

# Social Justice and Social Work: Reflections on the Past to Inform Present and Future

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# Opening context

- Social Work is a complex and sometimes contradictory strategy
- There is not one unified history or present- we have multiple histories and presents – and indeed ‘futures’
- I am here as a colleague working this out together rather than as a claimed ‘expert’ on history and our present
- I acknowledge my ‘lens’ applied in history work has influenced what I have seen and what I have not seen
- I acknowledge your memories, experiences and involvement in actual events and our thoughts and understandings may differ
- We should think of the past just as we do the ‘present’ where we ‘see’ the complexity and don’t try to distil or over-generalise
- My approach is history of the present: Seeking continuity and discontinuity, exploring moments in time and using history to critically inform our present thinking and understanding.

# IASW A lot to Celebrate!

Remember also the Forerunners:

Irish Association of Social Workers (from 1950s)

Irish Association of Medical and Psychiatric Social Workers est. 1964

Preceded by membership of Institute of Hospital Almoners, Irish Branch from 1937.

Association of Psychiatric Social workers, Irish Branch



Discontinuity within Dominant discourse:  
Joint committee of Women's Societies  
and Women Social Workers (est 1935)  
(See Skehill, 1999, FRMBHC, 2021).

Formed in **1935** including

Irish countrywomen's association

Irish housewives association

National Women's health association

Irish women's citizens association

Saor na Leanbh

Women's Workers Union

Mothers Union

Membership from Irish Hospital Almoners  
Association

- Issues and Mission
- Mission: Advocacy for reforms for women and children
- Reform of Child care services
- Call for legal adoption
- Better supports for unmarried mothers to help keep their children arguing that this required economic reform (e.g.. transferring money from institution directly to mother)
- Women to be allowed to do jury service
- Women to join the Gardaí
- Constitutional reform
- Institutional care and boarding out regulations (Skehill, 1999, 84)
- Challenging over-emphasis on wrong-doing of women who were unmarried mothers (1943) – 2 guilty parties but the 'the man getting off scot free' (1943 Memorandum – Skehill, 1999, 135)
- Equal representation of men and women on the Adoption Board (Skehill, 1999: 135)

# Irish SWK in International Context

- IRISH MEMBERSHIP ALONGSIDE Catholic International Union for Social Services in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (Walsh, 2005)
- First IASW gained membership of IFSW in 1966 (Walsh, 2005)
- Representatives engaged in consultations with UN and UNESCO through Membership
- Irish social workers attend conference in HELSINKI 1968 on the theme of 'social welfare and human rights':
- *'social workers must be the conscious of society...it was not enough to enable the client to adapt to human society, they must do all they can to influence society as reformists'* (Walsh, 2005, 219)

IASW use of  
International Platform  
*The 1970's witnessed  
a period of  
'remarkable  
international activity  
undertaken by the  
Irish Association'  
(Walsh, 2005, 221)  
which continued  
through the decades*

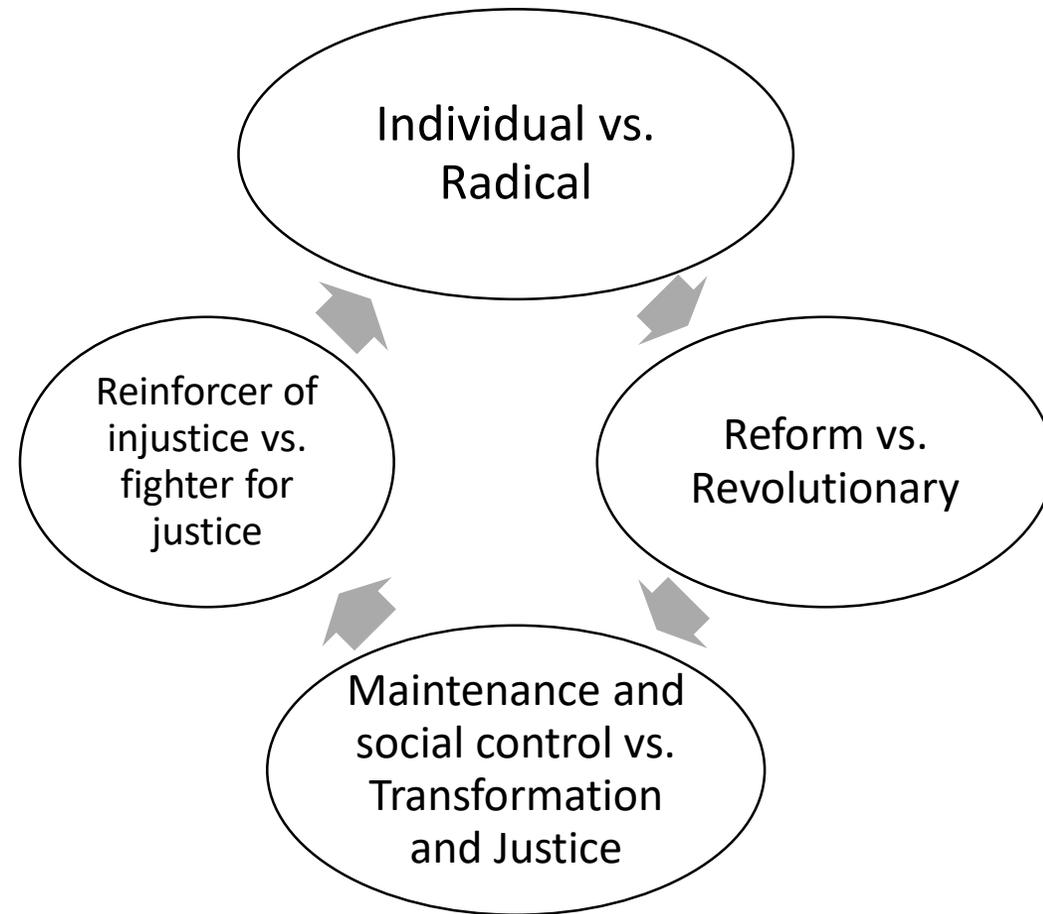
- ***IRISH ASSOCIATION PRESS  
RELEASE 13 MARCH 1975 IN  
CONJUNCTION WITH EU LIASION  
COMMITTEE considering:***
  - ***Migrant workers***
    - ***Social Fund***
  - ***Equality of Treatment Between  
Men and Women***
  - ***Mutual recognition of Diplomas***

