

Social Work with Children and Families: Challenges and Possibilities in the Neo-Liberal World

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Abstract

The 1970s saw social work as the rising star of the human service professions in the UK. Since then, the profession has been under attack from the media and politicians, this coinciding with changed ideological, political, economic and social circumstances. Practitioners' expertise and effectiveness were questioned and they were blamed for scandals, notably in relation to abused children. There have been changes in their organisation and practice whereby a profession based on knowledge, understanding and skills has become a so-called profession with managers now dominating what practitioners do. Relationship-based work has been transformed into a bureaucratic focus on the assessment of risk and rationing of resources and services, together with a more controlling, moral policing role. Focusing on developments in England in relation to children and families, I argue that, although what remains is a limited version of social work's possibilities, there remains scope for a radical/critical practice that involves working alongside users on the problems they face.

Keywords: Social work, children and families, neo-liberalism, deprofessionalisation, managerialism, radical/critical practice

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Introduction

Social work's roots lie in the socio-economic changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see [Payne, 2005b](#)). But it was after the welfare state was established during the post-war years of the social democratic consensus that it peaked. It was a product of a collectivist era when the state played a key role in ensuring the needs of citizens—health, housing, education, employment, social security and social services. Social workers helped provide the answer to remaining social problems in terms of direct work with individuals, families, groups and communities, as well as advocating and co-ordinating the work of other agencies to meet needs. Corresponding with the ideological move to the right and neo-liberalism, completed by the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979, the situation altered.

The New Right employed classical liberal critiques of state action, applying them to contemporary issues of economic and social policy, including preferring market to public sector approaches to welfare ([Rogowski, 2010](#)). Social workers eventually felt the brunt of this changed climate. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the introduction of care management led to deprofessionalisation concerning work with adults. Social work's decline accelerated during the New Labour years, particularly concerning practice with children and families. Despite talk of the 'Third Way', New Labour largely continued with neo-liberalism—a comment that can be applied to David Cameron's Conservative-led coalition. Consequences include the increased privatisation of, as well as the use of, the voluntary or third sector in the provision of services, as well as social workers being controlled by managers. Under New Labour, social work was largely sidelined and often became subsumed under 'social care', and its central role in relation to youth offending and mental health was taken away. Although a new social work degree was introduced along with post-qualifying courses, social work became ever more deprofessionalised and dominated by managerialism and the 'social work business' ([Harris, 2003](#)). Admittedly, following the Baby Peter tragedy (a baby who died at the hands of his carers in 2007), there was a resurgence of interest in social work as the [Social Work Task Force/SWTF \(2009\)](#) was established, a key recommendation being the establishment of a College of Social Work. Subsequently, the coalition government established a review of child protection to look at the bureaucracy faced by social workers ([Munro, 2011](#)). But, at a time of unprecedented public expenditure cuts, including the need to ensure that any expenditure arising from social work intervention is controlled, it is optimistic to expect too much.

In this paper, I pinpoint the ideological changes of the last thirty years being at the root of the social work's current crisis by focusing on some of the changes affecting work with children and families, including youth

offenders. Deprofessionalisation, managerialism and the ‘social work business’ are critically discussed prior to arguing that the reduced possibilities for a progressive, even radical/critical, practice need to be taken up.

From social democracy to neo-liberalism

The social democratic consensus spanned most of the traditional Labour and Conservative parties. This Keynesianism involved agreement on the nationalisation of major industries and planning their development so as to eliminate the ‘boom and bust’ of capitalism, together with the state needing to intervene to eliminate the causes of social inequities by creating the welfare state. Social problems that remained were explained in terms of an individual’s psychological make-up, which was susceptible to diagnosis and treatment by, among others, social workers. Notions of solidarity premised the view that the state could motivate national growth and well-being by the encouragement of social responsibility and the mutuality of social risk (George and Wilding, 1976).

As Labour and Conservative governments alternated into the 1970s, differences between them amounted to a little more or less government ownership and economic planning, with the welfare state remaining accepted. Within this consensus, social work was to become established as the *Seebohm Report (1968)* introduced local authority Social Services Departments to provide community-based and family-orientated services. However, this occurred as the consensus was to fall apart, culminating in the election of Thatcher, the seeds of which were laid earlier in the world economic crisis of 1973. Monetarism, the forerunner of today’s neo-liberalism, was the replacement of Keynesianism, a return to the free-market ideology that had been discarded since the 1930s Great Depression (see Ferguson, 2008).

