A Conceptual Framework for Taking Subversive Social Work into the Classroom

Melissa Laing & Christopher Maylea

School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University

Address for Correspondence:
melissa.laing@rmit.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Social work educators commonly describe aspects of subversive social work, or intentionally small-scale practice behaviours of caring resistance which fall outside the professional, procedural, or even legal boundaries of their roles. In contemporary neoliberal practice environments, subversion offers one way in which social workers can practise ethically and in line with their values. Despite this, subversive social work is not commonly or consistently theorised in social work literature or curricula. In this article we present a conceptual framework of subversive social work comprising three elements: caring resistance, ethical alignment and small-scale practices. We then explore implications of teaching subversive social work in a contemporary social work tertiary educational context.

We use this paper to argue that small-scale subversive actions may be the way that social workers can remain aligned with their critical approach and practise in a caring, ethically sound manner. To prepare social work students to practice in this way, we suggest that subversion should be explicitly theorised and taught, with a focus on framing subversive practice within social work ethics and values.

Keywords: *Subversion; Subversive Social Work; Deviant Social Work; Subversive Practice; Covert Practices; Social Work Education*

INTRODUCTION

Social work in the neoliberal era requires the mobilisation of dissent in creative, subversive ways (Carey & Foster, 2011). The precariousness of social work employment in this terrain has meant that more radical approaches, or overtly resistant social work behaviours have been, by necessity, driven underground to become covert – or completely non-existent. This paper considers the role of these underground, subversive behaviours in social work practice and explores the need to address them in social work curricula. Social work educators may include aspects of subversion in their teaching; however, subversion is rarely and inconsistently theorised in social work literature. Without due consideration, subversive practices risk becoming extinguished by "the neoliberal agenda" (Carrington, 2016, p. 230), or providing cover for genuinely nefarious behaviour by social workers. We argue that these practices need to be carefully considered and theorised in social work literature and classrooms, enabling their acknowledgement as a legitimate element of social work practice.

Critical social workers employed by organisations that are reluctant to "engage with critical and emancipatory frameworks" due to constraints placed by managerialism (Briskman et al., 2009, p. 3), "can easily feel like failed activists" (Macfarlane, 2016, p. 329). However, in these contexts, practising with care can be viewed as enacting resistance (Baines, 2018). The notion of subversion itself has problematic connotations of something unjust and originating in deceit (Portelli & Eizadirad, 2018); however, Turiel (2003) argues that resistance and subversive action are important elements in moral development.

We use this paper to argue that small-scale subversive actions may be the way that social workers can remain aligned with their critical approach and practice in a caring, ethically sound manner. After providing our definition of subversive social work, which we categorise as being practiced with either proactivity or reflexivity, in this article we present a conceptual framework of subversive social work comprising three elements: caring resistance, ethical alignment and small-scale practices. We then explore implications of teaching subversive social work in a contemporary social work tertiary educational context.

What is subversive social work?

This phenomenon of resistant, 'under the radar' practices is referred to with use of a variety of terms, such as: *subversion* (Briskman & Zion, 2014; Wallace & Pease, 2011, Maylea & Hirsch, 2017); *subversive actions* (Carrington, 2016; Mostowska, 2014); *positive deviant social work* (Carey & Foster, 2011), "isolated acts of banditry" (Jordan, 1990, p. 43) and *covert practices* (Fine & Teram, 2013; Greenslade, McAuliffe, & Chenoweth, 2015). Writing from a pedagogical perspective, Portelli and Eizadirad (2018) define subversion as action with the intention to:

> stand up to injustice and inequitable practices as a means of rupturing the status quo… and harnessing hope for change and opening up of new possibilities. At the core of subversion is an understanding that everyday decisions and actions have consequences far beyond the surface level and…impact others in numerous ways. (p. 54–55).

