# New generation leadership: Looking after tomorrow

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This chapter looks forward, asking how to envision a social work we need for the 21st century. It challenges easy notions of succession, mentoring and leadership preparation by proposing a tension between innovation and simply being guided by what has gone before. What types of leaders do we need to navigate complex futures? Will their skill sets and competencies need to be different and how do we prepare them for next generation leadership? How can today’s leaders exercise generosity of spirit in facilitating this transition, creating space and crafting enabling environments that foster such development? We argue for ethical leadership in the profession that guides new ways of thinking about and enabling a distinctive approach for new generation leadership in social work education, practice and research.

**Key words:** collaboration, critical and ethical leadership, social work, education, research, next generation, care ethics

# Introduction

In the context of rapid and widespread change in workforces, workplace parameters and reorganisation in health and welfare systems, approaches and strategies to develop and support new generation leadership must embrace anything but business as usual. The marketisation and corporatising of the human services sector worldwide (Salamon 1993; Mayo 2013; Atlas 2018), an ageing workforce in social work practice and education (Howard and Williams 2017), and the rise of evidence based practice (McDermott and Bawden 2017) characterise a time in social work where the conditions for developing and supporting new generation leadership face significant challenges but require urgent action.

Twenty-first century challenges of working within contexts of poverty, oppression and multi-agency practice, along with what Keenan, Sandoval and Ramone (2018, p. 3) describe as the increasingly “complex intellectual” functions of the role remain. The need for more effective leaders within academic and practice is clear. Conversely, new forms of social action, technological innovation making global communication and participation possible, and increasing opportunities for more fluid and adaptable leadership practice create new spaces, dynamics and possibilities for thinking through what new generation social work leadership might include. In this chapter, we: examine some of the contextual factors that have in the past, and continue to impact on leadership development and support in social work; explore some of the ways in which new generation leadership might be supported; and outline suggestions for social work education in creating conditions that encourage and nurture a distinctly social work focused approach to leadership across practice, teaching and leadership.

# Structural factors shaping leadership and how we might address these

The social work profession has been grappling with notions of leadership for many decades (Brilliant 1986; Lawler 2007; Iachini, Cross and Freedman 2015). There remains a lack of leadership and the need for a greater emphasis on leadership within the academic curriculum (Mohan 2002; Wimpfheimer 2004). Other related disciplines including medicine and nursing are more advanced in leadership development; despite these challenges, there is a requirement for the social work academic community to engage with this debate on a wider scale (Elswick et al. 2018).

## Power, social work and leadership

Proximity to power often elicits feelings of discomfort and avoidant action amongst social work practitioners and educators alike. A reluctance to participate in oppressive uses and structures of power is certainly a mantra in social work education. An awareness of how such uses and structures have shaped the lives of most of those we work with has worked to both energise and guide social work education and practice, and to make us wary of wielding that power in case we become too closely aligned with its oppressive characteristics. Our discomfort with power has also manifested itself in relation to leadership. McLendon, Kagotho and Lane (2016, p. 500) trace, what they refer to as an “abdication of macro power” to a historical tendency for social work courses to privilege micro practice as core social work, and shy away from macro practice (including leadership in organisations) as outside *real* practice. This, they argue, has often left social work approaches out of leadership and management discourse and social workers absent from macro decision-making in areas that are otherwise considered social work’s purview. Alongside this, researchers have identified a long-term and significant gap in social work education about leadership (Fronek, Fowler and Clark 2011). Specific curriculum focused on leadership in social work has been noticeably absent from university courses, further compounding a lack of confidence, knowledge, skill and comfort for students with the practice of leadership. As practitioners or academics, social workers can find themselves in leadership roles with minimal or no knowledge base about what social work leadership looks like. As a result they are left to look elsewhere for leadership knowledge, which further erodes a foundation upon which social work knowledge is adapted to leadership contexts.

Colby Peters (2018), in a systematic literature review of social work leadership theories, found that poor alignment between models of leadership often adapted and implemented in social work from military and business contexts have not served us well in thinking through leadership in the profession. His project on theorising social work leadership as embodied in contextual and relational approaches to professional work, rather than in terms of individual characteristics provides a critical link between practice and leadership for social work. Building a leadership approach that attends to practices in social work and adapts these to organisational contexts provides useful scaffolding for students, practitioners and academics in learning about and enacting a social work approach to leadership. When asking questions about next generation leadership in social work academia, equipping social work educators and researchers with a leadership approach and practice embedded in relational processes and focused on changing, rather than reinforcing unequal power relations seems obvious. However, as Sullivan (2014) argues, there is still a body of work to be done in building a solid research and knowledge base for social work leadership, or as he argues, client centred leadership. For us, new generation leadership requires social work educators to engage intentionally with social work leadership approaches, include these explicitly in the curriculum and work alongside students to work through, rather than avoid, the complexities of leadership practice in organisations and government.

