

Crossing borders: the limits of social work research and the potential for change

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This paper is concerned with the 'borders' of social work research and practice. The majority of social work research turns its gaze upon the accepted boundaries of 'social work', focusing in particular on service provision and service users. However, in this paper it is my contention that there are practical and moral imperatives why social work researchers should look outwards, beyond established disciplinary and institutional parameters, to those places where social work does not, or dare not, go. I will illustrate this contention by reference to a qualitative study of the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking children leaving the UK care system. The majority of these young people had failed in their asylum claims and were therefore no longer entitled to social work services. My findings prompted reflection on what happens when social work 'ends'; when vulnerable people find themselves without entitlements to services even though the social work commitment to social justice would suggest that they ought to be eligible for some form of protection or support from such services. Relatedly, it does seem that the borders of social work practice are mirrored in social work research, particularly given its increasing concern with evaluating already existing services, according to pre-ordained institutional criteria. Arguably, by accepting the borders of social work as they are currently constructed, researchers perpetuate rather than challenge the structurally determined boundaries which the prevailing consensus imposes upon both disadvantaged individuals and social workers who might wish to assist them. This paper will raise pertinent questions about the borders of social work practice and research, and about the methods which both services and researchers use to access individuals and groups who do not fit within the boundaries of conventional service provision. As such, it will contribute to conference themes 4 and 6.

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