Social work registration and professionalism: Social justice and poverty – fellow travellers or discarded passengers?

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Abstract

Poverty is a central focus for social work and social workers, but has received much less attention over recent times. While the ANZASW Code of Ethics and SWRB Code of Conduct differ in their expectations of social workers on social justice issues, it is the impact of managerialism and neo-liberalism and their incorporation of postmodern language of difference and diversity that is much more significant in this comparative neglect. Social workers need to reassert their collective voice on issues of poverty to meet their ethical obligations for competent practice.

Introduction

It is appropriate to begin with a brief description and disclaimer by way of background. I write as a life member and former Association President, as a current member of the Association's social justice group, Chair of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and of the Alternative Welfare Working Group which reported in 2010. Of course, none of these entities is responsible for this work; I simply state them here to indicate some of the influences on this work and on the reflections and thinking that lie behind it. Nevertheless, the significance of these (and other) links will become obvious as the article proceeds and hence it seemed appropriate to be explicit about them at the outset.

Part of the initial brief for the article was to reflect on the impact of registration on social work and social workers' attention to issues of poverty. In brief, the question begs a number of important implications and considerations (not necessarily in order of priority) such as:

- Has social work historically been interested in and attentive to poverty?
- Is poverty still a factor in the lives of those individuals, families and communities with whom and with which social workers engage in the practice of social work?

- Is there a mandate in social work values and ethics that could or should lead to social workers' attention to issues of poverty.

These three questions traverse a much wider arena than can be comprehensively and exhaustively examined in a solitary article. Suffice to say that the response to the first question (the historical roots) is: yes, there is clearly a historical focus on issues of poverty (and social justice). A range of commentators and authors have mapped out that territory and this article will take that as a given. (See, for example, Jones 1983; Pierson 2011). The focus then will be on dimensions of the last two questions. It is a discussion which needs to be rooted within a wider reflection on the links between social justice and social work because it is those links which provide the framework for both locating attention to issues of poverty as part of social work practice and providing a template to reflect on the current state of practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. A definition of social work provides a good starting point for the examination.

Definition of social work

The social work literature is replete with definitions, going back as far as the early professional and academic literature of a century ago. Core elements of these definitions are covered in both the academic literature and in recent Aotearoa New Zealand theses (Nash 1998; Staniforth 2010); the debates do not need to be traversed here. For current purposes, it is worth noting that social justice is a fundamental element in many (but not all) of the definitions and descriptions of social work. For the purposes of the discussion in this article, I want to use the IFSW definition which states, inter alia:

> … the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being … Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (International Federation of Social Workers, n.d.: 1).

That definition highlights the social justice components of the practice of social work as one of the central elements in performing effective practice. All of this (and the myriad books and articles that sit behind the statements here) beg the question – what do we mean by social justice – and it is that question to which we now turn.

Definition of social justice

As with social work, the concept of social justice is the subject of a vast literature of its own, with a wide range of approaches and emphases. Often the concept is associated with ideas and strategies that might be broadly characterised as social democratic, but it is worth noting that social democratic frames do not have a mortgage on the term as is reflected, for example, in the creation of the Commission on Social Justice by the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom. Again, the definitional debates can be put to one side, interesting and important as those debates are.

Rather, for current purposes, I am going to use Craig's (2002: 671-672) definition of social justice because of its comprehensive nature:

… a framework of political objectives, pursued through social, economic, environmental and political policies, based on an acceptance of difference and diversity, and informed by values concerned with: achieving fairness, and equality of outcomes and treatment; recognising the dignity and equal worth and encouraging the self esteem of all; the meeting of basic needs; maximizing the reduction of inequalities in wealth, income and life chances; and the participation of all, including the most disadvantaged.

Clearly, this definition is not a conservative one, containing as it does, inter alia, arguments for reduction of inequalities, participation and meeting of basic needs. It is worth noting too his initial sentence where he emphasises both political objectives and the pursuit of a range of policies to achieve those objectives.

What then of the link between social justice and social work? As I have indicated elsewhere (O'Brien 2011), social justice is referred to in the code of ethics of most social work professional bodies, including Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). Reflecting the international definitions, ANZASW's Code of Ethics contains a series of statements in section two about the role of social workers in relation to social justice, including the statement that, '… members inform society at large about social injustice… advocate social justice … and promote socially just policies, legislation and improved social conditions' (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers 2008: Items 2.2, 2.3, 2.4). Furthermore, as part of being an ethical practitioner, members are expected to, '… engage in constructive action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate social injustice' (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers 2008: Item 2.6).

