

# Pruned, policed and privatised: The knowledge base for children and families social work in England and Wales in 2019

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**Abstract:** The focus of this chapter is on the knowledge base for social work practice with children and families and its relationship to current social work policy development in England and Wales for the foreseeable future. It is argued that over the last ten years, the nature of the knowledge base for children and family social work, including the way it is generated, accessed and applied, has been increasingly subject to politically initiated change. This article argues that over the previous ten years of ‘austerity’, knowledge for social work has been purposely, and increasingly, ‘weaponised’ as a component of the same political system which introduced and now sustains neo-liberalism and austerity. Deliberate decisions have been taken by government in order to initiate – through a variety of inter-linked and mutually reinforcing strategies – the reframing and repackaging of the role of knowledge in social work practice with children and families. Following a review of current approaches to understanding social work knowledge, the article identifies five key inter-linked projects, which have been established by the Conservative government . It argues that these are intended to deliver a far-reaching political colonisation of the existing knowledge base for social work, which should be resisted by all social work stakeholders.

**Keywords:** austerity; neo-liberalism; social work; outsourcing; privatisation

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## Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the knowledge base for social work practice with children and families and its relationship to current social work policy development in England and Wales for the foreseeable future. Since the Social Work Taskforce and Reform Board of 2010, there has been a degree of overlap between the respective policy and practice frameworks for social work with children and families and for social work with adults, including the appointment in 2014 of two separate Chief Social Workers. However most recently developments in the two respective areas have taken a rather different course, not without debate and contention. (Brindle, 2019) This article focuses exclusively on the current issues in respect of social work with children and families. It is argued that over the last ten years, the nature of the knowledge base for children and family social work, including the way it is generated, accessed and applied, has been subject to politically initiated change. This has had major implications for a wide group of stakeholders, including practitioners, researchers and those who use social work services. Successive critiques of neoliberal and austerity policy have documented, in detail, the undermining of the public state at service level. However, the specific inter-relationship between austerity; knowledge for professional social work practice; and day-to day practice in a period of politically-driven austerity has received rather less specific attention. This is in spite of a wide consensus that knowledge, including research evidence, comprises a key component in any professional activity and intervention.

This article argues that over the previous ten years of 'austerity', knowledge for social work has been purposely, and increasingly, 'weaponised' as a component of the same political system which introduced and now sustains austerity. Deliberate decisions have been taken by government in order to initiate – through a variety of inter-linked and mutually reinforcing strategies – the reframing and repackaging of the role of knowledge in social work practice with children and families. This process, which can be described as one of *pruning, policing and privatising* the knowledge base for professional social work, comprises a number of inter-locking initiatives: tight control of the research agenda in terms of commissioning and dissemination; supporting the role of private companies in rolling out predictive analytics and machine learning; privatising the delivery of postgraduate social work training and narrowing the curriculum through mechanisms such as the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS), and National Assessment and Accreditation System (NAAS) and the commercialisation of knowledge which was generated in the public sector, for example, Signs of Safety. Furthermore local authorities are being increasingly encouraged to adopt algorithmic need-assessment methods and machine learning.

It is too early to identify every possible outcome of these changes but it seems highly likely that their collective and coincidental implementation will reinforce

the aggregate impact of the individual components. So, for example, recent commissioning of research and evaluation projects has been tightly linked to current political ideology, with research money being allocated through 'new' initiatives such as the 'What Works Centre', and, through the 'Innovation Programme'. At the same time, changes to the structure of social work education, include the truncating of post-graduate social work training in universities to six weeks classroom-based learning in FrontLine . At the very least, it is reasonable to suggest that these developments pose short and long-term threats to the chances of social workers developing a *structural understanding* of family and individual problems, an outcome almost certainly intentionally desired by those politicians and commentators who have supported austerity.

Taken together, these developments constitute a re-framing of the traditional compact between policymakers, researchers and practitioners. At worst, the nature of this new inter-relationship between service commissioning, evaluation, and practice application risks establishing an intentionally closed and mutually reinforcing system, rather than promoting a model of genuinely evidence-based policy and professional practice.

