

CHAPTER 1.1

Social Work and Society

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Social work and society are caught in an intense and changing relationship. Just as social work seeks to influence society (and individuals and families within it), so society in its many guises seeks to control social work, by setting limits on what social workers can and should do. Social work is situated in the middle, pulled between the individual and society, the powerful and the excluded, negotiating, and at times in conflict, with both.

This chapter examines social work and society from the perspective of a history of social work in the United Kingdom. This does not presume that the United Kingdom is the only country which might offer insight into this topic. Instead, it is argued that the United Kingdom provides a useful case-study example for exploring the changing relationship between social work and society over time. Nor is it to suggest that this is the only 'true' history of social work in the United Kingdom. There are many possible ways of presenting history, and many voices which have often been excluded from social work histories, such as the voices of the many people who have used social work services. This account should therefore be regarded as one attempt to do justice to the histories of social work in the United Kingdom, demonstrating as it does the complexities and contradictions at the heart of the relationship between social work and society.

What is Social Work?

There have been many attempts to define social work in recent years. One definition is widely quoted:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW 2012, <http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>, accessed 13 October, 2012)

This definition was negotiated and adopted at separate meetings of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in Montreal, Canada in July 2000, and then agreed as a joint definition in Copenhagen in May 2001. The definition has not been without its critics. For some, it is aspirational rather than practical; it tells us little about the realities of social work practice, especially in government agencies where the focus may be more on social control and safeguarding the public than on personal liberation. For others, it is seen as relying too heavily on ‘Western’ (or ‘Northern’?), developed-world ideas about rights and justice. Interestingly, the IFSW web site provides a rider to the definition: ‘It is understood that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive’ (<http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>, accessed 13 October, 2012). This captures well the contested and changing nature of social work, as does the story of the historical development of social work.

As I argued in my first book, historical analyses demonstrate that social work has always been subject to competing claims of definition and practice; it is only by exploring some of the discourses within social work that we can begin to understand what social work is and what it might be (Cree, 1995, p. 1). Social work cannot be separated from society – we cannot explain or understand social work without locating it within society.

What is Society?

The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that society is ‘the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community’. But what is an ‘aggregate of people’? How many people must this include for it to be considered a ‘society’? Does the definition assume a homogeneous or a heterogeneous group of people? What is a ‘community’? What does it mean to be ‘more or less ordered’? Most importantly, whose answers should we accept, and what are the implications of holding a particular position?

Classical sociologists had no problem in defining society. They worked from the assumption that ‘society’ (sometimes presented with a capital as ‘Society’) could be examined and analysed, much as any material object could be investigated in a laboratory. As the physical sciences studied the physical world, so sociology was the ‘science of society’. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries in Western Europe and the United States, sociologists’ main priority was to examine and explain what they saw as the new, ‘modern’ society in which they were living. Industrialization and urbanization had brought a new way of life:

Table 1 *Conceptualizations of society.*

<i>Pre-industrial society</i>	<i>Modern society</i>	<i>Postmodern society</i>
Feudalism	Capitalism	Global capitalism
Agrarian	Industrial	The information society
Rural	Urban	Decentralized
Simple	Complex	Fragmented
Religious	Secular	Pluralist
Faith	Science	Scepticism/relativity
Superstition	Reason	Diverse beliefs/ambivalence
Tradition	Universal truths	Contingencies/contradictions

society had shifted from a feudal, agrarian, ‘simple’ society to a capitalist, industrial, ‘complex’ society. Sociologists saw this positively: the ‘modern’ world signified progress, scientific reasoning and enlightened thinking. They were also concerned, however, about the negative consequences of modernization, including the loss of traditional values and social networks. They therefore sought to find ways of ameliorating the worst aspects of industrialization and so create a better society. Capitalism and socialism represented two very different ways as to how this might be achieved.

In more recent years, the idea of society as a single entity has been severely criticized. Pluralist approaches present society as a mosaic of competing worlds. Postmodern analyses have taken this further, emphasizing the contingent nature of existence and the chaotic, unexpected characteristics of late capitalist society. Society is here perceived as being complex and fragmented: just as we all have more than one identity, so we live and move in many diverse societies. The different ways in which society has been conceptualized are illustrated in Table 1.