## A focus on ethical leadership in social work

Building on this emerging agenda for the future of leadership in the profession, we argue the value of ethical leadership as a conceptual framework in social work. Ethics are central to how social work is defined in terms of its purpose, scope, and methods. Although definitions of social work vary and are contested (Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2018), a common sense of purpose can be identified through the lens of professional values and ethical principles, such as social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW 2014). The profession’s vision of a more socially just world inspires people to enter the profession (Khunou, et al. 2012). Codes of ethics define the standards for integrity and accountability, and provide guidance for resolving ethical dilemmas (Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2018). Consequently, values and ethics are central to social work practice frameworks (Connolly and Harms 2015). While a scholarly focus on social work leadership has gained momentum over the past 20 years, the centrality of ethical leadership in social work has been an implied rather than an explicit focus of research and professional literature. For example, Rank and Hutchison (2000 p. 499) concluded that social work leadership is evident by communicating a mission that is guided by codes of ethics, “to create proactive processes” that are empowering for people. Participants of their research identified ethical reasoning as a key skill for future leaders in the 21st century. However, Rank and Hutchison did not extend their conclusions to conceptualise the ethical and moral foundations of social work leadership. Clarifying how ethical leadership can be understood, articulated and practiced is an important agenda that can be advanced by the next generation of social work leaders.

### A critical approach to developing ethical leadership in social work

Adopting a critical approach to defining the parameters of ethical leadership is crucial if social work is to disrupt the institutional arrangements of neoliberal welfare that create and enforce inequality, by redefining: casework as contracted case management; the people who access services as consumers; success in terms of minimising risk to reputation and budgets; and, values technical management over creative leadership. Ethical leadership has been defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al. 2005, p. 120, in Brown and Treviño, 2006 p. 596). Ethical leadership is commonly articulated in terms of the characteristics and practices of ethical leaders (Brown and Treviño 2006). For example, ethical leaders are “honest, caring, and principled individuals who make fair and balanced decisions … frequently communicate with their followers about ethics, set clear ethical standards and use rewards and punishments to see that those standards and followed” (Brown and Treviño 2006, p. 597). They also act as role models for others. However, Brown and Treviño’s definition of ethical leadership de-emphasises the contexts in which ethical leadership is constructed and enacted, thereby obfuscating who benefits from and who is disadvantaged by this presentation of leadership. A more careful analysis is required if we are to answer the question: ‘What forms of ethical leadership are best suited to the future challenges of 21st century social work?’

Creating opportunities to expand a more diverse understanding of leadership and ethics is essential for progressing leadership in social work education, practice and research. Feminist scholars argue men’s experiences dominate representations of leadership (effectiveness, traits, and styles) (Fine 2009). While this is a broad area of concern, the relative silence of women’s contribution to leadership theory has particular relevance for the profession where the workforce is predominantly female. The gendered dimensions of social work have been a focus of considerable attention in literature that argues greater diversity needs to be embraced to address the feminisation of the profession and hence the social problems that social workers address (Khunou, et al. 2012). However, this perspective does not generally consider how ideas of social work are constructed through gendered discourses that ultimately prescribe a specific role for women that limit recognition of their capacity and establish a constrained picture of who male social workers are. Left unchecked, there is potential for the historical advantage and privilege of men and other privileged social groups to be reinscribed in future leadership models and strategies. Any consideration of how the new generation of leaders is constituted must look to a theoretical and evidence base that is informed by diverse knowledge sources. Asking what is similar and what is different about ethical leadership that is enacted in diverse cultural contexts could help this agenda thereby promoting a global vision of leadership in social work.

