**The worlds of social work writing**

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**Abstract**

One way in which academic and professional journals embody the identity of their field is through acting as a disciplinary marker of location. In this article we explore how a leading social work journal in the UK locates the discipline of social work, both internationally and in relation to the various professional, policy and academic ‘worlds’ it inhabits. We draw on data from a multiple method historical case study to illustrate the journal’s geographical reach, particularly in relation to how aspirations to be ‘international’ were expressed, and what that might be intended to convey. We combine this understanding with a ‘national’ view of the journal within the different interests and constituencies it represents. We conclude by considering what this dual analysis of the journal’s position in its wider world(s) means for questions of plurality and coherence within the social work field.

**Key words** Journals; scholarship**; i**nternational social work; social work discipline

**Introduction**

Academic and professional journals embody the identity of their field in various ways. First, they act as a representative forum for scholarly production. Second, they symbolise a partly visible culture of discipline work through editorial and review practices. Third, they act as markers of location within both the immediate disciplinary field and in their wider cognate worlds. In this article we focus on the third of these dimensions of academic and professional identities through a study of the leading journal for social work in the UK.

Social work is widely represented as a single field – variably a profession, movement, occupation, science or discipline - with purposes, values, and perhaps a 'portfolio' of strategies that afford coherence. Since at least the 1960s (e.g. Bartlett, 1970) it is some version of this vision that has been felt by many to unite social work globally, and that is enshrined in the constituting texts of international associations of social work (c.f. the Global Definition of Social Work).  However, social work always has both national and international identities. This is inescapable, yet carries an enduring and endemic tension, sometimes manifested as a resistance between national policy and service matters and international scholarly thinking – and more generally as an abrasive relationship between the applied and the discipline. This suggests a multiplicity not easily brought into accord.

Social work writing, as seen in journals, reflects this wider picture. Some journals, at least in terms of editorial policy, may convey a vision of social work as bringing together a heterogeneity within a common whole - a ‘unity in diversity.’ Others may hold a position that challenges the assumption of shared values and aims, through prioritising feminist, critical, radical, postmodern or evidence-based practice positions. Journals of the first kind express their editorial stance through varying degrees of emphasis on national or international identities, seen, for example, through the spread of author affiliations and interests. The journal under reviewis an example of a ‘unity in diversity’ journal that assumes a common base for social work.

This paper takes up these larger themes through a consideration of the relationship between the journal and some of the different ‘worlds’ of which it is a part. The term ‘world’ as used in this paper has the dual sense of both geographical reach (being ‘international’) and communities of interest, including the world of policy, the world of academia, and the world of the professional association owning the journal. International reputation, policy, academic and professional worlds – how do these themes knit together? In the sense of the communities of interest, the journal routinely faces distinct and often disparate actors – a space of positions and position-taking, to adopt an expression associated with Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

The themes of professional, academic and policy worlds thus come together as a set of dynamic actors that exert push and pull on each other. In saying this we are taking a relational approach, such that we do not think we can understand the journal’s position in representing the world of (e.g.) social work practice without also noticing its relation to academia, policy, and the like, through which the journal’s engagement is refracted. By ‘relational’ we are not thinking in terms of intersubjective relations, nor in terms of a rational choice model for how the journal’s ‘policy’ is understood, but in terms of systems of material, social and historical relations which exist independently of individual consciousness and will.

Including an international dimension in the paper has a dual purpose. Firstly, it enables analysis of how the journal’s position-taking is influenced beyond the worlds present in the national arena within which the journal is sited. Secondly, it draws attention to the ways in which the relational dynamics between the worlds of policy, profession and academia are intersected by a concern in the journal with global reach. By tracing these dynamics, we consider where the boundaries lie in ‘framing’ the social work field, for a journal which has cultivated a reputation as being an inclusive and generalist record for social work.

We deal with the journal’s worlds on the premise, tacitly accepted by the journal, that social work can be regarded as heterogeneous within a shared whole, and that the role of the journal is to represent that heterogeneity. This premise holds good only insofar as the journal’s different worlds deliver on that promise.

