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## **A critical evaluation of the extent to which the reform and modernisation agenda has impacted on the professionalisation of social work in England**

### **Introduction**

In this paper we consider the extent to which the reform and modernisation agenda in England has impacted upon social work's attempts to be considered a profession. We begin by delineating what constitutes a profession, then proceed to evaluate the impact of the reform and modernisation agenda on the public sector, before concluding with a critical analysis of its impact upon social work.

In England, the reform and modernisation agenda emerged in the early 1980s at the behest of the Conservative government (led by Margaret Thatcher at that time), continued through New Labour's period in office (between 1997 and 2010), and remained a key feature of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010 to 2015) and subsequent Conservative government. The impact of this agenda on the public sector, and social work specifically, should not be underestimated. Indeed, this paper will argue that this agenda has had a detrimental impact upon social work's ongoing attempt to be considered a profession.

### **What constitutes a profession?**

When unpacking a question such as this, it is important to first examine what is understood by the term 'profession'. Indeed, what constitutes a profession has historically been the subject of considerable debate, and hitherto there is little academic consensus over its precise definition. Such difficulties are due, in part, to the fact that, as Sims (2011) notes, rather than being static, the term 'profession' is one that is constantly evolving. Mook et al. (2009) concur that definitions of a profession have changed considerably across time, whilst Friedson (1994) contends that we are no more certain about what constitutes a profession today than we were in the early twentieth century.

With this in mind, Pavalko's (1970) eight characteristics of work is an expedient starting point for deciding whether or not an occupation should be considered a profession, as it takes both practical and ideological attributes into consideration. Practical attributes

comprise of designated periods for specialised training, personal autonomy, self-regulation and a sense of being 'elite', in the sense that access to the profession should be controlled in some way. The ideological attributes focus more upon the value base and core values that aspiring entrants must aspire to. For example, the notion of a 'calling' or being especially motivated for entering a specific line of work is deemed to be crucial for engendering a sense of commitment, common identity and community. Koehn (1994) suggests that commitment to a set of values and an ethical framework constitutes the most important feature of a profession. Moreover, Friedson (1994) argues that a profession is characterised by the fact that professionals possess theoretical knowledge and skill that ordinary people do not have.

### **To what extent is social work a profession in England?**

When attempting to evaluate how successful social work has been in its professionalisation agenda, it is important to have a clear understanding of what a professionalisation agenda entails. Wilensky (1964, p.27) defined it as 'the process whereby work groups attempt to change and actually change their position on one or more dimensions of the occupation-profession continuum, moving towards the profession pole'. In this respect, scholars have argued that there are few occupations that have been as conspicuously unsuccessful in their professionalisation agenda as social work has (Aldridge 1996). Indeed, social workers are routinely characterised by the media as being 'permissive left of centre liberals, ever ready to condone wickedness that ought to be condemned' (Clarke 2000, p.39). Moreover, social, economic and political factors, allied with the impact of globalisation and emergent managerialist approaches, have also impacted negatively on social work's efforts to be considered a profession (Dalrymple and Burke 2006).

Banks (2001) posits that social work is generally considered to be a 'semi profession', for the reason that, although it meets some of the eight criteria outlined by Pavalko (1970), it does not meet them all. For example, social work has a clear value base which is embedded in an explicit code of ethics, and is governed by a professional association. However, despite this ideological basis, Banks (2001) argues that social work is not grounded in a clear and firm theoretical knowledge, and, moreover, social workers do not have a monopoly over the skills required to perform their role.

In the English context, social work has been going through a period of perpetual change and instability over the preceding two decades, due, in part, to the entrenchment of neoliberal policies across Europe as well as the USA, Australia and New Zealand (Wiles 2017). It has been argued that government influence over social work is more extensive in England compared to other European countries (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). Similarly, Ixer (2013) observes that, compared to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the policy changes related to social work in England are more frequent and wide ranging, and, more troublingly, are not always predicated on a solid evidence base. The 1990s signalled the creation of a UK wide Social Work Degree programme, as well as four social work regulatory bodies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Wiles 2017). Professional registration in England was implemented in 2003 and became compulsory from 2005; this was a longstanding objective of the British Association of Social Workers and was seen by many social workers at that time as a recognition of the professional status of social workers (Wiles 2010).