## Ethical leadership and a critical ethics of care in social work

While the connection between ethics and leadership is relatively under-developed in social work, there is empirical evidence to suggest that valued leadership principles (Gellis 2001; Sullivan 2016; Colby Peters 2018) are congruent with a critical ethics of care (also referred to as a political ethics of care). Pease et al. (2018 p. 4) claim a critical ethics of care is underpinned by a “relational ontology where trust, mutuality, and connectedness challenge the autonomous individualism of neoliberal policies”. Derived from feminist care ethics (Tronto 2010), critical care ethics locates caring practices as both personal and political activities that are an individual as well as collective and communal responsibility. Crucially, it uncouples care from essentialist gendered assumptions about who should care (women), in what ways (utilising ‘natural’ feminine traits and practices), and where (in private in the home). A political ethics of care considers intersecting dimensions of care to include gender and other factors such as race, age, class, and sexuality and seeks to extend the scope of care beyond private and local spheres to global contexts where catastrophic suffering is occuring. Social work’s focus on ‘person-in-environment’ that considers micro, messo and macro contexts reflect similar concerns, which strengthens the argument of the ‘fit’ between care ethics, social work and leadership theories.

Transformational leadership links change with an ethics of care. Akin to many social work theories, transformational leadership focuses on collaboration and building a collective sense of purpose. This leadership approach has a focus on creating a sense of purpose that is shared and used to inspire collective enterprise towards the achievement of group goals. Creativity, innovation, problem solving and developing a supportive environment that attends to the unique needs of followers are core features of this theoretical perspective (Simola et al. 2018, p. 180). Transformational leadership is often contrasted in literature and research with transactional leadership that seeks to “advance the purposes of each party in economic, political, or psychological ways” (Simola et al. 2010, p. 180). It relies on “contingent reward” (where rewards are contingent on an action) and “management by exception” that includes constructive criticism and negative reinforcement (Simola, et al. 2010, p. 180). Transactional and transformational leadership entail different types of moral reasoning. Transactional leadership reflects a justice ethic whereas transformational leadership has an affinity with care ethics (Brown and Treviño 2006; Simola, et al. 2010). Framing each approach in polarised terms is unhelpful, however. Hay (2018, p. 49) notes, care and justice are “interdependent ethical concepts that need to be given equal consideration in social work practice.” Using critical ethics of care to achieve justice through transformational leadership should be considered to develop models for future leadership.

## A research agenda focusing on critical care ethics as a foundation for social work leadership

Given our concerns relating to the harsh and cruel consequences of neoliberal welfare that have led to the marketisation and commodification of care (Pease et al. 2018), we argue a political care ethic is a salient foundation for building ethical leadership theory and practice in social work. As a framework, care ethics align with the client-centred focus of social work. However, the benefits of theoretical rigour won’t be sufficient for building a credible foundation for next generation leadership: research is needed to determine if caring leadership practices translate to positive outcomes for people. Additionally, in the increasingly fractured model of service delivery arising from outsourcing and short-term funding arrangements, the ethical tone of human services might – at best – be described as ethically neutral (Brown and Treviño, 2006). At worst, the ethical tenet of human services has been corrupted by a profit-making mentality that has undermined the provision of adequate care resulting in terrible harm (for example, in Australia, consider various scandals in aged care, youth detention, disability care, and out of home care for children). This raises the question of how to get ethical leadership on the agenda of organisations in the rapidly evolving human services sector. In turn, another question is raised: how can we create organisational cultures that support ethical leadership that embodies a critical ethics of care (Fine, 2009; Tronto 2010) and that can address the rising cynicism of frontline practitioners (Brown and Treviño 2006) who are potential leaders.

Building on this analysis, in the second section of the chapter we discuss three areas for work in support and development of new generation leadership – new spaces, new dynamics and new learning.

# New spaces for leadership

The social work profession needs a diverse and inclusive approach to leadership, both within practice and the academic community (Rao and Kelleher 2000; Lawler 2007). The international literature suggests issues relating to leadership confidence remain, frequently along gendered and generational lines (Morley 2013), and there is a need to challenge patriarchy and traditional structures of power (Call, Owens and Vincent 2013, p. 597).

Connecting with new spaces where leadership can be practiced, where new leaders are emerging requires social work educators, researchers and practitioners to proactively move away from existing networks, succession pathways and mentoring models. In hierarchical and established structures such as universities, this is particularly challenging. Social workers are already participating in more fluid, dynamic and informal leadership activities both online and in person as leadership and participation processes are rapidly changing worldwide. Podcasts, social media and blogging provide spaces for social work students and graduates to test ideas, connect with others locally and internationally, and practice leadership on issues which link the personal and professional. This process involves re-examining traditional notions of professional boundaries, which is risky, but has the capacity to engage new generation social workers in informal and collaborative leadership. The potential here is that leadership capacity is growing informally creating a diverse and practiced group of emerging leaders who have honed their skills in the fluid and adaptive world of online communication.

