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Social Workers in Socio-Legal Collaborations: Re-Asserting a Pivotal Role of Influence and Leadership

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Abstract

Current legal discourse puts forward socio-legal collaborations, integrated social work and legal practice and medical/legal partnerships as innovations from the legal sector aimed at resolving clients' intertwined legal and social issues. In doing so it has generalised and diminished the specific contribution in these programmes of highly skilled social work staff. This article sets out a study of Australian socio-legal collaborations to re-establish the significant contribution made by social workers in this sector. It argues that social workers are the dominant social service profession and provide integral practice and leadership contributions. It argues that further research in Australia and internationally is required to support social work to stand in leadership alongside lawyers, not only in these programmes but also in the discourse and sector that surrounds them.

Keywords: Australia, collaboration, integrated, interdisciplinary, practice, socio-legal

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Introduction

Experiencing challenging life events, such as the loss of stable housing, the loss of work or income or escaping domestic and family violence, often brings individuals in contact with both legal and social service professionals. Inextricably linked legal and social issues have been shown to be a common experience, with approximately 43 per cent of people across the world reporting that justice issues had negatively impacted their lives including 29 per cent reporting physical or stress-related ill health and 23 per cent reporting the loss of employment or housing as a result (World Justice Project, 2019). These life events can be viewed from multiple perspectives, with solutions or interventions offered by a range of professionals including social workers and lawyers. When providing services through siloed professional spaces, however, it becomes incumbent on those experiencing the life events and seeking support, rather than service providers, to determine if the silo of 'social' or 'legal' assistance is required. To counter the burden this creates, lawyers and social services have sought solutions along two paths, through changes to individual practice and the development of integrated programmes. At a practice level, some lawyers have shifted towards therapeutic jurisprudence or holistic lawyering, introducing concepts of social work and psychology into the lawyer role (Brooks, 2005; King *et al.*, 2014). Likewise in social work, advocates of social work law have promoted a focus on the integration of law into social work practice, to ensure a responsiveness to legal rights and obligations in the practice are undertaken and the client outcomes achieved (Preston-Shoot *et al.*, 1998). A more longstanding approach, which is the focus of this article and an alternative to these individual practice responses, is to bring together professionals from each discipline to work collaboratively, creating an integrated programme response. Occurring across the globe and across practice areas (Ekstrom, 2015; Kumar, 2020; Hurd, 2023), social workers in these programmes have directly worked in legal firms as part of the service offering to clients or alternatively, programmes have introduced lawyers to social service organisations to provide legal advice from within community or health settings.

Despite an extended history, much of the current discourse of when and how socio-legal collaborations are occurring, however, would suggest that this is a relatively new practice and one initiated and driven by the legal sector (American Bar Association, 1994; Coumarelos *et al.*, 2012). These collaborations are often put forward as innovative legal sector solutions for clients facing issues where the legal and the social are intertwined and enmeshed (Noble, 2012; Gyorki, 2013). They are promoted as legal 'one-stop-shop' settings and as having better access and client legal outcomes as a result (Coumarelos *et al.*, 2012). Compared to the legal

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contribution to these collaborations, the roles undertaken by social service professionals such as social workers, both currently and historically, however, have remained comparatively underplayed and unexplored within this discourse. Specific social service professions have not been commonly identified in case studies by the legal sector. Many have generalised them as one 'non-legal' (Noone, 2012) group, setting the tone of where these trained professionals may be thought to sit as secondary to the seemingly more central role of lawyers.

Despite this, collaborations of this kind have a clear synergy with the inherent purpose of social work, giving direct access to individuals and families navigating a complex, powerful and potentially dangerous system (Madden and Wayne, 2003). They have the potential to provide access for the expansion of social work practice in areas, such as social work law and human rights practice. These suggest that not only should social workers be skilled at understanding legal contexts (Preston-Shoot *et al.*, 1998) but that the inherent focus of social work on people, families and social/structural contexts means that social workers can offer a progressive extension to individualised legal concepts, such as human rights (Ife, 2016), and as such offer a unique contribution in collaborative programmes.