The New Right argued for a complete break with Keynesianism because social democracy, including the welfare state and social work, was a major part of the problem. The rise and now domination of neo-liberalism, drawing on the work of Hayek and Friedman, is the result (see O’Brien and Penna, 1998). This ideology/political philosophy is based on the belief in individual freedom and of liberating individual entrepreneurial skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong property rights (Harvey, 2005). Its core idea is that free markets and free trade best achieve human well-being, despite the fact that they lead to vast increases in inequality along with anxiety and insecurity in many people’s lives (Ferguson, 2008; Garrett, 2009b). Nevertheless, the New Right achieved power utilising arguments about things such as the dependency culture on the back of a too-generous welfare state, militant trade unions holding employers and governments to ransom, and of there being a lack of law and order. They were also against state intervention and wanted to

reduce its activities, notably in the area of welfare, including self-serving professions such as social work, which were seen as encouraging welfare dependency.

As professional social work's emergence coincided with economic difficulties, together with a perceived growth in social disorder, this undermined the economic and social pillars of welfarism and the political consensus that supported it (Parton, 1996). For the left, it was seen as an element of class control, preserving the status quo of capitalist societies by controlling and regulating the working class (Bailey and Brake, 1975). However coherent the arguments were, they often failed to develop constructive alternatives, this unwittingly opening up a political space that was colonised by the New Right, which saw Social Services Departments as costly and inefficient. They wanted an increased emphasis on self-help, individual responsibility, 'choice' and freedom, as well as an extension of the commodification of social relations.

Tony Blair's general election victory in 1997 led many to believe major change would take place in terms of political ideology, and economic and social policy. However, the continuities were with the New Right and many of New Labour policies simply 'out Toried the Tories' (Powell, 2000, pp. 54; also see Powell, 2009) by consolidating the Conservatives' reforms so that social work was drawn deeper into managerial, market-orientated ways of thinking and practising (Harris and White, 2009b). Following the May 2010 General Election, we now have a coalition government implementing savage public expenditure cuts and attempts to 'get more for less' as the neo-liberal project continues.

Social work under the New Right, New Labour and the Conservative-led coalition

The organisational and practice changes to social work over recent decades have to be understood in terms of the aforementioned neo-liberal ideology/political philosophy. The premierships years of Thatcher (1979–90) and John Major (1990–97) saw a number of developments that impacted negatively. As alluded to, there was the introduction of care management for work with older people (see Philips, 1996), together with the removal of the social work qualification for probation (see Harris, 1996). The introduction of the Diploma of Social Work (DipSW) in 1989 allowed employers to shape social work education in their own interests (see Webb, 1996). The 1989 Children Act, despite its preventative and partnership ethos, confirmed a move from child welfare to child protection (Otway, 1996). No longer was child abuse a medico-social problem, with doctors and social workers the key professionals; instead, it was a socio-legal issue, with the police and courts taking an increasing role. Social workers became

investigators, with parents becoming objects of enquiry; the move was from therapy and welfare to surveillance and control (Howe, 1992).

Then, there was social work's 1980s success in relation to youth offending by diversion from the youth justice system and developing alternatives to incarceration (Thorpe *et al.*, 1980; Pitts, 1988; Blagg and Smith, 1989; Farrington and Langan, 1992). This was a key factor in the (then) reduction in youth crime and was arguably the most significant ever evidenced-based social work achievement. However, this was totally ignored, as, from 1991 onwards, 'populist punitiveness' (Bottoms, 1995) emerged. Politicians of all parties became increasingly punitive in their pronouncements and the 1991 Criminal Justice Act introduced court orders *not* to help young people who had social problems and had offended, but instead offering punishment and control in the community (Stewart *et al.*, 1994).

