Thanks and honour of invitation

The establishment (and disestablishment) of social work in Britain: The ambivalence of public recognition

Introduction

In this paper I will present a brief history of the development of social work in Britain exploring some of the conflicts that derive from gaining acceptability and establishment as a recognised and important role in society. These tensions will be analysed using the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence. The place that social work enjoys as part of the establishment and as an accepted public face of welfare will be critiqued showing both the benefits of acceptance and problems that arise from seeking social approval. I will suggest that contemporary social work is seen as a necessary sacrifice in countering some aspects of this social neurosis.

Background and context

Perhaps one of the criteria identifying a European late modern civilised society concerns its commitment to the welfare, well-being and self-actualisation of its citizens. However, this represents a political statement that oscillates between social change and social control, between care-giving and regulating the workforce. Human rights and social justice represent a central part of social work's mission internationally and these can stand in tension with politically sanctioned and socially approved welfare, and its social regulatory functions. Seeking public recognition is a 'dangerous' and ambiguous pursuit that must be approached with caution, knowledge and reflexivity.

Social work is embedded, historically and politically, within British society. It is underpinned by policy and legislation and, since the inception of the welfare state in 1948, there have been varying degrees of entitlement to social work services understood

as part of the social contract in which government elects to protect people's property and well-being in exchange for people's engagement in that government's socio-political project.

As part of the state apparatus, however, social work runs the risk of being used or influenced by party politics, whilst its professional allegiance is political in another way in seeking social change, justice and human rights. The two aspects may find themselves in conflict, which creates problems for its established position.

This ambiguity and ambivalence in respect of social work is important given the size of the profession in the UK - over 100,000 registered social workers, the majority of whom are female (72.5 per cent). This is a small percentage of the total population, less than 0.2 per cent, but is nonetheless significant in terms of public recognition of the importance of the role. If we are to understand contemporary social work in Britain and its place within the public

psyche, however, we need to understand its history and development.

Historical development of social work in Britain

There is a long history of welfare, charity and state involvement with impoverished, marginalised or vulnerable people in Britain. This involvement has been geared towards the twin goals of social regulation and functioning, and of social and political change. Sometimes these goals act in tandem, but not always, and throughout history there has existed the question of entitlement or eligibility – 'who deserves what'.

The debate concerning the beginning of social work is contested. Whilst social work was put on a clear statutory footing after the creation of the welfare state in 1948, it is generally recognised that it has a much longer history.

The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 marked a turn in legislation designed to 'manage' the poor (although there was prior legislation). A number of practices and welfare assumptions stem from the Poor Laws, which in some semblance remained until the creation of the welfare state almost 350 years later.

- the Poor Law 1601 created a statutory approach to welfare or poor relief – the political domain.

- it constructed systems of management, assessment and delivery – the administrative domain.

- it developed further the distinction between those who were 'deserving' and those who were 'underserving' – the moral domain.

These three domains continue to manifest themselves in contemporary social work. They exert different forms of control, act in tension and tandem and contribute to the public face and acceptability or otherwise of social work.

The Poor Law was recognised as flawed and expensive. Many attempts at reform were made, resulting in the nineteenth century Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 with its deterrent-focused approach which further embedded the system of poor relief as part of the state functions, supposedly separating out those who could not support themselves from those who could and should be encouraged to do so.

The political assumption at this time was that poverty and personal difficulties were the result of individual failing and weakness and therefore the responsibility of the individual rather than the state. The public face of the Poor Law guardians and overseers was one of control and coercion, politically sanctioned administration of public moral assumptions. These functions presaged many incorporated into the public role of welfare and social work.

Alongside Poor Law developments that created a nascent social services system, mental health also came under the purview of the state, which throughout the 19th and 20th centuries created a mental health system akin to that which we have today. This was especially the case in respect of people detained in asylums often on the basis on recommendations from Overseers of the Poor Law. The Overseer became the Relieving Officer, the Mental Welfare Officer and, in the 1983 Mental Health Act, the Approved Social Worker, replaced by the Approved Mental Health Professional in 2007.

Slide 7

Not all developments in early social work were state led. The work of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in the nineteenth century acted in parallel to the Poor Law ideology of deserving and undeserving and individual responsibility. Taking a fiercely moral approach to social services this charitable body augured case management, assessment and eligibility criteria. The first

hospital almoner, Mary Stewart, began as an officer with the COS and took social work assessment and eligibility criteria into the hospital setting.

