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McKendrick, David; Finch, Jo

Published in:
Social Work 2020 under Covid-19 Magazine

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

Link to publication in ResearchOnline

Citation for published version (Harvard):
McKendrick, D & Finch, J 2020, 'Social work, Covid19 and securitisation' *Social Work 2020 under Covid-19 Magazine.*

Social Work, Covid19 and Securitisation

David McKendrick and Jo Finch

Introduction:

In this reflective article we set about to critically explore the UK's Covid19 emergency legislation. We argue that whilst, on the surface, it appears a reasonable response to an incredibly unusual, frightening and critical situation, we remain concerned about the long term implications of the most restrictive and coercive emergency legislation passed in the UK to date. We argue that the military metaphors currently in popular usage, act to obscure the long-term ramifications of this legislation. We discuss the possible implications for current and future social work practice and argue that far from being unusual, this legislation is a natural progression from the development and rapid growth of securitised social policy, represented, most starkly for example in current counter-terrorism work in which social work has been co-opted into.

Covid19

At the time of writing, we are now entering the fifth week of what has come to be commonly known as "lockdown". The rules of this largely self-imposed arrangement are that we should stay at home, only leaving the house for;

- Shopping for basic necessities like food and medicine, with Downing Street saying you should do this "as infrequently as possible" and use food delivery services "where you can"

- One form of exercise a day, such as a run, walk or cycle. This can be done alone or with members of your household

- Any medical need, to give care or to help a vulnerable person

- Travelling to and from work, but only if this is "absolutely necessary" and cannot be done from home

<div align="center">(Adapted from McGuiness, 2020)</div>

We are also under requirements to self-isolate for 14 days if someone in the household has suspected Covid-19, those that are vulnerable because of serious health are required to continuously self-isolate for up to 12 weeks and the term "shielding" has come into common parlance. The phrase "stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives", is continually repeated by Politicians and Government Officials, on the daily COVID19 Government Briefings, other T.V interviews and is continuously repeated on commercials and other media advertising. Such is its repetitive nature, "Stay At Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives" has made us temporarily forget the "See, it Say It, Sorted" message, repeatedly announced on public transport, in relation to potential terrorist acts.

Invoking the Blitz Spirit

The closest experience we have to this current situation, was life during World War Two, when restrictions on freedoms and liberty were common place and formed part of a national effort to defeat an enemy who threatened our way of life, as much as our existence. Of course, for the vast majority of us, World War Two is not a living memory but a historical and cultural one. We have discussed previously how narratives of the "Blitz spirit" are often invoked when faced with issues of national security and ontological challenge (McKendrick and Finch, 2019). For example, the London Bridge terrorist attack immediately prompted a Blitz Spirit narrative by politicians and the press. Such narratives portray the populace, as tough and stoical, willing to make significant sacrifices, united by a common enemy, and willing to support and help one another. Of course, our current "enemy" COVID19, represents a new form of war, one which is not embodied in soldiers or countries, it is an enemy that we cannot see or touch, a silent and invisible foe who can invade our country, our homes and our bodies without being seen or heard. It is an enemy that is more deadly than anything we have

previously encountered, with a significant daily death toll in the UK, one which there is no precedence about how to manage, contain and ultimately defeat.

Military Metaphors

Unsurprisingly, our leaders are using the language of war and military metaphors abound. Prime Minister Boris Johnstone referred to it as a "national emergency" while his Health secretary Matt Hancock described social distancing measures as "mission critical" (Soni, 2020). The Queen invoked the wartime spirit of Vera Lynn in an address to the nation by saying "we will meet again" (Davies, 2020). NHS staff are positioned as being on the "frontline" of the battle against the virus (Milan, 2020) and whilst other workers have been designated as "key" in this pandemic, i.e supermarket workers, teachers, refuse collectors and social workers to name but a few (White and Hope, 2020), our weekly clapping for NHS staff is reminiscent of support for our soldiers on the frontline. We will return to the significance of language and the ways in which responses to the virus give us an insight into the thinking of government later on in the discussion.

Securitisation and Social Policy

In pre-Pandemic and conventional times, we have focused our academic endeavours on how legislation designed to prevent violent extremism adds a securitising dimension to social work practice (see for example, McKendrick and Finch, 2016; 2017 & 2020). We have looked at how particular communities are suspect, and described the subtle ways in which social workers are now increasingly deployed into the "frontline" of the UK Governments' PREVENT strategy. Our concerns about this "securitisation creep" centre on two distinct areas; one is the ways in which current social policy guides society to a more securitised space and secondly, the impact this has on the social work profession. Recent COVID19 inspired events have accelerated this in ways that were, until very recently, unimaginable.