Set out in this article are the findings of a recent research study that explored the landscape of socio-legal collaborations in Australia and the critical role played by social workers. By also outlining the existing Australian, UK and US socio-legal collaboration literature, which has contributed to the development of programmes within the current Australian landscape (Noble, 2012; Gyorki, 2013), it argues that there has been a diminishment of social work in the discourse over time but rather than seeing this as an accurate depiction of limited social work practice in the sector, it should instead be considered a reflection of the changing political and cultural response to social work more generally. As such, the current research presents an opportunity for social work to reassert its longstanding contribution and importance, and calls for further research into and support from the profession to elevate understandings of social work expertise in these collaborations and their contribution to programme success and positive client outcomes, both in Australia and internationally.

The discourse of social workers in socio-legal collaborations

From equal partner to unseen service provider

Examination of the literature in relation to socio-legal collaborations suggests that contrary to the 'recent innovation' narrative found in

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contemporary discourse (Noble, 2012), there is in fact a long history of specifically social workers collaborating with lawyers dating back to the 1950s. Developing in the USA during the 1950s, and then in Australia and the UK in the 1970s, collaborative programmes initially focused on poverty law and disadvantaged groups of people (Sloane, 1967; Phillips, 1979; Craige *et al.*, 1982; Noone, 2001), with some of these original Australian programmes still existing today (Noone, 2012). During these times of the first initial waves of collaborations in Western systems, politics and policy were focused on the collective and the strength of welfare states, providing conducive environments for the development of socially oriented and progressive organisations. The role of social workers as the central profession alongside lawyers was clearly articulated during this period with authors such as Craige, Saur and Arcuri in the USA specifically documenting the number of social workers in legal settings and the contributions they made (Craige *et al.*, 1982). Since this time a small but steady growth in development occurred in the USA (Trubek and Farnham, 2000; Brustin, 2002), with Australia and the UK experiencing a resurgence of programmes in the 2000s following access to justice research findings that highlighted social barriers to accessing legal services (Buck *et al.*, 2010; Coumarelos *et al.*, 2012).

In the 1990s, developing understandings of the social determinants of health encouraged a new wave of medical–legal partnerships (legal services delivered in and with health services), which were then taken up as health justice partnerships in Australia in the 2010s (Noble, 2012; Gyorki, 2013; Regenstein *et al.*, 2017; Forell, 2018). Research in the USA and the UK suggested that these social determinants of health were also reflective of socially based legal problems, suggesting the need for both social and legal solutions and the development of health justice partnerships in health settings (Tobin Tyler, 2012; Beardon and Genn, 2018). More broadly, this period saw a widespread endorsement of 'joined-up' policy directives. In Australia, a number of federal and particularly Victorian social policies made reference to working collaboratively, including: a National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services (Council of Australian Governments, 2010); A Fairer Victoria: Standing together through tough times (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2009); Foundations for a Stronger, Fairer Australia (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2011); Victorian Approaches to Joined Up Government (State Services Authority, 2007); and Changing lives: A new approach to family violence in Victoria (Department for Victorian Communities, 2005).

Reflections of political trends

During this resurgent focus on the socio-legal collaboration, however, the specific articulation of the social work role, as seen in earlier

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discourse, has been lacking. One way this reduced focus on social work can be understood is in the Australian context of changing social and political trends over the period. The socio-political 'activist agenda' present in the 1960s and 1970s saw governments that sought social change, supporting programmes originated by social workers in which advocacy and the legal system were utilised in collaboration (Sloane, 1967; Noone, 2001). Collaborations sought to empower clients, with the expansion of Australian community legal centres (CLCs) through advocacy by social workers in resetting understandings of legal aid, social justice and advocacy to be fundamental rights of the community (Noone, 2001; Giddings and Noone, 2004). By 1983, these programmes were accepted and formal inclusions of the Australian legal aid system (Giddings and Noone, 2004). By the late 1980s and 1990s, however, the Australian socio-political landscape had shifted dramatically, seeing many collaborations reverting to their distinct and separate professions. The activist and social reform agenda of previous years was left behind, and individualistic liberal governments were gaining traction, leading to decreased state assistance for social and legal problems, decreased funding for legal aid and CLCs and specialisation towards safety net legal services as opposed to broader social work contributions (McDonald and Jones, 2000; Noone, 2001). These political changes saw a distinct ideological shift away from social work mainstays, such as collective support and structural disadvantage towards individual responsibility (McDonald and Jones, 2000) and in tandem created a central, individual-focused legal voice in the discourse of socio-legal collaborations away from the original leaders and developers.