There were also independent bodies acting from political and/or religious motives such as Dr Barnado in child care, the Salvation Army in respect of temperance, the Probation service and the Settlement Houses which also added to social work's bifurcated development history as part of the state and irritant of the same. These diverse developments led to legislative change showing a desire to bring social services under control as well as to help regularise provision – the public face of welfare was a means of exerting social and political regulation and authority. However, this does not stop social activism as the other side of social work.

<mark>Slide 8</mark>

In 1948 social work services were brought together in local authorities although separated into three departments responsible

for health, welfare and children. This represented a profound change from disparate to coordinated care, from mixed to state provision; it heralded the beginning of state social work.

This situation remained until 1968 when the Seebohm Committee recommended the bringing together of the three areas of social work into social services departments, something which came into operation after the implementation of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. Generic social work, working across children and adult services, was born.

In practice, social work was not generic for long and a split was quick to develop between children's and adult social work and arguments in favour and against specialising in one route or another have continued since. These have been supplemented by reports into the failings of social workers, predominantly in child care with inquiries into adult care failings being, generally, less reported in the press. These show the ambivalent aspects of social

work in the minds of the public. They have driven calls for reform, often driven by shallow political populism, but also by the exigencies of reduced public spending, austerity, and continuation of the philosophy of self-responsibility introduced by Thatcher's neoliberal New Right agenda.

Social work in the UK became a regulated profession under the Care Standards Act 2000 s.61. In respect of the professions in the UK social work was a late entrant given its long history as part of the social and local government fabric of public service and protection, and its equally long history of education in the universities. Social work's history, by that point had shown it to be a recognised and established part of the social fabric accepted by the public.

Scapegoat and sacrificial profession

Tragedies, from the 1970s to the 2000s especially, led to public and political calls for social work reform and blame of social workers, although we can see the trend beginning from much earlier[1]. Reform, regulation and registration has been, however, a two-edged sword and led to increased political control and reduced capacity for political social work on behalf of human rights and social justice and increased responsibilities for social control. This is clearly demonstrated in the calls for reform following the publication of the inquiry into the death of Peter Connelly (Baby P).

Slide 10

Following this tragedy a Reform Board was set up to undertake a route and branch review of social work from recruitment, through education and into professional practice at all levels. At the same time there was increasing recognition that monitoring and regulation alone would not make practice more effective and that social workers needed to be able to exert professional judgements.

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[1] The Monckton inquiry report into the death of foster child Dennis O'Neill in 1945.

So, social workers were seen as part of the problem to be managed and contained but also part of the solution to society's problems, albeit by those with the power to define them as such. The SWRB led to increased control over the selection and recruitment of social work students, what happens during their education, what they do in practice and through their continuing education. Effectively, this has corralled social work as part of the technologies of government. Increased prescription and regulation has redefined social work, to an extent, as a safeguarding force.

Reform, regulation and registration was a two-edged sword and led to increased political control and reduced capacity for political challenge on behalf of human rights and social justice and increased responsibilities for social control. It also reinforced a culture of blame in social work and refreshes the idea that political control will prevent unruly and ill-educated social workers from doing harm. The question we must ask is 'how might we understand these assumptions and actions?'

In the mind of politicians and the general public social work is there to fix and mend society's ills, but also functions to carry society's sins away as a scapegoat, a vessel in which to pour hatred, loathing and blame. It is therefore both loved and hated at the same time – it is an ambivalent object in psychodynamic terms. Because it arouses such strong emotions, in a paradoxical way, it keeps it in the public agenda.

Ambivalence in Freudian psychoanalytic terms represents a conflict between a continuing instinct and an internalised external prohibition of acting on that instinct. It is not easily resolved as there is a constant wish to perform an act that is also, at the same time, detested.

Abraham extended this thinking offering a way of approaching social work as a common and accepted social object. Abraham's model begins with a pre-ambivalent stage which moves through a four-stage violent developmental journey related to consumption, digestion and expulsion:

i. late oral stage – seeking total incorporation of the object (cannibalistic phase) – a time at which government was seeking to incorporate social work into mainstream social functions

ii. anal-sadistic stage – seeking expulsion and destruction of the object – blaming, punishing and redefining social work in response to tragedies and public outcry

iii. late anal-sadistic stage - seeking conservation and dominance of social work – the subsequent reform and control of social work

iv. genital phase of love towards a complete object (postambivalence) – a stage which has not been reached in respect of social work

In such a view, social work's place in society presents a social neurosis. Rosenzweig on the other hand considers that the ambivalence rests with the stimulating object rather than the responding subject.