The Social Workers Registration Board's (SWRB) statement of competencies for social work practice contains a series of statements referring to aspects of the pursuit of justice as being requirements for a competent practitioner. For example, competence three is, '… competence to promote the principles of human rights and social justice' (Social Workers Registration Board 2012). Competence four also refers to social justice in a framework of promoting social change and competence five refers to issues of human rights although it does not specifically refer to social justice in identifying the specific elements of this dimension of competency. Similarly, echoing its competency standards, the Board's programme recognition standards refers to, '… competence to promote human rights and social justice' (Social Workers Registration Board 2013) in its statement of competence expected of graduates from recognised programmes. It does not include any reference to social justice in its statement of graduate attributes in the same document.

I will return to a discussion of some of the implications of these statements later; for now I want to turn to the second question above, namely the evidence about poverty in New Zealand and the links between poverty and social work practice.

Poverty, what poverty?

The existence and extent and persistence of poverty in New Zealand is now well established; the tragedy is the lack of effective and appropriate action to respond to this extensive body of evidence. A library of reports and documents around its definition, nature, distribution and effects has appeared in the last 25 years (Perry 2012; Office of the Children's Commissioner 2012; Rashbrooke 2013).While it is not necessary to summarise these reports and documents for our present purposes, it is important to note some key features briefly. Children,

beneficiaries, Maori and Pacific communities are significantly over-represented in the data, quantitative and qualitative.[1] It is important to note here too that poverty is not limited to those groups. The evidence is also clear that there is significant poverty among: (a) larger families; (b) families in paid work with dependent children; (c) specific groups of older people. We do not have the detailed knowledge of the living standards of disabled people, but it seems highly likely that they too are over-represented among those living below the poverty line, and, by definition, living below a standard that is acceptable to New Zealand.

Much of the work referred to in the previous paragraph is focused on either the incidence and prevalence of poverty among different groups or key components of poverty such as health, housing and education, all areas where the effects are clearly identified. What about social work and social work practice? How much of that practice involves work with those in the groups identified as living in poverty? Is there a link between poverty and the day-to-day practice of social work? While there is no direct measurement of the precise extent of this connection, all the indirect evidence and commentary from practitioners and agencies and the available reports about the nature of social work practice in this country provide compelling evidence that there is a link and the link is a significant one. We can assert with some confidence that poverty is the daily experience of a significant proportion of the individuals, families and communities social work engages with. We may not be able to be exact about the numbers but there can be no denying that they are significant and I would venture to suggest the experience of a majority of those with whom social workers work. While this is an assertion about incidence, not an argument about causality, the latter should not be underestimated.

There are multiple indicators of the significance of poverty in the material from social service agencies. A few examples will suffice. The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS)[2] has produced a range of reports over the years from its Poverty Indicators Project, and its quarterly Vulnerability report regularly highlights poverty and poverty-related issues in its data from member agencies. The Auckland City Mission website highlights the significance of poverty in its work while agencies around the country, large and small, are involved in providing food through their foodbanks and/or assisting and advocating for individuals and families with another basic need, namely the provision of adequate and affordable housing. To move into a different realm where there has been considerable social work focus in recent years, CPAG's report on child abuse highlights the significance of poverty among families where there are reports of child abuse (Wynd, 2013). In highlighting this connection, the report draws attention to the literature and research on the relationship between poverty and child abuse.

Their significance in social work practice means that both the requirements set out in the ANZASW Code of Ethics and the statements of competence from the SWRB point to a social work responsibility to take professional action in relation to these issues of poverty. Poverty is one of the major issues, arguably the major issue, facing, I am suggesting, the majority of clients. As such it is a clear manifestation of the issues of social injustice and discrimination set out by the two bodies and reflected in the quotations above.

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[1]   The literature referenced above provides the evidence and details for this. It is not necessary to repeat that here.

[2]   The author chairs the Council's Impacts of Poverty and Exclusion group and is a member of the NZCCSS Council.