**A journal case study**

The journal has played a significant role in the development of social work for half a century. As the ‘society journal’ of, at the time of its launch in 1971, a newly formed national professional association, it has become the foremost repository of scholarship for social work in the UK. Consequently, the journalhas a rich depository of data, which not only tell the story of the journal itself but reflect the narrative of social work as a changing field.

Assessing this data necessitated examining the journal through different methodological lenses. We took the approach of a multi-method historical case study of the first forty years of the journal[[1]](#endnote-1), encompassing archival/documentary analysis, oral histories, and examination of journal content. The publishers gave access to Editorial Board papers and we visited the records kept for the professional association at the Modern Records Centre linked to Warwick University in the U.K. Interviews took place with eleven former editors and other key informants. We undertook an analysis of journal content for the last year of each of eleven editorial regimes[[2]](#endnote-2) (number of articles = 483). In analysing the kinds of research published in the journal we adopted an extended categorization of kinds of social work research (Shaw and Norton, 2007).

On confidentiality, our approach has been to adopt a feasible degree of anonymity, referring to ‘the publisher’, ‘the professional association’ or ‘the journal.’ We acknowledge that this is rather a token gesture, as any interested reader could easily ‘decode’ the references. However, our approach enables us to write in ways that stress substantive points rather than their individual manifestations.

Ethical approval was obtained, the participants giving written consent on the basis that interviews would be anonymised. For that reason, when quoting editors, we use ‘broad-brush’ references to the early or later periods of the journal. Olive Stevenson is the exception, as we were unable to interview her and have drawn her perspective on the journal from published sources.

The starting point for analysis was the interviews, as out of all the data, they said the most about the journal across time. A provisional thematic framework was developed from a subset of interviews, which was fleshed out based on a further selection of the interviews and documentary data. We then applied the framework to all the interviews and documentary data, with the themes evolving as we did so. The content analysis was carried out simultaneously, with the results drawn on to ‘speak’ to the themes that were settled upon. The four broad themes which emerged were:

1. Journal identity
2. Journal practices
3. Journal form and content
4. The journal’s wider world

We have reported on aspects of these themes, including trends in journal content and how they relate to journal identity (Jobling et al, 2017) and the craft of journal practices (Shaw, 2019). In this article we illustrate the cross-cutting themes of the journal’s identity and its wider world(s), bracketing discussion of the journal’s relationship to professional, academic and policy worlds with a consideration of the journal’s international position.

**Being international - theme**

Being ‘international’ was central to the narrative of the journal’s identity. Indeed, internationalization seemed an aspiration from the journal’s inception. As early as 1973 Olive Stevenson was pressing the Publications Committee of the professional association to the effect that although the coverage of universities in the UK was good, there was ‘scope for a substantial increase in circulation to universities in the United States’ (Modern Records Centre. MSS.378/BASW/2/246 Publications Committee Minutes).

The idea and word came up in Board reports, interviews, and by inference from the analysis of the contents of the journal over forty years.But what is meant by being international? It might – and among the various sources did – mean one or more of the following:

* Articles that have meaning in a relatively large proportion of countries where social work is recognized.
* Articles submitted by writers from a wide range of countries.
* People associated with the journal from different countries.
* Journal sales successfully marketed to a relatively large number of countries.
* Journal articles downloaded from a relatively large number of countries.
* Acceptance of the journal in the USA.

The diversity of these indicators illustrates how the identity of a journal may have a certain elusive quality, being understood through a variety of connected yet discrete frames of reference.

