Social Work Practice and Competing Philosophies

Nigel Myles Verrall

Neo: A Journal of Student Research
March 2010

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Abstract

- *Summary:* Social work practice has often been subject to trends, something that could arguably be the case now. Postmodernism is on a march that threatens the long-standing modernist perspective on which social work has traditionally been practiced. However, postmodernism has important lessons to teach and may correctly be observed as an alternative practice approach with distinct theories and methods of application.

- *Findings:* The social work profession is under threat from creeping managerialism, bureaucracy and internally competing philosophies. Postmodernist perspectives have much to offer practitioners and the recipients of social work, but may be stifled because organisational structures, including academia, will have to embrace new practice methods in order for postmodernism to achieve widespread legitimacy. Traditional, modern social work practice with its empirically based frameworks and theories remains in the ascendancy for now.

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'Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish'
(Dawkins, 1989, pg 3).

Richard Dawkins' asserts that human behaviour mirrors the implicit self interest of our genome, as described in his seminal analysis of Darwinian bio-evolutionary theory, suggesting that those engaged in social work practice have overcome genetic self survival by displaying the humanistic qualities required in social care. In this article I will explore social work's journey from its humble beginnings, through enlightenment and modernisation, to the legitimised professional status it has sought and occupies today. However, social work faces the threat of destabilisation in the form of postmodernism.

Modern social work is descendent from 19th century middle class philanthropic gestures of social conscience that attempted to alleviate the conditions experienced by disadvantaged social groups. Apparent motivation for selfless actions on the part of the privileged good Samaritans may have been genuine altruism, or simply satiating their own desire for a better world for them to inhabit, Dawkins' *selfish* gene directing their endeavours. The period during late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries provided the catalyst for political, scientific and philosophical change earning this time the nomenclature 'The Age of Enlightenment'. This was an age of inexorable momentum, inspired by the belief that science would further human development with rational thought, knowledge and evidence. Advances embodied by the industrial revolution, medical advances and socio-political reforms, such as women's rights and the abolition of slavery, confirmed the pace of change. Enlightenment encouraged greater individual

freedom of thought, rationality and self-determination for the common good which '*…challenged the dominant religious view of the world and began to redefine cultural, ethical and politically important ideas*' (Webb, 2006: 26). As events moved apace, faith in religion to address society's malaise faltered.

Today social work is very different from that which has passed predominantly because of the continually shifting socio-political contexts and indeed comparable expectations of service users and professionals. Social work is increasingly practiced within a highly regulated structure of organisational, professional and political frameworks where service users are not merely *"…passive, dependent clientele"* of social care but consumers of social care with the positive and negative connotations that brings (Harris, 1999: 915). Conversely, the roles of those employed in '*reproductive jobs*' in health and social services, that is to say, servicing the state's need to perpetuate capitalism through a maintained labour force, '*…have become increasingly routinised, disciplined and de-skilled*' thereby contributing to the concerns of those who believe the social work profession struggles for legitimacy (Cockburn, 1977: 173).

The General Social Care Council (GSCC) has reviewed the roles and tasks of social workers in the 21st century, whereby the complex parameters and competing demands within which practice is conducted were illustrated using words such as '*regulation…trust…partnership…decisions…protect…control…*' (2008: 8). The Report expects that practitioners will support moves to develop and improve practice; however organisational changes, in terms of managerialism, politics and competing agendas are necessary to enable this (Ibid). The services of social workers are often called upon by those in authority and used to exercise control upon the perceived deviant elements in society; however when there are failings, the social work profession is vilified rather than

the duality of social care and social control that practitioners are asked to operate. Perhaps the Scottish Executive has a more enlightened view, stating, '*Social work services alone cannot sort out all of the problems facing society now and in the future'* (Scottish Executive, 2006:10). '*Social workers have a distinctive set of knowledge, skills and values…'* a unique combination when compared against other social care professions (Ibid, pg 9). Implementation of these core skills may vary due to what Sheppard describes as the '*…surface characteristics of social work…'*, which is the externally imposed regulation and procedural contexts often contrasting with the '*…deep and enduring…'* characteristics of helping the socially excluded in society, challenging discrimination and injustice (2006: 39).