**Social justice**



**Individual practice**

# 'Gladiatorial' Paradigms (Rojek, 1986 in McGregor 2019)



- Powell (1998) – emphasis on increase in scope for social work to focus on participation, empowerment, cultural justice and prevention
- Skehill (1999b) very strong (gladiatorial) critique of his optimistic view of social work and social justice versus 'reality' of mostly individualistic social work practice

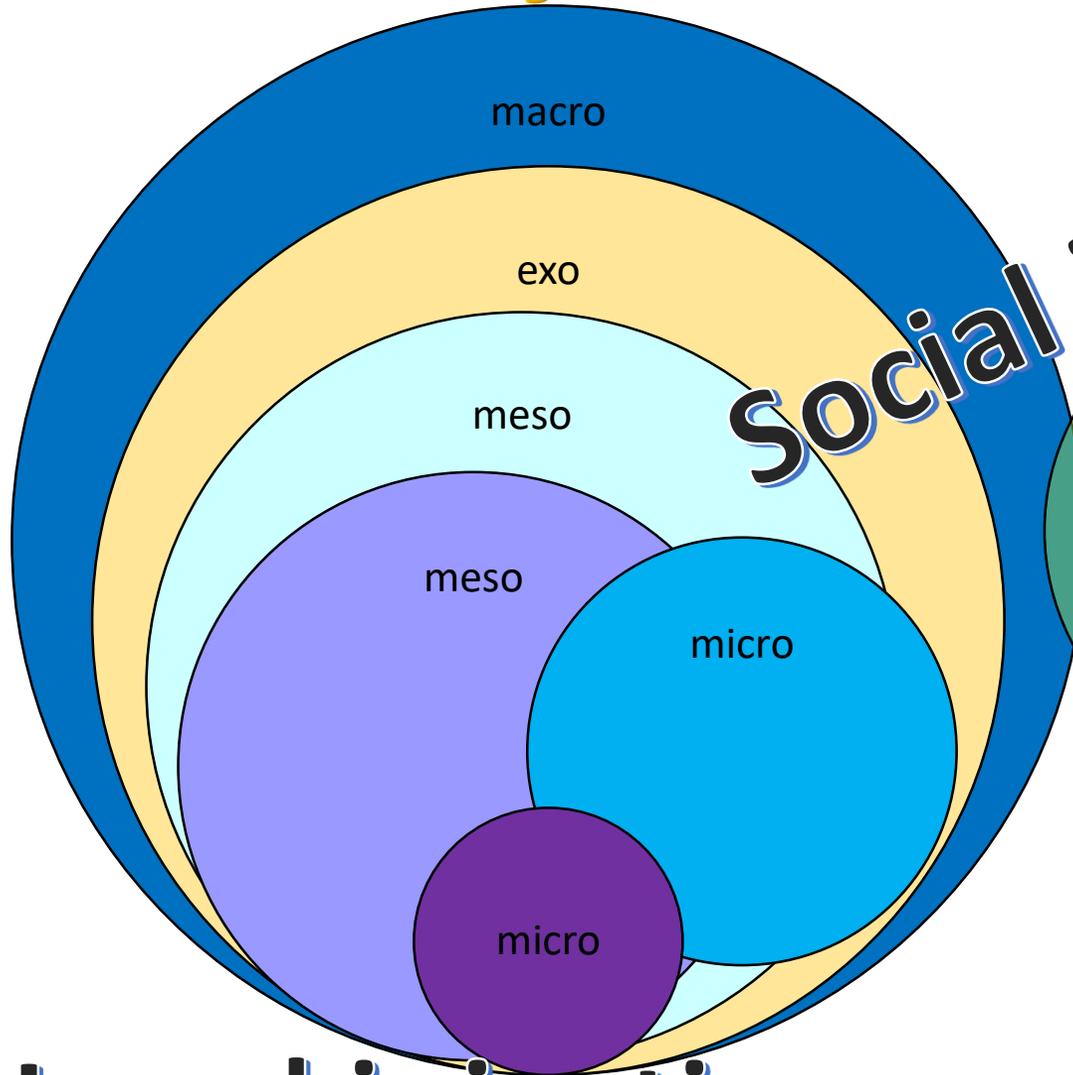
e.g.. Butler 2005 'Mental Health Social Work in Ireland: Missed Opportunities'?

