Article

Exploring the Social Representations of Social Work in the Sri Lankan Cultural Context: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This preliminary study examines the social representations of social work relevant to the Sri Lankan cultural context while considering indigenous social work discourses. Under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, six Sri Lankan social workers participated in online semistructured interviews. The interview data underwent thematic analysis, from which four main themes emerged: social work views and positionality; the relation between social work education and practice; contexts and distinctive practices; and issues and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees' narratives detailed how social work is represented in sociocultural contexts, emphasising community work and comparing local practices with Western-rooted professional social work discourses. Some interviewees' accounts also reported challenges surrounding social work education and the issues of social work practice in a multiethnic and multireligious society. The findings suggest the need for further research, with dialogue and reciprocal exchanges by stakeholders, to explore the diverse social representations of social work in the global and local contexts.

1. Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have discussed various perspectives in the Asia-Pacific region, including Sri Lanka, to develop culturally relevant social work education and practices. For instance, some studies highlighted local and indigenous social work practices in the broad sense [1,2]. Researchers in Sri Lanka have explored not only the development of and challenges to professional social work education in the country under the influence of Western (specifically European and American) approaches [3,4] but also indigenous, primarily faith-based, social work education [5,6]. These studies emphasised the urgency of adopting a comprehensive perspective, including alternative representations and discourses of social work, given that frontline workers and other practitioners are currently conducting a wide range of activities in Sri Lanka. Put simply, there exists a significant need to explore diversified perspectives in grassroots social work practice, alongside local and indigenous knowledge.

Questions about who is considered a social worker and how the social realities of social work are constructed in Sri Lanka are fundamental to the debate on appropriate social work practice and education. Despite the development of professional social work education, a steady gap between the supply of related human resources and the number of active social workers has remained unaddressed [2,7]. Concurrently, many practitioners, whether or not they have received formal social work education, conduct frontline community-based activities that can be considered social work [2,8]. This underscores the necessity of not only a deductive approach based on official statements and dominant discourses, but also an inductive approach based on the experiences of social work practitioners in the field,

considering Sri Lanka's sociocultural context and history [6,8]. This study assumes that different practitioners, including local and indigenous social workers, engage in grassroots social work activities and that their perspectives explain the social representations of social work in the field.

1.1. The Social Work Context in Sri Lanka

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is a multiethnic and multireligious country that has undergone several periods of colonisation under the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British before declaring independence as the Dominion of Ceylon in 1948 and adopting its current state name in 1978. More than 70% of its current population is Sinhalese, followed by Sri Lankan Tamil, Sri Lankan Moor, Indian Tamil, Burgher, Malay, Sri Lankan Chetty, Bharatha, Vedda and others [9]. Most Sinhalese people are Theravada Buddhists, while others follow religions such as Christianity. People of other ethnic backgrounds mainly practise Hinduism, Islam or other religions. Sri Lankan traditional societies were largely founded on peasant agriculture alongside ideological norms and distinctive gender roles influenced by religious values and the occupational caste systems [10,11]. Over several decades, significant changes occurred in such historical, political, sociocultural and religious contexts surrounding individuals and communities because of the civil war from 1983 to 2009 and the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, amongst others [12,13]. Therefore, Sri Lanka's history of colonisation and its multiethnic and multireligious context, as well as traditional but changing social systems, are likely to be interrelated with local and indigenous social work activities [14,15].

Sri Lanka's social work professional education and training have been influenced by its interactions with Western approaches and stakeholders. Social work education has been headed by the School of Social Work at the National Institute of Social Development (NISD), whose predecessor was established in 1952 [3,4]. The School of Social Work seems to incorporate Western social work theories. In addition, interactions and synergy between Sri Lankan social work and international stakeholders are evident. For example, the Sri Lanka Association of Professional Social Workers (SLAPSW), a member of the International Federation of Social Workers, has participated in international circles [16]. Moreover, after the Indian Ocean tsunami, the social work stream at the University of Colombo was established in cooperation with the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia [17,18]. Furthermore, some scholars have described how the development of social work education programmes involved international actors such as the United Nations and Canada and the participation of NISD staff who finished their social work education abroad [3,4].