Following a brief aide memoire of (1) traditionally- accepted approaches to understanding the nature of social work knowledge; and (2) earlier debates around the politics of research methods, this chapter identifies three current, inter-related strategies on the part of the current Conservative government:

- Prioritising the application of some areas of research knowledge over others
- Modifying or weakening evaluation rigour through the project commissioning process
- Facilitating the commodification by the private sector of knowledge which has been generated by publicly funded research.

Professional social work systems traditionally comprise professional training, a regulatory framework, and an inspection process. These three traditionally accepted components of professional status are inevitably influenced by political choices and can be 'operationalised', or to put it more provocatively, in this case, hijacked, to mutually reinforce the politicised drive to knowledge-reconstitution which we have highlighted above .This article concludes that in order to maintain the integrity of professional knowledge, including the way it is applied in practice, social work practitioners in England must urgently acknowledge the real threats to professional identity and integrity which are posed by these recent changes. Where appropriate, in the interests of those who use their services, social workers must acknowledge and resist the challenges posed to their professionalism, by working in partnership with all concerned stakeholders. Stakeholders, including trade unions, professional associations such as the British Association of Social Workers and the Association of Professors of Social Work, and groups for those who use services, such as Family

Rights Group and ATD Fourth World, all have a key role to play in resisting these worrying developments.

## **Part One: The context of this change**

### **Austerity and children's services**

There has been extensive academic and professional coverage of the evolving relationship between austerity and the state of children's services in England; and of Conservative efforts to rebalance the respective roles of the public and private sectors. (Butler, 2014; Jones, 2019) These critiques have highlighted the negative consequences for the ability of local authorities to deliver support and protection for children and families.

Jones (2018) documents the impact of austerity on poor people and public services, highlighting the parallel cutting of services and social security benefits alongside legislative facilitation of the take-over of publicly run services by private companies. He concludes

.... even very personal services such as children's social work and child protection can be contracted out to private companies ... their route to generating a profit is cutting back and down-skilling the workforce, reducing terms and conditions of employment ..... market analysts Laing Buisson have been commissioned by the government to advise on how to create a privatised market in children's social services .

The potential damaging impact on children and families of such privatisation is of course exacerbated by the continuing increase in child poverty and vulnerability (CPAG, 2017; Children's Commissioner for England, 2019) and the cuts imposed on local government children's services. Both scenarios are linked to the Tory government having deliberately imposed 'austerity' measures. (Webb & Bywaters, 2018). In tandem these developments constitute a double-sided assault on the well-being of children and families.

Deploying the alibi of 'austerity', the Conservative government went so far as to attempt to introduce a set of clauses into the 2017 Children & Social Work Act (known as the exemption clauses). These changes would have curtailed local authority duties to support children and families; but, thanks to a highly organised campaign by Article 39, they were defeated (Tunstill & Willow, 2017). However in spite of this positive outcome, in July 2018, the Minister for Children issued a document claiming some statutory protections for vulnerable children were 'myths' which, he advised local authorities, they could ignore. Following robust opposition including the threat of Judicial Review , he withdrew this document in March 2019.

Indeed heightened vigilance can be seen to be even more essential. As this article argues, and as the following quote from Emma Lewell Buck, (Shadow Children's Minister until her resignation over Brexit, in March 2019) shows, the building blocks of a total system change are now firmly cemented in place. Having consistently opposed all the earlier moves we have listed, she urged the minister to:

withdraw the document and cease repeated attempts to deregulate and wipe away hard-fought for protective legislation for children .... measures such as the What Works Centre, Partners in Practice, the discredited assessment and accreditation system and the innovation programme are not yielding any positive changes but have so far cost over £200m with at least £60m going to private companies.

As this paper seeks to show, central to this 'new politicised knowledge edifice' is an on-going and far-reaching political colonisation of the existing knowledge base for social work. In order to highlight how far this process has already gone, the next section is intended as a reminder of some of the key knowledge-related concepts around which there has – until now – been broad political, professional, and academic consensus.

## **Previous approaches and debates**

### *The nature of social work knowledge*

The development of a knowledge base for social work is a key theme in the social work literature: and, suffice it to say, there is no dispute as to the importance to 'good practice' of that process of knowledge-development (Payne 2005, p.225):

Since the outset, social work has sought a knowledge base in support of its professionalisation. It has moved from trying to draw its knowledge from its own internal resources to an increasing incorporation of its knowledge development as part of the wider social sciences, in the impact of social science research on social work, the development of a commercial market in publications and journals and the way in which debates about appropriate forms of social science have been drawn into the social work debate.