Our conceptual framework of subversive social work entails intentionally small-scale practice behaviours of caring resistance that social workers engage in to support vulnerable groups,

using practices that are aligned with their own ethics, but falling outside the professional, procedural, or even legal boundaries of their roles. As a deeply relational way of practising, subversive social work is informed by ethics of care (Tronto, 1993). Pease, Vreugdenhil and Stanford (2018, p. 5) write of the need for social workers to engage with what they frame as a critical ethics of care, or a "moral philosophy to guide practice and to be implemented in caring practices in day-to-day work".

Subversive social work can be proactive in nature, where social workers are on the lookout for opportunities to effect change for service users in their remit or practised with reflexivity in circumstances where it can be deemed necessary. It is the nature of subversiveness that it be hidden, a bit awkward, and something to be whispered about furtively. We argue that while subversion may be suppressed and silenced in neoliberal practice environments, the classroom provides an opportunity for examination and discussion of it. In this context, educators *hold the space* for the emerging social workers' to explore their development as conscious moral agents who are empowered to practise from a place of integrity, openheartedness and honesty. As Morley, MacFarlane and Ablett (2017, p. 33) write:

> … social work is a practice-based academic discipline with a strong commitment to critical analysis and practices of social change, social work academics may be among the best equipped to formulate meaningful responses for resistance.

The remainder of this paper presents a framework for subversive social work and discusses the implications of taking this into the classroom.

What is the framework of subversive social work?

Caring resistance

The first element of our conceptual framework of subversive social work is caring resistance. While social work theory encourages social workers to engage and connect emotionally with their work, this is often discouraged in social work practice (Williams & Briskman, 2015). We argue that in these practice settings, where objectivity, highly professional boundaries and clinical approaches are demanded, the simple expression of compassion, emotional connection and empathy can become subversive practice. This is characteristic of subversive social work, in that it often represents practices which previously would have been an accepted aspect of social work, which are now prohibited by neoliberal doctrine (Carey & Foster 2011). In this way, subversion is about retaining hope, for as Giroux writes "we must see hope as part of a broader politics that acknowledges those social, economic spiritual and cultural conditions in the present that make certain kinds of agency and democratic politics possible" (2004, p. 63).

Briskman and Zion (2014) describe ways that practitioners across a range of professions—including social work—reconcile a mismatch between adherence to professional procedural guidelines and values in the context of work with asylum seekers in detention on Christmas Island. One of these they categorised as subversion, and define it as:

> ...dispensing acts of kindness that may not be valued or even prohibited by the employing or subcontracting authority. Such acts invoke a politics of compassion and an ethic of care but do not necessarily align to concepts of justice. (Briskman & Zion, 2014, p. 279)

They explain that subversive practices "provide leads on how an ethic of care might be extended into a political practice of compassion" (Briskman & Zion, 2014, p. 282). Although mainstream social work practice requires professional boundaries as a way of protecting both practitioners and service users, Briskman and Zion legitimise the use of emotions. They write:

> … the linking of head and heart opens possibilities for changing practice. At the "heart" level we can invoke an ethic of care...to present care and caring as a distinct set of moral principles and as an alternative to the impersonal standards that dominate public life. (2014, p. 283)

For Briskman and Zion, the resolution of practice dilemmas afforded by subversive social work is motivated by care to transcend the restrictions of neoliberal managerialism.

Carey and Foster (2011) suggest that deviant social work could be defiance expressed attitudinally or emotionally, to reanimate workplaces otherwise devoid of care. A comment that exemplifies their positive deviant social work was "I ignore the rules sometimes because the 'system' is unfair" (p.588). This is caring resistance in action.

In her study conducted in Denmark and Ireland, Mostowska (2014) was interested in strategies employed by social workers to break or keep to the rules in their work with migrants who were experiencing homelessness. The unsanctioned strategies that she categorised as *subversive* were motivated by "simple human (but also professional) kindness, compassion and understanding that justify those 'subversive' actions" (Mostowska, 2014, p. 26). She articulates the tension experienced by social workers:

> The problem is defined on an individual level: how to help a particular person. They, as social workers, have the obligation to help. The problem is defined on a one-by-one basis, and remedies are also sought as exceptions rather than rules. However, these informal actions and the struggle with each individual case are also an indication of helplessness; only short-term solutions are possible in the context of the overall regulations. (2014, p. 26)

Caring resistance can be enacted by being present to the needs of service users in the moment, where opportunities for small-scale acts of subversion can present themselves to the attentive, proactive and reflexive social worker.