There is, however, an important difference in the nature of those expectations from the two bodies. The SWRB expectation and statement of competencies makes no reference for practitioners to act to change and challenge unjust policies; rather, their statements of relevance to this discussion are focused on the acts of individual practice and the requirement for a competent practitioner to undertake her/his practice in ways which do not discriminate and carry out human rights obligations, albeit at an individual level. While item five 'competence to promote social change' refers to promoting and advocating social change providing fairness for all and challenging discrimination (Social Workers Registration Board 2013: Item 5), significantly it then goes on to state that the social worker should, '… reflect (emphasis added) on social work practice with a view to enhanc[ing] principles of human rights, social justice and social change' (Op.cit.). The individualised focus which is reflected here is even more strongly reflected in the Board's Code of Conduct (Social Workers Registration Board, 2008) where the social worker's obligations are set out in terms of non-discriminatory behaviour in relation to clients (a term which is defined widely).

By way of contrast, as indicated above, ANZASW Code of Ethics suggests a more active requirement on practitioners who are expected to advocate for better policies, inform society about social injustice and advocate and promote socially just policies and improved social conditions. To use the traditional but critical distinctions, providing services and programmes for clients which are consistent with social justice and human rights principles is a necessary component of social work practice but it is not sufficient. In the context of our focus here on issues of poverty, practitioners would need to take up the issues of poverty that they see in their practice, advocate for policies which reduce poverty and inform society about the poverty they are seeing and the policies which are needed to reduce poverty.

What then has been the practice, the enactment of this ethical requirement? In brief, social workers have been comparatively silent and inactive in reflecting on and commenting on the poverty which has blighted New Zealand over the last 25 years. While their professional ethical code has given them both licence and obligation to do so, they have been generally conspicuous by their absence. As I have noted above, agencies and umbrella bodies have been active commentators meeting, in part, the ethical obligations in that they have been able to speak and act where practitioners have been potentially more vulnerable. Few practitioners have been media or public commentators and/or have appeared before Parliamentary Select Committees and working parties such as the Welfare Working Group where some of the most punitive and hostile responses to beneficiaries have been articulated and reflected in the recent processes of welfare change in which the focus of the debates has frequently been on attacking the poor rather than attacking poverty.

What, then, does this mean? To take up the question which was part of the initial brief for this article, has the creation of the SWRB led to or created this neglect of poverty in social work practice? Does the lack of action by practitioners mean that they have failed to meet their ethical obligations? I want to suggest that while these might be deductions from the discussion thus far, there are more substantial and substantive issues at stake and it is those to which we should look for an explanation. It is that discussion to which the article now turns.

Neoliberalism, managerialism, social work practice

I want to suggest that social work's neglect of poverty is linked with and arises from two powerful influences over the last three decades. We might describe these two influences as

occurring without and within. That is, some elements result from impacts and forces outside social work while other impacts and forces arise from within social work, although, of course, the forces within are not limited to social work but reflect, as I indicate below, much wider considerations of diversity, difference and identity, inter alia.

Briefly, the 'forces without' encompasses the powerful economic, ideological and political forces reflected in neoliberalism and managerialism. There is now an extensive international literature on the nature of managerialism and neoliberalism and their impact on social work. (Interested readers should see, for example, Ferguson, Lavalette, & Whitmore 2005; Dominelli 2010; Wallace and Pease 2011; Abramovitz 2012; Jordan and Drakeford 2012). Central features of managerialism and neoliberalism of relevance here are:

- an emphasis on individualism, on individual responsibility and on choice as an individual act,
- an associated denial of the significance of social structures and of the ways in which those structures create, limit and structure 'choice',
- an emphasis on voluntarism (at all levels) and a consequential rejection of social obligations and of social interconnectedness,
- an emphasis on the unfettered market as the creator, arbiter and distributor of individual and social good, with distributional effects as unfortunate but inevitable outcomes of those market processes,
- an emphasis on measureable results and outcomes, defined narrowly and measured equally narrowly, with funding linked to those results and outcomes, and
- an emphasis on trickle down effects of economic growth.

Consistent with its political and theoretical frame, neoliberalism regards poverty as arising from individual failing and individual choice. It is unconnected with economic distribution and economic structures and state responsibility and state response is limited and temporary, with an emphasis on both these dimensions. Ferguson and Woodward (2009) note too the top down, centralised nature of managerialism, the power of policymakers and managers to determine professional activity and the diminution of professional judgement and discretion.

