Chapter 10
Social Justice and Social Work Practice

Abstract The previous chapters have outlined the theoretical ideas pertinent to understanding social justice. This chapter synthesises these ideas into a coherent framework that includes a summary of the critical, distributive, participatory democracy and autonomy and rights philosophies presented in earlier chapters. We present this framework as an integrated and reflexive way to think about social justice practice, and the chapter then draws on social work literature to outline in brief form a wide range of indicative activities and practices that social work could undertake in the pursuit of social justice.

Introduction

Social workers seeking after social justice face a challenge. There are many global contextual drivers and social, political and economic changes that have developed over the past few decades that have reshaped social and political institutions around the world (McDonald, 2006). Mullaly (2007) suggests that after the oil crisis of the 1970s the world became vastly more connected via forces of economic globalisation. This meant further rounds of economic imperialism asnation-states asserted economic liberalisation through global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Tully (2012) also points out that this new imperialism acted in the name of protecting the negative rights of citizens (in the West) to free(er) markets. The widespread adoption of a *globalisation thesis* Mullaly (2007) by governments, policy elites and corporations was used as a rationale for further reductions in social spending on citizens within nation-state borders. Any previous consensus enjoyed by Keynesian inspired social policy gave way to what is now referred to as neoliberalism and this has marked the shift from the welfare to workfare state (McDonald, 2006).

In tandem with neoliberal globalisation, the conservative right have attacked (and continue to attack) the welfare state on the grounds that *state* delivered welfare creates

conditions that are at odds with the needs of markets for free trade. Those on the right have aggressively made a case for 'the moral superiority of individual choice compared to the tyranny of collective decision-making; the necessity for a strong state apparatus in terms of law and order compared to the weakness exhibited by welfare models of justice' (Leonard, 1997, p. 4). Nation-states that had established welfare states rolled back expenditure and focused instead on liberalisation and deregulation of protections and trade in order to ensure a flow of money. Trade unions and other forms of worker protection were undermined by the widespread acceptance of free market economics. In following, we are left with massive cutbacks on government spending and austerity, a punishment and coercive approach to welfare as workfare, the rise of risk management, a focus on individual responsibilism and entrepreneurialism, and the neuro-psycho-bio-medicalisation of human andsocial problems (Ife, 2016; McDonald, 2006, 2010; Rose, 2007, 2010, 2013). For a discipline and profession like social work that had a long and established place in the institutions of the welfare state delivering *social work*, this has presented some problems. Because welfare states in advanced economies found themselves severely curtailed, Mullaly (2007) suggests '…this bought a crisis in confidence in social work among people both within, and outside, the profession' (p. 2). We agree with McDonald (2006) that the changes that have been reshaping the world generally—and the world of social work particularly—are truly far-reaching, and this will require some innovative thinking about what social work is, where it is going, and how it will position itself in this new and unfolding context.

In this book, we have attempted to contribute to thinking about social justice by reviewing and discussing a range of critical and philosophical perspectives to help elucidate the concept of social justice. This chapter brings the discussion together in summary form, and it turns to social work literature to indicate the sorts of practices and approaches that social work may seek to develop, as informed by each approach. In doing so, our aim is to outline a framework for social work practice that emphasises *social* and *structural* aspects of human experience and social work practice.

We should point out a number of limitations to our brief summary below. First, our discussion is necessarily brief and our suggestions are indicative only. Social work has shown a remarkable ability to draw on diverse theories, knowledges and perspectives to craft an impressive array of practical and theoretical resources with which to respond to diversity and complexity in practice. Although we offer suggestions, we have refrained from being too prescriptive because social work practices and the methods and theories it draws from are highly situated and contextual, requiring reflexive adaptation in situ. Our intention is to only offer somewhat of a summary, and outline a range of possible practices that would align well with the philosophical orientations discussed earlier in this book. We have included references to key sources so that readers can explore these examples in more detail.

