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The Role Of The Social Worker In The 21st Century – A Literature Review

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The Role Of The Social Worker In The 21st Century – A Literature Review

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Introduction

This review of the role of the social worker was commissioned by the Scottish Executive to inform the work of the 21st Century Social Work Review group. This group was set up in 2004 by the Education Minister, Mr Peter Peacock, under the chairmanship of Mr William Roe. We surveyed a large volume of literature covering social work across much of the developed world.

Our prime focus is the role of the social worker across different service systems and national contexts. The role of the social worker nevertheless must always be understood in the context of the many kinds of social work service to be found in different administrative and legislative systems and in different historical and political contexts.

A profession in crisis?

Some recent commentators have suggested that social work is a profession in crisis. As one publication put it:

Social work in Britain today has lost direction. This is not new. Many have talked about social work being in crisis for over thirty years now. The starting point for this manifesto, however, is that the 'crisis in social work' can no longer be tolerated. We need to find more effective ways of resisting the dominant trends within social work and map ways forward for a new engaged practice (Jones et al., 2004).

Others see it as a profession that is evolving and changing and having reached a critical stage in its development in terms of its aspirations and organisational structure. Such issues identified include:

- A crisis in professional identity
- The erosion of professional boundaries
- The lack of professional recognition
- A shortage of qualified social workers
- The growth of para-professionals
- The failure to recruit
- High turnover rates and concern at the numbers leaving professional social work in local authority settings
- Working conditions
- Much 'social work' is being carried out by non qualified workers/carers
- The lack of resources necessary to allow social work to be effectively practised.

Defining social work

Academic experts, policymakers and leaders of the profession hold widely differing ideas about the basic nature of social work. It is subject to different definitions and its language can be confusing. There is no universally accepted idea of valid knowledge, skills or expertise for social workers.

1. Is social work suffering a crisis of professional identity – or is it just in the process of continuing change and adaptation to ever-changing social needs, political expectations and service priorities?

Different ideas about social work partly explain the gap between what social workers say they want to achieve and what they are actually able to accomplish within the constraints of the institutional settings where they work. Such differences also partly account for the gap between the expectations of those who seek to enter the profession and what they experience when they are in employment. Materials offered by training institutions rarely (though with some exceptions) offer prospective students any definition of what social work is.

Despite these different views there is fairly wide agreement that social work is committed to rights and justice; and that it exists to assist, support and enable those who suffer from the negative effects of social inequalities. Social work has a function of social integration:

'the function of social work is to maintain a stable though not static society and maintain the rights and opportunities for those who in an unplanned, uncontrolled community would go to the wall' (Davies, 1990).

It is also widely seen as having the function of dealing with failures in other social policy areas such as crime, health or education.

One particular statement of the nature of social work has been agreed in the international community and has been accepted in many quarters. In 2001, the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Work agreed the following definition:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IASSW, 2001).

Though of a very general nature the IFSW statement does promote a set of basic commitments for social work. It locates the social work task at the interface between the individual and his/her environment. It identifies the importance of social justice and rights and working with disempowered members of our communities. It also underlines the affinity between social work, the human rights conventions and the more recent legislation that strengthens the enforcement of human rights.

2. What is the distinctive character and contribution of social work compared with other professions in the health and social services?

Core values

There is wide agreement about the basic values of social work. Based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, social work should promote the rights to individual self-determination and participation in society. Social workers should challenge discrimination, recognise diversity, and work to overcome social exclusion. These values are substantially constant across different societies and throughout the history of social work.

What is distinctive about social work is the vision of the person's needs in the context of his or her life situation as a whole. Whereas other professions may be concerned more with particular aspects of a person's life, such as health, education, housing or income needs, social work is committed to working with the whole person and addressing the interrelatedness of different issues.

The 'crisis' in social work is seen by many as rooted in the difficulty, under current conditions, of upholding and pursuing the values of social work. The inability to operate according to core principles may partly account for the numbers leaving the profession.

The role of the social worker

A number of key themes of the role of the social worker can be identified in the literature. Social workers may play all of these roles in different contexts and in various mixes at different times in their career; and there may well be conflict between them. The roles are as follows.

Counsellor (or caseworker) who works with individuals to help them address personal issues. This has been a powerful and recurrent ideal throughout the history of social work and has been closely associated with its core values of respect and recognition of the inherent worth of every individual.