Traditional accounts (for example: Trevithick, 2008; Nutley et al, 2009; Blewett, 2011) have consistently highlighted debates about the exact parameters of the knowledge base and its application to the dilemmas regularly encountered in direct work. Key features include: theoretical knowledge; factual knowledge including research; and practical and personal knowledge, including the knowledge generated by carers and those who use services, as well as those who deliver them.

Of specific relevance to the issues discussed in this paper is the much respected

work by Walter et al (2004) for the Social Care Institute for Excellence on developing a framework for understanding the relationship between knowledge for social care; the responsibilities of agencies; and the responsibilities of individual practitioners. This work has been helpful in defining the scope of knowledge in social care:

*Types of knowledge*

- Organisational knowledge
- Practitioner knowledge
- User knowledge
- Research knowledge
- Policy community knowledge
- Legal knowledge

The study also explored a range of models for developing/using research in social care and concluded that the most successful approach is the *organisational excellence model*:

- the key to successful knowledge use lies with social care delivery organisations, including their leadership and management
- knowledge use is supported by developing a knowledge-minded culture
- there is local adaptation of research findings, other knowledge and on-going learning within organisations
- partnerships with local universities and intermediary organisations facilitate the creation and use of research and other types of knowledge.

These values can be seen to underpin the methodological pluralism of the (now discontinued but much respected and valued) DoH/DfE research initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout these decades both Tory and Labour governments commissioned extensive purposive research programmes in respect of children and family policy, and published the respective overviews and analyses of the studies as a series of 'Messages from Research':

For many years non-technical summaries of research programmes and initiatives in children's social care, funded by the Department of Health and the Department for Education have been produced. The intention is to make the messages of research useful and intelligible to practitioners, clinicians, service providers and policy makers. They are written by academic experts with the support of an outside advisory and implementation group, consisting of clinicians, practitioners, managers and others with expertise in the subject area. Each overview incorporates the comments of practitioners, clinicians and policy makers. (Davies & Ward, 2012)

***Methodological tensions around the generation of research knowledge***

Whilst governments have often taken an active role in disseminating a wide range of research, and have largely adopted an *inclusive* attitude to methodologies, with commissioning subject to peer-review, there has always been a level of debate between researchers as to the desirability of a *hierarchy of methods*. Differences have emerged across theoretical and methodological debates around the concept of evaluation; the notion of effectiveness; the nature of evidence; and crucially, the scientific status of competing *models* of social research.

There is a longstanding, largely benign tension between researchers about the merits of using quantitative as opposed to qualitative methods, but starker disagreement between those evaluators who espouse a positivist (experimental) approach and those who favour a non-positivist (non-experimental) approach. (Tunstall, 2003). As Trinder and Reynolds (1996, p24) argued '*research is highly political . Methodologies are not neutral sets of techniques to be picked out of textbooks*'. What has elevated these methodological debates to a new powerful position, is the extent to which the current Conservative government has sought to privilege experimental methods such as the random controlled trial, as evidenced by the considerable funding allocated to and through the 'What Works Centre'.

The apparent popularity of the concept of what works 'and its increasingly widespread adoption by governments does not mean that it enjoys uncontested respect or acceptance in every quarter, including social work. (Otto & Ziegler 2007; Gray et al 2009). Questions continue to be raised about the relevance of a sole emphasis on the random controlled trial, and whether the only way to test and re-test whether or not an intervention works is to conduct an RCT, with an experimental design and randomly assigned control groups

Too much focus has been placed on a narrow definition of what constitutes valid 'evidence' (and one that privileges particular approaches and voices over others) and a simplistic conception of the decision-making function. (Williams & Glasby, 2017)

These disagreements reflect more than methodological or hypothetical debates, with some social work researchers and social workers contemplating the *real-world* implications of respective methods. The Association of Professors of Social Work has raised serious concerns as to the risks to child and family well-being of pursuing a randomised controlled trial in respect of Family Group Conferences, as outlined in a DfE/WWC call for proposals (DfE, May 2019). APSW have argued (APSW, May 2019) that serious ethical issues are raised by a proposal that families will be allocated to usual pre-proceedings support *or* to one that incorporates FGCs, in order to generate evidence. Were this plan to be adopted, some families would be denied the opportunity to exercise their rights and responsibilities in order to produce evidence for professionals and policymakers. Furthermore it is argued that some families in the cohort who might have reached a plan, if offered an FGC, could if not offered one, well go on to lose their children through proceedings.

