
The determination of ‘problem’

Sonia Hibbs

Ko Maua Toku maunga tapu

Ko Ngati Ranginui raua ko Ngaiterangi oku iwi

Ko Sonia Hibbs töku ingoa

Ki te taha o töku matua tuturu, he Ngati Pakeha ia, kei Otumoetai tona käinga noho, ko Eddie Hibbs tona ingoa.

Ki te taha o töku matua whāngai, ko Ngati Ranginui te iwi, ko Pirirakau te hapü, ko Reg Borell tona ingoa.

Ki te taha o töku whaea, e toru nga whanau. Te whanau tuturu, ko te whanau Parkinson no Opotiki me te whanau Maka no Kaihau. Ko te whanau whāngai tuatahi o töku whaea, ko te whanau Tutahi no Maungatapu, ko Ngarino Tomika Tutahi töku koraua. Ko te whanau tuarua ko Miss Elizabeth Birley töku kuia, i Hairini tona käinga noho i nga wa o mua. Ko Marlene Borell toku whaea

Noreira ka mihi aroha ki o Mauao me nga wai o Tauranga Moana, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena ra tatou katoa.

The kind of definition a problem is given, and by whom will, in a large measure determine the actions taken to solve it (Wolock and Horowitz, 1984: 531).

Introduction

An issue is defined as a problem by the context in which it takes place. No issue or ‘problem’ stands alone; it is only considered a problem because it does not sit comfortably within the surrounding dominant context. This context has been created by those in power, who retain this power by also being the definers of ‘problems’.

Paraire Huata comments that: ‘Whoever has the power of definition, the power to define what something means, will always have the power’ (pers. comm., 26.8.02).

Those in power use the ‘problem’ definition as a means of negating potential threats while at the same time managing and controlling difference (Scott, pers. comm., 15 August 02). It follows then that any issue, situation, person and/or group in society that threatens the dominant context and therefore the dominant group, will be defined by them as ‘problems’.

To illustrate this argument and as an example of the power of context to define problems I shall discuss colonisation; in particular two very different value systems in terms of land and the environment. The role of discourse in relation to problem definition and the promotion of the dominant context is then outlined. Next the findings of Puaoteata are discussed as an example of the power context has to significantly define the experiences of those it defines as or having problems. The dangers of exclusion from problem and solution definition are also highlighted by this example. Next I study the ‘culture’ of social work, the cultural assumptions it makes, its relationship to the dominant context and the influence this relationship has on social work practice. Finally I discuss my practice principles from my perspective as a Maori who is a social worker.

Example / colonisation

Traditionally, Maori view the land or whenua as being the ancient mother, Papatuaanuku, and the sky, Ranginui, the ancient father. All the creatures and natural elements of the world,

including humans, are related. We are interconnected because we share whakapapa (Pere, 1997; Barlow, 1994; Patterson, 2000). John Bradley (1995: 27) describes the individual as being 'part of a whanau which was inclusive of all things in heaven and on earth.'

Salmond (1991: 39) refers to this relationship as a 'unity of being ... which was expressed in a language of common descent.'

In terms of the environment, Huata comments:

Our relationship with our environment was more meaningful in its potency. We were much more attuned to nature and had a greater sensitivity to how people interacted not only with themselves but also with each other and the environment. It was a very harmonious relationship (pers. comm., 2002).

Implicit within this relationship is the notion of reciprocity (Ruwhiu 1995: 23); asking permission before taking; only taking what you need and always giving something back in return. Maori lived collectively in their whanau and or hapu groups; land and food resources being held, shared and used communally (Bourassa and Strong, 1998: 5).

In terms of the ownership of land, Jack Lee (1993: 2) comments that Maori 'had no place in their thinking for the disposal of land as an item of trade'. Eddie Durie goes on to say that 'One did not own land. One belonged to the land' (cited in Patterson, 2000: 17) or as Ella Henry puts it 'the land owns us' (29.8.02, pers. comm.). These values however were at complete odds with those of the colonists, especially in relation to the 'ownership' of land and the indiscriminate use of nature.

