The social work professionalisation project before the 1990s in Aotearoa New Zealand: The dream

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The meaning and purpose of social work has always been debated within the social work profession. The profession dreams of contributing towards a better, fairer, civil society locally and internationally. This article explores the professionalisation of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. This exploration has been undertaken as background for an ongoing research project.

METHOD: A critical consideration of the different theoretical and historical dimensions and interests at work that impacted on the journey of professionalisation of social work in this country has been undertaken based on a review of literature. Part one of the article outlines a definition of social work, and different concepts and approaches to professionalisation. Part two of the article contextualises the different approaches to professionalisation within Aotearoa New Zealand, from early forms of welfare pre-colonisation up until the early 1990s.

CONCLUSION: The literature and trends discussed serve to both document the history of professionalisation of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand and as background to an ongoing critical research project which aims to uncover interests at work and interrogate the legitimacy of those interests, while enabling the voices of key actors from the time to surface, be explored, and be recorded.

KEYWORDS: social work professionalisation; professional associations; social work education

Introduction

Professionalisation is a term which can describe both an individual's socialisation process into the context of an occupation and also the process by which an occupational group aspires to professional status that is shared internally and recognised externally. Further the occupational group becomes a moral community that is potentially important to civil society (Beddoe, 2013a; Evetts, 2006a; Olgiati, 2006). The International Federation of Social Work provides a global definition of social work which states…

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

Social workers debate issues of social justice, human rights, cultural respect, indigenous

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knowledge, equality, sustainability, transformation, empowerment, liberation, equity, fairness, redress, support, problem solving, social change, empowerment, wellbeing, competence, ethics, values, trustworthiness and more in our specific contexts and also globally with a fervent desire to move towards the dream of a better, fairer, civil society. These collective values are the vision, and driver of our profession. The professionalisation project was considered and promoted by the profession as a pathway for social work to reach closer to this dream. However, the environment, theoretical base and practice settings for social work are complex and fluid. Payne (2005) identified three discourses in social work theory incorporating reflexive therapeutic, individualist reformist and socialist collectivist approaches from which to consider the practise of social work, with a micro, meso or macro focus, and from social control or social change perspectives. These discourses may be utilised to assist with illuminating the evolution of the professionalisation debate as well as the paradoxes within the debate.

How does the concept of professionalisation fit within this complex setting? "Ngā hiahia kia titiro ki te timata, ā, kaa kite ai tātou te mutunga" (You must understand the beginning if you wish to see the end) (Gilgen (1991) in Ruwhiu, 2001 p.55)

Part 1: Approaches to professionalisation

Before exploring the social work professionalisation project in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is useful to briefly discuss the differences in the approaches to professionalisation. A number of competing approaches to understanding professionalisation have been developed in the literature and they differ in their definition of what constitutes a profession and their analysis of why some occupations have professionalised to a greater degree than others (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998). These approaches include the *trait,*

characteristic or attribute approach (Etzioni, 1969; Flexner, 2001 (1915); Greenwood, 1957), the *power and control approach* (Becker, 1962 in Barretta-Herman, 1993; Freidson, 2001; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008) and *the process approach* (Beddoe, 2013a; Evetts, 2006a). Regardless of analysis, professionalisation implies status and influence in and on society.

Trait approach

The *trait, characteristics or attributes approach* to professionalisation emphasises the function of professions in society, listing a number of features that are required before an occupation can claim to be a profession. These traits usually include having a systematic theory and body of knowledge, recognised professional authority by clientele, community sanction, code of ethics, and a professional culture sustained by formal and informal groups including employing organisations, education and research centres, and professional associations (Daniel, 2013; Etzioni, 1969; Flexner, 2001 (1915); Goode, 1957). This approach to social work was first explored by Flexner in 1915. He posited that the word profession or professional in its broadest meaning is simply the opposite of the word amateur. But he argued that social work could not be a profession as it did not conform to all six professional criteria[i] (Flexner, 2001 (1915)). Rather, he argued that what mattered more is a professional spirit and approach to work.

