

## Guest editorial

I am delighted and honoured to be asked to provide a guest editorial to this issue of *Social Work and Social Science Review*. This edition of the journal appears at a time of uncertainty for social work practitioners, educators and services. There are four broad areas of concern.

First, the on-going austerity measures are pushing down living standards, increasing the gap between the richest and the poorest, driving up child poverty rates and targeting the most vulnerable through a series of vicious welfare cuts or 'reforms'. Those on the receiving end – the poorest, the most marginalised, those with a range of social and welfare needs – are the self-same people that social workers meet and work alongside in our daily activities. For social workers on the frontline austerity is making their working lives and the lives of those we work with much harder.

Second, it is becoming increasingly clear that austerity is being used as a cover for transformation. The current UK deficit is running at about 75 per cent of GDP, yet in 1945 when the welfare state was effectively built, the deficit was closer to 250 per cent of GDP. The deficit itself, therefore, does not necessitate cuts and retrenchment. The decisions being made are the result of political choices. The welfare state is being changed fundamentally by restructuring, by 'reform', by privatisation and by out-sourcing. It is not just that resources are becoming scarcer, but that the providers of services are increasingly drawn from the privatised sectors of the economy or from the Third Sector where voluntary organisations increasingly have to act in 'business-light' ways. During these 'difficult times' some companies and organisations are doing very well. Amongst those who are seeing growth and expansion are companies like Serco, Capita, Pinder – and even parts of the G4S business which is slowly recovering from its Olympic fiasco. These and similar companies have witnessed business growth and increased profits by getting access to public service contracts. Often these profits are secured, not only on the back of government contracts, but on the basis of a range of undesirable work practices such as zero hour contracts, minimal wages, little sick or holiday cover, no pension plans, and little formal training of staff. In these circumstances is it any surprise that there are growing complaints about the quality of care and support provided in the privatised care world? And social work is not immune. Increasing parts of the social work business are now being provided not by 'state social workers' (as Chris Jones' (1983) *State Social Work and the Working Class* (Macmillan) termed the majority of social workers employed by local authorities) but in what we might call 'state directed' social work projects – those undertaking statutory roles within voluntary and private agencies who are a growing minority within the profession.

Third, as a result of the Munro reforms social work education and training has gone through another change. September 2013 will see a number of Universities starting new degree programmes, with the rest following by the end of 2014. Yet before the new degrees have started Michael Gove has initiated further reviews of social work education

for children and adult social workers. These quick fire reviews will report directly to Gove without the chance for the profession to contribute directly to their outcome. The suggestion is that this is a quick-turn-around report to provide ammunition for fundamental changes to social work education, moving away from generic social work towards specialism. Such suspicions are fuelled by the development of both Step Up and Frontline, where 'good' graduates (however that may be defined), from 'good universities' (whatever that may mean) are fast-tracked into child protection social work. Certainly on the Frontline project this is achieved with very little formal university based education and training.

Finally the recent death of Daniel Pelka has raised questions about the failings of multi-agency working and led, once more, to soundings about 'social work's failings'.

Against this broad background the papers collected in this edition of the Journal offer an important counterpoint to many of the attacks on social work.

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Kearney, in his essay, offers a timely review of the Munro report and the thinking behind it and Gove's conceptions of 'child protection'. Kearney argues that there is a fault line in the policy discourse and this is repeated in Munro:

At times it seems to suggest that it means the protection of 'children at risk' from serious harm, but at other times it appears to refer to a much broader category of children in need and how professionals involved in universal child welfare services should be aware of the need for early intervention. (Kearney, p.9)

Crudely put: does 'every child matter' or is the purpose of social work services for children simply to intervene to protect vulnerable children in failing or problem families? It is interesting to note that the president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has recently stated that

About 2,000 children a year lose their lives because of an array of problems, which means the UK has some of the worst death rates among children up to the age of 14 in Europe" (The Observer, 13 July 2013)

The Royal College's point was that lack of investment in appropriate health services was leaving children vulnerable. Yet for Gove 'improved child protection' seems to be about a willingness to remove children from more families.