Unrecognised role of social work in collaborations

The 1990s and 2000s saw an increased political focus on community and integrated ways of thinking (Ferguson, 2004), enhancing a new resurgence of socio-legal collaborations with a particular focus in Victoria (Curran, 2005; Noone, 2012). The role of social work, however, did not rebound to its position of the 1960s and 1970s and has remained unarticulated and generalised as part of an amorphous group of social services (Curran, 2005). More recently, as the research around intersecting social and legal problems (Coumarelos *et al.*, 2012), and the social/legal determinants of health (Martinez *et al.*, 2017) has grown in prominence, professionals collaborating with lawyers have continued to be referred to as 'non-legal' (Noone, 2012). This term would seem to be deliberate in its lack of specificity, allowing legally controlled programmes to claim that a range of professions or quasi-professional staff would be possible alongside lawyers, such as 'social and community workers' or 'health professionals' (Forell and Boyd-Caine, 2018). This lack of specificity has

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thus negated the distinct roles that different professions within this 'non-legal' grouping may play and underestimates the professional knowledge and practice expertise that they bring. By clustering workers as 'non-legal', thereby defining them by what they are not rather than by what they are (Walsh, 2012), the current legal discourse of socio-legal collaborations has made the contribution of professional groups such as social work obtuse and secondary to that of lawyers.

For social work, this raises key concerns around recognition, professional practice and cross-disciplinary leadership. As a profession that is focused on the interaction of the inner and outer worlds of individuals and communities, the psychological and the social, whilst also engaging significantly in matters of law and social justice (Sheehan, 2013; Connolly *et al.*, 2018), social work would seem uniquely placed to participate in and lead these collaborations. However, leaving their contribution to be defined and described predominantly by a legal discourse would seem to provide little opportunity to more accurately depict this sector and the potential for social work leadership within it.

To redress this imbalance, the study detailed in the remainder of this article sought to establish, as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s papers of Craige *et al.* (1982), a more accurate understanding of the role and contribution of social workers to socio-legal collaborations in Australia. In providing clarity about the nature of the social work role within these current collaborations and the unique and critical contribution of social work practice, the study results establish a foundational landscape whereby the opportunities for social work leadership and practice development in this growing sector are made clear.

Methodology

The study of Australian socio-legal collaborations drawn on in this article was undertaken in 2016–2017. It utilised a Convergent Parallel mixed methods design model (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011), drawing from quantitative online surveys of programme managers and online surveys and semi-structured interviews with programme staff. The three data sources of this study were analysed separately before a Central Merged Analysis was conducted using a side-by-side comparison of data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Analysis of the quantitative data from each survey used descriptive and inferential analysis, comparing groups and the relationships between variables using SPSS. The qualitative data in this study was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and NVIVO. The study was conducted with ethics approval through the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee.

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Results

Numbers and scope of social workers in socio-legal collaborations

Whilst existing literature suggested some upward movement in current numbers of socio-legal collaborations in Australia from the original establishment of the West Heidelberg Community Legal Service in the 1970s (Noone, 2012), the study established that between April 2016 and February 2017, there were sixty-seven programmes available in Australia. This number of programmes represents an extensive range of geographical locations and significant potential access to social work services in the socio-legal context. The study showed programmes existing in all states and territories, with a clear predominance of programmes occurring in Victoria ($n = 25$), followed by New South Wales ($n = 18$) and Queensland ($n = 11$). Whilst having a small number of programmes ($n = 4$), the Northern Territory was identified as having the lowest programme per population ratio (1:61,700), indicating increased access to programmes in this location. The study also found that programmes represented a wide range of focus areas and areas of practice, suggesting socio-legal collaborations had the capacity to provide access to social work services across areas such as elder law ($n = 11$), domestic violence ($n = 7$), civil law ($n = 7$) and mental illness ($n = 6$). The study, however, also found that a significant number of programmes were in general legal practice ($n = 18$), which highlighted that lawyers, and legal settings in general, may provide a significant access point into social work service provision.

