The state, professionalisation and social work

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Introduction

To do social work in capitalist, imperialist countries is to occupy a place of pain and doubt (Rossiter, 2001: 1). It would seem that the ambiguity inherent within social work practice generally has, perhaps expectedly, crossed over into the arguments concerning its professionalisation. This discussion attempts to introduce a number of these debates. First I discuss professionalisation from a radical and critical perspective and then study the alliance professions have with the state and the difficulty the ambiguous nature of this relationship may represent to client centred social work practice. The impacts of political and economic influences are discussed, with a number of current social work practice examples provided.

The professions and the state

Professionalisation refers to the process through which an occupation acquires the traits associated with the status of a profession or ‘the socialisation process by which individuals are drawn into the institutional context of a particular occupation (Jones, 1978: 61, cited in Barretta-Herman, 1993: 35).

There seems to be a number of different arguments for and against the professionalisation of social work. Robyn Corrigan (2000) in her position paper on the statutory registration of social workers states that a key point for registration is the protection of the public from bad social work practice.

The basic argument for the statutory registration is to increase the protection of the public by ensuring that minimum standards of social work practice and consistent standards of service for clients would exist amongst social work practitioners (Corrigan, 2000: 3).

While statutory registration is not exactly professionalisation it would seem that professional status would be a natural progression once registration is achieved.

Another argument for professionalisation is that the increased status and power of a profession would elevate social work’s position in society, increasing its authority and therefore ability to argue on behalf of the oppressed communities it seeks to serve.

The challenge for social workers is to remain true to the dual commitment of the social work task by using power and status of increased professionalisation to improve services to clients and to enhance social justice (Barretta-Herman, 1993: 35).

According to Ernest Greenwood (1965: 10) social work has already acquired professional standing within the community as it has what he describes as the five distinguishing attributes of a profession, ‘systematic theory, community sanction, authority, an ethical code and a professional culture’ (cited in Barretta-Herman, 1993: 31).

There are however a number of insightful and precautionary arguments warning against the speedy professionalisation of social work without further considerable discussion and debate especially within social work itself: ‘...professions represent the winners in the societal conflict for power and control’ (Barretta-Herman, 1993: 31).
Social policies, as social constructions, can, through state legitimation, further the interests of the dominant forces in society. The state is an embodiment of the interests of the dominant class. Governments have the power to manipulate the relative distribution of welfare through their fiscal policies. The social relations which underlie economic life ensure that the prevailing distribution of power and the market system will not be compromised.

…the state is involved in the social construction and distribution of needs and dependencies - with the social production of inequality through the development and use of social institutions and groups which affect the distribution of resources, status and power between different individuals and groups in society (Herewini, 1993: 29).

Radical and critical theorists question the power of the state and its motives for granting an occupation professional status. They argue that the state does not grant the power, status and privileges of professionalisation without expecting something in return.

…a state does not permit the transfer of power to a professional group…without assurance that ‘by their social standing or through their work, they help to support and maintain and strengthen the existing economic, social and political order (Wilding, 1982: 12, cited in Barretta-Herman, 1993: 32).

Wilding further argues that:

…the professions are not an unimportant part of the state machine. They operate essentially as a force for social control in its broadest sense…to locate the causes of delinquency and deviance safely within the individual rather than in the economic and social system (ibid, Wilding, 1982: 16).

Radical and critical theorists are particularly concerned with the ambiguous nature of social work’s potential professionalisation, its relationship to the state, and the effects this alliance will have on the social action and social change components of social work. Radical theorists ‘…criticise the growth of professionalisation in social work as deflecting social work from its commitment to social action by emphasising singular interventions based on individual pathological explanations for social problems’ (Galper, 1980: 10, cited in Barretta-Herman, 1993: 32). Galper goes on to argue that radical social work is ‘…inherently socialist and inherently critical of an alliance with the state as an obligatory precondition of professional status’ (1980: 10).

Greenwood (1988:65) states that ‘…the professionalisation of social work could have disastrous secondary effects on the pursuit of social work’s dual commitment to individual and social change’, and that ‘elitism and mono-culturalism’ will be the inevitable result of professionalisation (cited in Barretta-Herman, 1993: 31).

Finally Heraud (1977: 213) also warns that ‘…as social work becomes more accepted by society, and has more resources and manpower invested in it, it is likely to become more wedded to the status quo and thus may be forced into a conservative or compliant stance.’

It would seem from the issues explored so far that the professionalisation of social work might potentially threaten its ability to respond to the wider societal causes of oppression, especially when those causes involve the state.

**Political influences and centralised case management**

The disastrous secondary effects mentioned by Greenwood can perhaps already be seen in the practice of some, mainly statutory, agencies. However Barbour (1991: 17) states that it ‘…is in some ways artificial to try to separate political and practice influences, as government social work practice will always be steered towards the politically expedient and least expensive option.’

Brown (2000: 10) comments on the global economic and political influences of the latter part of the 20th Century which led to ‘…sweeping changes in the world economic sys-
tems...powerful technological revolutions have an historical equivalent in the industrial revolution’.

These global trends had major effects on our country both politically and economically. The election of the fourth Labour Government in 1984...began a rapid process of economic liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation of formally State-owned businesses...New Zealand followed the Thatcherist example...the strong emphasis on free market systems changed New Zealand from a protected, highly regulated economy to a very open and deregulated one. This resulted in a period of high unemployment as large numbers of jobs became redundant (Brown, 2000: 11).

Sue Hanna (1999:14) comments that:

...The political situation since 1984 has seen a contractual and residual model of social service provision replace the largely institutional form of social welfare which traditionally represented the welfare state. The imposition of this new model, characterised by notions of privatisation, contestability, user pays, selectivity and individual responsibility has resulted in, at best, an alternative formulation of welfare and, at worst, a complete retrenchment in social services provision.

