Where to social work in a brave new neoliberal Aotearoa?

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ABSTRACT

Uncertainty is embedded in the nature of child protection work, despite the bureaucratic and managerial imperative to eradicate it. The recent focus on the scientific prediction of child abuse within high risk families connects with the neoliberal policy agenda of disciplining the poor and unproductive. Rather than being a new and far-sighted initiative, this policy focus on a dangerous underclass is historically evident within western liberal societies and is particularly prevalent in times of capitalist expansion. Child protection social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is enmeshed with poverty and social deprivation – with the lives of vulnerable families. Current policy initiatives are moving social work towards a stricter policing of the underclass poor. Child ill-treatment is correlated with poverty in the form of inadequate housing, education failure, poor health, low incomes and impoverished communities. It is time to make this clear in a political environment that is bent on divorcing social work from a concern with increasing structural injustice and focusing us on the detection, re-moralisation and/or punishment of deviant abusers. The liberal humanist tradition of social work focuses on the individual redemption of failing subjects. In a punitive neoliberal political environment, this orientation potentially lures social workers into an othering of those who are unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their own moral rehabilitation. We live in pivotal times for social work. This article asks readers to consider the argument put forward and to question where they stand: where might social work be taking you and where would you like to take social work?

KEYWORDS: child protection; poverty; neoliberalism; capitalism; history; inequality

Risk Identification: A solution or a gateway to engaging with complexity?

Child protection social work operates in an uncertain and conflicted environment (Morrison, 1997). This uncertainty can be illustrated in the policy and practice context, and in the legislative mandate. It is an uncertainty that is seldom overtly acknowledged. The protection of vulnerable children is something that we are loath to admit to being uncertain about. New Zealand and comparable Western jurisdictions are increasingly stratified societies in which vulnerable children are often parented by the most vulnerable adults (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). Child protection social work targets families who are socially and economically marginalised (Pelton, 2015). Indigenous people, ethnic minorities, and those classified as the underclass poor are disproportionately represented (Perry, 2012; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2015). This reality is often unnamed and unexplored in an emotive policy discourse which is focussed on the protection of the nation's children. For social work practitioners and the wider organisational systems which surround their practice, this discursive silence generates inertia, avoidance, accommodation, and discriminatory practice. Child protection systems need to openly recognise, acknowledge and address this reality - in both the policy and practice context - if child protection social work is to realise its potential.

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Practice approaches designed to contain and minimise uncertainty have proliferated in recent decades - from clinical risk assessment models through to more holistically framed assessment processes that attempt to balance the scales by considering strengths and protective factors (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Most recently we have seen the concept of "big data" and predictive risk modelling promoted as a scientific means of identifying and targeting the most dangerous and at risk amongst us (de Haan & Connolly, 2014; Keddell, 2014). The proposition that the key to child abuse prevention lies in the detection of children living in high risk family situations has a persuasive ring at first perusal. On the face of it, few of us would dispute that children at high risk live in situations which generate this risk. This circular assertion is central to the New Zealand Government White Paper on Vulnerable Children (Ministry of Social Development, 2012) and to the justification of contemporary policy development.

Self-evident truth is a persuasive public policy driver. However, closer interrogation of the ideological assumptions and practice complexities which are concealed beneath the rhetoric of the current Government exposes a much different and more complex narrative. For example, the cause of risky family environments may be attributed to either the personal characteristics of failing caregivers or to the socio-economic pressures which impact upon such families. Featherstone, White and Morris (2014) make the instructive distinction between a focus on "problem families" or "families' experiencing problems". Further, the issue of what to do about such families (particularly those who are adjudged to be resistant to risk assessment and evidence-based intervention) is also contested - both politically and in terms of practice methodology (Gupta, 2015).

The seductive notion that a limited number of high risk families pose a danger to the physical safety and morality of our children - and the attendant suggestion that the problem of child maltreatment can be solved, if such families can be located, monitored, treated, or punished (or their children removed into safe care) - is problematic on a number of levels. First, it is apparent that there are a variety of ways and means of identifying and approaching families that are deemed to be unsafe. As all able practitioners are aware, the quality of relational engagement between social workers and those who are constructed as their clients has a significant influence on subsequent outcomes. Secondly, if it is understood that child maltreatment and wider suffering is correlated with socio-economic disadvantage, it becomes apparent that stricter policing of the poor is a control mechanism rather than a strategy for social change.