Ethical alignment

The second element of subversive social work is ethical alignment. Social workers are bound by both national and international ethical codes in their practice; however, limits imposed by neoliberalism increasingly makes practising in line with implicit or explicit codes of ethical practice difficult. The use of subversion to attain ethical alignment is described by Portelli and Eizadirad (2018):

> … from the vantage points of those who are subverting for moral reasons associated with causing the least amount of harm, acts of subversion are a means to reduce tension and have a peace of mind by aligning one's actions morally with one's values and beliefs. The goal and intent of subversion is to prevent and/ or reduce harm to self and others. (Portelli & Eizadirad 2018, p. 63)

This is not to suggest that subversive social work will always be guided or limited by official ethical codes. The Australian Association of Social Work *Code of Ethics* (AASW, 2010) requires social workers to record information accurately; however, many social workers will act subversively by selectively recording, or not recording, information which may have detrimental consequences for their clients. Subversive acts may be undertaken inconsistently with published ethical guidelines, but are always consistent with the social worker's perception of ethical social work behaviour. Greenslade et al. (2015), looking at the motivations of social workers who reported to have undertaken covert acts in their practice, found that participants acted in a way that entailed "resisting an ideology that they believe runs counter to social work's value base" (p. 428). They also identified that social workers defied the restrictions caused by an overly risk-averse practice environment
to reconcile ethical dilemmas.

Fine and Teram's (2013) study on overt and covert practices by social workers found that social workers practising covertly can positively "affect the lives of individuals who are being 'un-served' by these systems" (2013, p. 1324), and "may be way ahead of their organisations in imagining alternatives that are outside of the current organisational logics" (p. 1326). The authors defined covert social work practice as "choosing to act in the face of moral injustice" to relieve distress in themselves and their service users (p. 1313). This notion of subversive practices being *ahead* of organisational policy is also characteristic of subversion, as it suggests that subversion can provide progressive illustrations of how social work could be practised more ethically. Examples of ethical incongruence in practice settings are endemic. The AASW *Code of Ethics* (AASW, 2010) requires social workers to work in compliance with international human rights law, and yet social workers who work in involuntary mental health (Maylea, 2017) or in offshore asylum processing (Briskman & Zion, 2014; Maylea & Hirsch, 2017) are engaged in practices which are in breach of Australia's treaty obligations. These settings provide specific examples of ethics conflicting with policy, such as the social workers who were fired and referred to Australian Federal Police for reporting child abuse on Nauru (Maylea & Hirsch, 2017). In these settings, where the full force of the State is maintaining unethical practices and dissent is prohibited, large-scale revolt or even overt resistance seems impossible, leaving only small-scale acts of subversion as a possibility for social workers to practise with ethical congruence.

Small-scale acts

The third element of subversive social work is small-scale acts. What differentiates subversive social work from other more radical or community-based approaches is the small-scale, often "mundane, daily actions" (Portelli & Eizadirad, 2018, p. 59) that are focused on the immediacy of service users' needs as an opportunity for action. Examples from the literature include "turning a blind eye" and "case-by-case rule-bending" (Greenslade et al. 2015, p. 424).

Carey and Foster's (2011, p. 576) positive deviant social work provides "tangible support to vulnerable people", which they argue is missing from radical social work's "theoretical critique, rhetoric...[and] perpetual reflexivity", which sublimates the immediate needs of service users in favour of "grandiose ideals and ambitions" (Carey & Foster, 2011, p. 581). The authors credit the failure of radical social work to provide grounded, street-level practices, which has led to a further absence of hope in practitioners already discouraged by managerial restrictions.