Some scholars, however, have identified challenges in applying theories to professional development in Sri Lanka, with its diverse sociocultural contexts and fluctuating resources [3,4]. One researcher, for instance, pointed out that it is inappropriate to introduce Western social work approaches in Sri Lankan society because of their different social and cultural norms, including mutual-help systems in communities and intrafamily dynamics [19]. Therefore, one primary debate in Sri Lanka may concern the development of social work practice and education that is relevant to the Sri Lankan context. For example, some researchers have argued that even before the emergence of 'Western-rooted professional social work' in Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks and nuns had already been engaging in 'social work' activities towards the theorisation of Buddhist social work [6,8,20]. Other researchers have recognised existing social work practices relevant to the Sri Lankan context, including community mobilisation, spirituality and sustainable development perspectives in case studies of government employees and nongovernmental organisation (NGO) workers [2,21]. In short, one may describe the development of local social work education and practice in Sri Lanka while discussing the challenges it faces in the indigenisation of overseas theories and practices under globalisation.

1.2. Analytical Framework

The multifaceted aspects of Sri Lankan social work must adopt an analytical framework that does not solely presuppose or assume the superiority of Western-rooted professional social work discourses [3,4,20,22,23]. This study set its scope using the analytical frameworks of social representation theory (SRT) together with international social work perspectives that include indigenous social work discourses.

SRT is rooted in Serge Moscovici's works in social psychology [24–26], and is deeply connected to social constructivism [27]. Moscovici [25] defined social representations as 'a set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communications'. Simply put, social representations refer to systems 'of values, ideas and practices' constructed as social reality [24]. They are also considered equivalent to the myth and belief systems in the traditional world [25]. Moscovici [24] argued that the functions of social representations include establishing an order that enables individuals to gain orientation and familiarity in the world and enabling communication amongst community members. For instance, scholars have examined the familiarisation of 'something' in the world as social representations by considering the process of anchoring and objectification [26]. Although social work studies have not thoroughly discussed SRT, some studies have examined the relation between the social representations in social work and practitioners' identities, amongst others [28]. We expect the SRT approach to help us examine the discourses of social work amongst people and their social construction process.

Some aspects of pluralistic discourses must be kept in mind when examining the social representations of social work in Sri Lanka. First, this does not mean exclusively assuming a global mainstream discourse. A representative example of globalisation in social work is the global definition of the social work profession [29]. This definition has to some extent influenced Sri Lanka as well as the international community through formal and informal interactions between domestic and international stakeholders, and '[t]he above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels' [29]. However, it is important to note some controversial issues: for instance, the global definition assumes social work as a profession [20,23]. This highlights the need for another perspective for considering dominant and marginalised social representations of social work and related phenomena at the grassroots level.

Second, the ABC model of indigenous social work provides a clue to exploring alternative social representations of social work internationally. This innovative but concise framework, proposed by researchers of the Asian Research Institute for International Social Work, has significant implications for the critical discussion on the dominant and marginalised discourses and decolonisation of social work [20,22,23]. To summarise, Model A refers to Western-rooted professional social work by local and indigenous practitioners, Model B pertains to the indigenisation of Western-rooted approaches or the Westernisation of indigenous social work and Model C refers to indigenous social work practices. Thus, the ABC model provides substantial implications for not solely assuming social representations of Western-rooted professional social work in advance. Some researchers have tried developing the model in the context of Buddhist social work studies in Asia, but these studies remain scarce [30]. Therefore, it is necessary to examine such social phenomena through practice-based research as well as studies of related fields, including the decolonisation of international social work [31].

Third, research based on the SRT approach has shown that interactions between actors of varying social backgrounds differ in interpreting and experiencing a phenomenon depending on the cultural context [28]. Thus, findings of the phenomena are not appropriate to be considered as one 'objective truth', but rather as a socially constructed reality [32]. Although stakeholders must be sensitive to the dynamics of power relations between them, this approach can introduce alternative discourses or representations generated through interactions between insiders and outsiders [33]. In other words, the SRT approach is also expected to promote discussions on the theme of this study towards reciprocal exchanges in social work [34].

1.3. Study Objectives and Research Questions

This preliminary study explores the social representations of social work relevant to the cultural contexts amongst practitioners who have received some related education and training in Sri Lanka. It asks the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What do Sri Lankan practitioners identify and mean by social work in their practices?
- RQ2: What culturally relevant social work practices are experienced and represented amongst Sri Lankan practitioners?
- RQ3: How are educational experiences in social work and related fields associated with their stories and images of their social work practices?

