

Social work as a professional project in Fiji

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Abstract

As social work professionalization grows in the Asia-Pacific, there is increasing recognition of the need for culturally relevant education, yet many Pacific nations lack formal definitions or recognition of social work training. In Fiji, international influences dominate definitions and ethics, creating tensions between Western frameworks and Pacific practices, which reflect deeper struggles between cultural identity and global professional discourse shaped by colonization and globalization. Using *talanoa*, a Pacific research methodology, and underpinned by decolonial thought, this article explores the experiences of sixty-one social workers from across Fiji and documents these tensions. It highlights the realities for many post-colonial contexts who are forced to walk within the realms of British Imperialist legacies and at times, incongruent cultural epistemologies. It warns of neocolonial risks inherent within professionalism agendas and questions whether social work benefits from efforts to organize as a homogenous, ethically unified profession.

Keywords: professionalization and de-professionalization; identity; indigenous; colonization; talanoa methodology; decolonization.

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Introduction

As academics and social work educators, we are often approached by students, and indeed colleagues from other disciplines, wanting a very simple answer to the question ‘But what exactly is social work?’ Or in a similar vein, ‘What is it that social workers actually do?’ Our response is quite often a perplexing retort of ambiguity, alerting students and colleagues to the contextually and culturally dependent nature in which social work occurs. Within the Australian context, of which both of the authors are employed, we may point students to the Australian Association of Social Workers, of which similar institutions exist in the UK and USA. In the Fijian context, of which this paper is situated, the Fijian Association of Social Work may also be used as a tool for guiding an understanding of what is social work. Indeed, when preparing to submit this article for publication, we were taken to the ‘Guideline for Authors’ page which includes a link to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)/International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) global definition of social work. This definition states:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW 2014)

Yet international social work bodies including the IFSW and the IASSW (2014) have struggled to agree upon global qualifying standards for social work education. As the global significance of culturally responsive practice becomes more apparent, attempts to provide a universal definition of social work have become more and more difficult (Jones 2024). Whereas some have argued there is a universal social work that can be understood as ‘united through shared human rights and social justice goals’ (Gray and Fook 2004: 627), others question the assumption that social work has enough of a solid homogenous basis by which to develop a set of universally applied principles (Daly et al., 2024). Even as institutions push to globally unify social workers through a shared construction of knowledge and value bases, such efforts run the risk of privileging Western interpretations of practice (Ravulo 2019). These difficulties in defining and understanding social work practice within the unavoidable backdrop of globalization create a challenging environment for which to develop globally relevant social work curricula and shared understandings of what it is to do, or be, a social worker.

This article aims to document the rise of professional social work discourse in Fiji in order to highlight the complexities, opportunities, and

challenges when enacting and interpreting social work in post-colonial communities. The goal of this research was to better understand the nature of localized practice and contribute to a growing emergence of Pacific-centric social work literature. The production of social work literature from within the Pacific Islands may contribute to international interpretations of social work and assist re-theorizing efforts for praxis within post-colonial contexts (Mafile'o et al., 2019). While internationalizing efforts offer opportunities and resources to enhance professional development and unity, it is vital that such processes provide the opportunity for collaboration and mutual learning, rather than the imposition of ideology and assumptions about what is best (Saxton 2021). Utilizing talanoa research methodology, this paper engaged sixty-one participants from across Fiji's two major island groups in an effort to contribute to the ongoing development of global social work conceptualizations. It argues for localized understandings to be better considered in the development of social work practice and education and warns of the dangers of neo-colonialism inherent within agendas that attempt to professionalize social work. As Lee (2022) suggests, situating taken-for-granted norms and procedures within diverse social and geopolitical practice contexts (such as Fiji) can help us to appreciate knowledge not as a universal objective entity, but as a responsive and reflexive mode for interpreting professional discourse within social work.