Ambivalence can lead to displacement (*Verschiebung*) as a social defence mechanism by which society directs negative emotions aroused by tragedies or perceived transgressions of normative social order on to social workers or social work as less threatening entities. The aim is to shift feelings on to this less threatening object and to resolve internal conflicts. Over time, this leads to the diminution of social work and social workers through increased control and regulation. A different response is required for social work to grow positively.

In Rosensweig's analysis we may identify three ways in which ambivalence operates in social work.

1. as a part of government machinery, it operates as a stimulating object for the general public who have faced ambivalence in public institutions and governments as well as in interpersonal relationships.

2. social work, as a profession, also represents an ambivalent object that stimulates the general public who express hatred and loathing, whilst desire the care and support offered by social workers when they or their families are in need.

3. social work acts as a stimulating object for government who want to control a despised and costly object, which makes tragic mistakes, whilst also wanting to ensure people are treated with concern and helped, especially if this gains votes.

These three faces of ambivalence can be exemplified using the case example of Peter Connelly (Baby P).

Ambivalence and public institutions

In parliament the government faced criticism from the opposition concerning the 'failures' in public services that led to the death of Peter. An unspoken assumption permeated this political attack that those public services, and social work in particular, were in some way under the control and purview of the government and therefore when tragedy occurred it was in itself a governmental failure.

There was a degree of ambivalence demonstrated in the actions of other public institutions and professions towards social work, notably the police. The inquiry report was released early to the opposition in part to allay some of the concerns raised against

police actions and to divert attention towards the failures of others. Professional ambivalence is seen in the necessity of working together as professions to safeguard the public but also in opposition when one's professional tribe was also under attack.

The general public also express ambivalence to governmental institutions and social work, as one of these bodies, attracts that suspicion and distrust. In respect of Baby Peter's death the government responded to accusations of public distrust by shifting the blame from the child's actual killers to the services involved, arguing there were missed opportunities, poor practice and poor education of social workers that led to this tragedy occurring.

Ambivalence – the public's love/hate relationship with social work

When child abuse investigations and inquiries come to the attention of the public, generally through the media, ambivalence is clear. For instance, social workers involved in the Cleveland

Inquiry (1980s) and in the Orkney's ritual abuse allegations (1990s) became the objects of public hatred and disgust for removing children from their families, and no doubt exposing the public to practices they would rather not acknowledge and thus increasing that disgust as a way of coping with it.

In the case of Maria Colwell, Jasmine Beckford, Kimberley Carlisle and the child central to our example, Peter Connelly, social workers were the object of disgust and hatred because they did not remove and protect the child. The popular newspaper *The Sun* campaigned openly for social workers to be sacked, gaining signatures in its petition and encouraging a public outpouring of vitriol against the social workers involved. Even the government minister, Ed Balls, joined in this clamour resulting in the removal of the director of Children's Services, Sharon Shoesmith and the sacking of social workers in the borough. The public display of 'bloodlust' acted to deflect attention from growing austerity measures, and also focused the blame on social workers rather

than the health and police services involved (although all three services were criticised in the inquiry report).

However, the opposite side of the public relationship was portrayed at the meeting of the Social Work Taskforce in December 2009. The singer 'Goldie', himself someone who had spent time in local authority care as a youngster, spoke passionately about the good social workers who helped him. The profession, facing a barrage of criticism also looked for positive stories of social work and care.

The ambivalence is seen in wanting social work services available where there is need but, believing this to attract stigma, would attempt to avoid connections with them.

<mark>Slide 18</mark>

Governmental ambivalence about social work

At the time the Peter Connelly inquiry was published the financial crisis had permeated governments across the world, the UK included. Whilst it is not suggested that the adoption of cost-cutting austerity measures and retrenchment of public services had a direct impact on the government's response to the death of Peter Connelly, the indirect association is clear. Social work is a necessary part of the apparatus of modern government. It helps to regulate society, ensure the well-being of the workforce (potential, actual and past), and to protect members of the public from malign forces and anti-social elements and acts as a buffer to governmental blame.

Social work, however, is not just a desired profession it is also demonised and detested because of its cost, its rebellious, uncontained nature which criticises government, and because it 'fails' to protect and safeguard all citizens all of the time.

Social workers' ambivalence

The direction of stimulation can be seen the other way too. Social workers may feel ambivalent about their public face and political establishment. From one perspective social workers cling to their privileged position as part of local government whilst from another position they may actively campaign for social justice and human rights against their employers and organisations. The unforeseen consequences of public establishment concern the increased prescription and regulation in practice that have channelled much of social work into a state function. In turn, this has the ambivalent potential to perform the state's wishes on the people or to enjoin with an assumed social common good – protection, safeguarding and well-being.