The contemporary demonising of morally unfit families in England - and the associated increase in care orders and forced adoptions - has been powerfully documented in recent scholarship (Parton, 2014; Jensen & Tyler, 2015). This phenomenon is best understood in relation to changes in the wider political and economic context. The superficially persuasive lure of neoliberal political dogma, which casts individuated rational choice and competition as both the "natural" drivers and the providers of human need, has increasingly come to dominate the middle ground of political and social thought in New Zealand and similar Anglophone societies (Peel, 2012). It is critical to emphasize that policy development in child protection is embedded in this context. Further, current practices can be better understood through the lens of economic and political history. In fact the tendency of neoliberal policy frameworks to ignore the inconvenient lessons of history is a large part of the problem. I will now consider some of the patterns evident historically in social service responses to issues of deviance and exclusion in societies like ours.

Historical threads and current realities

The unequal distribution of social suffering which accompanies the capitalist mode of development has dogged the liberal project from its beginnings (Bourdieu et al., 1999). The liberal tradition is itself a body of politically contested social theory, that spans the benign market primacy advocated by Adam Smith and the doctrine of equal human rights associated with Tom Paine (Duncan, 2004). Neoliberalism (new liberalism) is not new. It involves a reinvigoration of the "classical" liberalism of the Nineteenth Century, as opposed to the more inclusive social-liberal aspirations which, melded with Fabian socialism, generated the democratic ideals of the welfare state. Neoliberalism marks a return to the Nineteenth Century in this respect. It also takes matters a step further. This ideological shift has accompanied the global acceleration of capitalist development since the 1970s. It has become the dominant political world view in Anglophone countries and arguably throughout the Western world (Spolander, Engelbrecht & Pullen-Sansfacon, 2015). The process has entailed a radical reduction in the power of organised labour and an equally radical "upwards" redistribution of wealth (Callinicos, 2010).

Although the role of governments is often portrayed as minimal, neoliberal states are in fact very active in promoting conditions that facilitate commercial profit and advance corporate interests (Ferguson, 2008). The increasing global significance of regional free trade agreements are part and parcel of this configuration. Neoliberal "common sense" is also internalised as part of contemporary notions of "self-identity" or "subjectivity", whereby we are encouraged to construct and conduct ourselves as marketable commodities (Sugarman, 2015). Economic success is connected with shallow notions of individual choice. Social life is conceived as the sum of individualised entrepreneurship. In this way structural disadvantage and economic exploitation is obscured. The poor are blamed for their poverty in this policy context and the disadvantaged are treated as less than equal citizens. Beneficiaries, for example, are categorised as expensive and dangerous social failures (Bauman, 1998; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2015).

Neoliberalism is a powerful and deceptive political doctrine which promotes the marketization of services once seen as matters for public provision, such as the privatisation of prisons, migrant detention centres, or child protection services (Grey & Webb, 2013). Contemporary developments in social work are not disconnected from this rubric. In my view, the current neoliberal policy response to child protection tacitly endorses a return to the punitive ethos of early modernity. In the same way, that current economic policy in New Zealand, and comparable jurisdictions, is compliant with the interests of global corporate capital and packaged as promoting the inexorable logic of "the market", contemporary child protection policy increasingly echoes the distinction between the deserving an the undeserving poor, established in the infamous Poor Law of 1834 (Polanyi, 1944/1957).

The notion that the social marginalisation of a class of families is both a function of, and required within, the schema of modernist development has significant implications for social work. Michel Foucault, a thinker more commonly associated with post-structural analysis, has argued that the delineation of an excluded underclass is a necessary condition of the liberal capitalist social and economic order (Chambon et. al., 1999).

> So that instead of saying, 'There is the working class and the marginal,' we would say, 'Within the overall lower class, there is a divide between those who work and those groups who are not part of the system of production.' The institution of police, the legal system, and the penal system are one of the means to deepen this partition, which is needed by capitalism. (pp. 94-95)

The recent forced eviction of state housing tenants occupying valuable land in East Auckland, to make way for private sector redevelopment, is a cogent reminder that the insecurity which the capitalist model of development creates is disproportionately visited upon marginalised and relatively powerless sections of the population in structurally unequal societies such as our own.

There are two related elements at play. First, is the fact that the unparalleled productive capacity of the free market economic model necessarily leaves behind, or sweeps aside, those who fail to adapt and/or stand in its way (Ferguson, 2004). Secondly, the inevitable human casualties of these gales of creative destruction are often demonised, or "othered" - blamed for their inadequacies and held up as scare-crows to discourage dissent and promote collective docility (Bauman, 1999). This process is, in turn, associated with the manufacture of consent for selective disciplinary public policy in neoliberal times. As Parton (2014, p. 176) has observed in the English context, not '…only has the state become more residualized, marketized and consumerized, it has become more authoritarian for certain sections of the population'.

The New Zealand Government's recent focus on a group of high risk families is, in fact, a historically recurrent phenomenon. The problem of troubled and troubling families has haunted social work practice since the inception of social work in the late Nineteenth Century. It is the policy response which varies and this is influenced by political and economic forces - in terms of dominant interests and dominant ideology. Ferguson (2004) argues that, particularly in statutory child protection, social work has historically been assigned the dirty work of dealing with the 'refuse of modernity'.

