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Getting beyond 'heroic agency' in conceptualising social workers as policy actors in the 21st Century

Abstract

The professional project of social work assumes a particular orientation to human agency on the part of social workers. Specifically, the social work educational literature focusing on the nature of the profession suggests that social workers exert considerable control over the means and ends of their practice. In this paper we ask whether this assumption is warranted. While we conceptualise this issue as relevant to the entire spectrum of professional social work practice, here we discuss our claim in relation to social workers adopting policy activist roles. We suggest that the actual engagement of social workers in policy practice and political change in liberal democracies is muted and we canvas a number of reasons that help explain why this is the case. We canvas the impact of naive conceptualisations of what we call the 'heroic agency' of social work identity as employed in texts used in pre-service social work education. Specifically we pose the thesis that new social work graduates, when immersed into the organisational rationalities of reconfigured 'welfare states', may experience a considerable mismatch between the promise of being a social change agent and their experience as a beginning practitioner, making it difficult for them to confidently articulate their political identity and purpose.

Keywords:

new managerialism, political agency, policy activism, professional identity,

Introduction

Social work has been an important project of modernity. Its origin is part of the modernist impulse to create a better world conducive to the development of happy, healthy and industrious citizens. This normative orientation continues to be relevant to the current period of late modernity shaped, in large part, by the expansion of market capitalism across the globe and its association with old and new inequalities. These conditions pose a challenge to the profession as they undermine the possibility of pursuing a model of social protection committed to collective wellbeing. The last 20 to 30 years has seen the triumph of a more individualist understanding of social relations that weakens the idea of collective responsibility (Marion Young, 2011). Associated with this redrawing of rights and responsibilities the social science knowledge informing social work practice has also undergone significant shifts. Critics of the welfare state (for example Mead, 1997) have dismissed what they call sociological and political-economy approaches to problems like poverty, and have instead opted for behavioural-economic understandings of human behaviour. The combined effect of these changes is to cast doubt on the knowledge and actions of social workers as political actors, particularly those social workers directly engaged in work that seeks to redress social injustice and to influence public policy.

The validity and legitimacy of the radical tradition in social work knowledge and practice has been thoroughly challenged by these developments (Lymbery, 2001). One effect of this shifting landscape is the de-politicisation of issues such as unemployment, homelessness and household poverty both within society and within the organisational settings where most social workers practice. In the latter context, this process of de-politicisation has been facilitated by the adoption of New Public Management, emphasising technical and managerial discourses and devaluing the professional knowledge of social workers (Funnell, 2005). Overall, this framing of social problems encourages those professions working on social problems to adopt an 'inward looking' perspective that minimises the connections between structural change and the manifestation of individual problems. Our contention is that social work needs to maintain an 'outward looking' perspective, particularly if it seeks to remain relevant to the material needs of citizens and the goals of old and new social movements that seek to redress injustices. In this

paper we suggest that the task of ensuring social work remains relevant to contemporary political and social change will require a number of steps, including (1) rethinking the construction of the political agency of social workers to help re-establish a clear and realistic purpose in social work education, (2) questioning assumptions about how social justice claims can be advanced in the contemporary period of global governance (3) identifying appropriate metaphors to re-imagine the political dimension of social work practice and (4) revaluing the local level of organisational practice as a site of policy activism.

Specifically, we mount an argument that the professional identity proffered to beginning social work practitioners in pre-service educational programs is one which conceives workers as embodying and projecting a form of human agency seemingly impervious to the many pitfalls embedded in the world of contemporary practice. One such problem lies in what we conceive here as the 'heroic' claims made about what social workers can achieve in the name of empowerment and social justice. These claims, historically more aligned with the radical tradition in social work education and practice (Rojek, et al, 1988), are often not warranted when one considers the weight of recent evidence on how social work as a profession has been actively involved in redressing social disadvantage, growing inequality and continuing injustice. Lymbery (2001) argues that an increase in destitution and social division has combined with the demoralisation of social work to reduce its effectiveness in responding to social problems. In response, we suggest that social justice needs to remain central to the social work mission; however, we also argue that emerging practitioners should be supported to develop greater clarity about what they can and cannot do in the context of 21st Century spaces of social work practice.