Background

The Fijian context of practice

Fiji is an island state covering some 1.3 million kilometres of the South Pacific and comprising over 300 islands. The two major islands—Viti Levu and Vanua Levu—being home to approximately 90 percent of the population and living in what the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) describes as urbanized conditions (Shaw 2022). Fiji was a former British Colony, gaining independence in 1970, although continuing to experience several periods of political instability and military coups, in large part due to racial tensions between indigenous Fijians and Fijians of Indian ethnic origin, who were brought to Fiji under British colonial rule as indentured slaves (Lal 2015). This article does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of Fiji's political context, a subject extensively covered in existing literature. However, it is crucial to highlight that the legacy of colonization has contributed to persistent racial tensions, economic instability, widespread poverty, and a significant reliance on foreign aid to support social welfare, education and health care (Dansie et al., 2024).

The nature of Fijian social work is still largely absent in international social work literature, although there is growing emphasis on *Pacific* or *Pasifika* social work that includes the region of the South Pacific Islands, New Zealand, and also Hawaii (Ravulo et al., 2019). There is also tension about what can be considered ‘social work’ due to the informal nature of ongoing systems of social care that have existed for millennia, against the more recent backdrop of colonization, climate change, and the globalized nature of capitalist agendas and social inequality (Saxton 2021). Social work in Fiji, while historically rooted in informal community support, is a relatively recent professionalized field. Among i'Taukei (indigenous Fijian) communities, it is linked to communal care, while Indo-Fijians (Fijian's of Indian descent) often associate it with voluntary service (Nickson et al., 2009). The Department of Social Welfare (DSW), formally established in 1968, evolved from earlier colonial welfare schemes but lacked trained staff and legislative clarity. In response, a Diploma of Social Services was introduced in 1971, although it was short-lived. A subsequent Diploma in Community Development excluded core social work content and was eventually replaced by a culturally grounded model emphasizing family and kinship (Mills 2002).

Debates continue over the applicability of Western social work in non-Western contexts (Nadan 2017; Saxton 2021). Nonetheless, grassroots initiatives in the 1990s and the formation of the Fiji Association of Social Workers renewed calls for formal training. This led to the launch of a Bachelor of Social Work at the University of the South Pacific in 2007, the first of its kind in the Pacific Islands (Saxton 2013). Students who enrol in this degree graduate with a three-year Bachelor of Arts (Social Work) and complete a field placement (practicum) as part of their studies. However outside of the Pacific Island context, this is not recognized as a formal social work qualification in countries with large Fijian diaspora such as the USA, Australia, or New Zealand. Even outside of Fiji itself, there is little recognition of social work as a professional vocation across the wider Pacific Islands region, with many viewing social work as volunteer work or an act of charitable, religious service (Nickson et al., 2009).

In many Pacific Island nations, including Fiji, there is no national definition or formal recognition of social work training (Beecher et al., 2012; Saxton 2013).

The current definition and code of ethics adopted by the Fiji Association of Social and Community Workers (FASCW) is a direct mirror of the definition presented by the IFSW. This highlights the potential dominance of international influence in constructions of what social work should look like in Fiji (Saxton 2021). Yet, existing research exploring the experiences of Pacific Islander students enrolled in social work study in the USA shows there is incongruence between the Western content being taught at university and the practice experiences within their island homelands (Beecher et al., 2012). Certainly, tension between Western and non-Western values

and knowledge needs to be acknowledged in any setting where Western knowledge bases are seeking to establish themselves in non-Western contexts (Meo-Sewabu 2014). This article explores these tensions by considering how cultural identity and the influence of professional [Western] discourse through the forces of colonization, formalized education, capitalism, and globalization, compete to form understandings of social work in Fiji. It contributes to growing bodies of social work that prioritize indigenous epistemologies and understandings of social work knowledge and practice. Unless such nuanced and culturally informed understandings of social work can be reconciled with dominant Eurocentric understandings, professional social work is always likely to be a provisional endeavour (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010).