Dominance by numbers has meant our current context has been defined and shaped by the predominant culture according to its world view and western ideology. At the heart of this ideology are the capitalist values of individualism, economic wealth and growth, profit, production, property ownership (Hooker, 1996) and the commodifying of land and nature (Jackson, 2002).

Mead (1998) argues: '...it's a neo liberal ideology, it's a model of development that says everything in the world is up for grabs. Then the next thing is to assert ownership over every single resource that exists within that country.'

These separate world views illustrate two very different contexts, one believing that humans are subject to the natural and esoteric dimension (Ruwhiu, 1995:23) and the other believing that they are the masters of it.

Because Maori cultural values did not sit comfortably within the dominant context these values were then defined as problems, according to that context. The Treaty of Waitangi, legislation requiring individualised ownership of once communally held land and The Native Land Court are a few examples of the ways in which the predominant culture proceeded to control and manage the 'problem'.

It is within this world view and according to this context that 'problems' are now defined.

Discourse

The discourse of the predominant culture is used as a means of not only disseminating and promoting their world view but also of describing and defining 'problems', as they believe them to be.

Thomas comments that an objective of colonial discourse is 'to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.' (cited in Thomas, 1994: 40).

The degenerate types are the definition of the 'problem' and systems of administration and instruction are the means by which the problem is negated, managed and controlled.

This discourse comes from a dominant position of power and privilege and therefore is far from being neutral. Smith and Taki (1995: 17) comment that 'Implicit in the language they use are particular ways of seeing the world. The language assumes that Pakeha themselves are the centre of the universe and that we are peripheral to this world view's (p. 17).

Puao-te-ata-tu

The power of context, discourse and definition has meant that the predominant culture has the ability to significantly define the experiences of Maori and other less powerful or 'problem' groups in society. 'Problems' in general and Maori 'problems' in particular have been defined accordingly. Herewini (1993: 27) states that '...any conventional definition of need can be seen to reflect the dominant cultural values and moral judgement' and that 'perceptions of social problems differ, depending on who is determining the need.'

However, what is of particular concern is that after defining and ascribing the 'problem' the dominant culture then proceeds to define and ascribe the 'solution'.

John Rangihau captures the injustice and frustration felt by many Maori.

...I am constantly reminded of the number of Pakeha people who know better than I do what is good for me. It is about time we were allowed to think for ourselves and to say which things we want and why we want them. And to say that we want to do things for our reasons and not the reasons set down by Pakeha experts (Rangihau, 1975: 232).

The findings of Puao-te-ata-tu are an example of how exclusion from context, problem and solution definition can go on to cause 'major problems' in the lives of the particular group being defined. Puao-te-ata-tu states that the history of New Zealand since colonisation '...has been the history of institutional decisions being made for, rather than by, Maori people. Key decisions on education, justice and social welfare, for example, have been made with little consultation with Maori people' (p. 18). And that changes made to statutes have not always been in the best interests of Maori. 'Indeed some of the changes went directly against Maori customary preference.' (ibid: 7).

Historically, professionals have determined needs, without consulting the consumers of the service (Herewini, 1993: 27), however it is the imposed 'solutions' that usually go on to create 'real problems' for that particular group.

The culture of social work

'Social work practice is a reflection of the dominant culture.' (Huata, pers. comm. 30.8.02) Social work has its roots in the western communities of Europe and North America (ANZASW, 1993: 1). It has developed largely as a response to poverty created by the process of industrialisation and urbanisation. Social work is a means of helping people to survive in an economy and a society dominated by industrial work (Botsman, 2001). In other words social work is a product of the world view and capitalist values described earlier.

Heraud (1997: 212) states that:

...social work has been employed as one of the means of mitigating the worst effects of a capitalist market economy and softening the blows delivered to those who have 'failed' by a society dominated by profit and property owning.

This dominant context has given birth to social work and it is within this context that the social work task takes place. However, as mentioned in my introduction it is also this context that has the power of definition in terms of 'problems' and 'solutions'. What further complicates the situation, and which is of concern to many social workers, is that it is due to this context that problems such as poverty and unemployment have arisen in the first place.

