

Civil society/ 'Big Society' and the implications for social work education In England: A *Caveat Emptor* for other nations

Introduction

Diverse social forces such as uncritical acceptance of neoliberal globalization and the marketization of everyday life, and the continued dominance of right of centre politics have led to greater emphasis on individuality, self-responsibility and the diminution of 'big' state provision for marginalized and disadvantaged groups and people made vulnerable by these drives. Welfare states and centralized welfare provisions exact exorbitant costs from governments and society and are accused of reducing individual responsibility and stifling innovation, efficiency, voluntary or philanthropic participation in civil society.

The 2008 fiscal crisis and global recession, and ensuing austerity measures adopted and continued by many European nations, took place within this context of isomorphic convergence around neoliberal marketization. This resulted in a different way of viewing those people negatively affected by late modern social life and its attendant problems. Individual blame and pathologisation was normalised at a time when community funded services were reduced and structural causes of personal and social distress ignored.

Social work education has responded to social and political changes in England by focusing on the 'safeguarding' roles (Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2014, Manthorpe and Stevens, 2015), which worryingly entail an increased sense of surveillance, self-monitoring and governance. A more prescribed curriculum has been developed that prevents deeper and critical engagement with socio-political issues and draws its justification from the instrumental tendencies of central and local governments, the largest employer of social workers in England. UK devolution has allowed each nation to maintain their own social work services and for these to develop differently which has further entrenched English insularity and created a social work education and practice system that carries warnings for those countries who may be minded to follow suit (Parker, 2013).

This paper explores some of the paradoxes arising from contemporary changes to social work and education in England when set against the context of 'Big Society' as promoted by the British Conservative Party. After delineating the development of the concept of 'Big Society' and its fate under austerity, we consider some of the implications for social work and social work education in England. This is then critiqued in the light of changes to education which reflect and entrench the policies of 'Big State' rather than that of a philanthropically oriented, localized response to social problems. The paper offers two interlinked ways forward for social work and social work education. The first draws on the work of Hall and Smith (2015) concerning minor acts of urban kindness as small ways in which society can be repaired and maintained, the second draws on concepts of isomorphic convergence from organizational sociology exploring these as contingent and offering the potential for dialectic synthesis that localizes changes. The paper ends with a consideration of social work and its education separated from central and local

government, professionalized within itself and localized through its interactions with space and place.

Civil society as an active society

There is a long history to concepts of civil society reaching back to Plato and before that we need not repeat here. In UK politics, however, two policy initiatives stand out in regard to social work prior to the emphasis on 'Big Society'. Firstly, the 1976 Labour Government introduced a 'good neighbour scheme' to recapture a cooperative spirit redolent of wartime Britain in preparation for the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 (Hansard, 1976). The impact was short-lived and earned no reference in discussion of the 'Big Society' concept. The second pronouncement came, ironically, from former social worker and Conservative Government minister, Virginia Bottomley in the 1990s in a statement making the implication that a force of 'streetwise grannies' could undertake social work (Parker and Doel, 2013). Whilst Lady Bottomley's ideas did not gain purchase on the sector they perhaps reflected a commonsense assumption amongst many of the general public that gives impetus to 'Big Society' beliefs.

Moving away from social work *per se*, and into the area of wider social welfare, there have been broader philosophical moves toward engaging citizens in society that are not driven by austerity measures. The ideas behind Paul Hirst's (1993) 'associative democracy', on which Blair and Giddens' 'third way' and Cameron and Letwin's 'Big Society' are loosely based, is built on the perception that an expanding welfare state had lost ground, legitimacy and effectiveness to the market and organisation of corporate interests and had begun to be exposed to them. Hirst's alternative to a perception of a bloated, ineffective and illegitimate statist system and a neo-liberal system built around the interests of capital involved extending governance, but not government, by positioning deliberative democratic mechanisms (see Smith.....) to engage citizens in welfare processes, and thereby legitimising the public realm.