Whilst this range of programmes certainly suggests the potential for extended access to social work practice, in the context of existing literature, which generalised and merged professions into a category of 'non-legal', it was important for the study to establish the actual extent of social work practice within this context. The study identified lawyers and social workers as the predominant professions within the collaborations, with lawyers directly employed in 94 per cent of programmes ($n = 63$) and social workers representing the largest social service professional group being employed in 64.2 per cent of programmes ($n = 43$). Other social service professions employed in socio-legal collaborations were named by managers as counsellors in 19.4 per cent ($n = 13$), support workers in 16.4 per cent ($n = 11$), psychologists in 10.4 per cent ($n = 7$), nurses in 9.0 per cent ($n = 6$) and doctors in 1.5 per cent ($n = 1$) of programmes (see Figure 1). Of the programmes employing social workers, 58.1 per cent ($n = 25$) also reported only employing social workers, with no other social service professions in their collaboration.

The study also compared the work experience of the different professions. It found that despite there being more lawyers than social workers,

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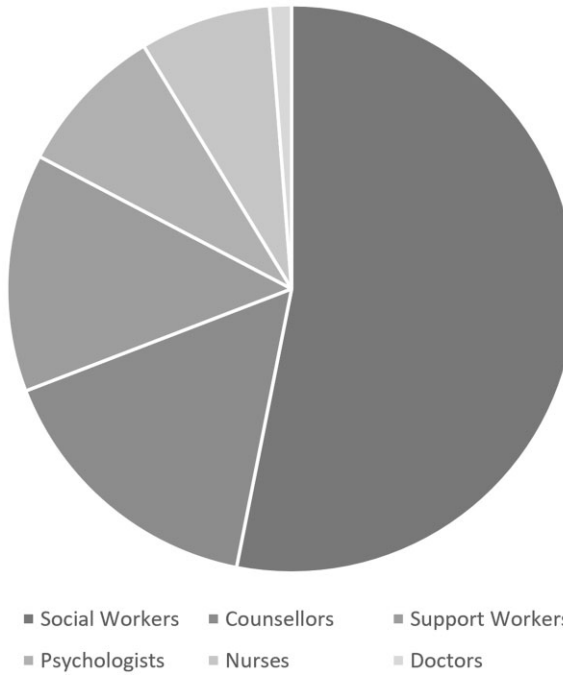


Figure 1: Social service professions in socio-legal collaborations.

social workers reported being more experienced than lawyers, with almost half of social worker respondents (45.8 per cent) reporting that they had fifteen or more years of experience, whilst a similar percentage of lawyers (40.7 per cent) reported that they had been with the programme for four years or less.

These findings of the study show not only a landscape of socio-legal collaborations that are well-developed across the country but also one in which the specific practice of social work is a key contributor. This serves as a direct counter to the existing legal-focused literature and the notion of general, 'non-legal' social service delivery (Noone, 2012), and suggests that there is a clear opportunity for social workers to claim and own the contributions they are making.

The roles and tasks undertaken by social workers

The specific contribution made by social workers was also explored in the study interviews. This showed that a range of direct social work clinical practice was provided to clients of organisations. These services were

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also offered to other staff and were provided alongside social workers taking up leading education and training roles within the programmes. Results showed that organisations were on a spectrum of how bounded to the legal matter they expected social work services to be, from completely aligned and only offered to help resolve a legal matter, through to social work services which were given the opportunity to work completely independently from the legal matter and engage with clients before and after a legal issue may have arisen. Within this spectrum, however, the roles played by social workers remained the same. The key roles played by social workers as described in the interviews included providing emotional support, social-based referrals, training, direct client counselling, direct client casework, debriefing and secondary consultation.

Participants also described taking on formal and informal roles in relation to vicarious trauma and staff care in their programmes, and as such performed roles to support the collaboration itself. A social worker participant of the study (##A01) described:

> When new lawyers start, the social support team do a sort of induction with the lawyers and we talk about vicarious trauma and we do an in-house one here as well so I can talk to them about how we work with the lawyers and what we offer to support them.

Another social worker participant (##A018) spoke about the debriefing roles played by social workers when working directly with legal counterparts:

> When you back in the car I would say 'Gosh, that was dreadful. How was that for you?' It's not formal debriefing but it's a way of supporting a colleague. It's a real sense of looking after each other in the roles.

Whilst social worker participants in the study were clear in the work they were doing, some still described legal colleagues were not aware of what social work was, nor were they aware of the expertise required for practice. ##A013, a social worker, described:

> Unless it's a personal relationship, lawyers don't know about social workers, what they do. They don't even know that we got a degree. Whereas, I think, social workers by nature are much more inclined to know more about what lawyers do than the other way around.

