997, p. 357) urge the profession to 'get on' with the development of a collective and creative approach to preserve the aims and capacity of social work to contribute to social justice outcomes. Likewise, Cameron and McDermott (2007, p. 64) suggest that, without further conceptualisation in social work from a range of rich resources, social work 'remains heir' to inappropriate, dualistic concepts.

In an attempt to redress this gap in repetition foundational social work theory, this paper presents an alternative, post-conventional ontological framework and demonstrates how it holistically and effectively captures the complexity and interrelationships of society when compared with traditional biomedical, linear, individualised accounts. The framework challenges the nature of knowledge in the context of social work and, *inter alia*, draws on the work of feminist post-structuralists, including Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Margrit Shildrick and Charis Thompson. This approach goes beyond merely incorporating a wider range of human experience into the existing dominant paradigm; its aim is to de-territorialise knowledge and to contribute to a knowledge base that is more transformative and emancipatory for society as a whole (Harding, 1991; Shildrick, 1997; Braidotti, 2005).

This post-conventional paradigm builds on important developments in social work theory in recent years. Cameron and McDermott (2007), for example, articulate the centrality of embodiment to social work epistemology. They draw on sociology and natural sciences, neuroscience in particular, to highlight the interrelationships between people and environments. Green and McDermott (2010) also explore how neuroscience and complex systems theory contribute to theory for social workers in the twenty-first century. Both emphasise that inclusiveness, interconnectedness and interdependence are key elements in contemporary social work theory and practice.

Post-structural feminism is identified as a particularly rich source of foundation theory for social work because of the contributions it makes to the critique of conventional, positivist theory, especially concerning embodiment, negotiated subjectivities, its inclusiveness and its validation of diversity and range of knowledge (Healy, 2005; Banks, 2006; Cameron and McDermott, 2007). Embodied knowledge is an important aspect of the social work domain but it also remains relatively under-theorised in social work (Peile, 1998; Tangenberg and Kemp, 2002; Cameron and McDermott, 2007). Likewise, notions of subjectivity require more exploration to adequately theorise the profession. Before presenting this conceptual framework, it is useful to consider the limitations of the positivist paradigm in more detail.

## Some limitations of the positivist paradigm

The dominance of the positivist paradigm persists in many discipline areas outside of biomedicine and other traditional, physical sciences (Plumwood, 1993) and it remains influential in social work despite several decades of feminist (and other) theory-building and critique of this paradigm (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000; Healy, 2005; Green and McDermott, 2010). It is argued that overreliance on this paradigm as a knowledge base in the context of social work is inadequate and inaccurate and that the dominance cannot be justified in ontological and epistemological terms. The major deficits in the positivist paradigm stem from its foundation in dualisms and the consequent assumptions about the subjectivity and agency of individuals. It is argued that these deficits are so fundamental that there is a need to envision a more inclusive, dynamic knowledge base to more adequately represent the social work domain.

‘Biomedicine’ as a particularly influential paradigm in conventional Western social work, is ‘a derivative category of Western science more generally’ and comprises three ontological spheres: empirical, interpretive and conceptual. These spheres represent the ‘symbolic-cultural’ nature of biomedicine and its power in Western knowledge. The biomedical discourse itself conceals this ideological agenda beneath a cloak of ‘scientific objectivity’ and detachment (Baronov, 2008, p. 235; Healy, 2005). Rather than being detached and neutral, feminism has been very successful in exposing the ways in which positivism constructs, reflects and perpetuates established power relations in society, particularly the male–female gender hierarchy (Harding, 1991; Lupton, 2004; Shildrick, 2004).

The illusion of neutrality—which Haraway (1988) refers to as ‘knowledge from nowhere’ and the ‘god trick’—is pervasive in modern Western science and it depends on Cartesian dualisms, especially the mind–body split. This binary ensures that there is an ontological gap between rationality and embodiment (Braidotti, 1991). This and other key dualisms like culture/nature, male/female are also hierarchical and, without exception, women are cast as ‘other’ in a subordinate position in relation to men. According to Plumwood (1993, p. 447), this dualistic, hierarchical construction is necessary in conventional ontology to reinforce oppressive power relationships and that mutuality, diversity and equality are ‘literally unthinkable’ within this paradigm.

