

Children's social work at the crossroads

We could say that social work for children is at the crossroads. Perhaps it has always been thus. At least in England. Here there is a lot of despondency about the profession; indeed, there is much despondency about all of the professions. The challenges are well charted in the pages that follow. But there is also much innovation and development, and some commentators are highly optimistic about the future.

We felt, therefore, that it was time to catch our breath, take stock and bring together a broad spectrum of social workers, their managers, government policy makers and academics to report on their innovations, thoughts, research and other experiences. Most but not all of the contributors to this double special edition of the journal are from the UK, and in the main they write about the situation in England. But the opportunities and challenges about which they write are, we know, alive internationally, even if they play out in different ways in different countries.

The papers we have collected look at the future of social work for children from several perspectives. Several of the articles deal with the history and the political and socio-economic contexts in which social work takes place. We then have a series of reflections on public systems, for example how social work departments process so many more cases than a decade ago or the way that some system leaders have gone about the process of reform. Then there are articles on practice, new models of social work and new ways of training. The edition ends with reflections about the future direction of the profession.

Now all the articles are in, it is time for us to ponder some of the overarching issues. We are not going to labour this. The point of the edition is to urge the reader to think anew. But there are some things worth saying in preface.

We have two takes. The first, likely the perspective of greatest interest to most readers, looks at the challenges from within the profession of social work. The second, looks from the outside, considering how the situation reflects broader challenges and opportunities for all professions and for public systems more generally.

Looking out from the inside

In many respects, social work is different from other professions. For example, if we were to ask groups of doctors, nurses, vets, teachers, health visitors, lawyers – indeed almost any professional group – to meet to discuss their role, tasks and functions, they would likely be very clear about who they are. They would, of course, inevitably differ in how they thought about how best to undertake their role, but they probably would not struggle to define the role.

This does not seem to be the case with “social work”, in all its forms but especially in the case of child and family work. For many years, there have been – and continue to be – major debates and disagreements about what a social worker is or even should be. The attempts of Sir Peter Barclay's committee in 1982 at definition resulted in major fractures among its members that were unresolved. The result was three different reports, none of which was accepted by the government of the time. The attempt in 2007 by the General Social Care Council failed to convince the government of the time, which was lukewarm. The ministers failed to endorse the document publicly and the work has been superseded by the Social Work Task Force^[1].

Why is it so? There are many challenges, but six, all addressed by contributors to this edition, are particularly important.

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First, historically, social work for children and families has not developed in a simple linear fashion, from “problem identification” to “problem solution”. Most problems, for example family breakdown, are social and cannot be resolved by social work’s case by case approach. New problems are regularly sent the way of the profession and also resist resolution – witness online child sexual abuse, modern-day child trafficking and slavery and child radicalisation. Unfortunately, scandals and tragedies have often been the triggers for new policies and practices in child welfare and protection.

Second, there is considerable discussion about the way in which social work education should take place and this continues to generate angry and polarised viewpoints. Debates about social work education often centre upon the role of social work in the twenty-first century, not just in child welfare and protection services but also in services to adult service user groups, especially those experiencing mental ill-health. Whether social work ought to remain a generic profession or whether practitioners, supervisors and managers should specialise remains an open question.

Third, the “refocusing” of child and family social work in line with the recommendations of the Munro (2011) review is not proving to be easy. It appears that the current system, itself heavily dependent on procedure and bureaucracy, is like the proverbial oil-tanker, cumbersome and slow to manoeuvre.

Fourth, recent evaluations emerging from the UK Government’s investment in innovation show the difficulties of moving from small-scale pilot projects to full-scale implementation.

Fifth, it will probably not surprise many readers to learn that poor families are more likely than “middle class” families to come to the attention of child protection agencies. But the extent of the reach of the profession into the lives of families struggling with adversity is creating a collective gasp, more so since so much of this involvement of the state in family life is about surveillance and so little results in any help. Paul Bywaters and Tim Sparks contributing to this edition, find that nearly a quarter of children born in the UK in 2009 were referred to social care before their fifth birthday.

Finally, many academics, policy makers and practitioners believe that the “social” is disappearing from “social work”. Have our eyes and ears become excessively focused on the individual to the extent of ignoring familial, social and cultural influences that shape relationships? Equally, others propose that the inevitable binary polarisation that flows from “either-or” logics, for example, framing the professional task as either the “need to assess parental sensitivity” or to take “account of wider ecological factors” is unhelpful. Generally speaking, it is not either-or, it is both-and.