In working through the steps to reconstruct social work, we must deconstruct the contemporary manifestation of the professional project. First, we outline the imagined identity of social workers reflected in literature produced for use in pre-service social work education. Second, we draw out the proposed and actual nature of social work policy activism and policy practice. Third, we address the notion of 'heroic agency' – what we mean and how it plays out, particularly in the genre of radical or critical social work but nevertheless more broadly applicable. Fourth, we examine well known and well documented New Public Management-inspired developments that have occurred in the actual spaces of

practice over the past 20 to 30 years and the impact these have had on professional autonomy and political agency of practitioners. Finally, we point to the concept of 'friction' as developed by Tsing (2004) as a useful metaphor for thinking about the possibilities for challenging injustice at a local and international level. This concept, we argue, helps us transcend one-dimensional notions of power transfer as suggested by some writings on 'empowerment' (see Bay (2003) for a critical analysis of empowerment social work) and helps infuse a more deliberative conception of what emancipation means in a global context. What we hope to achieve in the final section of the paper is to furnish some new conceptual resources for social work education and practice. Our core contention is that thinking critically and acting politically are mutually informing skills for social workers interested in intervening in the public sphere to advance social justice claims.

The imagined identity of social workers

The first part of our thesis is that the identity of the profession and of professionals promoted in pre-service educational literature positions social workers as having considerable capacity to achieve progressive social change, particularly at levels beyond the individual – that is, at the organisational, policy, and even at the societal level. We contend this is the case even when such claims are hedged by prevarication. Such grand thinking has a long tradition in social work. Writing as long ago as 1970, Harriet Bartlett, a foundational contributor to the profession in the US argued that social work is a profession that helps society 'work better'. This mission continues to be reflected in contemporary writing about the purpose of social work. Here we make this point by briefly examining professional identities and roles present in literature originating from the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), as well as examples drawn from Australia, Great Britain, the United States of America, and Canada. In the examples we canvass here, we italicise those words and phrases which, in our view, promote 'heroic agency'.

We begin with the IFSW. In 2000, this organisation produced a much cited statement about the purpose of social work:

The social work profession promotes *social change*, problem solving in human relations and the *empowerment* and *liberation* of people to enhance wellbeing. (IFSW, http://www.ifsw.org/f38000138.html, accessed 2.6.11).

Later in the same statement, it claims that:

Social work addresses the *barriers*, *inequities and injustices* that exist in society......... Interventions also include agency administration, community organisation and engaging in *social and political action to impact social policy and economic development*. The *holistic focus of social work is universal*, but the priorities of social work practice will vary from country to country and from time to time depending on cultural, historical, and socio-economic conditions (IFSW, http://www.ifsw.org/f38000138.html, accessed 2.6.11).

In Australia, key authors Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2008: 13) write:

To our mind, the purpose of practice can be summarised as follows: to position human welfare and human rights as a primary social responsibility, acknowledging that humanity exists in a balance with the environment, and to celebrate and nurture the diversity of humanity. Social workers…are charged with the responsibility of *bringing to public notice the values, attitudes, behaviours and social structures and economic imperatives that cause of contribute to the oppression of human welfare and rights*. They are further charged with *the duty to respond, with passion and hope, to human needs wherever and however it is manifested, and to work towards the attainment of social justice for individuals, groups and communities in a local and global context.*'

From Great Britain, Adams, Dominelli and Payne (1998: xvi) state that:

Social work, as a socially constructed *project aiming to tackle oppression*, is in this sense a perpetually changing and unfinished project.'