- **On anti-psychiatry and social construction of mental illness (Szasz, 1972)**
- 'social work students and practicing social workers who had never worked in mental health settings could, under the inspiration of the antipsychiatrists develop very strong abstract views which effectively persuaded them that there was **no point in even contemplating a career in mental health social work**' (2005, 43)

# Paradigms and the 'Box in the Middle' (McGregor 2019)

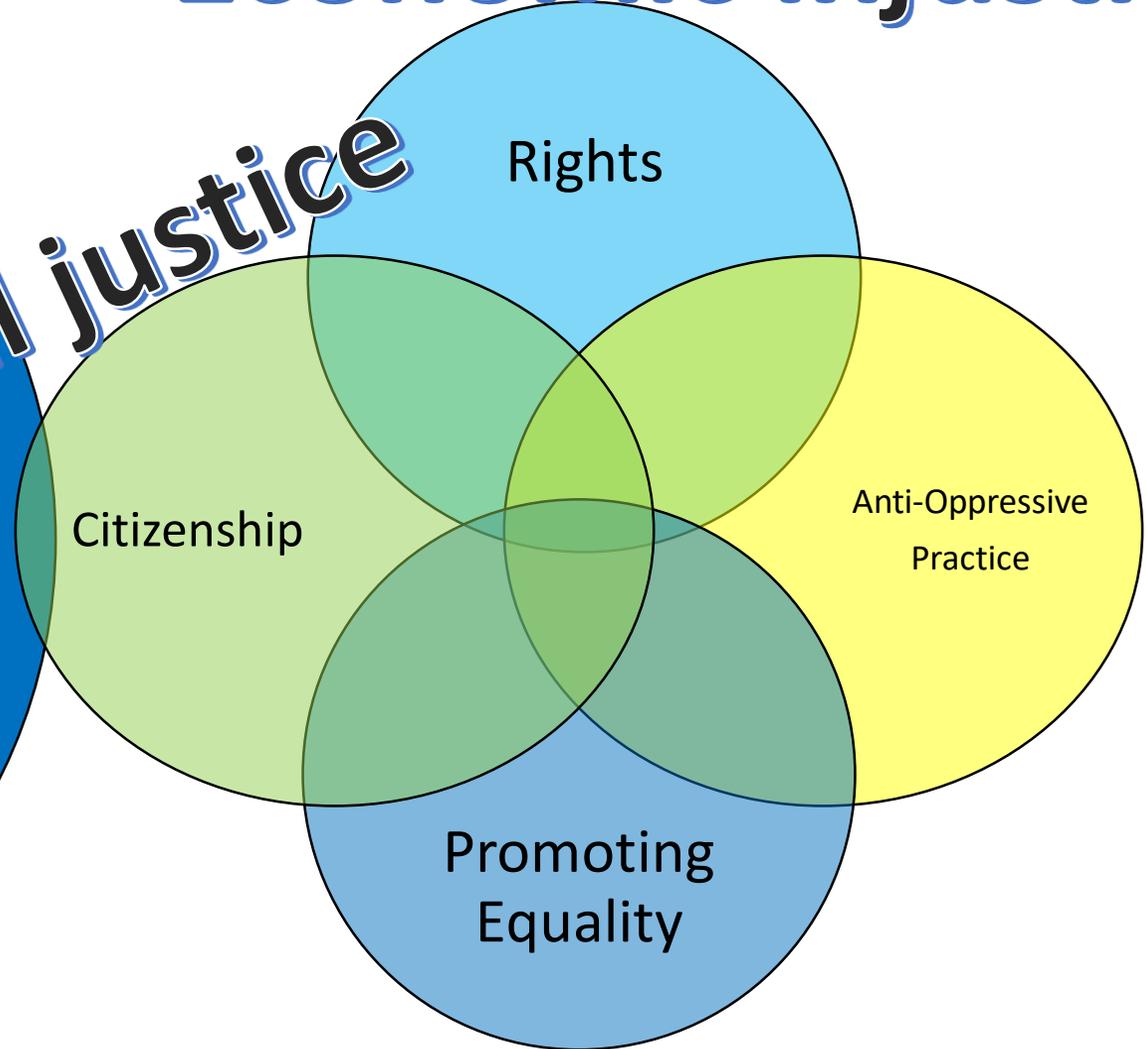


# Social injustice



# Legal injustice

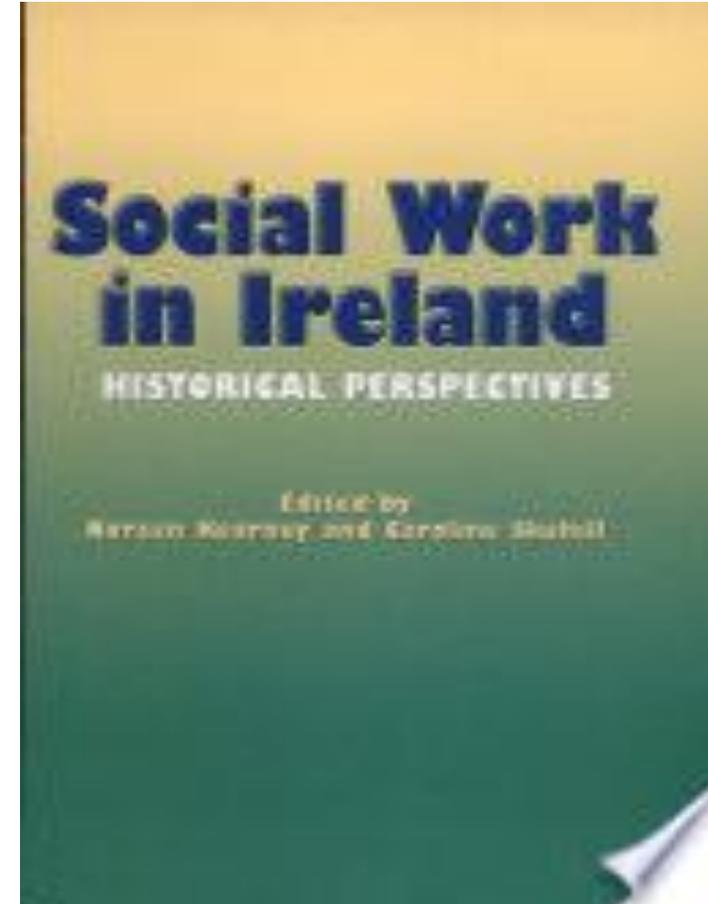
# Economic injustice



# Cultural injustice

# Some Key Moments relating to Social Justice

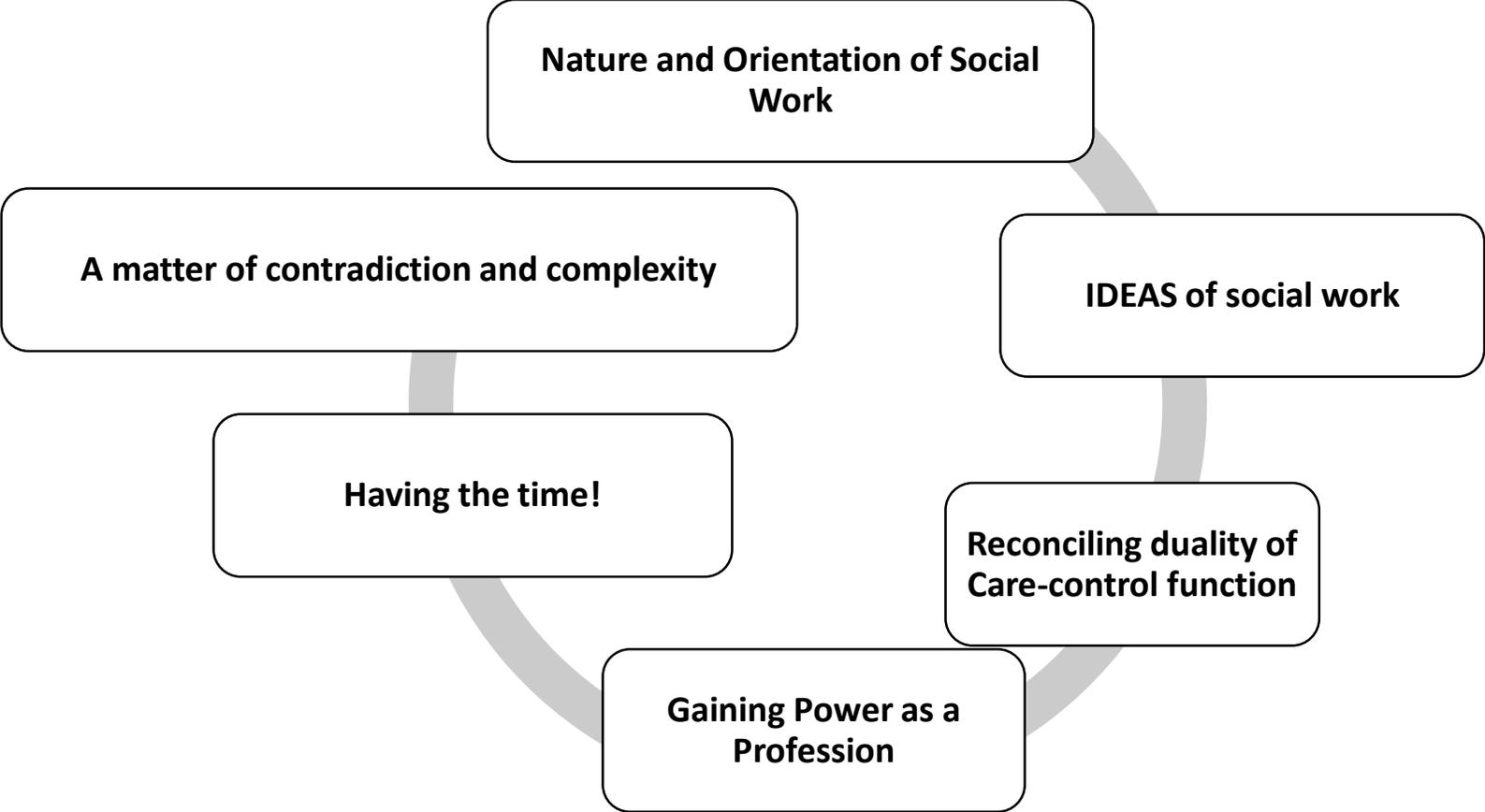
- Welfare and Wedding cakes – Jacobs Welfare worker 1906 promoting women's working rights /social work student placements (Kirwan)
- Local Authority practice with Travellers and Accommodation- contested practice (Delap and Kelleher) – 1970s –promoting advocacy in the job
- Community Work and Community Development debates during 1970s and 1980s (Carroll and Lee)
- Social Work and Intellectual Disability (Redmond and Jennings) – highlighting discrimination and stigma of society and impact on view of SWK in disability as 'poor relation' and the development of 'SWIM' in 1972
- Key members of Campaigns –e.g.. Tuairim (1966)
- Campaign Group for the Development of Personal Social services (1983)
- Interdepartmental Committee on Social Work Report (1985)



# But on the other hand....

- McGregor and Quin (2015: 13) reflecting especially on post-Celtic tiger and the recession, argue that looking back at history shows us:
  - 1. an aspiration towards this wider justice role, reinforced by the international definition of social work (IFSW, 2014)*
  - 2. Evidence that notwithstanding some excellent pockets of human rights and social justice practice, at almost everyone point in its history, this has not been the dominant discourse of social work practice and training'*

