

Title: Recognition and Social Work: The influence of the politics of recognition on policy and practice

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Recognising Social Work: The influence of the politics of recognition on social work

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Abstract

The politics of recognition is a common framework through which both individual and group demands are made today. Demands are made not only for individual distress to be validated, but also for cultural identities to be accorded positive recognition; in the acknowledgement of past trauma or abuse in the former, and in showing respect towards different lifestyles and beliefs in the latter. This paper discusses the politics of recognition in its historical specificity, in particular its interaction with the new social movements that came to the fore in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Such movements increasingly focused on cultural issues with a concomitant decline of a more materialist politics that emphasised economic redistribution. The forms that such demands for recognition can take are also highlighted. In addition, some implications for social policy and social work are discussed as whilst welfare recipients are often people requiring recognition, increasingly welfare providers also articulate a desire for their professionalism and societal worth to also be accorded positive cultural recognition. In light of this, barriers to, and strategies for, the achievement of a form of 'mutual recognition' between professionals and social workers are also discussed.

Keywords: Politics; Society; Identity; Validation

Introduction

The politics of recognition is arguably a key theoretical framework within which many contemporary social problems and related struggles are understood today (Fraser, 2008). It is frequently the language of recognition within which many of the 'new social movements' articulate their problems and identify the means to redress them. It forms the basis of much identity politics, whereby certain aspects of identity such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality or disability are recognised as valid in their own terms, and not as a deviation from some (traditionally white, male, heterosexual and able-bodied) western normative order.

Developed in relation to these wider social and political issues, the theoretical development of the politics of recognition attempts to understand the socio-political struggles of the late twentieth century onwards. There have been increasing attempts to engage with these theoretical debates within social welfare and social work (e.g. Houston, 2008; Webb, 2010), something that should come as no surprise given that the cultural turn in contemporary politics influenced both social policy and social work practice, for example in the recognition of cultural difference and the affirmation of personal experience.

In this paper I do not wish to discuss these important theoretical insights in great detail. I have done this elsewhere (McLaughlin, 2012) and would also refer any reader wishing an in depth discussion of the theoretical complexities of the recognition debate to the work of Lois McNay (2008), and the debates between Nancy Fraser and a variety of her critics including Axel Honneth, Judith Butler and

Richard Rorty (Fraser, 2008). For discussions of these ideas in relation to social welfare see Martin (2001) and Dahl (2009), and in relation to social work see Garrett (2010), Houston (2010) and Webb (2010).

My intention here is to provide a brief overview of the theories and to provide some examples of their complexity and conditions of emergence, and also to highlight changes in the way that many social movements articulate and express both hurt and protest. In this respect the focus is not merely on the rise to prominence of the 'demand for recognition' but rather to clarify what it is that is to be so recognised; what are the specific aspects of identity and culture that are presented as requiring public affirmation today? In so doing, I wish to contextualise both identity and expressions of recognition as historically specific constructs for the articulation of political and personal distress. These developments are important for social workers in their interaction with individuals and groups who are seeking recognition, but they are also relevant to social work as it to, partly in the wake of adverse media coverage, seeks public and professional recognition.

Redistribution or recognition

That we, as humans, require recognition from others is not a new psychological or philosophical insight. The German philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) argued that it was the 'struggle for recognition' that led to self-awareness. Nevertheless, Hegel's central thesis of recognition from our fellow humans as being essential to achieve full humanity received a resurgence of academic and wider political interest in the latter decades of the twentieth century. According to Taylor (1994) recognition from our fellow humans is not a matter of common courtesy, 'it is a vital human need'. If this is the case, if due recognition is an essential part of what makes us fully human, then it follows that the withholding of it, or

misrecognition, 'shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred' (p.26). Whilst Garrett (2010) is correct to identify the 1990s as the period in which academics re-engaged with theories of recognition, in reality such presuppositions had been the concern of both sides of the left/right political divide in the 1980s. The rise of multiculturalism and identity politics in this period indicates that in this respect the academy was analysing contemporary developments by use of theoretical concepts that were already in political usage, albeit articulated in non-academic terminology. In other words, the academy followed, it did not lead, the contemporary return to Hegel. This should come as no surprise, critical theory is, at its best, the 'theoretical reflection of the emancipatory movements of the age' (Honneth, 2003, p.112).

