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A Question of Principles

What makes a Social Worker a Social Worker?

There's never been a more opportune moment to be writing this article on the essence of social work. The profession is at a critical point, in new potentially contradictory contexts. This discussion focuses mainly on developments in England but is relevant to emerging developments in the rest of the UK.

With the introduction of the new social work degree from 2003, registration and protection of title of 'social worker' from April 2005, new financial investment in the form of bursaries for social work students and a new post-qualifications framework (by 2007), the future for social work looks rosy. Politically these changes have been owned and promoted: Stephen Ladyman described them as playing "an important part in raising standards in social work practice(1)."

At the same time there have been changes, leading to ambiguity about the territory and importance of social work in its own right. 'Social Care' is now the predominant term used since the mid-'90s rather than 'social services' and indeed 'social work', evidenced in the titles of the UK Care Councils. The question is, is it now an inclusive term relating to a wide range of care, of which social work is a highly qualified part, or does it represent a dilution of the special nature of social work into a more generic alternative to health care, mopping up all the areas of community based service as health services are more carefully redefined by cost and capacity? Thomas & Pierson (2001) define social care as "assistance given to people to maintain themselves physically and socially…in residential and day care centres and…at home,…distinguished from health care" and care given by a family member (2) – neatly avoiding all the contested areas that social work can include.

In addition, England has now moved to a separation of services for adults and children challenging the integrated nature of the professional territory, and adding to the sense of fragmentation. Adult services are now linked with the Department of Health and child/family services with the Department for Education and Skills. MP John Hutton, speaking in 2003, described social care as "treating everyone as a whole individual taking account of all their needs and their social context (in order to build) a service of care which is fair to all of us and as personal as possible for each of us" (3). He refers to care services for all. Phil Hope, Minister, speaking at the launch of Skills for Care and Development on November 8th 2005, differentiated between adult services supported by Skills for Care - "social care" and "children's services" supported by the Children's Workforce Development Council. This language of separation challenges definitions of social care and could pose a further threat of disintegration for social work as a

profession.

While presenting a personal view on the nature of social work, I also want to draw on an animated discussion at the Second Annual Forum of the Assembly for Social Care and Social Work Education, Training and Research (September 2005) on what is special about social work and social care. The Assembly is a recently formed network of non-governmental organizations concerned with the development of people and knowledge in social work and social care practice.

Nigel Horner (2003) suggests social workers are in their element when analyzing and scrutinizing their identity (4) and implies they will have lost some of their sparkle once they stop discussing it. For me, this is not just adolescent angst (though the analogy may be relevant at times). It also relates to the first of seven particular characteristics of a social worker that I would identify (with due reference to Perlman, Hollis, Woods, Rogers and others) as:

> PASSION: for justice, to protect the vulnerable, and for always asking questions about why e.g. poverty or social marginalization exists;
> PERSON-CENTRED: seeing the person needing help, protection, or intervention (rather than the problem);
> PERSPECTIVE: seeing individuals at the centre of a system, which may include family, neighbourhood or community, user/carer groups;
> POTENTIAL: being able to see potential for change
> - in and with people, of their circumstances, perceptions, or their ability to make and be involved in decisions, and in themselves, as professionals, to develop and improve;
> PROCESS: being able to 'navigate' through systems and frameworks, whether legal, financial, cultural or professional, to achieve best outcomes through a range of activities from assessment to advocacy.
> And last but not least:
> POWER and POLITICS:
> These reflect a new face of an old dimension, recognizing that to exercise power wisely over people's liberty and quality of life and managing risk, means sharing power (with for example, individuals, their carers, other professionals, volunteers), and being aware of and challenging the ever-changing political context. Human rights, variable resources, and non-diminishing need are always in tension with society's expectations of people's freedoms and responsibilities, and of gaps to be filled by social workers.

And how does all this fit with social care? While advocating the continuing and special place for social work in any future health and social care structures, it is clear that the professional community needs to align itself with the wider community of practitioners who play a part in people's lives. Not only will this recognize the wider contribution, it is also politically imperative and expeditious in this complex environment, and the best hope for safeguarding resources for the

most needy and disadvantaged in society, sharing a voice with service users and carers (5).

The September 2005 Forum of the Social Care and Social Work Assembly therefore took up this wider challenge of identifying the special nature of social work/social care, informed by a presentation by Don Brand (SCIE) of issues arising from the Review of Social Work in Scotland and in the context of questions posed by the author's presentation on the changing face of social work and social care as either evolutionary or symptomatic of fragmentation. The debate concluded with agreement on six key features applicable to the whole of the social work and social care workforce, in their commitment to:

- Respecting and championing social justice and human rights across a range of situations and people in adult social care and children's services;
- Helping people who experience distress to negotiate life transitions;
- Intervening in conditions and circumstances that require action, often as a matter of urgency and where there may be conflicting interests;
- Carrying out a variety of roles in complex and sometimes high risk situations that require the delivery of high quality of services;
- Adapting and applying professional knowledge, skills and values to different social problems and settings;
- Advocating for, facilitating, enabling and empowering socially excluded individuals, groups and communities to take control of their lives. (6)

I would suggest that engagement with the power and political dimensions I identified earlier are more particularly the domain and responsibility of qualified social workers than social care workers, but the territory of professional practice needs the voices of all professionals and service users/carers. (5)

There will be future debates on similarities and differences between social work and social care, perhaps stimulated by the separation of 'social care workers' for their registration (planned, GSCC). There will also continue to be debates on the different and complementary contributions of other professional groups to health and welfare. What is important for social workers is to continue to articulate and adapt their special contribution, while also bringing their skills and value base to the management of changes ahead. Balancing regard and respect for people, (whether service providers, people receiving services, or carers/family/supporters) while seeing the overview (structural, financial and political) has always been the hallmark of a social worker.

Notes

The Assembly for Social Care and Social Work Education, Training and Research has the following members:
ACTAN (Association of Care Training and Assessments Network)
APSW (Association of Professors of Social Work)
ATSWE (Association of Teachers of Social Work Education)
BASW (British Association of Social Work)
JUC SWEC (Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee)
NATOPSS (National Association of Training Officers in Personal Social Services)
NOPT (National Association of Practice Teachers)
SCA (Social Care Association)
SSRG (Social Services Research Group)
SWRA (Social Work Research Association)
UK Standing Conference of Stakeholders in Social Work Education and Training

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References

1 General Social Care Council (GSCC) Annual Report 2004-5, Quotation from Stephen Ladyman, MP, Community Minister (Feb 2005)
2 Thomas N & Pierson J (2001) *Dictionary of Social Work*, London: Collins Educational, p 347
3 referred to by Robbins, 2004 cited in Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (2005) Report: *Developing social care: the current position*
4. Horner, N (2003) *What is Social Work*? Exeter : Learning Matters p129,
5 Croft S, Beresford P & Wulff-Cochrane E (2004) The Future of Social Work in Statham D (ed), *Managing Front Line Practice in Social Care*, London: Jessica Kingsley
6 based on Dominelli L & Higham P (2005) Letter submitted to Guardian on behalf of the SW and SC Assembly, 14th September 2005