2. Methods

This international collaborative study is part of a research project titled 'Exploring Indigenous and Professional Social Work in Developing Countries and Its Relation with International Cooperation', scheduled to be completed in March 2024 [35]. This study was conducted by an overseas researcher who has experience in social work practice in Sri Lanka with SLAPSW. In April 2021, the authors discussed the research plan and decided to conduct an online interview study because of the constraints and circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1. Methodology

As discussed in the analytical framework, the methodology follows the SRT approach while taking a social constructivist position. Although scholars have applied various methods to the SRT approach, these methods were often qualitative. In interview research, it is necessary to not only explore stories and episodes narrated by an individual but also consider the dynamics and sociocultural context, including the participant–interviewer interaction [36].

2.2. Participant Recruitment

The interview candidates were selected via purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were: (1) practitioners who had engaged with social work or related activities at the time of recruitment, (2) those who had undergone education or training in social work or related fields and (3) participants confirmed by at least one of the authors as having conducted any active practices and being expected to tell their stories. Participants were mainly recruited through SLAPSW and additional participants were supplementarily recruited through snowball sampling. After seven social work practitioners were invited for interviews, six of them (four and two participants through SLAPSW and snowball sampling, respectively) expressed their willingness to participate (Table 1). Two were district-level social services officers, one was a village officer (*grama niladhari*) and three were NGO or volunteer workers. Three were female and three were male.

Table 1. Interviewee characteristics.

Pseudonym *	Gender	Sector	Title/Activities	Education/Training	Recording Time
Anuradha	Male	Gov	SSO	BSW	66 min
Buttala	Male	Gov	SSO	On-the-job training, Dip. counselling	55 min
Chilaw	Female	Gov	Grama Niladhari	Dip. social work	65 min
Digana	Male	Other	Voluntary social work	Dip. social work	53 min
Ella	Female	NGO	NGO staff	BSW	62 min
Fort	Female	Other	Voluntary social work	CBR training	60 min

Notes: Gov = government, SSO = social services officer, NGO = nongovernmental organisation, BSW = bachelor of social work, Dip = diploma, CBR = community-based rehabilitation. * The pseudonyms were derived from arbitrary place names.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Semistructured interviews with each participant were conducted using an interview guide between June 2021 and January 2022. In the interview guide, basic questions included items about the interviewees' educational and practice backgrounds, social work activities, perspectives and values as social work practitioners, meanings and images of social work and recognition of foreign knowledge in social work. The interviews were conducted by video teleconference in Sinhala or English depending on their preferences and took about one hour per participant (excluding the time outside of the interview). The interviews were recorded with the consent of each participant.

This study used Nvivo qualitative data analysis software to perform thematic analysis of the collected interview data with reference to technical guide papers [37,38]. First, a verbatim transcript was prepared using the recorded data, which the authors read carefully. In the case of Sinhala, a professional, native translator translated the transcripts into English. All the narrative data were then inputted in Nvivo, clearly distinguishing between the interviewer's and interviewee's dialogues. The data were segmented into basic narrative units, with segments added where narratives contained different meanings and contexts. The relevant parts of the narratives were extracted in accordance with the RQs and were given appropriate code names. The coding process involved comparing similar and opposite examples considering contexts and implications. If there were any inconsistencies, revisions or integrations were made as necessary. Codes with similar meanings were grouped while exploring themes. Differences and relations between codes and themes were interpretatively analysed.

As will be shown in the findings section, the participants' narratives were examined by theme. Some results were expected to include, but were not limited to, narratives representing 'values, ideas and practices' [24] of social work with their past and daily experiences. The findings of the thematic analysis were then interpreted using the SRT approach.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Aomori University of Health and Welfare on 26 May 2021 (No. 21017), followed by a reconfirmation by the Research Ethics Committee of Shukutoku University in June 2022. After the approval, a research agreement was signed electronically by the first author and SLAPSW in June 2021. The authors explained to the interviewees the study and their rights in the survey. Interviews were audio-recorded for participants, who provided verbal and written consent.

3. Findings

The analysis produced four main themes: social work views and positionality; the relation between social work education/training and practice; contexts and distinctive practices; and issues and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. From each main theme, subthemes emerged. The following is an interpretation of these main themes together with the related narratives.

3.1. Theme 1: Social Work Views and Positionality

This theme included practical perspectives; comparisons with other concepts; differences in practices according to position and affiliation; and gaps between the significance of social work and low public recognition.