When considering the extent to which social work can be considered a profession in England, it is also important to note the reforms brought about by the Care Standards Act 2000. This Act led to the establishment of a governing professional body for social workers: the General Social Care Council (GSCC). This was followed by the publication of a national Code of Practice for social workers, which both outlined the requisite standards of professional conduct and practice (GSCC 2002), and marked the introduction of the first official ethical code for the profession (Humphrey 2006). The GSCC has since been replaced by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), and both a new ethical code (BASW 2012) and 'standards of proficiency' (HCPC 2017) have subsequently been published. The establishment of a regulatory council also signalled the introduction of the Social Care Register (in 2003), the social work degree (also in 2003), and the 'protection of the title' (from 2005).

The increased governmental regulation associated with these reforms represents a formal recognition of the role of social work (Healy 2016), which, in turn, strengthened the status of social work as a profession (McLaughlin 2007; Rogowski 2012). As Beddoe (2014) notes, a core feature of professional status is the qualification for entry, as well as the provision of specialist educational training (Olgiati 2006). The advent of the social work degree meant an increased period spent in assessed practice, as well as a greater emphasis on practical knowledge. According to the Social Work Task

Force (2009, p.15): 'achieving degree status sent a clear signal about what social work should be: a profession made up of highly skilled, highly qualified practitioners'.

The introduction of the Social Care Register also contributed towards social work's attempt to achieve professional legitimacy (Beddoe 2014). Due to this register, only those who meet the requisite standards for training, professional skills, behaviour and health are able to register and practice as a social worker. This measure, in principle, defends social work against 'would-be members who do not conform to the occupational ideal' (Van Heugten 2011). Consequently, registration can be understood as a form of 'occupational closure', providing institutionalised barriers and/or restrictions to entering or remaining in a particular occupation, which is another core feature of professional status (Klein 2016; Van Heugten 2011). This 'occupational closure' was further reinforced by the introduction of ethical codes and 'protection of the title', which enable the governing body to remove a worker's professional status if they fail to adhere to the minimum standards of practice (McLaughlin 2007).

Having said this, researchers have argued that these new arrangements may have also produced other manifold effects, such as a loss of professional discretion and autonomy for social workers (McLaughlin 2007), a failure to recognise the values that drive social work (Healy 2016), and, ultimately, their 'professional power [being] subordinated to the neoliberal project' (Van Heugten 2011, p.182).

Historically, social workers have been relatively unsuccessful in their attempts to portray positive images of the work they do to the public via the media. Indeed, they are routinely criticised by the media and the general public for not using their statutory powers properly, either by not utilising them enough to protect the vulnerable (Laming 2009; Laming 2003; Dominelli 1996) or through being overly draconian and controlling (Cleveland Enquiry 1988). Although, of course, all professionals (including doctors and lawyers) make mistakes, social workers invariably suffer disproportionately high levels of public vilification when things go wrong (Stack 2010). Dominelli (1996) notes that this is because social work, in contrast to the medical and legal professions, has historically been made up of women, and, moreover, has not had the necessary financial backing and support from politicians to be recognised as an independent profession. Consequently, society's inherent sexism has detrimentally impacted upon social work's mission to be considered a profession, and played a key contributing factor in it being subjected to greater public vilification than other male-dominated professions (Dominelli 1996).

Hugman (1991) proposes that one reason why social work has been considered a 'semi profession' is that it does not have academic jurisdiction over a specific area of knowledge. Lymer (2000) continues this line of argument, positing that social workers have hitherto failed to make the public aware of the complexities of the professional judgements that they have to make on a regular basis. Similarly, MacDonald (1999) argues that, although social workers are required to possess a high level of professional judgement, the general public and other professionals do not perceive this judgement and knowledge to be sufficiently esoteric.

