

Editorial

De-professionalism, neoliberalism and social inequalities

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A key influence of austerity politics has centred on resolving the future of professionalism and 'the public sector' in the UK. Impacts of this and other neoliberal leanings concerning the role of the state, outsourcing and privatisation have, it would seem, contributed to a qualitative failure and lack of commitment towards delivering public services. This stems significantly from reduced funding, and in particular from growing evidence of the sector's inability to recruit, retain, train and reward adequate numbers of professional workers to meet society's increased demands. A key argument arising from this deficit and fragmentation is that this has led to a pattern of de-professionalisation.

Why is this important? The first reason is because these cultural changes have prompted a rethink of some of the main theoretical and interdisciplinary perspectives, used as a basis for understanding how different professions have developed their identity. This has involved, sometimes casually, threats to professional knowledge, training and expertise. The second reason is that de-professionalism has become a euphemism for intensifying a trend towards public sector retrenchment, which includes outsourcing, underfunding and devolution of tasks. This has caused severe disruptions in respective workforces across the UK and contributed both to a decline in morale and become associated with abuses of power and authority. A third reason is because there is now a considerable body of evidence to show that public sector workers have become undervalued and this has had implications for the level and quality of care, protection, teaching and other professional interventions. It also diminishes the efficacy of certain areas within public services and reduces productivity, thereby leading to greater social inequalities. Austerity as an accepted norm has become characterised by a political failure to argue against it, even among opposition parties; and this has sent out a message from the UK 'establishment' that in post-crash Britain the capitalist state remains unreformed and is unreformable.

UK austerity policies embody a presence of continued uncertainty, lacking evidential commitment to rebuilding public services along more egalitarian lines. Neoliberalism, involving a remaking of the state, pre-configured to serve the demands of capital has meant that some professions have arguably lost authority because the state has lost its authority. Instead of celebrating the virtue of professional expertise, a system based on neoliberal ideas tends to view professions as raw material within a general commodification process. This has given rise to a different rationale: it must ask what value is the corporation to the community, how does it serve civic interest rather than just its ledger of profit or loss?

Whereas the state has a capacity to extend audit, intervention and knowledge transfer, there has been a continuing debate that, across main areas of the public sector, there has been a *loss of autonomy* in professional practice. This has become a major finding from research and other in-depth commentary investigating the different domains of health care (Glasby and Dickinson, 2014; Greer, Wismar and Figueras, 2016; Ham and Charles, 2018; Health Foundation/Kings Fund, 2018; Maybin, 2016; Powell, 2019), of social work and social care (Evans, 2015; Garrett, 2018; Martinelli, Anttonen and Matze, 2017; Rogowski, 2016), of education (Dobbins and Plows, 2017; Lewis and West, 2017; Shepherd, 2017) and of criminal justice (HMI Probation, 2017; Runova, 2018). De-professionalisation has become part of the lexicon defining the marketisation agenda, hence it follows that if austerity finished tomorrow, it is likely that it would continue.

How does this premise link to social inequalities in the UK? De-professionalisation, defined by terms that circumscribe the reduced capacity of the public sector workforce, has become enmeshed in a wider debate around rising inequalities. Announced in May, the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) established an interdisciplinary research forum, chaired by Professor Angus Deaton, to examine disparities of income, wealth, health and political access.

Amid fears Britain is on the cusp of sinking towards deep and ingrained inequalities following a decade of stagnant pay growth, there's a real question about whether democratic capitalism is working when it's only working for part of the population. (IFS, 2019)

A research puzzle to unravel needs to be based around the question of how far some professions have become fellow victims along with the rest of society, where widening inequalities in pay, health and opportunities in the UK are undermining trust in democracy.