'Forces within' on the other hand is an attempt to reflect the many diverse strands subsumed rather loosely under terms such as postmodernism, identity politics, the politics of difference. Postmodernism has also been critical of many aspects of twentieth century social democracy, particularly in relation to uniformity, the contested nature of 'reality' and the denial of difference. Of course, postmodernism begins from a very different starting point and with very different goals from those reflected in neoliberal thinking and politics. Importantly too, unlike neoliberalism, inequality has been a focus for many postmodern writers.

Social work has been significantly shaped and influenced by (and in turn has itself shaped and influenced) the emphasis on the diversities of gender, ethnicity, culture, sexual identity, ableness – to draw out five critical elements. The postmodern turn has highlighted these differences and their importance to both individual and collective identity, often stressing the importance of the differences in contrast to the uniformity, similarities and commonality that was identified as one of the hallmarks of the previous age of modernity. The emphasis on identity and difference has meant that economic structures and their effects and consequences have received less attention than previously, and indeed in some instances have been ignored, as analysis and struggles have focused on expressions of identity and differ-

ence from disadvantaged, discriminated and minority groups. (Fook (2002) takes up some of the discussion about the strengths and limitations of postmodernism very thoughtfully).

Importantly for the discussion here, however, neoliberalism and managerialism have been well able to accommodate the emphasis on diversity and difference which are central to postmodernism and to related developments in social work practice over the last three decades. As I have noted, central to the ideas of diversity and difference is the notion of identity. Neoliberalism with its emphasis on individualism has accommodated this without any great difficulty by highlighting individual difference; identity has become individualised and is not socially constructed. Consistent with the tenets of neoliberalism, collective actions based around identity (such as those of groups of disabled people or of ethnic communities, for example), are, for neoliberals, the actions of individuals coming together freely to express and act on shared interests. However, the identity on which that is based is an individual identity; it is not socially constructed in the ways carefully described by writers in such diverse fields as disability, gender and ethnicity, for example.

There is, then, a disarming apparent confluence between the neoliberal and managerial arguments on the one hand and postmodern arguments on the other. 'Agency' provides a very good example of this. Ideas of agency, 'independence' and self-determination are very comfortable for neoliberals and indeed are central to neoliberal politics and programmes. The individual makes choices and determines his/her own destiny. Postmodern struggles have also given some emphasis to issues of agency and the importance of struggling to exercise control over direction and decision making and reduced dependence on the state through highlighting the importance of the self-knowledge and experience of discrimination and disadvantage. Most importantly for the purposes of this discussion, they highlight the capacity to act in order to advance their own needs and to articulate how best to respond to those needs. The work of feminist groups, indigenous and ethnic communities and disability groups provide good examples of this.

Thus, while shaped very differently and with quite different aims and objectives, the postmodern emphasis on agency and identity has been very comfortably accommodated within neoliberalism and neoliberals have in many respects appropriated the language very effectively. While postmodernists highlight the qualities and strengths which disadvantaged and discriminated groups bring to their lives and their capacity to exercise agency so as to reduce/eliminate that discrimination and disadvantage, neoliberals use the same notion to demand responsibility and to justify punitive and monitoring approaches to those groups as is reflected in the work on welfare reform in New Zealand and many other countries around the globe.

To take a specific example, postmodernists see lone parents' experiences and knowledge about their lives and needs (and their poverty) as providing the basis for an effective welfare programmes and welfare services, while neoliberals use similar language to justify increasingly punitive requirements for beneficiaries, arguing that they are capable people, should be required to exercise that capability and punished when they 'fail' to do so. Let me hasten to add that this is not a conspiracy argument, far from it. Rather it is an argument that neoliberal and managerialist frames have appropriated the language and concepts of postmodernism to advance their own ends and have been able to do so in ways which are consistent with and indeed reinforce their own approaches and frameworks and political and social agenda.

How does all this link with the neglect of poverty? One of the fundamentally missing ingredients in much of the postmodern emphasis on difference and diversity is the neglect of the ways in which material considerations such as income influence and shape lives. Identity matters, individuality matters, difference matters but in focusing on these and related elements social work and social workers have often forgotten, perhaps ignored or neglected, the crucial significance of the material disadvantage (poverty) which blights the lives of clients. In our (legitimate) focus on and interest in diversity and identity and the ways in which these factors shapes lives and opportunities, the key importance of the adequacy and availability of income in shaping and determining what happens for clients has been lost and we have failed to be an active and effective voice on issues of poverty.

