

Finally accountable? Social work and the Community Investment Strategy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines and proposes a social work response to the Ministry of Social Development's Community Investment Strategy social policy. Beddoe and Maidment's (2009) critical intersections model is utilised for this purpose and critical reference is made to the Productivity Commission's (2015) policy-framing Report *More Effective Social Services*. The details of the Community Investment Strategy are discussed in relation to service user perspectives, critical social theory, social justice and the role of the social work profession. The resulting analysis highlights that, if left unchecked, the Community Investment Strategy may do harm to those it purports to help. In particular, the Strategy promotes the Ministry of Social Development's agenda at the expense of those who need to access social services. The suggested social work response is actively anti-oppressive in promoting social justice and placing the service user at the centre of social work practice.

KEYWORDS: Community Investment Strategy; social work; critical intersections; service user perspectives; social justice

Introduction

In 2015 the Ministry of Social Development implemented its Community Investment Strategy with Minister Tolley (2015) making it clear that the strategy will affect the way that social services are purchased and delivered in New Zealand. It is important that social workers understand this neoliberal social policy in order to appreciate its likely implications and formulate an effective social work response. To this end Beddoe and Maidment's (2009) critical intersections model is used here as a lens through which the Community Investment Strategy is explored and critiqued. The policy document is considered in the light of service user perspectives, critical social theory and the values of the social work profession itself. Rather than being a benign initiative, the Community Investment Strategy is revealed as a policy that may lead to

oppression: greater challenges for people in need of support and reduced access to social services. Accordingly there is a need for social workers to respond to the Community Investment with a critical anti-oppressive stance and to work with service users in ways that privilege their perspectives, prioritising their needs over those of the Ministry of Social Development.

The Ministry of Social Development's Community Investment Strategy is located in the context of the New Zealand government's embrace of neoliberal policies that impact upon society at large as well as upon social services and those who use or are employed by such services. The implementation of neoliberal market policies in recent decades has been a significant challenge to social service provider organisations which have been compelled to compete against each other

for funding (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009; Duncan & Worrall, 2000). An emphasis on individual responsibility and accountability is central to the neoliberal agenda. Such policies, however, do not impact equally upon all members of society (Duncan & Worrall, 2000) but, rather, tend to have the greatest impact upon those who are already disadvantaged (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). The ongoing reform of the social security system in New Zealand has, for example, emphasised recipients' responsibilities ahead of citizenship rights and has resulted in the increased marginalisation of people receiving benefits and an erosion of their status as citizens (Duncan & Worrall, 2000; O'Brien, 2013). In order to guard against similar oppression it is important that social workers remain alert to shifts in social policy and that they maintain and develop their role as advocates for social justice (Beddoe and Maidment, 2009).

The Community Investment Strategy demonstrates a shift in social policy to focus on (and emphasise to provider organisations) the outcomes the Ministry and government expect from their investment in social services (Ministry of Social Development (MSD), 2015a). The MSD identifies that in the past services have not been based upon the "broader social goals being sought" (MSD, 2015a, p. 5). The new focus is ostensibly designed to ensure that services reach those who need them and that results align with priorities identified by the government (Tolley, 2015). The government's three identified priority areas, as presented in the Results Measurement Framework are: "vulnerable children, children in hardship and reducing child maltreatment"; "vulnerable young people, including young offenders, and reducing youth crime"; and "vulnerable adult victims/survivors, addressing perpetrators' behaviour and reducing violent crime" (Tolley, 2015, p. 5; MSD, 2015a, p. 4). The Strategy applies to all social services purchased by the Ministries of Social Development and Youth Development, except those purchased by Work and Income (MSD, 2015a). Many

service contracts will already be aligned with the Strategy and it is expected that by July 2018 all services purchased by MSD will have results-based measures embedded in their contracts. Demonstrations of the efficacy of social services by way of these results will, in turn, influence the Ministry's subsequent purchases (Tolley, 2015).