At the ontological level, the subject in traditional science is then disembodied, rational, unitary and most definitely male, leaving women ‘ontologically out of order’ (Braidotti, 1991). The profound androcentrism of the disembodied subject coupled with traditional science’s penchant for universalism leads to a knowledge base predicated on epistemic oversights and exclusions—one that fails to acknowledge its context or to account for sexual (and other) difference or to adequately theorise gender roles at the

social level or human bodies and bodily experiences at the material level. Clearly, such an orientation is inappropriate for social work. Persistent reliance by default or by design only serves to reinforce an oppressive status quo. As Plumwood says, there is 'a need to truly change the subject' so that differences and 'others' are no longer treated in terms of domination and so that dualistic hierarchies 'no longer pass without question as normal and natural' (Plumwood, 1993, p. 459).

Human bodies in the positivist paradigm are typically attributed with mechanistic qualities, depersonalised as objects to be acted upon rather than as active agents in their own right. Their various parts are disaggregated and approached in a specialised, fragmented manner with limited regard for interconnectedness and interrelationships. Faulty parts and dysfunctions are assessed, diagnosed, treated and (ideally) cured in the linear medical model. The broader context of bodies and their parts is often not given adequate consideration. Whole-body processes are broken down into their component parts, sometimes into a seemingly disconnected set of discontinuous steps—a perspective that swaps 'totality for the parts that comprise it' (Braidotti, 1994, p. 48). Bodies are reduced to sameness and commonness by this dismembering. With sameness and standardisation, differences are not recognised and, crucially, sexual differences in particular are reconfigured, with women's bodies being typically defined as faulty and problematic.

Given this ontological foundation, epistemic privilege is accorded to a particular form of masculine perspective. The perspectives of 'others' are either excluded entirely, incorporated as pathological and atypical according to the male-as-standard yardstick and/or have interpretive frameworks imposed on them regardless of fit. This 'epistemic imperialism' and 'epistemic indolence' along with the monological habits of phallocentrism compromise the completeness and the validity of the conventional biomedical paradigm to fully account for a range of human experiences (Braidotti, 1991, p. 190; Braidotti, 1994). This foundational criticism also indicates that alternative paradigms pose deep threats to social order if the gendered nature of conventional science is exposed and transcended (Harding, 1986). This transcendence is a fundamental challenge for mainstream social work if the profession is genuinely dedicated to emancipation and social change and if it is sincerely opposed to oppression and social control.

These criticisms of traditional science and biomedicine do not imply that systematic enquiry is to be abandoned altogether; indeed, a more complex and inclusive post-conventional ontological foundation would improve the quality of knowledge. To this end, Hartsock (1985) urges us to criticise 'bad science' as well as 'science as usual' in all its partiality, gender bias and exclusion and to pursue epistemologies based on interrelationships and interdependence. This exhortation is especially relevant to the social work profession and its aims to work in multidimensional ways towards social justice and human rights outcomes.

Developments in post-conventional, ‘new science’, such as systems dynamics, neuroscience, contemporary evolutionary theory, complexity theory, resilience and sustainability, add momentum to the sort of theory building that moves us away from the ‘dated conceptual scaffolding’ of conventional positivist paradigms (Meaney, 2001, p. 50; Sterman, 2002; Nowotny, 2005; Walker and Salt, 2006; Cameron and McDermott, 2007; Green and McDermott, 2010). Without a similar, sustained focus on re-imagining the *ontological foundations* of social work, we risk building ‘elaborate [epistemological] facades’ (Meaney, 2001).

## An alternative, post-conventional paradigm for social work

In light of the criticisms of positivism, an alternative paradigm needs to:

- conceptualise subjectivity as embodied, active, interconnected and interdependent;
- validate experiential knowledge; and
- acknowledge the broader context from which knowledge originates as well as its broader social implications.

