



2. Life in a time of neoliberalism: social work in England

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Key words

Neoliberalism, England, social work, new public management

Introduction

Throughout the world the concerns and reverberations of the impact of the last financial crisis, caused by the banking sector, have had and continue to have on economies and societies¹. Whilst the immediate and enduring impact of this latest financial crisis has been widespread, it is important to note that financialisation and globalisation of our economies along with «modernisation» of social welfare services have been on-going process. Critics argue that this process of neoliberal globalisation is promoting significant changes to our social political and welfare systems and societies, resulting in a variety of intended and unintended consequences. More broadly the economic crisis has impli-

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cations at a macro level for inequality, social unrest and at a micro level, youth employment, community cohesion and individuals. The severity of this crisis has resulted in some questioning, whether the consequence might involve the unwinding of the dominance of the neoliberal economic paradigm. However, this crisis, as with many previous crises, offers society opportunities to challenge existing models of capital development and accumulation but doesn't guarantee it (McBride, Whiteside, 2011).

This most recent crisis has come to be viewed by some as being «in the system», rather «of the system» (Jessop, 2012) and has been subject to considerable public efforts to recast those who should be held to blame. The importance of this effort can be viewed in the crisis which started as a result of a banking crisis, in the heart of capitalist economies, which was transformed and recast as a problem of the state and the poor (Jessop, 2012). The public perceptions and public narrative of both of these interpretations, have important implications for potential change, the latter perspective ensuring some public acquiescence to the necessity of austerity across many countries in Europe or whether the status quo is returned. In the case of the latter, social policy reform, along with the displacement of the costs of the crisis can be placed on the shoulders of non-elite groups through mechanisms such as austerity, whilst the former requires more fundamental reconsideration (Jessop, 2012). Additionally, financialisation and rapid movements of capital have resulted in reductions to the welfare state and greater use of penalisation to force the working poor into low wage jobs, as well as the inevitable work insecurity. There has also been the rise of the penal state as a result of social insecurity, rather than criminal insecurity and a disciplining of the working classes (Wacquant, 2010). Thus the poor are subject to disciplinary action by the state either through the promotion of «workfare» or an expanding «prisonfare» (Wacquant, 2012). Whilst the manifestation of this may be different in Europe than in the Usa, Wacquant argues that in Europe with its stronger tradition of state, that it is the police that have been strongly involved in the suppression of dissent as a result of civil disorder and anguish in low income communities (Wacquant, 2012). This is important for social work, not only as a result of the income and wealth inequality, but also for its impact on society and the profession.



It is important for social work that it understands the origins of the crisis, recognise the political, economic, historical and social origins of both the crisis as well as the proposed policy implications and critically evaluate its role as a consequence. These implications pose complex and challenging questions to consider the role of social work at a macro through to micro level in society. Critical perspectives utilising multiple lenses are important. Failure by the profession to correctly identify the nature, origins and complexity of the problem, will no doubt result in errors of analysis and proposed intervention. Despite these challenges, it is possible to identify similar collective themes, shared understandings, discourses and enactments internationally. This paper will be informed from the experiences of neoliberal implementation in the United Kingdom (Uk) and in particular, England (as one of the four nations that comprise the Uk), but it is often possible to detect similar global themes influencing diverse societies despite their different discourses, manifestations and political complexions.

1. What is neoliberalism?

In seeking to understand the global dominant economic and social policy doctrine of neoliberalism, it is important to unravel what is meant by the term and its ideology. In doing so, the current market economy should be viewed as a historically rooted form of social organisation, which whilst producing some benefits has also introduced many structural tensions which have the potential to be destructive for the society (Polanyi, 2001). Prior to the «market» and notions that the market could order society; politics, religion and social norms were the dominant forms of governance (Polanyi, 2001). As a result economic elements of societies such as land, labour and money were not principally commodities to be bought and sold, but rather they were embedded in social relationships and therefore subject to moral negotiation, community supervision and religious reflection. However, in our capitalist society «markets» have become autonomous, increasingly deregulated, and are believed by its proponents to be able to order societies for the better. The consequences for society of these changes are therefore important and as a result of this macro-economic doctrine it is critical



for social work to understand, critically evaluates well as offer perspectives and interventions.

Neoliberalism is defined by Harvey (2010: 2) as being «a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices». As a result, it is argued by some, that neoliberalism is refined form of earlier liberal models, grown from the opposition to the work of John Keynes in the 1930's and the later policies involving the New Deal in the United States of America but with some significant reforms (Kotz, 2002).