Beddoe and Maidment's (2009) critical intersections model is applied here as a fruitful means to examine the Community Investment Strategy and to inform a social work response. The model utilises social work education's core curriculum areas, such as promoting critical thinking and linking the profession with the policy context. There is an emphasis on engaging with "current critical issues and debates in social work" (Beddoe & Maidment, p. 4). Beddoe and Maidment categorise these debates as involving critical social theory, service user perspectives, cultural imperatives, and the profession itself. In this model it is the points of intersection, or overlap, between the various curriculum areas and critical debates that warrant social work's particular attention. In relation to analysis of the Community Investment Strategy, insights can be generated at these points of intersection between critical social theory, the social work profession and service user perspectives. These critical intersections are discussed in this article and a social work response developed to address the power imbalance inherent in the Ministry of Social Development's Community Investment Strategy.

The Social Work Profession

The drive for efficiency and accountability implies that service providers are ineffective and have not previously been held to account. This suggestion has significant implications for providers and for the social work profession alike. At its worst it indicates that the outcomes achieved by providers, practitioners and service users are not good enough. At its best the Community Investment Strategy calls upon providers to

prove that their work is relevant and meets the government's social goals. A required improvement in provider organisations is explicit in MSD's 2012 establishment of the Capability Investment Resource Fund to support providers to "become stronger and more sustainable" and in recent findings that the Fund is "improving the ability of providers to achieve better client results" (MSD, 2015a, p. 11).

In addition, the New Zealand Productivity Commission was recently instructed to investigate the state of the country's social services and its findings are published in *More Effective Social Services* (2015b). This report highlights provider concerns that coincide with Social Development Minister Tolley's (2015) earlier admission that the government does not know whether services are effective or not, despite receiving the required reports from providers. Whilst providers state that the government does not utilise the reports that providers submit (NZPC, 2015b), the Minister asserts that these reports do not demonstrate effectiveness because the MSD has been asking the wrong type of questions (Tolley, 2015). The Community Investment Strategy states that providers have "deep knowledge of and links into communities" and by utilising these links the MSD is able to reach those most in need of support (MSD, 2015a, p. 4). This is a partial acknowledgement of what providers and their staff do achieve. However, the Ministry's (2015a, p.7) stated quest to build the "evidence base for effective services" overlooks the social work profession's longstanding commitment to practice based evidence which drives excellence in social service provision.

The social work profession has a long history of accountability. The Community Investment Strategy essentially represents a change in what is measured and reported rather than social work "finally being held accountable". Friedman (2005, p. 22) defines accountability as —"a relationship between persons or groups, where one is responsible to another for something

important". For social workers this is manifest in their complex relationships and multiple accountabilities to funders, their organisations, clients and the community; to the profession as well as to their own values (Houlbrook, 2011). Moreover, social workers are accountable to the profession's code of ethics (Banks, 2012). This accountability framework is not diminishing and nor is the ever-present necessity of meeting contractual reporting obligations. The change of emphasis in terms of what is measured and reported upon is the difference made or "value added" to people's lives, in line with the outcome measures pertaining to the government's stated priority areas (MSD, 2015a; Tolley, 2015). Banks (2012, p. 594) calls this a "new accountability". The MSD enthusiastically notes that "providers want to be able to evidence the positive impact they make in client's lives" (MSD, 2015b, p. 2) and, similarly, some Australian social service workers have called the tools utilised to measure outcomes a "blessing for accountability" (Houlbrook, 2011, p. 56).