Concern has been raised that according primacy to matters of cultural recognition risks downplaying the material inequalities that exist within modern society. In other words, a politics of cultural recognition can displace one that concerns itself with material redistribution. The debate between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler illustrates the complexities of the issue. Fraser (2008) is aware of, and concerned by, the danger of polarising the debate, and with it political tactics, by positing it as an either/or issue: a class based politics of redistribution versus a cultural politics of recognition of difference. For Fraser, this either/or dichotomy is problematic because in reality both are necessary for true social justice; not only is cultural or group recognition required but economic and material redistribution also if 'participatory parity' is to be achieved. For example, being white, male and heterosexual may, in cultural terms, make you part of the normative cultural order, but if you have little money or material possessions your ability to participate in society is severely curtailed. In this instance it is economic and material redistribution, not cultural recognition that is

required. On the other hand, as homosexuals occupy all spheres of social and economic life their collective identity is not based on their relationship to the means of production but in their position as a devalued group. Their marginalisation as homosexuals is not rooted in the economic sphere; rather it is in the cultural domain where heterosexist norms and homophobic attitudes reside. From this, it follows that cultural recognition, not economic redistribution is necessary to address this aspect of injustice

Such a polarisation however is problematic, not only because of the intersectionality of such aspects of identity as race, sexuality and class. For example, the argument that certain sexualities are devalued predominantly due to cultural misrecognition has been criticised for viewing issues around sexuality as being 'merely cultural' (Butler, 2008). Butler argues that Fraser's downgrading of queer politics in this way is due to an analysis that overlooks the way in which, in a capitalist economy, the regulation of sexuality, with its gendered heterosexist assumptions was systematically connected to the mode of economic production in such a way that both 'gender' and 'sexuality' become part of material life. This is 'not only because of the way in which it serves the sexual division of labor, but also because normative gender serves the reproduction of the normative family' (Butler, 2008, p.51). Honneth (2003) also sees the separation of redistribution and recognition as running the risk of 'introducing a theoretically unbridgeable chasm between "symbolic" and "material" aspects of social reality' (p.113). Honneth does not deny the need for economic redistribution but he sees it as being just another aspect of required recognition.

It can be seen, even from this very brief discussion, that the redistribution/recognition issue is a complex one. Further problems can arise in

that cultural identities, which are fluid, complex and intersectional can be reified if one aspect of them is selected for 'recognition'.

The above has relevance to social workers in that they need to take into account all the factors that are pertinent to a person's sense of identity, especially barriers to them being seen as fully human subjects, if they are to help them achieve social justice. It highlights the danger of hiding behind the cloak of 'anti-oppressive' practice, where cultural difference is recognised but there is a failure to address economic inequality, for example in the denial of adequate assistance to asylum seekers (Humphries, 2004).

New Social Movements

The politics of recognition forms the basis of the theoretical and political work of what have been termed New Social Movements (NSMs). Such movements came to prominence in the 1960s and gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst many of these movements still emphasised the importance of social class and economic inequality, class was demoted from its hitherto exalted status as the main vehicle of progressive social and political change. Other forms of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality and disability challenged the centrality of class based paradigms, pointing out that this either marginalised their experiences and/or further contributed to their oppression. The emergence of NSMs marked a move away from a focus on disputes between capital and labour to campaigns that focused less on monetary demands and more on cultural and lifestyle issues. In challenging the normative order, movements such as environmentalism, feminism, and lesbian and gay groups promoted alternative ways of living and embraced differing values to the norm.

The main friction within society then was not necessarily class-based but due to the tension where system and lifeworld conflict. For Habermas (1981)

contemporary disputes arose from 'the colonization of the life-world', and 'are not sparked by *problems of distribution*, but concern *the grammar of forms of life*' (p.33, emphasis in original). There has been much debate about whether Habermas is correct in his analysis of the extent of the decline of class conflict. For example, Edwards (2004) highlights sporadic outbreaks of employer/employee conflict over pay and working conditions in an attempt to show that Habermas underestimates the extent of class conflict today, whilst Shakespeare (1993) points out that it is not an either/or situation, and that many 'new' movements also campaign around 'old' issues such as material redistribution. Such empirically focused debates tend to miss what is of most historical importance within social movement theory and practice. As Crossley (2002) points out, it is the paradigm shift in how the working class is viewed, and also views itself, that is of historical importance. For the old labour based movements the working class was the main social movement in capitalist society. For the NSMs it is but one identity that should not be accorded any special status. NSMs then analyse society to identify

other schisms, conflicts and movements *at the heart of the modern social order...* The thesis of NSMs, in this respect, is a thesis about the shift in the mode of historicity in western societies and the corresponding shift in the central struggle of those societies. It is this mode of historicity and its faultlines which lends NSMs their 'newness', rather than any particular empirical feature of those movements.