**The journal and its worlds**

Before exploring several of these potential indicators further, we pick up the opening observation regarding the relationship between the applied and the discipline. How does the journal negotiate its position within the different constituencies it represents, whether those of the policy community, the academic community, or the professional association owning the journal? We are aware that these are not the only groups that a social work journal may seek to represent, with service users and practitioners being obvious communities of interest. For the former, we found little evidence in the data of consistent and direct engagement with service users, as authors, readers or indeed in any other capacity. For the latter, the picture is more complex. In the early days of the journal it was assumed that practitioners would both contribute to the journal and be central members of its audience. Olive Stevenson (1971, 2) noted in her inaugural editorial that the journal must strike a ‘balance between scholarship and readability. For we are conscious…that unlike some “learned journals” the readership is mainly composed of busy practitioners.’ Stevenson (1971, 2) also talked of the journal aspiring to three kinds of article: research, reflection and argument, and ‘good description.’ She added that ‘good description’ is probably the way the practitioner can contribute most to the journal: ‘…if…there is also some tentative conceptualisation which advances social work theory then so much the better.’ Half the initial Board for the journal was made up of practitioners, and practitioner reviewers were drawn on until the middle period of the journal when a shift to a more exclusively academic regime occurred. There was some recognition by interviewees that the journal had become more distant from practitioners over the years, and this was mainly framed in terms of readership, as this editor from the middle period of the journal reflects: ‘…the issues have tended to get longer and I think for many practitioners it would simply seem a bit overwhelming…to have to come to terms with material in there’. However, the majority of discussion by interviewees on engagement with the world of practice was refracted through the relationship between the journal and its other worlds, to which we now turn.

***The professional world***

The journal is owned by the national professional association. At the onset of the study approximately five per cent of the then current membership subscribed to the journal. How did the professional association regard the journal, and how did the other stakeholders in the journal regard the professional association’s interest? Many of those to whom we spoke expressed a positive view of the relationship between the journal and the professional association. An informant from the professional association described the journal as ‘the jewel in (the *professional association’s*) crown really’.

This was underscored by an informant formerly heading the professional association, who believed that ‘increasing the impact of the journal in the UK was obviously of prime importance, as well as influencing its readership worldwide.’ There is an apparent paradox that a national professional body should find its interests enhanced by the aspiration to internationalize the journal. The status dimension of this was routinely explicit in reports to the Board by the Associate Editor in the USA, as for example in 2008, when she said ‘My role involves raising the visibility and prestige of the (journal) in the US and encouraging submissions from US-based authors.’

The intertwining of interests is complex. It included for some a more negative view of the professional association’s relationship with the journal. This could be depicted as a relationship of indifference and distance, or for others one in which potential conflicts of interest were present:

I was never quite clear, as I say, what the input was. I think occasionally…there’s a kind of commercial tension maybe between them and (*publisher*), I’m not sure…I don’t think the fact that there was a (*professional association*) interest ever really impinged on our work as editors.

Our general interpretation of the diverse evidence on this question lies partly in endemic tensions and partly in the tides of influence on social work and the journal. There are always likely to be ongoing tensions of the kind represented by a late period editor, who said

Because the journal is owned by a professional association, it has a…delicate balancing act to try and figure out what the politics of the profession is, and the politics of the time…We’re very clear, we tease them a bit, that they’re the Murdoch, as owners, and we’re the editors, and there is the kind of tension in there which they’ve been very clear - they don’t see the (*journal*) as a mouthpiece for (*the professional association*).

This kind of tension was expressed by an earlier editor who said ‘My guess is, that the journal was always viewed as a bit highbrow and a bit academic, and insufficiently geared to practice issues, by (the *professional association*). I think they always had some rather ambivalent feelings about it, but they let it go its own way and they contributed to it.’

The actual playing out of these tensions between inclusion and rigour perhaps had a sharper edge than when ‘recollected in tranquillity.’ There is lengthy correspondence in the archives from the mid-1970s expressing the then editor’s consternation that a representative of the professional association was being appointed to the Editorial Board without consultation. Despite the early assumption about the need for accessible writing for practitioner audiences, the editor wanted representatives who could bring academic rigour and seems to suggest that the nominated member (a senior figure within an agency) would not be able to bring these abilities (Modern Records Centre. MSS.378/BASW/2/246).