A further issue that problematises social work's professionalisation agenda concerns social work values in and of themselves. For example, radical social workers have argued that if social workers were viewed as professionals by their clients, then this would create a social distance between them and their service users. That is to say, it would reduce the chances of the service user engaging with the social worker (MacDonald 1999), which, in turn, would undermine the overall efficacy of the profession. Green et al. (2006) observe that, given that it is paramount for the social worker and client to have an equal relationship, it is not helpful for the social worker to be framed as the 'expert', since it is the client who is in fact the 'expert' in their own situation. Consequently, Trevithick (2005) suggests that it is imperative that social workers are not perceived as being overly distant if they are to build up meaningful professional relationships with service users.

The fact that social work, unlike other professions, is comprised of a large number of members who do not wish to be considered as professionals, also goes some way to understanding the limited success of its professionalisation agenda (Green et al 2006).

### **Public and private sectors**

Although the public sector has a high proportion of professionals in the workforce, it nevertheless only makes up about a fifth of the entire workforce in the United Kingdom (Brinkley 2012). For many people there is a choice to be made between working in the public or private-sector, due to the fundamental differences between the two spheres.

On average, for equivalent jobs, public-sector pay is lower than the private-sector, and public sector staff also tend to have a larger number of rules and regulations to adhere to (John and Johnson 2008). However, public-sector jobs are often viewed as providing the opportunity to perform a socially useful job (John and Johnson 2008). The

suggestion, here, is that public-sector workers are more altruistic than their private-sector counterparts (John and Johnson 2008).

The existence, or lack thereof, of a 'public-sector ethos' is the subject of on-going debate and invariably forms an integral part of the discussion around public services. The 'public-sector ethos' has been defined as being 'the ethical framework within which British public officials are expected to operate. This includes behavioural traits such as honesty, integrity, impartiality and objectivity; loyalty to the organisation and its goals; a commitment to public service; and accountability through and to its political authorities' (Horton 2006, p.32-33).

### **The impact of the reform and modernisation agenda**

In light of what we have thus far established about what constitutes a profession, at this juncture it is important to evaluate the impact that the reform and modernisation agenda has had on the public-sector in general, and on social work specifically.

Modernisation as a term is either rarely or poorly defined by governmental actors and/or political commentators. One definition views modernisation in terms of achieving 'traditional objectives by modern means' (Powell 2008, p.3). Blair and Shroeder (1999, p.29) argued that 'constraints on 'tax and spend' forced radical modernisation of the public sector and reform of public services to achieve better value for money and a new programme of changed realities'. Indeed, Finlayson (2003, p.66) posits that if there is a 'single word that might capture the essence of New Labour's social and political project it is modernisation'.

There is a close link between modernisation and new managerialism, or New Public Management as it is sometimes otherwise called; this involves the importation of a market orientation and business practices into the public sector as a means of maximising the organisation's performance 'through cost-cutting, increased regulation, privatisation of services, reengineering and evidence based management' (Cunliffe 2009, p.18). Managerialism is defined by Lawler and Bilson (2010) as an emphasis upon the individual roles and accountabilities of managers as opposed to any other professional role or identity. The belief here is that, as many organisations are similar (regardless of sector), managers are thus able to operate effectively within any domain and can transfer their managerial skills to other organisational context (Lawler and Bilson 2010).

The impact of managerialism and privatisation on public sector workers, including social workers, should not be underestimated. The OECD (2009) argued that they have engendered a 'transfer of assets to the private sector rather than a transfer of activities'. When one considers the extent of privatisation over the last three decades, this position is hard to disagree with. A significantly large number of public sector organisations, many of which were thriving at the time, have now been privatised, including, among others, British Aerospace, British Airways and British Telecom. The public service reforms that were initiated by the Conservative government in 1979 have been continued first by New Labour and then by both the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition and, most recently, the current Conservative government. The 1983 Conservative manifesto laid out the changes that they intended to engender:

To release more money for looking after patients, we will reduce the costs of administering the Health Service. We are asking health authorities to make the maximum possible savings by putting services like laundry, catering and hospital cleaning out to competitive tender. We are tightening up, too, on management costs, and getting much firmer control of staff numbers (Conservative Party, 1983).