The work of Luce Irigaray (1984, 1985a) is a useful basis for developing such an alternative paradigm. Irigaray’s overall aim is to disrupt the hegemonic male mode of knowledge and its universalism and oppositional stance—to reject the singular, male vantage point in the creation of knowledge. She wishes to make *difference* a key part in the ontology of an alternative paradigm and clearly articulates that difference must be regarded as difference *between females and males*, not difference *from the male*—the latter position would maintain the male as standard and women as ‘non-men’. Exchange between humans is a key element of Irigaray’s philosophy. This perspective has obvious relevance to core social work values and is a sound foundation for relationships and how central *relationships* are for professional practice.

Of particular interest is Irigaray’s argument that current forms of knowledge dominant in the traditional positivist paradigm offer a mechanistic view of human bodies and, importantly, that this view is inadequate to account for sociality between humans. Irigaray advocates for embodied identity and ethics based on lived experience and she recommends empirical studies to form the basis of a new paradigm to adequately account for ‘the sex which is not one’ (Irigaray, 1985b).

Similarly, Rosi Braidotti (1991, 1994, 2005, 2006) argues that the patriarchal theoretical system fails to recognise interconnections and the fluidity of subjects—her concept of ‘the nomadic subject’ (Braidotti, 1994). Braidotti’s thesis is that, in sexualising discourse, the false universalism of theoretical statements and the ontological frailty of traditional scientific discourse

are exposed (Braidotti, 1991). Braidotti's theory of embodiment is significant. It suggests that human bodies are not reduced to biologically determined destiny; bodies experience the world and its complexity in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. This is identified as particularly relevant to social work, as 'bodily experiences and their cognitive and emotional interpretations are at the core of social work' (Tangenberg and Kemp, 2002, p. 12). The embodied person is a key part of the *bio*-psycho-social model (Saleebey, 1992) and yet bodily and emotional knowledge are subjugated by traditional, modernist approaches (Peile, 1998; Cameron and McDermott, 2007). As noted by Saleebey (1992), a challenge for social work is embodying the *person*, in the *person-in-environment* model. Cameron and McDermott (2007) and Payne (2010) also identify embodiment as central and argue that the physical, socio-cultural and care aspects of lived experience need attention in post-conventional social work ontology. Thus, the profession needs to further theorise bodies, bodily knowing and the interconnectedness of 'ways of being'—*fluid* ontology and the 'diverse nature of subjectivity' (Parton and Byrne, 2000, p. 23) to adequately underpin social work in the 'messiness of everyday experience'—the multiplicities, complexities, contradictions and ambiguities (Borden, 2010, p. 7).

Cameron and McDermott's (2007) efforts to theorise bodies in social work, drawing predominantly on neuroscience, are a welcome addition to the conceptual landscape of contemporary social work. Building on their work by drawing on post-structural feminist embodiment theory and focusing at the ontological level adds a rich dimension to their important work.

To theorise everyday experience, Charis Thompson (2005) uses the term 'ontological choreography' to capture how humans negotiate and experience the world in multiple, self-determined ways. She uses the context of assisted reproduction to illustrate her conceptualisation of ontological choreography. Thompson says that people have multiple ontological positions; they often juggle paid work, unpaid work and other commitments; they are at times 'the patient' or 'the client' in the waiting room and at times engage in a sort of conscious subordination in order to achieve certain aims; and, at other times, people are assertive, active protagonists. Thus, ontology is changeable and adaptable, depending on context and agency. Ontological choreography is useful to conceptualise the actual and potential inter-relationships and interactions between people. It is also an appealing concept for social work because it implies dynamism, exchange and co-operation. Ontological choreography is also useful in conceptualising the fluidity of subjectivity and the possibility of co-existing object and subject status.