We can perhaps infer that the journal’s position in relation to the professional association is one of identity maintenance. Hence, the journal’s role as an important ‘intellectual asset’ for the professional association reflects its value as a symbol of professional credibility. Ironically however this has required the journal to move away from practice over time, and align more closely with the world of academia, and its substantive and stylistic mores. Such positioning brings on-going ambivalence, as the journal does not necessarily ‘speak’ the language of the audience represented by the professional association, but nevertheless performs an important professional function. This in turn is framed by contextual concerns regarding the complex and contested relationship between research and practice within the social work field. We now consider the journal’s position regarding the academic world, in light of these questions of rigour and relevance.

***The academic world***

A recurring theme in interviews was that the journal aimed to distil ‘usefulness’ from rigour. An editor illustrated these aims, saying the journal brought, ‘…the oversight of research findings in…the discipline of social work, and of course therefore useful for the social work profession, but as channelled through academic thinking about it.’

Even so, scholarly and practice concerns continued to be juxtaposed throughout the life of the journal. A publisher interviewee situated the journal in academic publishing trends accordingly: ‘almost all the journals over a fifty year period or so, they’ve generally become less professionally oriented and much more scientific in terms of their scholarship.’ There was a sense of loss and gain described by some interviewees in the kinds of writing the journal prioritised, with one person commenting that, ‘writing in social work has become more likely…to be…scholarly, less based on…practice wisdom, less based on knowledge acquired in the field.’ This shift was aligned with the aforementioned decline over time of practitioner involvement in the journal’s processes and as contributors.

However, the movement by the journal to a more clear-cut scholarly identity was viewed by many of the informants as playing a significant role in carving a space for social work as a ‘respectable’ discipline. Indeed, many of the interviewees made implicit value judgements on the trend away from ‘anecdotal’ content in the journal, towards ‘higher-quality’ and ‘empirically-based’ papers. A later editor reflected,

I think it was an effort…to state clearly that it was possible and desirable to have a high quality academic journal in the field of social work, that social work counted as an academic discipline, and that it had its own distinctive characteristics that meant that it…couldn’t simply be subsumed into sociology or social policy or criminology…

Achieving ‘respectability’ was thus connected to developing academic ‘confidence.’ It is worth noting that early issues of the journal carried abstracts from a wide range of allied disciplines such as psychology, social policy and sociology. Several participants observed with approval the demise of these abstracts, which as one editor pointed out ‘represented a professional and academic social work that was maybe less confident about its own academic coherence.’ Nonetheless, it was acknowledged by many participants that social work continues to take a contested role in universities internationally. Although the journal was established in part to promote the research reputation of the field,

in many universities social work is still regarded as a…junior discipline, …a lot of academics in university regard…social work…mainly as a training element within the university, rather than research and having academic credentials. (editor)

This question of status in the academy has been sharpened by shifts in wider academic practice over the last few decades, such as the rise of external research assessment processes. In the late 1980s a national exercise to assess the UK’s university research and to allocate research funding crept almost unnoticed into the world. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE. Latterly the Research Excellence Framework) developed to become a yardstick of institutional and individual research achievement aspired to and reviled in almost equal measure. Similar exercises have spread to numerous countries. An editor of the journal in the days just prior to the RAE remembered

When I was…working in university in the seventies, eighties…it seemed to be accepted that a lot of the social work teachers…didn’t produce research or publications…very much. That was left to the people in social policy and sociology to do.

For this person the RAE had yielded some benefits. ‘I think that the changing culture in terms of the research exercise meant that many universities have put considerable pressure on social work academics to…be productive in terms of research and publication, so I think that will…produce a wider range of material.’

Extolling the benefits of research drivers such as RAE/REF was not a widely shared view. An early editor lamented that ‘the short-termism of the way in which university funding and strategizing takes place is not really at one with the rhythm of the production of sound…knowledge. So yes, it does influence it; all of it’s bad.’ An editor from the 1980s changed tack to say ‘You mentioned about standardisation… I think it’s…to do with the perception that the research assessment process more or less demands that papers appear in what are seen as being high quality journals.’ At the more individual level ‘young academics get…driven to neuroses really by the pressure on them to produce published research articles.’ Indeed, one of the drivers behind the international agenda for the journal – certainly from the publisher perspective –was to increase citation rates. At the time of this study the publishers referred to how ‘getting increasing usage in the States would also increase citations. There are a lot of US social workers, so they…would be also a supply of citations.’