In the current neo-liberal era of austerity, it can be seen that methodological concerns should not be viewed as merely 'ivory tower' debates, but as potential justificatory mechanisms for rationing or controlling services, and that David Quinton, a widely respected (largely quantitative) researcher was right to warn, as far back as 2004, of the tension between effectiveness and entitlement to services:

we do not need a demonstration that these behaviours including listening to parents' concerns, taking their view seriously, and paying attention to the realities of their lives promote better parenting in order to change our approach to service delivery ... [parents] ought to be able to expect such responses even if there are not any 'demonstrable' effects on them. (Quinton,2004. p.177)

## **Part Two. The current crisis for professional social work knowledge: Five key projects**

This section provides a brief outline of five key inter-linked projects or processes which, as argued above, are being deployed to bring about significant change in the nature and role of professional social work in England, by restricting a previously pluralist, inclusive approach to professional knowledge generation and knowledge access.

- Changes to the system for the professional qualifying training of social workers, (including, notably, Frontline)
- Introduction of closely politically-aligned, on-going assessment procedures for all social workers (KSS; NAAS) which reinforce a narrow focus on child protection work, as opposed to child and family social work;
- Increased political control of the research commissioning and dissemination process (What Works Centre)
- Specific encouragement of the adoption of machine learning in local authorities, deploying 'tick-box' answers which represent the antithesis of exercising professional discretion
- Incitement to adoption of private for-profit generated 'franchised packages/ tools', including Signs of Safety



## Changes to professional qualifying training:

**Potential impact:** reduction in diversity of workforce; erosion of structural understanding of social workers, disproportionate emphasis on technical skills.

Several major (politically-driven) changes have been made to the length, content and identity of the providers of professional social work training over the last five years in England, reflecting the political priorities of the Coalition and Conservative governments. Training required to become a qualified social worker in the UK has traditionally been delivered through a range of university-based routes. Since 2003, with the introduction of the social work degree (which coincided with the establishment of a professional register for social workers), these routes have been provided at both graduate and post-graduate level. They have varied in format and length, including two- and three-year full-time routes, as well as extended part-time routes; and an accelerated ‘Step up to Social Work’ programme for graduates with relevant degrees. The curriculum of the social work degree has until now explicitly reflected the multi-faceted role of the social worker. By covering sociological, psycho-social, ethical, legal and socio-political perspectives, degree programmes have attempted to create a model of the professional social work role which is based upon an integration of skills, values, knowledge and personal qualities. Such a model was reinforced by the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) introduced in 2010, at the end of the Labour government. The principle of genericism has been preserved and defended on these pathways, paradoxically in recognition that the increased specialist context of *some* social work roles requires a broad understanding of the interlocking needs of individuals, their families and communities.

In 2014 the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) published a policy paper proposing a new model of social work training based upon the model of fast-track training promoted in respect of teaching – Teach First. This new route – subsequently to be called Frontline – was designed to recruit ‘high achieving’ graduates from Russell Group universities. Their training would entail a five week residential course, after which the student would be embedded in a local authority children’s social work team which specialised in child protection. Josh Mc Allister, the author of the report (a teacher by training without any background in social work) argued the social work profession needed higher calibre students who could, within two years, go on to become ‘leaders’ in the profession. This approach drew on the idea that child and family social work ‘tragedies’ were rooted solely in the poor calibre of the workforce. It completely ignored the impact of austerity on what are always morally and professionally complex decisions.

This model was received with enthusiasm by Government, unsurprisingly, as it could be used to support a narrative that the sector – and indeed child welfare more generally – needed ‘*innovation*’ in order to reshape the workforce ‘for the better’. This

resulted in enthusiastic Government (and indeed official opposition) support for the new Frontline initiative. Ministers have allocated the programme a large sum of government money – currently about £450m -whilst funding has been diverted from programmes delivered by the HE sector. This new training vehicle remains the subject of contention and criticism, including the fact that its students, who tend to be from less diverse, more affluent backgrounds, enjoy a very privileged position over their colleagues on other routes, including significant bursaries.