Margrit Shildrick (1997, 2002, 2004, 2006) considers the conventional biomedical model in terms of subjectivity as well as bioethics, providing a more comprehensive alternative paradigm than Thompson's. Shildrick engages with Irigaray's notion of dual subjectivity to envisage how 'fluid

subjectivity' could form the basis for a post-conventional ethics and for a more adequate knowledge base in the context of human health and society (Shildrick, 1997). Shildrick criticises conventional bioethics for being 'curiously disembodied' and for taking the 'sovereign subject' as its ontological base (Shildrick, 2004, p. 149). She identifies a need for increased recognition of the mutuality of relationships in the biomedical encounter and for more effective acknowledgement of the contexts in which biomedicine and its disembodied subject is immersed.

Shildrick says that traditional positivist science relies on the Cartesian erasure of corporeality and that feminist notions of dual subjectivity are therefore a major threat to the 'certainty of closure' provided by the singular subject (Shildrick, 2006, pp. 40–2). Like Thompson, Shildrick emphasises the mutuality of the biomedical encounter and identifies traditional science as a cultural representation in itself, especially in the absence of women as ontological agents. This highlights the central task for feminism in the broad context and for social work in this particular context—to challenge and change the very foundations of traditional Western knowledge starting from the ontological level through to the epistemological and methodological levels. The philosophical disadvantage of women and 'others' within the traditional scientific paradigm clearly needs to be redressed to facilitate an effective epistemological transformation in social work theory; sustained reliance on linear, individualised conventional ontology cannot be justified. Thus, for social work, if it is in fact a profession with anti-oppressive, emancipatory, social justice aims, conscious or sub-conscious default to a traditional ontology is inappropriate and only serves to reinforce oppressive power relationships in society.

Shildrick insists on the need to 'refuse the comforting refuge of broad categories and fixed unidirectional vision' and to 'deterritorialise' knowledge to include dynamic, fluid ways of knowing (Shildrick, 1997, p. 3). Fluidity also implies that there is no unified category of 'woman' or 'man', but rather multiple, fluid possibilities for women and men. Like Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity, fluid subjectivity acknowledges that experiences of a phenomenon will be contextual, variable and sometimes contradictory and that universalism is as inadequate as it is unattainable. This notion of fluid or nomadic subjectivity is surely a better basis for the social work paradigm in that it respects multiple ways of being in the world, interrelationships, diversity and co-operation. It opens up emancipatory possibilities for all rather than limiting and proscribing 'ways of being' in the world. It does not depend on hierarchical dualisms. It provides a basis for engaging in transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary co-operation—'to cross disciplinary boundaries' as a more effective and thorough means of conceptualising complexity (Sterman, 2002, p. 511; Green and McDermott, 2010).

Shildrick's post-conventional bioethics casts all people, including those involved in client–worker relationships, as equal moral agents, thereby addressing some of the limitations of Thompson's concept of ontological

choreography. Shildrick thoroughly rejects the positivist, biomedical model and its fragmentation of women and men into a set of functional norms and body parts with no personhood. If people are pathologised in this way, as objects for the clinical gaze (Foucault, 2003), then they are also often thereby silenced. Traditional medicine and derivative professions are left to practise on bodies and relate to service users as universalised, standardised objects, rather than as unique socially situated individuals. Thus, it becomes sufficient to treat ‘patients’ with ‘technical proficiency rather than with care and concern’ (Shildrick, 1997, pp. 76–7). This is clearly not an adequate ontological base for social work (Borden, 2010; Parton and O’Byrne, 2000).

Shildrick argues that the medical model also obscures the transactional nature of encounters between people and that it obscures women, in particular, as intentional, full moral agents. An important step in re-envisioning the social work paradigm, then, is to reaffirm embodiment as ontologically foundational and via phenomenological inquiry, to seek experiential, ‘situated’ knowledge in a range of contexts as a basis for this restoration and to assert that people ‘are not simply passive victims in the face of scientific developments’ (Shildrick, 1997, p. 210).