The social construction of professional social work

‘Knowledge is not an unconditional entity’ (McAuliffe et al., 2023: 115). All knowledge, including social work knowledge, is created within a historical, political, cultural, and economic context. Moreover, knowledge is given validity by those who seek to control the development and dissemination of knowledge (Foucault 1984). Within the social work profession, Dominelli (2010) identifies a number of forces that shape social work, including the fiscal and economic climate, increased demands on service provision, social work’s spread as a global profession, and the influence of international organizations such as the IFSW and the IASSW. These forces, either individually or collectively, impact upon the nature of social work and how it is understood, interpreted, and practiced across the world. Whether we consider social work as an activity or a profession, a social institution or a formally organized occupational group, its validation is bound up with knowledge (Tadesse and Elsen 2023; Daly et al., 2024). If knowledge informs actions, social work, as an entity, requires knowledge in order to direct action (Smith et al., 2025). Knowledge, therefore, is closely connected to validity and validation, because central to the idea of knowledge is a belief that it will be useful in guiding action (Beckford 2018).

Understanding social work as a profession therefore involves careful consideration of existing social work bodies of knowledge and the way in which this knowledge is validated. Within social work, the process of knowledge validation relies on the social mechanisms by which existing power and authority is maintained and change is resisted or pushed forward through discourse. These can create hierarchies of knowledge where only one type of social work knowledge is validated (Lee 2022). Commitment to particular knowledge sometimes leads to rejection of alternative ways of knowing (Trevithick 2012). When reflecting on all of the different influences and sources of knowledge that drive our understanding of what we perceive social work to entail, it may be useful to see social work as a what Catherine

McDonald (2006) terms a 'professional project'. Drawing from the Weberian view of society as an entity in which different groups are competing for economic, social, and/or political rewards, professions also become a group competing in this social arena. Such professional entities, including social work, form an occupational group often linked with specific academic qualifications and pursue a 'project' in order to improve and maintain their position within the social arena. In the context of social work, the 'professional project' refers to the various undertakings and required characteristics espoused by those wishing to propel the idea of social work as a collective identity.

Professional projects are political, in the sense that they are primarily driven with outlining boundaries to distinguish between them and others and thus create a barrier between who's in and who's out. Those who are in receive greater recognition and status than those on the out (McDonald 2006). The notion of the social work professional project is of particular relevance to Fiji as the varying organizational, political, and professional agencies compete for a voice in the social work arena. Currently, the FASCW is undergoing a national review of its definition of social work, and plans have been tabled in Cabinet for a potential national social workers registration board. Although the outcome of these measures is yet to come to fruition, it will undoubtedly have an impact in terms of who is included versus excluded when it comes to the social work practice space within Fiji. Within the emerging social work identity across the Pacific Islands, social service agencies, community groups, government policies, laws and institutions, education and training providers, and associations such as FASCW are likely to have a role to play in determining how social work is understood, enacted, and enabled (Saxton 2013). It is representatives from each of these practice domains that have indeed contributed to the content, ideas, and opportunities presented in this article.

Methodology

Talanoa research design

As more and more non-Pacific researchers recognize the importance of local or indigenous systems of knowledge, awareness also raises the need to avoid interpreting others' actions solely through the researcher's own cultural lens. Tunufa'I (2016) suggests that *talanoa* may present a space for this to occur. *Talanoa* can be intended for use a de-colonizing research method when the researcher acknowledges the way in which knowledge is shared between the researcher and participants to facilitate a collective understanding of an issue or phenomenon between all involved in *talanoa*. Zhao (2012) suggests this creates an 'active subject to

subject' relationship which potentially subverts a power imbalance between researcher and participants. In *talanoa* settings, meaning-making is shared among all participants, and the researcher becomes an active part of the process rather than a passive observer. Such an approach to post-colonial research seeks to value traditional models of knowing and limit the privileging of Western epistemology as the basis for which knowledge must be interpreted (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba 2014).

De-colonization in social work research and practice

If social work research is to genuinely honour cultural diversity and indigenous knowledges, it must acknowledge the ongoing risk of neo-colonialism embedded in professionalization agendas (Zuchowski et al., 2017). De-colonizing approaches require social workers to critically reflect on their race and privilege, validate indigenous wisdom and rights, and relinquish the power conferred by professionalism and academic authority (Dunk-West and Saxton 2024). Challenging colonialism involves confronting dominant worldviews and the assumptions embedded in social work education, research, and practice (Ife and Tascón 2019). This can provoke discomfort, particularly for those unfamiliar with questioning Western paradigms or recognizing how indigenous knowledges are marginalized when forced into Western concepts like 'interviews' or 'data analysis' (Dunk-West and Saxton 2024). De-colonizing social work research embraces ambiguity and prioritizes locality-specific knowledge, supporting more reciprocal, relevant, and egalitarian practices (Tuhivai-Smith 2012; Va'ai and Nabobo-Baba 2017). Though uncomfortable, it is a necessary responsibility for all in the profession.