First, several interviewees discussed basic perspectives on social work. For example, Mr. Digana stated that the fundamental perspectives required for social work practitioners were the concepts of empowerment and strengths, which correspond to contemporary social work:

> *When it comes to social work, what we do is empower people and uplift their strengths. Social work is when we help and strengthen people to make them achieve something on their own rather than give something to them.... We must also have some knowledge on how and where they must be referred to.* (Mr Digana)

Second, most interviewees discussed social work by comparing it with other terms and concepts. Like Mr. Digana, they distinguished 'social work' from 'social services' in the form of simply giving direct aid to beneficiaries:

'Social services' (samaja sewa) means we identify the problems that people face, involve ourselves directly in it and try to solve it. But when it comes to 'social work', we identify the problem, and we coordinate with the situation so that the particular persons can solve the problem by themselves. (Ms Chilaw)

Other interviewees made similar observations. Ms. Ella, for example, mentioned a traditional metaphor that might be related to the traditional saying, namely 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime' [39]. She stated, '[W]hen someone is hungry, you can either give them a fish (social services) or teach them how to fish (social work)'.

Third, interviewees noted differences in job titles according to one's organisation, and practices could vary depending on one's position and affiliation. Two interviewees who held government offices stated the following:

The job title 'social services officer' is assigned by the government. But a similar position is assigned by the job title 'social worker' by NGOs and INGOs.... In addition to that, one part of our duty is that we are bound to visit the field and provide the maximum service as social workers in the field to empower our target groups.... Now such qualifications are highly considered. (Mr Buttala)

Not all social services officers are social workers. But some've learnt social work among them, and they're trying to raise the extent of social work up to 60–70%. It is possible to include the social work view onto our duty. (Mr Anuradha)

These explanations clarified that the extent to which social work practices might be conducted depended on the practitioner's identity, positionality and organisational contexts but that occasionally, substantial practices could also be conducted with ingenuity. In addition, Mr. Buttala, a government social services officer, reported that recruitment requirements have recently included social work-related degrees although the actual situation might be changing considering a transitional period [2]. In contrast, from a voluntary or nonprofessional perspective, one interviewee who practised voluntary social work activities besides his main job said:

My main occupation is working as a lawyer. In addition, I participate in those kinds of activities.... So, I try my best to help people in my country as much as I can. It's social work, and most of the time I give my service voluntarily free of charge. (Mr Digana)

While Mr. Digana viewed his social work practice as something beyond his main profession, he considered being a social worker as one of his identities.

Fourth, two interviewees identified the differences in the social representations of social work between practitioners and the general public, with one describing the challenge:

But in Sri Lanka, the public doesn't seem to understand different meaning between social work and social services. So people think social work is equal to social services. So, only the very people of community activity and the students who studied at the NISD may know about social work. (Ms Ella)

In sum, interviewees' narratives under this theme referred to social work views through comparisons with other concepts and between organisations. Specifically, some narratives indicated the possibility of identifying social work in their practices and positioning themselves as social workers. They also emphasised differences between social workers' images of social work and those of the general public, which could be associated with their narratives of social work. In other words, their narratives highlighted social realities that might be different from or contradictory to practitioners' knowledge of social work.

3.2. Theme 2: The Relation between Social Work Education/Training and Practice

This theme referred to the interviewees' experiences of social work education and training and included the associations between their learning experiences and field practices as well as the challenges confronted by Sri Lankan social work education.

First, all interviewees discussed their learning experiences in social work and related disciplines such as sociology and other approaches such as community-based rehabilitation (CBR). Some included narratives of applying their learning experiences to their current social work practices. For example, Mr. Digana explained that he had obtained a social work diploma from the NISD, whose courses had an eight-month field placement, and spoke of using such fieldwork in real practice.

> *That experience and skills we gained still come in handy even right now when we help people or when there is a common work in the village. So, the knowledge and influence we gained from the diploma is actually a big deal.* (Mr Digana)

As his narrative indicates, Mr. Digana recognised that learning from field placement has positively affected his current practices. In addition, Ms. Chilaw described her experiences of working with children and on poverty issues in slum areas as part of the rural camp community work projects during her higher-diploma coursework at the NISD. She also spoke about her experiences of engaging with environmental pollution issues from the green social work approach in her final project at the institution. She continued discussing the education and training that she had received, stating,

> *And the other thing is that with the job I have, I got the opportunity to cover all the fields. My job experiences also involve social work practices for 13 years. I have had great experiences in every field of social work.... After being recruited, I received an intensive training program with colleagues. The training covered the major areas of social work.* (Ms Chilaw)

Ms. Chilaw's narratives highlighted a continued fostering of her learning in social work practice even after completing the educational courses and entering the field as an administrative officer; while practicing in the field, she continues to undergo professional development in social work. Mr. Digana has also incorporated his social work learning into other areas as a social work educator, as well as his participation in SLAPSW seminars and programmes.