A key initiative of the Conservative government during the early 1980s was to introduce a new set of providers for public services by 'contracting out' what, at the time, were deemed to be inessential services, such as cleaning in the National Health Service, to private providers who were brought in to carry out such functions (Greener 2008).

This marketisation and modernisation agenda continued under New Labour and gained further strength under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, which stated in 2010 that it would, amongst other things "...promote independent provision in key public services (including from private sector companies)... and attract external investment and expertise into the public sector to deliver better and more efficient services" (HM Treasury/Cabinet Office 2010, p.2).

From the outset, New Labour sought to distance themselves from Old Labour, and a key part of this agenda involved modernising public services. Discourses of modernisation were used with increased frequency as New Labour's period in office progressed. However, despite modernisation and reform being at the forefront of their agenda throughout their 13 years in power (from 1997 to 2010), this was never an entirely coherent strategy for New Labour. Indeed, the health service testifies to this;



while Frank Dobson (Secretary of State for Health) was viewed as a relatively left-wing figure during his time in office, a much more overtly right-wing approach was advocated by his successor (Alan Milburn). During his time as Secretary of State for Health, Alan Milburn pursued policies which were far more neo-liberal in nature, and, as such, had a significant impact on both the level and propensity of outsourcing in the health service.

The advent of neo-liberalism, and its especial emphasis on contracting out the delivery of services from the public to the private sector, included 'applying ideas to public services that are drawn from private business management and that focus on securing more economic, efficient and effective services; and... the privileging of managers, rather than professionals...', with a high degree of prominence placed upon the achievement of targets has had a significant impact on all public services in the UK' (Harris and White 2009, p.3).

In contemporary Britain, however, it has been argued that the once observable distinction between private and public services was becoming increasingly blurred (Spolander et al 2015). In the context of social care, for example, public services are often supplemented with private services, which, in turn, leads to further blurring of the boundaries between the public and private sector, including on the behalf of those whom public services are provided for. Arguably, under New Labour, then, there has been a 'sustained, interconnected and comprehensive paradigm shift' towards private welfare (Drakeford 2008, p.175).

New Labour introduced policies and legislation which meant that structurally, public provision came to rely largely on private providers, a phenomenon which has continued under subsequent governments. Consequently, private providers are now an inextricable part of the infrastructure of social care. However, culturally speaking, 'these structures rely on ideas that are less clear, relying on individual users (or their proxies) choosing between alternative providers in essential private situations where information is often scarce' (Greener 2008, p.97).

The impact of privatisation on local government in recent years has been well documented, and consists primarily of cost-cutting and reducing expenditure (Bel and Warner 2008, p.107). Public choice theory argues that competition reduces the potential for excessive supplying of public services, which, in turn, should reduce the cost of delivery of services (Frontier Economics 2010). However, one of the challenges

presented by local privatisation concerns its 'failure to provide lower cost service delivery. Inadequate understanding and management of local government service delivery markets has been partly to blame' (Bel and Warner 2008, p.107).

### **The impact of managerialism and modernisation on social work**

It has been argued that 'managerialism' has had a negative impact on social work's attempts to be considered a profession. Freidson (1994) posits that professional discretion and autonomy are key characteristics of any profession. However, scholars have argued that the emergence of managerialist principles has contributed to the erosion of these attributes in the case of social work (Clarke et al. 2000; Evans 2016). In fact, Green (2006) found that public sector professionals in the UK experienced a substantial loss of autonomy and discretion over the course of the 1990s, due, in part, to the role of new public management and the diminishment of trade union power.

The increased emphasis on formal systems of management, and the concomitant increase in scrutiny via prescribed targets and increased managerial control (Evans 2016), has resulted in the 'undermining of professional judgement' for social workers (Green 2009, p.115). This has impinged upon the independence of social workers to 'do the right thing' as opposed to 'doing things right' (Munro 2012, p.6).