This paper is underpinned by a framework of decoloniality, that stems from an ontological belief around the socially constructed nature of reality. It may use research terms unfamiliar to reader, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to outline the epistemological underpinnings of Fijian cultural concepts such a *talanoa*, as well as further lending to tensions about the need to validate such epistemological nuances by the authors who are both white, to a readership that are unlikely to be Fijian. Interested persons may consider the references in this paper as a good starting point for further investigation of some of the uniquely Fijian or Pacific cultural context as well as further detail on *talanoa* as an established Pacific research methodology.

Method

Talanoa was used because of the recognition that in the Fijian context, issues of importance are often discussed collectively (Vaka et al., 2016). In particular, the *talanoa* group method provides opportunity for in-depth discussion that encourages the exploration of meaning. It also allows

comparisons of an individual's experience with others in the group and may facilitate a shared understanding of the issue or phenomenon under discussion (Tamasese et al., 2005). In addition to groups, *talanoa* also occurred with social workers on an individual basis. The individual discussion process allows for the participant to be in the centre of the research inquiry and values their unique insights and contribution to the research. The strength of this process further rests in the way in which language is used as a tool to construct a representation of the world in which both the interviewer and interviewee are able to discover more about themselves (Naufahu 2018). In this manner, participants also become active contributors to knowledge, and not merely passive subjects being researched on, rather than with. Such approaches to research lend themselves to being a collaborative rather than an isolated experience (Va'ai and Nabobo-Baba 2017) and further respects Fijian understandings of *talanoa*.

Talanoa was held in English, as this is one of the three National languages of Fiji. The research received human research ethics clearance in addition to permission from the Fiji government to undertake the study, which required the researchers to satisfy University and Government requirements regarding ethics, methodological suitability, appropriate participant reimbursement, and the adherence to suitable cultural protocols. The study was completed as part of the requirements for a larger PhD project.

Research participants

Talanoa was held in the six major townships of Fiji, namely Suva, Nausori, Lautoka, Nadi, Labasa, and Savusavu. In total, forty-two practitioners comprising twenty-six females and fifteen males participated in individual conversations. Pseudonyms have been used when presenting participant narratives in recognition of the challenges to maintain privacy and confidentiality within small community and Pacific Islander contexts. In addition to individual *talanoa*, group discussions were also held in Suva and Labasa. Between five and fourteen people elected to participate in each group, with a total of nineteen group *talanoa* participants. None of the people who participated in the *talanoa* groups had previously shared individual conversations with the researchers, which added to the depth and diversity of research participants for this study. Sixty-one total participants represent three of the four major divisions in Fiji: the Central, Northern, and Western Divisions. The conversations were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribe manually, before being uploaded into NVIVO to aid the practical elements of coding.

Coding and analysis

An inductive approach within *talanoa* was initially prioritized to enable an intuitive understanding of the lived practice experiences of

participants (Halapua 2005). However, in practice, purely inductive reasoning proved too challenging, because the themes and patterns were not always clear and ‘theories’ difficult to extrapolate. The process was not always linear and thus benefited from having cross-over with more deductive approaches to analysis. What ensued was a more plausible data analysis process, where conclusions were made from the data flowing between the inductive process of generating themes and codes from the data and the more deductive process of checking how these themes apply to broader and pre-existing constructs of professional social work.