In education, research and practice, there is considerable potential for increasing participation in and support for a wider range of leadership activities that currently exist outside formal academic networks and pathways. While positional leadership in academia, as in organisations, provides critical decision making structures, academics in social work need to be developing a much more diverse range of spaces in which leadership can be practiced. This includes at a student level, in collaboration with practitioners, and within academia. Staying close to the values and parameters of social work practice, collaborative education activities such as immersion learning in partnership with organisations and communities, supporting community-led research and student-led learning projects are all examples which open up spaces for diverse leadership. If we are serious about wanting to support and develop new generation leadership in social work across education, practice and research, the ways in which we look for, open up and support new spaces where leadership can be practiced are critical. The increasing opportunities for building learning and encouragement of leadership, both face to face and digitally within social work education will be instrumental in shaping the knowledge and approaches of new generation leaders in the profession.

William-Gray (2014) found that the experience of working in virtual real world organisations was an effective way for practitioners to develop their leadership. Similarly, Crisp (2017) argued that online learning and interaction in social work education contributes to equipping social work students with skills and knowledge about working in this arena. For Crisp, the reluctance of the profession to work with online contexts puts it in danger of being left behind as virtual interactions become more prevalent. Accessing and supporting online spaces for social work practice and learning provides valuable new opportunities for leadership practice and development to take shape with the fluidity and very different dynamics that occur online. Hosting online groups, working with social media, exploring the potential for gaming or simulated online contexts for learning and exploring scenarios are just some of the ways in which this kind of space can support new generation leadership in social work.

# New leadership dynamics

The second area that is worth focusing on in thinking through new generation leadership in social work is that of relationships and dynamics. As with power, the ambivalence experienced by social workers in relation to expertise and professional knowledge can create a significant barrier to building confidence and skills in leadership. An increasingly important example of this relates to social work leadership and research capacity.

Building capacity in research has been a common imperative in social work education and practice for some time and across a number of countries (Gray et al. 2013; Orme and Powell 2017; McDermott and Bawden 2017). Paying attention to the links between research and leadership has becoming increasingly important across a number of fields in which social workers find themselves working. McDermott and Bawden (2017) argue that cultural change is essential for both research and leadership capacity building and this change must be based on what they describe as “research mindedness” (McDermott and Bawden, 2017, p. 901), through which social workers see themselves as practitioners with research expertise and knowledge. In this way leadership is intimately connected with research capacity for individual social workers and social work teams. The relationship between a systematically gathered and clearly articulated body of knowledge and new generation leadership is an important one in a context where evidence based practice and evidence based programs are increasingly linked with the allocation of resources in organisations where social workers are in leadership roles. This alliance is not without tensions, however, which needs to be discussed and worked through in order to more effectively support new generation leadership that remains distinctly aligned with social work. New generation leadership in social work does and will take shape in a context where professional expertise linked to research evidence is becoming a major currency. Developing generous and effective support architecture for social work students and practitioners to engage positively with this kind of expertise is of paramount importance to ensure a self-sustaining process for social work leadership development into the future.

Here we return to the central role played by social work education in creating an engaging and supportive learning environments in which knowledge, skills and confidence in relation to research can develop. Like leadership, research is an area of learning where students experience anxiety and reluctance. As a result, in practice, these experiences persist and shape an avoidance of research practice (Morgenshtern et al. 2011; Maschi et al. 2013; Blakemore and Howard 2015). Blakemore and Howard (2015) found that using experiential, hands on learning to teach research was an effective way to address anxiety, reluctance and disengagement experienced by undergraduate social work students. The connections between social work education strategies that are intentionally designed to engage students and build confidence in areas that are perceived as challenging (including research and leadership), and the development of leadership confidence and capacity in social work are worthy of our attention if we want to encourage an ongoing and sustainable strategy for generational renewal in social work leadership.

