

Editorial

Over the years *Social Work and Social Science Review* has held an important role in focusing attention on how social science knowledge informs and shapes the organization, management and practice of social work. Moreover, through their editorship, David Thorpe and Bob Sapey have encouraged the use of social science as a means of interrogating developments and trends. Rather than merely adding to the literature on how to implement government policy and guidance, papers published in the journal have raised questions, challenged assumptions and offered fresh, invigorating perspectives. As recent Guest Editors, Suzanne Regan and Andy Bilson have furthered this approach and the special editions of the journal have made important contributions to current debates. In consequence, the journal now holds an important position as an outlet for, and source of, critical reflection for all those connected with social work. Because of this, I am delighted to be taking over as Editor. I aim to continue the good work of my predecessors and hope that I too will facilitate thought provoking contributions to the literature on social work.

Questions concerning change and the construction of social work will be a theme within future editions. Over time, papers will be published that were presented at a symposium entitled 'Changing Social Work?' that was hosted by the journal and Lancaster University in September 2004. The topic of the symposium was decided in relation to claims that neo-liberalism, globalization, electronic information and communications networks, marketization, managerialism, consumerism, individualization and the declining ethos of public service have contributed to a re-configuration of social work in the developed world. For some, change is fundamental, and the continuation of social work as previously understood is in jeopardy. For others, however, changing titles, tasks, organizational cultures and structures, do not represent a watershed, but rather a continuation of an evolutionary trajectory. A positive interpretation sees today's social work in the UK as a welcome progression towards efficiency, effectiveness, and a shift from paternalist professional-client relations to partnership with service users as stakeholders. Perspectives presented at the symposium varied, and this variety is reflected in the papers published here.

Two of the papers appearing in this issue result from the symposium. O'Brien draws to attention to, and takes issue with the superficial, but increasingly influential construction of social work as a practical activity only. According to this construction, social workers are agents of change, but explanations of problems that might act as a guide to the kind of change necessary, or how change might be brought about, are not required. Such a

construction disengages social work from social science knowledge and limits the potential of practice. For O'Brien, social work has to be appreciated as a practical activity that is inherently associated with particular understandings of the social. By interrogating recent literature, O'Brien explores the various understandings that are currently in play. The second paper, written by Sarah Banks, reports on empirical research that aimed to examine the practice of public sector staff working within the new managerialist context (see for example, Harris, 2003). Theorists such as Thorpe (1994) and Parton *et al.* (1997) have considered the underpinning moral content of social work decision making. In the accounts gathered by Banks, however, social workers actively construct themselves as moral agents who struggle ethically with the kind of practice they are now expected to undertake. Put another way, social work is no longer the occupation they originally joined and this may lead to questions regarding their future career.

The paper written by Houston and Knox directly addresses the question of workforce retention in social work. Focusing particularly on child and family practice, the stressful content of the work and dysfunctional organizational contexts, are taken into account. Taking a positive and optimistic position, Houston and Knox nonetheless make a case for dialogue and change. Drawing on the work of radical theorists, the potential of drama and workshops, are advocated as a means of social work managers and practitioners collectively identifying problems and solutions. This paper emphasizes human agency and encourages action rather than complacency and defeat.

In a similarly optimistic vein, Marthinsen explores how social work organizations can become learning organizations. Whilst the development of partnerships between Universities and practice agencies is encouraged, social workers and managers should not only rely on researchers conducting 'one off' analyses of their work. Instead, they should develop systems that facilitate routine monitoring and evaluation. Such systems should engage meaningfully with the day-to-day activity of the worker. Such systems should encourage reflexive practice and continued learning. In consequence, services to children and families will be improved and stated goals are more likely to be achieved. Marthinsen's paper is a welcome addition to the two specialist themes of evidenced-based practice and organization that have become strong features of this journal.

References

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