> In an important sense, child protection systems have chronically enmeshed with certain kinds of high - risk children and families for as long as there has been a child protection movement. There is a discernible intergenerational transmission of child protection work where generation after generation of the same family (or types of families) and welfare systems are caught up in intense relationships. This is reflected in a core pattern of long term, multi-problem, multi-referred cases which keep coming (back) to professional attention and which are at the heart of high risk work. (p. 199)

Ferguson's description of social reproduction and practice enmeshment is likely to strike a chord with anyone who has tangible experience of child welfare social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is something of an "uncomfortable truth", as there is also an element of in-built resistance to the association of child abuse with wider social deprivation. On the one hand there is the dismissal of causative links between economic stress and child maltreatment seen in the statement from Paula Bennett, the then Minister of Social Development, in the fore-word to the New Zealand White Paper on Vulnerable Children (2012): 'poverty is no excuse for abuse'. More significantly there is also a widely promulgated, if counterfactual, perception that child abuse is distributed "without favour"' across class boundaries. With the notable exception of sexual abuse, the incontrovertible reality is that a plethora of social disadvantage - poor housing, poverty, health and educational disparities - increases the likelihood of child maltreatment, including the 'notification' of such incidents given the greater professional surveillance of relatively impoverished communities (Parton, 2014).

The post-war welfare state structures developed in Anglophone jurisdictions were not (nor, in retrospect, were they likely to be) successful in eradicating the familial consequences of material inequality. Jones (1983) suggests that the spectre of the excluded and unproductive continued to haunt social work practice aimed at the

reintegration of the recalcitrant poor in the U.K. in the late 1950s.

> The evacuation programme after the war, followed by the growing involvement of social work agencies such as Family Service Units, among the slum populations of inner cities (Titmuss, 1950; Stephens, 1945), heightened awareness about the ways in which a substantial cluster of the population seemed to be locked in poverty and destitution. Popularly known as the 'problem families', writer after writer (Timms & Philp, 1957) drew attention to the manner in which these families not only constituted a huge drain on the newly expanded range of state welfare resources, but also produced more than the average number of children, many of whom never made it to the labour market in an employable state. (p. 15)

Nevertheless, the universal social services associated with the Western welfare state, including social work, were designed to ameliorate the more virulent manifestations of inequality inherent to market economies. When we give thought to the popular contemporary notion of vulnerable families, living beyond the margins of the respectable classes - posing a danger to the health, safety and socialisation of their children, compromising their right to normal development - we might do well to be mindful of the historical context canvassed above. This notion of a morally corrupt and threatening underclass is a recurrent public policy discourse that, unsurprisingly, is more prevalent in times of economic liberalisation. Consent to increasingly interventionist "protection" of the children of the poor is manufactured through the inculcation of moral outrage and the cultivation of perceived threat within "mainstream citizenry" - the imagined "middle New Zealand" of political rhetoric (Beddoe, 2014).

Pelton's (2015) recently published summary of relevant research studies presents compelling empirical evidence of the correlation between economic inequality and a range of negative social outcomes for children, including the incidence of maltreatment and associated state intervention. It is not as if social workers do not realise this. In this vein, Parton (2014) suggests that a wider social policy lens should include the concept of societal or systemic neglect: the visible neglect and violence visited upon vulnerable citizens and communities as a function of economic policies which facilitate unrestrained capitalism. Featherstone, White and Morris (2014) suggest that it is vital for the social work profession to interrogate its illusions of beneficent neutrality within what has become an increasingly divided and divisive social world, characterised by the unequal allocation of social and economic resources. Social work is urged to abandon …

> … belief in its essential innocence and to recognise its history under all sorts of highly problematic political regimes. The dominant child protection paradigm fits within a highly individualistic approach to families and, in essence, is compatible with a neoliberal emphasis on individual solutions to what are public troubles manifesting in private pain and sorrow (p. 36).

Social workers, perhaps more than any other professional group, are afforded a direct view of the human consequences of structural disadvantages. As a beginning social worker in South Auckland in the 1980s, I engaged with Māori and Pasefika families whose file notes had followed them from the gentrifying suburbs of the central city (Hyslop, 2007). I am not suggesting that economic disadvantage is the only measure of social need, or that it is the only issue that needs to be addressed in the field of child protection, merely that relative poverty is a pervasive structuring reality, always has been, and is increasingly the case in a neoliberal environment which exacerbates inequality.