Clawson's paper raises a number of important issues about safeguarding people with learning disabilities in the context of forced marriage. Debates about forced marriage are usually located within debates about violence against women, immigration and cultural difference; rarely is the issue discussed in regard to learning disabilities.

Clawson's paper makes it clear that forced marriage is a growing problem (according to the Forced Marriage Unit in 2005 there were 400 forced marriages in Britain, by 2012

this had risen to 1485, and Clawson suggests the figure is likely to be much higher given the unreliability of the data), but she also argues that we need a more nuanced approach to the problem. She notes that 22 per cent of those forced into marriage are men and that, despite the commonsense notion that this is a 'south Asian cultural problem' the backgrounds of those in forced marriages come from Asia, Africa, Europe, China, Irish Traveller communities among others.

But her paper is particularly revealing in its discussion of people with learning disabilities. She suggests the motives for marriage can be varied: it can be parents worrying about the long-term care of their child, it can reflect a range of ideas about demons, witchcraft and 'curing' people with learning disabilities, it can reflect traditional roles and perceptions about the family in the provision of care – and suspicion of welfare agencies. Clawson makes it clear that forced marriage is still abuse but to understand the complexities and shape our interventions appropriately we need to be culturally sensitive and aware of different conceptions of family, marriage, rights and learning disabilities.

Stroud and Warren-Adamson's paper is particularly pertinent in the aftermath of Daniel Pelka's death. Their concern is multi-agency working with a particular focus on the police as a non-specialist agency often involved in making key initial decisions about risk. Especially in out of hours situations officers will be expected to make decisions about whether to remove a child or not or whether to refer for a S47 investigation, for example. The paper considers the potential (and the potential problems) of specialists providing appropriate risk frameworks to aid non-specialist professionals in these types of situations. Whilst acutely aware of the dangers of 'tick box' risk frameworks, their conclusion is that a minimal framework can be developed which would be useful for non-specialists.

Heyman's paper looks at 'partnership working' between social services and young carers. The paper draws on qualitative research based in the North East of England. The in-depth interviews and field notes allow us to hear the voice of young carers and social workers working with and supporting carers. The paper raises a number of issues. What is meaningful partnership in this situation? How are young carers specific needs met (as opposed to being merged with more general 'needs of young people')? How are young carers views obtained, used and implemented within service delivery? As Heyman notes:

The YCWs [Young Care Workers] felt that they were being listened to when they were needed to provide information and services, but not when they were trying to make sure that past lessons were learned. The lack of a structure for listening to each other appears to have been paralleled by the lack of a structure for social workers to listen to clients, in a way that would allow them to distinguish specific client group needs (that is, young carer needs) from other needs related to disability and disadvantage within families. (Heyman p.63)

Ward's paper is a review and evaluation of a training programme established between

an HEI and four local authorities on leadership, supervision and management within safeguarding and social work agencies. This is an important topic post-Munro and one that is becoming more visible within social work education, training and practice. Debates over the meaning and nature of supervision have become crucial as part of recent social work reforms. In the early decades of the twentieth century there was a clear perception that supervision had drifted into a form of labour control and direction at the expense of an approach focussing on problem solving and reflection. The paper presents evidence from a training programme and the participants reflections and evaluations of how meaningful leadership and supervision can be embedded within local social service agencies.

Finally Malin and Tunmore's paper brings us back to issues of child protection, poverty and neglect – and in this sense poses again the questions that Kearney raises in the first essay. Based on an evaluation of the Children's Services Programme in the North east of England it grapples with the problem of meeting children's health and social care needs, through high quality support at a time of growing poverty, inequality and welfare 'reform'. The paper traces how a number of local authorities in the north east are trying to square this circle and argue that if we are to meet our obligations a 'rights based-child centred approach' is required and their paper offers some pointers as to how this can be achieved.

Taken together the papers offer an important and, at times challenging, resource that will help social work educators, practitioners and students start to navigate the rough waters we are presently going through.

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