Sheppard convincingly argues that social work practice operates '*…in the interface between the mainstream and marginal in society'*, flanked by the public and private aspects of social lives, acting as a conduit illuminating the plight of the marginalised and in return the ethical and socially responsible behaviours of the mainstream are impressed upon the excluded (Ibid: 40). Shardlow suggests that social work's function '*…is to help maintain the fabric of society, a fabric that would otherwise be brittle and likely to fracture…'* (1998: 29). This implies a need for a mechanism to maintain equilibrium, social order and control, a role reluctantly befallen upon social workers whose diversity '*…embraces a spectrum of activities along a wide continuum, with counselling and support at one end and statutory powers to remove liberties at the other'* (Jones, 1998: 34). Although valid, these statements suggest it is perhaps perilous to embrace the social worker as an agent of social control or as '*… the inquisitor…',* rather than enabling society's individuals; the preservation of the fabric of society is merely consequential (GuggenbÜhl-Craig, 1971:104).

Social work is a professional discipline that '...*contributes to the development of social policy, practice and service provision*', defining the importance of professional practice as being the beginning and end of a circular process, informing policies which subsequently inform practice (GSCC, 2008: 4). Practice is not purely a technical event following simply prescribed sets of instructions, but is '...*contributing to the learning and development of others...*' helping to define its professional legitimacy (GSCC, 2002: 20). Furthermore, Whittington and Boore fundamentally define a profession as having, '...*Possession of a distinctive domain of knowledge... a code of ethics and professional values... Power to discipline and potentially debar members...*', all of which relate to social work (McBride and Schostak, undated). The ability of the GSCC to debar and discipline members clearly recognises that qualified social workers are accountable for their actions, therefore implies a degree of autonomy in the same way that doctors are subject to sanctions by the British Medical Association.

Social work has been described as a semi profession, similar to nursing and teaching, and not comparable to the '...*learned professions of medicine...* [or]...*law...*' as it does not have the required features of those professions (Freidson, 1994:17). Etzioni states that semi professions are characterised by being, '...*an integral part of the bureaucratic organisational structure...communicating knowledge rather than applying it...training required for the semi professional is short and specific...*[and]...*female*' (Horowitz, 1985,: 297). Although this article was written over two decades ago, it seems that social work is similarly viewed today by the elite classes of professionals rather than as a true reflection of social work. Etzioni's assertion that gender also partly defines professional status is accurately reflected in the continued institutionalised gender discrimination.

Figures from 2003 proclaim that the UK health and social care labour force '*…is highly gendered in its configuration. Female workers account for 1 million out of the 1.1 million total*' but the report does not extrapolate positions of authority associated with gender (Simon et al, 2003: 2). Carpenter suggests that divisions within the health care system may only mirror that which is prevalent in wider society, indicating reluctance to sanction professional status upon women which may threaten or challenge the monopoly enjoyed by male dominated positions of authority (1993: 96).

Long has there been discourse on the subject of social work practice as an art or as a science. Hugh England states that,

> *Social work is an activity dependent primarily upon the process of understanding people, and communication and activity based closely upon that understanding…It is clear that such understanding is different from explanation, in that it is not empirically verifiable; the perceived and the percipient are both ephemeral* (1986: 101).

England's statement suggests that the complex nature of human beings and the skill involved in their understanding, differences in perception and contexts all serve to confound the social work profession as something that cannot be expressed by purely empirical knowledge. England briefly makes reference to the work of Brandon and Davies where it was noted '*…even qualifying social work courses do not actually assess practice competence*' (1986, pg 118). This situation has now changed, with professional qualifications requiring observed assessment of practice, one aspect where social work could be criticised artistically.

