Social Work values in a time of austerity: a luxury we can no longer afford?

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Aims of presentation

• Explore the problems of upholding Social Work identity and values in times of austerity
• Note that social work takes place in professional, organisational and political contexts and that these do not necessarily sit comfortably together
• Remind us of definitions of social work
• Problems for social work in contemporary organisational settings
• Note the gap – how it is – how it ought to be
• What are the choices facing social work?
• What are the opportunities for promoting the Social Work profession in the current climate?
• The social work profession facilitates social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.
• Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion.

International Federation of Social Workers – values for social work
• Social Worker as resource manager
• Social worker as helper
• Social worker changing the world
• Politics as the manipulation of power to control access to resources
• Social work can be seen as an aspect of state power in this sense
• Social workers are the gate-keepers to scarce welfare resources
• Increasingly assessment is of eligibility not needs?
• What about social work as social inclusion and social justice?
• Where are the opportunities for realising the political rhetoric of prevention?

Social work as a political activity
• There are contexts that are part of what defines our professional identity:
  • Social political and economic context – hostile government, austerity, resource shortfall.
  • Constraints of organisational and legal context
  • Who we are and what we bring to our profession – use of self – old-fashioned idea or all that is left?
  • Also – what binds us together and defines our collective identity – what would a room full of social workers agree on?
  • Need to think about supportive ‘communities of practice’ – not welcomed in some organisations – but a necessity where there is fragmentation or isolation

Social Work identity
• Some aspects of professional social work identity:
  • Autonomy – collective autonomy
  • Person-centred approaches
  • Holistic approach
  • Understanding practice in its political, historical economic and social context
  • Participatory working – colleagues, service users, communities
  • Service user focus or involvement
  • Values – respect, human rights, social justice
  • Critical reflection

• Not exclusive individually but builds a whole picture

Social Work identity
• Target culture and perverse incentives – e.g. rough sleeper initiative, ‘quick win’ assessments, management priorities for social workers’ time

• Poverty and health inequalities - life expectancy for males in unskilled jobs is 6.1 years less than for professionals in Ireland (15 years less than average for Travellers) (Irish Medical Organisation 2012)

• Boy living in Glasgow suburb of Calton will live on average 28 years less than a boy born in nearby affluent Lenzie (WHO August ‘08).

• Health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries – Ireland in top 6 for health and social problem index and in top 8 for income inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009)

Contemporary problems for social work practice
• 10% of Irish children live in constant poverty
• Irish men have the lowest life expectancy in the EU at 65 (Public Health Alliance Ireland)
• 22% of the Irish population live in jobless households
• Jobless adults in Ireland are more likely to live with children (Economic and Social Research Institute 2012)
• Under 40s hardest hit by recession and austerity in Ireland – greater effect on children
• Close to 200,000 gave up health cover in the last five years (Economic and Social Research Institute 2012)

Contemporary problems for social work practice
• Quotation from Jones (Ferguson et al 2005)
• Eligibility thresholds and crisis work
• Social work and direct payments – empowerment or individualisation/fragmentation of consumers of welfare?
• Choice and empowerment – or privatising public services – community resources?
• Austerity leading to cuts in budget for voluntary sector and independent sector organisations
• Organisations increasingly require social workers & managers to assess eligibility and ration resources
• Marginalisation of social work values within integrated organisations.
• Privatisation of social work services? Problems of changed conditions of service.

Contemporary problems for social work practice
In the face of continued inequality and social injustice:

- Accept the status quo – (SW as resource manager)
- Work to alleviate problems caused by poverty and discrimination through current organisations. (SW as helper)
- Resist the status quo both in outcome and organisation (SW as changing the world)
  - 3 part model for social work practice (Payne 2002)

Social Worker choice:
• A rhetorical approach – but is there an element of truth in your experience?
• How do you define your identity as a social worker in the current climate?
• Do you have examples of clashes between expected practice and your professional values?
• Do you feel comfortable discussing them?

Is it true for you?
• On two counts:
• One to maintain the critical edge to our practice so we can be more effective operating in the political climate of social work
• Secondly so that we can resist the undermining of our professional identity, and the further marginalisation of people using SW services

Opportunities for resistance
Opportunities for resistance

- Legislation
- Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers (CORU)
- Critical reflective practice
- Theories for anti-oppressive practices
- Service user involvement
- Community orientation
- Collective action
• Equal Status Act (2000)
• Anti-discrimination in relation to specific groups
• Promoting equality
• Impact assessments
• Specifically - promoting the interests of children and adults in the face of challenge to their human rights

Legislation
4. Promoting social justice

- You should promote social justice in your practice, through:
  - challenging negative discrimination and unjust policies and practices;
  - recognising and respecting diversity;
  - demonstrating cultural competence;
  - advocating for the fair distribution of resources based on identified levels of risk/need;
  - working towards social inclusion.

Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers
7. Demonstrating ethical awareness

d) If there is a conflict between this Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics and a registrant’s work environment, the registrant’s obligation is to the Code.

e) Subject to your duty to act in the best interests of your service users, you have a responsibility to engage and advocate with the relevant authorities to promote the provision of appropriate resources and facilities.

f) You have a duty to assist in the efficient and effective use of resources and to give advice on their appropriate allocation. While balancing a duty of care to the individual service user, you should be aware of the wider need to use limited resources efficiently and responsibly. Such awareness should inform decision making in your practice.

g) Written records of advocacy on behalf of services or service users should be kept on file, demonstrating the registrant’s efforts to address concerns.

**Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers**
9. Acting in the best interests of service users
You must:
• treat service users as individuals;
• respect diversity, different cultures and values and not condone, facilitate or collaborate with any form of discrimination
• respect and, where appropriate, promote or advocate the views and wishes of service users and carers;

Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers
• support service users’ rights to take part in all aspects of the service and to make informed choices about the service they receive;
• help service users to reach informed decisions about their lives and promote their autonomy.
• protect service users if you believe that they are threatened by a colleague’s conduct, performance or health. The safety of service users must always come before any personal and professional loyalties;
• work in line with the principles of human rights and social justice.

Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers
• Critical approaches see knowledge as situated in social, economic and historical contexts (Fook 2002)
• Knowledge is subjective and reflects power relationships
• Critical reflection then challenges dominant knowledge and social relations
• What effect do they have in the practice context?
• Identifying legitimate and non-legitimate power
• Important in SW where professionals habitually work with people whose voice is excluded due to – e.g. homophobia, racism, ageism, disability, class prejudice etc.
• E.G. people with learning difficulties and independent living
THEORY FOR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

Capitalism and the construction of poverty (e.g. Ferguson and Woodward 2005)

Radical social work as a critique of the history of the welfare state and its contradictions within a capitalist mode of production – dealing with the consequences of the constant reproduction of class conflict, poverty and discrimination

No mainstream parties in Europe are interested in anything but managing these contradictions - no interest in dealing with poverty

Capitalist democracy - perpetuating inequalities – racism, disability etc.
THEORY FOR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

Leonard - SW based on the pathology of individuals not the pathology of social systems which create class discrimination, poverty etc. Blaming the poor. Logical not pathological behaviour

Spirit Level argument (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009) – unequal societies that create the worst outcomes – (www.equalitytrust.org.uk)

Empowerment requires a theory of power

Anarchist social work: testing the legitimacy of any power relationship – closely associated with anti-oppressive practice

Anti-racist perspectives – structural & institutional discrimination
THEORY FOR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

Social model of disability, normalisation, ageism

Feminist theory; patriarchy - political, social, cultural and economic domination of women in their social relationships with men.

Strengths perspectives: avoiding problem and needs focused practice

IFSW - social work and social justice – an area for legitimate professional social work activity
Service user involvement

- Rationale - consumerist or democratic? (Beresford and Croft 1994)
  - Participation, meaning and ownership
- Doing this on an individual basis through ‘good’ practice - active listening, advocacy, acknowledging strengths, focusing on potential
- Collectively using systems for involvement wherever we are – in Universities, in public, voluntary or private organisations
- Listening to communities & user groups - avoid the primacy of politician, manager and practitioner definitions of need.
- Building alliances in our workplaces, and in organisations such as IASW & SWAN, working with organisations that are run by and for service users.
SERVICE USERS IN COMMUNITIES NOT IN MARKETS

• Revisiting of community work and community orientation to practice

• A radical alternative to individualised and pathologising care management, risk assessment, and consumerism

• The ideology of individualism (Plant 1974)

• Choice + individual consumers in a market of care (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Ferguson, Lavalette and Whitmore 2004)

• Need to focus on community support networks and not just atomised individuals
COLLECTIVE ACTION

• Networking with other organisations – e.g. Trades Unions who have members in work or not who are benefit claimants – but also other organisations – new social movements – not specifically linked to poverty – but who deal with social injustice. Noting the nature of demands/needs as comprising a lack of something specific but also a more general lack of social justice – seeking out commonalities.
COLLECTIVE ACTION

• Think radical democracy – revealing the particular demands of individuals and communities which are made invisible by the universalist ideology of neo-liberalism – e.g. individual choice and consumerism – exposing the way this ideology blames individuals for not being able to choose within markets – the way the ideology creates feelings of failure in meeting the requirements of neo-liberal ideology.

• ‘All of our grievances are connected’

• So connect
ALL OF OUR GRIEVANCES ARE CONNECTED
Collective approaches

• Collectivism not individualism
  • Diversity and difference – important for practice with individuals in need.
  • Choice, quality and collective user involvement
  • Alliances reflecting mutual interests
  • Strength in unity - working together – what about the Union? What about other organisations – e.g. IASW & SWAN?
  • What about communities of practice?
  • How might Universities help with this?
  • Speaking truth to power
"If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing."

MALCOLM X
• Legislation
• Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers (CORU)
• Critical reflective practice
• Theories for anti-oppressive practices
• Thinking about your power
• Service user involvement
• Community orientation
• Collective action

Are these practices feasible for you? What other ideas help you maintain your professional identity?
7 ACTIONS FOR A CONTEMPORARY RADICAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

• Making political nature of social work explicit
• Developing a critically reflective approach to organisation and practice
• Making alliances with service users
• Advocacy for service user needs
• Community as a focus for SW practice
• Practice based on social justice not market forces
• Acting collectively
• Being disobedient!
‘Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is our original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and through rebellion.’
In conclusion – if we are committed to social work and social justice:

Let us develop our understanding and our skills in acting politically wherever we are.

Let us not be afraid to expose the powerful ideology that underpins individual and organisational policy and practice.

Let us judge our practice on values of social justice not the values of resource control, privatisation and profit.

Let us make alliances wherever we can, especially with service users – all our grievances are connected.

Let us not wait for others to make it happen.

Let us take control of our professional destiny in order to make a difference in the lives of the most marginalised people in our societies.
Some resources

- [http://thespiritleveldocumentary.com/](http://thespiritleveldocumentary.com/)
- [http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/)

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