The history of social work in the United Kingdom offers unique insight into the social, economic and political changes which have taken place in the past and are being lived through in the present. It provides a window onto the modernization process; we can see at first hand the social changes which led to the emergence of ‘modern’ social work and the struggle within social work to professionalize and live up to the ‘modern’ ideal. An examination of social work’s current position throws postmodern ideas and analyses into sharp relief. The complexities and uncertainties which seem to be endemic in social work are inevitable given the dynamic and contested nature of post/late modern/risk society.

Social Work and ‘Pre-Industrial’ Society

There have always been those who need help from others, though this help was not always called ‘social work’. In pre-industrial society, poverty was widespread. However, there was no notion at this time that the state should have any part to play in alleviating hardship. It was accepted that it was the family’s responsibility to care for those in need. The 1601 Poor Law Act confirmed this:

It should be the duty of the father, grandfather, mother, grandmother, husband or child of a poor, old, blind, lame or impotent person, or other poor person, not able to work, if possessed of sufficient means, to relieve and maintain that person.

Beyond this, churches and monasteries provided residential services for older and infirm people without family support through almshouses, infirmaries (for the care and treatment of the sick), and hospitals (literally ‘hospitality’ for the poor, especially the old, and for travellers in need of temporary shelter). At the same time, landowners gave extra help (sometimes financial and often in kind) to tenants and their families at times of sickness or poor harvest.

The social and economic changes known as the ‘agrarian revolution’ changed established systems of social support for ever. The process of enclosure which converted arable land to pasture led to mass unemployment for rural labourers, rural depopulation across vast areas of the countryside, and a decline of traditional obligations between landowners and tenants. Simultaneously, the dissolution of monasteries destroyed the provision of institutional social care services and led to hundreds of older and disabled people being thrown out onto the streets. Fears of social disorder led to the passing of the 1601 Elizabethan Poor Law Act (England and Wales). The Act reaffirmed the principle of family responsibility, while authorizing parishes to levy rates on property to pay for services for the poor and needy who had no family support. It also determined what help should be provided:

- the ‘impotent poor’ (the aged, chronic sick, blind and mentally ill who needed residential care) were to be accommodated in voluntary almshouses;
- the ‘able-bodied poor’ were to be set to work in a workhouse (they were felt to be able to work but were lazy);
- the ‘able-bodied poor’ who absconded or ‘persistent idlers’ who refused work were to be punished in a ‘house of correction’ (Fraser, 2009).

Parishes were never able to raise sufficient funds to make this a realistic programme of social support. Nevertheless, what the act demonstrates is a series of propositions about a new relationship between the individual and society. Firstly, it recognized that individual and charitable efforts were no longer sufficient to meet need; the state must therefore intervene to provide services. Secondly, it formalized the notion that there were different types of poor people, requiring different kinds of intervention. Finally, it presupposed the idea that the state’s responsibility should be limited to the control, punishment and deterrence of the ‘bad’ poor, whilst ‘good’ poor people would be helped by voluntary agencies. Subsequent legislation and social welfare policy in the United Kingdom built on these ideas, with significant implications for the development of social work practice.

Social Work and ‘Modern’ Society

If the agrarian revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marked the beginnings of a transformation in the relationship between individuals and society, it was the social crisis known as the ‘industrial revolution’ in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries which consolidated this shift across Western Europe and North America. Social work emerged as a response to this crisis, and as a compromise between different views about what form that response should take.

The industrial revolution brought with it rapid industrialization and urbanization which changed for ever the lives of all people, rich and poor alike. Social problems that had been dispersed and largely invisible in the countryside (for example, poverty and overcrowding, poor housing, ill health and disease, alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution, unsupervised children) became more concentrated and more visible in the new towns and cities. Working-class freedom and social deprivation spelt danger to the middle-class city dwellers who clamoured for something to be done to contain and control the threat from the 'dangerous classes'. This is clearly illustrated in the following excerpt from a sermon preached by the Reverend Thomas Chalmers in 1817:

on looking at the mighty mass of a city population, I state my apprehension, that if something be not done to bring this enormous physical strength under the control of Christian and humanised principle, the day may yet come, when it may lift against the authorities of the land, its brawny vigour, and discharge upon them all the turbulence of its rude and volcanic energy. (Quoted in Brown, 1997, p. 95)

Something *was* done. The nineteenth century saw the introduction of a vast array of social welfare initiatives, including the establishment of new social work agencies. These initiatives were promoted by a range of stakeholders: public bodies, voluntary agencies, and private individuals, often, but not exclusively, members of the new urban middle class (see also Cree and Myers, 2008).