The truncated ‘academic’ timetable in the Frontline programme means that the curriculum is very much narrower than traditional routes. With high levels of input from those with a background in systemic and behavioural approaches, the Frontline programme is almost exclusively ‘skills based’ in comparison to other social work programmes. While the experience of service users features prominently, there is little space for exploring the policy context that might have shaped this experience. Rather there is a focus on ‘good’ or ‘bad’ practice. Initially the programme had a university partner, but now all teaching input has been removed from universities and is provided in-house, through a five-week residential programme, with subsequent input provided via occasional recall days. The final dissertation currently requires students to identify a *behavioural pattern* in their practice and analyse it. Critics may see this as ‘anti-structural’ in comparison to the broader remit of other HE social work programmes, where a final dissertation provides the opportunity to explore and understand the political, social, and legal dimensions as well as the practice issues.

In summary, statutory child and family social work entails intervening on behalf of the state in the private lives of families. Social work education in England has traditionally sought to produce social work practitioners who are equipped with a pluralistic knowledge base as well as the professional skills and values to undertake such a complex role. The much narrower remit of Frontline reflects an emphasis on the technical skills seen as necessary for managing immediate interaction with families, whereas the ‘traditional professional training model’ incorporates knowledge of structural and social factors as well as practice skills development.

### **National Assessment and Accreditation System (NASS) and the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS)**

**Potential impact:** embedding/reinforcing at qualifying and post qualifying level a narrow and socially uncritical conception of the social work role.

In his highly critical report on social work education, Sir Martin Narey (2014) maintained that it was dominated by an ‘ideologically driven academy’. He argued that anti-oppressive practice, and sociological issues and values have had a disproportionately high profile in the training; he broadly welcomed the approach of Frontline. Narey also expressed his surprise that there was no nationally recognised

statement of what social workers should 'know and do' at a post qualifying level. He recommended the Department for Education produce a 'Knowledge and Skills Statement' for child care social workers. This was produced shortly afterwards, and is now in its third iteration.

In contrast to the earlier Professional Capability Framework (PCF), the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS) presents itself as a description of 'what social workers should know and do'. It thereby proffers a highly prescriptive – and, critics would argue restrictive – definition of the role of a child and family social worker. In response to Narey's critique, KSS avoids a statement of values; its explicit focus is on *what social workers should do rather than what they should know*. Knowledge is seen as linked solely to issues such as child protection, child development and the law. There is some acknowledgement of analysis, reasoning skills and supervision, but taken overall, it reflects a technocratic, rather than a critical or value-informed perspective.

It is also striking that although the KSS purports to be relevant for all child care social work, in reality its focus is on *assessment and child protection*. Areas of practice such as children in need, children in care, care leavers, disabled children, and fostering are absent. It is probably far from coincidental that this narrow conception replicates and complements the model of the *interventionist social worker* which underpins the FrontLine approach.

The *National Assessment and Accreditation System* (NAAS) for social workers was proposed by Government in the 2016 White Paper *Putting Children First*. This extended the role of the KSS from that of *a framework to the model of social work* which underpinned a new national assessment process which would in effect police its continued adoption by the workforce. The publicised aim of this initiative was to boost public confidence in the profession. However, the Chief Social Worker (2017) argued that it would also facilitate an increase in opportunities for social workers to pursue post-qualifying professional development. She argued that in contrast to adult services, practitioners in children and families services had no such opportunities.

The NAAS is in the process of being piloted – and is subject to a boycott by UNISON. As Turner (2019) reports, there has been such slow progress against government take-up targets, that some councils are paying practitioners to participate. The assessment mechanism involves two elements: an online component which tests knowledge; and an observation of practice. The online element tests areas such as social workers' legal knowledge. The observed element involves the observation of a social worker taking part in a role play with actors. While this might appear innovatory it is of course also likely to be extremely expensive.

These dual publicly expressed aims of NAAS: firstly, promoting public confidence and the credibility of social work; and, secondly, providing developmental opportunities for social workers are problematic on both counts. The first assumes a crisis of public confidence in social work that appears to have no clear basis.