(Crossley, 2002, p.151, emphasis in original)

This is not to suggest the absence of aspects of cultural and lifestyle issues within the older class focused social movements, but rather to emphasise their move from the periphery to the centre of social movement theory and political

struggle. The focus was now predominantly on cultural recognition not necessarily economic redistribution. However, if a desire for recognition is a vital human need its manifestation is also a historically specific one. The formation of the self and what aspects of it that is emphasised and valued is not universal or timeless; on the contrary it is influenced by the intersection of various social dynamics. In this respect it is worth looking at some contemporary demands for recognition and some of the factors that led to them being articulated in such a way.

Recognising What?

There has been much discussion about the merits of the politics of recognition in relation to various social movements and groupings, and the processes that have influenced the wider publicity given to certain aspects of life experience and identity formation. Many factors intersect to influence how people give meaning to their lives and articulate their problems, with the interplay of power and politics important as campaigners frequently try to get their concerns higher up the political agenda, often, as in the case of feminism, trying to get what were hitherto seen as private concerns (such as domestic violence, child abuse and unpaid household labour) recognised as political issues. However, the reasons why some campaigns are more successful than others can be complex, and for all the positives in highlighting the existence of abuse the current pre-occupation with it also illustrates the priority given to recognition (in this case of past abuse and/or current trauma) over more material concerns in. In other words, as some avenues are closed off others come to prominence.

Such a political process can be seen in relation to the rising focus on child sexual abuse and concomitant declining emphasis on poverty (Haaken, 1998). Haaken notes how the decline of an activist women's movement during the 1980s and

the rise of neo-liberal conservatism had a detrimental effect on many grassroots women's organisations. However, whilst those programmes that campaigned around such issues as poverty and domestic abuse declined in number, those organisations that focused on child sexual abuse survived. For Haaken, this was because 'sexuality was the one area where feminists could enlist conservative support and moral outrage' (p.241). Likewise, the focus on the catholic church as an entity within which there was widespread child sexual abuse was also influenced by it being easier for feminist campaigners to generate support and sympathy over clerical sexual abuse of a minor than it was to generate unity of moral outrage over the church's pronouncements on such things as homosexuality, abortion or women's position within patriarchal society. This draws attention to the way that the current focus on sexual abuse and concomitant demand by victims to have their suffering recognised is as much to do with external politics as it is with internal cognitive drives. This is not to deny the reality of abuse it is merely to historicise its articulation.

In similar vein, the attempt to give meaning to experience via the paradigm of trauma is itself a historically specific development, and again one in which politics and social movements played a key role. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) first appeared in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III)* in 1980. However, as with many psychiatric diagnoses, its inclusion was less to do with developments within psychiatry than with those in the wider world of politics, in this case the anti-Vietnam war fervour prevalent within US society at the time. As Scott (1990) notes,

The struggle for recognition of PTSD by its champions was profoundly political, and displays the full range of negotiation, coalition formation,

strategising, solidarity affirmation, and struggle – both inside various professions and ‘in the streets – that define the term.

(p.925)

In effect, despite the validity of PTSD being disputed within the psychiatric establishment, those in favour of its inclusion in DSM-III ‘were better organised, more politically motivated, active and ultimately successful’ (McLaughlin, 2012, p.60). Seen from such a perspective, the demand for recognition of PTSD, whilst it may be experienced individually in the contemporary period, is not the outward expression of an internal, unmediated psychological drive, but is a historically contingent form of seeking validation of, and giving meaning to, experience. Since being first included in the DSM-III, the concept of trauma has expanded from its initial focus on those who had suffered extreme experiences to become an increasingly common way of articulating distress. Such is the plasticity of the term that it can be utilised by opposing groups. For example, in relation to abortion, many pro-choice activists argue that to give birth to an unwanted child, especially if the pregnancy was the result of rape, would be harmful to the woman’s mental health. Similar arguments are also heard from pro-life activists who argue that future trauma awaits the woman who has an abortion, with some at the extreme end of the spectrum arguing that even in the case of abortion following incest or rape ‘abortion is equally destructive. Women report that they are suffering from the trauma of abortion long after the rape trauma has faded’. From this perspective the abortion is seen as ‘the second rape’ (Feminists for Life, 2008, online).