# Some reflections on historical moments and themes relating to Social Work and Social Justice



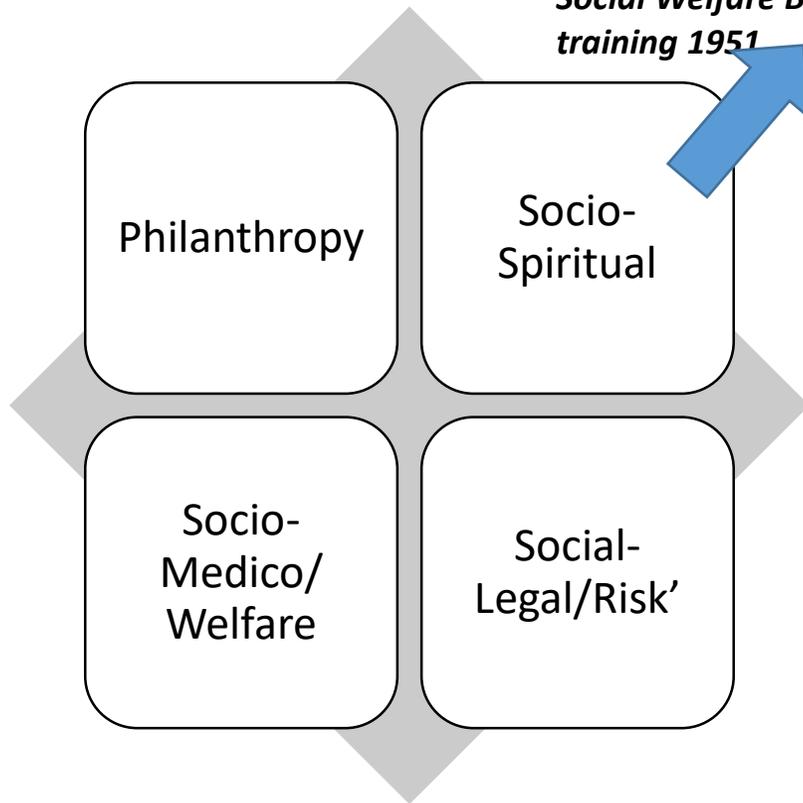
# Reflections on Social Justice and Social Work in history so far (1): Nature and Orientation Social work

- There has always been a 'dual' pathway in social work between individual 'casework' and collective practices (e.g.. COS and Settlement Movement)
- Community Development, community work and community organisation in Ireland – principles and practices of social justice – but on the 'margins of social work' (Carroll and Lee, 2005: 162).
- Irish Social Work developed from philanthropy 'socio-spiritual', 'socio-medical' and 'welfare' oriented discourses during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Skehill, 1999, 2000)

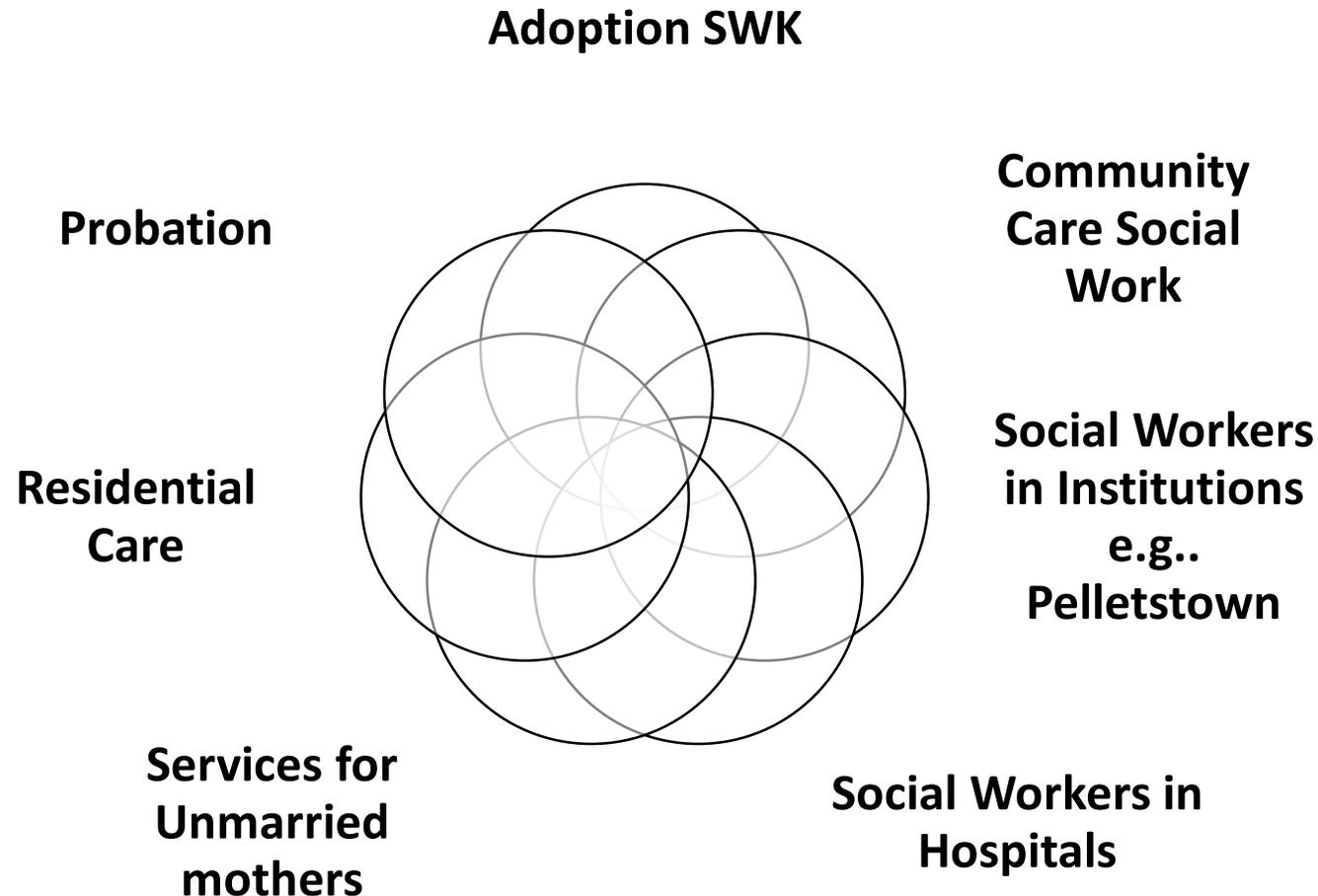
# Brief reminder of history of Social work in Ireland (Skehill, 2000, 2003)