There are contrasting notions of evidence based knowledge and academic learning stemming from rational thought and investigation (science), compared with assessed practice (art) and the interpretation with which they may be viewed, eliciting debate on the formulation of social work as an entirely empirically founded profession. The current hegemony of modern social work is reliant on the rationality of an evidential foundation for practice, based on research where formal knowledge fundamentally precedes and outweighs that which cannot be precisely measured, the postmodernist perspective of social work. Postmodernist social work perspectives are characterised by creativity, flexibility, individualisation, the fragmentation of '*…ideas of universal truths or values*' and perhaps most importantly, a rejection of no single perspective as having supremacy; '*All perspectives have an equal claim to validity…*' (Sheppard, 2006: 60 – 61). The principle of equality of views and knowledge is typically ethical; however a localised, culturally specific knowledge base could result in inconsistent approaches throughout the wider contexts of social work, hindering communication with other colleagues aligned to the modernist view and erode professional accountability.

Cnaan and Dichter believe that relativism and postmodernism already exists '*In social work,* [where] *a large part of expertise is based on refined experience (art) and less on logico-science*' (2007, pg 3). If that is true, it may be partially demonstrated by constantly restructuring organisations, fragmenting services based on new approaches/thinking and practice contexts, as well as traditionally right wing policies embraced by left wing politicians. However, in its truest sense fragmentation relates to the '*…breaking up of social work into separate parts*', a process unrealised at the present time (Sheppard, 2006, pg. 63). Although there are different areas of social work the application of practice and the fundamental elements are indistinguishable. Noble advocates '*Rather than call for the negation of grand theories, social work needs to realign itself with a*

more, rather than less, national and global focus' in order to tackle the global structures *that perpetuate injustice and marginalisation'* (2004: 289). Conversely, there is also a need to consider how the modernist preoccupation with analysing social structures could possibly deflect our understanding of meanings expressed by localised cultural/social experiential knowledge. A balance is required between modernism and its aspiration of definitiveness and postmodernism's interpretivism.

There may be difficulties presenting a modernist perspective to service users who may reject science in favour of astrology, spiritualism or indeed religion. Perhaps a localised culturally specific interpretation of social work practice is necessary in such situations, where social work practice does not pressure service users to conform to services' ways of thinking. However, potentially there is too much that will require elucidating, with prospective unaccountability, in order for postmodernism to transcend modernism. The modernist perspective that believes progress is made through rational scientific study and is subject to development and reflection in cultural and socio-political transformations is relevant to practice. The perception of postmodernism conjures anarchistic inferences or as described by Harvey, as something which '*…swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change…'* (1989: 44). As much as it may be difficult to definitively agree in absolute totality with either view, Kant's observation that '*…some truths were not derived from material objects through scientific study'* is valid and relative to the postmodernist theme of decentralising knowledge, yet rational foundation is necessary on which to expand theoretical beliefs that may eventually find solutions in the abstract (Hackett, 1992, not paginated).

Formalised global knowledge allied to the modernist perspective has been necessary to legitimise, justify and inform practice through scientific rationale and research. Such an

approach to social work has been influential in its development from humble beginnings into an industry of megalithic proportions. However, the unique and mostly unpredictable nature of human beings does make difficult and contentious the application of scientific foundation in social work practice. The goal in explaining behaviours scientifically, requires '*…the formulation of general laws on the basis of observation…and, when necessary, experiment; and the deduction from such laws, when established, of specific conclusions*' (Berlin, 1979: 16). Due to the capriciousness of people '*…it may not be possible for all social care to be built upon a pre-defined set of knowledge*' where outcomes can be predicted (Golightley, 2008: 3). Scientific credibility relies on testing theory, where consistent examinations produce identical results, a process not easily adapted to human theoretical models. Knowledge used in social work emanates from wide ranging sources such as; research, academic study, service users and personal experience, all of which are relevant to social work, as such a diverse profession is unable to function with a singular source of knowledge. D'Cruz and Jones state that research is '*…a crucial component in the practice of social work…*' and is fundamental to its professional status (2004: 6). Academic study is perhaps the most conventional form of knowledge with its emphasis on reflective thinking, research, theory, values and ethics.