Certainly, there have been critical headlines in the press, most commonly after child deaths but there is no evidence within government policy documents (or indeed elsewhere) which suggests widespread negative public attitudes toward the profession. Moreover, the policy imperatives of NAAS fail to acknowledge either the challenges facing the sector from the impact of austerity, or the intrinsic ethical and professional tensions which are inevitably generated by state intervention in the private lives of families. Instead any difficulties are located entirely in the deficits of individual practitioners.

The claim that NAAS supports continuing professional development is also flawed as NAAS is not a post qualifying training programme, nor indeed does it claim to provide the basis of a 'curriculum' for in-house or university-based training. It is a process designed to address service weaknesses, exclusively on the basis of identifying weak workers. It contrasts very obviously with previous workforce developments over 30 years, including several frameworks for post-qualifying progression; and the Post-Qualifying Child Care Award. These awards depended on joint academic and practice-based assessments. Assessments were undertaken after substantial input of quality-assured teaching and training, which had itself been tested for credibility, validity and currency of the knowledge base underpinning the programmes.

The assessment decision in the NAAS is based upon an artificially constructed observation of practice and a test of a knowledge base which has been narrowly and centrally defined through the KSS. Furthermore in addition to being an unwelcome process in a period of austerity, during which the workforce and the wider sector are already under profound stress, these tests risk producing false positives and negatives. That is to say effective social workers may well fail and those whose practice is potentially problematic, may well pass. All of these hazards are exacerbated by a lack of clarity regarding the relationship between NAAS and professional registration in the context of a new regulatory system.

## The What Works Centre

**Potential impact:** increased political control of the research commissioning and dissemination process; reduced university research

The establishment and launch in 2018 of the 'What Works Centre' constitutes a very obvious example of the politicisation and centralisation of social work knowledge. It succeeds and builds on the earlier example set by the government funded *Innovation Programme*, set up by the Conservative government in 2014. The Innovation Programme's operating model initially entailed a close relationship with the Spring Consortium, (of Mutual Ventures, The Innovation Unit, and Deloitte's). The tendering process and management of contracts with research teams (only a

minority of whom were based in university social work schools with well-respected social work researchers) was delegated to this agency which took its share of overheads and then contracted with 'middle-men' bodies to provide consultation and research advice to the scholars conducting the evaluations. One of these was the Rees Centre, a research centre originally funded by the venture capital firm 'Core Assets' which is itself in receipt of sums of public sector funding for the provision of foster care services. (Jones, 2019, p.242) This was the model adopted by the 'What Works Centre' which emerged as the repository of DfE research funds as the Innovation Projects came to an end, in order to fund and supervise evaluations of a range of projects, many delivered by the private sector, with considerable funding going to private researchers.

The What Works Centre describes itself as:

... a new initiative that seeks better outcomes for children, young people, and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. Our mission is to foster a culture of evidence informed practice. We will generate evidence where it is found to be lacking, improve its accessibility and relevance to the practice community and support practice leaders ...to create the conditions for more evidence -informed practice in their organisations.

Commissioned by the Department for Education, the Centre represents a consortium of: NESTA (where it is based), Cardiff University, its initial research delivery partner, Social Care Institute for Excellence, FutureGov, and Traversum. The centre

seeks to address two key challenges: creating a better evidence base by sponsoring new practice-focussed research ... and ensuring the Centre's work results in change not just knowledge.

One key Centre *strategy* is the 'Evidence Store', launched in January 2019, and which so far contains systematic reviews of 11 programmes, including family drug and alcohol courts; solution focussed brief therapy; kinship care and Signs of Safety. The Centre Director has said

the store aims to answer questions around ' what can I do in my practice .... what things can I refer a family to that work or have been shown to be effective? *Because otherwise you're a bit reliant on a combination of expert judgement, which obviously social workers have a lot of, and intuition.* (author's' italics; Sanders,2019)

At the very least promoting these systematic reviews will inevitably privilege those interventions and responses which are favourably reviewed, over the other social worker activities which do not make the list.

Furthermore key areas of professional knowledge and/or challenge seem unlikely to be chosen for experimental study, including the impact on child well-being of family poverty and homelessness. As recorded above, concerns have already been raised by social work managers and academics in respect of the centre's proposed RCT of Family Group Conferences. (In this instance, as argued earlier, allocation on a random basis might well impede a family court requirement for a family with children on the edge of care to participate in an FGC, with one potential outcome being a family potentially losing their children.)