Today we see the vast majority of the populace complying with the government's instructions on social distancing. We, the populace, appear to have accepted dramatic changes to our working practices; we have isolated ourselves from colleagues and friends while engaging in a variety of activities that are counter to the natural social elements of human behaviour. We are compliant in the securitisation of our lives and our communities and we have done so at an exceptional pace and with little or no complaint or protest. Indeed, current government pronouncements have praised the populace for "following" the rules, despite sustained media focus on those who flout the rules by continuing to have social gatherings, or are perceived to be breaching social distancing rules. There have also been concerns raised in the press and social media about overzealous police interpretation of the emergency legislation, for example the use of police to examine our supermarket shopping to ensure only essential goods have been purchased, stopping people sunbathing in public parks or indeed, stopping a family play in their front garden.

The Governments COVID19 emergency legislation therefore (Gov.Uk, 2020) is one of the most illiberal pieces of legislation ever to pass through parliament and contains actions that would normally be seen as unthinkable. Yet as a response it is arguably proportionate to the dangers presented by this pandemic. In the current climate and with the knowledge we have of what has happened in other countries, it appears to be by and large proportionate, but what concerns us however, is how quickly the restrictions and extraordinary measures contained in it will be repealed when we emerge from the current circumstances? Our primary concern is that governments prefer security to liberty and may be unlikely to give up some or all of these new powers, particularly in a situation where a return of the virus or something similar is possible. Alongside, this, growing success (and appeal) of localised voluntary support groups, growth in localised charities at this time as well as significant fund raising activities for the NHS, may suit the neo liberal agenda of the retrenchment of the welfare state.

Social Work and Covid19

Our second issue relates to the impact the current circumstances will have on the social work profession. We have previously expressed concerns over the "investigative turn" in child and adult protection social work (McKendrick and Finch, 2020), and the increased involvement of social workers as agents of a punitive and coercive state (McKendrick and Finch, 2017) Social workers are at risk therefore of being increasingly deployed to a series of "frontlines" either in the war on terror, feral and dangerous families, or in the current biological war we are living through. We are witnessing the contraction in the role of social workers as the current crisis become the new normal. We note the almost fetishized hero worshipping of frontline NHS personnel (despite the fact they have to make difficult decisions about who has access to lifesaving treatment), the weekly clapping, and the deathly silence around social workers and social work activities during the lockdown. This is despite vocalised and very real concern about the plight of vulnerable children, people living with domestic violence and vulnerable and isolated members of society. Social workers are thus having to make decisions that pose even more distinct ethical and moral dilemmas than "normal". This in turn raises pertinent questions about the predicament social work is in more generally, questions that go beyond the day to day responses to the crisis and open up a space where we can have a constructive and critical discussion not only over the causes of the current crisis but it's effects too. It seems to us that the social work profession is ideally placed to pose these and other questions and in doing so engage in an opportunity to imagine what our own and other professions might look like when we emerge from the dystopian circumstances we find ourselves in at this moment. There is an opportunity therefore, for social workers to be more vocal about the issues faced by the people they work with and the terrible impact social distancing and being in a lockdown may pose to individuals already at the margins of the public consciousness and understanding. We suggest challenging the military language in use as indeed we have previously suggested in relation to a social work fast track training scheme, called Frontline (Finch and McKkendrick, 2017) and resist succumbing to dominant narratives about times of war, unity and localised, non-governmental forms of support and focusing energies on policing our own friends, families, neighbours and communities, which only serves to distract from

the machinations of Government. There are signs that the plights of many citizens, the precarious nature of much employment and families only just surviving the economic system will be obscured by our current emergency

Concluding Comments

The COVID19 emergency legislation on the surface, is a potentially reassuring policy, one that may keep us safe from a terrible virus that is responsible for the deaths of many people. For many however, the lockdown, has significant far reaching implications, financial, health and the risk for abuse from family and friends is significantly raised. It is likely that the ramifications of the lockdown will be felt for some time after this extraordinary period. It will also contribute, in a variety of ways to changes in the professional direction of social work. From what we are able to discern so far some of these changes are potentially damaging for a profession whose roots lie in the support for and empowerment of the most vulnerable and a commitment to radical social change. While COVID19 dominates the social and political agenda and our efforts are concentrated on winning a war we should not forget that there are others injured in the conflict of day to day life that require the continued opportunity to have their voices amplified. The challenge for social workers lies in our continued ability to support all of those voices during a time of calm as well as conflict

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