> *I'm a member there [SLAPSW]. The association has held many seminars and programmes in social work.... Indeed, I've participated in a lot of training programmes at the NISD. I worked as a field supervisor for the students several times. I contributed to the training with the role of a field supervisor from the institution [NISD], and I developed my social work knowledge further.* (Mr Digana)

His narrative indicated that one can learn more about social work by not only receiving social work education but also teaching it.

Second, however, several interviewees discussed how inadequate opportunities for education and training are represented in the local context. This included the disparity in educational opportunities between urban and rural areas and the lack of available educational resources.

> *The department is trying to provide training with more focus on social work than ever. But I think this teaching and training on social work needs to go on updating and that knowledge must be monitored, evaluated and updated for us to be able to have feedback on it. Because when you go away from Colombo to the rural areas, the facilities get diminished, and I see that as a weakness.* (Mr Anuradha)

> *Most of the very limited books we have in Sri Lanka, a lot of books from European countries.* (Ms Ella)

These interviewees highlighted the urgency of creating more educational opportunities and the need to develop culturally relevant social work education and teaching materials

in Sri Lanka. Ms. Chilaw also mentioned the potentially relevant role of practitioners' motivation in pursuing social work:

> *I just wanted to do a service for people. That is my passion.... But the majority of grama niladhari don't get involved in it although the opportunity is always there. There are not many people who're fond of this.... I don't know why this has been the case though.* (Ms Chilaw)

These accounts on the interplay between social work education and social work practices illustrated some perspectives from people who had received some education in social work and related disciplines. Interviewees' education and training experiences varied, with some expressing the relevance to their current practices and others highlighting challenges and issues. This theme could be interpreted together with Theme 1 because of the relation between their learnt experiences, including their acquired knowledge in social work, and identification of social work in their practices.

3.3. Theme 3: Contexts and Distinctive Practices

This theme referred to the social representations of social work practices considered distinctive to or relevant in Sri Lanka and its local sociocultural context. It included approaches that are deemed appropriate to Sri Lankan society and the characteristics of practices in Sri Lanka compared with those of Western-rooted professional social work. In addition, some interviewees spoke of working with minorities and marginalised groups within Sri Lankan society.

First, some common narratives about Sri Lankan society and relevant social work approaches were observed. One was the relation between social work practice and the sociocultural context, which included religious rituals, with one interviewee discussing the religious aspects of social work practice.

> *Although religion and demographical aspects are different in each society, sometimes activities related to entertainment, singing songs and religious activities, etc. are performed with elderly groups and people with disabilities. Before the pandemic, people often got together for activities like shramadana at village-level societies. For example, if they were used to conducting meetings at temples every month, they decided a date and cleaned the temple as a shramadana project, or they cleaned a road of the village.... In Buddhist societies, they enjoy going on a trip, but the objectives are to visit Anuradhapura as pilgrims, etc. Those are the activities that make them well-being.* (Mr Buttala)

This narrative described the possibility of integrating concepts and metaphors of religious and cultural collective action, including donating labour, *shramadana* [3], into social work practice in the community. In relation to this, another interviewee mentioned the importance of community work and the perspective of people's connectedness in Sri Lankan society:

> *In Sri Lanka, the interconnection is always high, which means there are so many bonds [particularly in rural areas]... The best method for Sri Lanka is community work.... Most of the time among the families and the society, the well-experienced tends to guide the others.... We can develop our attitudes quickly and minimise the problems because people already have mutual friendliness to each other.* (Ms Chilaw)

> *We need to do casework, but doing casework is not enough to address these kinds of issues.... I think for community practices, community work is more effective for assigned to the case.* (Ms Ella)

Second, when discussing social work in Sri Lanka, interviewees frequently compared local practices with Western methods and Western-rooted social work. Indicating the usefulness of Western-rooted social work theories and techniques, one interviewee was more direct about the need for practices that are relevant to Sri Lankan society.