*'Our people do not want lady-analysts of their lives and motives. Trouble is certain to develop if almoners undertake psychological investigations in our homes and hospitals' Arch Bishop McQuaid letter to Family Welfare Section of Catholic Social Welfare Bureau re SWK training 1951*

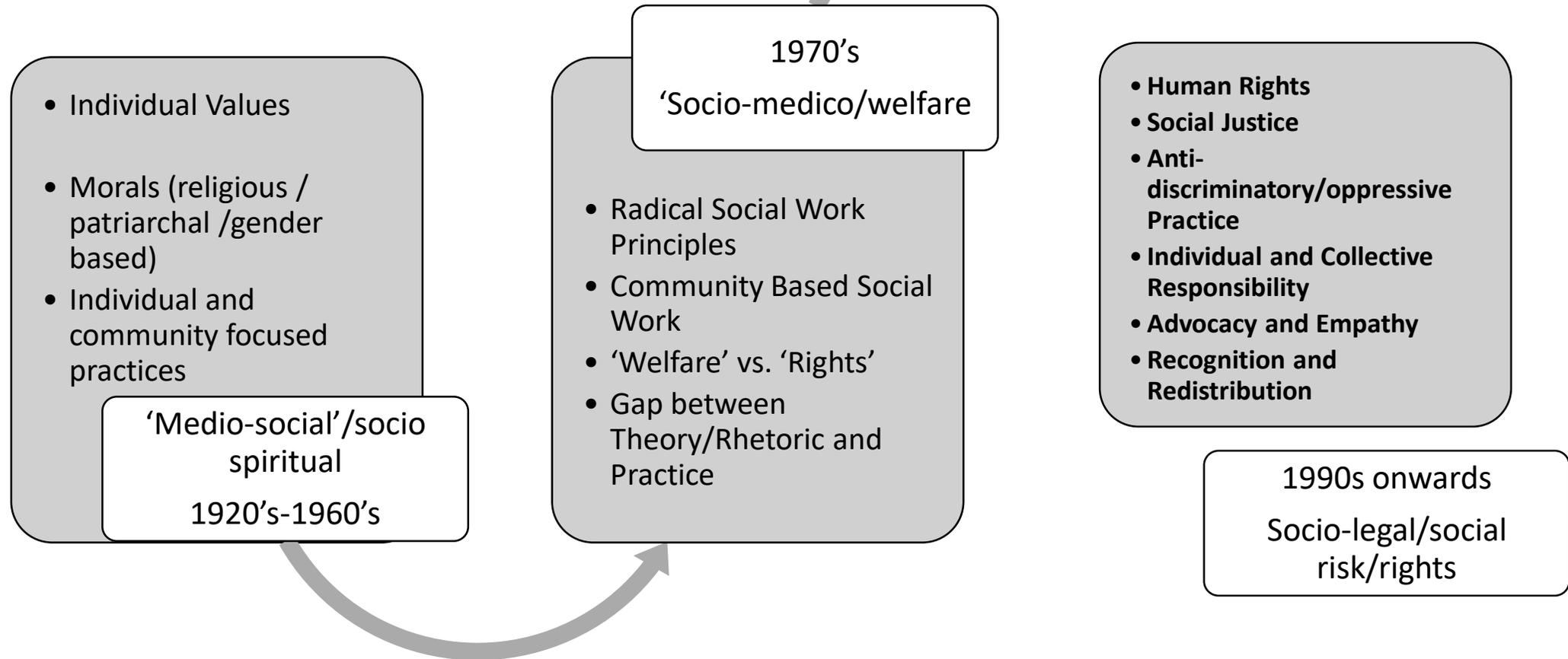
- Forerunner to 'Child Protection and Welfare Social Work' 1902-1980s) Inspectors of Board Out Children (from 1902)
  - Children's Officers (SWK/ PHN/AO) mid-20<sup>th</sup> century
  - Psychiatric social work
  - Almoners (from hospital /maternity) from 1919
  - 1971- First Generic Training in Ireland



# Post-1970 – SWK in context of practice with unmarried mothers and children (e.g.. FMBHCR)



# Reflections on Social Justice and Social Work in history so far (2) IDEAS OF SOCIAL WORK



# Reflections on Social Justice and Social Work in history so far (3) – the ‘problem’ of reconciling social control and regulation

- Past and Present, ‘Social justice’ has not been our ‘dominant discourse’ – e.g.. not what the majority of the public or media say or see
- We have an Ambiguous relationship with social control functions in social work and lack of association of protection with ‘justice’
- Our potential to practice from a social justice perspective may be limited by concerns about role as ‘social control’ and how to reconcile this e.g.. in child protection, mental health, probation

# Dilemmas about the 'social control'/protection/ /regulation function of SWK...Mental Health

- **On Social Control concerns and Mental health Act 2001**
- 'social workers, already enduring criticism as child-snatchers, could easily become associated in the public mind with forcible removal of psychiatric patients to mental hospitals. While opportunities to develop an enhanced therapeutic role in public mental health services were not easily discernible, it appears as though social workers in general and PSW's in particular were **unwilling to pursue expansion if this meant an expansion of their social control functions**' (Butler, 2005 47-48)