The position of the journal has been influenced by a perceived need for disciplinary respectability, which has been compounded by the trend towards performance indicators across all domains of university life. Teater (2017), writing from a US perspective, argues that the significance of such metrics means social work academics are incentivised to publish for promotion and for the benefit of their institution rather than for the social work community more broadly. We can infer that there exists a reciprocal reinforcing relationship between the journal and the social work academy, whereby a concern with ‘usefulness’ is perhaps overshadowed, in the words of one later editor, by ‘the rules of the game.’ This brings us back to questions on the ‘voice’ with which the journal speaks, and to whom it is speaking, not only in relation to professional practice but also within the broader political arena.

***The policy world***

Social work has not traditionally been strong on making explicit the potential and actual influence of social work on policy (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013), despite the sometime role of social workers as policy actors (Marston & McDonald, 2012) A complex relationship exists between social work academia and the world of policy. For example, the professionalisation of social work over time, and the associated genesis of evidence-based policy have been perceived by some as determinedly uncritical projects. These matters are ones on which there can be almost tribal loyalties. In a similar way, a common and longstanding trope is that social work academia is disconnected from the ‘realities’ of practice as shaped by policy mandates (e.g. Marston and McDonald, 2012; Whittington, 2012). Further, there is a broader debate about the influence of social science academics within the policy world (Smith and Stewart, 2016). Where does the journal fit into this picture, and what story do interviewees tell about whether the journal does (or indeed should) have ‘impact’ within the policy world? Here, rather than focusing on the extent to which journal content is policy-relevant (see Jobling et al, 2017), we focus more on the rhetoric and recurring efforts of stakeholders in the journal to negotiate and promote speaking to policy.

From a trans-Atlantic viewpoint, the potential for political influence through the journal was significant. The USA Associate Editor remarked ‘I think as… the unified voice for the profession, through editorials and through what gets submitted to the journal, the journal can influence social work practice and social policy in the UK, in a way that it would be hard for any US journal to do.’ She went on to comment ‘I think more than the NASW[[3]](#endnote-3) journals…(the *journal*) also has a social change mandate.’

Some editors seemed less sanguine, although they rarely made clear distinctions between impacts on policy, practice or service users. ‘It is rare but not unknown for an article in the (*journal*) to have wider practice influence. I think it has happened, but I think it happens fairly rarely.’ One editor recalled the journal being criticised by a national policy-maker, who alleged ‘it was a sort of stuffy academic…it wasn’t…sufficiently oriented to service users and practice’. This editor felt that whilst not entirely fair, there had been a number of ‘missed opportunities’ for the journal in finding avenues for dissemination and dialogue within the policy sphere. It is perhaps telling that we found little evidence of direct work within the policy field.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Such discussion of engagement (or lack of) with the policy world by interviewees was crosscut by reflections on the journal’s political position within a politicised profession, and the consequent challenges for influence. There was an ebb and flow to the political ‘tone’ of the journal, dependent not only on socio-political context, but also the predilections of editors. The following editor from the later period acknowledges, ‘we did probably look out for more sociological and politically orientated articles than say psychologically…’ This was reflected by an interviewee from the professional association who commented,

…there have been…changes for the better in…that one of the things that was around at that time was too much concern about…quite a clinical model of social work…that I think was over the years…replaced by community social work aspirations. Well not replaced, but engaged with…

However, periods when the journal has taken a more overtly political stance have not always been welcomed. This is in large part due to the significant position of the journal in relation to the professionalisation and academisation of social work in the UK. An editor told us of a particularly controversial period where the professional association,

…felt that the journal was actually having a…negative effect, which was making it …difficult for people to operate positively in the particular political environment in which they found themselves. (*The professional association*) found itself…in a very difficult position. It was trying to build up the professional profile of social workers, with a government that (was) actively disliked.