Advocate on behalf of the poor and socially excluded. The social worker can support individuals or groups by assisting them to give their own voice to their wishes, needs and aspirations. The advocacy role still privileges the notion of a close relationship between client/service user and social worker.

Partner working together with disadvantaged or disempowered individuals and groups. The empowerment of the client or group is a major objective.

Assessor of risk or need. Social workers have been given an increasing role in the assessment of need and risk over a number of client groups. The concern has been that assessment may be at the cost of fulfilling the casework role with individuals, families and groups. Assessment may be seen to be associated with policing or surveillance, leading to a fracture in the relationship between the client/service user and the social worker.

Care manager who arranges services for users in a mixed economy of care, but may have little direct client contact. In the mixed economy of care, social workers may arrange care for individuals which is carried out by non qualified social workers or those working within the voluntary or private sectors.

Agent of social control who helps to maintain the social system against the demands of offenders or other individuals whose behaviour is problematic.

3. The role of the social worker ranges across counselling, advocacy, partnership, needs assessment, care management and social control. Are these roles compatible with each other? Should they all be undertaken by the publicly funded social work services?

A continental perspective

A variant approach to social work is found in the continental tradition of social pedagogy. This stresses the educational role of the professional and the potential of individuals to address their family and social situation through the acquisition of appropriate skills and knowledge. Social pedagogy involves:

- working with individuals on a relationship basis
- assisting individuals in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to be a member of appropriate social groups – the family, community and society
- often sharing the life space of the individuals involved.

Social pedagogy shares with the main tradition of social work the emphasis on human relationships and a holistic approach to social problems. While there is no guarantee that it would readily translate into a UK context, the Kilbrandon report's proposed creation of a social education department is reminiscent of the principles of social pedagogy.

The social context of social work

The role of social workers is affected by changes in the social context. Amongst the important changes noted in the literature are the following.

Demographic and social changes, especially the ageing population and falling family size, which will affect the ability of families to provide care for dependants. Alongside these changes in the structure of the population there is continuing change in the nature of the family. The move away from the 'traditional' family has implications for the growth of one parent and 'multi parent' families. The increasing numbers of women entering the labour market will affect the provision of social care. It has been suggested that women may be less inclined than previously to view social work as an attractive career proposition.

The priorities for social work have changed since the time of Kilbrandon report. In addition to the specific needs of the ageing population, a large number of scandals or problematic cases involving children have had an impact on the social work role. The rise in drug related problems has also contributed both through work with drug users and also because of the implications of increasing drug use on children and families.

Poverty and social exclusion are seen to be increasing and some commentators believe this makes it especially important to continue providing the distinctive role of social work. Without it many members of our communities would lack protection from the negative consequences of exclusion – poverty, ill health, poor housing, low educational attainment and so on.

Internationalisation of social problems and their tendency to cross national borders. Migration has meant that social work must now have a more international outlook than before and must address the needs and experiences of individuals from different ethnic, cultural and political backgrounds. The continuing enlargement of the European Union will mean that this becomes a more important issue. Where those concerned are asylum seekers, the fear is that social work will once more be drawn into a monitoring or surveillance rather than supportive and caring role. It is no coincidence that there is considerable activity to foster international cooperation, collaboration and harmonisation of activities in the social work field.

The removal of many international borders will have implications for the development of social work as a profession as there is a need to develop common qualifications and training programmes.

Modern communications technologies are radically affecting information handling and record keeping in the social services. Telemedicine technologies have been developed to provide remote training for health workers as well as remote diagnosis of ailments. Similarly, both social work practice and training will increasingly be influenced by the deployment of modern communications and information technologies. They may offer opportunities for new forms of information provision, remote services and self help. Some technologies, such as videoconferencing and online counselling, could actually allow more face to face social work to be carried out.

Some observers consider that as social workers become responsible for databases of personal information relating to named children and families, this may lead to a greater monitoring or surveillance role than is compatible with the values of social work.

Welfare Philosophy and Policy – Changing Ideologies

Social work has been affected by changes in welfare policy and ideology since the postwar years. Service provision has been dominated by the following models, in approximate succession.