Connolly and Rathgen (2000:15) point out the difficulty in committing to social work’s dual focus under such conditions. ‘The restructured economy of the 1980s engendered a market-driven social services environment. Within this increasingly complex area the mission of social justice rests uneasily.’

Howe (1994:529) comments that practice in the 1990s is less likely to ask ‘why’ than who’ ‘what’ ‘when’ and ‘how many’.

The social worker’s practices are more likely to be task-orientated and performance related, quantifiable and measurable, product-minded and subject to quality controls. Procedure manuals and lists of competencies define more and more what social workers should do and how they must do it (cited in Dearsley, 2000).

Dearsley goes on to say that: ‘This environment including the contracting culture (an international phenomenon) could create factory-like conditions for social work’ (p. 9).

This turbulent political climate, the massive changes and the ‘rolling back’ of the welfare state has had a huge effect on the social work profession and the way in which social work is performed.

Substantial structural changes over the past four decades, including the rise of globalisation and market driven approaches to the management of human services, already threaten the continuation of critical practice traditions in social work. Indeed, some critical social workers have declared the halcyon days of activist practice have now passed (Healy, 2001: 1).

These factory-like conditions, budget driven agendas and the endless form filling became apparent to me on both my placement experiences but in particular my second placement within a major health service.

The first few hours of my very first day were spent in a training session provided by the Needs Assessment Team regarding the type of information required from the social worker for those elderly patients (65 years and over) needing long-term, state-funded residential care. Because of changes and cutbacks in health spending the criteria for funding allocation from the Ministry of Health for this particular age group had become much more stringent. Although the Needs Assessment Team tried to make it sound very focused around the well-being of the client, my analysis of the situation was that to save the Government money the patient would not qualify for any assistance until all family and community support (being free or cheaper) had been completely exhausted. The Ministry of Health had devised a seven page funding application form for the social worker to fill out on behalf of and in conjunction with the client/family.

I was completely abbergasted and remember looking around the room of experienced, practising social workers for some kind of guiding clue as to whether this was a ‘normal’
part of their jobs or not. The student in me needed to gauge their reaction and I was even more flabbergasted to see that outwardly no one seemed very surprised or upset at all. They had obviously been through this type of training before. Maybe it was a sign of my naivety but a sudden realisation hit me like a ton of bricks, I was just a glorified WINZ worker. For me this was morally abhorrent not only because of the oppressive treatment I had personally received from such a system but because in my eyes I had now become a part of that same oppressive system.

Hilary Searing (2002) states that ‘Social workers have always had to deal with the impact of structural disadvantage on individuals and families ie. with poverty, racism and other oppressions. Now social work itself is being seen as another form of oppression of the working class.’

This was definitely not what I expected from my role as a social worker and definitely not why I took up social work training. Perhaps once again this was due to my naivety and idealism, even unrealistic views of what I believed social work to be.

These idealistic and perhaps misunderstood expectations of social work and the role of a social worker are also highlighted by the research of Pam Smith (2001), who in 1997 conducted a study with a group of CYFS staff ‘…to examine social workers’ expectations and aspirations of their statutory role’ and to see whether ‘…the social control model was understood and reflected in the social workers’ expectations when they began work at CYFS’ (Smith, 2001: 22).

When asked, ‘if working for a statutory organisation fulfilled their expectation of the social work role’, approximately half of the respondents answered negatively. Comments on the reason why included: too many administration tasks including computer data input, resourcing and monetary restrictions; reactive instead of proactive work; policy changes including New Right Ideology, not always in the client’s best interests; too narrow a focus; State Sector Act; shifting of the threshold; aiming for crisis management and containment; problems are complex and ingrained (Smith, 2001: 23).

The situation I experienced within this health service is also described by Karen Postle (2002) in an article that draws on research of care managers in the social services field working with older people. She argues that the position of care managers has become ‘uncertain’ and ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘…exacerbated by changes since the inception of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990’ (2002). ‘Some staff...saw the work as finance-driven with others likening their job to working for the Department of Social Security, where the focus is form completion for means-tested benefits’ (Postle, 2002: 341).

Postle goes on to mention that care managers found it very difficult to deal with the ‘...ambiguous position of closeness to bring about change, yet distance caused by dealing with an essentially bureaucratic financial process...’ (p. 341).

In response to this ambiguous situation Hillary Searing comments:
Social workers in the social care field have been redesignated as ‘care managers’ and reduced to the role of mediator between the client and organisation. In addition, the prevailing ideology of managerialism has obscured the high level of poverty and deprivation of service users and seriously undermined social work values (Searing, 2002).

**Conclusion**

During its history social work has developed a dual focus. First, to enable and empower individuals, families, groups and communities to find their own solutions to the issues and problems that beset them; secondly to learn from specific instances of need, to inform society
at large about the injustices in its midst, and to engage in action to change the structures of society that create and perpetrate injustice (NZASW Code of Ethics: 1).

The arguments presented in this discussion illustrate the conflict and tensions inherent in social work practice, its professionalisation, political influences and the combined effects these will and are having on current social work practice.

There are no easy answers to these dilemmas, however part of being able to practise with integrity and from a ‘comfortable space’ within these tensions is to be aware of them in the first place. The ability to see the ‘big picture’ the social circumstances and societal causes of individual problems, is indeed the foundation of true social work and a discipline in its own right.

There is more to social work than simply conforming to, and fitting in with, the organisation and the wider environment. The ability to show a certain independence of thinking is what makes the social worker ‘professional’ (Searing, 2002).

References