The third way never really got beyond policy rhetoric. However, mechanisms which sought citizen involvement in the public realm were trialled in the bastion of statist welfare, the National Health Service, with some success. For example, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, citizens' juries and citizens' councils had been formed to engage and consult citizens on NHS tendering and rationing issues (.....). Indeed, the NICE citizens' council is still in existence today (<https://www.nice.org.uk/get-involved/citizens-council>). However, whilst only a few third way policies that were implemented clearly engaged citizens in areas of state welfare, the 'Big Society' concept did not hide its attempt at mobilising citizen engagement as a means of *replacing* the role of the state. By using the emotive words of WW1 General Haig, in a 2010 speech at the Conservative Party conference, then recently elected Prime Minister David Cameron sought to mobilise British citizenry by suggesting that '... your country needs you' (2010 Tory conference speech).

With this subtle, and yet significant, political difference in mind, it is important to analyze the 'Big Society' agenda as promoted by the Conservative Party and espoused by the Coalition Government. In times of crisis and austerity this may be even more the case

as welfare spending is challenged and social need increases. This agenda poses both challenges and opportunities for social work practice and education but it also raises issues about the wider solidarities upon which equality and social justice depend, begging a care-related question paraphrasing *'quis custodiet ipsos custodes ?'*

Philosophically, the 'Big Society' concept developed from Tory disillusionment with state welfare which it was argued had not produced a caring, supportive society in which people expressed concern and care for one another, but rather created a selfish, individualistic society that left communities isolated and disadvantaged alongside leading to a life of dependency and a reduction in the sense of individual responsibility for other people (Cameron, 2009). Whilst these concerns had from Margaret Thatcher onwards permeated Conservative Party thinking, they represented a sharp shift from the welfare state consensus that lasted from 1948 into the 1970s, with notable exceptions (REFS).

These concerns were articulated, in broadly economic terms, in the Conservative Party's paper on localism which promoted five pillars towards shifting power from the 'Big' state to local communities (Conservative Party, 2009). The five pillars stated that:

1. communities should be given a tangible share in local growth – focusing on the economy
2. local government should be free from central government control, whilst not dealing with the tensions inherent within this
3. local people should have more power over local government spending and resource allocation – something that, alongside the fourth pillar, appeared politically driven as a means of derailing initiatives that might support non-Conservative Party priorities
4. local people should have more power over spending priorities
5. regional government should be removed – again political in that regional government constructed a further tier of expensive bureaucracy and also tended to favour the Labour Party rather than the Conservatives

The policy impetus was to reduce the state and tiers of government, something perhaps that resonates with many on both left and right and with public concerns to reduce unnecessary expenditure. However, there was little fine detail given in the thinking at that time, except perhaps a proposed National Citizen's Service scheme for 16 year olds (Stott, 2011).

The popularity of the idea or the drive behind the 'Big Society' idea, however, saw its inclusion in Conservative Party documents leading to the 2010 election and indeed it was included in the Conservative Party Manifesto itself (Conservative Party, 2010a; 2010b). A three-point priority area plan was delineated in the 2010 document *Building a Big Society* which proposed three areas of commitment:

1. *Public service reforms* – funding for third sector services would be released from dormant bank accounts and the third sector would be encouraged and empowered to take a greater role in tackling social problems, especially at a local level.

2. *Community empowerment* – communities would be given control over community facilitates, local planning and accountability of local public services
3. *Mass engagement and philanthropy* – behavioural economics would be employed to create volunteering opportunities and philanthropy

Again, however, the detail and underpinning was not fully worked through. Whilst Stott (2011) believes the concept of Big Society did not have the positive reception that earlier political concepts such as community cohesion or social capital had in the minds of the public, or indeed politicians, the earlier policies were not accepted uncritically and have drawn deep challenges from excluded or labeled communities (REFS). However, the 'Big Society' idea continued to be promoted through the online Lottery-funded Big Society Network, a body that fell into disarray following allegations of funding misuse (Mason, 2014). Also, calls for greater decentralization of power and the facilitation of charity and philanthropic development were increased towards the 2010 election as a means of driving the Big Society agenda forwards (ref).