Service users' '*…knowledges grow out of their personal and collective experiences of policy, practice and services*' and as such should be actively incorporated within health and social care structures (Beresford, 2000: 493). Service users are now routinely involved, consulted and deliver the formation of policies, legislation and training. However, there is still a presumption that academia has a more valid claim on theoretical social work knowledge than that of service users, which Beresford claims is an oppressive and non inclusive system perpetuating this supposition (Beresford, 2000:

497). Although some advances are being made with regards recognising service users' unique perspectives as sources of knowledge, it is perhaps progressing gradually at the point of greatest impact; service delivery. There may be reluctance to fully include service users in delivery of services and policy formation due to how that involvement could be perceived as challenging to professional status, ultimately compromising professionals' controversial position of being the experts. Importantly, high levels of involvement by service users are not apparent in the traditional professions of medicine or law. Sir Francis Bacon eminently noted that *knowledge is power*, a statement relevant for service users whose knowledge can '*…be used as a social tool in the course of power struggles*' for recognition of their unique contribution to social work (Faulkner and Arnold, 1985: 21).

Increasingly, social work has moved towards a managed profession, where the use of knowledge has become diluted and difficult to apply due to procedural and informational necessities and an organisationally risk-averse culture that controls practitioners. Parton states that practice has been shaped by managerialism in the form of how a service's performance might be judged, where '*…social workers were less concerned with why clients behaved as they did than with what they did'* and how information technology, databases and the need to acquire information has directed practice and consequentially influenced knowledge (2008: 259). Practitioners may feel frustrated due to difficulties in utilising theories primarily due to organisational control, competing managerial agendas and the focus on reactionary social work rather than proactive. Clearly as a profession social workers are highly managed, perhaps as a result of high profile failures, but to shape professional destiny there is a need to regain trust and autonomy.

Rationality still forms the most significant foundation for formal learning and practice in social work, a consequence of modernism still asserting a dominant philosophy. However, does rationality cover all eventualities with regards addressing spirituality or religious beliefs in service users? Gray believes that '*…within society and in social work a swing to more traditional, religious and indigenous ways…*' is evident, suggesting that practice should be more relativist and open to such beliefs that may contradict rationality (2008: 177). The postmodernist framework might be best positioned in such situations with its flexibility to view solutions culturally local to the source of the issue.

Practice wisdom, as an alternative practice perspective, has many subtly different meanings, dependent on opinion and context, demonstrated by O'Sullivan's suggestion of '*…the flexible use of an amalgam of knowledge from various sources*', encompassing practice, empirical and personally derived experiential sources (2005,: 225). Practice wisdom may fit with a postmodernist's view of how to practice social work and can be considered as an alternative perspective to rational practice. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of qualified workers may admit to allowing experiential knowledge to inform their practice to some degree, yet practice wisdom used in exclusivity does not further the aim of professional legitimacy, as it is susceptible to distortion, bias and is not easily transferable between people.

The forthcoming New Ways of Working mental health policy, distinguishes between those with a '*…traditional professional qualification…*' and non-professionally qualified workers (NPQW's), suggesting diverse levels of responsibility, knowledge and accountability (CSIP/NIMHE, 2007: 82). The division of labour and newly created roles formed by this policy describes NPQW's as associates to the qualified workers, indicating that practice wisdom without formal, rational underpinnings does not provide a

robust footing for complex practice situations. In order that practitioners appreciate issues facing service users at the point of intervention, it is necessary that they have a comprehension of the service user's life events and experience. However, if service users' experiences are to be given suitable authority, then equally valid are the experiences and practice wisdom of professionals. However, organisational structures are not necessarily equipped to allow practice wisdom or experience, preferring the safety and comfort of rigorously applied theoretical frameworks. There may be much discussion between academics and theorists of the postmodernist momentum, but the reality on the frontline suggests that little impact is being made.

Is social work, practice? Perhaps it can only be described so if knowledge exists that is derived from a body of evidence, where academic learning has taken place and theoretical frameworks underpin the understanding of practice. However, a clinically proficient social worker is not necessarily an effective practitioner and this is where humanistic qualities, personal life experience, flexible approaches and an understanding of people make the difference. Dawkins may well be right in his assertion that we are inherently selfish (1989); however our ability to escape our genetic certainty has benefits for all.

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