Second, the presentation of the different social work approaches and examples we have grouped and classified under each perspective in no way suggests that they are mutually exclusive, incommensurable or antagonistic. This classification and grouping of examples and illustrations have been done only insofar as it makes it easier to organise the text for clarity. In reality, many of the methods, examples and
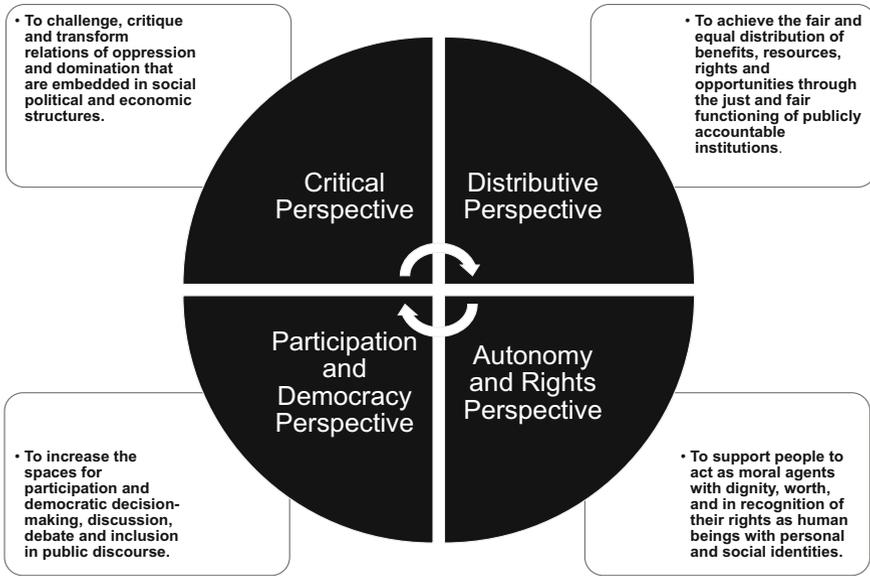
- To challenge, critique and transform relations of oppression and domination that are embedded in social political and economic structures.

- To achieve the fair and equal distribution of benefits, resources, rights and opportunities through the just and fair functioning of publicly accountable institutions.

Critical Perspective

Distributive Perspective

Participation and Democracy Perspective

Autonomy and Rights Perspective

- To increase the spaces for participation and democratic decision-making, discussion, debate and inclusion in public discourse.

- To support people to act as moral agents with dignity, worth, and in recognition of their rights as human beings with personal and social identities.

Fig. 10.1 An integrated model of social justice theory and practice

illustrations we present below may very well equally apply more or less under each or all perspectives and would depend on the orientating theory—we would expect there to be significant cross over and intersection of each approach. In fact, it is our contention that a practice approach for social justice needs to utilise and integrate a range of different methods, and it should be reflexive and adaptive about how this is done. Finally, what is suggested below is not an exhaustive portrait of where socially just practice may go. We encourage readers to consider how they may take the insights from the four critical and philosophical orientations to social justice as a point of departure for analysis, critique, insight and reflection on practice.

Figure 10.1 outlines the critical and philosophical perspectives we have discussed thus far in this book.

Summary of the Four Approaches and Indicative Practices

Critical Social Science, Critical Theory and Social Work

Critical social scienceincludes a wide range of theories and bodies of knowledge that seek to transform the social, economic and political structures and relations that oppress, dominate, marginalise, exploit and discriminate. Critical social theories develop explanations for 'what's going on', but they also include a normative and

politically motivated vision for how things could or ought to be, along with some propositions for how we might get there. Critical social science has its roots in Marxist, feminist, postcolonial and post-structural theorising, critique and social action. This strong critique and social change focus means efforts are made towards organising action to address the root causes of injustice that are embedded into the fabric of society—its economic superstructure, political system, and its social norms, values and discourses that are implicated in perpetuating injustices. With a twin focus on personal problems and public issues (the personal is political), critical approaches seek to attack and transform the root causes of injustice.

In social work there are a cluster of theories that draw from this legacy (albeit in different ways), including critical, radical, structural, anti-oppressive, anti-racist, feminist, postcolonial, postmodern and post-structural approaches in social work (see Allan, Pease, & Briskman, 2009; Briskman, Pease, & Allan, 2009; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Mullaly, 2007; Orme, 2009; Pease & Nipperess, 2016; Turbett, 2014). Chief targets of critical theories include: neoliberal capitalism; elitist political cultures; oppressive and discriminatory social structures and relations; racism; sexism; prejudice and discrimination; biomedical and biopolitical discourses and practices of power, control and domination; professionalism and notions of 'the expert'; and, in some instances, the universalist assumptions and norms associated with the Enlightenment, colonisation and modernity (Briskman, 2003).