Theoretically, the concept was supported by Norman (2010) who promoted the message that developing a new compassionate society transcended the problems of left and right in politics; a message that many people disillusioned with party politics could grasp. Also, Blond (2010) suggested that communitarian civic concern would seek to redistribute capital and capacity from the centre of government to local communities and Lord Wei (2010) touched on public fears of a 'broken society' to be mended by mass participation in 'Big Society', predicated on the assumption that people have not only the drive and energy to engage but also the time to devote to such.

Whither the Big Society?

Before the thinking underlying the 'Big Society' concept as indicated here could be put to the test, the austerity measures of the same Coalition government promoting it diluted the potential impact of the 'Big Society'. However, the ideas underpinning it were, as Jordan and Drakeford (2012) admit, a shift from the economic model followed by New Labour previously and the prevailing hegemony of the market championed by Margaret Thatcher and interpolated into New Labour's policies. Unfortunately, the focus on local communities writ large in 'Big Society' concepts ignores the necessity of national frameworks and welfare planning needed to tackle large-scale social problems. Jordan and Drakeford suggest that in order to tackle such matters a Basic Income Scheme and adequately funded National Care Services would first be necessary. This would then allow social workers to assist in the development of local solutions to some of these problems which have been individualized and pathologised through the shifts in discourses from state provision to self-responsibility.

Greve (2015) recognizes that the debates around civil society and 'Big Society' are unresolved and definitions are contested. Greve identifies two key foci – organizational and moral. The contemporary welfare mix is concerned with a (shifting) balance in organization between state, market and civil society (family, third sector). The current iterations of 'Big Society' seek to increase the role of civil society, as seen in this mix, in providing welfare services which means relying more heavily on the involvement of

families, volunteers and third sector and charitable organizations. Moving towards such an organizational mix also requires the promotion and adoption of a particular moral discourse that shifts moral responsibility onto individuals and away from state provision.

The meanings for social work and concomitantly for social work education are clear. It is to this that we shall now turn.

Implications for social work and social work education

'Big society' suggests the rise of the small and the diminution of the big, a reduction in professional welfare services and developing or utilising the unqualified and the volunteer workforce alongside a more overt reliance on family care. It may be considered as both an attack on professionally organized local authority social work and education for such. It may also represent a means of recovering its social and community roots. Social work is political, it cannot be other as it deals with people in need and disadvantaged or marginalized in and by societies. However, the current political straight-jacket worn by English social work and social work education could be replaced by more comfortable attire by harnessing key social elements of civil society and removing social work from direct local authority employment and requiring services to be provided by a professionally qualified and educated workforce who answer to their own professional code of ethics.

This may be welcome to the political right and left for a variety of shared and different reasons. A libertarian left may find 'Big State' provision constraining and prescriptive willing a more communitarian approach favoured by the political right's espousal of 'Big Society'. Others may find the removal of self-responsibility by state provision to run counter to an ordered and free society. However, many citizens may consider the lack of professional infrastructure to represent a monumental change in social provision, to dispense with many years of collected policy and practice evidence and potentially dangerous, a civic crisis that may lead to social maladaptation instancing a sociology of despair and hopelessness whilst not envisioning a potentially bonadative tapping of common concern for the human condition.

