Social Work: Twenty-First Century Challenges of Identity, Equality and Resourcing

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21st Century Challenges

Challenges arise from:

- Professional and personal identities, professional voice
- Labour processes based on bureau-technocratic practice
- Economic inequalities, especially the economic crisis and austerity
- Neo-colonialism
- Indigenous world-views
- Locality-specific, culturally relevant practice
- Democratic deficits
- Controversies about values, especially equalities and diversities
- Service user involvement
- Resource scarcities
- Environmental issues
- Violent conflicts and (in)securities
- Curriculum and placement development
Additional 21st Century Challenges

The internationalisation of social problems

• Drugs
• Organised crime
• Human trafficking
• Human smuggling
• Modern-day slavery

Fear of deviance

• Mental illness
• Crime
• Terrorism

• Atypical family structures

Migration and immigration

Climate change and disasters (climate migrants)
Professional and Personal Identities

A contentious issue:

– Essentialised or fixed and unitary identities
– Postmodern or fluid and multiple identities

Social Workers tend to focus on fixed and unitary identities:

– Problematic in responding to diversities
– ‘Other’ or dehumanise those that are *different*
– Engage in oppressive practices (indirect and direct)
– Personal and professional identities can diverge and/or converge or overlap
Challenges to Essentialised Identities

• New social movements
  – Challenge unitary assumptions and exclusion from public life, social resources and decision-making
  – Demand recognition of equality, entitlements (human rights) and actual citizenship
  – Tactical alliances around identity and enforced unity within categories
  – Identity politics

• Radical professionals, scholars and researchers

• Voluntary sector workers

• Unaccountable elites and multinational corporations

• Assumed homogenous victims
Voices from Below

• Voices of many tones and hues
  – Challenge top-down concerns in status quo and exclusion
  – Produce a cacophony of sound
  – Value local/indigenous/non-expert knowledges
  – Appreciate harmonious differences

• Include new challenges, e.g., austerity, environmental crises, new health concerns

• Identity-based groups
  – Emphasize similarities
  – Emphasize differences
  – Look for similarities while acknowledging differences
  – Encourage collective action across social divisions
Emphasizing Diversities

Politicising Differences:
- Submerging or amplifying differences
- Can encourage compliance when accepted or resistance if not

Key aspects of identity-based differentiation impact upon social work practice (and theories):

- Class
- Gender
- ‘Race’, ethnicity and culture
- Disability
- Age
- Mental ill health
- Faith
- Citizenship
- Human rights and social justice
Organising for Change

• Changing practice in the field – service organisation and delivery, especially in social services, health and environment
• Changing laws and policies
• Bringing new theories and practice methods into the academy
• Changing social work curricula
• Changing assessment criteria
• Producing new teaching materials
Community Dimensions

Community identity/ies have to be created

– Can be ‘unitary’ and fixed
  • Would require the imposition of one version on diverse peoples and professions to achieve this
  • Americanisation and globalisation can help/impede this task

– Could develop as unique, multiple, fluid identities that share values and attitudes to the world in common
  • Would require agreed common political purposes and institutions
  • Maintain both uniqueness in identities and commonalities
  • Difficult to achieve without political will
  • Develop capacity and resilience in people and communities
  • Training is relevant
Challenges to a Pluralistic, Unified Identity

- Racism, e.g., Fortress Europe including ‘Little Englanders’; religious differences in Sri Lanka
- Failure to integrate diversity in existing populations
- Structural inequalities continue to impact on people in differentiated ways that make some more equal than others
- Austerity exacerbates concerns about scarcity
- Inadequacy of values in solving structural inequalities like poverty
- Redistribution of resources is necessary (requires values of equality, solidarity and reciprocity to be shared equitably)
- Requires a vision that transcends neo-liberalism
Neo-liberal Challenges

Neo-liberalism as the current form of globalisation is a key challenge:

• Capitalist social relations permeate all aspects of social, political, cultural and economic life
• Neo-liberalism undermines diversity
• Market-based solutions dominate
• Individuals become consumers/non-consumers
• Individualism destroys social solidarity
• Competition over scarce resources
• Lack of social cohesion produces rising crime rates, increased numbers facing multiple forms of exclusion including poverty
Activation State: Friend or Foe?

The financial crisis has yielded the activation state aimed at promoting self-reliance, especially through paid work.

- Adopts neo-liberalism as an economic strategy (limited state provisions), while politically maintaining a commitment to social solidary, e.g., ‘We are in it together’, Big Society
- Presupposes everyone can engage in the labour-market, when they cannot, so doomed to fail
- Excludes many of those wanting to work from official unemployment figures
- Devalues forms of unwaged work, e.g., women’s work at home, volunteering
- Writes off sections of the population who are without money or paid jobs, e.g., the ‘underclass’
- Ignores environmental crises and disasters
- Unprepared for new crises in health and social care provisions
Financial crisis destabilises the welfare state

- Many welfare models in Europe (social democratic, neo-liberal, corporate, Mediterranean, family)
- Financial crisis has cut state commitment to publicly-funded cradle to grave welfare
- Provision falls on individual and family
- Violates individual human rights to welfare (Articles 22-27 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR))
International Enforcement of UDHR is Poor

Provisions of UDHR are rarely enforced:
- State sovereignty over-rides state’s duty to care
- Resource shortages accepted as a barrier
- Only exception: Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar
- Divisions in Human Rights Council
- Limited social action around UDHR provisions
- Limited use of UDHR by social workers
Moving Forward with New Solutions

Those involved in identity-based politics have:

• Organised for social change, often through social movements

• Critiqued oppressive practice in social work, (especially women and minority ethnic activists)

• Developed alternative services that were developed and run by those concerned, e.g., feminist provisions around domestic violence, homes for black elders

• Brought about legislative changes

• Demanded mainstreaming of their interests, e.g., women, disabled people, black activists
What Can Social Workers Do?

- Can we all be ‘wealthy’ together and not destroy the planet?
- Research the impact of neo-liberalism on local communities and individuals, to highlight diverse forms of social exclusion
- Develop and agree new holistic professional vision
- Include environmental justice alongside social justice
- Endorse non-violent conflict resolution (e.g., Nairobi)
- Mobilise local communities and groups to reverse their disempowerment, develop new visions for how to live
- Lobby governments and international organisations to move away from profit-making at any cost towards caring for people and planet’s physical resources/environment (e.g., community-based energy)
- Advocacy and collective action
- Mobilise civil society organisations
- Promote egalitarian social relations
- Redistribute resources globally (e.g., new social movements)
- Multidisciplinary working (e.g., EwF)
- Raise professional profile (e.g., Global Agenda)
Thank you!

Questions?

Shaped by the past, creating the future