Perhaps surprisingly, under New Labour, social work fared even worse (Jordan, 2001). The 2000 Care Standards Act resulted in the Central Council for the Education and Training in *Social Work* being replaced by the General Social Care Council to regulate social work training and the social work and care workforce. The Social Care Institute for Excellence was established to identify and disseminate evidence-based practice, with the demise of the National Institute of *Social Work* (NISW) subsequently occurring. The obvious question is why the use of the word 'care' and the absence of 'social work' in these changes? Perhaps it showed the disdain with which New Labour held social work as well as the continued desire to cleanse and remove any oppositional possibilities to the neo-liberal project.

New agencies, including statutorily enforced partnerships and quangos, were created, all impacting negatively on social work. One example, together with the New Labour emphasis on inter-professional working, was the creation of Youth Offending Teams (see below). Then there was social work's absence from any real role in relation to Sure Start and the Children's Fund, preventative initiatives for younger and older children and their families, respectively. However, as in other areas of the public services, the overall result was work that was once the preserve of highly trained professionals, was increasingly carried out by less qualified support, outreach and other staff. Rather than this being done to ease the pressure on overworked social workers, the public were increasingly having to put up with cut-price services (Rogowski, 2010).

Significant changes followed the Victoria Climbié Inquiry (Laming, 2003) into the death of a young girl who died of injuries inflicted by her carers. *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) led to the 2004 Children Act, aimed at transforming children's services and ensuring every child had the support they needed, though offending and asylum-seeking children were largely conspicuous by their absence in such deliberations. The act sought to enhance the integration of health, education, social services/care and others, to avoid professionals working and

thinking within a so-called bunker-like mentality in their 'own' departments. This led to demise of Social Services Departments in 2006, with local government no longer providing a safe, supportive environment for the practice of social work. Indeed, one way forward was the establishment of pilot social work practices for looked after children (see [Le Grand, 2007](#)), with the coalition government now looking to extend this to social work with adults.

Despite the foregoing, many see two current developments as having positive possibilities, these being the beginnings of a College of Social Work and the Munro recommendations ([Munro, 2011](#)). Regarding the former, it is argued that a college would give a voice for, and raise the status of, social work, though one has only to recall that the British Association of Social Workers have had serious misgivings as to whether it will be genuinely independent of government. This is an important point, given that it is not long ago that NISW, which in some ways provided a similar role, was wound up. Then again, Munro argues that cutting bureaucracy will enable social workers to spend time with families, focusing on the needs of children, in turn allowing more scope to exercise professional judgement. In particular, the Hackney reclaiming social work model is enthusiastically referred to ([Munro, 2011](#), pp. 151–66), notwithstanding it is based on a management model developed by business consultants. There is also a call for 'more determined and robust management' ([Munro, 2011](#), pp. 5), but, given that many of the problems confronting social work have resulted from such imported private sector management styles, many remain to be convinced that practitioners will see a positive difference in day-to-day practice.

Social work practice with children and families

When it comes to the actuality of social work practice with children and families, New Labour's 'modernisation' and 'transformation' agenda (see [Garrett, 2003](#)) amounted to the increased proceduralisation, bureaucratisation and control of the social work task ([Lymbery and Butler, 2004](#)). For example, there is the increased documentation needed for looked after children and those subject to child protection plans. Then there was the introduction of the assessment framework and the 'electronic turn' ([Garrett, 2003, 2005](#)).

The standardised assessment framework ([Department of Health *et al.*, 2000](#)) aimed to move social work from focusing solely on child protection, instead introducing an initial assessment for all children in need aimed at developing an increased emphasis on family support. For complex and/or child protection cases, more in-depth core assessments were required. In essence, the assessment changes were an attempt to define out the indeterminacy, uncertainty and ambiguity in practice by introducing a

'techno-rationalist' method (Cleaver and Walker, 2004). Such an approach, however, fails to capture the fact that people's social problems can often be messy and not amenable to simplistic solutions (Smith, 2004). It also leads to an over-focus on information gathering, this coming at the expense of genuinely meeting the needs of children and families. The overall result is that practice largely consists of processing and classification rather than direct work with children and families (Allen and Stanley, 2011).