Welfarism prevailed in post war years of the fifties and sixties. The welfare state accepted its responsibility for all and where need was expressed it was to be met on the basis of universal provision. Social work was provided by disparate and locally variable services informed by a paternalist approach. It had not yet reorganised into large scale departments. A number of assumptions permeated the welfare services including social work:

- The idea that the state could identify and meet need.
- The belief that trained welfare workers could determine need and how best to address it
- A relationship between social worker and 'client' which reflected the hierarchical nature of the organisational arrangements – that there was a power imbalance with social worker equipped to know better than the client what needs were and how to meet them.

Professionalism – the ideology stressing the expertise and authority of the professional – was historically and conceptually allied to welfarism. There is a commitment to service provision by qualified professionals, with regulation of practice. The relationship with the client is still one where the power balance rests with the professional whose training has equipped him to assess and meet the client's need. The notion of a professional identity for social work was probably at its strongest within this ideology.

With **consumerism** there is shift towards the client becoming a consumer able to choose services, rather than being merely a recipient of them at the discretion or judgement of the social worker. The market becomes an important and powerful force in the availability of services to meet needs and the balance of the relationship between social worker and consumer begins to look less hierarchical. However, the relationship is still biased in favour of the social worker because of his/her authority to carry out assessments and knowledge of what the market has to offer. Protection for the consumer is very limited.

Managerialism gives priority to the managerial and economic concerns of service funders and providers, focusing on service costs and efficiencies. Some social workers believe this is at the cost of direct face-to-face work with clients. With consumerism, managerialism further promotes service provision by non state agencies. The role of the social worker moves towards assessment of individuals' needs and the regulation of services delivered. Although the service user is seen less as a 'client' whose needs are determined by a professional perspective, there is nevertheless concern that managerialism as it applies to social work attaches more importance to budgets and targets than to meeting the particular needs of individuals. The managerialist approach removes much front line social work from professionally qualified social workers and allows service provision to be determined by the market.

Participationism stresses a closer and more equal partnership between professional service provider and service user. For the participationist, the key objective is to strengthen the position of the user, to have more user input into discussions about the nature of services provided and to locate such discussions in local and community contexts. The emphasis is on community based services in which user and social worker are partners in seeking to address and ameliorate the life situation of the user. The power imbalance is reduced, the user is actively involved in his/her own future and has an active role to play as a citizen not excluded by poverty or disadvantage.

Social work in future would involve itself actively and directly in the lives of those it seeks to support. For social workers this would be a shift back to practice which

4. What does society expect of its social workers? Is it possible to implement the true aims and values of social work within the local authority social work departments?

remained true to the values threaded through the history of social work irrespective of the organisational and institutional changes which have impacted on it.

Organisational Change

Just as there have been identifiable ideological shifts influencing the role of the social worker, so too have organisational changes impacted on what social workers can and cannot do. Postwar social work services were provided through small and rather disparate entities. It was only with the Kilbrandon and Seebom reports of the sixties that most social work provision was shifted to large integrated social work or social service departments, with a relatively small role played by non public agencies.

Subsequent attempts to allow social work and social workers to have a closer relationship with the groups and communities they served can be seen in the proposals for 'patch' working and the advocacy of community social work in the Barclay report. A number of developments have significantly influenced the nature of social work provision since then and will continue to do so in the future.

Local Government Reorganisation

The changes in local government in Scotland, reversing the regionalisation policy of the seventies, reintroduced a larger number of smaller social work departments.

Mixed Economy of Welfare

There is now a far more mixed economy of welfare, in which provision is not only through public or state agencies but increasingly through voluntary, non-profit organisations and private commercial enterprises. Like other welfare services social work is increasingly provided by a mix of organisations in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

Similarly, in most countries there has been growth in the para-professional sector of workers in social care who are not classified or qualified as 'social workers'. The concern expressed is that much of the core task of social work may increasingly be carried out by para-professionals. A consequence of this is that qualified social workers may be left to fulfil responsibilities, such as care management and risk assessment, that are one step removed from what they take to be the true role of the social worker. The further danger is also that the goals set for social work – such as care management, risk assessment and service management – are externally defined rather than being determined by professional judgement. This changing role for social workers, in which they are seen to lose elements of their core tasks, may well account for the disillusionment expressed by significant numbers of them.