In this sense the journal has always had to negotiate different value-positions in social work, which in turn has involved maintaining a careful position toward the world of policy. Such challenges are not limited to particular historical junctures, as this editor remarks:

The journal’s had to operate in…a largely negative political environment, because whichever government we’ve had in, certainly in my lifetime as a social worker, has not been as supportive to social work as we think it ought to have been. So…I think we’re always working…in a less than ideal political environment.

Discussion on the journal’s position to the world of policy took place, as already noted, within the context of social work’s national identity within the UK. In this sense, social work was described by someone as, ‘a small discipline in a small country, albeit with a rather inflated ego.’ The same person stressed the importance of developing diverse counter-cultures, a view shared by many informants. ‘We no longer, and we should never accept - and sometimes North American and UK academics somehow believe this - that their language, their discourses, their paradigms somehow trump other paradigms in other parts of the world...’ On that note, we return to the overarching theme of this article – the meaning for the journal of ‘being international’.

**Being international - variation**

The journal’s worlds have been understood so far in terms of different kinds of interested communities. In doing so, we have touched upon how the journal’s international agenda has influenced its position in these various arenas. However, a journal’s world - in a more literal sense - also refers to the extent of geographical reach. Editorial assessments on this score were relatively unambiguous, although supporting evidence was rarely included: ‘It’s the premier British social work journal…and has top quality papers in it, and over…recent years, has developed an international reputation as well.’

How does this resonate with the indicators of ‘being international’ we described earlier? We have already examined some of these indicators elsewhere, including analyses of authors by country (Jobling et al, 2017) and therefore focus on the following three indicators here:

***Articles that have meaning in a relatively large proportion of countries where social work is recognized.***

There has been significant growth over time in the proportion of authors from outside the UK writing in the journal (see Jobling et al, 2017). However, a large majority of this growth emanates from North America, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Israel, correlating with Roche and Flynn’s (2018) analysis, which found that very few articles in the major social work journals are authored by writers from the Global South. Additionally, the growth in representation of authors from outside the UK does not necessarily mean that articles in the journal became more ‘globally’ oriented as a result. In broad terms we can say ‘being global’ relates to knowledge exchange, social development work, international policy formation, and ‘local’ practice which interrelates with global issues, such as refugee settlement (Healy, 2001). Conceptually, global social work is based on a perspective which integrates social justice, human rights, collective welfare, and ecological approaches. Global social work thus emphasises solidarity, positioning social work practice as part of a ‘multidirectional web’ (Ahmadi, 2003, 16).

Some of the categories deployed in our content analysis speak to these global concerns. Our analysis of the focus of writing suggests very few sampled articles were directed at ‘people as members of communities’, which we categorised as including asylum seekers and refugees, and members of black and minority ethnic communities (11 articles, equivalent to 2.3% over the history of the journal). Moving to substantive questions in which writers were interested, the scholarship in the journal seemed to have a potentially ‘global’ gaze in only a small proportion of the 483 articles (Table 1).

Table 1 ‘Global’ gaze of research questions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Problem addressed | Number | Percentage |
| Understand/respond to issues of equality, diversity, oppression. | 37 | 7.7 |
| Understand/respond to issues of nationhood, ethnicity, race | 3 | 0.6 |
| Demonstrate/assess the value of comparative, cross-cultural research, and of cultural distinctiveness | 3 | 0.6 |

Drawing conclusions from these figures needs to be done with caution; the sample size and number of cells in particular makes analysis problematic. However, Roche and Flynn (2018) posit that the major social work journals are largely preoccupied with domestically boundaried concerns, and a similar inference perhaps can be drawn here.