In a recent publication, *Capital and Ideology* (2019) the French economist Thomas Piketty bemoans the ineffectiveness of the Left and Right at coming up with solutions for redistributing wealth. He explores the material and ideological interactions of conflicting social groups that have produced for example colonialism, communism and capitalism which have shaped the lives of many people but at the same time sustained inequality for the past millennium. Piketty's research concludes that the great driver of human progress over the centuries has been the struggle for equality and education and not, as often argued, the assertion of property rights or the pursuit of stability. This new era of extreme inequality has derailed progress since the 1980s and an argument is made for more 'participatory' socialism, a system founded on an ideology of equality, social property, education and the sharing of knowledge and power. Proposals include tackling wealth inequality by giving employees a stake in their companies, including for large companies to issue a percentage of outstanding equity a year into a fund held and managed by the workforce. Piketty specifically highlights a need for employees to have 50% of the seats on company boards, for voting power of even the longest shareholders

to be capped at 10%, and that there should be much higher taxes on property.

Robert Skidelsky, a leading economist on productivity growth, has proposed similar measures for tackling social inequalities in a paper commissioned at the request of the Labour Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, John McDonnell, and which was published in 2019. The author argues that measured productivity growth has slowed down dramatically in the western world in the last forty years, for reasons which are not well understood, but which are connected with the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy. Collective bargaining for wages, hours and conditions of work has been severely eroded – real wages have stagnated, earnings dispersal has widened and job insecurity has increased. A proposed remedy is for the state to invest in the public sector, and to use public procurement policies to leverage conditions of employment in the private sector. In line with Piketty's notion of widening participation, Skidelsky claims that an actual reduction of hours would be achieved through negotiations between the government as employer, professionals and the public sector along with trade unions. The purpose would be towards resolving how to split the 'efficiency gains' fairly between all 'tasks' in the public service, including those which cannot easily be automated like nursing and teaching (Skidelsky, 2019:).

The argument driving the need to tackle social inequalities so often goes back to reforming the private education sector and, backing the current campaign to achieve this, once again the Shadow Chancellor, McDonnell has come out to demonstrate an adherence to an 'integrated education system' (Benn, 2019). This particular suggestion would involve private school assets – endowments, investments and properties – being redistributed to the state sector where for example the state buys up the property currently owned by the private sector similar in a way to how private hospitals, trusts and charities were taken over on the creation of the NHS in 1948. Research to underpin this proposal, for example Gamsu (2019) explores the way education fits into the broader structures of class and capitalism where there is now evidence of a more robust advocacy for the British Labour Party to be in a position where it 'seriously takes on elite culture and power in Britain' (Gamsu, 2019).

To comprehend the gradual consolidation of elite culture, Daniel Markovits in *The Meritocracy Trap* (2019) attempts to show that in the midst of runaway economic inequality, meritocracy has become 'a sham'. He argues that it has become exactly what it was conceived to resist – a mechanism for the concentration and dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations. From his research he concludes that

upward mobility has become a fantasy, and the embattled middle classes are now more likely to sink into the working poor than to rise into the professional elite.

Pertinently this same sentiment is echoed by the journalist and critic Aditya Chakraborty (2019) who has commented on the fact that the share of UK income going to the top 0.1% is now at its second highest in history, similar to where it was in the 2008 banking crash:

At heart this is about how relatively few people in a small cluster of professions and industries, living in a tiny number of neighbourhoods, are enjoying riches beyond belief. And all this while wages for the median worker barely rise, and the schools and hospitals and libraries and parks on which the rest of us depend are run down to breaking point – nurses can seek a pay rise, teachers can leave but no such stress for top earners.

De-professionalism manifests itself through patterning inequalities across parts of the health, social care and education workforce. There is an inexorable need to develop and invest in the unqualified workforce, such as health care assistants in hospitals, and care workers in the community. A singularly important factor however is the noticeable gender divide, for example in the NHS workforce as a whole in the UK, where there is a distinct lack of male nurses, male child care experts and male adult social carers – 11.4% of nurses in the UK in 2017 were male (NHS Digital, 2019, Nuffield Trust, 2019). The National Minimum Data Set assessed the amount of people employed within the social care sector, finding that 82.2% of employees were women and only 17.8% were men, reinforcing a belief that men are not even applying for jobs within the social care sector (Workforce Intelligence, 2019).

