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EDITORIAL

Pay to present, pay to publish: Some critical reflections on research dissemination in social work

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In academia, the mid-year months are often packed with conferences worldwide, while academics may also use this period to work on publications before or after a well-deserved holiday. Against this backdrop, a conversation with colleagues at a recent conference prompted me to reflect in this editorial on the costs of presenting academic research at conferences and of publishing it as part of our responsibility to disseminate research findings. During this conversation, we pondered whether attending conferences, particularly in social work, was worthwhile. In a light-hearted vein, I suggested that the question warranted consideration in an academic paper titled "To conference or not to conference in social work?" A colleague had just published a research paper drawing on the ideas of Foucault (2001) to examine how power and knowledge operate through social institutions and discourses to shape what societies accept as truth, normality and individual identity. This led me to wonder: What might Foucault have said about social work conferences?

Upon my return from the conference, I wrote a feedback report for the deanery of my faculty and compiled the articles for this issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*. In doing so, I recalled my conversation with colleagues and reflected on the considerable expense involved in disseminating research, whether through a conference presentation or a journal publication. As a practice-oriented social worker, my first instinct was to conduct a cost analysis, despite having spent much of my career exploring how neoliberal discourses affect social work by encouraging us to "count instead of judge, measure instead of think, and care about the cost instead of the cause" (Tsui & Cheung, 2004, p. 439).

Nevertheless, I made some calculations, although I recognised that they might not be realistic or valid in relation to the "cause". For a South African academic, the total cost of attending a conference abroad can conservatively be estimated at around R60 000, including all expenses (approximately US$3 622). This would generally require financial assistance from one's institution, which would normally expect the recipient to present a paper. A presentation is

usually allocated 20 minutes, followed by 10 minutes for discussion. In recent years, however, conference organisers appear to have sought to make events financially viable by accepting as many abstracts as possible. This practice reduces the time available for presentations, sometimes to as little as 10 minutes. Consequently, each minute of presentation time could cost R6 000. My calculations became even more unsettling when I recalled that, according to the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group (2026), the estimated average monthly cost of providing a child with a basic, nutritious diet had reached R980.66. The R60 000 spent on a social work conference presentation could therefore provide five children with a basic, nutritious diet for a full year, with approximately R1 160 remaining. This would be sufficient to feed a sixth child for slightly more than a month. Extending this calculation suggests that the combined costs incurred by all presenters at a social work conference could provide all the vulnerable children in an average-sized rural South African village with a basic, nutritious diet for a year**.**

However, social work conferences can also help to bridge the persistent gap between theory, research and frontline practice. Face-to-face interaction builds trust. The professional relationships, exchange of ideas and opportunities for future research collaboration that emerge from that trust may therefore be among the most valuable outcomes of conference participation. For practitioners, conferences offer exposure to emerging evidence and interventions that inform daily practice and reduce professional isolation. Students gain early access to current debates, role models and networks that may shape their careers. Academics can test ideas against the realities of practice, establish research collaborations and disseminate findings to those who apply them. Crucially, participation in conferences may foster a shared professional identity across these groups, strengthening the collective voice that social work needs to advocate for vulnerable populations. The cross-pollination of ideas ultimately benefits those served by the profession. Thus, my estimate of the cost of conference attendance should not be reduced to a simple either-or calculation. Instead, I should ask whether such expenditure produces adequate social and scholarly returns. Here, my colleague's discussion of Foucault's ideas prompts a further question: Who can afford to participate in knowledge-production spaces, and whose voices are consequently excluded? After the conference, was the knowledge shared with other academics, practitioners, students and communities who could not afford to attend or were otherwise unable to do so? Was the presentation developed into an accessible publication?

Of course, Foucault would not have posed these precise questions, nor did he reject conferences. Throughout his career, he travelled extensively, delivered lectures internationally and participated in seminars and public debates. He used these occasions not merely to transmit knowledge but also to question accepted assumptions and encourage critical reflection. Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, I might therefore ask: Should we attend social work conferences not only as presenters or delegates, but also as critical observers of how social work knowledge is produced and disseminated? To what extent are these processes accessible to all?

This brings me to the publication of conference papers, since both fee-charging conferences and journals regulate who produces knowledge, where and how it is presented, who has access

to it**,** and which forms of dissemination are regarded as academically legitimate. A conference presentation reaches a limited audience in one room for a brief period and then vanishes. Publication accords that fleeting contribution a lasting form. It creates a permanent, citable text that contributes to the evidence base and remains available worldwide long after the event. Without this step, valuable findings do not undergo rigorous peer review, may remain largely unverified, and cannot inform practice or policy beyond the immediate audience. Conference presenters who do not publish their papers forgo much of the scholarly recognition conferred by publication in an accredited journal, while the social work profession loses access to knowledge whose production has already been funded. Consequently, failing to publish research presented at conferences wastes intellectual labour, weakens social work's evidence base and impoverishes practice because the resulting findings are not fully disseminated.