Admittedly, child protection should be located in the broader context of effective and comprehensive support for children and families at the neighbourhood and community levels—arguably something that the framework attempted (see Lonne *et al.*, 2008). However, a key criticism is that it had an uncritical acceptance of current economic and social arrangements, these being the unquestioned foundation for familial dynamics and interpersonal relationships (Garrett, 2009b). Initially, there was some flexibility for social workers to address this in that they could use their own narrative to describe and explain the reality of the problems and difficulties facing children and families but this was reduced by the aforementioned 'electronic turn'. Finally, following completion of the assessment forms, unless there are child protection concerns, in many cases, little actually occurs in terms of help and support. Often, families are simply told their parenting is 'good enough', perhaps with advice about other agencies (Rogowski, 2009). Such assessment processes, underpinned by the functional objective to manage risk and police the socially marginalised, seem to be used to screen out some needs, redefine them as someone else's problem, or say they were insufficiently serious to warrant intervention (Smith, 2008).

Furthermore, perhaps all governments have now given up thinking that social workers should work preventatively with children and families. This is because, in 2006, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was introduced so teachers, health visitors, children centre staff and others could use the framework to improve multidisciplinary working and provide preventative help to children. A key problem, however, is that the assessment aspect of the tool, like social work assessments, predominates rather than the provision of any additional services. As a result, many teachers and health visitors, for example, see it simply as a bureaucratic burden to be avoided. More fundamentally, social workers should be wary about encouraging this process because there is a real danger of hastening the demise of a social work identity. After all, essentially, CAFs are about what traditional, preventative social work consisted of, and a time when services were actually provided.

The 'electronic turn' utilises information and communication technologies (ICTs) that are increasingly fulfilling a crucial role in terms of technologising and marketising the public sector (Harris, 2003). The need for efficiency, effective targeting and ensuring the requirements of 'customers' dominate rather than those of service providers are the arguments put forward for the changes. But the Integrated Children's System shows how

disastrous the unthinking introduction of ICTs can be, with social workers having to spend most of their time simply in-putting data that the computer requires (Hall *et al.*, 2008; White *et al.*, 2010). How can social workers be expected to protect children when they are prevented from spending significant time with them or their families because of having to devote most of their time to the computer?

As for youth offending, New Labour's flagship 1998 Crime and Disorder Act continued with 'popular punitiveness'; this eventually widened to include anti-social behaviour, essentially the criminalising of nuisance (Squires, 2008). This 'get tough' approach is carried out by Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), the effect being correctional early intervention, deterrence and punishment, with the well-established policies and practices of the 1980s being abandoned (Goldson, 2000). Current coalition proposals to rebrand anti-social behaviour orders are unlikely to alter the get-tough response to youth offenders, nor will it alter the fact that practitioner discretion and autonomy have been eroded as managerial bureaucracy and targets continue to dominate.

Another concern with YOTs, as with social workers working too closely with the police in child protection, is the blurring of roles, resulting in social workers losing their professional identity. The unified identity of YOT practitioner has emerged, with the role and influence of social workers diminishing, along with the emphasis on the young person's wider social and economic context. In many youth justice texts (e.g. Smith, 2007; Stephenson *et al.*, 2007), social work is barely mentioned, indicating that, whereas social work *was* pivotal to dealing with youth offending, this is no longer the case. The most obvious manifestation of this is that services for young people in trouble have been separated from mainstream children and families social work services (Goldson, 2007). What remains of social work is increasingly tied to a system primarily concerned with the management of risk by controlling the behaviour of young people who represent a threat to the wider community (Smith, 2008).

Deprofessionalisation, managerialism and the social work business

The recent changes to social work's organisation and practice have amounted to deprofessionalisation because the overriding concerns have been with encouraging managerialism and the 'social work business'.

Although professionalism can be attacked from the political left (see Simpkin, 1983), a more enduring attack on professional or 'producer power' came from the New Right (George and Wilding, 1994), this being taken up by New Labour arguing that public services, including social work, had to become 'modernised' and responsible to the 'consumer'. At

a rhetorical level, this meant increased professionalism, significant developments being the introduction of the social work BA degree, along with social workers having to register with the General Social Care Council. On the other hand, the pre-occupation continues to be ensuring a reliable and compliant workforce who will simply work at the will of employers through managers (Dominelli, 2009; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). Essentially, the degree focuses on the practical knowledge social workers require (Department of Health, 2002) to the exclusion of the knowledge to be gleaned so as to combat social injustice. While academics welcomed the move to a graduate profession, they were certainly less enthused about the degree's increased reliance on 'mechanistic skills' and a 'competence model of education' (Orme *et al.*, 2009). Further, despite the emphasis on continuing professional development, the preoccupation with 'competence' is an example of it being a governmental tool for the regulatory control of professionals (Eraut, 1994).