Neoliberalism therefore proposes that the market is the best allocator of resources to resolve the questions/concerns posed by society and that the parts of government that seek to interfere with the operation of the «market» harm «market» efficiency as well its supremacy (Marobela, 2008). Neoliberal proponents argue that individual choice is also strengthened through the operation of the market (Kotz, 2002). Indeed Clark and Newman (1997: 14) identify that the workings of governments are often perceived, by neoliberal advocates, as being monopolistic, with poor services and inefficiencies that require the discipline of «customers» (Sotirakou, Zeppou, 2006). This focus on the development of public service «customers» provides a mechanism for the transformation of government and the use of the private sector. The model further advocates that reductions in state responsibility enable reduced levels of taxation thus promoting economic growth which benefit all segments of society, including that of the poor. The resulting «trickle-down» effect of wealth and prosperity ensures the widespread of the resulting increased economic prosperity. Less regulation of capital markets and economic systems, reductions and reshaping of the role of the welfare state, augmented use of casual labour in employment and new models of accountability along with governance in the public sector (Pratt, 2006), have all become hallmarks of neoliberal implementation. As a consequence, the reshaping of the state has therefore been two fold, promoting the «invisible hand» of the market, while reinforcing



the «iron fist» of the penal state through the promotion of «workfare» (Wacquant, 2012).

Changes to welfare states when viewed globally may be considered through a variety of lenses. From the perspective of the global south; those in the global north already have more comprehensive systems which even in their «modernised» state might be considered, from their perspective, to be generous. However we should recognise that this change in the role of the state signifies a trend away from the previous role of the state to mediate the impact of capitalism, limit its exuberance and that this is now changing such that it also no longer provides a buffer against poverty (Gregory, Holloway, 2005). With the emphasis on entrepreneurship and social capital, the responsibility of poverty is increasingly located within the individual «citizen», rather than the socio-political system. For instance within the Uk, young people are encouraged to invest in their «social capital» through the use of school selection using league tables. More recent reforms to higher education have included massive hikes in student fees and the marketization of university courses. The state therefore is no longer seen as the guarantor and coordinator of equality and equity of access, but rather in maintaining the availability of an education market. Blame for any lack of employment or other structural concerns would therefore not be located in systemic social, economic, historical and political factors but rather in the individual who has failed to invest sufficiently in their «social capital» or not taken sufficient care in procuring this education and skills from the market.

Harvey (2010) observes neoliberalism as a «political» project, which supports capital accumulation, reduces labour market rigidity and rolls back previous social equality gains whilst restoring power to the economic elites. Almost inevitably globalised neoliberal policy therefore requires governments to support capital mobility, free trade, reductions to the size and scope of the state (often involving privatisation, deregulation and tax reductions), balanced fiscal budgets, inequality acceptance due to markets and labour flexibility (McBride, Merolli, 2013).

Additionally there has also been widespread internalisation of neoliberal doctrine into everyday discourse and culture, including through the influence of tv programmes such as «Big Brother» and «The Apprentice». Through these, the ethos of modern workplaces are rein-



forced by competition between contestants, acceptance of external authority, individualism, team conformity and always being positive (Windle, 2010: 254; Bauman, 2002). This promotion of individualism undermines notions of universalism, solidarity, equality and equity and begins to reshape the discourse and ideas of who might be considered deserving and who might be underserving in society. The internalising of these neoliberal ideas and values helps convince, that the system is legitimate and the true nature of neoliberal projects are often being disguised or presented as fresh and reformist through the use of political spin (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that many countries seeking to introduce neoliberal economic reforms have undertaken this using the language of «modernisation». This was the case in the Uk by successive governments in a policy of reducing the welfare state.

2. Neoliberalism and new public management

Neoliberalism and new public management (Npm) has provided the vehicle to the promotion and incorporation of private sector tools and values within the public sector, as well as facilitating the transfer of public service delivery to the not for as well as for private sectors of the economy (Monbiot, 2000; Davidson, 1993). Within England, social welfare/work has experienced substantial change in the past two decades resulting in reductions to state provision, growth in for profit services, organisational change and the application of private sector management techniques and consultants (Hafford-Letchford *et al.*, 2010). Alongside these structural changes there have been workforce difficulties in recruitment and retention, low pay (Hussein, 2011), care quality scandals (Care quality commission, 2011) and regulatory and business environment changes (Harris, 2003).