Looking in from the outside

What has been and is happening to social work also applies to other professions. In the pages that follow there are references to pressures, limited resources, scandal, unhealthy system dynamics, innovations, opportunities and challenges presented by science, and much more. Each one of these issues applies in some way in social work for adults, education, health and other helping professions. Broader forces influence the development of the professions, social work for children included.

A useful guide point is a recent paper by Donald Berwick (2016), a health scientist and policy maker at the Institute for Health Care Improvement in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His viewpoint paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* talks about health policy through three eras. In the first era, the professions were handed a lot of responsibility by the state for developing policy and integrating new knowledge, hence the emergence of powerful colleges of general practitioners, surgeons and other medical disciplines. By the 1960s, the weaknesses of this model were manifest in evidence about inefficiencies, health inequalities and significant variations in the quality of practice, so ushering in the second era, which in England was dominated by the new public management approach. Linkages between inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact were measured, and new markers and accountabilities of the professions to the state formed. The utility of this second era is all but exhausted. It has brought many benefits, but there have been many unintended and unwanted effects. So now Berwick looks forward to the moral era, characterised by less and smarter measurement, a focus on improving not proving, a willingness to listen to the consumer and the rejection of greed.

As Bullock and Parker’s paper in this edition shows, social work was a late developer as a profession, nonetheless it has been subject to the same forces that Berwick describes, and can

now avail itself to the same opportunities that will emerge as neo-liberalism and zealous new public management subsidies (it will not disappear).

The articles in this edition give some clues about what this means for social work. As a reader, you will form your own views. As editors, we are drawn to the following possibilities.

First, the new era is likely to encourage us to look beyond both the intervention and a narrow focus on human development outcomes. The great challenge of our times is the level of disconnection in society, with huge sections of our populace cut off economically, geographically and emotionally. A great opportunity of our times could be relationships, creating the social contexts that encourage mutual aid. Between the lines of several of the articles about practice innovation, the reader will find the beginnings of a conversation about the relational capabilities of social workers.

Second, several of the articles also discuss the need for shared concepts of risk and responsibility. Our societies have been understandably frightened by the volume of evidence that has emerged since the 1960s about maltreatment visited on children, mostly by their parents but also by other adults. In considering its response, society has conceptualised the problem in terms of “other people’s children” when any reasonable empirical observation shows that it should be conceptualised in terms of “our children”. Thinking about “our” children will produce a new framing of risks to and responsibilities for healthy child development.

Third, as several of the articles – Frost, Wright and Featherstone and colleagues in particular – attest, the new era will likely reformulate the relationship between civil society, in the broadest sense of that term, and public systems in addressing human suffering. In Berwick’s second era, the development of social work for children focussed mainly on local authority child protection teams when, in fact, the great majority of support for families in trouble is provided by civil society, and not just non-government organisations funded by the state. Chris Wright’s observation that most social work is not done by social workers is an important reminder for thinking about the future of the profession.

Fourth, a new era will lead to a different view about what we are trying to achieve for children. In the new public management era a series of formulations about the purpose of children’s services emerged, using words like “health”, “safety”, “happiness” and, mindful of the state as paymaster, “economically viable”. Looking forward, we are likely to be urged to be more nuanced and to pay far more attention to the things that matter to children themselves. Where this will lead, we cannot tell. Connection, as mentioned above, is one avenue. Agency, the ability to comprehend and make one’s own decisions is another. Virtues, helping us all to be more good than bad, even when we are faced with multiple adversities, is another.

Finally, as Berwick suggests, there will be a radical change in the way we think about and apply evidence, balancing out the obsession with intervention trials, cost-benefit analysis and lists of what works in the second era. This creates both challenges and opportunities for social work, which never fully embraced the wonders of intervention science and so may be well placed but underresourced to adapt to new uses of data and evidence that are now emerging.

The papers in this special edition reflect both the tensions operating within the profession and the forces exerted from outside. We hope they will stimulate more discussion. This is clearly an era of change, some might say upheaval. The papers that follow do not provide ready solutions but we encourage readers to embrace the ideas in a spirit of open-mindedness, enquiry and curiosity.

Note

1. www.communitycare.co.uk/2009/12/01/social-work-task-force-past-reviews-of-the-profession/

References

- Berwick, D. (2017), “Era 3 for medicine and child care”, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 315 No. 13, pp. 1329-30.
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