Managerialism and the 'social work business' (see, e.g. Clarke and Newman, 1997; Clarke, 1998; Harris, 2003; Evans, 2009; Rogowski, 2010, 2011) have transformed the way welfare organisations carry out government policy—a change reflecting the move away from administering of public services to their management (Harris and White, 2009b). It stemmed from the neo-liberal ideology that the market was superior to the state and that public services needed to be managed much like the private sector. Public services, including social work, had to become more like businesses, functioning in a context as market-like as possible. The rhetoric referred to 'empowerment', 'choice' and 'needs-led assessment' but the consequence of these developments on practice was far-reaching. Social work was taken 'away from approaches that were therapeutic or which stressed the importance of casework, let alone anything more radical or progressive' (Harris, 2003, pp. 66). Moreover, the move to the managerial 'social work business' is anathema to social work values and its commitment to social justice and social change.

The changes outlined have had a negative impact on practice, simply because 'modernising agendas had served to undo good practice' (Doyle and Kennedy, 2009, pp. 51). Such agendas aim to quantify and justify service outcomes, often resulting in the policing function dominating practice objectives at the expense of other priorities, including the real needs of users (Stepney, 2006). Social workers are often so busy at 'getting (the current) the job' done that they are in danger of losing sight of what and who they are, including their professional uniqueness and style of intervention. The 'modernising' developments often simply lead to social workers having to work their way through a maze of new rules and procedures while simultaneously adhering to deadlines and targets to achieve organisational performance indicators.

Then again, when it comes to social work with youth offenders, the influence of managerialism is apparent in the ASSET form. Though aimed at

assisting decision making in practice, often it is simply a management tool to improve information gathering (Smith, 2007; Whyte, 2009). Such prescriptive form-filling along within a managerial and business ethos has led to the ‘zombification’ of social workers in youth justice (Pitts, 2001).

Radical/critical possibilities

In many ways, social workers have ‘been turned into unreflective people-processors by waves of managerialism over the last 30 years and, more recently, by the intertwining of managerialism with New Labour’s modernisation agenda’ (White, 2009, pp. 129). Such a situation is likely to continue under the coalition government, despite talk of reducing social work bureaucracy. This is because a major neo-liberal concern is with marketisation, reducing public expenditure and controlling social workers. If intervention occurs, it is supposed to be evidence-based but, as stated, in most cases, unless there are child protection concerns, little is offered. Interventions that do occur are usually of a controlling, authoritarian nature, amounting to users being told to change their behaviour and lifestyles or face the consequences, with losing one’s children being possible.

Despite the foregoing, there are those from a radical/critical perspective who manage to retain a sense of optimism: Garrett (2003, 2009b) focuses on the remaking or transforming of social work with children and families; Ferguson (2008; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009) wants to reclaim social work together with reasserting a radical approach; and Jordan (2007, 2008, 2010) looks at social work and well-being.

Remaking and transforming social work

Garrett (2003, 2009b) provides a critical account of the changes afflicting social work with children and families as a result of neo-liberal rationality. However, although neo-liberalism is the dominant ‘common sense’ or ideology, it contains flaws and inconsistencies and, thus, there are opportunities. For instance, whereas the role of the state is to produce conditions conducive to neo-liberalism, included are spaces for potential opposition. Often, neo-liberals falter because they must engage with ingrained cultures that, because they are not in tune with neo-liberal ‘common sense’, generate resistance. Social workers often have a loyalty to the practices and norms of their discipline as well as what amounts to the forced-upon practices and norms of the market. The resulting tension between a value base reflected in a humanistic code of ethics can lead to opposition to the privatising of services, together with the development of counter strategies. Garrett (2009b) goes on to refer to Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony’, with the emphasis on words and discursive struggle being linked to more orthodox

politics based on groups such as political parties, trade unions, professional associations and social groups, where it is possible to create counter-hegemonic strategies aimed at social change.