The transformative and action side of critical and radical approaches in social work includes: collective solidarity and action (Allan, 2003; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009); joining and supporting local and global social and political movements (Mullaly, 2007; Whitmore & Wilson, 2005); collective or cause advocacy (Allan, 2003); covert and overt activism (Briskman, 2014; Greenslade, McAuliffe, & Chenoweth, 2015); public protest, demonstrations and lobbying (Fraser & Briskman, 2005); civil resistance and non-violent resistance (for a review, see Schock, 2015); consciousness raising, power sharing and dialogical relationship building (Allan, 2003); critique and subversion of dominant discourse and norms (Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005); critical empowerment (Fook & Morley, 2005); lived experience research and education (Dorozenko, Ridley, Martin, & Mahboub, 2016); service user informed knowledge and practice (Beresford, 2000; Beresford & Boxall, 2012); critical education and critical pedagogy (Fook & Askeland, 2007); critical supervision (Noble, 2016); critical reflection (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Hodgson & Watts, 2017, pp. 228–241; Morley, 2016); critical thinking and judgment (Taylor & White, 2006; Tilbury, Osmond, & Scott, 2009); bottom-up ecological and socially just community work (Ife, 2016); social justice group-work (Sullivan, Mesbur, Lang, Goodman, & Mitchell, 2003); radical casework (Fook, 1993); and, organisational resistance politics (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009, pp. 157–159).

Social Work and Approaches Towards Distributive Justice

Social justice from a distributive perspective pursues a fair and equitable distribution of resources, benefits and opportunities. The influence of John Rawls (see Chap. 7) on the philosophical paradigm of distributive justice has been substantial, particularly on articulating a non-utilitarian, non-meritocratic conception of justice. This deontological and politically left-liberal position seeks to advance and maintain a political and social structure that guarantees equality of basic liberties and rights, while at the same time ensuring that the least advantaged are not further disadvantaged, and in fact, ought to benefit from the way that society is organised. For Rawls, an assumed condition of a distributive form of justice is a legal, policy and institutional structure that can articulate, coordinate and moderate and refine through the public use of reason, discussion and debate what principles of distributive justice ought to be adopted and in what ways. This may take the form of, for example: a system to collect and redistribute national wealth in areas of need; publically funded and accessible minimal social subsistence; a legal system that is fair and open and accessible to all; non-discriminatory policies and laws that enable wide access to social institutions and offices of power and responsibility; a coordinated policy approach to support equality of opportunity; protection from discrimination and arbitrary abuses of state and corporate power; forums and opportunities for citizen and civic engagement; maintenance of a civil and open public sphere; and, a commitment to a social contract.

For social work, realising Rawls' vision of a fair distributive system of benefits, opportunities and basic liberties presupposes skills and practices in these sorts of areas: advocacy (both individual and cause advocacy) (Ezell, 2001); deep policy and legislative knowledge (Bateman, 1995; Jansson, 2003); effective and strategic use of organisational systems, procedures and resources (Gardner, 2006); organisational systems thinking and analysis (Hodgson & Watts, 2017, pp. 161–167); networking and coalition building (Ife, 2016, pp. 50–51); research and analysis and using research to influence policy and practice (Alston & Bowles, 2013); applying—or developing, educating, training—and using principles of equal opportunity or anti-discrimination in legislation and practice (Thompson, 2012); argumentation, critical thinking, persuasion and assertiveness in communication across diverse audiences (Bateman, 1995; Cournoyer, 2014; Payne, Adams, & Dominelli, 2009); policy submission/proposal writing (Jansson, 2003); public speaking and presentation skills; knowledge of the policy-making process and how to influence it (Bridgman & Davis, 2004); understanding of natural justice and mechanisms for appeals (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010); and, leadership (Lawler & Bilson, 2010).