Dominelli, in a subsequent chapter (Adams et al, 1998: 10) makes the following claim about anti-oppressive practice:

> ‘Transcending commonsense attitudes about ‘difference’ requires *the exercise of an empathy which goes beyond placing oneself in another’s shoes* by daring to put these on and wear them for a while *to develop a deep understanding of the other person’s position* whilst at the same time reflecting on the privileged nature of one’s own.’

More recently (quoting the IFSW definition referred to above and writing to the British context) Thompson and Thompson (2008) among other things, claim that social work promotes *social change*, is focused on *empowerment* and *social change*, enhances well-being, and works to achieve *human rights and social justice*. We provide these examples not to belittle the authors or to undermine their intent. Rather, we wish to bring to the forefront of our readers’ minds the manner in which the profession positions its collective identity and purpose. In these humanist definitions of social work the purpose is defined as acting in the interest of a person, a group, a community in order to transform policy and practice in the name of the ‘good society’ or more specifically in the name of redressing a social or personal injustice. It is the triumph of agency over structure that characterises these actions as heroic.

Social work literature has its fair share of heroes and heroines that exemplify this figure of transformative action. Going back as far as Jane Addams, for example, in her pioneering settlement work in Chicago during the late 1800s and early 1900s we can identify a narrative in an emerging conception of radical social work of overcoming significant structural obstacles in order to improve standards of living for poor people in general and women in particular. The reference to historical figures in professional education serves the present in important ways; it helps to inspire the moral imagination of beginning social workers seeking to make a difference in the world. All vocations need historical figures and narratives that embody certain principles if they are to be successful in offering a professional identity that is both inspirational and utopian in its ideal form. There is nothing problematic about that proposition per se. What is problematic, however, is if these principles and narratives are not reworked and refined to suit changing social, political and economic circumstances.

There are continuities across time and space about the nature of social and political struggle, but there are also important discontinuities that bring into the question the relevance of 'heroic agency' as a way of conceptualising the purpose and legitimacy of social work. In thinking about these discontinuities we need to get beyond normative claims about the means and ends of social work and consider some of the evidence about how the idea of the social and the political are changing. Our purpose in interrogating heroic agency is to promote sufficient destabilisation of the imagined professional identity of social work to allow other possibilities to emerge, other ways of thinking and acting that are more consistent with uncertainty and complexity. In the next part of the paper we trace the notion of heroic agency as it manifests in policy practice specifically, an arena of practice that we consider to be a core area of endeavour for social workers. We show that despite every attempt to bring order and certainty to social policy making through policy science and policy training, a great deal of uncertainty still prevails.

Social workers as policy activists and policy practitioners

Social workers are always engaged in policy work, whether as end users, as producers or somewhere in between, engaged in what Lipsky (2010) refers to as a 'street-level' bureaucracy. In these spaces, social workers exercise varying degrees of professional discretion in interpreting government policy within the resource constraints and norms of a variety of organisational settings. Some social workers become official and semi-official policy makers in their own right, either within or outside of government. As such, teaching policy skills such as policy submission writing, political lobbying and understanding government are a core part of the pre-service social work curriculum. The social policy knowledge and the skills taught, however, can also promote limitations in how agency and purpose of social work policy activism are conceptualised – an understanding encapsulated by our notion of social workers as 'heroic agents'. There is a real risk that what is presented in social work education about what is required by social workers to secure conditions for the 'good life' continues to be conceptualised in what Nancy Fraser (2010) refers to as the 'Westphalian frame'. This term refers to the hegemonic idea that the subjects of socio-political justice (social work clients) are more often than not constituted with reference to the national territorial state. This position, as we demonstrate subsequently, is inadequate, especially

when coupled with a conceptualisation of social workers as heroic agents. What is required are principles that can supplement this national frame to deal with the more complex realities of acting under conditions of contemporary global governance. Nancy Fraser (2010: 25) explains this point in relation to the need to rethink the western welfare state so that other political spaces emerge in which social workers as policy activists can act:

> 'The idea that state-territoriality can serve as a proxy for social effectivity is no longer plausible. Under current conditions, one's chances to live a good life do not depend wholly on the internal political constitution of the territorial state in which one resides. Although the latter remains undeniably relevant, its effects are mediated by other structures, both extra and non-territorial, whose impact is at least significant.'