Statutory (public) initiatives in the nineteenth century

At the statutory or public level, there was innovation in the nineteenth century across many spheres of life. Schemes for public sanitation, education, policing, prisons, juvenile correction, public workhouses and mental asylums accompanied legislation governing working conditions and the treatment of children as well as new mechanisms for recording population change. The social welfare initiatives demonstrate both continuity and change in thinking about the relationship between the individual and the state.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (England and Wales) divided the poor into two groups:

- the 'deserving poor' (e.g. elderly, sick or disabled people, orphans and widows) who were to receive financial and practical support (often home-based) from charitable or voluntary organizations;
- the 'undeserving poor' (e.g. able-bodied unemployed men, single mothers, prostitutes) who were forced to turn to the state, and thus to the workhouse, since there was to be no poor relief outside the institution (Mooney, 1998).

The Act thus built on the distinctions created in earlier Poor Law legislation, confirming the separation between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor and furthering the idea that it was the state's job to exclude and discipline the 'residue' (the

'underclass' in today's language). They were to be removed from society, in common with those others who did not have a place in the new, modern, industrial society: the mentally ill, the disabled and the criminal.

The nineteenth-century initiatives also illustrate new ideas about the role of the state. For the first time the state was to take action to set social conditions for *all* people, not just those who had transgressed society's rules. Free education was to be available for all children up to the age of 11 years; public sanitation would benefit all classes of people; employment legislation would control the economic and work practices of all factory and mine owners. And legislation allowed the state to intervene in the heart of private lives, that is, the family. The 1889 Prevention of Cruelty and Protection of Children Act for the first time made cruelty towards children illegal and introduced provisions for children to be removed from their families to a place of safety.

This new conceptualization about the role of the state was not reached easily, and was not accepted by all. Individuals and groups fought against state encroachment into individual liberty and the right to live (and work) without statutory interference. Those who were most unhappy were often the new middle classes who bore the burden of rising taxes to pay for social improvements. Scotland showed marked reluctance to go down the road of statutory intervention. Although Scottish parishes were permitted by a Poor Law Act of 1579 to raise taxes through rates, few did, and the chosen means of support remained the church or the estate (Levitt, 1988). Where relief was given, it was targeted at those who could not work (the 'destitute' and 'disabled'); financial support of the 'able-bodied', by either voluntary or public agencies, was discouraged.

Voluntary (philanthropic) initiatives in the nineteenth century

There was an explosion of voluntary activity in the nineteenth century, with the creation of hundreds of new philanthropic agencies. These included police court missionaries; rescue societies for 'fallen women'; housing associations; university settlements; children's charities; hospital almoners; caseworkers from the Charity Organisation Society (COS) and other relief agencies; visitors on behalf of churches of all denominations and many other secular visiting organizations. Large numbers of middle-class people and some working-class people were involved in some form of philanthropic effort, either as fund-raisers, visitors, managers or activists. Some philanthropists restricted their involvement to small-scale action, such as visiting people at home. Many others were also involved in large-scale campaigning work. They saw no contradiction between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' (Mills, 1959). Instead, their work with individuals and families was a key part of their mission to change society. Helen Bosanquet, a COS District Secretary for many years, expressed this as follows:

What we aim at in all social work . . . is that both the whole community and every member in it shall be progressive, on the rising scale. We shall not be satisfied if the community as a whole can show a momentary increase in wealth, or learning, or culture, unless all classes within it are partaking intelligently in the social life, sharing in its progress, a source of strength and not of weakness. (1902, pp. 5-6)

