Paradigms of Social Work: Alternative Perspectives on Social Work Practice Theory

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Abstract
This paper reviews claims that there are paradigms of social work. Alternative meanings of the concept ‘paradigm’ focus on shifts in the structure of knowledge and knowledge development in a discipline, or, particularly in the social sciences, on a looser understanding of paradigm as cluster of beliefs that order discourse within a discipline. Most discourse in social work concentrates on the looser analysis. The international definition of social work reveals three alternative potential paradigms within social work: a tripartite analysis of practice objectives and dichotomous analyses of social work’s knowledge and values bases. Review of practice theories and accounts of knowledge and values informing social work suggests that distinct paradigms exist, but these are overlapping and interacting sets of ideas, rather than representing incommensurable disciplinary shifts.

Keywords
discourse, knowledge base, paradigm, practice theory, social work, theory

Introduction
My aim in this paper is to review claims that there are paradigms of social work. The first section, after this introduction, considers alternative ways in which the concept of paradigm has been understood and used. From this account, I identify and evaluate claims that there are alternative paradigms of social work. Then I review potential alternative paradigms. In my conclusion, I argue that alternative discourses about social work constitute paradigms in the sense that they are distinct sets of ideas about social work practice that order discourse within the discipline of social work.