We can elaborate on the example that Fraser uses to make this point, which is manufacturing goods and economic justice for workers in a global economy. While capital flows to parts of the world where the labour is cheapest, those made dependent on that capital through the sale of their labour are unable to leave when that capital takes flight. The shoe and clothing factories in Indonesia where people live in conditions of abject poverty in labour camps is an apt illustration of this predicament. It also helps to illustrate the connections that make territorial justice struggles (such as national anti-poverty campaigns) difficult to sustain. In the face of rising living costs in developed countries, consumers may demand lower prices for goods. The workers that produce those cheap goods are demanding better wages and conditions. Not only are the parties to the justice claim in dispute, so is the arena/s in which these justice claims heard and debated. Offshore interests, such as multinational companies try to influence domestic debate, even as nationalists and local democrats seek to territorialise them. Similarly, the offshore workers economic interests are to dismantle protectionist trade barriers, while the domestic trade unions seek to resist neoliberal encroachment and protect local jobs through higher prices for imported goods.

International bodies, such as the World Trade Organisation seek to facilitate this free movement of capital through their influence on national governments. At the same time, civil society actors and social movements may protest the very legitimacy and authority of the World Trade Organisation. The effect of these developments, argues Nancy Fraser (2010) is a bewildering lack of consensus even among professed social democrats about how to understand the injustice, let alone redress it.

In light of this example we need to ask how do social workers act as a policy activists when the 'who' the 'what' and the 'how' of social justice are all in dispute? We will return to this question in the final part of the paper. For the moment our purpose is to problematise the framing of justice and the idea that there can be certainty about how to proceed as a policy activist. Social work, as a creature of modernity, has traditionally sought to overcome uncertainty through its faith in social science-informed technical knowledge as a basis for action. The embrace of 'evidence based' social work and 'evidence based policy' illustrates this desire for certainty in the face of deeply conflictual and fraught practice contexts. There has been considerable debate about both of these related movements (Webb, 2001) which emerged out of evidence based medicine and their relevance for the social work profession (see McDonald 2003). One of the criticisms of previous social justice claims making is the assertion of technical expertise by social workers as policy practitioners, particularly when they rely on a rational policy making paradigm. Within this paradigm it is the social worker as 'hero' who, when armed with 'facts' and the 'truth', prevails over disorder, entrenched power and politics. This naive and positivist conception of policy practice has been thoroughly challenged by the argumentative turn in policy analysis (Fischer and Forrester, 1993), deliberative policy making (Fischer, 2003) and interpretative approaches to policy analysis (Yanow, 2000).

In deliberative and interpretative approaches to policy activity the practitioner must engage in understanding how different communities and interests understand a given social problem, and as such the role of a policy activist in the political sphere is more about acting as an interpreter and mediator of competing worldviews, rather than a technical legislator (Bauman, 1987). These ways of doing policy work may not be as expedient as ‘top down’ policy approaches; however, they are likely to be more inclusive and therefore more consistent with how social workers engage with communities of interest. Participatory action research frameworks, community development approaches and deliberative democracy are all examples of a more inclusive mode of political engagement and policy development that involve social work practitioners (McBride, 2005). What works against these modes of policy research and action however are the concrete organisational realities that many social workers now find themselves within. In the next section we discuss the governance effects of New Public Management and its impact on social work within public sector organisations and its reach into non-profits and charities.