At a less theoretical level, the London borough of Haringey's case of Baby Peter opened up spaces for a more progressive debate about social work for children and families (Garrett, 2009a). First, attention began to be focused on Ofsted, which had previously approved of services there. It had relied too much on quantitative data, on how many forms had been filled in within the specified timescale, and not enough on the underlying quality of service provision. Second, there was an increased public awareness about the electronic recording system social workers were forced to use, including the inordinate amount of social work time spent on computers. As indicated earlier, and despite my element of cynicism, Munro (2011) advocates reducing social work bureaucracy. Third, there was a more sensible debate about what could and could not be achieved by social workers, namely that, although generally, the child protection system works well (Smith, 2004; Pritchard and Williams, 2010), risk and child deaths cannot be *totally* eliminated. Fourth, attention was focused on how neo-liberal policies, reflected in unfilled vacancies, agency staff and high staff turnover, were impacting on the ability of social workers to deliver effective services. The subsequent SWTF report (2009) echoed much of the foregoing, thereby calling into question New Labour's 'modernisation' agenda.

Reclaiming social work

Ferguson (2008; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009) has similar concerns relating to the dominance of neo-liberalism, how it has changed social work, why the profession should be reclaimed and why a radical/critical practice still retains its relevance. He takes serious issue with developments effecting social work as a result of managerialism, competition and marketisation. The increased bureaucracy, being care managers and rationers of resources, and ever more having to be the moral police, all contribute to a profound sense of dissatisfaction among social workers. However, with this dissatisfaction, the seeds of resistance are sown, this being fuelled and strengthened by the emergence of two types of social movements—social welfare and anti-globalisation/capitalist. Social welfare movements such as disability and mental health users have challenged traditional models of social work and ways of delivering services while also being at the forefront of resisting attempts to reduce welfare spending. The anti-globalisation movement is against the neo-liberal concern with the unrestricted accumulation of wealth and exploitation of people and the planet, while also reflecting social work values of respect and social justice. Such factors together with

a re-engagement with a radical/critical practice provide social work with 'resources for hope' (Batsleer and Humphries, 2000).

Radical/critical practice itself draws on Marxist thought and critical theory more generally (see Fook, 2002), with problems confronting people seen as social and structural rather than individual, and arising from class, race, gender and other oppressions (Rogowski, 2008). The focus is on political action and social change, while simultaneously addressing the immediate needs of individuals. It involves anti-racist/sexist and anti-oppressive/discriminatory perspectives along with empowerment and advocacy (Payne, 2005a). It is about a better world simply because it is impossible to envisage an inclusionary neo-liberal/capitalist world. Although group and community-orientated strategies of the past (see, for example, chapter 3 in Rogowski, 2010) are often no longer available, social workers can pursue:

radical ideas in practice ... in their individual work with service users, through the relationships they build with them, the attention they pay to their needs and rights and in their own personal recognition of the oppression and discrimination they face (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009, pp. 75).

Social work, welfare and well-being

Jordan (2007, 2008, 2010), never comfortable with the market mentality of neo-liberalism, eschews the perspective of accountants, managers and government ministers, re-emphasising social work concerns with relationships and feelings that are not vague, woolly concepts. He argues that social work sits well with a happiness and well-being agenda that sees a future consisting of environmental awareness, a revival of respect and mutuality among ethnic diversity, and a vision of our collective quality of life. A concern for happiness and well-being is also at odds with New Labour's over-regulation of welfare and social relations, even to the extent of social work being a tool of oppression (Jordan, 2010). During my life, we have witnessed a move from a collectivist welfare state to a competitive individualist society in which everyone takes responsibility for themselves. If individuals cannot do this, they are increasingly dealt with in authoritarian ways. What have been lost are collective measures for social protection, which have been sacrificed in order to achieve the goals of more flexible market-orientated systems and people. This may have helped the UK to adapt to the demands of globalisation, but it has also led to a diminution in qualities such as mutual respect, acceptance and consideration of others.

Social work is far more than the neo-liberal preoccupation of being able to deliver services to individuals whose well-being is taken to lie in a choice of alternative suppliers or as offering interventions to target specific behaviours. This implies that services are one-off experiences that can be consumed one after another and overlooks the value

generated by the ‘interpersonal economy’ (Jordan, 2007). Rather, social work comprises interactions involving emotions such as empathy, trust and respect, these being the mechanisms that produce much of the value of social work.