The Ministry of Social Development generally and the Community Investment Strategy specifically place a strong emphasis on the need to gather data to evidence outcomes. This demand has implications for social workers and researchers alike. Practitioners assume a very direct role in the recording of data pertaining to outcomes and, in effect, this makes them practitioner researchers. This potentially eases the historical tensions between social work and research that have seen research framed as a lesser activity than that of working directly with service users (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). In this area it has been suggested that social work and service users collaborate to conduct research that generates "bottom-up change" (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009, p. 134). However, this intention contrasts with the New Zealand Productivity Commission's (2015, p. 9) identification of a prevalence of "top-down control [that] means that decision-making power primarily sits with the relevant minister or chief executive of the agency". The Productivity Commission

recommends that government, universities, social service providers and service users' work together to find solutions to social problems. Practice based research generated by practitioner researchers could play a pivotal role in informing such solutions.

The Minister of Social Development has indicated the need for governmental agencies to work collaboratively with each other to achieve better outcomes for the people of New Zealand (Tolley, 2015). This need is acknowledged to a degree in the Community Investment Strategy's call for a "cross-government contracting framework" and for "better cross-agency systems and processes for social-sector purchasing" (MSD, 2015a, p. 11). It is less noticeable in the Strategy's Results Measurement Framework where MSD's relationships with the health, education and justice sectors appear tenuous. On the whole, the Strategy lacks tangible emphasis upon, or a determination to facilitate, MSD's collaboration with other government agencies. In its report *More Effective Social Services* the Productivity Commission (2015b) highlights the need for a move to a collaborative, whole of government approach to the purchase of social services. In particular, the current fragmented "silo" approach whereby each ministry purchases services separately does not adequately meet the needs of people with "complex needs that span across the silos" and leads to poorer outcomes for those most in need of support (NZPC, 2015b, p. 7). Concerns about the fragmentation of social services have also been voiced within the social work profession (Duncan & Worrall, 2000) and links made with the government's market based approach to purchasing of services in which provider organisations compete against each other for funding (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009; Duncan & Worrall, 2000). This further highlights the need for government agencies to change the way that they purchase social services. With practitioners in both government and non-governmental agencies the social work profession is well placed to advocate for a government purchasing model that is collaborative, efficient, and

more responsive to the needs of individuals, families and communities.

Critical Social Theory

The Community Investment Strategy holds the individual responsible and accountable for their circumstances. A critical social theory analysis provides a critique of this orientation. The MSD's statement that it purchases a number of services to address "the wider *causes* and consequences of poverty and material hardship" (MSD, 2015a, p. 17, emphasis added) actually translates into a focus upon individual responsibility. The Strategy emphasises the need for the individual to change their "attitudes, beliefs, behaviour ... [and] circumstances" (MSD, 2015a, p. 13). Such an onus upon the individual is consistent with that of a neoliberal agenda (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009). In reality personal difficulties are located in the "social and political context of people's lives" (Pease, Allan and Briskman, 2003, p. 2). Consistent with critical social theory, an anti-oppressive stance calls for social workers to align with people and to work with them to expose "unjust policies and practices" that serve to oppress and to replace them with ones that are non-oppressive (Dominelli, 2002, p. 35).

The Community Investment Strategy at times utilises negative stereotypes that may further disempower and oppress. Thompson (2012, p. 43) defines stereotyping as "a set of characteristics ... assumed to apply in total to a person or group". An example found in MSD's Results Measurement Framework is the categorisation of children who are made vulnerable by social issues such as parental substance abuse, poor parenting skills and poverty arising from parental unemployment (MSD, 2015a, p. 23). The packaging of these characteristics together is typical stereotyping. Another example found in the area of "vulnerable adults/survivors" is that "people with risk factors associated with perpetrating sexual violence are identified and the risks reduced (for example, mental health problems, alcohol

and other drug issues)" (2015a, p. 27). This statement is particularly concerning for its potential to do great harm by increasing stigma and discrimination, linking as it does the perpetration of sexual violence with mental illness. From these examples it is clear that stereotyping is both an oppressive and divisive act that creates a culture of "them" and "us" (Cooper & Rigney, 2009, p. 65). Social work practitioners have a duty to challenge this positioning and the marginalisation that it causes.