> *I believe that foreign practices could not be directly applied to the Sri Lankan context. For example, there are day care centres for elderly people in some other countries.... [A]s far*

as a village, people do not come even if a day care centre is implemented, because even an elder person prefers to stay at home. Because they are in touch with their neighbours, they know everyone in the village. (Mr Buttala)

Other interviewees also compared representations of Western-style casework with those of their practices even when they might be hypothetical. One interviewee discussed the importance of social work in the context of a society with limited public resources but with strong social strengths of religious life and bonds among citizens.

One of the theories in social work is to change at the individual level. In order to do that, the best way is the individual approach, and only after that, they would go for group work or family social work. But here, we do the group dialogue most of the time . . . . One of the reasons is the lack of resources because one officer must handle a large number of beneficiaries, so there's a difficulty to deal with them individually. (Mr Anuradha)

Regarding these cultural aspects and social capital, and using Buddhism as an example, Ms. Chilaw highlighted the significance of religious life in social work responses:

In our country, people live with the culture... Religious effects also have been there to minimise problems of people in our culture. Gautama Buddha is the greatest social worker. Buddhist philosophy always teaches us how to behave in a good way. (Ms Chilaw)

Meanwhile, some interviewees reported that Sri Lankan society has been affected by the West through internationalisation and a history of colonisation, implying certain Western impacts on Sri Lankan social work practices.

Sri Lanka has already been a Westernised country to some extent. Such as dressing, so everything is like the Europeans. So, there are a lot of things that we can adopt.... We have changed some because some concepts [of Western-rooted professional social work] directly take to our context with these cultural barriers and others.... But still, it is very much related to Sri Lanka. (Ms Ella)

One may interpret such narratives on distinct social work practices and contexts as the intersection between global and local dimensions of practice in Sri Lanka. That is, the interviewees' narratives on real-world practices imply an interplay between Sri Lanka's unique sociocultural context and internationalisation.

Third, some participants described the relations between social work practice and issues involving minorities in the country; one interviewee mentioned minorities' poor living conditions:

There are Muslims as well as Burgher people in the division.... Some of them are doing well-reputed government jobs. But many minorities live like in slums... The number of children who get proper education is less in the area.... They [families] try to earn something for day-to-day expenses. (Ms Chilaw)

And we are working with the estate communities [where many Tamil plantation workers who have disadvantaged socioeconomic status live], which are really marginalised, problems. So we should take a discussion because, you know, these people work hard . . . . But their living conditions are pretty much poor. Housing for the area is highly limited, education limited, very poor, but they do. So as social workers, we have a lot to address for their needs. (Ms Ella)

These narratives represented some issues that minorities experience in Sri Lankan communities. Some interviewees also described practices in areas where most residents were ethnic minorities. Mr. Anuradha, for instance, reported that his team had adopted a collective approach in working in a tea plantation area where approximately 60% of residents were Tamils who tended to have low incomes.

We're all human beings whether you're Tamil or Sinhalese.... We can mobilise small teams and we do. There are societies for the old people and self-help groups of people with disabilities. Those groups get together to engage in small programmes.... It's difficult for

them to gather in one group in a single GN [grama niladhari] division. So, we form three groups for three areas to gather them and give them an opportunity to exchange and share the things they have. (Mr Anuradha)

The interviewee narratives associated with this theme included the context and content of social work practices in a socioculturally multifaceted country. They described relevant practices in the sociocultural context while considering the influence of globalisation and Western norms. Some also highlighted the challenges presented by minority issues. The final theme from the thematic analysis—the relation between the COVID-19 pandemic and social work practices—emerged separately as an example to address changing social needs and situations.

3.4. Theme 4: Issues and Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This theme emerged because of the COVID-19 pandemic's devastating effects on global health in 2020, altering every aspect of life as well as social work practices. The interviewees' narratives under this theme may be reflections of their present-day status at the time of the interviews, and their actual situations may have changed from day to day. Nevertheless, the interview responses under this theme represented identified needs, actions to address social issues and pandemic-related restrictions and challenges that the interviewees faced as they performed their activities. Despite differences in their organisations, roles and functions, all interviewees mentioned local challenges in providing social work services in the context of the pandemic. One interviewee, for example, stated:

During the COVID-19... they have big issues. One is the unemployment that a lot of people who were working in Columbo as workers, but they had to return to that... There are so many individuals, unemployment issues, reproductive health issues, nutrition issues, etc., which are all tough issues. (Ms Ella)

