

## Guest Editorial

This edition of *Social Work & Social Sciences Review* brings together a number of high quality papers on a range of key issues for social work knowledge and practice in an increasingly globalised environment. What connects all these papers is further evidence of the need to construct our practice knowledge in a way that is nuanced, culturally, historically and spatially situated. The need to be able to engage with service users' own perspectives and ways of constructing their own lives is a key shared theme of the papers. Reflexive (De Cruz et al, 2005), evidence-based (Marsh and Fisher, 2005) and culturally sensitive practice (Butler and Molidor, 1995) all surface in underpinning good practice and enhanced social work knowledge. Although social work is constructed increasingly in terms of enhanced skills and competencies in official reports across the 'advanced' economies, these articles make clear the need to imbue skills with a critical mindset, one that acknowledges difference, difficulty, nuance and messiness (Crisp, 2010). These papers also have a strong sense of human recognition running through them, that even the harshest most challenging phenomenon are often better understood by reference to what structures all our thinking and social practices. There is a tendency in much work around my own specialism, adult disabled people, to construct languages of difference, separation, distinction-for example in the word forensic learning disability, a truly Victorian construction which drives us further apart inadvertently. I was delighted to see the quality and focus of the papers for this edition and see them drawing on robust empirical evidence of cultural sensitivity, self-help, nuanced child protection and humane practice.

The first paper 'Working with Dignity' by Kaare Pettersen explores the work of Norwegian Incest centres. Although making clear these centres are fairly unique, they do reflect broader good practice in fostering self-help principles in people who have been the victim of familial sexual abuse. The paper draws on empirical studies of centre staff in highlighting constructions of dignity that underpin practice philosophies towards healing in post-abuse contexts. Views of shared humanity also get explicit mention in the paper as key to the construction of good practice-seeing what we have in common, reflecting on what it is to be human. This is made all the more poignant when you are informed that nearly a half the centre staff across the 19 sites studied have themselves experienced child sexual abuse. Of note these centres are not therapeutic and act officially as an adjunct to that, but they also explicitly found their practice on a non-therapeutic construction of victims of child abuse as therapy provides a professional discourse in search of labels. The shared understanding of the 'indignity' of sexual abuse and the 'dignity' fostered by self-help are explored and offer both a profound insight as to ways of seeing, but also gives a fuller insight of how professional roles can operate to support

each other. The paper is also important at the level of a philosophical construction of notions of dignity and indignity as human emotions and self-constructs.

Another paper in this edition deals with issues of child protection and abuse. The paper 'We've Stood on the Precipice' by Maguire et al, explores the role of a police Child Protection Unit (CPU). This paper explores both the ideas that underpin practice, the interface with social work, and also differences between the Unit and mainstream policing processes and cultures. Using cultural and contingency theory the article explores almost anthropologically (of note drawing widely on Mary Douglas' work) the functioning and efficacy of the Unit. Importantly the Unit operates in a way that might be seen as more akin to a social work ethos in weighing up how interventions and sanctions against child abuse affect both perpetrator and also the victim. This is a theme that runs strongly through violence studies in emphasising possible amplification of violence/abuse if the wrong professional approach or outcome is reached. The article notes the very labour intensive and inter-personal nature of CPU work is very different to say crime work. Ironically although arguably evidence of police work at its most skilful and socially engaged, CPUs and Public Protection Units (PPUs) are at risk in an era of cost savings as they are likely to be seen as beyond core policing. There is then an obvious risk of losing some or all of the expertise accrued in these contexts. The article also looks at how the CPU aims to reduce burn out and emotional distress from prolonged exposure to very harrowing case situations. The latter will clearly ring bells with child protection social workers and academics.