Other traits considered important in order to professionalise have been added or strengthened over the years, including specialist skills (Daniel, 2013), the generation of original research (Lyons, 2000), long periods of training and socialisation within higher education (Wilensky, 1964)

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[i]   The six professional criteria listed by Flexner (2001) in 1915 "Essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility, deriv[ing] raw material from science and learning; this raw material is worked up into a practical and definite end; they possess an educationally communicable technique; they tend to self-organisation; they become increasingly altruistic in motivation" (Flexner 2001, p.156).

coupled with control over entrance to the training (Daniel, 2013; Orme et al., 2009), commitment to service (Brill, 2001), autonomy of action (Olgiati, 2006), prestige and remuneration and fiduciary relations with clients. There is however, no consensus as to the essential traits that may be used to clarify the difference between professions and occupations (Wilensky, 1964).

Others argue that occupations distribute themselves along a professional continuum with undisputed well-recognised professions, such as medicine and law, with a maximum degree of attributes or traits at one end and occupations, such as social work, being less developed and with moderate levels of attributes and positioned further down the continuum (Greenwood, 1957). The concept of the semi-profession was introduced to explain why some occupations such as social work (and teaching and nursing) did not fully meet the traits required to be a profession, including employer constraints on their autonomy, limitations on professional monopoly, power, public esteem and community sanction (Scott, 1969), and additionally, not placing themselves above the communities they worked for (Beddoe, 2013a; Goode, 1969). Further it was asserted that different fields of social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1970s and 1980s were variable in their systematic body of knowledge and approach to professionalism (McDonald, 1977; Toren, 1969).

Thus, in the Aotearoa New Zealand setting, the low level of practitioner training, cultural imperatives and ideological challenges towards professionalisation placed the traits framework in doubt (Ings, 1986). Additionally, the trait approach fails to consider the reality of privilege, power and control with regards professionalisation projects (Barretta-Herman, 1993; Wilding, 1982).

Power approach

The *power or control approach* to professionalisation developed from the 1970s. This approach focuses on why and

how occupations establish and maintain dominance and the degree to which an occupation achieves the exclusive right or monopoly to perform certain types of work or delivery of services. In utilising this approach, consideration may be given to how knowledge is organised into disciplines and the effect that professional recognition has on relationships with clients, society, and with other professions (Barretta-Herman, 1993; Freidson, 2001; Becker, 1962 in Hamilton, 1974). Further, the power approach offers an explanation of the social processes underlying any occupation's attempt to attain professional status, and the hierarchy of professions with reference to the profession's power and control, which the traits' approach did not fully explain (Weiss-Gal &Welbourne, 2008).

The crucial part played by politicians, who are enlisted by an occupation to support professionalisation by having laws adopted and creating an alliance between the state and profession is also integral to the power approach towards professionalisation (Barretta-Herman, 1993; Wilding, 1982). However, as social work also has a commitment to social action, social justice, and equity, the profession must at times challenge dominant state interests. This may in part explain both why social work has not yet received universal acceptance of its claim to professional status (Beddoe, 2013a), and also why the state was initially reluctant to regulate social work (Ings, 1986). Barretta-Herman (1973b) argued that "the challenge for social workers is to remain true to the dual commitment of the social work task by using power and status of increased professionalisation to improve services to clients and to enhance social justice" (p.35).

The gendering of professionalisation projects is also examined in this approach noting that professionalisation takes place within broader structural and social systems. Rueschemeyer (1986, p.137) remarked that the "high devotion/low power syndrome" of the social service

professions fits well with women's traditional roles (cited in Witz, 1992 p.58). Etzioni's (1969) definition of semi-profession also had two defining features; it was an occupation located within a bureaucratic organisation and one in which women predominate. It is argued that definitions of professionalisation effectively exclude women, women's knowledge, the feminine characteristics of caring and any focus on relationships (Bolton & Muzio, 2008).

Notions of class, ethnicity and religion have historically also played a role in the development of professionalisation projects, with some groups having restricted access to the power and resources necessary for the successful development and maintenance of professionalisation projects (Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Witz, 1992). Social workers have traditionally dealt with "dirty work" and still predominantly deal with the most economically and socially depressed people in the community and with some of the most severe problems (Jones, 1974). Recruitment of social workers also often emerges from these same groups and this in turn impacts both on power and desire to professionalise (Toren, 1969). Further, social work's early alignment with faith or religious causes was seen by Walter (2003) to threaten the occupation's professionalisation as it was not viewed as a science and was instead seen as more closely aligned to the arts.