Limits on political agency arising from without and within organisational settings

Recently there have been growing concerns that social work as a profession and individual social workers are disengaging from policy practice. For example:

> *Social Work's adoption of micro practice and hyper-professionalism led to a form of anti-intellectualism, which manifested itself in several ways, including a partial withdrawal from its earlier social justice mission. For example, a cursory examination of the two leading social work education journals (*Journal of Social Work Education* and *Social Work Education*) showed that in 2001-2002 they published 167 articles, only 19 addressed diversity and social justice.....Current pressure to firm up a professional identity has also produced practitioners that function mainly as administrators and clinicians, while overlooking the historic role of advocate and public intellectual.* (Karger and Hernandez, 2004)

There are many reasons why this trend has continued – the rise of neo-liberalism and associated social conservatism have had a major impact on the purpose of social work (see Lymbery, 2001), as has the associated constraints imposed by New Public Management – especially in the public sector but also in the non-profit sector. Other broader factors include the speed of economic and social change and the

general rise in 'amoral familism', defined as an unwillingness in a society by its members to engage in activities devoted to the collective good because of an over-investment in the wellbeing of the nuclear family (Banfield, 1958). And for social work in Australia and the UK, limited involvement in policy advocacy is a major issue. A relative lack of profile in the policy process compared to other professions (for example, lawyers) increasingly renders social work irrelevant to the decisions which shape the experiences of disadvantaged populations and the organisational conditions of social work practice. While the trade unions can advance reform of social work labour conditions, the professional associations have a responsibility to be actively engaged in policy debates. However, Lymbery (2001: 380) points to the fact that in the UK, the British Association of Social Workers has not been able to operate as an effective mass-membership organisation, thereby limiting its ability to affect the destiny of the profession. The perceived irrelevance of professional association raises important questions about what sorts of factors are shaping social work identities and actions in organisational settings.

As is well known, the last twenty years of the 20th Century witnessed the rise and eventual dominance in the liberal welfare states of the doctrines of New Public Management in public administration (Peters, 1996; Rhodes, 1994). In combination with various programs of welfare reform, these had the effect of transforming welfare service delivery in both the state and non-state sectors. Drawing on micro-economics in the form of public choice theory (Buchanan and Tullock, 1980) and principle-agent theory (Grossman and Hart, 1983), these processes drew previously autonomous and distinct state agencies into the now-dominant logic of the market which has penetrated many aspects of state activity. Just as neoclassical economics is centrally implicated in the reconfiguration of national economies, public choice and principal-agent theories reconfigured the state. In doing so, professional autonomy was deemed problematic and was increasingly challenged and systematically eroded.

In the language of public choice theory, rational actors (in this case, social workers) wish, at all times, to maximise their own return by using their position for material self-advancement and enrichment. As a consequence of this, advocates of public choice theory argue that policy and service delivery in the human services is distorted away from the preferences and interests of the majority of citizens. The

(assumed) characteristics of public servants (again, read social workers) cause them to run service delivery agencies in their own interests rather than in the interests of economic and social efficiency, a supposed phenomenon known as *rent seeking*.

Agency theory is a particularly influential strand of public choice theory, introducing many of the concepts that now characterise public service delivery, for example, the notions of *principals* and *agents*. Agency theory examines the relationship between principals and agents. These roles operate in a cascading chain of relationships from politicians to department heads down through the hierarchy of administration all the way to the team leader and the front line social worker. A principal is she who sets the task; an agent is he who implements it. The central problem for principals is how to *control agents*, particularly opportunistic agents such as professionals (social workers) who may harbour pretensions of autonomy.

When set in motion, both sets of theory underpin the design prescriptions of New Public Management, which among other things, is clearly related to increased distrust of bureaucracy and disquiet about the autonomy, practices and decisions of bureau-professions such as social work (Harris, 2003). Social workers now find themselves firmly drawn into re-designed service delivery systems which, in turn, promote new forms of control and accountability. They must demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness within the calculative rationality of the principal. Performance measurement and performance indicators represent one (albeit very effective) tool of this rationality. (We note that there are others; for example, performance appraisal, performance-related pay, quality assurance, total quality management, risk, audit and so forth). Through their use, control is exerted all the way down from the centre of government to the street-level of service delivery – through all aspects of policy, program and service delivery (Newman, 2001).