Characteristics of de-professionalism include a loss of autonomy (Demailly and De La Broise, 2009; Frostenson, 2015), job insecurity (Kuhlmann and Saks, 2008; Standing, 2014) and lack of specialist training opportunities (Carrell and McEnaney, 2018; Glatter, Donnelly and Ainley, 2017; Nutbrown, 2012). Perhaps the time has come to reverse the ‘inverse training and investment’ law? In the past, too much of the workforce debate has focused on the most expensively trained workers, while the other end of the health and social care workforce has, until fairly recently (GOV.UK, 2013) been largely ignored. Approximately 60% of the NHS’s training budget is spent on the most highly paid health professionals, doctors (12% of the workforce) and 35% is spent on nurses and allied health professionals, who account for 40% of the total workforce (calculations derived from national workforce data – NHS Information Centre, 2013 – and breakdown of training budget (Imison, Buchan and Xavier, 2009)). Despite the fact that the biggest growth in need will be in hands-on, out-of-hospital, and social care, there is no national funding streams for training the unqualified workforce, such as health care assistants, who have no real professional pathway. There is also little national investment in the social care workforce, and the national subsidy for social work training has now been removed. While the Cavendish Review (GOV.UK, 2013) called for more formal training for health care assistants and support workers in the NHS and social care settings, it is unclear whether any national funding will support this ambition.

In a market-led form of provision driven *ipso facto* by financial considerations there is a temptation for example to employ fewer ‘specialists’ as opposed to those possessing a more generic or basic training. Applying this to a school context this may translate to employing fewer subject specialists, in a community care service the parallel would

apply to relevant clinical specialities. Professionals might experience a weakening of status as a result of a perceptible reduced demand for their specialist knowledge and expertise. An expression of collective powerlessness may become evident across parts of the social care workforce coupled with a pattern of trenchant feminisation characterising for example major sections of the teaching and early years workforce (Mistry and Sood, 2013; Van Laere et al, 2014) This gender imbalance experienced within an already vulnerable workforce, where de-professionalism thrives, would appear revealing in confirming our understanding of gender inequality.

Furthermore the teaching profession across the UK reflects a similar pattern – Department of Education statistics show only 26% of teachers in England are men, accounting for 38% of secondary and 15% of primary school teachers (Packham, 2018). Teach First, which recruits and places top graduates in schools serving low-income communities, to tackle inequality, says the lack of men entering the profession has resulted in an untapped resource (Sellgren, 2016). In 2017, 498,100 teachers were employed in state-funded schools (including classroom teachers, headteachers and deputy and assistant heads), around three-quarters of whom were female (approximately 376,300 teachers) (GOV.UK, 2019). As well as acting as an expression of gender inequality, this consolidated trend of de-professionalism has an intersectional impact by contributing to other sources of inequality, for example as regards the employment of adults with a disability.

An ideological reference point for how de-professionalism has taken shape in the UK lies within neoliberalism as a blend of market individualism where the goal is to reduce state intervention in the belief that unregulated market capitalism will deliver more efficiency and growth. A prevailing observation is that employers may be less willing to employ disabled people since they regard them as a hindrance to meeting their efficiency targets, often seen as pivotal in managing a modern-day workforce, including that pertaining to human services. There are around 8 million people of working age in the UK with a disability, according to the Office of National Statistics. However, figures from the Office for Disability show that fewer than one half of disabled people are in employment. The under-representation of people with disabilities in the workplace means many employers are ‘missing out on talent’ (The Conversation UK, 2019). ‘A business case for embracing diversity is straightforward’, according to one employer, ‘it means you have access to talent that others may overlook and you retain talent you might otherwise lose ...’ (*Recruiting Times*, 2019). Also it would not make sense to ignore a substantial proportion of the working age population in the current economic climate where employers complain of skills shortages. In support of this notion there is research that points to the fact that disabled people take less time off sick and are better performers (TUC, 2011; UCU, 2016).