Social Work Approaches Towards Participation and Democracy

As mentioned in chapter four on capitalism and neoliberalism, the rise of neoliberalism has seriously eroded the welfare state and the spaces for meaningful democracy and engaged citizenship. This is why we contend that enhancing the spaces and practices for democracy and reasonable deliberation is an important antidote to neoliberal hegemony. We recall here the statement by Brenner, Peck, and Theodore (2010), who argue that a post-neoliberal future should aspire to a 'progressive, solidaristic, and radically democratic normative vision' (p. 342). This is a speculative broad-brush vision for a future beyond the current neoliberal order, the exact details of which remain unspecified—and rightfully so. Hence, working out this vision and addressing what sort of society we want and how can we attain justice requires extensive, engaged and ongoing deliberation and participation in reasonable debate, discussion and public discourse. This is work that social workers can initiate and sustain as part of their practice.

There are many different forms of democracy. These include direct democracy (direct and unmediated citizen engagement in government), representative democracy (a political class who rule on others behalf, often selected through some form of election or vote), constitutional democracy (the historical legal architecture that is the legacy from the rise and emergence of nation-states, which have sought to establish and impose sovereignty over people and territory), and deliberative democracy (which includes participation and collective decision-making over matters that directly impact people). It is the latter aspect of deliberative democracy that we focus on here as we think that social work can enact spaces and practices to support robust modes of participatory and deliberative forms of democracy. Participation is both enabled and constrained by: the nation-state and its relation to, and articulation ofcivil society; national and global constitutional governance arrangements; interference on agency and freedom, such as oppression and domination; and, deep diversity, which can be supported and enabled as an ethic of democratic participation, or dominated by policies of assimilation and group-based stereotyping.

Participation, deliberation and making decisions over matters of importance may take the form of small-scale, face-to-face spaces, where people from diverse backgrounds can enter into discussion and debate, to exchange ideas and reasons for and against various proposals or problems under deliberation. In doing so, the deliberative approach aims to increase the degree of accountability towards discussion and decision-making through the exchange of views, and through the public airing, testing and critical evaluation of reasons and arguments. The form this takes should be done in a manner that promotes: the development of well-informed opinions; the reasonableness to change one's mind upon further discussion and reflection; a deep diversity approach towards tolerance and engagement of different modes of speech, expression, ways of talking and of giving reasons; and, a tolerance for *reasonable disagreement* rather than simply trying to engineer or force consensus or having the discussion collapse into petty arguments, point scoring and one-upmanship.

Creating spaces and practices of participatory and deliberative democracy may take many forms, such as: service user involvement in service development, governance, research and education (Beresford, 2010; Beresford & Boxall, 2012); civic engagement, such as local meetings and discussion groups of people who come together to deliberate over local and global topical matters to achieve social and economic justice (for international examples, see IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW, 2014) ; community organising to help set up meetings and public forums to share and debate proposals and make decisions (Alston, 2009); truth and reconciliation study circles and commissions (Androff, 2018, 2010); consciousness-raising groups (Healy, 2000; Mullaly, 2007); peoples inquiries into matters of public interest (Briskman & Goddard, 2007; Briskman, Latham, & Goddard, 2008); advocacy and support for people to contest the rules under which they and others are governed (such as contesting or reviewing the rules and policies in organisations, governments, NGOs and other institutions) (Ezell, 2001); service user partnerships and structures for deliberation (Beresford, 2010); advocacy and empowerment to bring lived experience into the public domain; for example programs to enable refugees to share experiences and contribute to discussion about refugees and people seeking asylum (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 2018); local and national boards of governance and advisory groups with substantial stakeholder involvement and inclusion (Beresford, 2010); and, participatory action research or cooperative research inquiries (Heron, 1996; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Social Work and the Pursuit of Human Rights and Autonomy

Human rights provide a significant moral resource and discourse for social work to consider questions of social justice and rights generally (Ife, 2012). Much of what is expressed through international human rights instruments and norms resonates with social work more broadly, such as ideas that people everywhere are deserving of dignity and respect, the intrinsic value of every human being, and the promotion of equitable social structures (International Federation of Social Workers 2012). Social work can play an important role in highlighting humanitarian issues and, work towards achieving a civil society within states and within the international arena. Social work can also play an active role in advocating and monitoring the compliance of institutions and nation-state obligations towards human rights (Briskman, 2014; Briskman et al., 2008). This is particularly the case in relation to people who may be stateless due to war and other factors, or those seeking asylum. Stateless and displaced people are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses and violations because they are in a state of 'unfreedom' and are dependent and vulnerable to the arbitrary use and abuse of power (Kesby, 2012; Skinner, 2012; Tully, 2002). This is the link to autonomy, which in general terms points to the capability for someone to be their own person, and to make choices and decisions that are not arbitrarily subject to and constrained by externally imposed forces. Autonomy is also an important aspect of how people conceive of themselves as authentic. In situations of domination,

oppression and rights abuses, to what extent can people pursue choices, exercise their agency, and achieve a state of authenticity? Under conditions of oppression, domination and human rights abuse, what then becomes of autonomy?