Furthermore, ##A015 described the importance of social workers understanding and communicating their role to others:

> . . .it wasn't until we got really clear. . .and started to own our professional expertise that it felt like now we are on some equal grounds here.

These results reflect the commonly described difficulty of articulating the exact role of social work within or external to collaborations (Delavega

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et al., 2019). In providing a clear definition of the role through this study, however, it is hoped that understanding of social work will increase, not just at the individual or programme level, but also at the level of the wider socio-legal collaboration discourse.

The contribution and influence of social workers to collaborations

Working from this foundation of the volume of social workers in these programmes and the roles they undertook, the study then moved to explore the influence working in collaboration with social workers was having on the practice of lawyers in these programmes and the programmes more generally. Consideration was given to the theoretical frameworks and approaches practitioners were bringing to their practice and the programme and their perceptions of how their practice changed between collaborative and non-collaborative settings.

Theoretical foundations of practice

Social workers reported consistently that their practice was informed by one or more specific theoretical frameworks and approaches (91.1 per cent, $n = 41$), whilst this was much less common in lawyers (33.3 per cent, $n = 17$). The key practice approaches for social workers were strength-based ($n = 20$) and feminist theory ($n = 10$). In contrast, the key practice approaches nominated by lawyers were therapeutic jurisprudence ($n = 6$) and collaboration generally ($n = 6$). Trauma-informed practice, however, was the key theoretical framework which cut across both professions (lawyers $n = 2$; social workers $n = 12$) (see Table 1).

This focus on theory, particularly by social workers, however, was not necessarily just retained by the practitioners themselves. Over half of managers of programmes reported that the programme as a whole followed a practice theory or framework including trauma-informed, strengths-based, therapeutic jurisprudence and social justice and human rights. This was reported slightly less in programmes located within a law firm or CLC (56.4 per cent, $n = 22$), but more in those located in a social service or community health centre (61.5 per cent, $n = 8$). This was also evidenced in the interviews of the study where social worker participants such as ##A013 described:

> The influence that I have here is talking about Trauma Informed Care, working with clients, and supporting clients to answer some questions from lawyers that can be very intrusive, but lawyers need to know to be able to get some advice and how to navigate that stuff. That's probably being the change for [the service], I think, 'cause that's the area that I'm interested in

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Table 1. Key practice theories listed by participants

Profession	Social Workers (*n*)	Lawyers (*n*)
Strengths-based	***20***[a]	0
Trauma-informed	***12***[a]	***2***[a]
Feminist	***10***[a]	0
Therapeutic jurisprudence	0	***6***[a]
Collaboration	0	***4***[a]
Systems theory	7	0
Social justice and human rights	5	2
Client centred	5	1
Solutions focused	5	1
Anti-oppressive practice	4	0
Attachment and psycho-dynamic	4	0
Community and child safety	3	0
Recovery theory	2	0
Case management	1	0
Social work based	1	0
Community development	1	0
Narrative	1	0
Empowerment	0	2
Strategic and systemic advocacy	0	1

Note. Frequency by profession.
[a]Frequently nominated practice theories.

These descriptions of social workers bringing influential theory and practice frameworks to the collaborations in which they sit are also reflected in the measures and descriptions of practice change provided by participants.

Measuring practice change

In the study, concepts from the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) were drawn upon. Gilligan proposes a continuum of ethical practice and values that were initially based on a gender distinction between female and male-orientated ethics (Gilligan 1982). Feminist critics in social work and law have certainly questioned the work's link to gender (Gould, 1988; Walsh, 2012); however, feminist scholars have also suggested that these concepts can be used from a feminist rather than feminine perspective, with the concept allowing consideration of alternative approaches developed from a place of strength and positivity rather than as deficient or not the male norm (Menkel-Meadow, 1986; Gould, 1988; Cahn, 1992). These theories have also been taken further than their gendered origins finding a place in wider ethical debates in both social work and law as a continuum between a social work ethic of care and a legal ethic of justice (Daicoff, 2004; Meagher and Parton, 2004). To apply this to this study, the Ethic of Care and Ethic of Justice scales were created by the researchers using the five pairs of core ethical elements set out by

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Ethic of Care		Ethic of Justice
Context	⟷	Specificity
Relationships	⟷	Rights
Circumstance	⟷	Rules
Equity	⟷	Equality
Conciliation	⟷	Adversarialism

Figure 2: Measures of practice.