An interviewee who worked in a divisional secretariat also described government-led emergency social services to address such social issues as follows:

Due to the pandemic situation these days, certain decisions were made by the government, which means, what should be done for socially vulnerable people. We have to check whether they have food. We also have to check whether people with disabilities have food and money. We have to check if the elder homes maintained by the divisional secretariat have enough facilities or they encounter any issues. (Mr Buttala)

These narratives illustrated some of the various social challenges that social work practitioners were expected to address during the pandemic. While substantial activities ranged from services provided by government organisations to more grassroots practices, similarities were observed in the interviewees' perspectives on assessing and meeting community needs and challenges, such as those of vulnerable people. The following interviewees also discussed how they attempted to resolve social issues during the pandemic.

Due to the pandemic situation, there's no way we can gather people. So, they were unable to carry out their regular activities.... Since they didn't have any other income, we interfered and helped them go through that difficult period and overcome their problems by coordinating with the institutions that have possible resources. We had set up organisations, called swashakthi [self-help] groups, for people with disabilities and old people, and we help them through those organisations.... Being isolated, they had difficulties expressing their problems. So, we've utilised technology like creating SNS groups and connected them as much as possible so that we can be aware of their problems and help them ease their difficulties. (Mr Anuradha)

There are a lot of cases, especially psychological issues. A lot of people stay at home.... So family-related matters were raised and domestic violence in the situation... As social workers, we try to minimise those issues and to give some support to the people. (Ms Ella)

These accounts indicated that the participants conducted social work practices to address social issues caused by the pandemic. Amid their clients' various difficulties, the

interviewees adopted community work approaches that were similar to their prepandemic work as well as implemented alternative methods of service.

4. Discussion

This study sought to explore the social representations of culturally relevant social work from the narratives of Sri Lankan practitioners. Thematic analysis of semistructured interview data revealed similarities and differences in interviewees' daily practices. The findings of this study, along with the analytical framework of the SRT approach and three RQs, are summarised and discussed as follows.

4.1. Summary and Interpretation of Findings

This section summarises the four themes arising from the interview data in line with the three RQs. RQ1 intended to explore the social representations of social work and social workers in Sri Lanka, and Theme 1 summarised the interviewees' narratives of social work and their positionality. For instance, the interviewees highlighted the distinction between social services (*samaja sewa*) and social work [3,5,19]. Some interviewees argued that social work could be integrated into organisational programmes in providing direct social services for clients. Accordingly, these interviewees' activities, including voluntary practices, may be identified as social work regardless of the narrow definition of social work 'professions'.

RQ2 intended to explore the social representations of culturally relevant practices by Sri Lankan social work practitioners, and Theme 3 described distinctive social work practices in relation to and in contrast with Western-rooted professional social work. Although the interviewee narratives did not necessarily indicate the familiarisation, or a social object, of culturally relevant social work practices, they nevertheless mentioned their implicit practices. Indeed, some narratives discussed sociocultural approaches, developmental practices and collective activities, including local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Theme 4). These findings also included accounts regarding the religious and spiritual aspects of social work practice, as well as the challenges of working with minority clients [21]. These narratives suggest that scholars in Sri Lanka, a multiethnic and multireligious country, must explore social representations, including implicit knowledge and practices, of culturally relevant social work [14], by working with people of different languages and diverse backgrounds.

RQ3 aimed to explore the representational association between social work education, training and practice in Sri Lanka, and Theme 2 explored these from interviewees' experiences of practices as well as learning and training backgrounds. This study observed that all interviewees had undergone some form of social work education or training, with some directly drawing on their past education for their present-day social work practices. Others reported practicing in ways that did not seem directly linked to their educational experiences.

Theme 2 has implications for social work education and training discourses in that it considers their link with representations in the public spheres [40]. Regarding potential human resources in social work fields, for instance, some narratives indicate a lack of interest in and incentives for social work education and training amongst some local practitioners and other stakeholders. Such issues might be interpreted using the association of the public representations of social work that might be different from the practitioners' narratives—and different discourses that could be identified even amongst practitioners—as demonstrated in Theme 1. SRT describes such phenomena of social representations and social realities, some of which might be different from or contradictory to each other, as 'cognitive polyphasia' [40]. It is also worth examining whether the social representations of social work could be linked to the promotion of its education, including social investment in it, in the local context [41].