Therefore, the economics of scholarly dissemination in social work merits critical scrutiny, since platforms for sharing knowledge increasingly impose significant costs on authors. Conference papers converted into book chapters do not always undergo rigorous peer review, which may limit their scholarly authority. In addition, many accredited social work journals are published by commercial publishers and require readers or institutions to pay subscription fees. Although open-access options are available in many of these journals, authors are often required to pay substantial article processing charges. Fully open-access journals may be more accessible to social work readers without subscription access. However, in the absence of sponsorship, such journals may need to levy article processing charges to remain financially viable, thereby shifting the cost to authors. The financial implications of publishing in subscription-based and fully open-access journals, together with the costs of their editorial management and peer-review systems**,** warrant a separate and equally important debate.

The central issue is that many social work researchers ultimately have to pay both to present and to publish their research (see also Duarte, 2022). Yet dissemination in social work may be understood as a collective responsibility, given the profession's global commitment to social change, social cohesion, empowerment and liberation**.** This requires presenters and authors to reflect carefully on the financial, social and environmental implications of their dissemination choices. Such reflection may encourage the intentional exploration of accessible and cost-effective approaches to sharing knowledge that extend the reach and practical value of their work. After all, advancing practice remains a core purpose of research in social work. If the price of dissemination produces the silence of those who most need our knowledge, social work will have counted the cost while forgetting the cause.

In this spirit, the present issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* once again opens its pages to academics, students, practitioners and the wider public. It brings together 11 open-access articles, a research note and a book review. Although the contributions engage with diverse fields of scholarship and practice, six interrelated themes can be discerned: social work education; male youths, single fathers and single mothers; children; disability; workplace violence; and professional wellbeing.

The issue opens with two contributions on social work education. **Willem Roestenburg, Hanelie Malan, Roelf Reyneke, Varoshini Nadesan, Ulene Schiller and John Rautenbach** examine how six dimensions of social and academic support influence the wellbeing of South

African social work students, who often carry considerable socio-economic, academic and emotional burdens. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the authors conducted a quantitative**,** cross-sectional survey involving 233 students from five higher education institutions. Their findings are noteworthy. Limited on-campus support was associated with lower levels of wellbeing, while friendship networks were unexpectedly associated with depression. The authors therefore call for deliberate institutional investment in both the emotional and academic support of social work students.

Continuing the focus on education, **Goitseone Leburu, Rebecca Skhosana and Noxolo Zwane** explore the transition from blended to fully online work-integrated learning in social auxiliary work education, a development accelerated by the broader digital turn. Their scoping review, informed by the PRISMA-ScR framework and Kolb's experiential learning theory, synthesised 45 sources retrieved from eight databases. The findings reveal both possibilities and concerns. Online delivery can enhance flexibility and access, but it also exposes shortcomings in digital literacy, institutional support and placement arrangements. The authors advocate structured digital pedagogies, stronger institutional and placement support, updated regulatory frameworks, and the careful safeguarding of the profession's core values.

The second broad theme turns our attention to male youths, single fathers and single mothers. **Lancelot Nyamaka and Kwashirai Zvokuomba** investigate male youth suicide in urban Bindura, Zimbabwe, moving beyond the economic explanations that have tended to dominate the literature. Using descriptive phenomenology, they engaged five young men who had survived suicide attempts and 32 family members, friends, witnesses and professionals. Their thematic analysis points to a complex interaction among romantic, socio-economic and spiritual pressures. In response, they propose livelihood and social protection measures, partnerships with families and community leaders, spirituality-informed education, and a culturally responsive social work curriculum**.**

Nompumelelo Shange and Nathaniel Kgadima consider the advice that single fathers offer to men raising adolescent daughters, thereby broadening the scope of earlier scholarship on father-son relationships. Framed by the Fatherhood-Masculinity Model, their qualitative study draws on telephone interviews with 14 participants. The findings challenge enduring stereotypes by showing that fathers can perform the role of provider with warmth, care and nurturing. They also demonstrate the value of professional support. The authors accordingly recommend father-focused interventions, social work curricula and policies that challenge misconceptions about father-daughter relationships.

Moving from fathers to mothers, **Leandi Erasmus and Tanusha Raniga** examine how social and economic exclusion affects the psychosocial wellbeing of single mothers in rural South Africa. The emotional lives of these women have too often been overshadowed by a focus on material deprivation. Working within a qualitative interpretive tradition, the authors conducted 16 semi-structured interviews in isiZulu and analysed the data thematically. The findings present a sobering picture of unemployment, limited economic mobility, dependence on social grants and persistent psychosocial strain. The authors call for developmental social work responses at the micro, meso and macro levels that attend to both the psychosocial wellbeing and material needs of single mothers.