Many values and norms in social work circle around the concept of autonomy; for example consent, self-determination and empowerment (Reamer, 2013). Autonomy is also an idea deeply ingrained in the liberal conception of the person as one who is (or ought to be) the author of their own will and their own choices, often expressed by the term 'freedom' (Christman, 2018). This condition of freedom is seen as an important route to becoming a moral agent. A moral agent is a conception of the human person as one who is able to act, reflect and make choices on the basis of factors that are somehow their own (authentic in some sense). This degree of agency possessed by individuals towards various aspects of their lives refers to the power they have to act without interference from external agencies, to act under conditions of independence from the arbitrary will of others, and to achieve a vision of self-realisation that may be political, moral or spiritual.

We can immediately see how human rights violations (and domination and oppression generally) is a barrier to people achieving their full humanity. Furthermore, under the conditions of domination—and in particular, secrecy, fear, violence, persecution and totalitarianism—we are less likely to develop the capabilities of reasoning and free thought that is central to public deliberations and discourse. Kant's conception of autonomy is linked to practical reason, which is a form of public reason and deliberation undertaken by participating free *citizens*. Under these conditions, people become capable of thinking for themselves (Christman, 2018). This is a core Enlightenment value and one that is related to other institutions such as modern forms of democracy, critical thinking, science and knowledge, and the development of a public sphere.

As mentioned in chapter nine, autonomy should not rest purely on a view of human beings as individualistic atoms or beings who think, reason, choose and decide in isolation from each other. An atomistic and individual account of autonomy is a limited conception because it falsely assumes that autonomy is disembodied and disembedded, when it is not. Autonomy also points to the intersubjective and relational nature of human life. For example, although people may see themselves as having more or less, or greater or lesser degrees of freedom and autonomy, it also matters whether or not their status as autonomous beings is recognised *by others* in socially and institutionally embedded relationships (Laden, 2001; Laden, 2005). It is all very well to say that people are free and autonomous, but this falls apart very quickly when they are not treated accordingly. It begs a question: what opportunities are there for the exercise of autonomy within relations of care that pay attention to aspects of vulnerability, domination and human rights transgressions? A critical and socially informed notion of autonomy means to conceive of autonomy as formed from within power relations, and thus these power relations are always present and formative on the autonomous subjectivity of people engaging with each other in working out how to relate to one another, to think, choose, decide, reason and communicate with each other (Allen, 2011). It means to see autonomy as a way people struggle for recognition and fulfilment within a practical field of social relations, power and contextual

circumstances that bear down upon and shape on the phenomenological experience as autonomy.

The kinds of activities and practices for social work along these lines may include: human rights advocacyand activism (Briskman, 2014; Briskman & Cemlyn, 2005); human rights education (Ife, 2012; Nipperess, 2013); community development (Ife, 2016); education and consciousness-raising (Mullaly, 2007); consent and informed decision-making (Reamer, 2013); shared decision-making, power sharing and enabling a voice for marginalised or oppressed groups or individuals (Heather & Shulamit, 2017); critical empowerment (Fook & Morley, 2005); promotion of self-determination (Murdach, 2011; Steen, Mann, Restivo, Mazany, & Chapple, 2017); compassion and empathy (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011; Reamer, 2013); promote discussion, debate and public discourse (MacKinnon, 2009); tolerance and respect for diversity of opinion and modes of expression within a human rights framework (Ife, 2012); interpersonal skills of communication, negation and empowerment (Trevithick, 2011); interpersonal skills of respect and promotion of dignity (Hodgson & Watts, 2017, pp. 100–113); fostering relations of care and respectful interdependence (Lloyd, 2006); non-violence (Ife, 2012); virtue ethics (McBeath & Webb, 2002); building trust in organisations and working towards civil and harmonious workplaces and organisations (Roberts, Scherer, & Bowyer, 2011; Six, 2007); working with and promoting schemes of redress (Murray, 2015); environmental justice and community participation and action (Pyles, 2017); support for safe and accessible public space and community commons (Toolis, 2017; Ware, Bryant, & Zannettino, 2011); and, promote cultural diversity and create spaces for cultural expression (Garcia & Van Soest, 2006).