***Journal sales and readership from different countries***

The journal was viewed as having an international presence in terms of where readers were domiciled. The Board reports from a fairly recent editorial regime include editors’ comments that the journal‘has long had an international readership and profile.’ Conscious that there was a recurrent rhetorical claims-making regarding the internationality of the journal, there is little we can say about the actuality of international readership. We do know that institutional subscriptions have influenced the growth of the journal. The most recent 2018 figures[[5]](#endnote-5) show most institutional subscriptions came from Europe and the UK, which combined make up nearly 40% of the total. Asia, North America, and South America held comparable shares, each accounting for approximately 20% of total institutional subscriptions. These latter regions have formed the greatest source of growth in later years. By contrast, their total subscriptions stood at only 9% in 2000. Second, institutional subscriptions tell us something about *possible* readership, but not necessarily about who in geographical terms accesses the journal. Here we can draw from the figures for online visits to the journal provided by the publishers to the Board. These show that by far the greatest number of visits emanate from Europe, consisting of 56% of all visits in 2018, with the majority being from the UK. North America came second, with 20% of visits in 2018. It appears that readership for the journal is mainly UK based, but with a developing profile elsewhere, albeit as with the scope of articles, oriented to the Global North.

***People associated with the journal from different countries.***

One of the ways in which the journal in its later period worked at expanding its geographical scope - in terms of both authors and readers - was to include academics from a range of countries as international advisors. This development was not only aimed at increasing the volume of non-UK author/readership, but also the diversity, with an editor commenting that they wanted to shift the journal’s position and relevance away from the Global North. A precedent was set for advisory roles with the creation of a North America associate editor, which was reported by the journal editors at the time to have been ‘a great success increasing the visibility and marketing of the journal in North America, and provides a possible model for similar appointments in other parts of the world where the journal’s influence might be increased.’ Soon after this, a panel of advisors from across the world was recruited, with their remit to ‘promote the journal in their respective regions and to report back…about local developments and the implications for future journal policy.’ The reports from the advisors to the journal Board were in general constructively critical about what needed to be done to make the journal more relevant to the variety of social work present in regions, although in a number of cases very sharply so – especially where regions were underserved by ‘mainstream’ social work journals. However, the role of the advisors was not clearly delineated. As one interviewee said ‘…I don’t know that these people have ever been very successfully hooked in with the journal.’ Indeed, the advisors expressed that they ‘could do more’ if given sufficient guidance and communication. Although their roles were aimed at broadening the relevance of the journal beyond ‘home turf’, there were evident challenges for the advisors (particularly representing global South countries) in supporting the journal to materially engage with culturally diverse models of social work.

Taking these three indicators together, we can suggest two possible inferences. First, the subject matter of the journal remains largely preoccupied with questions and problems that make sense within the countries where social work has been established over a relatively long period. How far this reflects a straightforward Western scholarly hegemony calls for more careful consideration. Second, taking the evidence from this and the previous output from this study, the journal does appear to have established a less ‘British’ voice and scope. Nevertheless, it is important to note the differences between the calls for international inclusivity from many of the study informants and the reality of the journal’s position in relation to global gaze, readership and the development of networks outside the UK. As we have observed in relation to the journal’s ‘national’ worlds, the interaction between the rhetorical and material positions of the journal reflects the relational field within which the journal is situated.

**Discussion and conclusion**

How may we conclude regarding the significance of the journal, from pursuing the idea of overlapping worlds of practice, internationality, academia, the professional association, and policy? Academic journals – particularly ones embedded within professions – both reflect and interact with a variety of worlds. However, ‘membership’ of these worlds can only be partial and is premised on what position a journal takes in looking ‘outwards’. For the case study journal in this article, there is perhaps a necessary balancing act entailed in negotiating the mores of different places and constituencies. This way of seeing matters has some connection with Robert Merton’s muted version of standpoint theory, or as he expresses it ‘Insider’ arguments (Merton, 1972). In his remarks about strong ‘Insider’ claims that particular groups have monopolistic access to particular kinds of knowledge, he suggests that, while group identities do significantly influence explanations, individuals do not have a single organising status but a complex status set - in our case, as members of both national and international communities. Hence, we begin to consider the distinctive and interactive roles each plays in ‘the process of truth seeking’ (Merton, 1972: 36).

