

At a conference concerned with “looking to the future”, it seems to me that we should ask – is there anything from the recent past say, from the 1970s, which offers some guidance for the future? History does not repeat itself, in the sense of a re-enactment of precise sets of circumstances. However, if we can identify some key issues which have underlain the difficulties in which social work has found itself, they can be applied to future developments. All I can do today is to offer a kind of “taster”, a sample of the work that needs to be done.

There seem to me to be four central issues:

- The development of appropriate professional confidence
- A clearer understanding of the essence of social work
- Better integration of appropriate theory into practice
- The determined affirmation of core values

The development of appropriate professional confidence

The 1970s saw the beginning of a downward trend in social work confidence. In the early post-war years, social work was energetic and optimistic despite the fact that practice was full of black holes and social work education was struggling to get off the ground in the face of rapidly expanding training.

At the very point when it seemed that social work would take its place as an emergent profession within statutory structures, as social service departments were created, as

CCETSW came into being, as BASW was formed (out of separate organisations), as the concept of 'generic' social work took hold – whilst all this was happening, ill-assorted forces were gathering to undermine its progress. These forces included the rise of a particular group of sociologists who attacked social workers' aspirations to become 'professionals'; cries of 'elitism' rent the air. This struck a raw nerve in social work, reflected in the BASW decision to abandon a requirement for qualification to become a member. (This was disastrous in political and Political terms). From 1979, (preceded by a period of hostility whilst in opposition), the Thatcherite reign began, with a particular brand of antagonism to both local government and social work. This was in contrast to the earlier days of Conservative leadership. When Tories were Toffs; they knew that the poor would always be with us. Part of their political contract was to Make Allowance for the Poor. This was why, in general, social work services of that time were better in the Tory shires than in the old Labour controlled towns. A true devotee of the early Welfare State believed that improvement in working people's conditions, housing, benefits and so on, would make social work redundant. The Thatcher administration sought, in their word, to "reform" the concept of a welfare state. (Some of us would say "undermine"). It had to pay attention to child abuse, however, because of public opinion. But, in general, the movement towards a recognised, well trained profession was seriously slowed down by political lack of enthusiasm. (This is amply evidenced in the history of CCETSW in that period). Of course, other factors were at play, including the attitude of the relevant trade unions to post qualifying training.

There is also much to be said about the impact of New Labour on the social work project. But that is fresh in your memories and is for another time. Meanwhile, we need to be thinking and watching as the next election looms and asking ourselves – if elected what would a Cameron administration want of social work? The trouble is that this political leopard – conservatism – can change its spots. But will it, and how?

However, we cannot see this erosion of our confidence as simply about other people being nasty to us. In 1970, the creation of social service departments was motivated by a genuine desire to improve the structure at local government level within which the social work and social care were delivered. Unfortunately, these 'reforms' were an early example, constantly repeated in more recent years, of *politically driven attempts to achieve improvements in service delivery without adequate understanding of the complex factors involved and their resource implications.*

Surely this is a lesson we can take into the future?

Into all this, there fell in 1973 the bombshell of the Maria Colwell Inquiry. It set in train a series of events which are with us today. Child abuse and the desperate search for effective child protection had profound effects on social work, not only because it is intrinsically such a complex problem but also because it took over the public and political agenda regarding social work, distorting the reality of the wide ranging tasks which social work engages. It was followed by decades of such inquiries, including major

scandals in residential child care. Residential child care (with reason) sank in public esteem when sexual abuse was uncovered and there was manifest failure to meet the challenge of the distorted older children coming into such care. An unfortunate side effect of this was lack of public understanding of, and respect for, the progress being made in the field of fostering and adoption. this.

In this context generally, of growth in professional confidence, *can we also reappraise the value of the wide ranging research which has been a feature of the years since 1970, much of it sponsored by government?* There is an awful tendency to rush on to the next thing and lose the 'corporate memory' of what we now know about the social work role and the clients which it serves. (Yes, I reject "service users" as a description).

A clearer understanding of the essence of social work

The significance of this, which, of course, must underlie growth in confidence, has been emphasised by Moira Gibb in her keynote address. Social work, perhaps not uniquely but distinctively, is a process in which the importance of the inner and outer world's of the person to be helped must be balanced. That is to say, in each individual case, the process can vary; in one, it is the individuals' inner fears and anxieties disturbing ordinary life, and their repercussions, which dominate the social work agenda; in another, it is poverty and material hardship. It is often both but the mix can be very different and change over time. Social workers must have the capacity to respond creatively to both. This way, we do not get blown off course to become, on the one

hand, more like psycho-therapists or 'counsellors' or, on the other, administrators, however benign.

Such general statements, however, have to be worked out in relation to changing structures and roles. For example, how does this apply to social work in the context of schools, hospitals, hospices, and so on?

The past years have shown how uncertain we are about identity of social work in different settings. I am not sure why; it does not seem to me to be anything like as difficult as people make it out to be! *It is critical for confidence now to do this work, especially when others are brought in to perform social care roles, hitherto thought of as 'social work'*. This is especially evident in adult care. A specific agency as host has a perfect right to use social work in relation to particular issues which concern it most. It does not have the right to deny social work its proper role, the flexibility of moving between these inner and outer worlds of their clients as appropriate.

Integration of appropriate theory into practice

This raises complex issues of different kinds of theory which cannot be explored here. For example, there are theories to do with human behaviour and theories about modes of treatment. Social workers have to 'pick and mix' for their purposes; there is nothing wrong with that – doctors, for example, do the same. It is important to understand that none of us are 'theory-free'. We all operate on sets of assumptions, on frameworks for

making sense of what we see. In so doing, we select and discard, so that the same family or individual may be differently perceived by different professionals/workers who are differently tasked. There is a real danger, however, when professionals are not aware of their own assumptions and not open to challenge.