However proposals for 'Big Society' are interpreted the concept has profound implications for social work and education for practice. This is seen clearly in England in The College of Social Work's (2015) message prior to the general election called for May 2015. With 90,000 social workers the professionalization of social work has developed apace and the practice is embedded within the social infrastructure and psychology of citizens. Yet it is recognized that the circumstances in which 'Big Society' has grown has seen downward pressure on local authority budgets thus straining social services and their provision, especially within adult social care. Inspection and regulation services are failing clients and public accountability has risen as visibility increases through social and public media. Earlier calls for a continuing professional development capacity for English social work has also suffered under this time of budget cuts and resource constraints. The College of Social Work therefore blasts a clarion call towards the next election to enhance working conditions, develop a strong public voice and centre for resource sharing and development. The professional agenda runs, if not counter, then

parallel to that of the 'Big Society'.

Pedagogies in social work education have since 2003 become increasingly focused on an integration of practice or field education and learning and classroom-based study. The rationale behind this derives from untested assumptions of the pedagogic efficacy of field education, something that is far from certain (Parker, 2010; xxx).

A peripheral industry of social work education – including reformed field placements, professionalized and often 'sanitised' service user and carer groups, practice-educators, tutors and liaison officers in universities practice agencies and in professional and government bodies - has developed through the work of the Social Work Reform Board and Social Work Reform Unit, a cross-departmental group developed to address media-heightened concerns about social work practice and education following the publication of the report into the death of Baby Peter (XXX; Jones, 2014). The work of the Reform Board and subsequent Reform Unit has developed an increasingly prescriptive curriculum and approach to English social work education. The qualifying bachelor degree and Master's programmes have been somewhat removed and isolated from the years of pedagogic experience, expertise and research within universities and subjected it to the media-fuelled, fleeting whims of politicians. These curricula developments have stultified a great deal of creativity and tested the metal of social work academics whilst the hegemony of employers begins, as the ones who pay the pipers, call the tune! This is seen within the Teaching Partnerships that will form the architecture of social work education in England from 2015/16.

Whilst we would not wish to argue for a separation between the academy and practice we would wish to see acknowledgement of research-driven expertise over and above ephemeral political gain. Employer-led initiatives produce social workers for a specific utilitarian purpose and aspects of learning, skill and value-sets that are not directly relevant to this run the risk of being ignored. This is potentially damaging to the social work profession in England and its standing across the rest of Europe and, indeed, internationally, something recognized by the 2014 EASSW statement on English education initiatives (REF). It also provides an employer or organizational-driven service that may not provide what those requiring the services want or need.

The direction of travel in England is redefining social work in this country as a local authority practice that is signally different to third sector work, community development approaches and privileges the social policing and regulatory roles social workers have with families and those made deviant by society. The protection activities of social workers, now dressed up in the hard-to-understand language of safeguarding, represent the profession. Child protection, adult protection, assessing the nature and degree of mental illness or what might be in the 'best interests' of an individual are the scaffolding of practice and education. We may ask if this is this sustainable and what it might mean for civil society.

If social work no longer provides that safety net or that harbour and asylum for marginalized and vulnerable people in the ways it once did and were expected, then civil

society and the development of mass participation by volunteers and family members will certainly be required. Such a scenario may also signal the end of social work as a profession in England and a reinvestment in community development, third sector organizations that are not aligned, necessarily, to local or central government – although, of course, in practice, many will be funded by such.

Figure 1 The implications of Big Society for social work and social work education

Elements of civil society/big society	Implications	
	Social Work	Social Work Education
Local autonomy, responsibility and accountability	Local policies and procedures Local priorities Challenge to wider social work identity?	Education for generic or specific practice
Decentralisation of power, empowerment of communities	Local authority employment and control	But standards in care, assessment timings, process
Focus on families and volunteers/good neighbours	Reduced staffing Focus on facilitation rather than provision Deprofessionalisation	Numbers/relevance of education Security of jobs – university concerns
Focus on voluntary and third sector charities	Changing workforce profile Qualification issues Deprofessionalisation of social work/ professionalization of third sector?	Focus on statutory work, protection & safeguarding in tension with ‘whole family’ approaches and lifespan approaches

Minor acts of urban kindness: a way forward?