Beddoe (2013a) describes a professionalisation project as "a sequence of activities linked to an underlying purpose, which in the field of professions in society, is directed at the improvement of the standing and power of an occupational group, often over decades with many different actors" (p.48). A sociological analysis of professionalism suggests that emphasising professionalism is a distinctive and special way of controlling and organising workers and work, with real advantages for both practitioners and their clients in terms of status and service delivery (Evetts, 2006a, 2011).

Process approach

A third approach, the *process approach*, focuses on the concept of professionalism in both occupations and professions implying the importance of trust in client relations and reducing the significance of requiring a definitional line between professions and other (expert) occupations (Evetts, 2006a). This approach suggests a "less elitist stance and allows for social mobility of occupational groups while recognising this activity is not entirely independent and autonomous" (Beddoe, 2013a p.46-47). Professionalism can be conceptualised as both an occupational value (Freidson, 2001) and/or as a discourse (organisational professionalism) (Evetts, 2003; Fournier, 1999). Evetts (2006b) suggests that

> in addition to a profession protecting their own market position through controlling the licence to practice and protecting their elite positions, professionalisation might also represent a distinctive form of decentralised occupational control or moral occupational community that could be important to civil society (p.136).

The term professionalism has also been transformed into a discursive tool for discipline, performance and control (Cockburn-Wootten, 2012).

The social work professionalisation project both nationally and internationally continued in various ways over the latter half of the twentieth century, with the occupation gradually adopting more of the identified traits, power and control, trust in client relations and ethical direction to gain greater recognition (Hugman, 1996). Professionalisation, therefore is a politically charged project, achieved through a series of strategic alliances with those in power (Freidson, 2001) while at the same time evidencing technical knowledge and competence, promoting ethical standards and public interest while separating the discipline from competing groups with

alternative cultural capital (Beddoe, 2013a; Jones & Truell, 2012). Professionalism, as a process approach has thus been argued as a way to establish symbolic capital (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011), authority, value and confidence in (social) work while also fostering occupational closure and a practice of exclusion and control which in effect could undermine key social work values (Beddoe, 2013a; Cockburn-Wootten & Brewis, 2014).

Part 2: The social work professionalisation project

The Aotearoa New Zealand history of social work professionalisation commences with recognising the early forms of welfare that were in place in Māori society through whanau, hāpu and iwi before the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi (Durie, 1995; Nash, 2001). The introduction of Pākehā forms of welfare reflected to a degree what was available in Britain at the time (Younghusband, 1981), and compensated for the limited social and economic capital of many of the new immigrants who were not in a position to provide for periods of unemployment, sickness or old age (Tennant, 1983). This period includes the devolvement of responsibility for social services to the state (Social Security Department, 1950), and the growth and development of social work as a salaried occupation (Beddoe & Deeney, 2012; Nash, 1999; Tennant, 1983, 1989). The Child Welfare Division of the Department of Education was responsible for child protection social work under the Child Welfare Act, (1925).

Explanations for the length of time taken for the social work professionalisation journey in Aotearoa New Zealand incorporate a range of factors that are both internal and external to social work (Nash, 2009). Factors include the religious spiritual beginnings of the occupation; the female domination of the occupation in terms of both the workers and the caring tasks; power constraints with regards influencing law;

some social workers' internal ambivalence about professionalising and the social work imperatives of social action and reform; the initial lack of a clearly articulated body of knowledge and corresponding availability of education and training; associated low levels of social work practitioner autonomy; the lack of clearly demarcated social space or field for social work; as well as the marginalised position that clients of social workers hold in society (Garrett, 2007, Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011). Overlaying these factors is the unique bicultural orientation of Aotearoa New Zealand and the structural inequality experienced by Māori (Benton, Benton, Croft, & Waaka, 1991; Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Development of Social Welfare, 1986). Pūao-te-Āta-tū, a milestone report documenting structural racism within the Department of Social Welfare (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Development of Social Welfare, 1986) led to significant changes in child welfare legislation (from the Department of Social Welfare Act (1971) to the Children Young Persons and their Families Act (1989), with a focus on whānau decision making and the family group process. Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand was both challenged by and supported the moves to develop services provided by Māori for Māori along with a professional association that was responsive to demands for partnership.

The main actors in the development of professions are practitioners, users, universities, the state and employing organisations (Evetts, 2011; Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). In the remaining discussion consideration is given to the growth of social work education, the development of a collective identity that was responsive to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi), and the impact of a number of public inquiries and reviews of social work practice in the Aotearoa New Zealand social work professionalisation project.