Is social work then colluding with this cycle? Is social work supporting and reinforcing the structures and systems that create those problems?

To illustrate this point Heraud goes on to say:

...social work agencies have philosophies little different from the past, and measure 'success' by the extent to which clients have been helped to achieve the minimum standards necessary in a market-dominated economy. Thus while confronting the failures, social work acts as a bridge back into a race which most of its clients cannot hope to win (ibid).

What also needs to be discussed in terms of context is the 'dual focus' of social work. Is social work an agent of social control, reinforcing the values of the dominant context? Or is social work an agent for social change, working towards challenging and changing the dominant context?

Hunt argues strongly that traditional social work '...is a form of social control rather than social change, it is manipulative, profoundly conservative, it colludes with the injustice of a divided and profoundly unequal society' (Hunt, 1978: 10, cited in Barretta-Herman, 1993: 30).

The ANZASW Code of Ethics admits to social work playing a '...significant role in the colonisation process' (1993: 1). And of the '...imposing of solutions rather than enabling and empowering people to take charge of their own lives in the context of their own values and aspirations' (ibid). The history of social work in this country, or indeed any country, will reveal these statements to be true (see Margolin, 1997).

The following quote from Hyslop (1997: 59) illustrates the power and ability of the dominant context to define problems. It also highlights the imposed solutions and social control functions performed by social work on behalf of and in the name of the dominant context.

Traditionally Maori children are seen as linked to extended family and kinship groups and ultimately to common ancestors. This source of assistance was often ignored and unexplored. Maori children were removed from abusive and/or non-coping urban family environments and placed in foster care on the basis that individual parents were inadequate. The evocative realisation was that racist social work practice actively contributed to intergenerational alienation and creeping cultural genocide.

Social workers have power and authority that derives from their status, role and professional abilities (ANZASW, 1993: 2). They may also have the added 'powers conferred upon them by legislation where the state uses social work as a means of social control'. The ANZASW Code of Ethics refers to working within this context as an 'apparent dilemma' (ibid).

The onset of professionalisation poses further dilemmas for social work in terms of its relationship with the dominant context. Wilding (1982:16) explains:

...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 the economic and social system.

Conclusion

Practice Principles

The following quote from O'Brien (2001: 14), illustrates the significance context has in determining every aspect of the social work task.

Context shapes all aspects of practice in every component of social work activity. It shapes the lives of clients, the activities of practitioners, and the agencies responsible for providing services.

Context clearly shapes the work of practitioners, in both a direct and indirect sense.

I believe it is vital that we as social workers develop a critical analysis and awareness of the context with and in which we work. We must critically analyse the role of social work

within that context and understand the influence this context has on not only our roles as social workers but also the life circumstances of our clients and agency environments.

We must understand the power this context has in its ability to define 'problems', as it is these 'problems' with which we are expected to work. We must analyse the 'solutions' and ask ourselves whose solutions are they and what's the intent behind them; will they help or will they further oppress? This analysis of solutions is critical, as it will be social work, as it has been in the past, which will be responsible for the implementation or 'imposing' of them.

Due to the exclusion of Maori values and voices in the shaping of the current dominant context and considering the role social work has played in the colonisation process in Aotearoa, as a Maori who is a social worker I believe this type of analysis is imperative. It is in the main, our people who are being defined as 'problems', it is Maori who are most likely to be experiencing difficulties with and within the dominant context. My experience of being Maori in this country has taught me to critically analyse and question everything, especially reason and intent. As Hyslop's quote outlines, social work has not always acted in the best interests of Maori. As a Maori social worker if I am to do something as drastic as taking another Maori mother's child away from her, in the name of 'social work', I need to have thoroughly analysed the reasons why. If I am to work from a place of integrity I need to have an intimate knowledge of the context in which this type of action takes place.

I need to ask myself if it's the issue that's the 'problem' or is the real 'problem' the context in which that situation is taking place.

Finally, as a Maori social worker I need to be thoroughly satisfied that I am not being used by the predominant context as just another tool to control and manage the uniqueness of my own people!

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