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SOCIAL WORK AT THE PRECIPICE: NAVIGATING THE PARADOX OF PRECARIETY, PROCEDURALIZATION, AND THE PROMISE OF CRITICAL ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

The social work profession stands at a critical juncture, caught between its emancipatory aspirations and its co-optation by neoliberal systems of control. This paper argues that the profession's current crisis is rooted in three intersecting phenomena: the precaritization of the social work workforce, the proceduralization of practice that has displaced relationship-based approaches, and the profession's persistent ambivalence toward rigorous evidence generation. Drawing on feminist disability studies, critical race theory, and social activism scholarship, this paper proposes an integrative framework that reimagines social work as a form of "critical, evidence-informed activism." The framework reconceptualizes social work knowledge as pluralistic and democratized while maintaining commitment to methodological rigor. By mobilizing the conceptual contributions of feminist disability studies, embracing epistemic justice, and reclaiming activism as central to professional identity, social work can navigate its existential challenges and fulfill its transformative potential. This paper contributes to ongoing debates about social work's identity, purpose, and future by offering a synthesizing vision that refuses the false binaries of care versus control, evidence versus values, and reform versus abolition.

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INTRODUCTION

The social work profession, for over a century, has positioned itself as a bridge between individual suffering and structural transformation, between care and justice, and between the personal and the political. Yet, in the second quarter of the twenty-first century, this bridge appears increasingly unstable. Social workers face unprecedented challenges: the erosion of professional autonomy under neoliberal managerialism, the intensification of caseloads and bureaucratic demands, the delegitimization of anti-racist and anti-oppressive frameworks in public discourse, and an existential crisis of identity that calls into question whether the profession can remain faithful to its emancipatory mission (McGinn, 2026; Gupta, 2026; Schram & Silverman, 2012). This paper emerges from a conviction that the challenges confronting social work are not merely technical or administrative but deeply ontological and epistemological. They concern what social work is, what it knows, and how it knows it. The profession finds itself at a precipice, and the question is no longer whether social work will change, but in what direction and for whose benefit.

The central argument of this paper is that social work's current crisis is best understood as a product of three intersecting phenomena: (1) the precaritization of the social work workforce, which undermines professional stability and practice quality; (2) the proceduralization of practice, which has displaced relationship-based approaches with bureaucratic compliance; and (3) the profession's ambivalence toward rigorous evidence generation, which has weakened its capacity to demonstrate effectiveness and advocate for its methods. These phenomena are not discrete but mutually reinforcing: precarious workers are less able to resist procedural demands, and the absence of a robust evidence base makes the profession vulnerable to external control and delegitimization. However, this paper is not merely diagnostic. It offers a constructive vision for social work's renewal: a framework of "critical, evidence-informed activism." This framework mobilizes the conceptual contributions of feminist disability studies (David, 2025), embraces epistemic justice and pluralism in knowledge production (Piedra, 2026; David, 2025), and reclaims activism as central to professional identity and practice (Gupta, 2026). It refuses the false binaries that have paralyzed the profession, care versus control, evidence

versus values, reform versus abolition, and instead insists that rigorous, equity-centered scholarship and practice must be integrated to advance social justice. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 examines the literature on social work precarity, documenting the multiple forms of insecurity facing practitioners and its consequences for practice. Section 3 explores the proceduralization of social work and the displacement of relationship-based practice. Section 4 addresses the evidence debate, acknowledging the tensions between scientific rigor and anti-oppressive commitments while arguing for a more pluralistic yet rigorous approach. Section 5 presents the integrative framework of critical, evidence-informed activism, drawing on feminist disability studies (David, 2025) and social activism scholarship (Gupta, 2026). Section 6 concludes with implications for practice, education, and research.

The Precaritization of Social Work: The Precarious Helping Hand

Conceptualizing Precarity in Professional Contexts: The concept of precarity, originally used to describe the marginalization of working-class groups, has expanded to encompass the experiences of professionals, including social workers, whose labor has become increasingly insecure and devalued (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). The systematic review by Schuler, Healy, and colleagues (2026) on "The Precarious Helping Hand" provides crucial empirical grounding for understanding how social workers experience precarity. Drawing on 34 studies from five social science databases, the review identified 55 items of precarity experienced by social workers, including job insecurity, value-practice gaps, limited skill development, and strained client relationships (Schuler et al., 2026). The feminization of social work is central to understanding its precarity. As England, Budig, and Folbre (2002) have argued, professions characterized by caring labor are systematically undervalued because social norms construct such work as driven by love rather than remuneration. This "care penalty" leaves social workers with limited financial rewards and relatively low status, a pattern replicated across nursing, teaching, and other feminized professions (Schuler et al., 2026). The profession's vulnerability is compounded by neoliberal welfare restructuring, which has introduced competitive tendering, austerity measures, and intensified monitoring that prioritize service numbers over human connection (Hyslop, 2018; Schram & Silverman, 2012).