Gilligan (1982). The Ethic of Care scale was used to represent traditional social work values and contained five individual elements; context, relationships, circumstance, equity and conciliation. The Ethic of Justice scale was used to represent the more traditional legal practice approach. The Ethic of Justice contained five elements of specificity, rights, rules, equality and adversarialism (see Figure 2). How strongly a participant's legal or social work practice was focused on each element was measured using a Likert scale from 1 to 7. These were then totalled and averaged across the five elements to create overall Ethic of Care or Ethic of Justice scores. Using these scales, participants were also asked to apply the measure to both their current collaborative roles and to a past non-collaborative role where they were not working in programmes that brought lawyers and social workers together. The difference between these scores was used as an indicator of change with a range of change scores possible between 0 (no change) and ±6 (increased or decreased Ethic of Care or Justice).

The study found that the context of collaboration, as compared to a previously non-collaborative role, allowed lawyers to both increase their ethic of care (a more social work-inspired approach to practice) ($MD = 1.03$, $p > 0.000$*) but without losing their ethic of justice (a more legally orientated approach to practice), which also increased ($MD = 0.46$, $p > 0.010$) (see Table 2).

This suggests that collaboration with social workers had not reduced the 'justice' focus inherent to lawyers but in fact supported a 'justice' focus, as well as enhancing legal practice towards elements of the ethic of care such as relationships and conciliation. Furthermore, social workers seemed able to maintain both their ethic of care and ethic of justice, reporting a very small increase in the ethic of justice ($MD = 0.06$) and a small decrease in the ethic of care ($MD = -0.21$), neither which reached statistical significance. This, however, may still be suggestive of social workers having a stronger sense of their own practice focus. Whilst working with lawyers could present a new and challenging experience, it

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Table 2. Comparison of past and present scores for the ethic of care and ethic of justice scales

	M (SD)		Mean difference (95% CI)	*t*	p	Eta-squared
Social workers						
Ethic of Justice Scale	Pre $n = 28$ 5.45 (0.72)	Post $n = 28$ 5.51 (0.62)	0.06 (−0.22, 0.35)	0.464 (27)	0.646	0.01
Ethic of Care Scale	Pre $n = 31$ 5.87 (0.67)	Post $n = 31$ 5.66 (0.80)	−0.21 (−0.61, 0.20)	−1.034 (30)	0.309	0.04
Lawyers						
Ethic of Justice Scale	Pre $n = 28$ 5.37 (0.92)	Post $n = 28$ 5.84 (0.73)	0.46 (0.12, 0.81)	2.778 (27)	0.010*	0.23
Ethic of Care Scale	Pre $n = 29$ 4.90 (1.05)	Post $n = 29$ 5.93 (0.58)	1.03 (0.66, 1.40)	5.684 (28)	0.000**	0.54

*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$, Likert scale 1–7.

may not be of such a nature to significantly alter their professional or ethical practice. These results suggest a possibly stronger theoretical basis for social work in these spaces and in turn social workers would seem to influence the programmes and professionals around them.

Discussion

The results of this study paint a much clearer picture of the central role played by social workers in Australian socio-legal collaborations and provide a strong basis from which leadership in the sector could be further developed. It provides a direct counter to the legal-dominated discourse of 'non-legal' or the generalised social service provider (Noone, 2012), demonstrating an established and influential role for social workers in this growing sector. Rather than being a profession that could potentially participate in socio-legal collaborations, this study would suggest that they are *the* profession collaborating and in doing so, they shape and influence collaborations through their practice.

Whilst the current academic discourse remains dominated by the legal sector and concepts, such as therapeutic jurisprudence has recast what social work provides as a legal practice approach (King *et al.*, 2014), this study can be used to draw attention to the influence of social work in current programmes and the benefits to both programme participants and the profession. The growing number of programmes in the Australian landscape and the influence of social workers within them, for example, demonstrates a clear space in which social workers could work with lawyers to progressively expand engagement with human rights beyond the legal to human engagement in relational contexts (Ife, 2016), and where individuals and families can take up relational and well-being

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outcomes, rather than solely legal outcomes, as a response to their specific needs (Ife, 2016). As an inherently dangerous system for vulnerable populations to navigate (Madden and Wayne, 2003), it is incumbent on social workers to not only be competent in how the law impacts social work practice or shapes the support that social workers can provide, as is called for in social work law and other jurisprudence perspectives (Preston-Shoot *et al.*, 1998; Kennedy *et al.*, 2013), but also, as is the opportunity in these collaborations, to step into the system directly and to influence and advocate from within.