# .... ON CHILD PROTECTION AND WELFARE AS SPECIALISM IN SOCIAL WORK 1970s and 1980s –

- ‘Ideally a social work service with a community base should provide a broad range of services, encompassing the elderly, disabled and the young. However, in most areas, the service is confined to families and child care. Indeed, in some areas, the focus has been further concentrated on families with children at risk. **This is not one of professional preferences but is dictated by the pressure of demand coupled with staff restrictions**’ (inter-departmental committee on social work, 1985, p. 59)

...and probation Geiran (2005: 97),

- reflection on care vs control/'deserving' and 'undeserving' offenders describes probation work 'as a contested branch of a contested profession working in the contested areas of the social arena...rather than a fixed phenomenon, which is or is not deemed to be exclusively *controlling or caring*'

# An alternative interpretation?

- IASW Code of Ethics recognises this

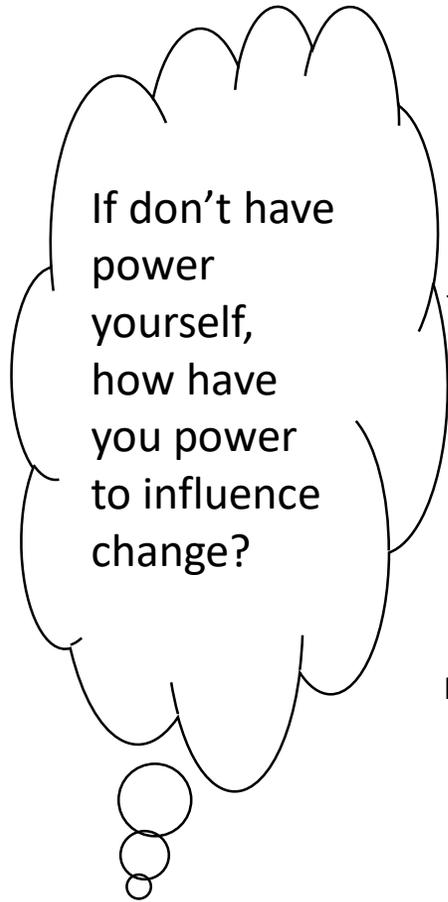
- Need to broaden view of legal and regulatory powers to consider how powers can be used positively to promote justice, fairness, protection and rights
- **How can 'control' /'regulation' functions NOT be about social justice** (protection from harm, challenging violence, using law to ensure safety)?
- While social work had scope to develop across a range of domains, one continuity is the expertise of mediation in the social between
  - Care-control
  - Regulation-support
  - Needs-risk
- BUT this MUST be in a context that differentiates intrinsic-extrinsic factors /a critical systems framework (e.g. anti-poverty practice)
- 3. Social workers in focusing on individuals, families, groups, and communities in which they live will be aware of the potential power imbalance in the relationships that follow. Social workers will strive **to use their power appropriately within such relationships**
- 4. The practice of social work operates within systems that have a regulatory function. Social workers must be cognisant of the **inherent tensions between support and control that may arise**. In addressing such tensions, social workers will at all times strive towards the objective of the service user maximising their own ability to make and carry out decisions affecting their quality of life.

## 4. A matter of contradiction and complexity

e.g. Final report of the Mother and baby home commission (Murphy, 2021)

- Content of the report reflects the contested and contradictory nature of social work (noting also the contested nature of report itself)
- Evidence of examples of social justice practice and expansion of social work leading to change in culture and practices
- Also evidence of practice that was complicit in reinforcing injustices and rights violations /failure to act or to challenge
- Collective and individual actions need to be critically considered in a mutually respectful, open, honest and constructive way to learn from past to inform present and future
- We need to keep developing opportunities already begun in relation to critical dialogue, reflection, debate and actions in response to findings and impact of the Report within the profession and leadership in a wider context.

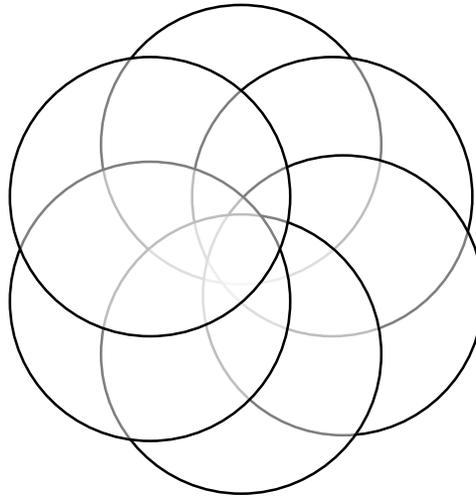
# Reflections on Social Justice and Social Work in history so far (5) – gaining power of profession



If don't have power yourself, how have you power to influence change?