Much of the philanthropic work took place on the margins of public agencies; the workers saw their task as mediating between individuals and the state (Clarke, 1993). They also, however, frequently sought to set limits on the state's involvement in the lives of individuals, by working as both Poor Law Guardians and 'friendly visitors', or by passing on information about individuals' circumstances to Poor Law boards. Most philanthropists believed passionately that statutory measures encouraged dependency and that the only way people could be helped to help themselves was through the reciprocal relationship between an individual and a trained volunteer. Octavia Hill, manager of a large number of Housing Associations in London, wrote in 1886:

The more I watch the more the action of the public puzzles me. By rashly pouring vast sums into new largely advertised, wholesale schemes, their feverish excitability is creating a body of thriftless, ungracious, mendicants, living always on the brink of starvation, because taught to look to what may turn up. And those who love and know the people have to stand sadly aside, feeling that all giving is fatal until such rushes be over. (Reprinted in Whelan, 1998, pp. 93)

Octavia Hill's words show that philanthropy was not envisaged simply as a neutral alternative to state intervention; it was a deliberate attempt to hold back the increasing role of the state. From this perspective, philanthropy (and later social work) was not an apolitical, private intervention into social problems but was a 'deliberately depoliticising strategy for establishing public services at sensitive points midway between private initiative and the state' (Donzelot, 1980, p. 55). It offered a way of intervening in the lives of individuals and families to 'fit' them for the new industrial society without undermining individual responsibility and the role of the family (Parton, 1994).

The principal actors in this new sphere were middle-class women. While men busied themselves with political and economic affairs, and in the management of charitable organizations, it was largely women who performed the visits to people at home and in institutions. A survey carried out in 1893 estimated that approximately 500,000 women worked 'continuously and semi-professionally' in charitable activity, with another 20,000 employed as paid officials in philanthropic organizations (Prochaska, 1980, p. 29). These women brought to their voluntary work specific (middle-class) ideas about class and gender, family and work, age and sexuality. They believed that their own, bourgeois culture and beliefs were superior to those of working-class people; their goal was to make them more 'middle-class'. They also believed that men and women had different 'natural' qualities and abilities; that as women, they had a special contribution to make to the management of poorhouses and workhouses, school boards and prisons, as well as to the daily household management of poor families.

There was a fundamental contradiction here. Middle-class women, through educating the working classes in domesticity, also freed themselves from their own domestic confinement. Philanthropy brought opportunities for useful work, recreation, and creativity to middle-class women excluded from the world of paid employment. As Florence Nightingale declared: 'Charity work, free from chaperons and prying relatives represented deliverance from the stitch-stitch-church-stitch routine

of female existence. It was adventure' (quoted in Prochaska, 1980, p. 11). The 'private' world of the working classes was thus the point of entry for middle-class women into the 'public' world of work and politics. At the same time, the 'private' work carried out by working-class women in middle-class households (as domestic servants, cooks and nannies) gave middle-class women the leisure time they needed to indulge in charitable work with the working classes (Summers, 1979).

Social Work in the Twentieth Century

It has been stated already that the nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of a wide range of social support initiatives, instigated by both statutory and voluntary agencies. In the twentieth century, social work services became increasingly incorporated into the state, either carried out directly by the state, or by the voluntary sector on its behalf, and statutory agencies became responsible for regulating and controlling the voluntary sector, through funding and inspection arrangements. As social work became progressively a more legally defined, narrowly proscribed activity, so the social reform agenda within social work became marginalized.

How did this change come about? We have already seen in the previous centuries a growing acceptance of the idea that the state should intervene to provide services and set conditions (to a limited extent) on behaviour. The twentieth century took this to a totally new level. Liberal reforms at the beginning of the twentieth century were followed during and after the Second World War by a massive programme of social legislation which promised to tackle outright the five giants of 'Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness' (HMSO, 1942) and remove all trace of the stigma attached to the Poor Law. The principal systems of provision included social security and pensions, the National Health Service, education, family allowances, housing and planning, childcare and national assistance. The aim was to end social inequality for all; the task of social work was to pick up the small number of people who fell through the welfare net and rehabilitate them so that they could again play their part as full citizens. Three separate local authority departments were set up in 1948 to meet social work needs: children's departments targeted children deprived of a 'normal' family life; welfare departments were set up to work with older, physically handicapped and homeless people; and local health departments were created to provide services for mentally ill and handicapped people. According to this new standard, the voluntary sector was complementary and supplementary to the state, filling in gaps and experimenting with new forms of help.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that arguments against the increasing role of the state had been defeated for all time. The tide of social democratic optimism and new confidence in central planning measures that followed the Second World War may have muted the voices against state encroachment, but they did not disappear (Stewart, 1999). The limited funding made available to the new social work departments in the post-war period demonstrates that they were never expected to be a central arm of the welfare state in the way that health and education services were. A key aspect of social work practice – child protection services – remained in the hands of voluntary agencies, which also provided the bulk of