These results also align with more recent developments in socio-legal collaborations. In Australia, there is a growing awareness of the importance of trauma-informed care on both client and practitioner experience, and a strong reliance on strength-based practice in developments driven by the contribution of leading social workers (Eastern Community Legal Centre [ECLC], 2019; Gountras, 2021). In the private sector, integrated social work practice has been extended by private law firms, such as Slater and Gordon Lawyers, with their holistic, socio-legal collaborative programme emerging from trauma-informed social work foundations (Gountras, 2021). Whilst this may lead some (Specht and Courtney, 1994) to question if this is moving social work away from its core constituent clients of the most socially and economically vulnerable, the services offered by this private law firm are generally 'no win, no fee' with an ethos of making otherwise financially exclusive legal services available to all (Gountras, 2021). The fidelity and outcomes of their trauma-informed practice have yet to be empirically assessed (Gountras, 2021); however, this focus on trauma also works to elevate the experience of trauma as core to the definition of vulnerability that this social work practice embraces. In the community setting, the Eastern CLC (ECLC) has also used trauma-informed care as a central point to the development of their integrated programme, drawing on holistic and client-centred service measures (ECLC, 2019).

By understanding the current landscape and role of social work in these programmes through this study, it provides a foundation from which future research on client outcomes and the impact of practice frames such as trauma-informed integrated practice can be undertaken. It also provides a potential pathway for funding and leadership beyond the legal domain, and the authors would call on both social work practitioners and professional associations to advocate and support this leadership role. The study presented in this article, however, was the first of its kind undertaken in Australia and whilst it represents the most accurate understanding of socio-legal collaborations and the role of social work within them in this country, further research into the practice is also required. Despite the concept of the ethic of care and ethic of justice having been used extensively by law and social work, and as such have relevance for a study of this kind, there are as yet no validated measures

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or other empirical data that could be compared to the findings documented here. Additional research to validate these measures of practice and to examine the indications of the specific areas in which social work is influencing legal practice, such as understandings of human rights or the importance of relational contexts, would provide more sound understandings of the role and influence of social workers in these collaborations. Further to this, however, is the necessity to provide a substantive evidence base, not just of how these collaborations are occurring, but their direct impact on client outcomes and the client experience of well-being during and after their interaction with the legal system. Whilst it is clear that in the Australian setting these collaborations are growing and social work is the lead social service profession involved, it remains unclear if the promise of these collaborations, to meet the needs of clients and to enhance their outcomes beyond what may be achieved through separate social work or legal consultations, has been fulfilled.

Continued development and further research into the role of social work in socio-legal collaborations in Australia and internationally are essential to ensuring that social work practitioners have a voice at the table in discussions of client outcomes, sector innovation, funding and policy. The landscape presented in this study not only reflects the reality of socio-legal collaborations in Australia but in its promotion can also reinforce and protect the unique contribution that social workers are making to the experience and outcomes of clients in this sector.

Conclusion

Despite being some of the original leaders in socio-legal collaborations and the historical establishers of community legal programmes, social workers have long been written out of the history of integrated practice. As a result, law and the legal discourse have come to dominate the space, where it has redefined the practice provided by social work as an innovation of the legal sector's own making. The study presented in this article, however, attempts to re-establish a more accurate indication of the Australian landscape of socio-legal collaborations and the role played by social workers within them. Whilst it has not specifically focused on the outcomes for clients from such collaborations, it is hoped that the potentially positive impact for clients across this sector when social work brings alternative perspectives such as those on human rights, trauma-informed and anti-oppressive practice will continue to be explored in Australia and internationally. It is also hoped that in understanding the current landscape, social work will translate the leadership role played by practitioners in individual programmes into leadership in the discourse and discussion of the wider socio-legal sector. The role played by social workers and the practice they bring is essential to both client and

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programme outcomes, and it is hoped that in the future a commensurate value is placed upon furthering this contribution internationally and in Australia, through both leadership and research.

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