4.2. Comparing Pluralistic Discourses

Based on the findings, this section focuses on the significance of a comparative analysis of the social representations with multiple perspectives, including the ABC model of indigenous

social work. This study mainly compared discourses between Western-rooted professional social work and local social work practice in Sri Lanka as a case study country. Finally, this research suggests opportunities regarding international and diversified perspectives.

First, the findings discussed not only the social representations of Sri Lankan social work practitioners but also those of Western-rooted professional social work. From the viewpoint of the ABC model of indigenous social work [22,23], the interviewees' practices may correspond to the spectrum of Model B. This means that while this study discusses representations of local practices relevant to the sociocultural context in Sri Lanka, it can also assume that, to some extent, the participants' narratives likely interacted with Western-related representations or internationalisation in their social work. Indeed, their narratives on their practices were linked and sometimes contrasted with Western-rooted professional social work discourses. Therefore, an interpretation consistent with the ABC model would indicate a complex relation where practices that correspond to each model are neither completely separate from nor identical to each other. While this interpretation suggests that even in a world where globalisation will have inevitable effects with interdependency [42], individual social work practitioners might have diverse experiences with different narratives of local and indigenous practices and knowledge.

Second, however, the findings also suggest pluralistic social representations as well as representational dynamics amongst them. Although this study posits a hypothetical 'Western-rooted professional social work' [20,22,23], this is not a monolithic entity and rather could be only one of many social constructions or representations [32]. From this perspective, a discussion of this comparison could itself be positioned as a parallel discourse [14]. Paradoxically, for instance, the participants' narratives clearly described some alternative representations from a non-Western context by comparing the dominant discourses in Western-rooted professional social work. Moreover, these themes might also be discussed not as a simple dichotomy between Western and non-Western social work, but rather from more diversified perspectives. It is therefore worthwhile to discuss pluralistic social work discourses alongside power dynamics in the process of indigenisation and authentisation of certain discourses [31] and to engage in a dialogue between stakeholders [31,34].

Third, the findings emphasised the significance of the reflective (re)construction process of social representations of culturally relevant social work practices. An attempt at international collaboration and coproduction with multiple perspectives in this study could be proposed as a strategy to facilitate a discourse on social education and practice, considering their social representations, in Sri Lanka. In addition, efforts to explore Model C of indigenous social work, which involves the exchange of alternative discourses through international studies on Buddhist social work [19,20,22,23,30], would have implications for constructing social representations of social work regardless of its religious foundation. Scholars may explore—with caution—the development of social work practice and education through interactions and exchanges between internal (i.e., local) and external (i.e., international) perspectives. Since the risk of neocolonialism exists when external voices become the majority [2,15,31,43–45], a critical debate, both locally and globally based on local knowledge creation, is required to democratise social work.

4.3. Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, its sample size was quite small. Although it was an exploratory study, some bias might have been present in the demographics of the interviewees; for example, this study might not have considered grassroots practices by other types of social work practitioners. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sri Lankan domestic situation in 2022 caused many difficulties to continue this project, including interviews with more participants. Second, the research methodology also had limitations in that this study relied solely on data collected through online interviews because of the substantial restrictions on international research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the narratives obtained did not provide a comprehensive account of

social work practices in Sri Lanka. Different findings could have been obtained with the inclusion of, for example, ethnographic studies of participants' social work activities in the field. Third, there were theoretical limitations to the findings. This study did not examine the macrolevel process of familiarisation of social work and culturally relevant practices in Sri Lanka. A further discussion would require studies on related social phenomena and historical analysis. Finally, it was necessary to deepen discussions with stakeholders in Sri Lanka as well as scholars in interdisciplinary fields, including indigenous psychology [46]. In this regard, it would not be appropriate to generalise these findings to the entirety of Sri Lankan social work.

5. Conclusions

Using practitioners' narratives, this study examined the social representations of social work relevant to the Sri Lankan context. Despite several research challenges, the findings shed an exploratory light on the alternative social representations of culturally relevant social work based on the experiences and backgrounds of Sri Lankan practitioners, which have been inadequately described in literature. This study also provided some insights into the context of indigenous social work with discourses on decolonisation; indeed, the study would have benefited from a small but 'international' research collaboration team. This study's predominant recommendation for follow-up is for social work practitioners and researchers in various contexts to use its perspectives to promote social work research, such as social representations and discourses of social work across the globe, including Western-rooted professional social work and indigenous social work, on an equal or parallel basis in principle.

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