Inter-professional collaboration

Social workers increasingly work in close cooperation with other professionals such as teachers, doctors and nurses. There is an ever stronger movement towards the organisational integration of social work with other services such as education, health and housing. Joint working has been valued as effective and beneficial to service users. There is evidence that social workers outside local authority social work departments, such as those who work in GP practices and in a variety of healthcare settings, play a significant role as members of multidisciplinary teams. It is particularly interesting that similar discussions about working in multidisciplinary teams, the growth of para-professionals and the search for professional boundaries have been held in the context of the role of the nurse in the modernising NHS.

The place of social work in the wider health and education agenda raises the question of whether it is still necessary for social work to be carried out within local authority social work departments. It has been suggested that it would offer new opportunities for social work to be separated from its close identification with local authority departments. In the next stage of its development in Scotland social work may be undertaken within different organisational structures where the distinctive role of social work has to be based on professional considerations and not organisational location.

The debate about professional roles also reintroduces the discussion about whether social workers should be trained as generic workers able to work with all client groups including the elderly, children, offenders, and so on or be specialists. The consensus does appear to be that social workers require some basic or general training foundation but that specialisms may be required for working with specific groups.

Leadership and management

There is no doubt that joint working between social work and other professions has many positive outcomes. Nevertheless, it would be remiss to ignore warnings about the dangers associated with joint working, which might threaten the identity of social work and further contribute to the 'crisis' it faces. Senior managers in social work in Scotland identified the following difficulties (van Zwanenberg, 2003):

- providing leadership for social work within mixed teams and across separate governance arrangements
- maintaining a high profile for social work within a multidisciplinary team setting
- retaining social work values
- ensuring quality of professional service provision
- ensuring a focus on the social work agenda so it is not a subset of either health or education and resisting professional boundary erosion
- managing resources within the competing demands of differential team requirements
- building and developing a care management culture that reflects the core values of social work and centres on the needs of the users and carers.

From the leadership perspective the distinctive identity of the social worker may well be threatened by increasing integration with other services. This does not necessarily indicate that that professional social work will cease to exist. But it will be all the more important for social work to clarify and consolidate its professional identity in the world closer working with other agencies and professions.

Prevention restated

Preventive work to address the circumstances which put children and families at risk was a central principle in the Kilbrandon report. What is taken to be the crisis of social work is linked to the perception that social workers in the local authority setting are no longer able to effectively carry out preventive work.

The notion of 'constructive social work' recently promoted by Jordan and others (Jordan et al 2004) is one response to this understanding of the present condition of social work. It emphasises the importance of assisting the service user in tackling change; working with the service user in his/her community context; promoting preventive work; and allowing the service user to be a partner with the worker in addressing the situation they find themselves in. It begins with how the service user him or herself perceives the

5. Do we now need a different kind of social work service from that devised in the sixties? Is social work best provided by local authority social work departments – or would service users be better served by a strong professional social work element within education, health and other social services?

situation and a 'narrative for change' is then negotiated through dialogue. This demands that social workers are trained in the skills associated with counselling and therapeutic work. It requires an organisational structure which allows the worker the freedom to work creatively in partnership and it seeks to address the stigma associated with notions of 'welfare'.

Conclusions

- Social workers are very much needed to support those affected by poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion.
- The supposed 'crisis' in social work is mainly a matter of professional identity and the understanding of the profession's basic aims. It impacts on recruitment, retention and social workers' confidence in their mandate.
- There is an urgent need for social work to clarify its professional identity and its distinctiveness compared with other professions. This needs to be viewed with reference to the changing nature of the relationship between worker and client.
- The professional identity of social work need not be inextricably linked to specific organisational structures. Rather, its identity should be based on its core values and principles.
- The evidence suggests there is no logical need for a single structure social work department. The limited research evidence available suggests that social workers can and do work well and effectively in a variety of multi-disciplinary contexts and organisational settings. Core professional values and commitments are more important than organisational structures.
- Social work has increasingly moved away from its commitments to direct work with individuals, families and communities and away from a preventive role. Social workers may thus be required to fulfil an organisational function that conflicts with professional values and principles and with the reasons that provided their motivation to enter social work in the first place.
- Models from other countries may be suggestive, but change should recognise the achievements since Kilbrandon.

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