A second key element in the Centre's activity is the commissioning of research studies, and an early topic announced at the beginning of 2019 is an 'independent, external study on the ethics of applying machine learning in the setting of children's social care'. As highlighted below, *Machine Learning*, as an initial choice of topic for study, has attracted both surprise and criticism. It also provides a very good example of the 'operational inter-linkages' being purposely established between the five key projects highlighted in this paper. These respective 'mechanisms' have the undoubted- and it is argued intended -potential to interact in order to help reframe the professional knowledge base of social work, and bring it closely in line with the requirements of the current neoliberal socioeconomic order.

University-based researchers in particular will face moral as well as professional dilemmas as to whether or how they engage with the What Works Centre, given the very considerable amount of government research funding which will be routed through it. Academics will of course continue to be subject to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which takes account of research outputs, including levels of grant funding awarded to academics, so many research active social work academic may have to make difficult choices.

## The technological take-over: Predictive analytics and machine learning

**Potential impact:** reduction or obliteration of professional discretion through tick-box social worker decision-making; and potential stigmatisation of whole communities

It might be concluded that it is technical initiatives which pose the ultimate threat to a role for even 'minimal human-input' to the social work relationship. The colonisation of 'social work related knowledge' in the form of quantitative or big-data, by the private companies who produce machine learning and algorithmic packages, could well obliterate the role of professional child and family social workers from decision making processes altogether.

Global consultancies are investing considerable resources in the area of predictive

analytics and machine learning, and much of the argument in favour is couched, ironically in terms of its potential for improving professional practice:

How machine learning can help improve the lives of children and families .... the advantage of machine learning is that it can consider a much larger number of variables than a human brain ever could, and without the unconscious bias that people may bring to the analysis based on their previous expectations of what might be significant. (capita.com/ourthinking)

Current, 2019, high profile discussion of the role of predictive risk analytics in child welfare highlights the potential impact of such 'change' to the content and implementation of a professional social work base. New techniques for data extraction and analysis, referred to as *big data* and used to develop algorithmic *decision support systems* (DSS) are explored by Gillingham (2019) who identifies the resulting challenges for social workers including incorrect recommendations generated by DSS, or recommendations that perpetuate the social prejudices that disadvantage service users. Eubanks (2018) describes these sorts of methods as

recreating the poorhouse of old, by cloaking both the structures that lead to poverty and the implicit beliefs about the poor in a veneer of scientific legitimacy.

Data based computer programmes are increasingly being purchased by local authorities to replace (or it would be argued by the firms 'complement') local social work knowledge and skills in order to help identify vulnerable children in the community.

Keddell and Stanley (2018) reviewing the recent developments, conclude that

in an age of austerity, and a climate of fear about child abuse, perhaps it is unsurprising that social workers have turned to new technology for help. (*Guardian* 16th Sept 2018)

Government enthusiasm for this 'technological potential' is implicit in the early 2019 decision of the What Works Centre, which as outlined above, has announced its plan to undertake a

series of pilot studies to explore the 'use of predictive analytics in Children's Social Care ... to better understand the strengths and limitations of this approach ...and consider the ethics of this use'. (<https://www.surveygizmo/s/3/436699//What-Works-Centre-Expression-of-Interest/piloting-potential-of-analysing-case-notes-to-assist-social-workers>)

Whatever the context and no matter how seductive the commercial marketing, it is impossible to see these developments as being anything but at variance with the

value base and the skill-set of professional social work. It is of course possible to dispute their impact on both the human and civil rights of people who use children's services, as well as on the status of social work as a profession. However it is difficult to deny that the same knowledge base which has – historically – contributed to the current status of social work as a profession, is, in a period of austerity, being quantified, digitised and deployed as a means of eroding, if not removing, that very status.