residential childcare services. It was not until after the passing of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and the Local Authorities Social Services Act (England and Wales) 1970 that statutory social services were on a level that seriously undermined voluntary ones. New generic Social Work and Social Service Departments brought together the previously disparate services under one roof, offering universal personal social services for all; 'through one door on which to knock' (Seebohm Committee, 1968). The voluntary sector's task was confirmed as being 'to supplement local authority work' and 'a stimulus to further progress', in the words of the Social Work (Scotland) Act. These developments have been described as the 'high tide' of social work (Langan, 1993).

There is a paradox in the expansion of the state's responsibilities. While voluntary agencies in the nineteenth century had, at least in part, seen their role as one of restraining state interference in the lives of citizens, voluntary agencies in the twentieth century became increasingly supportive of a greater role for the state. Those who campaigned for the passing of the Children Act in 1948 included representatives from powerful voluntary organizations that worked with children. The same was true of the later 1968 and 1970 Acts. In practice, voluntary social work agencies did unprecedentedly well out of the expansion of statutory social work, as local authorities, strapped for cash and resources, turned to the voluntary sector to meet requirements of the new legislation.

The driving force behind the developments that took place in both statutory and voluntary social work can be found in the intersection between the needs of the growing welfare state and the demands of social workers themselves. The state needed professional workers to staff its new departments. At the same time, the 'would-be professions' benefited from the occupational and organizational base provided by the state (Clarke, 1993, p. 15). The 'bureau professionalism' that became the pattern in local authority social work departments (and in many of the larger voluntary agencies) guaranteed social work its service-user base and its continuing legitimacy. But it also restricted the kind of activity that social work could be involved in, and the autonomy and discretion that social workers could exercise. Commentators have been critical of the self-serving nature of professions and the social work profession in particular. It is argued that professionalization encouraged social workers to give up their claims to change society (Hugman, 1991), led to a diminishing of the authority of women's voices in social work (Dominelli, 1997), and an abandonment of social work's traditional commitment to the poor (Jones, 1997).

Whichever is the case, the old arguments against the growing dominance of the state did not vanish. In the 1970s and 1980s in the United Kingdom, the welfare state in general, and social work in particular, came under increasing attack from both the right and the left. Challenges came from a number of distinct, and at times overlapping, areas:

- A decline in the United Kingdom's economic competitiveness and a reorientation of fiscal and monetary regimes led to the welfare state becoming a target for radical change (Clark and Cree, 2001).
- Black and anti-racist groups drew attention to the deep-seated racism within social work ideology and practice (Dominelli, 2008).

- Child abuse tragedies from the early 1970s onwards highlighted statutory social work's powerlessness to prevent abuse from taking place, either at home or in the very institutions set up to protect vulnerable children (Hill and Aldgate, 1996).
- Feminists pointed out that state services, while claiming to support women, reinforced gender stereotypes and confirmed women's oppression (Langan and Day, 1992).
- Disabled people campaigned against the paternalism of state provision, and fought for a measure of control over how services were to be delivered (Campbell and Oliver, 1996).
- Key voluntary agencies pushed for an increased role for the voluntary sector in 'welfare pluralism' (Gladstone, 1979).
- Radical social workers drew attention to the structural causes of service users' problems and sought to form political alliances through trade unions (Langan, 1993).
- A New Right agenda was promoting the role of the family and voluntary provision in preference to the 'nanny state' (Pinkney, 1998).