Given this sociology of despair in respect of contemporary social work and social work education in England, we can envision a way forward that disaggregates social workers from the local authority mantle, relocating social workers from ‘Big State’ to ‘Big Society’, and centres around small acts of psycho-social maintenance and repair.

Hall and Smith (2015) interrogate the idea of minor acts of kindness as a counter to the sociology of hopelessness infusing much urban study, drawing on Nigel Thrift’s work on urban repair and maintenance. Citing Plummer (2013), Hall and Smith call for an everyday form of pragmatism that focuses on justice, empathy, kindness and care. In the changing landscape of social work education and practice that we have painted above, the values outlined by Plummer seem to capture those being lost within the profession. Perhaps, therefore, they offer a way forward in recapturing social work’s rationale in England, whilst offering a particular view of civil society.

Thrift (2005) looks at repair as micro practices that are taken seriously as a means for continuation and also mutability in urban life. Small acts of repeated kindness work between urban dystopias and dangerous utopian visions to prevent total decay and fragmentation or an equally hazardous preoccupation with one political perspective for utopia. Thrift's work, however, centres on physical repair to urban infrastructures which although having connections to the urban environment, accessibility and affordable social housing necessary to building positive psycho-social futures for people may not reflect what social workers do in terms of daily practices. Hall and Smith (2015) identify the differences between physical repair and social repair, and it is the latter that links more closely to social work and community development and the philosophies of philanthropy and charity that underpin academic renditions of 'Big Society'.

Hall and Smith (2015) draw on their own research into urban patrols looking at the relationships between mobile groups and urban spaces. In particular they focus on street cleaners and a homeless outreach patrol, both undertaking repair work, one physical and maintaining the urban fabric and one social repair. Both exemplify the importance of urban repair in the maintenance and positive development of urban spaces.

The role of the homeless patrol is to locate and 'street-comb' for a population of authority-wary individuals, to build trust, provide essential goods and to point those people towards services. Each performance of the homeless patrol represents a minor act of social repair and can be construed as part of an infrastructure of kindness that glues together social relations in urban spaces. Hall and Smith (2015) rightly point out that these acts are also political acts of kindness, pointing to the uneven social and spatial provision of repair services and the hegemony of an environmental politics of commodities that precludes repair by evaluating the differential worth of people within social and spaces. For instance, setting eligibility criteria for the receipt of certain services and precluding access to services and goods on the basis of behavior and lifestyle, something they see also on a macro scale in respect of inter-country sanctions in times of civil conflict. The descriptions reflect some of the notions underlying civil society, although they remain funded by local government. However, they also offer the potential for a civil society that draws upon professional expertise, knowledge and skills and something that could represent a potential future for social work. This is given further support from an unlikely source in Atkinson's (2015) 'manifesto' for ethnography, recognizing the social and community roots of ethnography. It is possible to see the required immersion in a community and its culture and the commitment to developing a deep appreciation from a wide variety of sources and forms of data as representing social work practice in a specific community.

The acts of repair they describe are seen as kindness but Hall and Smith (2015) distinguish, as noted above, between acts of physical repair that differ from those of social repair. The former represent acts that are completed for the benefit of social actors themselves and may be construed as selfish acts, we mend physical spaces for ourselves. However, Hall and Smith suggest that unlike physical aspects of the urban infrastructure people do present for repair, avoid offers of repair and services can develop tensions in acting or not acting as a result, being paralyzed from acting under certain circumstances.

What Hall and Smith (2015) fail to acknowledge is that helping the hard-to-reach or making an offer of repair to individuals who reject those offers may also represent selfish acts. Part of the urban lives we inhabit seeks to create interrelational, interactive spaces that are agreeable and mutually satisfying, a harmonious urban infrastructure that provides positive benefit for us all.

This is where social work has a future in developing and contributing to civil society and one which transects big and small state and civil society.