Practice examples

When considering the work of Garrett, Ferguson and Jordan, some overburdened practitioners argue that, at a theoretical level, their views are all well and good, but how do you implement such ideas in day-to-day practice? This arises because there can be a gap between radical/critical theory and the practice. Even so, I maintain that there are opportunities and these need to be utilised. In particular, it is important to avoid seeing social work in terms of simply moral policing, the social control aspect, with instead more emphasis being given to the caring side of social work—one that is concerned with social justice.

Nowadays, radical/critical practice may have to amount to ‘quiet challenges’ and resistance to managerial and business-orientated discourses and practices (White, 2009), and a number of examples spring to mind. For instance, one can mystify or conceal knowledge of users in order to acquire resources, this amounting to the manipulation of knowledge and information on their behalf. Or, again, one could delay or exaggerate paperwork or assessment plans so that managers are ‘forced’ into taking a particular course of action. Ignoring, bending or re-interpreting rules and procedures also has a role to play. It can amount to ‘deviant social work’—small-scale acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception and sabotage aimed at maximising help and support to vulnerable people (Carey and Foster, 2011). Such ‘quiet challenges’ are often hidden and scattered throughout practice. When it comes to specific cases, let us look at what a radical/critical practice might entail.

First, disaffected teenage young people can be hard to reach and engage with. A social worker might be faced with a fifteen-year-old young man with a disrupted care background. He is challenging in terms of not going to school, being disruptive when there and often goes missing from home. Drug and alcohol abuse are other issues. He refuses to engage with social workers because, at the instigation of managers, they keep changing or his case is closed. Faced with this, it is important that the young man’s views are fully reflected in the various assessment and other reports, together with the need for practitioners to persevere, be available, honest and consistent in their dealings with him. Admittedly, this can be a difficult task, given that managers want to process cases as speedily, and with as little recourse to the public purse, as possible. But attempts can be successful, this resonating with arguments about the importance of relationship-based practice (Ruch *et al.*, 2010).

A second example is that of a teenage girl who is continually absconding, staying out overnight, sometimes for days at a time. She associates with other girls who then 'hang around' with or are targeted by teenage and older young men who befriend and sexually exploit them. Again, in reports written for child exploitation meetings, instead of focusing on inadequate parenting, in effect blaming often single-parent mothers doing their best in difficult circumstances, the practitioner could advocate for a more progressive response such as group work with the young woman concerned and her female friends, even though few social workers are currently allowed to use this method. This could, utilising an empowering model (e.g. Mullender and Ward, 1991), focus on the issues and concerns but with an emphasis on the young women learning from each other's experiences. These experiences could be related to current society, which, despite changes influenced by feminist thought, is still dominated by men.

In relation to child protection, as a result of Victoria Climbié and Baby Peter, it is easy for practitioners to fall into the trap of seeing themselves solely as the 'hard cops' of the welfare state. This because of the role they have been forced into in the current neo-liberal world, often merely intrusively asking questions, gathering information and, in so doing, inspecting families' homes and lifestyles. In many cases, this is carried out *not* with the aim of finding out what help and support are needed to provide reasonable care of the children, but rather with a view to defending the organisation's reputation if things go wrong. Instead of such defensive practice, social workers should work with children and families on the basis that they are potential allies in dealing with the issues under consideration. In a case of neglect (see Taylor and Daniel, 2005), for instance, you could have children arriving at school late or not at all, often ill-clad and hungry, because their single-parent mother is often hung-over from repeated alcohol abuse and has been unable to get up. Home conditions could be another concern. A neo-liberal social work approach would be simply to tell her to change her lifestyle or face the consequences of child protection procedures and care proceedings. A more critical social work approach, however, would work on the issues of concern but in a more collaborative/partnership-orientated way by listening to and, wherever possible, acting on, the mother's and children's view of the situation. This includes spending time with the family, sympathetically delving into the reasons for her drinking, her and her children's worries and anxieties, and so on. Financial and housing problems, for example, might be factors. Linking the family members with and, if necessary, accompanying them to, appropriate local groups and agencies dealing with their particular issues might be needed. Advocating on behalf of their situation might also be required. All this takes time, and could well be frowned upon by managers who merely want to quickly process such cases, but, nonetheless, the resilient practitioner will find ways round this and create some space.