Hall's paper on 'Surreptitious Feminization of Domestic Violence' also draws on the notion of culture in using empirical evidence to explore gender patterns and dynamics in domestic violence. Hall makes the very valid point that data on male victims of domestic violence are likely to underestimate the numbers of victims of domestic violence, often due to male inhibition in reporting such violence. This reflects broader gender assumptions in US/UK culture, whilst the shame of a man reporting domestic violence may be greater than the fear of violence. Hall makes the point that the figures, ones often taken as indicative of major gender differences may systematically underestimate male victimhood in the USA and the UK. Hall makes a plea for social work cultures to engage with broader gendered cultures in affording fair treatment, access and appropriate constructions of domestic violence. Hall, rather controversially perhaps describes the gendered access to justice and support, one that currently favours women, to equal a feminization of domestic violence policy and practice. Social workers, in this reformulation have to 'make space' for the possibility that men can be and frequently do face domestic violence. Signposting towards advocates is important in this context. A broader point is made by Hall, one which taps into more established practice in this area in noting that mainstream and sometimes professional constructions of domestic violence can stigmatize couples who try to stick together. Hall notes that complex dynamics may challenge assumptions of binary constructions of offender and victim, where relationships may in fact involve two-way violences. Hall's paper is likely to stimulate very lively debate in social work and beyond.

Drawing very different conclusions on the gendering of community and culture and the implications for social work, Drolet and Mohamoud's 'Gender relations in Canadian multi-cultural families', the authors compare the experiences of gender roles and duties of men and women in 3 ethnic groups-Somali, Chinese and Lebanese. They used empirical research in the form of focus groups to explore these roles-young men, young women, adult men and adult women. Whilst there were differences across these cultures, the common feature of all three communities was the double standard that afforded men greater social freedoms and parameters compared to women. Gender roles and expectations were more fixed and gender stereotyped for women. Women were however openly critical of these discrepancies and do protest and show signs of agency in stating publicly the pressure exerted on them to fulfil these roles. This threw up interesting challenges especially where opportunity structures in Canadian society did not coalesce with gendered assumptions. For example male unemployment in the Somali community meant some women of necessity had to take on paid work whilst still fulfilling their domestic and parenting duties. Younger women in local family networks were often drawn upon to undertake household and child rearing roles. The Lebanese situation is presented as more immersed in mainstream Canadian culture and not harking back to a country of origin-its gender dynamics. However it was still felt that men had some traditional and 'protective' role that sets parameters for what Lebanese women can do. The authors paint a picture one where cultures merge, but older inter-generationally shaped dynamics persist to limit women's social opportunities. However the employment and labour market dynamics are inadvertently offering a challenge to just what women can do. The most resistant gendered space appears to be that of the domestic sphere where at best women may be expected to have dual roles of lead on networked responses to family chores. The article exhorts social workers to enhance their cultural/sub-cultural awareness and to explore ways in which inter-generational dialogue can be furthered to enhance women's entry to the broader life opportunities.

The final article in this edition explores the very different issue of why social workers in England might choose or end up undertaking agency social work, given perceptions of this work as irregular, discontinuous, insecure and not embedded in one social work department. The chapter on 'The experiences and perceptions of agency social workers in England' is a very significant challenge to a stereotyped view that agency work is poor social work or that people end up in this work as a last professional resort. Echoing work exploring why women work part-time in the UK, the article based on empirical study of adult social workers, establishes that personal agency and choice are more important than had previously been assumed. Agency work offers some social workers the opportunity to rise above office politics and to take work more squarely on 'their terms'. This flies in the face of much previous thinking on agency work. Cornes et al note that the freedom to work in a way that did not involve being mired in office politics, poor working conditions (De Ruyter et al, 2008) and the scope to shape one's working life are the push and pull factors leading some social workers to opt for agency lives. The authors use the term 'gold collar workers' to describe the conditions enjoyed

by some agency social workers. On the down side poor training and lack of a secure career infrastructure were seen as detracting from the quality of working life as an agency worker. The broader shift to 'reduce expensive drains on the public purse' may lead to fewer non-core social work opportunities in the future according to the authors.

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## **References**

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