Development of social work education

The development and increasing availability of social work education and training is a significant part of the social work professionalisation project and this history has been comprehensively detailed by Nash (1998) and others. The first formalised social work programme was initiated at Victoria University in 1949 (McCreary, 1971; Nash, 2009; Staniforth, 2010) and was soon complemented with various vocational programmes including the State Services Commission Social Work Training Centre at Tiromoana, Porirua (Fry, 1974; McDonald, 2004; Staniforth, 2015). Social work education became firmly embedded in the tertiary sector with the introduction of Massey University's four year Bachelor of Social Work programme in 1976, soon to be followed by programmes in other universities (Nash, 1998). During this period the New Zealand Social Work Training Council was empowered to "…develop basic minimum standards for accreditation for social work training" (Nash & Munford, 2001 p.23). Social work education and training proliferated to meet increasing demands for available and accessible social work training. The New Zealand Council for Education and Training in the Social Services (NZCETSS) developed requirements for the level A and B certificates, resulting in numerous low entry programmes being established (Beddoe, 2014). Level A endorsed courses provided an introductory level certificate undertaken within a 12 month period, while level B courses were at least two years in duration either a postgraduate diploma from Victoria or Canterbury Universities, the Bachelor of Social Work degree from Massey University, or a two year Diploma from some of the Polytechnics (Nash, 1998)[ii]. NZCETSS was replaced by Te Kai Awhina Ahumahi Industry Training Organisation which further expanded the low entry (University Entrance not required) courses and additionally introduced work-based training and unit standards for practitioners that on completion resulted in a level B Diploma. For many years, the Level B qualification was generally considered to be the benchmark minimum qualification for employment as a social worker in health and other sectors and this was reflected in the historical qualification benchmark set by the inaugural SWRB (Social Workers Registration Board, 2014). Since the implementation of the Social Workers Registration Act (SWRA)(2003), the SWRB has the responsibility for the recognition and monitoring of the standards of social work qualifications across the range of tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand[iii]

Development of collective professional identity

The development of a collective social work professional identity began to emerge in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1960s and in 1964 the New Zealand Association of Social Workers (NZASW) was established. The Association affiliated to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), developed a Code of Ethics and held an inaugural conference in its first year. The agreed upon focus was training, sharing information, research, professional standards, philosophy and international linkages (Hancock, 2004; Hancock & Nash, 2005; Nash & Miller, 2013).

In 1969, NZASW established a working party to consider establishing a register of social workers (Corrigan, 2005; O'Brien, 2013). However, being guided by Treaty considerations, the need for on-going development of accessible education and training and related issues of social justice, registration was shelved for many

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[ii] "The specialist C level qualifications were either gained through postgraduate study or specialist courses in other settings. The C level qualification was not one that became particularly widespread" (Nash, 1998 p.365).

[iii] There are currently 22 recognised social work qualifications, owned by 17 institutions (Social Workers Registration Board, 2016) and delivered by 19 tertiary institutions across 28 sites (J. Duke, personal communication, January 14, 2016).

decades (Hancock, 2004; Nash, 1999). Both the amalgamation of the Child Welfare Division of the Education Department and the Department of Social Security in 1970 – 1971 (Kendrick, 2004; Nash, 2001) and the creation of the category of social worker in the Department of Social Welfare Act (1971) further recognised social work as an occupation with its own professional identity. Around the same time, the NZASW membership committee endorsed a proposed definition of social worker and published it in the Association journal (Manchester, 1970)[iv].

The Aotearoa New Zealand journey of social work professionalisation is an example of a professional project that has followed a systematic process over many decades with many different actors involved. Academics discussed their views on the professionalisation project and the role and place of university education alongside the profession's responsibility for maintenance and setting of standards (Ritchie, 1967). Sharing information was achieved through a number of channels including NZASW publications with the first NZASW journal published in 1965 (McKenzie & Nash, 2008). The development and on-going publication of two special journals Te Komako and Tu Mau within the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers ((A)NZASW)[v] journal, identify significant developments in terms of "recognising the status and mana that belongs to its Tangata Whenua and Pasifika members" (McKenzie & Nash, 2008 p.4). News from the branches was originally included in the journal. From the 1990s the news was recorded in the monthly Association newsletter, ANZASW Notice Board. Recurring themes and issues in the