Finally, ‘old’ radical social work concerns with politicisation and conscientisation, for example, can still play a part. As noted, it may be difficult to engage in some of the potentially radical/critical community/group-work initiatives of the past. But, and despite the advent of postmodernism, which challenges the basis of over-arching ‘truths’, it is still possible to work with users on an individual basis with the aim of developing an understanding of the underlying causes of the problems and difficulties they face, namely the neo-liberal system we currently live in.

As well as practitioners working with users in progressive, radical/critical ways, there is also a role for collective action. This means engaging with the British Association of Social Workers and the nascent College of Social Work, for example, so as to ensure a stronger professional identity, as well as the Social Work Action Network (a radical, campaigning organisation of social workers, students, academics, users and carers) to develop strategies to resist managerialism. Trade unions can and do assist in such processes. Broader social groupings also have roles to play. The anti-globalisation movement is significant because of its ability to bring together disparate groups—trade unionists, environmentalists, peace campaigners, feminists, socialists and many others—to challenge the neo-liberal world. It amounts to ‘unity in diversity’ (Leonard, 1997, pp. 177) and points to some ways forward in challenging neo-liberal orthodoxy. Working individually in one’s day-to-day practice, as well as collectively, means social work can work towards a different, more just and equal world, not least because more equal societies are better for everyone (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

Conclusion

By the end of the 1990s, the welfare state was no longer regarded by neo-liberals as aiding social solidarity, instead being a means to provide consumers with tailored, cost-effective services. New Labour embraced the new welfare culture, envisaging a modernised welfare state and its social workers as having to work with the grain of market imperatives (Page, 2009). Such a view is being developed and taken further by the Conservative-led coalition. Already, we have seen backtracking in relation to the SWTF’s (2009) proposals in relation to a Master’s degree qualification, together with a General Social Work Council, which was proposed towards the end of New Labour’s term of office. There are also the doubts about the College of Social Work and the Munro proposals, so the priority, at the instigation of managers and politicians, remains likely to be social workers implementing ‘getting more for less’ policies as state services are cut. This will entail the continued bureaucratic emphasis aimed at rationing resources and risk assessment. Such a scenario lends itself to a critical pessimism because of the key problem that confronts social work.

All three major political parties in England, along with most of the governments and the main political parties in the developed (and increasingly the developing) world, accept a consensus seeing neo-liberalism (or, in more overtly Marxist terms, global capitalism) as the only way forward. Despite the global recession of 2008–10, the belief in free markets and limited state intervention remains intact to the extent that the very the existence of social work as a profession is threatened. The caring and supportive side of state social work does not fit in with the neo-liberal ideology, which emphasises people having to take responsibility for their own lives, supported by family, friends, local community and voluntary organisations where necessary—the so-called ‘Big Society’. Perhaps all that can be expected over the coming years is that social workers will become even more the acceptable face of the state in saying that no or minimal services can be offered. People will be expected to ‘stand on their own feet’, with social workers only intervening if people become a danger to themselves or others, and then in an authoritarian way. But, surely all is not lost.

I take a more optimistic view of future possibilities for social work, while acknowledging the pitfalls (Rogowski, 2010). It is possible to utilise the space opened up by the death of Baby Peter, reclaim social work and make the most of the opportunities provided by the current emphasis on happiness and well-being. There may be many challenges and difficulties, but spaces remain as the practice examples outlined indicate. This has to be complemented by acting collectively so as to ensure that there is resistance to the neo-liberal world. Social workers must move beyond being competent ‘technicians’ towards a broader concept of what is professional, namely an acknowledgement that knowledge and understanding are required in order to challenge current managerial obstacles and practices. This knowledge and understanding points towards the structural connections that penetrate the surface of what social workers encounter on a daily basis and involve locating users’ difficulties and possible solutions within a wider social context.

When it comes to the ‘modernisation’ and ‘transformation’ of social work, despite the *intensification* of work and the *individualisation* of users, the *inconvenience* of, albeit reduced, discretion will hopefully endure (Harris and White, 2009a). A niche can be found for some progressive, even radical/critical possibilities.

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