Dimensions of Precarity in Social Work Practice: Schuler, Healy, and colleagues (2026) document that certain groups within the profession face deeper precarity than others: workers in private settings, younger workers, placement students, and bilingual workers. This uneven distribution of insecurity raises critical questions about how intersecting identities and employment contexts shape vulnerability. Social work educators also experience precarity, which threatens the sector's capacity to reproduce skills and maintain professional knowledge (Fenton, 2014). This finding is particularly concerning, as it suggests a generational erosion of professional competence and mentorship. Beyond employment insecurity, social work precarity is ontological, it concerns the very conditions of professional practice and identity. As Butler (2004) and Joronen and Rose (2021) have theorized, precarity describes shared human vulnerability to external harm, though this vulnerability is unevenly distributed. Social workers,

because of their commitment to crisis response and engagement with marginalized populations, are intrinsically exposed to hazards, whether in disaster contexts (Anazonwu et al., 2017; Iravani, 2005) or through the vicarious trauma of bearing witness to suffering (Gupta, 2026). The COVID-19 pandemic vividly illustrated this vulnerability as social workers were forced to shift to remote practice while managing severe resource shortages and rising needs (Banks et al., 2020; Redondo-Sama et al., 2020).

Consequences for Service Users and Practice Quality: The precarity of social workers is not merely a labor issue; it has profound consequences for service users. Frequent staff turnover and service terminations weaken rapport between social workers and clients, an element considered essential for meaningful change (Schuler et al., 2026; Amanda, 2015; Andrade-Guzmán & Rao, 2020). The professional relationship, which lies at the heart of effective social work, is eroded when workers are unable to sustain continuity of care. Under neoliberal restructuring, social workers often operate under strict service targets, drifting from their human rights mission and facing the risk of deskilling (Schuler et al., 2026).

The Proceduralization of Practice: Fear, Faff, and the Erosion of Relationship

The Procedural Turn in Social Work: The displacement of relationship-based practice by bureaucratic proceduralism has been a central concern in social work scholarship. McGinn (2026) offers a characteristically direct critique in "The End of Social Work," arguing that "good social work has been mostly killed off by proceduralization, or bureaucratization." He uses the evocative term "fear and faff" to describe a practice environment dominated by risk screeners, dead-end assessments, transfers, and signposting, with relationship-based practice increasingly marginalized. This procedural turn is not accidental but reflects the implementation of neoliberal new public management reforms that prioritize efficiency, accountability, and risk management over professional judgment and relational engagement (Hyslop, 2018; Schram & Silverman, 2012). Social workers are increasingly expected to act as gatekeepers, managing risk and rationing resources rather than responding to need in holistic, person-centered ways. The result, as McGinn (2026) argues, is that social work has become an institution of social control, regulating marginalized populations rather than empowering them.

The Displacement of Relationship: The erosion of relationship-based practice has multiple consequences. First, it undermines the therapeutic and supportive functions of social work. Research has consistently demonstrated that the quality of the worker-client relationship is a critical factor in achieving positive outcomes, particularly in child welfare, mental health, and community development contexts (McGinn, 2026). Second, it alienates social workers from the values that motivated them to enter the profession. Value-practice gaps, the discrepancy between what social workers believe they should be doing and what their organizational roles require, are a significant source of moral distress and burnout (Schuler et al., 2026). Third, proceduralization contributes to professional deskilling. When social workers are required to spend the majority of their time completing forms, engaging in risk assessments, and managing caseloads, they have limited opportunities to develop and practice relational and therapeutic skills (McGinn, 2026; Schuler et al., 2026).

This has implications for service quality and for the profession's capacity to recruit and retain skilled practitioners. As McGinn (2026) observes, "the challenge which is right on our doorstep right now, a challenge that we have been complicit in creating, and a challenge that we are actually well-placed to meet" is "the replacement of relationship-based practice with fear and fuff."