In these new circumstances, what is deemed as 'effective' is determined not by the profession, but by politicians. These same people are themselves heavily influenced by the ideas of New Public Management and by the political imperatives of the day dominated by the twenty four hour news cycle; imperatives which in many cases are generated by a mass media, which regularly underestimates and

oversimplifies the nature of the problems faced and responses made by such operatives as social workers. In this way, the emerging design principles of the reformed state become the driving force for the reconstitution of professional practice. This then brings us back to the question about how to act in the conditions of the present. In addressing this question the next and final section of the paper tentatively suggests some new metaphors and conceptual resources for thinking about the political agency of social workers, particularly those regularly engaged in policy activism, broadly defined.

Possible pathways for conceptualising social workers as policy actors

From the discussion above it is clear that one of the ways in which the agency of social workers needs to be rethought is in line with the same way we must rethink the expansion and contraction of the welfare state. As discussed previously it is important to think beyond the national frame in conceptualising how to act in making social justice claims. Here we think there needs to be a continuing emphasis on redistribution and the inequalities arising from mal-distribution of economic and social resources, both nationally and internationally. The economic realm remains important to social work practice in addressing social injustice. The cultural realm is also a sphere of social action that the social worker must attend to as a political agent. Discourses that circulate in the public sphere about disadvantage can add what Nancy Fraser (1990) succinctly refers to as adding cultural insult to economic injury. Constructing the long-term unemployed as 'dole-bludgers' or 'scroungers' in the public sphere serves to legitimate a punitive policy response and limited resource allocation in addressing the problem of unemployment. As such, matters of *recognition* are inextricably tied to *redistribution* and accordingly social workers as political agents must become adept at working both material and cultural injustices.

The case of refugees and the conservative politics of border protection is a good illustration of the connection between material and cultural justice. When refugees are demonised by politicians and the mass media as 'illegals' or 'queue jumpers' (as they regularly do in Australia and other countries) it

becomes possible to deny this group of people material resources granted to others. The discourse of illegality is powerful precisely because it resonates within a society that supposedly respects and upholds the rule of law. Constructing people as 'unlawful' puts them on the side of a moral binary that works against their claims to be recognised as a person with rights. To address these injustices social workers must become involved alongside members of these communities in reframing these identities in the public sphere. In Australia, for example, social workers in multicultural community organisations and members of the public and local councils have been effective in organising competitive football teams involving both refugees and members of the mainstream community. These sporting events have attracted positive local and national media attention, which has helped to break down cultural stereotypes and a politics of mistrust between new arrivals and the established community (Ollif, 2008).

The cognitive scientist George Lakoff (2003) argues that cultural reframing is important aspect of political work in variety of contexts, such as the media, workplaces and other sites of practice. For social workers, this means knowing ones values and being prepared to articulate them in challenging myths and stereotypes. Arguably, it is a collective and professional responsibility to challenge cultural mis-recognition when it is encountered. Lakoff (2003) argues that cultural frames are more powerful determinants of political and social attitudes than available evidence. He suggests that when a politician or policy maker is confronted with a fact or a piece of information that contradicts his or her mental frame it is often the inconvenient fact that is often rejected. Similarly, we know from research into the connection between the internet and political opinions that, more often than not, citizens use the internet to locate information and knowledge that reinforces rather than challenges their political views (Muhlberger, 2006). So, it is not enough to speak truth to power, as a naive conception of heroic agency in rational policy practice would lead us towards. We must also contest the frame itself, which in an international sense of politics and justice means questioning the state-territorial frame when it is imposed on transnational sources of injustice. Nancy Fraser expands on this point in her argument for a three dimensional politics of misdistribution, misrecognition and misrepresentation in relation to feminism:

> Developing such a three dimensional politics is by no means easy. Yet it holds out tremendous promise for a third phase of feminist struggle. On the one hand, this approach rebalance[s]…the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution. On the other hand, it…. explicitly contest[s] injustices of mis-framing.