Shildrick, like Donna Haraway, emphasises that the deconstruction of traditional science does not equate with its destruction; there is clearly a need for systematic, rigorous scientific knowledge on a range of matters and its contributions deserve proper recognition as *part of* a broader range of knowledge. Likewise, social work has often been described as an art and a science (Dominelli, 2004; Healy, 2005) in that there is a need for empirical, formal theory along with practice knowledge and experiential and informal theory. The persistent dominance of the traditional scientific paradigm has resulted in the scientific form of knowledge being privileged and this need not be the case, indeed *should* not be the case, in social work. Loosening up knowledge to legitimate other ways of knowing would promote richer, more complex types of knowledge being recognised in various contexts—‘successor science’, as advocated by Harding (2004). Social work, by virtue of its breadth of focus and multidimensional nature, presents itself as a ripe context for loosening the grip of traditional science and for the development of a post-conventional paradigm (Payne, 2010).

Haraway (1988, 1989, 1997, 2000, 2004a, 2004b) is considered a ‘major foundation’ for post-conventional ethics (Shildrick, 2004). She provides a critical but not a rejectionist approach to traditional science as she engages with techno-science to envision a more comprehensive science based on collectivism rather than individualism (Haraway, 2004b; Valentine, 2008).

Haraway’s aim is to avoid what she calls ‘the dismembering cannibalism’ of Cartesian epistemology and to deliver a transformative, complex system of knowledge based on a radical subversion of the traditional singular

subject. This singular subject, she says, results in women in particular being devalued in Western logos, as disappearing from the field as visible social agents (Haraway, 1989; Braidotti, 2006).

For Haraway (1991, 1997, 2004a), subjectivity is interrelational, non-linear and non-fixed. She uses various images to describe this conceptualisation of subjectivity: 'the cyborg', 'onco-mouse', 'companion species'. As with Shildrick's (1997) 'leaky bodies' and Braidotti's (1994) 'nomadic subjects', this form of ontology captures multiple ways of being and serves to undermine the power of the bounded unitary subject and to open up epistemological possibilities. Embodiment and corporeality are central in these theories and bodies are recognised as active and dynamic, and not just as cultural texts in discourse.

Another key contribution from Haraway (2004b) to a re-imagined social work paradigm is her concept of situated knowledge and her rejection of traditional science's 'knowledge from nowhere' and 'the god trick'. Situated knowledge, then, is the recognition that knowledge is grounded, embodied, contextual, partial, complex and based on engagement and interconnections rather than on disembodiment and transcendence. She describes contexts as 'material webs of human and non-human actors' (Haraway, 1997, p. 116). This is especially relevant to social work whereby human and non-human actors (clients, social workers, methods of service delivery, welfare service systems and provisions, for example) are part of a complex system working towards specific outcomes in terms of social justice and human rights. These interactions are regarded by Haraway as new forms of kinship that create 'affectionate ties' to human as well as non-human others (Haraway, 1997).

Drawing mostly on the work of Braidotti, Shildrick and Haraway and with reference to Irigaray and Thompson, the key elements of the post-conventional conceptual framework for a more appropriate philosophical foundation in social work can be summarised as follows:

- In terms of ontology, social work must move beyond a reliance on the disembodied, singular, bound subject and subscribe to an ontology whereby embodiment, interrelationships, mutuality, fluidity and interdependence are central.
- In terms of epistemology, the social work discipline needs to validate a variety of forms of knowledge, and resist the dominance of traditional science and its claims to universalism. Social work needs to subscribe to an epistemology that is contextualised, experiential, complex and provisional—one that captures a range of lived experiences of the world in rich and variable ways. There is value in considering various experiences of phenomena including commonalities, differences, quirkiness and contradictions in order to better account for human experiences of the world and to avoid prescriptiveness and social control in social work relationships with clients.

## Enacting a post-conventional paradigm

This conceptual framework has been constructed and articulated in the hope that it will build on theory relating to the social work profession in the following ways (as advocated by Cameron and McDermott (2007) and Davis (2007)) and by contributing to:

- (1) the reconceptualisation of the body;
- (2) the documentation and exploration of the embodied experiences of service users; and
- (3) the restoration and enactment of epistemic agency to disempowered people.

In the post-conventional paradigm, people are not disconnected or unitary and nor are they represented as one element of the mind–body binary so pervasive in traditional scientific paradigm. Rather, people are *reconceptualised* as corporeal, biological bodies engaged in constant interrelationships and connections with others; they are more than a cultural text or site. People feel pain, pleasure, think, speak, laugh, interact and connect with others in mutual exchange.