In recent years, we have seen mounting criticism of assessment procedures which amass 'facts' (so called) and a description without a theoretical framework by which sense can be made of them. Looking back, we can see that government documents (such as the famous 'assessment triangle'), have been 'theory light' – perhaps behind this lay a fear of being controversial? Unfortunately, the impact of social work reports, especially those for the courts, has been weakened by this.

Here, then, is another (big) piece of work, perhaps most important for social work educators. How do we facilitate the selection and integration of "theory for use"?

This is an area, however, in which we need help. This was brought home to me recently in preparing a lecture on the work of Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and psychoanalyst, on 'the anti-social tendency' in young people and its relevance to us today. To help me, I bought a very fat book, with more than 1000 pages and more than 30 chapters. It is a highly respectable, scholarly text on criminology. (MacQuire et al 2007). I found to my surprise that there were only 3 or 4 chapters which could be described as putting forward a 'psychological' view of crime and delinquency – leave alone psycho-

analytic. The book is overwhelmingly sociological in the way it seeks to understand these social problems. Indeed, one of the 'psychological' chapters specifically addresses the lack of dialogue between these two important disciplines. (Hollin 2007) It is so obvious that both have a part to play in our understanding and it is critical for social workers because it will affect the actual work which they do with the "anti social" family and the individual. *Thus, we need help from those better qualified in certain disciplines than we are to begin to make these links.*

Determined affirmation of core values

Since the end of the 1970s, the post-war consensus of the welfare state has been profoundly challenged. In this are all the debates about private/public/voluntary sectors in social welfare. What can we say about this in relation to its impact on social work values? There seem to me to be 3 core values to be upheld and fought for if we are to claim to be social workers.

The first is blindingly obvious but is under threat. That is: the needs and rights of those we seek to help must remain the overriding priority of the work.

I am not naïve; I am well aware that resources are limited, that there are competing priorities, even in practice with families, between, say, parent and child and that there are compromises which have to be made. But there must be consistent vigilance about this moral duty and therefore a willingness to stand up and be counted when conflicts

arise. From what I read, the recent problems in the GSSC about serious delay in hearing cases related to conduct or discipline of social workers may be a good example of where priorities to protect clients may have been put aside for other resource driven priorities.

More generally, the growth of independent 'for profit' fostering agencies has afforded some worrying examples of the conflict between the model of shareholders and profit and the needs of profoundly deprived children. Another example, to which Moira Gibb made reference, concerns the agenda of "personalisation" in adult care. There is something deeply uncomfortable about an assertion of a person's rights to make his/her own decisions (which happen to save money) without careful assessment of whether they wish to do so. Yet again, recent history is replete with 'perverse incentives', in which targets may work *against* the rights and needs of people. (See, for example, reducing numbers on the child protection register).

This issue is so important and urgent. There must be people with some authority to whom social workers can take their concerns. Their impotence within many employing organisations is clear to see and is even more difficult to resolve than 'whistle blowing' in individual cases. This may be an important role for 'a college'?

The second core value concerns the centrality of the relationship between worker and client. Social work is about doing things *with* people, not *to* them, as far as that can be achieved. The implications of this are far reaching. Qualities which are generally

recognised as integral to all significant relationships, such as concerned reliability, must be present in professional ones. For example, I hope I never hear again of a social worker for a refugee young person who came to a meeting without having read the file and, not knowing his parents had been killed, asked him if he wanted to go back and live with them.

Here I would like to read to you what my former tutor Clare Winnicott wrote on the subject of professional relationships.

‘Our professional relationship is in itself the basic technique, ... by means of which we relate ourselves to the individual and to the problem’...Our professional self ‘is the most highly organised and integrated part of ourselves, It is the best part of ourselves... we get reassurance about our value and goodness because people can take and use what we give. Our professional relationships are more balanced and reliable than our personal lives’. (Clare Winnicott 1955, Casework techniques in the child care service. Pp. 149/50).

The third core value is a requirement for social workers rather to them. The organisations which employ social workers must find ways of ensuring that social workers can fulfil their obligations and use their skills. I am much cheered by the emphasis the Social Work Task Force seems to be placing on this.

An example which makes me angry concerns the role of social workers in relation to childrens' contact with their parents. I find it deplorable that so few children go on car journeys for those purposes with their social worker. They offer ideal opportunities to work with children in this most sensitive area. Of course, it is not always necessary. But the presumption should be that it is necessary in many cases. More generally, there have to be ways of helping social workers' bear the burden of difficult and stressful work, of which skilled and sensitive supervision or peer group consultation are two examples.

So what has this mini-rant been about?

It is a plea to grasp the opportunities which seem to be presenting themselves at this moment to re-establish the credibility of our ideal; that is: a well grounded, reasonably confident profession. Implicit in this must be the goal of organising ourselves better *as a profession*, of using our intellectual resources more effectively, and of helping to shape organisational structures fit for the purpose of doing social work.

It is also a plea to you to get a grasp of *some* of the history – what takes your fancy – and see whether there are detailed lessons to be learnt and how they might be used positively for the future. There are different kinds of history – all of which we have been neglecting. There is the relevance of our clients' history to their lives today; there is our

own personal history and the effects of this on our work; and there is the history of our struggling profession. All require attention.

Olive Stevenson

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References

Website: www.ostevenson.com. This website contains a substantial number of papers relevant to the context of this paper.

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