Conflicted Identity: the divided faces of practice knowing

Jordan (2004) suggests that there is something of a paradox in the liberal humanist discourse of social work which obstructs acknowledgement of this reality. According to Philp (1979), the social work way of knowing - its "knowledge form" - is embedded in the possibility of individuated human change as opposed to generalised risk probability. In part, this orientation explains the tension between social work values and processes of actuarial risk assessment. The humanist roots of social work emphasise the possibility of reformation and repatriation as opposed to the likelihood of risk or recurrence (Goldstein, 1990). It can also be argued that this orientation has contributed to social work's preoccupation with the politics of recognition - freeing the "individual" from the constraints of classist, racist or sexist stereotypes - at the expense of a focus on the collective politics of distribution: class-based social inequality.

My doctoral research (Hyslop, 2013) investigated the nature of social work practice knowledge, as evidenced by data gleaned from interviews with twenty one experienced social workers in a wide variety of practice settings. Analysis of this data confirmed a general awareness that social work clients are drawn disproportionately from socially disadvantaged groups. However, there was also some friction associated with this insight. In my opinion, this apparent dis-ease goes to the heart of social work theory and practice. It can be explained by social work's location within the liberal humanist tradition: a commitment to the promotion of "potential" equality, even in the face of substantive inequality. The following quotes from interview transcripts are pertinent to this sense of resistance to the acceptance of (obvious) collective disadvantage. Given the chronic over-representation of Māori as the clients of social work in Aotaeroa New Zealand, the following observation from a Māori child protection social worker is significant.

I suppose to me in regards to that, Pākehā are - excuse me, no offence - very much into labelling people. So you do have the poor ones I suppose and the not so, but all I see is Māori and I suppose in working across the board, the clients are the children.

The conflict alluded to is perhaps best captured in the following comment from another research participant.

I think it would be really easy to say that the majority of the clients who I've worked with have come from across the board but it's not true. I think that's what everyone wants to say but in actual fact it isn't true. The majority of the people I have seen, whether it's been in mental health, drug and alcohol, basically life problems, it's mostly the lower socio-economic scale. You can't get away from that and one of the main problems people are suffering from is poverty. End of story.

It seems that a desire to suspend judgement of the inherently redeemable individual risks some denial of the constraints born of structural inequality. The danger of this conflation is that it potentially draws social work into complicity with punitive neoliberal social policy. This is particularly interesting to me at the level of personal practice experience. Although faith in human possibility is woven into the fabric of social work practice, repeated exposure to the life worlds of marginalised individuals who are drawn into inarticulate conflict with state systems can generate a tendency to exclude some families from full citizenship.

Social workers as moral gate-keepers to neoliberal citizenship

Ferguson (2004) draws on research undertaken into statutory practice in Ireland, where social workers described some of the client families encountered as living in a "time warp". Ferguson identifies

"the implication that these marginal, dirty and uncivilised families have failed to move with and keep up with the times, that they somehow 'out' of time" (p. 189). In my twenty years of experience in child protection social work in Auckland, New Zealand, I often observed groups of social workers in social or out-of-hours gatherings engaged in the exaggerated mockery of individual parents and / or children who were perceived as inadequate and often as somehow grotesque. It was as if repetition in the form of tribal incantation would exorcise doubt.

The relatively common perception that this behaviour can be explained as a form of restorative black humour, that counter-balances the burden of care in circumstances of shared adversity does not seem to adequately account for the urgency and vehemence displayed in these rituals. Looking back at this experience, I can now see a reflection of what might be termed the "shadow side" of the modernist social work project. It is perhaps best understood as a necessary reflex in the sense that a profession that is ostensibly concerned with social inclusion must find a way to justify the punitive face of practice. Some clients do not make it on to the list and we have a need to rationalise this to our personal and professional selves. Social work is a paradoxical profession in late capitalist society. It sees collective exclusion and advocates for individuated re-inclusion. The critical question for child protection in Aotearoa / New Zealand is which of these two faces will come to dominate practice development. As ever, I would urge practitioners that the answer is in our hands.

Conclusion

Let us be frank. Most of the client families served by statutory child protection are drawn from the ranks of the socially disadvantaged brown proletariat. High risk circumstances - which must be effectively, compassionately and safely responded

to - are generated in situations of poverty which are not the result of individuals being work shy and benefit dependant. They are the direct result of inadequate income, overcrowded and substandard housing, inadequate education, poor health and deprived neighbourhoods. This cumulative and cyclic disadvantage is an outcome of economic policy which promotes gratuitous consumption and lionises the accumulation of obscene levels of private wealth.

Growing inequality has plagued this country for the last thirty years. So, what is to be done? The answers are complex and child protection social work will only ever be part of the answer. Perhaps if we could just identify, isolate and fix those dirty and dangerous high risk families more efficiently and cost-effectively it would all go away. Alternatively, we could remove their children, re-shape them as safe and productive citizens and break the cycle of inter-generational transmission. Now, what do you think of these solutions and the role assigned to social work in this neoliberal future vision?

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