As an empirical base for a post-conventional social work paradigm and as an antidote to relativism, the *embodied experiences* of social work service users need to be consistently sought. The phenomenological basis of the paradigm is crucial in valuing all people as embodied subjects with situated knowledge of society. Service users, as situated knowers, interpret, reflect on and re-work their experiences of social issues such as poverty or interpersonal crisis and, as such, their knowledge is ‘epistemologically indispensable’ as a central starting point for theory (Davis, 2007, p. 57). Bodies cannot be ‘sidestepped’ in social work theory and a focus on embodiment ‘strengthens the validity and usefulness of... theoretical perspectives’ (Cameron and McDermott, 2007, pp. 64 and 17). Seeking service users’ knowledge in this way ensures that *epistemic agency is* afforded to social work clients as participants with a resource to contribute to the knowledge base of social work, including a more comprehensive, phenomenological evidence base for the profession.

## Implications for social work practice

Social work and its core values of respect for the equality, dignity and worth of all people (IFSW, 2000) and its concern for the micro, meso and macro levels of situations demands a firmer, articulated knowledge base for truly transformative, anti-oppressive practice. As suggested by a wide range of social work theorists, the profession’s framework for ethical, holistic practice is well placed to disrupt the dominant positivist discourses and to

reclaim human rights from the silencing and disempowering effects of positivism and modernist modes. The human rights foundation of social work emphasises the need for foundational assumptions about wholeness, interdependence, interconnectedness, diversity and broader community context to be reinforced, and not to be overrun or distracted by the individualism of linear subject–object relations.

To achieve a more ethical, effective, holistic and responsive form of social work knowledge, ongoing contributions to psychosocial knowledge are required from a range of epistemological bases. There is value in the deliberate use of methods based on replicable, positivist approaches to some psychosocial issues and there is a need for rich, experiential qualitative knowledge to ensure that service delivery is responsive to the actual needs rather than the assumed needs of service users. Likewise, practitioners' experiential knowledge has a legitimised, validated place in such an inclusive paradigm.

Along with a firmer, more comprehensive knowledge base, the system of regulation and accreditation needs to develop a correspondingly broader base. More independent service-user representation would contribute to this aim. The continued over-reliance on the biomedical and positivist approaches and calls for a conventional form of evidence-based practice only serve to reinforce bias in the knowledge base and stymies creativity, responsiveness and potential for multidimensionality and improved quality in service delivery and theory development in social work.

Clearly, more than technical proficiency is required in the delivery of social work services and the development of knowledge is 'a collective enterprise, built through dialogue' (Sprague, 2005, p. 180). It is desirable for dialogues to be ongoing with people who choose to engage with social work. An emphasis on *relationships* in social work, on the *process* of developing models of practice, the purposeful use of a wide range of knowledge to inform practice and building-in evaluation and documentation as core elements of practice are key to innovative theory and practice. Innovative practice models such as the Body Cognizant Assessment Guide (Cameron and McDermott, 2007) exemplify the complexity, interconnectedness and dialogic nature of contemporary social work. Ongoing research along these lines is therefore indicated and meaningful recognition of experiential knowledge and its incorporation into a revised, post-conventional paradigm could comprehensively transform social work epistemology into a cohesive, holistic framework that can adequately account for interrelationships, co-operation, experiential knowledge, collective concerns and participation in the context of social work efforts to work for social justice outcomes using an emancipatory, human rights approach. What is required is a human rights framework in which an ethics of care is broadly conceptualised in terms of proficiency and technical expertise as well as caring in terms of respect and nurture for all people. A clearer articulation of the ontological base of the profession is key to this aim. Social work logically

requires a post-conventional ontological base capable of accommodating concepts such as inter-connectedness, interdependence, co-operation, diversity, equity, embodiment, situated knowledge and inclusiveness. The conventional ontology of positivism in its linearity and individualism is no longer adequate, if indeed it ever really was.

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