Douglass (2013) contributes to this position by arguing that interpretations about data are made, rather than found. Although every effort was taken to promote the voices within Fijian social work paradigms, Douglass (2013: 73) posits that data analysis is not something that is easily separated from data collection. Both involved many choices made by the researchers, regarding the epistemological positioning, research methodology, participant sample, lines of questioning, what to pursue, and what to leave out. These choices were all are product of, and integral to, developing an interpretation through qualitative thematic analysis. Mindful of this, the researchers have attempted to make their interpretive and analytical process explicit throughout the research process. This has involved ongoing processes of deliberate self-reflection, cultural mentoring, and debriefing to check interpretations and develop meanings gathered through transcribing, reading, and coding of data. Cultural mentoring by a Fijian academic assisted in ensuring the interpretation and analysis remained embedded in Fijian epistemology and further support a decolonizing research agenda. However, the ongoing limitation, or struggle of this research process, were the tensions between wanting to engage and uphold talanoa as the driving research paradigm, while facing ongoing requirements to conform to Western academic requirements and publication protocols that are inherently rooted Eurocentric narratives of what research should look like. These tensions are explored further in Mafle’o et al. (2019) chapter ‘towards a Pacific-indigenous paradigm for Pacific social work’.

Ethical considerations

Positive and reciprocal relationships formed throughout the research process were also integral to the ‘success’ of the research process. As a member of the Fijian community by way of having lived and worked across Fiji for a number of years, and a Fijian namesake (God-Child), the researcher remains accountable to Pacific peoples and the participants who shared their stories; long after any article is peer reviewed and published. This is consistent with research guidelines produced by the Pacific Health Research Council (2003). As identified above, formal approval to conduct research in Fiji was also granted by the Fijian

Ministry of Education, the Department of Immigration, and with endorsement by the University of the South Pacific. Ethics approval was obtained by the researcher's University (ethics approval number: 140000643). Pseudonyms have been used to reflect the relational style of research within Fiji, while simultaneously respecting the confidentiality of the participants in this study.

Results

Participants described the emergence of a social work professional identity and that, as social work is in its formative years of development, there is ambiguity from the community regarding the professional role of social work practitioners. As one participant shares:

Well, right now in Fiji, social work is kind of a new thing, and when you say that you are social worker, from experience, the next thing people would say is 'What's that?', or 'Are you being paid?', or 'What's your qualification? Are you working with the church?' (Josephine)

One participant talks about her experience as a social work student trying to encourage new enrolments at the University Open Day. She recounts how community members were uncertain about the role of a social worker. The best way she was able to explain social work to prospective students was to describe it as a 'new' or emerging entity:

So, at USP Open Day, students from high school were coming, and we were standing at the social work booth, and then this student looked at me and they asked me, 'So, is this charity?' And then we said 'Well, half of it is a bit like charity, but not all of it is charity. It's like a new thing; social work is a new thing'. (Meraia)

Another participant mirrors this experience by sharing on the potential relationship between the relative newness of social work practice in Fiji and the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the profession.

Working in the social work field here in Fiji tends to be confusing at times. Social work in Fiji, I think, is developing, and because, in general, I think, in Fiji, when you ask someone, or when someone asks me and I say, 'I'm a social worker', the next question is 'Do you get paid?'. To them, whenever you work [in social work], it's voluntary. (Kesa)

The above participant also alludes to a difference in the conceptualization of 'social work' between the social worker themselves and those in the community. This was matched by the experience of others, who again re-link this to the fact that social work is a new and emerging concept.

I mean like, for us, it's like a profession, but for others, they still don't know about social work—it's still like a developing thing in Fiji. (Jone)

Much of the professionalization of social work in Fiji was attributed to the provision of university and vocational training opportunities that feature courses as well as a growing social services sector. As one participant shares, increasing university enrolments and training opportunities have contributed to visibility of social work professionally.

Now, I think it's because of the workshops, and a lot of students have been enrolling in social work programs. These [Government] ministries and NGOs are now becoming more aware of what social work really is, and I guess it's improving, it's developing. (Atu).