Other acts of subversion are less small scale. Maylea and Hirsch (2017) point to accusations by the Australian government of an organised plot for social workers to marry Iranian asylum seekers detained on Manus Island to obtain spousal visas and subvert the refugee assessment process. They call on social work to learn from other groups, such as the National Immigrant Youth Alliance in the United States which has infiltrated immigration detention centres to document human rights abuses (Muñoz & Young, 2016). While these practices may fall outside of *traditional* social work practice, conventional social work practice has proven ineffective in responding meaningfully to the effects of neoliberalism in the lives of service users, and perhaps new methods are required.

Teaching subversive social work

Including subversive social work in tertiary social work curricula is not without difficulties. It is clear that a healthy society is one with some subversive elements, and yet, as social work educators much of our teaching practice focuses on "acquiring competency-based skills" (Macfarlane, 2014, p. 326), and maintaining compliance—as evidenced in marking and assessment protocols. It becomes difficult to teach and theorise subversion when we role model ethics as rule compliance in the flattened neoliberal university classroom, "by training people to accept the status quo rather than developing critical social consciousness" (Macfarlane, 2014, p. 328).

Teaching subversion also has other risks, including the potential for legitimising risky and unreflective practices that beget bad social work. Social workers are not immune from corrupting practices, and once liberated from notions of compliance with organisational policy and legal frameworks, social work graduates may feel entitled to practise in highly problematic ways. We concede that this risk is real, but it is not mitigated by ignoring the scope for subversion. Instead, it requires us to better theorise the contribution of subversion to the practice environment, and the reflective and reflexive processes that might mitigate this risk.

This is not an argument against engaging with subversive practices, but a call to use the classroom to create a safe space to have the courageous conversations (Macfarlane, 2014) required to workshop and map the consequences, enabling the cultivation of practitioners who are prepared for the terrain that subversive social work may be practised within.

Approaches to teaching subversion

As subversive social work itself has had such limited consideration in the literature, it is unsurprising that its application in the classroom has even less. We acknowledge that social work educators are already teaching subversive social work, by sharing examples

of practice in which they were able to successfully operate outside of the boundaries of their roles to achieve effective outcomes—including protection from harm—for clients. In the experience of the authors, this has ranged from explicitly criminal acts, such as fraudulently completing Centrelink paperwork, to supporting people to view their files in contravention of organisational policy. These may present useful, scenario-based learning opportunities, for social work students to reflect on their ethical standpoints, and reflexively engage with their decision-making processes.

Even these small-scale actions (or intentional *in*actions) need careful consideration, as social workers may tend to use their *own values*, rather than *social work values* to guide their practice. This becomes particularly problematic when we risk colluding with people and implicitly supporting behaviour we would not explicitly condone—turning a blind eye to stolen goods or evidence of problematic substance use in households with young children.

A final concern of inclusion of subversive social work in social work curricula is the risk to dilution of its potency that teaching it explicitly has. By virtue of identifying ways in which social workers can be subversive, we risk damaging the social work brand and therefore challenging our credibility in the neoliberal workplace. Beyond this, by shining a light on subversion we risk undermining the power it has to do good, the result being tokenistic and empty gestures—acts that are merely illusions of resistance and serve only to assuage our feelings of futility. As educators, we must be mindful that the power of subversion is derived from its underground nature, meaning its use requires it remains largely uncovered when manifested in the field. This does not mean that we should not give social work students explicit permission to practise subversively; rather, that we should be aware of where the responsibility for consequences of such actions rests, our duty to social work graduates, and to those with whom they will work in their future careers.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the relevance of subversion requires further investigation and reflection, as there are untapped opportunities worthy of exploration. We encourage other social work academics to further this debate and maximise the potential of subversive social work, and to find ways to use and adapt our conceptual framework into their teaching practice. Without critically theorising and engaging with subversion, we risk failing to prepare students for the potential pitfalls of working outside formal policy, or worse: failing to equip them with skills and approaches which they require to be successful social workers.

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