Conclusion

This chapter has summarised distributive, critical, democratic and rights perspectives on social justice and made some links between these theoretical and philosophical perspectives to the social work literature. In doing so, our aim has been to offer a synthesis of these perspectives by indicating in brief form the sorts of activities and actions that social workers may develop. Taken together, activities and actions will assist social workers to push their practice towards the broad aim of social justice. By way of conclusion, we present this summary in Table 10.1.

Table 10.1 Summary of philosophical and critical perspectives on social justice and indicative social work practices

Perspective	Summary	Indicative activities of practice
Critical Perspective	To challenge, critique and transform relations of oppression and domination that are embedded in social political and economic structures	Use direct and indirect activism to achieve access, inclusion and natural justice Promote and support social movements and collective action for social change Facilitate consciousness raising activities and spaces Critique and moderate the use of power and knowledge so as to address domination and oppression Practice critical education and learning through critical reflection Utilise community development/organising to build collective solidarity and inclusive communities Support union movements and workers cooperatives to facilitate workers' rights and class consciousness Adopt anti-racist and pro-feminist practice approaches Support and develop Indigenous knowledge and practice Develop ecologically sustainable practices Critique the limits and impacts of positivist and biomedical knowledge on human welfare Critique and transform capitalist neoliberalism in favour of local cooperatives, economic regulation, public ownership of assets, and the sustainable meeting of human and ecological needs
	Critical/Radical/Structural/Anti-Oppressive social work Radical casework Group-work Community work Activism	
Distributive Perspective	To achieve the fair and equal distribution of benefits, resources, rights and opportunities through the just and fair functioning of publicly accountable institutions	Conduct policy research and policyadvocacy to support justice as fairness Support the functioning of the welfare state and its institutions Work towards just, transparent and accountable institutions Foster and enable access and inclusion to decision-making in institutions and organisations Promote equality of opportunity and access to resources and opportunities, especially for the most disadvantaged Support and promote freedom of speech and assembly (with an ethic of toleration and reasonableness) Advocate for *socially just, ethical* and appropriate income support schemes and systems and responses that address disadvantage
	Structural/Macro social work Case and cause advocacy Organisational development Legal and policy research and advocacy	

Table 10.1 (continued)

Perspective	Summary	Indicative activities of practice
Participatory Democracy Perspective	To increase the spaces for participation and democratic decision-making, discussion, debate and inclusion in public discourse	Practice and support active participation and inclusion in decision-making about the rules, norms, methods and processes of inclusion and decision-making Adopt service user perspectives and include service user involvement in the development, governance and delivery of services and knowledge creation Promote citizenship and advocate for citizen rights and recognition by nation-states Develop spaces for dialogical face-to-face debate and discourse to support the public use of reason and knowledge Create and sustain local and institutionally embedded models of participation and decision-making
	Participation in political fora Small group-work Citizen's juries Co and shared decision-making Organisational and institutional change and development Public and open reasoning and debate	Promote and support freedom from coercion (for example, freedom from non-arbitrary interference from state and corporate actors) Promote and practice collective decision-making as an ethos of practice and service governance Legislative debates, political campaigns, demonstrations
Autonomy and Rights Perspective	To support people to act as moral agents with dignity , worth, and in recognition of their rights as human beings with personal and social identities	Use excellent communication skills that focus on address, recognition and acknowledgement of others Build and foster toleration and respect for difference Support and foster human capabilities and the conditions necessary for self-determination and self-fulfilment of individual and collective capabilities Uphold human rights and advocate for human rights policy and legislation Practice different forms of recognition as an ethic of practice (for example, affiliation, love, relations of care) Advocate for the importance of place, space, culture and social relations in human well-being
	Human rights practice Social advocacy and public empathy Advocate for freedom and liberty from violence, oppression and arbitrary dependence and interference Solidarity with disadvantaged and marginalised peoples Sanctuaries for freedom and safety Cultural competence and safety	

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