The demand for recognition then, frequently takes the form of recognising past or current suffering, the traumatised self being presented for public affirmation.

Recognising service users

The usefulness of the recognition thesis to social work has been well documented in relation to work with service users, in particular its connection with attachment theory in relation to child care and mental 'illness'. The lack of 'reciprocal recognition' from mother or other love object in the early months and years of childhood is held to be a key factor in the development of psychological problems for the child, problems that can also impact on them when they are adults (Garrett, 2009).

In a period in which status differentials are increasingly held to be illegitimate, when the rhetoric (if not the reality) emphasises participatory parity, a variety of groups highlight the way in which their particular circumstances situate them negatively in relation to other groups. This is most well known with regard to issues around race, gender, sexuality and disability, but it also manifests itself in other ways. An example of this can be seen in the campaign by *Carers UK* to have the term 'carer' to refer exclusively to unpaid carers (Lloyd, 2006). The aim of such a campaign is to get some form of recognition for the work they do with friends and/or relatives. It is recognition of their contribution to the social welfare of others, a recognition that forces professional care workers to acknowledge that they are not the only ones doing the caring. Whereas the title of 'care worker' implies a paid employee, the designation of 'carer' signifies an unpaid informal caring relationship.

Paradoxically, the struggle for recognition of both the value of care-giving and the worth of those who provide it, can lead to the withdrawal of care. Public sector strikes would be an example of this, as would be a refusal to carry out tasks other than those contractually specified, such as when Danish home helps refused to make sandwiches for their elderly clients in an attempt to gain recognition for what was seen as silenced, unrecognised, care work (Dahl, 2009).

Here, we see a clash between the care workers' demand for financial gain (material redistribution) and their clients' wishes for cultural recognition, to be seen as valid human beings worthy of respect and time rather than being treated as a commodity, as a task to be completed and ticked off on a timesheet. It also highlights aspects of Honneth's argument that material redistribution is a form of recognition in that the awarding of higher financial reward can make people feel more valued, their contribution to society also accorded greater recognition. Whilst such an example may seem somewhat trivial it serves to highlight the lived experience of recognition and redistribution at the juncture of care work.

Others are concerned that some people are not categorised as a specific service user group. For example, Mullender and Hague (2005) are concerned that women suffering domestic violence and abuse are not *recognised* as a user group in their own right. They correctly note that one consequence of this is that as other, recognised, user groups demand a 'voice' into policy development and implementation, women survivors of domestic violence and abuse are effectively excluded from this process. As a consequence, those with the direct experience of domestic abuse and the problems it creates have little input into how services purportedly geared to meet their needs are prioritised and implemented. This is unfortunate as the insight from the direct experiences of abused women can prove invaluable for both policymakers and professionals in the design and implementation of initiatives to alleviate the causes and consequences of domestic violence and abuse.

Notwithstanding the various dynamics involved in the increased social and governmental concern with domestic violence and abuse mentioned earlier, the current priority given to it (in relative terms at least) within contemporary social policy can be seen as a successful case of an issue being moved from the

private to the public sphere, from the pre-political to the political. Social opprobrium towards the perpetrators of such assaults coincides with increased recognition of the damage that can be done to the victims. Preventing the physical and emotional consequences that sufferers can endure increases their ability for 'participatory parity' in familial, social and civic life.

However, the above examples of carers and victims of domestic violence and abuse highlight that it is recognition *by the state* that is demanded in the calls for past abuse and current hardship to be validated, with calls for measures that will improve the quality of care given or received. The incorporation of women within a framework of trauma, and also into state policy and procedures can come at a cost. The issue of individual trauma can become the focus of government action at the expense of the more social and material factors that affect women. In addition, informal care can be reconfigured as a technical relationship which runs the risk of undermining spontaneous relationships between friends and family. Nevertheless, it is clear that social workers and care providers need to listen to those affected by social problems and who access social services. In this respect, recognition of the views and experiences of service users is essential. However, the politics of recognition is pertinent to social workers in other areas also, not least in the profession's attempts for it also to be accorded due recognition.