The Strategy's preoccupation with risk and vulnerability is likewise divisive and promotes cultural oppression. Not surprisingly, various social commentators have linked the "rise of risk" with the "focus of public policy on individual freedom, choice, responsibility, and obligation" (Green, 2007, p. 399) and it is readily apparent that such a focus is central to the Community Investment Strategy. The Strategy labels people as "vulnerable" or "at-risk" and sets the scene for such risk to be "managed and reduced" (MSD, 2015a, pp. 22-27). Ferudi (2007) identifies that risk has come to relate to a person's identity rather than their "relationship to a specific threat". Such labels also serve to expose those identified to public gaze and scrutiny (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009) and may lead to society excluding them. Crucially, such labels make "the vulnerable" and the "at risk" people the actual problem rather than the underlying social and economic issues being identified as the problem. Furthermore, responding to risk has been associated not with actions that support and prevent the feared risk occurring but, rather, with interventions after its occurrence (Green, 2007). This is particularly relevant to the Results Measurement Framework in which the bulk of funding is assigned to intervention and a far smaller amount to prevention (MSD, 2015a). For a practitioner to resist the culture of risk they must work with people in a timely manner and according to their needs. Moreover, it is important that social workers do not align themselves with the surveillance, labelling,

and demeaning of service users but, rather, act in ways that actively resist such oppression (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009).

The Community Investment Strategy focusses upon deficits to which social work must respond with a strengths based practice approach. The Strategy identifies many deficits to be remedied, such as addictions to alcohol and other drugs, child abuse, unemployment and criminal activity (MSD, 2015a). However, neither the Strategy nor the Minister of Social Development, seem to recognise the strengths that people have and which sit alongside their difficulties. A strengths based approach emphasises such awareness and supports people to harness their strengths to address areas in their lives which are causing them difficulty (Egan & Lewis-Nicholson, 2009). This is a powerful model and one in which the social work practitioner shares power with the service user rather than exercising power over them. It assumes that the client is both resourceful and competent (Egan & Lewis-Nicholson, 2009). This is in stark contrast with the Community Investment Strategy which assumes that the service user is passive and, thus, holds the social worker professionally responsible to change the service user. Moreover, a strength-based approach and practice privileges the service user experience and their voice (Egan and Lewis-Nicholson, 2009). The strengths model is consistent with anti-oppressive practice and, at this point of a critical intersection, aligns both with critical social theory and with the service user perspective.

The Service User

The Community Investment Strategy assumes a passive service user rather than a person taking an active role. MSD state their expectations as to the changes they "expect for clients as a result of receiving a service or programme" (MSD, 2015a, p. 13). This approach reflects the conception of a docile service user who both receives a service and is also changed by the service. This statement is consistent with a more traditional model in

which the client is the passive recipient of treatment and who is influenced by policy, the profession, and the organisation (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009, p. 76). However, MSD also expresses their commitment to work with people to better understand their needs (MSD, 2015a) and this statement, whilst incongruent with the Ministry's other expectations for and about service users, is likely to resonate with social work. With its call to shift the "power balance" away from the funders and towards service users and for government departments to "let go of the reigns of central control" (NZPC, 2015b, p. 18), the Productivity Commission becomes an unexpected potential ally of social work and service user alike.

Social work practitioners must work with service recipients to ensure user input into the formation and measurement of relevant goals and outcomes. It is likely that some outcomes of work with social services will be intangible and not readily measurable (Houlbrook, 2011; Keevers et al, 2012). Such outcomes may include increased confidence and self-esteem, or an improvement in personal relationships. These may be a necessary part of the journey and can contribute to more readily measured outcomes such as gaining employment or completing a course. The former may be measured by qualitative data whereas the latter is usually measured by hard data. By ensuring that qualitative data remains a part of reporting obligations the practitioner ensures that the service user voice is heard. The service user perspective must also be heard in the process of forming outcome measures at a policy level to ensure that the government's social goals are neither the sole nor the primary driver of social services. In their 2014 review of the Community Investment Strategy draft, Price, Waterhouse and Coopers (PWC) identified that the Ministry had yet to complete its setting of such measures and that they appeared to be relying upon service providers to help generate them. Whilst progress made towards setting outcomes and measures since PWC's review

is not clear, there nevertheless remains a valuable opportunity for service user and social work input. Indeed, if service users are to be other than a passive recipient of services, it is imperative that they be actively involved in determining outcomes relevant to them.