The phrase ‘life-long learning’ has similarly become part of an ideology focusing on the economic imperatives of developing a more productive and efficient workforce. It complements the drivers of neoliberalism by making the flexible reskilling of individuals a compulsory life project, rather than offering the time-limited period of traditional

study to acquire fixed qualifications. Since 2010 governments have planned to increase the demand for skilled workers by focusing on skills rather than qualifications. The connection with de-professionalism is the way that more of the cost has been shifted onto learners and employers (Callender, 2012).

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De-professionalism can be defined by a precariousness or lack of efficacy as regards outcomes of some treatment interventions, and this Issue of Social Work and Social Sciences Review contains six articles all of which have a professionally-connected theme relating for example to fostering, mental health, evaluating social work practice or health promotion. A first article by Hansen, Provencher and Yates, 'Outcomes and savings associated with the Quality Parenting Program', examines the outcomes of training and support programs for foster carers. It focuses on the merits of the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) which aims to improve outcomes at low cost by empowering foster carers as well as caseworkers, and specifically on the outcome of permanency. This article uses administrative data to show that the earliest implementation of QPI shortened stays in care for children who were reunified. Also it concludes that the savings from shorter stays in care were estimated to be more than three times greater than expenditures.

A second article by Mesurado, Crespo and Shiaffino, "In good spirits" and the achievement of material satisfaction: evidence from Argentina' considers the impact of mental health in relation to emotional life satisfaction. It explores the elements that increase satisfaction in men and women according to their self-reports, also the influence of socio-economic variables and the absence of pathological symptoms in the prediction of emotional and material satisfaction. One conclusion from this study is that the results appear rather complex to analyse in any definitive way. The authors' findings however seem to demonstrate that socio-economic variables are associated with material satisfaction but not with emotional satisfaction whereas absence of pathological symptoms are related to both material and emotional satisfaction.

In the third article, 'Pruned, policed and privatised: the knowledge base for children and family social work in England and Wales in 2019', Tunstill argues that during the period of UK austerity the nature of the knowledge base for children and family social work has been increasingly subject to politically initiated change. An argument is made that deliberate decisions have been taken by governments in order to initiate – through a variety of interlinked and mutually reinforcing strategies – the reframing and repackaging of the role of knowledge in social work practice with children and families. This article identifies five key interlinked projects, which have been established by the Conservative Government, and which, it is claimed, are intended to deliver a 'far-reaching political colonisation' of the existing knowledge base for social work.

A fourth article by Bhatti-Sinclair and Sutcliffe, 'Normative and positive social work in the context of the placement decision: a defence of social workers', considers significant

questions for professional practice, such as the extent to which decisions made by social workers encompass the notion of 'maximising social welfare'. Such decisions as regards out-of-home placements are analysed partly from an economics perspective, and it is argued that deriving 'a societal objective' faces theoretical problems for analysis, even if a well-defined criterion was to become available. This is due to a lack of requisite information and to the range of differing interpretations of available data posing an inevitable dilemma for professionals. The argument is made that statistical analyses have lacked the data and techniques necessary to detect any underlying processes for understanding placement decisions, and that many would appear highly random.

In the next article, 'Controversies in preparing for end-of-life in Nsukka town, Nigeria and suggestions for Nigerian-based social work practice', Agbawodikeizu, Agwu, Okoye and Igwe, postulate that the practice of making end-of-life plans is currently poor in Nigeria and that this has led to several controversies. Data were gathered from over 500 adults in a cross-sectional study and analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Examples of controversies centred on cultural beliefs, which were discovered to exercise an overbearing influence and on various practices which were found to deter many people from proper planning of end-of-life care. One suggestion was to draw on the support and advocacy offered by professional social workers.

In the final article, 'Profiling of student athletes using behavioural strategies and alcohol use based on cluster analysis assignment', Saunders, Dudley, Milroy and Wyrick consider findings from an extensive student survey which challenge the assumption that participation in sports acts as a behavioural protective factor for use of alcohol. Some of their findings showed that students were more likely to engage in 'binge or high risk drinking' as compared to their non-athlete peers. A central aim of the study was to examine the structural features that influence whether a given student athlete will be categorised into groups such as high or low-risk drinking behaviours and some initial conclusions are presented.

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