As one participant explains, many who are engaged in volunteer and informal community service would identify as a social worker:

And a lot of volunteers actually identify themselves as social workers, and they see themselves, like, if we were to put the rule or the definition of social work, they feel that they also can identify with that, because of the work that they've been doing, even although that they haven't gone for qualifications. (Miranda)

Several participants further verified that the lack of community and government recognition of social work as a registered profession contributes to an environment where both those with formal qualification and those without are able to self-identify as social workers. Partly this had to do with divergent conceptualizations of social work, with some positions viewing social work as something that is done, as an act of service and community responsibility. Others took a position that social work is (or should be) a formally recognized position. This has contributed to a broader debate among those engaged in social work practice about who can be considered a social worker and the ways in which social work is being legitimized within Fiji.

One participant describes the ambiguity around social work as 'problematic'. Drawing on her experiences of studying social work at university, she shares her views on the way in which social work has a very distinct professional basis:

When I was studying at USP, and I did many placement at various departments and NGOs and I learn many things about social work, and most of the time I think people look at us like they think we are only do volunteer work, and they really did not have any understanding about what social work means. I always told them that this job—that to be as social worker—it really cuts across all levels, like, it's a professional work; it's not only the volunteer work that they think we do. I think, in Fiji, the fact that we are not recognised by the community at large and also, maybe, the government, like it's professional work, it's problematic. (Mary)

Among those who had engaged in further studies, there was a strong view that the role of social work was often misunderstood and quite often undervalued by members of the community. For some, there was concern

regarding the quality of service being provided by those who may not have undergone additional social work training. This was particularly true for those who had undertaken studies in Western university contexts. For others who had pursued studies locally, there was often less a concern with the quality of existing community practices than a frustration with what was perceived as a lack of valuing of their particular skill set and knowledge base. Yet others suggested that it would be offensive to inquire as to a person's formal qualification, as this would imply that they lacked the necessary skills and/or knowledge for their role and might not show respect for extensive practice experience. He reflects:

I think that's a tricky question and issue in that, with social work, 'cause sometimes they might not have a degree per se, but the experiences that they've been doing over the years, and if you ask them to do a degree, definitely people will not be very much happy. So, I think asking about their qualifications may be a deterrent. (Sairusi)

Others reflect on how their practice experience, combined with lived personal experiences, including experiences of trauma and adversity, has enabled them to work effectively with clients, despite not having formal training.

I think, for myself, I haven't I'm going through an education—I've tried to go and do education while I'm working because I haven't been able to complete that, and so most of this job is just going through experience, because I was a sexual abuse victim when I was younger, and so it's just the different experiences I've gone through and the different trainings that I've had that has allowed me to do a lot of work proper. (Nanise)

Other examples of drawing on lived personal experience to inform practice include people living with HIV working in sexual health, women with children of disabilities working within the disability sector, and a large proportion of women who identify as experiencing violence or marginalization because of their gender. While lived experience and practice knowledge was highly valued by many participants, indigenous and localized ways of 'knowing' run the risk of being devalued, particular as social work seeks to establish itself as a distinct profession with formalized education and training. Within the context of Fiji, existing practice knowledge faces a real threat of being overthrown, as models of practice developed in Western contexts are imported via higher education and international capacity-building endeavours (Thaman 2013; Varani-Norton 2017).

In light of the ambiguity surrounding social work practice in Fiji, in addition to competing views about what should be considered 'social work' and how this best be determined, efforts have been made by the FASCW to develop a Fiji-specific definition of social work. However, as participants note, competing views about inclusion and exclusion hinder these efforts. This tension is emblematic of broader struggles in

professionalization, where the need for inclusivity must be balanced against the desire for standardized qualifications and practice.

Discussion

Participants frequently referred to social work as ‘new’ or ‘developing’ in Fiji, a sentiment that highlights its formative stage of professionalization. The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes social work was evident not only between social workers and the broader community but also within the practitioner community itself. For some participants, social work was seen as an act of service that anyone could perform, while others argued for stricter delineations based on formal qualifications. This debate reflects [McDonald’s \(2006\)](#) observation that professional projects often grapple with defining boundaries, determining ‘who’s in’ and ‘who’s out’. The lack of widespread understanding about what social work entails, as shared by participants in this study, further resonates with [McDonald’s \(2006\)](#) argument that professions must construct public legitimacy to solidify their identity. This legitimacy-building process requires clear demarcations of professional roles and functions, yet in Fiji, the conflation of social work with volunteerism and traditional models of social care complicates these efforts. As participants pointed out, the lack of recognition for qualified social workers versus untrained practitioners dilutes the professional status of the field and risks undermining the specialized knowledge and skills that formal training provides. The counter argument to this, of course, is that professionalization and neoliberal agenda dilute and undermine traditional models of social care well established to suit the local cultural milieu ([Ravulo 2016, 2019](#)).