## **The branding of knowledge through private-for-profit packages**

**Potential impact:** increased government influence on the privileging of some theoretical critiques/knowledge for practice over others

A fifth building block in the new 'knowledge infrastructure' described in this chapter, is the emergence of specific *branded practice models*. Their image as both apparently 'profession-friendly packages' at the same time as comprising commercially profitable innovations, has facilitated increasingly widespread use, and they have been adopted by many local authorities. Their penetration of the 'public market' is facilitated by other key components of the knowledge system mentioned above, such as funding initiatives under the auspices of the DfE Innovation Fund. Indeed as the meticulous analysis by Jones (2019, p.284) demonstrates, the selection of the word 'Innovation' by social work policymakers has turned out to be very beneficial to the proponents, and certainly the owners, of several of these new commodified knowledge packages:

High profile among the government's promoted and funded innovations have been the 'Reclaiming Social Work' model of statutory children's services organisations and the use of the 'Signs of Safety' practice model for child protection. Both have had close relationships with the DfE and its advisors and with significant payments to the creators of the models. (Jones, 2018, p.284)

In fact the role of individual players, many appointed to official positions by government, cannot be ignored. *Reclaiming Social Work*, an organisational model, was developed by Isobel Trowler and colleagues in Hackney. Trowler, having left Hackney, is now Chief Social Worker for Children (Jones, 2018, p.285).

*Signs of Safety* provides a particularly clear example of the various strands which have come together in supporting its widespread national roll-out. It is described by its licensees in the UK (Munro, Turnell and Murphy, 2016) as a

strength-based, safety-orientated approach to child protection, which expands the investigation of risk and ... focussing on strengths and signs of safety, within a family,



it allows an overall judgement on safety to be made.

Branded /for profit practice tool packages models have included several different forms of systemic practice including strengthening families; restorative practice; motivational interviewing; trauma informed practice; and attachment assessment. Many local authorities have adopted and purchased a wide range of practice tools and packages, generally justified as promoting engagement with children and families which helps practitioners to collect and analyse information more systematically.

## Conclusion

This article has provided an account of some of recent changes being made to the *social work system* in England over the last decade. Some of these changes have undoubtedly attracted considerable attention and criticism e.g Frontline. However it is suggested, there has been far less recognition of the worrying extent to which such simultaneous change potentially establishes a new *politically-protected and closed knowledge system*. In other words, the aggregate impact of these respective initiatives is very much greater than their individual parts. Earlier pluralist models of knowledge creation and dissemination, taken for granted in a more politically progressive period, have been jettisoned in favour of a *professional social work knowledge industry*, which operates in line with the still dominant neo-liberal political ideology of the Tory government.

The situation in respect of professional social work – and crucially its underpinning knowledge base – looks very different in 2019 than it did ten years earlier. Explicit political decisions have been taken and imposed on the sector with considerable implications for the role of higher education; the nature of research; and the accreditation of professional competence. Whilst critics may suggest social work stakeholders have ‘sleepwalked’ into this situation in reality they have had little choice. This is because Government has taken the opportunity presented by austerity to mount a simultaneous assault on all the key mechanisms which previously, have delivered a professionally qualified social worker, right through from the stages of qualifying, post qualifying, and continuing registration. It is obvious that such changes raise serious dilemmas for all social work researchers, teachers and practitioners.

Taken together these respective initiatives substantially reduce the likelihood of social workers being able, willing, or allowed to take a socially critical position in their day- to -day work with children and families. In a period of continuing austerity this can only be to the detriment of the integrity of the profession in the future, as well as to the well-being of those children and families with whom they

will work .

As the above account has sought to show, there is now little if any opportunity for legitimate dissent within local authority employment: rather the reverse, with targets, such as those for NAAS, incorporated in the occupational system. Similarly, in respect of social work academics, whilst retired members of a university workforce may no longer have to conform to the REF requirements, for other junior employees, ignoring the imperatives of some new funding streams will be a high risk undertaking. This is a point in time for a collective response through social work organisations such as BASW, the Association of Professors of Social Work, and the trade unions to which social workers belong. Whilst always being ready to acknowledge practice/knowledge deficits where they exist, these professional groups must work together to defend the importance of an inclusive knowledge base. This is essential in order to produce and sustain a workforce of socially critical child and family social workers, committed to delivering the very best services possible through the most imaginative and non-stigmatising access routes.

## Note

Differences between the two practice areas include separate knowledge and skills statements for practitioners and practice supervisors; major differences in the approach adopted to practitioner accreditation; no establishment of a single adult services 'What Works Centre ' instead drawing on a pluralist range of knowledge centres; the adoption by children and families services of *Frontline* which is, a fast-track, non -university based programme; whilst *Think Ahead* in mental health, also a fast-track programme, remains university based.

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