CORU 2012 – Irish social work become first health and social care registered profession

NSWQB 1997 –first time Irish education has its own qualification board (IASW lobbied, with IFSW support, for this in 1975/6)



1991 Child Care Act – associated pay increase and recognition

Med Social work  
1953 Health Act  
(100 years of MSW 2019)

Status, recognition, equal pay  
– e.g.. 1972, social workers earning less than basic clerical grades in local government

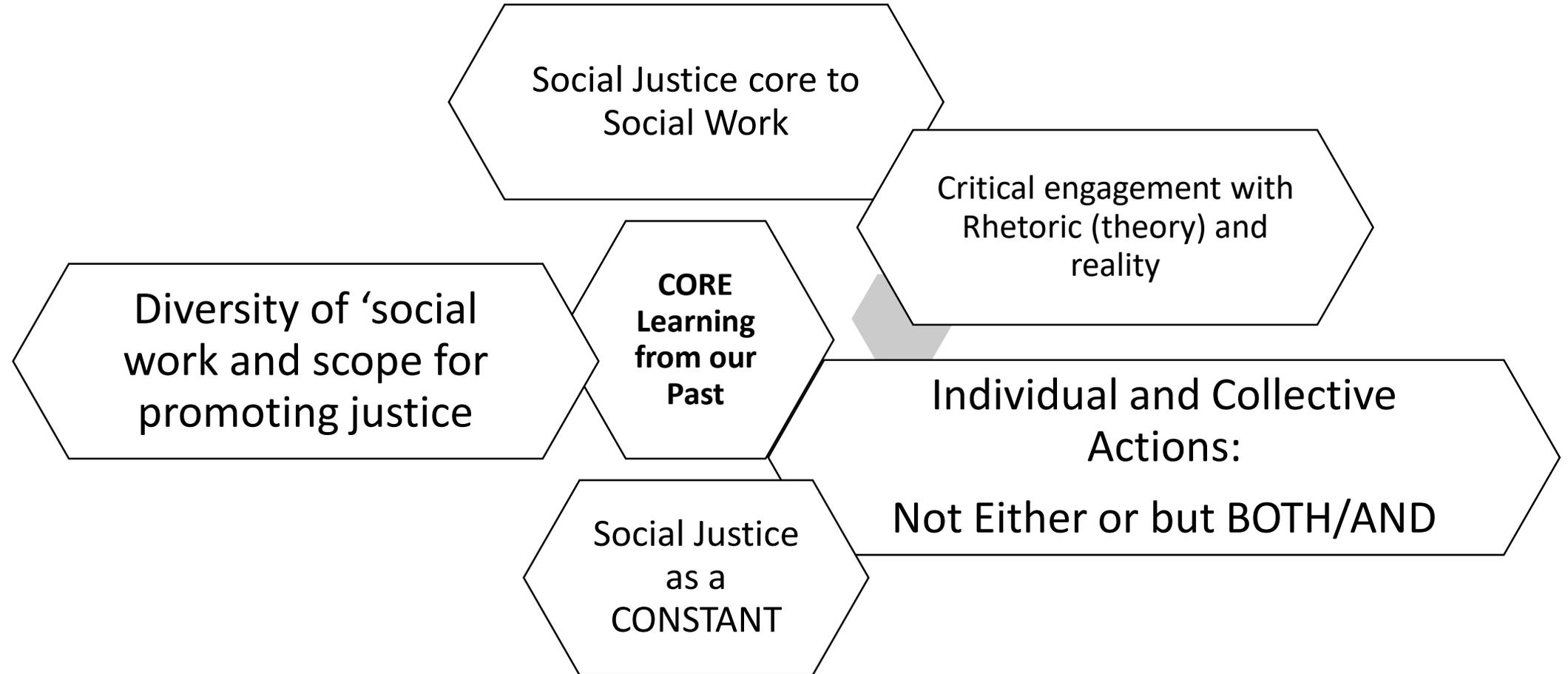
***A continuity of 20<sup>th</sup> century Social work, up to 1990s, was the struggle and quest of establishing itself as a profession with parity of pay, status and position***

# Reflections on Social Justice and Social Work in history so far (6) – Having the TIME!

- in this regard: It has been represented to us that at present, the workloads of social workers are so great that they are unable to give adequate time and attention to each person or family and that essential work would be left undone. ... **At present, social work time and skills are so often used to little purpose in trying to help deprived families whose greatest need is for such things as housing, employment, environmental amenities or for services such as day care for children** (Task Force on Child Care Services, 1980, para 19.1.6

In Powell, 1998: 315)

# Summary of Learning from Past



# Conclusions PPCT (2)

## Person:

- Decisions about 'personal' professional stance
- Make Social Justice a 'constant' in practice
- Recognise it has many features and find a way that works for you and your practice and approach

## Process

- Consider 'Support and protection' framework in ecological context (**McGregor and Dolan, 2021**) or 'supportive protection and protective support' (McGregor and Devaney, 2020)
- Review 'processes' (methods, approaches, practice models) to embed social justice and name its complex dimensions
- Create greater public awareness of social work and articulation of the limits and potential
- Networked professionals – leadership
- Association – collective action and dialogue – strengthen from within, respect each others differences
- leave 'gladiatorial' differences behind and embrace our own and others 'super diversity'
- Promote Citizen based social work practice

# Conclusions PPCT (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1996)

## **Context:**

- still constrains as well as enables but we have greater power and position in the present
- Push back and push forward in context
- Use positives of context (e.g.. data, evidence, inspection, principles of partnership, justice, diversity, legal instruments) to promote social justice

## **Time**

Creating history of the future – how can we actively shape that now for those affected

in the past: it is never too late for social justice to be fought for) and

those in present and future

# Possible futures?

**better Public understanding** of complex and contradictory nature of social work

Profession is **confident, assertive and clear** about social justice as constant in ALL practice

Systems that might **constrain** are pushed to **enable** to maximise scope of rights legislation.

Social Work IS a **networked profession** learning from past practices and reigniting role and relationships

We are situated and learn within **global, national and local context** (embracing diverse anti-oppressive, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory social justice oriented practice)

Practice is informed by **citizenship, partnership, participation and co-production** (see McGregor et al, 2020)

Principles of law and policy are mediated to have direct impact through **socio-legal practice**

Ideas and theories are **dynamic and generated between shared partnership between practice, policy, public and academia** with citizenship, partnership and participation at the centre

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