This emphasis on the transnational in Nancy Fraser's work is consistent with the emerging interest and scholarship in global social work. The recent contribution by Harrison and Melville (2010) *Rethinking Social Work in a Global World* offers an example of how social work scholarship can bridge critical theory and social work to expand the imaginary of political action to include transnational actors and landscapes. The book explores contemporary global issues such as the environment, new information and communications technologies and examines the implications of adopting global notions of citizenship for social work. This emerging literature is engaging with post-colonial writing and critical enthnography in moving the conceptual apparatus of social work practice forward. A critical ethnographer and anthropologist's work of particular interest here is Anna Tsing (2004) and her conception of 'friction' as a metaphor for thinking about how to act as a political agent in the contemporary context. Metaphors help to establish a new frame because they include representations of the social and physical world in new and novel ways.

Challenging the widespread view that globalization invariably signifies a 'clash' of cultures, for example, Tsing (2004) develops friction in its place as a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up our contemporary world. Tsing (2004) defines friction as the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference. It is these relations of difference that mean neither party to the encounter can go on unchanged by the contact. Friction is an appropriate metaphor in thinking about social change in the contemporary period because it helps to overcome the fatalistic thinking that can sometimes be associated with the discourse of globalisation. In the popular conception of globalisation, the flow of goods, ideas, money and people proceeds entirely without friction. Tsing (2004) gives political thinkers and policy activists a way of working through the productive friction of

global connections to see what sorts of unpredictable and uncertain possibilities for emancipation might emerge. Tsing (2004) wants us to go beyond thinking about globalisation as a program of integration that is unfolding towards some dystopian or utopian end point. Given the social work profession's interest in social justice, the point here is to follow connections to see whose social justice claims are relevant, from what perspectives and in what frame (national and extra-national).

Finally, we want to return to how this construction of policy activism relates to the question of moral agency and purpose, an issue of direct relevant to articulating what social work can achieve in the contemporary period. Our emphasis in this paper has been to start from a more humble position. We have suggested that presented with a socio-cultural discourse of passive agency in the face of marketisation and a professional discourse about the possibilities that arise when 'heroic agents' confront social structures can be difficult for beginning practitioners to reconcile. Rossiter (2005: 4) argues in her insightful analysis of these contradictory discourses of agency and responsibility that social workers as people suffer when the results of practice seem so meagre in comparison to the ideals inherent in social work education, in agency expectations and in implicit norms which define professional activity. The result of this asymmetry can be ambivalence, uncertainty and doubt. A more humble starting point helps to reduce the contradiction, while maintaining a politics of hope. This position is similar to what Marion Young proposes when she talks about the idea of the *perhaps* in conceptualising political agency:

> 'Let us try together to alter the social processes that we understand produce injustices and perhaps we will have some success. People in solidarity for the sake of justice are determined to improve social relations, but they are also tentative.'

This conceptualisation also means looking past large scale structural change as an indicator of the efficacy of political agency. Returning to the discussion of New Public Management we should acknowledge, for example, those moments when social workers refuse to use the generic market language of 'customer' when referring to ordinary citizens in their everyday practice (Marston, 2004). Some social workers working within large and small organisations have learned to become 'bi-lingual', strategically using managerial language when communicating with funding bodies or senior managers to secure

funding and other resources, while using a more explicit social justice discourse when connecting with ordinary citizens and their struggles (Marston, 2004). This 'double speak' might be interpreted as a form of conservative resistance; a better starting point we think is to acknowledge and validate the multiple forms of political agency that exist at all levels of policy practice. The local level of social work practice is acknowledged as an important site of policy practice (Brodkin, 2000), and as such we need to develop a clearer recognition of the political potential inherent in everyday interactions between workers and citizens. Symbolic refusals and covert resistance can sometimes amount to a seismic shift, a point acknowledged by Scott (1990: 191-192) in his work on the potential power of practical resistance in confronting domination:

> 'These are the forms that political struggle takes when frontal assaults are precluded by the realities of power. At another level it is well to recall that the aggregation of thousands upon thousands of such 'petty' acts of resistance have dramatic economic and political effects'.