Critical Reflection on the Procedural Critique: McGinn's (2026) critique, while valuable, risks overstating the extent to which individual social workers can resist procedural demands. The structural forces that have driven proceduralization, austerity, competitive tendering, intensified monitoring, are beyond the control of frontline practitioners. As Gupta (2026) notes, "for most social workers, either employed by the state or in organizations reliant on state funding and needing to earn a living, this can be difficult" to resist. Yet, as Timor-Shlevin, Krumer-Nevo, and Refaeli (2023) argue, resistance can operate on a spectrum of power exertion, from minor acts of everyday resistance to major challenges to policy and practice. This suggests that even within procedurally dominated contexts, social workers can and do engage in forms of resistance that preserve relational and emancipatory practice.

The Evidence Debate: Rigor, Relevance, and Epistemic Justice

The Persistent Evidence Gap: The question of evidence in social work has been a source of ongoing tension. McGinn (2026) revisits Stoesz's (1997) critique that the profession has failed to develop an evidence base for practice and that there is no appetite within the profession, or its body of educators, to change this. McGinn's systematic review of Family Group Conferencing (McGinn et al., 2020) found just a few studies of moderate quality and concluded that there was "no evidence of note" to support its use. In response to this finding, practitioners variously dismissed the relevance of the review, argued that methods like randomized controlled trials (RCTs) were inappropriate for social work, or maintained that their practical experience was sufficient evidence of effectiveness (McGinn, 2026). These responses highlight a profound tension within the profession: the commitment to evidence-based practice exists alongside skepticism toward the methodologies typically used to generate rigorous evidence. This tension is not merely methodological but epistemological. It concerns what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge counts, and how knowledge should be generated and validated (David, 2025). As McGinn (2026) argues, social work's "inherent dislike of rigorous practice evaluations has hurt us" because it leaves the profession unable to demonstrate its value to policymakers and funders.

Methodological Debates and Epistemic Justice: However, the critique of evidence-based practice in social work is not without foundation. Critics have argued that the prioritization of RCTs reflects and reinforces white supremacist constructs that devalue the lived experiences of minoritized populations captured through qualitative inquiry and other forms of scholarship (Teasley, Baffour, & Stanley, 2022). As David (2025) argues in her analysis of feminist disability studies and social work, the dominant social work approach to understanding disability has been rooted in a medical model that constructs disability as a problem of pathology, risk, and burden. This approach reflects ableist logics that place value

on people's bodies and minds based on "societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence, and productivity" (Lewis, 2020). The recognition that there are no value-free methods (David, 2025) is crucial. Quantitative methodologies, no less than qualitative approaches, are shaped by cultural assumptions and power relations. As the editors of the Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research have argued, social work must "reject epistemic injustice" by examining its reliance on "dominant cultural values that lead us to rank certain data, knowledge, thinkers, and ways of knowing as more 'scientific' than others" (Piedra, 2026). This requires "a conversation about and examination of the power and privilege inherent in research itself, including how it is funded, conceptualized, rewarded, disseminated, used, and viewed" (Piedra, 2026).

A Pluralistic Approach to Evidence: The evidence debate in social work has been polarized between those who advocate for methodological orthodoxy and those who reject quantitative methods as inherently oppressive. This polarization is unhelpful and ultimately self-defeating. A pluralistic approach to evidence recognizes that different questions require different methods and that qualitative and quantitative approaches can complement rather than compete with one another (Teater, 2022). As McGinn (2026) notes, "RCTs are an entirely different method of scientific enquiry deployed toward entirely different, but often complementary, goals" than qualitative research. A pluralistic approach also acknowledges that practice-based knowledge and experiential knowledge are forms of evidence. As the comparative study of social work research by Teater, Nuñez, and colleagues (2025) found, social work research is characterized by several distinctive features: it "seeks solutions or actions," "integrates an ecological approach," and "is upheld by ethics and social justice" (Teater et al., 2025). These features suggest that social work research should not mimic the natural sciences but should embrace its unique contribution: the integration of scientific inquiry with the social justice and critical framework of the profession (Maynard, 2007).