Hood (1991: 4-5) identified Npm techniques and tools as: the use of explicit standards and performance measures; the management of the public sector utilising private sector techniques and values; the emphasis on results rather than process; breaking down public services into their component parts; promotion of competition in public service provision; and greater discipline in the allocation of resources. Other or-



organisational changes include the use of specialised, flat and self-determining organisational units rather than large, hierarchy bureaucracies; use of contractor type relationships as well as market mechanisms to deliver public services (Pollitt, 2001). These changes are often operationalised through privatisation of state services; promotion of internal markets, reductions to universal service delivery; promotion of individualism alongside ideas of resilience and efficiency and finally the clouding of the boundaries between private and public sectors. The changed use of terminology such as «customer» and «service user», as well as the use of tenders and contracting all support the further introduction of these processes and markets (Borghi, van Berkel, 2007; Clarke, Newman, 1997; Newman, Clarke, 2009; Valkenburg, 2007).

In addition to the promotion of public sector change, society has also undergone cultural transformation, including the commodification of parts of society that were previously considered impossible to marketise such as social welfare, pollution and water (Connell *et al.*, 2009). This shift in the structure and organisation of public services has promoted further and normalised notions of efficiency and accountability, while other principles such as equality, equity and participation have been de-emphasised (Gregory, 2007). For social work, with its commitments to values like social justice, this should poses significant concerns as does social work reticence and slowness to theorise as well as engage critically in these debates.

For social work, the decline in values such as social justice, equality and equity is problematic, especially as the new emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness has significant implications for practice. For instance, concern about equity of access might be usurped by notions of management efficiency, resulting in services that may be considered efficient but do not deliver services needed by the community.

Commentators view globalisation as an indication of the international introduction of neoliberal market reforms (Quiggin, 1999). Despite on-going implementation over three decades, the social work profession has been slow to articulate, theorise and consider the implications for practice (Khan, Dominelli, 2000; Dominelli, 1991; Lyons, 1999). However, more recently there has been renewed, although limited, consideration of these impacts (Lyons, 2006; Dustin, 2007; Dominelli,



2010) and this paper continues that trend by exploring some of these implications.

3. Profile of social work in England

Social work became a 3 year degree level qualification in 2001 and the title of «social worker» is protected requiring registration with the professional regulator. The curriculum for the profession was influenced by the then professional body General social care council (Gsccl), subsequently incorporated into the Health and care professions council (Hcpc) and as heavily influenced by social work employers and the government. Since gaining its degree status, a number of influential reviews have been undertaken to review the practice and training of the profession (Social work task force, 2009^a; 2009^b; 2009^c; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). The Narey (2014) report is particularly interesting given the authors work in the prison service, it being commissioned within weeks of the more thorough Croisdale-Appleby report and Narey's subsequent appointment as a government ministerial advisor after its publication (Cleary, 2014).

The newly formed College of social work developed a professional capabilities framework (Pcf) which came into operation in 2013 and this highlights nine overarching areas of capability that social workers should be able to demonstrate on qualification; namely: professionalism; values and ethics; diversity; rights, justice and economic wellbeing; knowledge; critical reflection and analysis; intervention and skills; context and organisation and professional leadership (Martin *et al.*, 2014). All these areas now are required to be addressed in the qualifying curriculum and although the knowledge base for the Professional capabilities framework is articulated, the exact curriculum in each university is determined locally and agreed with the college through regular inspections.

Qualifying training also incorporates 200 days of assessed fieldwork placements which are undertaken in two placements. The fieldwork practice educators being involved in the assessment of practice and written assignments during this time. It is also necessary for all students to have clearance of any criminal record via a disclosure and barring



check (Dbs), which is undertaken at the start of training. On qualification, social workers also need to undertake an assessed and supported year in employment (Asye) and to complete a portfolio in order to achieve the status of a qualified social worker (Martin *et al.*, 2014). Regular continuing professional development (Cpd) is then required to maintain their registration with the professional regulator and this renewed every 2 years, subject to ongoing Cpd. Whilst it is a requirement to practice that social workers remain registered with the Hcpc, registration is optional for social work educators based in academic institutions (Martin *et al.*, 2014).