Although seeking leadership definitions risks reductionism and can “obstruct new ideas and interesting ways of thinking” (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003, p.362), notions of social work leadership have been considered in the literature (Gellis 2001). As noted earlier in this chapter, professional skills and values relating to ethical practice, empowerment and communication are evident (Kedian et al. 2015; Rank and Hutchison 2000). With increasing managerialist approaches evident in practice and academia, the values of the profession can be a significant driving force in the leadership agenda, and challenge potential dominant power structures (Healy 2002; Lawler 2007). Leadership in the profession does need to manifest itself in significantly different ways to other disciplines, and ‘distributed’ models of leadership offer fluidity of boundaries and acknowledge the wider skills of all group members. Leadership models based on relationships and networks (Uhl-Biel 2006; Hyde 2018) offer collegiate approaches worthy of further exploration. These shared approaches can be effective (Grant and Crutchfield 2008) and are congruent with the values of the profession. They also challenge outdated ‘sole’ leadership models that are restricted by power and agency status.

In addition, the dynamic of leader and follower in hierarchical approaches to leadership, which shapes worker and management relations in most human services organisations, needs to be examined and challenged. Collaborative practice both within the profession and in multi-disciplinary settings is very familiar to social workers (Williams 2016). While collaborative leadership practice often occurs in teams, this is more unusual in organisations and across multi-organisational systems (Aarons et al. 2014) due to its perceived complexity. Research on collaborative leadership in social work makes up a surprisingly small body of knowledge and this reflects the point made earlier in the chapter regarding the still developing task of translating social work practice knowledge into a clear leadership discourse. Strategies such as rotating leadership (Davis and Elsenhardt 2011), using social change processes to inform organisational leadership (Ospina and Foldy 2010), and utilising action learning to develop collaborative leadership (Raelin 2006) represent some of the promising pathways worthy of attention and research to shape a plan for support of new generation leadership in social work.

The development and demonstration of different approaches to leadership is an important element of new generation leadership architecture. Opportunities for students and new graduate social workers to see and experience hierarchical or command and control leadership are plentiful in practice and at the university. Examples of co-operative and collaborative leadership are not as available. For social work educators, devising learning activities that enable students to see and experience alternative approaches to leadership (not just have them explained in theory) goes some way towards planting possibilities that challenge mainstream leadership ideas and assist social workers to imagine things differently. It is critical that current social work leaders engage in challenging *the way things are* in relation to leadership and design diverse leadership experiences alongside new practitioners and researchers. This needs to be core business for social work if new generation leadership is to emerge in a well-supported way.

# New learning

Throughout the chapter, we have returned to the critical role of social work education in creating conditions for new generation leadership to thrive. The final area of our discussion is solely focused on what kind of new learning we need to encourage to support emerging leadership. This learning is not bounded by what occurs during those years people are studying for a social work qualification that are, as we have emphasised, an important part of the picture. The question about what kind of new learning we need is one of dialogue, debate and discussion. It needs to be focused on how current and emerging leaders (both formal and informal) can engage in ongoing conversations about issues, practices, and ideas that impact on people and communities we work with. We may not need to converse about leadership itself often, but developing knowledge planning and action together, and with those people and communities within the remit of social work should guide the shape and direction of new generation leadership across research, practice and teaching.

# Where to from here?

Effective leadership is key to the future of any profession (McCall 1981) and the notion that all students have capacity to develop as leaders may be significant for future leadership strategies (Komives and Wagner 2009). Hyde’s (2018) suggestion that there is potential for social workers to have leadership influence from traditionally low status areas is also worthy of further exploration. The international definition of the profession places an emphasis on promoting social change (IFSW 2014); as Netting and O’Connnor (2003) suggest, all social workers have a role in leading in this area and offers a foundation for integration into the curriculum. The critical reflexive nature of the social work role also suggests the profession is well placed to engage with debates about frameworks for future leadership.

Leadership education in social work, in line with these approaches, must include a clear articulation of what specific social work leadership looks like (Colby Peters 2018), and we have suggested a critical ethics of care as a framework for ethical leadership. There is a need for opportunities for supported hands on and experience based learning (McLenden et al. 2016) to ensure students build confidence and knowledge of leadership and experience themselves as leaders. In addition, it is vital we create opportunities for more connected dialogue between universities and organisations where social workers are already in leadership roles and are grappling with the complexities of workplace environments. Practice based learning environments offer key opportunities for leadership development (Ianichi Cross and Freedman 2009). These strategies require collaboration and cooperation, not just between individuals, but also between organisations and institutions. Ultimately, if we commit to an ethical leadership model that reflects a political ethic of care, then leadership discourse will become more inclusive through collaborative practices. This will create its own tensions in terms of how to clarify the narrative ‘thread’ of social work leadership but it is vitally important for creating a distinctive model of social work leadership in education, practice and research. To us, it seems, this is the future vision for social work leadership.

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