Recognising social work

The role of the now disbanded General Social Care Council¹, specifically in relation to the regulation and registration of social workers, was precisely to have social work recognised and valued as a profession, and social workers as professionals. The aim is for social workers to be accorded public recognition for their professionalism and for providing a valuable service both to particular individuals and society in general. By holding to account those who fail to meet the required professional standard of behaviour, the GSCC sought to reassure the public that those whom it registers are of high moral behaviour and professional aptitude. On the whole, this drive for professional status was greeted enthusiastically by social workers (McLaughlin, 2008). However, it was not always thus. When professional status was on the table in the 1970s there was much disagreement as to whether this was a good move, with some radicals seeing such a move as elitist and one that would further the divide between workers and their clientele (Payne, 2002). In this sense, the demand for professional recognition as expressed by social workers can, yet again, be seen not as an ahistorical psychological need, but as a historically specific one.

The struggle for recognition of the value of social work was recently fought out in the mainstream media. Following the death of Baby Peter Connolly in 2007 at the hands of his mother, her boyfriend and his brother, and reports which damned social services (alongside other agencies, though this was relatively overlooked) for failing on numerous occasions to take steps to protect Baby Peter, social workers were pilloried in the tabloid press. Whilst public and media hostility to social workers is not new, the Baby Peter case did attract an unprecedented level of vitriol, particularly from the Sun newspaper, which published the names and

¹ The GSCC was disbanded on July 31 2012 and the regulation of social work became the responsibility of the Health and Care Professions Council on August 1st 2012.

photographs of those professionals it deemed responsible for failing to protect the child. It also launched a campaign to get them sacked, and also requested that anyone with any information about them contact the paper with the details – no doubt in the hope of receiving damning and/or salacious personal stories.

In response to these attacks, some within the social work profession chose to go on the offensive. The Social Work Action Network (SWAN), which describes itself as ‘a radical, campaigning organisation of social work and social care practitioners, students, service users, carers and academics’ (SWAN, 2010, online), published a statement condemning media coverage of the Baby Peter case, in particular that of the Sun newspaper. Community Care magazine launched a *Stand Up Now for Social Work* campaign, with the specific aim of improving media portrayals and public perceptions of the profession (Maier, 2009). The campaign made seven demands relating to the media and employers. The details of the seven demands need not concern us here, what is of particular interest in relation to this paper is that the first letter of each demand is taken to form the acronym RESPECT. In other words, a particular form of recognition is being demanded, recognition of the worth of social work and by implication social workers.

Whilst it is of obvious benefit for the social work profession to have highlighted the complexities that they deal with on a daily basis and also to showcase the beneficial aspects of their interventions for individual service users, their families and wider society, such initiatives can have only limited impact on societal ambivalence towards social workers. This is due to public attitudes to social workers having less to do with malevolent media coverage and more to do with the role they play in modern society. So, whilst it is important to accord recognition for the important work that social workers do in terms of protecting

and helping the vulnerable and those in need, it is equally important not to overlook the inherently contentious and problematic nature of the role. Social workers invariably negotiate the boundary between the public and private spheres, between the right to autonomy from state intrusion into our lives and the right of the state, in this instance in the guise of the social worker, to exercise authority, control and coercion over how we live our lives. The tension in navigating this boundary, and the conflict and hostility it generates, do not arise from negative media coverage but from the very nature of the role. In an important sense this is to be welcomed as it benefits both the individual and society. It should not be forgotten that access to, and allocation of, scarce resources is frequently decided on a social worker's assessment, as is the threshold for compulsory admission to a psychiatric hospital, the instigation of court proceedings to remove a child from its parents, or the approval of prospective adoptive parents. No matter how appropriate the social worker's decisions in such individual cases may be, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is frequently a controversial one with a highly significant outcome for those subject to the social worker's power.

Given the reality of such aspects of the social work role the issue for practitioners is to try and work towards a form of practice and interaction with service users whereby, hopefully, a form of mutual recognition is achieved.

Towards Mutual Recognition

If both social workers and service users have a shared interest in being accorded due recognition, the task for social workers is to incorporate this into their daily practice. However, the danger is, particularly in the current climate of austerity and cuts to welfare services, that we get a form of recognition more akin to Honneth's conceptualisation with his focus on cultural aspects of identity and the

need for tolerance and respect. Whilst this is important we must not forget Fraser's call for such recognition to be coupled with a consideration of the material and economic conditions of social work's clientele. However, 'consideration' in and of itself is not enough, it also requires attempts to improve the situation. Failure to do so can lead to the situation, identified as far back as the mid-1908s by Sivanandan in relation to 'race awareness training' whereby (white) professionals gained raised awareness of other (non-white) cultures whilst continuing to allocate them the poorest resources, for example housing them in the most deprived areas that lacked adequate infrastructure (Sivanandan, 1985).