journal over the years have been noted including discussions about qualifications (education and training), membership of the association, conferences and their coverage, generic social work and evolving fields of practice, client concerns (Hancock & Nash, 2005; McKenzie & Nash, 2008) and at specific times debating professionalisation (Ings, 1986). Social work as a profession was threatened by the demand for competence in organisational-based tasks at the risk of neglecting social justice imperatives in order to adapt to, and survive in, the deregulated market-driven neoliberal environment. During the 1980s NZASW experienced a period of very low membership with internal conflict around issues of racism, social justice, accountability and the place of qualification (Beddoe & Randal, 1994). The remaining membership considered winding-up the Association.

At the same time, a number of public inquiries and reviews investigating practice within social services and institutional racism in the Department of Social Welfare and wider society (Benton et al., 1991; Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Development of Social Welfare, 1986; Report of the independent inquiry team reporting on the circumstances of the death of a child, 1989) resulted in the public and professional demand for better, safer, more professional services and thus a focus on the education and training needs of those in the social services sector (Beddoe, 2013b). Changes in legislation (Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act (1989)) and processes for working with children and young people who were at risk of harm were introduced and regularly reviewed (Mason Report, February, 1992).

The professional Association responded to the challenge of essentially being a Pākehā organisation with the development of a response to its Treaty of Waitangi obligations which included constitutional changes so that both the Tangata Whenua and Tauiwi caucuses would hold equal representation for decision making

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iv   The definition provides a description of what a social worker does, disciplines from which the practice derives its theory and the presence of social work supervision. Case-work, group-work, community organisation and social service administration were named as ways practitioners may carry out their tasks.

v   NZASW changed its name in 1998 to Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) to reflect its bicultural priority

(Beddoe & Randal, 1994). In 1988, rather than wind-up the Association due to the internal conflicts, the remaining membership of about 100 paid-up members voted to develop and implement an accountability process via a competency based membership system including a parallel process available for Māori social workers using the Niho Taniwha model (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2008). A national Code of Ethics was also developed along with a complaints procedure (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 1993). These developments sidestepped issues of professionalisation, qualification, elitism and registration, yet provided a way for social workers to demonstrate values, knowledge and skills sufficient for competent practice (Beddoe & Randal, 1994; Keall, 1993; Nash & Miller, 2013). However, the membership of the professional Association with demonstrated competency did not include the majority of social workers practicing in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Beddoe (2013a) argues that, this situation may have continued on for many years in Aotearoa New Zealand if it were not for the state's obsession with risk and audit and the corresponding public crisis of trust in social workers and the professions in general. It became important for the state to be seen to be doing something about promoting high standards for public services. Interestingly and ironically for social workers, the drive for professionalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand came at the same time as consumer challenge to professional monopolies (Freidson, 2001) and critique of the widespread acceptance of knowledge claims of professions (Harington & Beddoe, 2013). Social workers have long been active in challenging the label of expert, arguing for client self-determination and partnerships with consumers (Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2001; O'Brien, 2011; Sanders & Munford, 2008), utilising strength based approaches and feminist, empowerment, anti-discrimination and anti-oppressive theories to underpin practice' (Payne, 2014).

Conclusion

The social work professionalisation project in Aotearoa New Zealand had to navigate the many barriers and interests at work which were both internal and external to social work in order to develop professional status that was shared internally and recognised externally. At the same time, the professionalisation project needed to preserve the dream and vision of social work so as to positively impact on civil society. In considering the different approaches to professionalisation, the range of barriers to the journey of professionalisation of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand up to the mid-1990s have become more apparent. By this time, the Association was poised to once again consider the possibility of professional regulation and in the early 1990s it set up a working party to consider options of social worker registration (Blagdon, Taylor, & Keall, 1994). Concerns began to mount regarding whether professionalisation in the form of statutory regulation would or could provide opportunities for greater practitioner scholarship, civic literacy and responsibility to utilise theory, provide ethical care and retain a concern for social justice (Harington, 2006). The link between the dream of professional social work while taking the next step involving the development of a statutory regulatory framework for social workers was less certain. However, by the turn of the century, there was a concerted push for the statutory regulation of social workers and registration proposals were developed. These developments looked set to mark a massive professional shift for social work in Aotearoa New Zealand with statutory social worker regulation to become the next major historical phase of the social work professionalisation project.

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