Hoggett et al (2006, p.761) argue that those involved in the social professions, including social workers, "are engaged in forms of ethical practice on a day to day basis. This highlights the continually contested value domain within which they operate... without the use of judgement and discretion the work of public servants would be impossible". Furthermore, Hoggett et al (2006, p.759) proceed to suggest that "public sector work is 'value saturated' work in which workers are caught between the competing claims of a range of private and public goods which include their own interests, the interests of their organisation, their profession, individual service users, the community and the general public. Workers confront this dynamic and shifting field of competing claims with their own values and identities."

Managerialism requires social workers to place greater emphasis upon meeting the needs of the organisation, rather than those of their service users (Rogowski 2011). Resultantly, an increased disparity has developed between social work tasks and duties and the values which initially brought social workers into the profession (Jones 2004). This dual-process of modernisation and managerialisation within public

services has had a negative impact on social work's attempts to be considered a profession, and, in fact, by encouraging social workers to leave 'behind their professional identity', it has ultimately led to the de-professionalisation of social work (Rogowski 2011, p.162). This is why Rogowski (2012, p.929) argues that the move toward managerialism in social work is 'anathema to social work values and its commitment to social justice and social change'.

In England, the role of social workers is made all the more challenging yet still by the fact that, as public servants, they are supposed to accept and respect the legitimacy of political structures and the processes of democratic governments (Pratchett and Wingfield 1996). In fact, in 1985 the Head of the Civil Service went even further and argued that civil servants should carry out their duties with 'precisely the same energy and goodwill whether they agree with it or not' (cited in Ridley 1985, p.31). This is especially challenging for social workers, as they also have a clear set of core social work values to which they must adhere. Included within the profession's core values is a duty for social workers to 'challenge discriminatory, ineffective and unjust policies, procedures and practice' (BASW, 2012). The implication for social workers, here, is that there is the potential for a marked disconnect between their core social work values and the government's policies and procedures.

Howe (2006) has argued that the recent decline in the status of social work has coincided with the increase in external controls from managers, local authorities (who employ most social workers) and central government. That is to say, that as social workers increasingly operate under the control of bureaucrats and managers, this will lead to their professional knowledge being devalued (Fabricant et al. 1992). Rogowski (2012, p.921) lends support to this perspective, stating that, although social work was previously 'a profession based on knowledge, understanding and skills', it has now become a profession in which managers are 'dominating what practitioners do'. In such an environment, targets and quantitative data become the priority, rather than, say, undertaking high quality work to improve the life opportunities of service users and their families (Diaz and Drewery 2016; Featherstone et al 2014).

Munro (2012) has powerfully argued that, as a result of reforms and the modernisation agenda, social workers have become overly focused on completing assessments within timescales, when in actual fact these arbitrary timescales have very little impact on improving service user's life opportunities.

The impact of neo-liberal reforms on social work is multi-faceted. One of the central tenets of neo-liberalism is that the individual should have choice and freedom, which serves to protect the market against any type of interference by the state or those operating on its behalf, including social workers. It has been argued that 'new service boundaries and forms of resource allocation and an increased emphasis on assessment, together with the means to regulate and review, are increasingly key elements of social work' (Parton 1996, p.23). Parton (1996) proceeds to argue that it is now the role of social work to assess risk and allocate scarce resources and services in an 'individualised way'.

Between 2008 and 2010 there were several high-profile child deaths, notably Peter Connolly, which had a significant influence on the approach adopted by the UK Coalition government upon coming to power in 2010. As Jones (2014) observes, the Coalition government's principal response to these deaths was to reduce procedures and guidance; case in point was *Working Together* (2013), which was significantly shorter than the 2010 and previous versions. The emphasis on needs which ran through previous versions was supplanted by an extensive focus on risk of harm. Parton (2016) argues that during this period the government's view of vulnerable families became more punitive in nature. The radical changes to the Welfare system put in place initially by the Coalition government and continuing under the Conservative government are underpinned by a discourse of individual responsibility (Parton 2016).

As Parton (2016, p.34) outlines: 'while the range and level of universal and secondary prevention benefits and services have been reduced, the role of the state in other areas has become more authoritarian and much more willing to intervene in certain families with the full weight of the law behind it'. An illustrative example of this is the 145% increase in care proceedings between 2008 and 2016 (Cafcass 2017).