To return now to the earlier discussion on ethics and competency. The postmodern critique of 'modernism' has, as noted above, emphasised difference and diversity as key components of both analysis and action. This postmodern emphasis is reflected in the SWRB's Competency Standards priorities, at least in the order in which they are set out, 'recognis[ing] and support[ing] diversity among groups and individuals' (Social Workers Registration Board 2012: Item 2) ahead of promoting human rights and social justice and promoting social change – the latter are items three and four. In their respective documents, both the SWRB and ANZASW give first priority to relationships with tangata whenua but with a different emphasis. The Board emphasises competency to practise with Māori while the Association's Code refers to 'responsibility for Te Tiriti o Waitangi-based society' which is a much broader focus. At the risk of over simplification, the SWRB emphasis is on the practice of social workers while the ANZASW emphasis is on social work's broader remit. Interestingly, the ANZASW Code does not refer specifically to difference or diversity but both documents list an almost identical series of grounds (culture, 'race', gender, sexual orientation, age for example) on which social workers must not discriminate. The ANZASW code requires practitioners to have 'particular regard for disadvantaged minorities', a requirement which the SWRB does not make.

The 'alignment' and the associated appropriation referred to above have one other important shared aspect, shared to some extent at least, namely pushing income poverty into the background (in the case of postmodernism) or reducing it to individual failings (neoliberalism). It is this 'alignment' which has been critical in social work's comparative neglect of poverty over the last two decades and is a more potent factor than the development of social work registration. Rather than being causal in social work's comparative neglect of poverty, the SWRB's requirement to reflect rather than act and on not discriminating on the grounds of social and economic status echoes the environment within which it is located. Importantly, however, it is social and economic status which is the subject of reflection, not poverty.

All of this begs one other important question: what do we mean by competency in relation to social work practice? Commentators on competency (see, for example, Wallace and Pease 2011; Rogowski 2012) have noted that the emphasis on identifying competencies moves social work towards a narrow technical frame, rejecting the relationship and professional dimensions of practice, including the inherently political nature of social work. This is not an argument that practitioners should not worry about being competent. Rather, it is an argument for a much broader approach to what constitutes competency, rather than relying on assessment of skills as the measure of competence.

The way forward: what is to be done, how should we act ?

Given social work's history, the profession's code of ethics and the materially impoverished nature of the lives of so many of social work's clients, how do we proceed from here? In asking this question, I am asserting implicitly that social work needs to gather up again its commitment to engaging with issues of poverty and to be active and be seen to be active in relation to engaging with issues of poverty. Of course, this does not occur at the expense of the other dimensions of discrimination and disadvantage which I have noted in the above discussion. Rather, it is an emphasis which sits alongside those dimensions and which informs discussion about those dimensions.

First, then, we need to recognise that there is an issue for social work to address. Second, we need to identify and acknowledge the significance of poverty in the lives of the families and communities we work with. Over the years, many of us have been challenged about ignoring and/or neglecting racism and sexism; the same challenge is appropriate here. Third, we need to expect that our individual and collective actions (and those of our representatives) will reflect this acknowledgement. This means an active and persistent public social work voice on issues of poverty, a voice which is articulated alongside and for clients, individually and collectively. It means too standing up publicly for and alongside poor and impoverished families and communities, sometimes in ways that will not be comfortable but which can be managed if done collectively. Neoliberal and managerial frameworks will, of course, lead to individual social workers being challenged about their actions; it is collective and representative actions that will be required to produce change.

There is a useful discussion of aspects of these requirements in the social work literature (Hick, Fook & Pozutto 2005; Ferguson 2008; Rogowski 2012 ; Wallace and Pease 2011; Stanford 2008). Common to all of these is the importance of developing practice which challenges neoliberal and managerial frameworks, activity which, in Ferguson's (2012: 752) words challenges the, '… dominant ideology of 'non-political' professionalism'. We will need too to reassert, '… how people construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations' (Fook 2002: 18). Reasserting the significance and impacts of poverty in the practice of social work is an integral part of being an effective, ethical practitioner. In doing that we will need to act rather than merely reflect. Professional ethics and responsibilities demand nothing less than taking action against poverty. Agencies will vary widely in their support for social workers to take social action with and on behalf of their clients. However, professional ethics require such action and as ethical practitioners we will need to join effectively with colleagues in our agencies and in the wider professional community to ensure that we meet the requirements of this part of our ethical code. Being a socially just practitioner demands nothing less.

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