Toward a Framework of Critical, Evidence-Informed Activism

Mobilizing Feminist Disability Studies: The work of Kendal Marie David (2025) on mobilizing feminist disability studies (FDS) for expansive social work scholarship offers a compelling model for theorizing the integration of critical frameworks with empirical rigor. David traces the history of FDS from its emergence in the work of feminist disability scholars like Jenny Morris (1991, 1996), Liz Crow (1996), Carol Thomas (1999), and Susan Wendell (1996), who used feminist methods and concepts to critique the social model of disability and to examine the particularities of disabled women's lives. Central to this tradition is the analysis of feminist entanglements with eugenics and the theorization of care in the context of deinstitutionalization. David (2025) argues that FDS offers rich conceptualizations of "disability and debility, social justice, the marketization of care, and coalitional care politics." By adopting a nuanced conceptualization of care, social work can understand "the inextricable linkages between the liberation of care workers and disabled people" (David, 2025). This is particularly relevant given the precarity of both care workers and service users. David's analysis suggests that social work's commitment to social justice cannot be realized without addressing the

ableism endemic in social work research and theory. This requires "a gradient understanding of disability identity" and a "coalitional approach to analyzing and conceptualizing care" (David, 2025). The application of FDS to social work has implications for practice, research, and education. In practice, it suggests that social workers should move beyond deficit-based models of disability and toward a relational understanding that recognizes interdependence and reciprocity in caring relationships. In research, it suggests that social work scholarship should engage with the conceptual contributions of FDS and critical disability studies. In education, it suggests that social work curricula should address ableism alongside other forms of oppression and should model coalitional approaches to social justice (David, 2025).

Reclaiming Activism as Professional Identity: Anna Gupta (2026), in her editorial on social work and social activism, draws on the concept of "the fierce urgency of now" to argue that the profession must "continually confront" the challenges of climate crisis, rising inequality, and far-right fascism. Gupta conceptualizes activism as ranging from "radical revolutionary action to community work to everyday actions" (Baines, 2011) and emphasizes "the emphasis on action; the association of activism with a cause, a social goal, often fuelled by passion, commitment and energy; activism challenging social norms and decision-making's status quo" (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). Reclaiming activism as central to professional identity requires social workers to engage in critical consciousness and aspire to change the system, challenge power and oppression, and foster community agency (Gupta, 2026). This is not a rejection of the profession's statutory functions but an insistence that these functions can be performed in ways that resist rather than reinforce inequality. As Gupta (2026) argues, drawing on Timor-Shlevin, Krumer-Nevo, and Refaeli (2023), "critical actors should challenge hegemonic systems from within through a series of small remedial, corrective steps that enable change in existing policy" (Schram, 2015).

Building alliances with community organizations and activists is a crucial dimension of this approach. In areas such as youth justice, where state interventions are "highly racialized, gendered, and classed" (Wroe, 2022), community organizations and activists are increasingly engaging with "policing and prison abolitionist and anti-carceral debates" (Gupta, 2026). Social work voices are largely absent in these debates, and there has been limited engagement with abolitionist debates in relation to child welfare and protection (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Gupta (2026) suggests that there is "much that we can learn from the 'process of abolition' that harnesses the strengths of families and communities to develop community resources, restorative practices, and transformative justice."

Integrating Evidence and Activism: The framework of critical, evidence-informed activism integrates the rigor of evidence-based practice with the emancipatory commitments of social activism. This integration requires the profession to move beyond the false binary of evidence versus values and to recognize that rigorous, equity-centered scholarship belongs at the center of the national conversation on social justice, community well-being, and social policy (Piedra, 2026). The Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative, which has contributed to establishing university centers, seeding doctoral projects, informing policy directions, and generating widely used tools, demonstrates how research can advance social

justice (Piedra, 2026). The framework also requires a commitment to epistemic justice. As Fricker (2007) argues, epistemic injustice occurs when individuals and groups are wronged in their capacity as knowers, when their knowledge is dismissed, devalued, or rendered invisible. The social work profession must "promote knowledge democracy and pluralism" (Piedra, 2026) by recognizing "the right of every people to their own knowledge and ways of generating, legitimizing, and valuing it" (Schmelkes, 2023). This does not mean abandoning rigorous methods but ensuring that methods are appropriate to the questions asked and that diverse voices and knowledges are included in knowledge production. Finally, the framework requires the profession to embrace critical hope. As Gupta (2026) concludes, "critical hope is a form of hope that is active, engaged, and rooted in social critique of power and oppression. It's not passive optimism, but rather a belief in the possibility of change together with a commitment to actively work towards a better future" (Grain & Land, 2017; Bishundat et al., 2018). This is the animating spirit of a social work that refuses to settle for simple answers, choosing instead to embrace complexity as both a challenge and a source of insight (Piedra, 2026).