The consequences of the disillusionment with the welfare state included a retrenchment of the state in terms of its provision of welfare services. The idea that the state could not – and should not – provide all social welfare began again to gain ascendancy. But although the rhetoric of the 1980s may have been about reducing state involvement, the reality was the introduction of new and ever-more stringent mechanisms for regulating and controlling social services, in statutory, voluntary and private sectors. The result has been greater, not less power for the state.

International comparisons make it evident that there is no 'right answer' to the questions of who should provide social work services, and of what kind. In many European countries, social workers are state employees with wide responsibilities in relation to employment and social insurance. In contrast, social services in Australia rest firmly with the voluntary sector and in the United States, most qualified social workers are either self-employed or working for private agencies as counselors and therapists. In Latin America, social workers attached to churches play a key role in working with groups to tackle poverty. Moreover, some of the largest non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for example, the Red Cross, Age Concern and Oxfam, play a major role in the organization of welfare services throughout the world during times of trauma such as wars and civil conflicts (Dominelli, 2000, p. 32).

Social Work and 'Postmodern' Society

It is impossible to say when the 'modern' period in social work ended and the 'postmodern' began, supposing that it exists at all. Whatever we think about 'post-modernity', we can be certain that the world of the twenty-first century has changed and is continuing to change rapidly. The structure and organization of social work in the United Kingdom has been transformed; 'modern' assumptions about the role of social work are open to question; it is uncertain what form social work will take in the future.

As we have seen, the relationship between social work and society has been shaped by a number of different processes, historical, social, economic and political. Factors beyond our geographical boundaries are of even greater significance for social work and postmodern society. The impact of economic organization on an international scale (globalization) has been that individual countries can no longer function as closed societies, if this was ever truly possible. Writing in 1993, Smart argued that social life and social relations, identity and experience could no longer be limited in scope to 'society', particularly where society is envisaged in terms of the boundaries of the nation state. For many countries, globalization has been experienced as a kind of colonization of local cultures and customs; a 'Westernization' or even 'Americanization'. Yet globalization has also opened up so-called marginalized and 'peripheral' communities throughout the world, bringing the potential for greater awareness of diverse cultures that may challenge the hegemony of 'Western' ideas (Allahar, 1995).

Globalization has already begun to have a direct influence on social work in the United Kingdom. As the transnational nature of economic organization has undermined the power of nation states (Bauman, 1998), old defensive barriers between countries have broken down and new alliances formed. Agreements reached at European level (such as the European Convention on Human Rights) are today reshaping policy and practice in all the member countries in the European Union, just as international treaties (such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) is impacting on adults and children across statutory, voluntary and private agencies. Whilst some systems of government have become larger, there has been a cross-Europe movement towards the devolution of responsibilities away from governments to smaller units of power. In the United Kingdom, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies have brought increasing disparities in the relationship between social work and society across England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as demonstrated in the different countries' approaches to the question of provision of social care for older people.

Globalization has been accompanied by attempts across advanced industrialized societies to cut public expenditure and introduce new ways of managing welfare. In most countries, this has meant an increase in social inequalities. In the United Kingdom, the mechanism of the market has been introduced throughout public sector agencies. Statutory social work agencies have seen the creation of a split between purchaser and provider roles, and the introduction of charges for services, the contracting out of services and the promotion of competition between the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. Clients have become 'customers', and social workers budget-holders, with little control over the resources which they must purchase in the 'market' of care. Social workers are experiencing high levels of anxiety and pressure, as they strive to maintain the social work role in the face of challenges from other care professionals, such as occupational therapists, district nurses and community psychiatric nurses.

Some commentators propose that the defining characteristic of the post-industrial society is information – it is information that produces and sustains contemporary society and makes globalization possible (Kumar, 2005). By bringing together ever faster and cleverer computers with worldwide telecommunications' systems, knowledge and information can be shared instantaneously, and people can

1 Useful web sites

www.gcu.ac.uk/heatherbank/ – the Heatherbank Museum of Social Work, founded in 1975, and based at Glasgow Caledonian University.

www.workhouses.org.uk/ – contains interesting materials about workhouses and poorhouses across the UK.

<http://swhn.chester.ac.uk/papers.php> – the UK's Social Work History Network papers can be accessed here.