Social work, it is argued, occupies a role somewhere between the respectable (i.e. the middle classes) and those members of society who deemed to be deviant or dangerous (Philp 1979, as cited in Chambon et al 1999). Social workers are viewed as splaying some kind of mediating role between those who are actually or potentially excluded, and mainstream members of society (Parton 1994). This mediating role of social workers, as well as the very identity of social work itself, has become altogether more complex and ambiguous over the last three decades.

There is an additional political agenda which has impacted upon the current state of affairs, and this concerns the effect of some high-profile child protection cases where things have gone considerably wrong. For example, in 1973, seven-year-old Maria Colwell was tragically beaten to death by her stepfather; the case captured the imagination of the public and garnered media attention in an analogous fashion to the recent Baby P case. In the Colwell case, social work was effectively put on trial, with the right-wing press in particular blaming social workers for the tragedy.

There is a stark contrast between the findings of the enquiry into the Maria Colwell case and those of the Victoria Climbié case 25 years later. In the case of Maria Colwell, numerous professionals visited on a regular basis but failed to communicate with each other, and, indeed, there was an almost competitive element between agencies regarding who was offering support to the family (Colwell Inquiry 1974). In the Climbié case however, it was found that there was an attitude of 'how fast can we make it someone else's responsibility?', with agencies and professionals all ardently trying to hand the case over to another professional as quickly as possible (Laming 2003).

Following the Climbié case enquiry, any remaining public trust in child protection services and social workers dissipated even further, and Ofsted brought in a new and much tougher inspection and regulatory regime. The previous inspection regimes were deemed to be too 'soft' and in its place Ofsted sought to foster 'an audit culture' based on ensuring that targets were met, since this was seen as the way in which confidence could be restored in child protection services (Featherstone et al 2014). This raised the following critical question: 'do compliance mechanisms provide better outcomes for children?' To date, there remains no definitive answer to this question.

The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) argued that social workers must assert their professional standing and develop their expertise in working with families. It ventured that this would, in turn, signal a shift from the compliance and blame culture within child protection services towards a learning culture, in which professional judgement and effective relationships with service users would improve services for vulnerable children and families. This coincided with the College of Social Work being established, with the express objective of improving education for, and the public standing of, social workers. There is still considerable work to be done if social workers are to achieve the challenge laid down by Munro; moreover, the cuts put in place by the current Conservative government have made this objective all the more difficult yet still, as The College of Social Work has now been disbanded. It remains to be seen

whether social workers are able to achieve their professionalisation agenda, and, arguably, the reform and modernisation agenda has had a detrimental impact upon achieving this aim.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we first sought to examine what constitutes a profession, a challenging task in and of itself, as there is hitherto no clear consensus within academic inquiry. We explicated that these definitional difficulties are due, in part, to the fact that ideas pertaining to what constitutes a profession are ever evolving. Through recourse to Pavalko's (1970) eight characteristics of work, we evaluated to what extent social work meets this well-established criteria for distinguishing between an occupation and a profession, and delineated some of the key reasons behind why social work has thus far been unsuccessful in achieving its professionalisation agenda.

We then proceeded to provide insight into the impact of the reform and modernisation agenda on the public sector more generally, before examining its impact on social work specifically. Based on this discussion, we believe that the modernisation agenda has had a significantly negative impact upon social work's attempts to be classified as a profession. However, it is also important to stress that there are other factors that have undermined social work's professionalisation agenda which are not specifically related to the modernisation agenda. These include social work's poor media profile (Stack 2010), as well as the fact that, in contrast to almost all other professions, many social workers do not want to be considered as professionals, as expert status would negatively impact upon the nature of their relationships with their clients (Green et al 2006).

Recent initiatives in England, such as the Munro Review of Child Protection and the introduction of Principal Social Workers in most authorities, not to mention the new posts of Chief Social Worker for Children and Families and Chief Social Worker for Adults, will hopefully mark an important step in improving the public standing of social workers. In so doing, the hope is that these measures will significantly contribute to the ongoing effort to view social work as a profession, and, in due time, help social workers to achieve parity of esteem with doctors and lawyers.

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