The next three articles focus on children and child protection. **Niccoh Diago and Marianne Strydom** examine social work services for child-headed households, an area of practice that remains insufficiently understood despite continuing violations of children's rights. They interviewed 23 purposively selected social workers, supervisors and provincial officials across three provinces. Their findings reveal fragmented support and considerable gaps in access to family counselling, community care, education, income and shelter. In accordance with constitutional and legislative obligations, the authors urge the government to prioritise resources for child protection across all levels of social work practice.

Busisiwe Mdluli and Priscilla Gerrand turn to parents' experiences of the urgent removal of children by designated social workers. Although parents stand at the centre of statutory intervention, their perspectives are frequently marginalised. Based on semi-structured interviews with 12 parents, this qualitative case study shows that the removal of a child can fracture family life and be experienced as a profound and traumatic loss. The authors make a compelling case for trauma-informed practice that engages, respects, supports and empowers parents from the first encounter.

Still within the field of child protection, **Simone Robinson and Lizane Wilson** explore social workers' experiences of investigating alleged child sexual abuse in the context of divorce. Such cases are marked by considerable emotional, legal and resource-related complexity. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the authors conducted online semi-structured interviews with 12 social workers and analysed the data using content analysis. Their findings underscore the decisive role of collaboration: effective coordination can facilitate intervention, while poor coordination can delay or obstruct services. The authors call for greater role clarity, forensic training for social workers, interdisciplinary professional development, and increased government investment in multidisciplinary child-protection services.

The ninth article focuses on disability. **Brian Tigere and Nontembeko Bila** explore social work practice in community gardens for persons with disabilities in rural Limpopo, where existing generic guidance does not adequately address the particular demands of this setting. Through qualitative applied research, they interviewed ten social workers and analysed their accounts thematically. The findings are encouraging but also point to important limitations. Although social work services promote empowerment, participation and sustainability, they are not sufficiently tailored to the distinctive context of community gardens. The authors therefore propose standardised, disability-inclusive guidelines that could be adopted by relevant government departments.

In the penultimate article, **Xola Fayo** examines Western Cape social workers**'** experiences of workplace violence and the disturbing extent to which it has become normalised. Guided by ecological systems theory and social learning theory, this qualitative exploratory-descriptive study draws on semi-structured interviews with 17 social workers. The findings reveal physical aggression, intimidation and verbal abuse, compounded by inadequate organisational responses, workplace tension and limited resources. The author calls for stronger reporting mechanisms, trauma-informed support, context-responsive safety policies and organisational leadership that accepts responsibility and accountability.

The final article turns to professional wellbeing. **Precious Mseba** asks how South African social workers and educators use metaphors to understand and articulate their own wellbeing, a concept that is both multidimensional and difficult to define. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Analysis and the Capability Approach, the study is based on 15 semi-structured interviews. The findings portray professional wellbeing as dynamic, multifaceted and not always easily expressed in literal language. Metaphors illuminate capabilities, functioning and inner states that might otherwise remain obscured. The author suggests that figurative language can become a valuable means of strengthening professional wellbeing in practice, education and organisations.

In the research note section, **Lambert Engelbrecht and Lorién Parker** pose a deceptively simple question: Why do good papers get desk rejected, and how might this be prevented? They provide practical guidance and illustrative examples, while emphasising that preventing desk rejection involves more than a box-ticking exercise. Authors should aspire not merely to add another publication to their records, but to contribute meaningfully to the evolving body of social work knowledge. Put simply, scholarly work should be written to be read, used and cited.

The issue concludes with **Sandra Bredell's** review of Alessandro Sicora's *The Emotions of Social Workers and How Reflecting on Feelings Can Enhance Practice* (Policy Press, 2026). She regards the book as a timely and valuable resource for readers interested in emotional labour, reflective practice, resilience and professional identity. At a time when practitioner wellbeing and workforce sustainability are receiving renewed attention, the book reminds the profession that emotions should not be ignored. Rather, they should be recognised, explored and used as sources of learning and professional growth. Bredell consequently recommends the book to a broad readership within social work and beyond.

In sum, the contributions in this issue illustrate the breadth of contemporary social work scholarship and the close relationship between research, education, policy and practice. They engage with social work students and educators, fathers and mothers, children and families, persons with disabilities, and practitioners themselves. Across these diverse contexts, however, a common question remains: How can social work respond more critically, compassionately and effectively to the realities of people's lives? After all, the advancement of practice remains a central purpose of research in the social work discipline. Yet when the cost of sharing knowledge excludes those who generate it or prevents that knowledge from reaching those who need it most, research becomes detached from the very purpose it is intended to serve.

Once again, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* provides a platform through which authors can share contextually grounded research with a local and global readership. In doing so, the journal remains faithful to its mission: to publish and promote high-quality scholarship that reaches beyond its immediate setting and makes a meaningful contribution to social work in South Africa and beyond.

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