<http://www.naswdc.org/pressroom/features/general/history.asp> – provides information on American social work history.

<http://historyofsocialwork.org/eng/index.php> – launched in 2010 with support from the Flemish ministry of welfare and the Dutch ministry of welfare.

build social networks and communities of support across societies and countries. This has clear advantages for social workers and service users. But critics have pointed out that information technology (IT) is only really available to certain groups in society, leading to an increase in social exclusion for those who have no access to it. Information technology has also brought with it the capacity for surveillance and control to a degree unthinkable in the past. Networked computer systems, DNA screening and electronic 'tagging' bring ever-more sophisticated ways in which the 'disciplinary society' can 'police' its members (Foucault, 1977).

Globalization and information are not the only reasons for the changes taking place in social work. Postmodern society is also a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). Our lives are affected by global risks beyond our control; the speed at which change is taking place makes us feel insecure and vulnerable. Social work in the United Kingdom has sought to cope with (and manage) the idea of risk and uncertainty by introducing new systems for organizing professional practice and new mechanisms for predicting future risks and their potential negative outcomes. How far management of risk is ever truly achievable remains an open question, but Cree and Wallace (2009) argue that social workers must nevertheless seek to behave in a professional, ethical manner, working alongside service users and other professionals to share the responsibilities and challenges that real life brings.

Conclusion

The relationship between social work and society is a dynamic and highly contested one. As society 'modernized', so social work shifted from the informal to the formal sphere, from voluntary to statutory agencies. Social work became a key mechanism of the new 'disciplinary society', positioned, as Donzelot (1980) and others have claimed, at a midway point between the individual and the state. In more recent years, disciplinary power has continued to grow, as the state has increased its regulatory and inspectorial role in a new 'mixed economy' of care.

But the story of the changing relationship between social work and society is not one of 'caring' voluntary agencies versus 'controlling' statutory services. On the contrary, the motivations of those involved in the nineteenth-century voluntary agencies were as much about controlling and re-educating the working classes as they were about humanitarian concern or social reform. They worked hand-in-hand with statutory (poor law) agencies to manage the social consequences of industrialization and urbanization. At the same time, the emergence of 'the social' provided a gateway for middle-class women to enter the public arena and the world of professional work.

Today the lines between voluntary and statutory agencies have become increasingly blurred. Most voluntary agencies rely heavily on local and central government funding for their activities, albeit now within the rubric of the 'big society' (see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/big society/>). At the same time, statutory agencies continue to depend on informal networks of caring to meet most social need. There is a general acceptance (again) that the state cannot provide all social welfare needs; that statutory social work must be a service of 'last resort', rationed by ever-more intricate tests of 'risk' and 'need'. The 'undeserving poor' of the past are today's 'socially excluded' or 'underclass'; they remain the principal users of statutory social work services.

So what of social work and society in the future? Realistically, social work will continue to be more about helping people to fit into society than about changing society; it will be concerned with maintenance rather than social revolution (Davies, 1994). But given its breadth of scope, its complexities and its diversities, social work can do more than this. Social work has privileged access to the lives of individuals and the workings of society. Through this, it holds the possibility of exerting a positive influence on both. If it is to achieve this, it will have to align itself more completely with those it sets out to mediate on behalf of – the poor, the socially excluded and the less powerful in society. And it will have to show courage to speak out about the structural causes of people's problems and the extraordinary resilience of their lives.

Five Key Points

1. Social work is situated midway between the individual and society, between the powerful and the excluded, negotiating, and at times in conflict, with both.
2. Historical analyses demonstrate that social work has always been subject to competing claims of definition and practice – there is no essential social work task.
3. Modern social work emerged as a deliberate strategy to ameliorate the worst effects of rapid industrialization and urbanization.
4. The professionalization of social work in the United Kingdom meant that social work (statutory and voluntary) increasingly looked to the state to provide its ‘clients’ and regulate its activities.
5. The postmodern world brings new opportunities for creativity and diversities in social work, as well as dangers of increased surveillance and control of social work’s subjects.



Three Questions

1. How far is social work a class-specific activity today?
2. What does it mean to say that social work is a ‘women’s profession’?
3. What is the role of the voluntary sector in social work today?

Further Reading

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