Implications and Conclusion

Implications for Practice: The framework of critical, evidence-informed activism has significant implications for social work practice. First, it suggests that social workers should engage in everyday acts of resistance to procedural demands, preserving relational and emancipatory practice within the constraints of their roles. This requires a commitment to critical reflection and the development of what Briskman (2013) calls "courageous ethnography", bearing witness to harm and the policies and processes that perpetuate injustice. Second, it suggests that social workers should build alliances with community organizations and activists. As Gupta (2026) argues, this is essential for challenging oppressive policies and for developing alternatives to carceral and punitive approaches to social problems. The examples of community-led responses to serious youth violence (Liberty et al., 2024) and abolitionist approaches to child welfare (Dettlaff et al., 2020) offer models for community-engaged practice. Third, it suggests that social workers should engage with the evidence base for their practice and contribute to its development. This requires a pluralistic approach to evidence that recognizes the value of diverse methodologies while maintaining commitment to rigor. The development of innovative training approaches, such as the Virtual Skills & Workforce Trainer (VSWT) Center at the University of Utah, which uses deliberate practice theory and virtual home simulations, demonstrates how evidence-informed training can improve practice outcomes (University of Utah, 2026).

Implications for Education: For social work education, the framework suggests the need for curricula that integrate critical theory, research methods, and practice skills. This includes training in diverse research methodologies, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and in the epistemological foundations of social work knowledge (David, 2025; Teater et al., 2025). It also requires education in anti-oppressive practice and activism, including the development of critical consciousness and the skills for building alliances and engaging in systemic change (Gupta, 2026). The use of simulation-based training, such as the VSWT Center's approach, offers opportunities to develop practice skills in

controlled environments before work with real clients (University of Utah, 2026). Such approaches can help address the competence gap identified by the Center and can complement traditional field education. However, simulation should not replace the relational learning that occurs in practice settings; it should supplement and enhance it.

Implications for Research: For social work research, the framework suggests the need for scholarship that is both rigorous and socially relevant. This includes research that addresses the Grand Challenges for Social Work (Piedra, 2026) and research that engages with the conceptual contributions of critical disability studies, feminist theory, and other critical frameworks (David, 2025). It requires research that challenges epistemic injustice by including diverse perspectives and knowledges and by examining how research itself perpetuates or challenges oppression (Piedra, 2026). The comparative study of social work research by Teater and colleagues (2025) suggests opportunities for cross-national learning and the development of research agendas that are informed by global perspectives. The study found that social work research is characterized by its focus on solutions or actions, its integration of an ecological approach, and its commitment to ethics and social justice. These distinctive features of social work research should be embraced and developed rather than minimized.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the social work profession is at a precipice, facing existential challenges of precarity, proceduralization, and epistemological crisis. These challenges are deeply interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. The framework of critical, evidence-informed activism offered in this paper provides a way forward that integrates the rigor of evidence-based practice with the emancipatory commitments of social activism. The framework mobilizes the conceptual contributions of feminist disability studies, embracing a gradient understanding of disability and a coalitional approach to care (David, 2025).

It reclaims activism as central to professional identity, engaging in everyday resistance and building alliances with communities and activists (Gupta, 2026). It embraces epistemic justice, promoting knowledge democracy and pluralism in research and practice (Piedra, 2026). And it insists that rigorous, equity-centered scholarship belongs at the center of social work's mission. The challenges facing social work are formidable, but they are not insurmountable. The profession has faced existential crises before and has emerged transformed.

The question is whether, in this moment, social work can embrace its transformative potential or whether it will continue to retreat into fear, proceduralism, and ambivalence. The urgency of the moment demands that social workers "slow down, listen more closely, and see the world through others' eyes" (Piedra, 2026). It demands critical hope, a commitment to actively work toward a better future (Gupta, 2026). As the profession confronts its crisis, it must remember its purpose: not merely to help people survive within oppressive systems but to transform those systems and imagine more just and compassionate ways of knowing and being (Piedra, 2026; Gupta, 2026).

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