Of course, an individual social worker can only achieve so much in the face of the macroeconomic situation, and the reality of daily practice may entail a restriction of service provision as budgets are cut and eligibility thresholds are raised. In such a scenario it may be that it is Honneth and not Fraser who offers the most appropriate theoretical approach for current practice. However, this would fail to address Fraser's call that both the material and cultural aspects of people's lives be seen as important in pursuit of the goal of participatory parity.

This does not mean making promises to service users that cannot be kept. Honesty over what can be done may not be popular and may elicit a hostile response but by treating the client with civility, informing them of the reasons why such a need cannot be met via social services *and* offering possible alternative providers or advocates it may still be possible to achieve a form of mutual recognition. However, this in and of itself is not enough. The social worker who is serious about according their clientele due recognition needs to challenge the system in which they operate and which is providing inadequate material resources to those who are in need of help and support. Such a willingness to

challenge the prevailing political and economic climate would not only gain them recognition from their clients but would also give them a sense of professional integrity. In other words, recognition of the benefits of social work must be balanced by a critical appraisal of the role. It would be a sad day for the profession if it was to become an uncritical functionary of the state. Nor should we accept, or expect those in need of help and support to accept, the low levels of resources available.

The service user led organisation *Shaping Our Lives* gives some advice for social workers on how to work in a person-centred way despite the many constraints that they face. Ultimately,

You are in charge of how you personally relate to the people you work with. Even if you are not given more time or resources, you can treat people as individuals, respect their rights and communicate well. You also have legal and moral duties to challenge bad practice in your organisation. You can make sure you know about people's rights, so that you can pass the information on and challenge when you see people's rights being ignored and abused.

(Croft *et al.*, 2011, p.22).

Working in such a way can be seen as compatible with Fraser's (2103) linking of recognition and redistribution with representation.

The politics of redistribution and recognition have much to offer us as we negotiate the social work role. Few reading this would, I hope, contend that the vast majority of those who receive social work support require greater material resources and less vilification from such sources as government, the media and wider society. In short they require both material redistribution and cultural

recognition. There will be inevitable tensions as these interact, especially within changing economic circumstances and when the demands of some social actors conflict with those of others. In many respects, negotiating such tensions is at the heart of social work, which is why it is necessary to understand the historical and dialectical nature of the articulation of the redistribution/recognition debate. This is important not only in an abstract theoretical sense but also in order for social workers to help the recipients of social work, because, as Mills (1959) so succinctly put, 'Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (p.3).

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to show not just the complexity of the turn towards cultural recognition in contemporary society but also to highlight some of the factors that have allowed it to come to the fore. The decline of class-based political movements and with them the loss of faith in the ideologies that they espoused was undoubtedly a factor in the rise of the new social movements and the cultural turn in political life. The issues raised by such movements proved extremely influential in society in general and also in social work education, teaching and practice, such issues related to such things as race, gender, sexuality and disability being incorporated into the curriculum, policies and professional practice respectively.

It is also clear that the expression of dissent and articulation of experience does not happen in a vacuum. In this sense the specific form that demands for recognition take are not mere intrapsychic needs but are historically and politically contingent. The tendency today is to demand recognition of past trauma or other adverse experience, and for the state, whether in the guise of

social worker or not, to validate the traumatic experience by conferring due recognition of the reality of suffering.

Such developments are of relevance to social policymakers and social workers as they work with many people who are indeed suffering and who do require validation. However, an awareness of the historical specificity of identity construction can allow an approach that does not see the person as a victim, but as someone who can, with appropriate conditions being met, overcome her difficulties and take control over her life. This could minimise the danger whereby the predominant identity recognised is that of the traumatised individual something which risks infantilising the individual and pathologising social problems.

The recognition debate also affects social workers in a more personal way, as they too seek recognition for the work they do. Again, as discussed, this has some positives, but it can also reinforce the divide between worker and client, and also downgrade the more macropolitical aspects of the social work role whereby social workers wield considerable power over the autonomy and liberty of individuals, negotiate the inherent tension between the public and private spheres and are responsible for the allocation of scarce resources to those in need. It may be that this negates the possibility of true mutual recognition between social workers and service users. Nevertheless, when warranted, challenging state power and the inadequacies of social welfare provision in such ways as to allow service user autonomy and control over their lives can go some way towards achieving such a goal.

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