Social Justice

Social work practitioners must ensure that the drive to conform to MSD's Community Investment Strategy does not override the profession's commitment to social justice. Such a dilemma is outlined by Beddoe and Maidment (2009, p. 130) who link the rising "obsession with accountability and efficiency" to a decrease in social work's engagement with pressing social issues. As a response to the Community Investment Strategy, social work practitioners and the social work profession must ensure that social services remain available to those who need them. This is not made clear by the Community Investment Strategy where the bulk of the spending is on higher level intervention (MSD, 2015a; NZPC, 2015b). A preventative focus would not only reduce government spending in the long run, as people exit services earlier and at a lower level, but would also reduce the human cost (NZPC, 2015b). Moreover, an emphasis upon services for "the vulnerable" and those most "at risk" begs the question of social services' continuing availability for those seeking preventative or lower level of intervention and support. Therefore, as Dominelli (2002, p. 35) points out, "change is necessary to ensure that no one has to worry about how they are to access social resources to meet basic needs".

Social work practitioners can also remain faithful to the profession's pursuit of and dedication to social justice by ensuring that the Community Investment Strategy does not lead to the homogenisation of services. This is a clear risk posed by the threat of standardised outcomes. Social work practitioners must resist all attempts to standardise delivery by

making all social work approaches and social service organisations alike. For provider organisations this would remove the point of difference that distinguishes their service from another and might adversely affect their ability to compete for funding. Further, as Keevers et al. (2012) highlight, sometimes it takes a long time to get results and this reality is at odds with the “quick fixes” required by systems demanding accountability. Indeed, imposing standardised time constraints removes the focus from building and maintaining effective working relationships and may adversely influence outcomes (Keevers, 2012). Moreover, standardisation over-looks the diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand society. As Beddoe and Maidment (2009) suggest, treating everyone the same can do a great deal of harm. In particular, social work in New Zealand has a commitment to bi-cultural practice and the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The Aotearoa New Zealand Association Code of Ethics (2013, p. 8) stipulates the need for social workers to “constructively promote change in those agencies and organisations that operate from a mono-cultural base” and “at all times avoid imposing mono-cultural values and concepts upon Tangata Whenua”. Social work practitioners uphold and advance the principles of social justice when they respect diversity (Chu, Tsui & Yan, 2009) and do so by resisting standardised outcomes, timeframes and practices.

Conclusion

As a Ministry of Social Development policy indicative of the government’s overall neo-liberal stance, the Community Investment Strategy adopts a focus on efficiency and accountability that poses a number of challenges to social workers, the profession, provider organisations and service users. If social work meekly aligns itself with the strategy’s current manifestation then the profession fails in its accountability and commitment both to service users and to social justice. To remain accountable and to ensure that people receive the services that

they need when they need them, it is vital that the social work profession challenges the Ministry’s prescriptive agenda. The role of practitioners in responding to the real felt needs of service users must continue to be prioritised. Furthermore, it is imperative that social workers tailor their service to individual people and families rather than churning out a homogenised product more likely to cause harm. Social work must place the responsibility for government social policy outcomes where it belongs rather than upon those affected by such policies, even if this means challenging the Ministry of Social Development and the government itself. For social workers to uphold people’s rights and to fight for social justice even in the shadow of such powerful institutions is for social work to be faithful to its mission. This is where social work’s accountability rests.

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