Within the context of practice, the Gscc (2002) developed a code of practice for social care workers, which emphasised the protection of rights for service users and this was further developed 15 standards of practice proficiency by its successor regulator, the Hcpc (2012). There is no standard career structure for the profession, other than in the early years of practice. In addition the British Association of social workers has developed a code of ethics, but its membership is only approximately 10,000 of the 87,000 registered social workers and therefore its code is aspirational (Basw, 2002; Dickens, 2012).

As a result of reductions to the welfare state and privatisation of services, many social workers have seen their role change from direct service delivery to that of care manager/commissioner of these services from private or not for profit service providers (Martin *et al.*, 2014). These providers often employ unqualified social care workers, resulting in a shrinking employment market for social workers.

Within this environment the management and supervision of social work has always been considered important in practice. The key purpose of supervision in the profession being on education/professional development; support/personal development and administration/accountability. It is within this context that supervision was also viewed as an important aspect of quality control and the bond between the professional worker and their agency. However, the profession has now experienced reductions to the support of professional practice, increased administrative burdens and the promotion of management practices (Beddoe, 2010; Noble, Irwin, 2009; Simmonds, 2010).



4. Neoliberalism and social work

The profession has therefore been both passive and slow in its theorisation and resistance to market related social policies. These have changed the way in which recipients of social work services are viewed, their eligibility to access them and the scope of services offered. Consumers along with their care have been elevated to commodities that can be sold in care markets. These changes have wider consequences for the notions of citizenship, although this is outside the scope of this paper. However neoliberal policy implementation is eradicating the association with politics and public jurisdiction to that of customer and being seen as self-interested individuals that are operating within an economic relationship (Clarke *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore the ideology also believes that professionals themselves act in self-interested manner, without altruism, promoting their own agenda's, requiring strong leadership and management to temper this. However despite these assumptions relatively insufficient attention has given to social work human resource systems with little workforce intelligence available to support the management process (Evans *et al.*, 2006). As a result, it is difficult for Uk social workers to fully understand the implications and challenges of: workforce (Hafford-Letchford *et al.*, 2010), staff recruitment (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Curtis *et al.*, 2010); retention difficulties and the importance of promoting good people management and evidence based practice (Evans *et al.*, 2006). In addition the average work life of a social worker is 8 years in the Uk and this compared unfavourably to pharmacy which is 28 years, medical doctors at 25 years and nurses who average 15 years (Curtis *et al.*, 2010). This evidence suggests that there are considerable challenges within the professional workforce but this area is under researched.

One of the challenges for social work is that the profession is ambiguous in its nature, such that regardless of its definitions, it exhibits equal measures of both strength and weakness. However despite the professions commitment to social justice and that's its interventions with individuals and families whose social distress is a manifestation of social structures, questions remain about its role and responses. Under neoliberal and Npm policy and management systems, fault is often located within the professional worker rather than the broader questions



about systems, organisations and their culture, efficiency drives and a lack of resources. Macro-economic and social policies such as neoliberalism have considerable impacts on how society is structured, organised and shaped. As a result, it is surprising that this structural framework has not facilitated more consideration and debate by the profession in recent years. This state of affairs raises question about the whether the profession is being shaped by outside forces beyond its control, whether it has been adaptable to macro-policy shifts (Jordan, 2004) or even has been too uncritical of its own role and position (Lorenz, 2005).

The impact of neoliberalism on social work has been significant and has included; the shaping of the profession and its training, promotion of managerialism; the advancement of markets and private sector providers; altering the relationship between professional assessments and resources; uncritical use of performance indicators and notions of efficiency; varying the core of social work delivery away from being mainly relationship based; recasting users of services as customers and commissioners of services; reductions in universal service provision and promotion of individualism (Dominelli, 2010). As indicated earlier, the scale, scope and impact of these globally must be viewed within the context of local practice and policy but also consideration of its nature as a global profession.

Furthermore, the process of McDonaldisation (Dustin, 2007; Ritzer, 2011) has also had an impact on social work practice and is the perfect example of processes and systems of management rationalisation. Within this McDonaldised process, efficiency is seen as the ideal way to obtain a desired management result, most often through following a range of procedures along a predesigned workflow (Ritzer, 2011). Each aspect of the service is then calculated through a process of quantitative calculations, whilst qualitative aspects are deemphasised (Ritzer, 2011). The process provides homogenised products that are consistent and those that interact with the service, as customers, are encouraged to consume these services as quickly as possible, in addition to production and outcomes being standardised (Ritzer, 2011). Within this form of work organisation, staff discretion is absent and the staff are often managed by procedures, supervisors, checklists and formal management processes (Wastell *et al.*, 2010). Thus procedures and routines be-



come uniform; with reductions in social work professional discretion, regulated social work tasks, targets, occupational standards and focus on efficiency and effectiveness as key measures (Harris, 2003, James, 2004). As a result, responsibility for decision making on professional knowledge, is now replaced by the gathering of evidence to decide if the necessary thresholds to receive services have been achieved (Adams, Shardlow, 2005).