The orientation a journal takes to this identity work is what can make it a marker for the broader disciplinary field in which it is situated, whilst simultaneously constraining it from reflecting certain aspects of the worlds to which it is positioned. The journal came into the world in the UK when the basis for common ground in social work was newly conceived in terms of a unified form of service delivery (Social Service departments came into being following 1970 legislation in England and Wales) and a common professional identity (the professional association, the journal’s owners, was also launched in 1970). The ebb and flow of the journal’s location reflects corresponding shifts in how far and in what ways the social work community, especially in the West, has manifested a shared understanding of social work’s enterprise, programme and vision.

Within this context, journal processes and content are underpinned by tensions which are not always easily reconcilable. Even for the journal in question, which has always aimed for ‘unity in diversity’ in the range of positions, methods and substantive domains it includes, such tensions can be challenging to negotiate. A complex and often contested relationship exists between social work as a profession and social work as an academic discipline. Yet it has long been established that the development of a ‘canonical’ body of theoretical knowledge is central to the recognition of professions (Gorman and Sandefur, 2011). Within this context, the journal has reflected a drive towards a ‘respectable’ status for social work, which in turn is based on particular academic tropes. It may be that the contextual historical shift in the academy towards a metric-driven approach to research outputs has further emboldened a ‘standardising’ academic culture, which has shaped the environment of the journal and the voice with which it speaks.

The potential, over time, for the marginalisation of what could be deemed ‘practice-near’ voices in the journal may also apply to what we know of international perspectives within the journal processes, content and reach. Indeed, we can see how the position of the journal in relation to the worlds of the professional association and the academy compound a boundaried narrative of internationalism. The same process of standardisation which requires a certain scholarly voice also foregrounds “Northern epistemologies” (Roche & Flynn, 2018, 3). Despite intentions towards increased diversity, it seems the journal can be defined by what Collyer (2014) terms geographically aligned ‘core-periphery relations’ within academic knowledge production. As Roche and Flynn (2018) conclude, social work journals are not immune from academic publishing norms, in which researchers (and consequently readers) from the Global South are under-represented.

That is not to say that a journal cannot operate with some collective agency in moving against such norms, as a form of practical-moral activity (Schwandt, 1997). Indeed, it is clear from editor accounts that there was a general desire over the life of the journal to see it influencing wider worlds – both globally and nationally in terms of policy and practice communities. For the latter, it is telling however that occasional tensions with the journal owner – the professional association – have tended to be of the political variety. There are well-rehearsed questions that have relevance here, on how societal ‘impact’ can be understood, whether journals should be acting as ‘impact generators’ via their collective voice, and how a critical distance can be maintained from the world of policy at the same time as engagement with various value-positions in social work.

By analogy with Burawoy’s arguments about public sociology (Burawoy, 2005), the journal represents different kinds of social work, each of which has its own legitimation: *disciplinary* social work justifies itself on the basis of scientific norms, *policy oriented* social work on the basis of its effectiveness, *critical* social work on the basis of its ability to supply moral visions, and *public, practice-oriented* social work on the basis of its relevance. Each has its own forms of accountability and politics, and each its own form of pathology, whether it be insularity and irrelevance for disciplinary social work, sectarianism in the case of critical social work, contractual distortions within policy oriented social work, or hostages to the pursuit of acceptability and popularity of public social work. The sustained success of the journal over almost half a century suggests the balancing act has proved relatively successful, but has lingering unresolved and perhaps unresolvable dilemmas.

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1. Research for the study commenced in 2013. Transitions in the publishers and the professional association, the research team and editorial tenures each extended the duration of the project. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The eleven Editorial regimes studied were: 1971-74, 1975-77, 1977-80, 1981-84, 1985-87, 1987-91, 1992-95, 1996-99, 2000-04, 2004-10, 2010-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The US National Association of Social Workers [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The analysis of journal content suggested around only 5% of all articles directly focused on the policy, regulatory or inspection communities (Jobling, *et al* 2017: 2178). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kindly supplied by the current editors and the publisher of the journal after our study had concluded. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)