Dialectic isomorphic convergences: A way forward

Theories of isomorphic convergence have developed along three vectors - coercion, normativity and mimesis (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). They are applied to organizational development demonstrating how organizations and even global tendencies tend to coalesce around isomorphic structures that standardize and stultify, although there has been criticism of the idea that such tendencies preclude mutability and, as we shall see, the processes are contingent and dialectic.

In social work education these theories have been used to demonstrate how the development of structures and standards designed to enhance and improve social services for people have assumed an isomorphic tendency (Parker et al. etc...). Global standards and rules set by regulatory and authoritative bodies, whether at the local and national level or indeed at the level of international body, act as coercive agents in defining the 'oughts' and 'musts' of education such as Standards of Proficiency required by the Health and Care Professions Council (REF), the Professional Capabilities Framework demanded by ~~the recently defunct~~ College of Social Work in England (REF), or the Global Standards for Education or value statements delineated by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (REFs). By default these coercive structures create normative assumptions that, once embedded, construct the deviance of those not conforming. The model provides us with a means of theorizing changes in England and also to challenge them, whilst allowing for the development of potential modifications such as internalizing the small acts of kindness into daily practices and education that represent social work in civil society.

Isomorphic convergences can act protectively against forms of practice that are unfair or unjust, but it is important to note that the drive towards isomorphs in educational standards has come predominantly from those nations of the Global North who hold hegemonic positions and, to ensure a 'seat at the table', many nations of the Global South are seeking to mimic the practices of those nations. In fact, Britain, along with the US, has been a key exporter of 'social work' to many nations. This results from Britain's colonial past and also because of its history in the construction and development of welfare systems. In recent years the development of South Africa's Children Act and the Social Work Act in Malaysia owe much to British developments. However, the separation of the four administrations in the UK have heralded a new situation and it is important that the contemporary changes in England, or elsewhere, are not also exported or imported without deep critique. If not tempered by appropriate attention to local

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conditions and indigenous need these isomorphic structures could create a social work that privileges the dominance of neoliberal globalization.

These isomorphisms, as we have noted above, are not static but contingent and negotiated, however, reflecting a dialectic process between global and local welfare and social work systems and synthesizing new forms which are reflected back into the convergent processes at play within the global world. Thus local changes and adaptations to isomorphic structures in ethics, education standards and priorities are possible and changes can be reflected back on to those prevailing structures leading to adjustments. In the case of social work education in England this offers us a useful model for understanding and developing practices. The coercive imposition of social work education models across England requires resistance rather than mimetic acquiescence on behalf of academics if they are to maintain global standing in social work research and education and to reflect social work's commitment to social justice. The pusillanimous approaches made so far have reflected a post-fiscal crisis environment and the marketization and massification of higher education in which fee-income streams are privileged over academic and politico-moral rigour.

Adopting practices of social repair removes social work from the conflicts developing within big state/little state debates and sets social services within the everyday. Thus it is imperative that social work practice grapples with its own locus in England as an entity within local authority politics and its potential to act at the interstices between normative expectations in society and its 'outsiders' (Becker, 1963). Social work education has a role to play through an integration of research, knowledge exchange with social services practitioners, communities and those who use services, and education. In England it is important that a spirit of 'disobedience' is adopted where appropriate to ensure that the knowledge, skills and values of social work academics feeds into future developments rather than responds to employer-led requirements. It is important to reclaim humanity in social work, to emphasise the professionalism of the practitioner and to provide a future that enhances the life chances of those using social work services.

By focusing on interstitial work and small acts of everyday kindness, social workers can bring 'Big Society' into reality whilst loosening it from any party-political connotations. It can also stake a claim to professionalism in itself and apart from social work's predominant local government setting. This requires an educational shift and mutual rather than asymmetric partnership that values the iterative and creative aspects of education rather than the instrumental and commodified educational 'packages' developed through association with current 'Big State' thinking – a political given of both left and right perspectives. This represents England's potential dialectic.

Conclusions

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