In emphasising the importance of the discursive dimension of political action we take our analytical cue from governmentality studies (Dean, 1999) which suggest that an important point of political action is to make hegemonic truths appear as neither inevitable nor natural, so that other possibilities might emerge. For social workers in policy settings this might mean making explicit the behavioural or economic determinism that underpins devalued social identities, such as 'welfare dependent', 'bad tenant' or 'illegal immigrant.' Highlighting alternative forms of social organisation might also be done through social workers being actively engaged in social research experiments or comparative policy research that challenge prevailing policy assumptions.

The point of these interventions is to open up a space for inclusive policy deliberation. The conception of a more 'humble' political agency being articulated here does not mean giving up on a claim to the universal, particularly universal discourses such as human rights. The universal remains necessary for ambitions for a better future. The universal is always present in the work of political agency. Inspiration for action always begins with and ends with a claim for something in the name of the universal. We must,

however, also accept that the universal is given meaning through the particular, and it is these local contexts that require us to pay attention to the complexity of social relations and social problems. For social workers as policy activists this means abandoning the modernist search for one policy or variable as either the sole cause or the sole solution. Social problems are always made up of interconnected policies and practices and, in many cases it is difficult to find a single culprit. Simple moral binaries and single cause and effect chains can inadvertently promote blind spots in thinking clearly about the who, what and how of social justice in the 21st Century. This lack of clarity can lead to confusion about how to act and what can be achieved, which can have an immobilising effect on beginning social workers.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to deconstruct and then reconstruct a form of policy activism that suits the present conditions of social work practice. Overall, what we have tried to do is sketch a reconceptualised political agency to encourage social work to gain some critical purchase in policy change and activism, while at the same time not giving up hope that social work can make a positive and progressive difference. In the face of evidence of growing social inequality social workers undoubtedly need individual hope to inspire collective action. What might seem to be unrealistic hope can begin in considering the possibility that tiny cracks might yet break open the dam; and contingent openings are sites of unexpected force-for better or for worse (Tsing, 2004). But given the unpredictable nature of these encounters of friction we can also embrace the liberating thought that social workers are not acting alone as heroic agents. There is no certainty that anyone's actions, acting individually or collectively, will be the factor that breaks the dam wall. If we think about policy practice, with or without the benefit of hindsight, it is inherently difficult to determine the decisive factors that lead to policy change. It could have been the persuasively written submission, the delegation to the Minister, publicly drawing on the discourse of universal human rights and a nation's obligations under those conventions in a media interview that made the difference. Or it could have been that the Minister was simply trying to win favour from his or her more left wing colleagues in caucus because they needed their support for an unrelated piece of legislation in the near future. As such, the social worker as policy activist must live

with uncertainty and accept the inevitability of politics in policy change and they must be agile enough to work with diverse coalitions and unexpected allies to effect change.

Indeed, we have suggested the social worker as policy activist needs to eschew mono-modal self-conceptualisations which position the professional self as a 'heroic agent' capable of single-handedly effecting individual and social change on a large scale. As Lymbery (2001: 381) concludes: some writing about social work has tended to identify radical practice as existing entirely at the structural level, implicitly devaluing the small scale activities with which social workers are typically engaged. What we have tried to do here is to acknowledge the potential for political change within local organisational settings, while remaining cognisant of how practice settings have changed dramatically over the last twenty to thirty years. We have offered some directions consistent with a framing of justice that is deliberative and inclusive, but also humble about what might be achieved. We are not suggesting this is the only way to map out a way of pursuing social justice and policy reform in the conditions of the present. We hope this paper makes a contribution to the ongoing conversation about how the purpose and identity of social work can be clarified in the interests of providing a confident and socially engaged professional identity for beginning practitioners.

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