Ambivalence in a psychoanalytic sense offers an explanatory framework for the two-sided face that society presents towards social work as an embedded social object and function. We may

question how this ambivalence can be resolved and what future

lies ahead for social work.

Social work is both a loved and hated feature of society. It is

blamed for tragedies yet sought out when there are social and

intrapersonal needs. A Kleinian approach to ambivalence may

offer more than Abraham's model. When we recognise that

ambivalence permeates social and intrapersonal life and allows us

to assess and evaluate it provides the public with power. Klein

allows for a dialectical interplay between opposite positions in

resolving conflicts arising from ambivalence towards the object.

This may offer a way forward in respect of social work, in

decision-making and choice taking and is rational, creative and

perceptive. State recognition for social work can be tempered by

relational methods that are embedded in human rights and social

justice. At times these rest on metaphorical, and sometimes actual,

sacrificial acts by social workers.

Sacrifice, social work and the dialectic of ambivalence

Ambivalence as a dialectic allows for a positive portrayal of sacrifice. In the role of 'sacrifice' that social work maintains its public face – carrying away the transgressions of society and being loaded with guilt by society (displacement). Sacrifice also offers a way forward to maintain professional integrity by walking in solidarity with marginalised, disadvantaged and stigmatised people - social work offering itself as an expiation on behalf of the people with whom social workers practise. Social workers are associated with sacrifice in two ways: sacrificial victims and martyrs in solidarity.

Even where there are no grounds for suggesting social workers did not respond to evidence of abuse, inquiries may tend to blame them for being over-optimistic and failing to challenge 'disguised compliance'. The deep-seated need to create distance between

'them' and 'us' reflects the need for social work to assume blame and accept public anger.

Social worker as sacrificial victim

Social workers can be tainted by association with the contexts and lives of service users with a social 'wrong' and who through trial by media are required to offer a sacrifice – reputation, job, position – in this way the 'sins' of society are expiated.

Social workers, therefore, become much needed instruments of society who can be sacrificed to maintain the social and political status quo or can be used by government to deflect attention from pressing social and structural problems.

Social workers represent a symbolic reminder of the social wrongs that have led to a public outcry. The public demand that social

workers can and must carry these wrongs to mitigate them and salve the pain of society and those who employ and regulate social work.

Using our example of the death of Baby Peter, politicians and media piled the guilt for and distress arising from this tragedy onto the social workers involved and then director of children's services, publicly rebuking them and highlighting their failings. This culminated in calls for punishment enacted by sackings, disciplinary hearings and public humiliation. The social workers were used, as a sacrifice, to deflect attention from government responsibilities whilst acting as a psycho-social defence against contagion by the 'feared other', the abusers themselves. This scapegoat or sacrificial rite, however, does not offer support those who require its services.

Social worker as martyr in solidarity

Social workers act in solidarity with those in emotional, social and spiritual distress by standing besides people and being associated with them. Social workers champion new understandings and promote the wellbeing of marginalised people. By doing so social workers offer the potential to resolve the ambivalent relationship by fostering new, shared and constructive approaches to social problems.

As a human rights and social justice led profession, however, social work concerns resistance, resilience and hope which also remove the assumed uncleanness of those people who are marginalised and oppressed in society. State sponsored social work has become part of the problem rather than seeking to align itself with those in uncertain, insecure positions. Standing with the oppressed accords well with social work values, but the insecurities of social workers as local government employees makes this difficult to achieve. This represents one of the

disadvantages of gaining public acceptance and face as a profession.

Social work practice would see the facilitation of a collective response to people's need and/or oppression as necessary to effecting change. This requires a transformatory rite to atone for the wrongdoing of the state, a sacrifice which social work, as part of the state social system, can provide alongside the people by exposing the wrongs done to the people and standing beside the people as they work together to change them.

Through this ritual, private identity is replaced by a collective identity. Acting together enhances human rights and social justice through adding a social work voice to those of the oppressed.

This act of solidarity attracts society's opprobrium whilst at the same time removing the stain of wrongdoing from society. The rituals performed by social workers including the sacrifices made

represent both an abuse of a 'consumed object' and active technologies of resistance. Sacrifice offers hope. If social workers remain part of the system their rituals simply assuage the guilt of those with power. If social workers resist the status quo and stand alongside marginalised people they have a chance to transform society and the lives of those with whom they practise.

Slide 26