The results of this research suggest that while the professionalization of social work in Fiji is gaining momentum, it must navigate a path that integrates both formal [read Western] training and traditional practices. Participants highlighted the role of university education and vocational training in shaping professional identity, with many attributing growing visibility and recognition of social work to such initiatives. As Fiji continues to embark on the journey of promoting and developing professional notions of social work via the establishment of tertiary-level social work qualifications, models of social work developed in Western-liberal democracies are likely to be extremely influential in shaping the ways in which social work develops in the Pacific ([Saxton 2021](#)). [Ravulo \(2019\)](#) warns against the uncritical transfer of Western social work frameworks to non-Western contexts, a concern echoed by participants in this study who recognized differences between traditional and professional models. While formal training offers tools for addressing systemic social issues, its potential to overshadow culturally rooted practices risks perpetuating a neocolonial hierarchy, where Western approaches are seen as superior.

The manifestations of a professional category of social work may be seen as an application of the practice associated with twenty-first century Western 'professional' movement (Nuttman-Shwartz 2017), but occurring within a so-called post-colonial practice context. Given the colonial legacy of Fiji and the critique of globalization efforts as inherently favouring Western capitalist agendas, it is important to understand how social work knowledge is generated in Fiji so as to better understand how certain types of knowledge may be privileged over others. According to Trevithick (2012), the dominance of Western knowledge and the subjugation of indigenous knowledge is one area in which power imbalance may apply. Despite the recent increased recognition of indigenous knowledge, acknowledgement does not always carry as much perceived validity as the 'expert' knowledge of professionals (Zuchowski et al., 2017). Thus, indigenous knowledge runs the risk of being discounted or considered less relevant (Thaman 2013; Varani-Norton 2017). As social work continues to assert itself as a global profession, it must ensure that no single knowledge system becomes so dominant that it suppresses other cultural ways of understanding.

The participants' reflections illustrate the coexistence of traditional care models and emerging formalized practices, but they also reveal tensions. Although Fiji has long been exposed to Western social work ideas through international aid and education, cultural protocols and social perceptions often hinder the development of a formal social work profession (Ravulo 2019). Social issues are shaped by stigma and traditional beliefs, with social work often seen as an inherent aspect of kinship care rather than a professional vocation (Furuto 2013; Ravulo et al., 2019). Cultural debates on whether social welfare needs should be met through traditional networks or Western-style professional training remain unresolved, highlighting conflicts between indigenous practices and globalized models. Further research exploring the way in which practice is enacted in Fiji, as well as examination of locally informed understandings of practice as these align with global understandings of social work is therefore warranted. Such an examination of practice approaches may also provide insights as to the ways in which components of indigenous and Western modalities can be blended together to offer a way of co-creating nuanced, more contemporary and post-colonial understandings of what it is to do social work. It may also answer questions as to whether such a blending of West-Non Western practices is even practical, or desirable in post-colonial and settler colony sites of social work practice.

Conclusion

The professionalization of social work in Fiji is at a crossroads, marked by tensions between tradition and modernity, informality, and formalization. As participants illustrated, conceptual ambiguities, cultural foundations, and

neocolonial influences complicate efforts to define and legitimize the profession. However, these challenges also present opportunities for Fiji to chart a unique path in social work development. As we transcend a decade since the IFSW (2014) established its global definition on social work, explorations of a more contemporary and responsive understanding are timely. By embracing its cultural heritage and fostering inclusive, contextually relevant practice wisdom, Fiji has the potential to contribute meaningfully to global discourses on social work as both professional and de-professionalizing project.

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