Across the work place and the profession, changes to the structure of the profession can be observed with increased use of flexible working practices, longer working hours, greater flexibility in recruitment and dismissal and the acceptance of new working roles (Duménil, Lévy, 2004). Workers are often employed on shorter working time or temporary contracts, with the creation of new roles that require few if any formal qualifications for work that was previously undertaken by qualified staff. Whilst this flexibility has been advocated as necessary, to support labour market problems by international agencies such as the Organisation for economic co-operation and development (Oecd), others such as the United Nations International labour organisation (Ilo) have argued for greater regulation of both finance and increased labour security (McBride, Merolli, 2013). Traditionally, more stable employment has facilitated employment progression, promoting loyalty and employee commitment. However the increased focus on employment casualization to reduce labour costs in capitalism has resulted in larger salary inequality differences between managers and staff (Connell *et al.*, 2009).

An added complication in the employment of social welfare/work staff is the wider implications within a market driven environment, especially where cost is a primary consideration in low commitment employment with the resulting employment tensions that arise between employers and employees (Boxall *et al.*, 1998). In this complex and competitive market situation organisations may seek to employ lower skilled staff to support their financial status or improve profit margins. Work force retention, skills scarcity may all be unintended consequences. Within this market driven environment, the links to care worker vacancies and turnover are important for the quality and levels of care that are provided. Hussein and Manthorpe (2011: 6-9) identify a number of issues that appear associated with this changing structure



and context of Uk care service provision; greater staff turnover in the for-profit sector, staff turnover around 25% and substantially higher than the staff turnover for the economy (15.7%). Furthermore changes to European Union (Eu) migration rules rather than policy initiatives (Hussein, Manthorpe, 2011) have also resulted in an influx of workers from previous Eastern Europe into the care sector (Hafford-Letchfield *et al.*, 2010). The challenges of work practice acculturation, language skills as well as the political implications are under researched, despite a correlation between workforce indicators, quality and turnover of nursing aids (Uk equivalent of care workers).

Further challenges for professional social work leadership is that the need for social welfare services often massively exceeds resource availability (Lymbery, 2001). It is often social workers rather than their managers or political decision makers often are those who are blamed for the shortfalls, or for any errors which might be the consequence of these shortages (Lymbery, 2001). This has important consequences for professional wellbeing, often leaving social workers feeling helpless and alienated from their professional roles (Pullen-Sansfacon, 2012). The contributor factors associated with resources is hardly ever acknowledged or rectified by politicians or managers (Lymbery, 2001).

5. Conclusion

In this paper it was argued that neoliberalism's impact has been widespread, transforming communities, societies and the profession. Whilst social work's response has been muted, the rise of social inequality and societal stressors such as unemployment, family dysfunction suggests that the profession needs to consider its intervention at several levels to be successful and to continue to have relevance.

It is therefore clear that social work now finds itself in a precarious position not only within the Uk, but potentially in some other countries. The dominant neoliberal economic model is impacting on our communities, societies and profession, with the impact of socio-economic policies i.e. austerity and financialisation clear to see in those communities, practice and in our services. The challenge for social work includes the need to be far more critical and strategic in its analysis, reflection, and inter-



vention. The implications for social work include and extend well beyond debates about autonomy and professional discretion, the role of competence based practice, supervision models, performance and accountability systems and individual practice. The profession should be engaged critically and leading in key policy and practice debates, finding its voice and confidence to seek collective solutions.

Almost inevitably neoliberal economic models leave social work with many professional dilemmas and debates, including the professions role and responsibility, what training and skills deficits hamper effective engagement, how should it engage critically and as a collective, and how it should engage citizens in these complex debates. Responses are required at policy levels, as well as at individual practice level, but critically, social workers should be open to debate and view the wider global social work fraternity as providing advice, support and critical reflection of differing models of analysis and intervention.

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