3. Working with diversity in a neoliberal environment

Mr Lyndon Gordon and Dr Carole Zuffery

Mr Lyndon Gordon, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

Dr Carole Zufferey, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

ABSTRACT:

Social work is a profession dedicated to working with diverse population groups from a social justice perspective. This research examined the influence of neoliberalism on social work in South Australia and how it impacted on the practice of South Australian social workers with service users. Whilst the structural impacts of neoliberalism on social work in Australia are well documented, the perspectives of social workers about the impact of neoliberalism on their social work practice have received little critical attention. In this qualitative, exploratory study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven South Australian social workers employed in government and non-government organisations. A significant finding of this research was that economic imperatives increased pressures on social work practitioners and limited their ability to take into account the complexities of the material problems experienced by disadvantaged families and community groups. This pressure impacted on their capacity to work in culturally competent ways with diverse population groups. The study raises awareness of the political contexts in which social workers are employed and the importance of social workers being more engaged in challenging neoliberal organisational policies.

INTRODUCTION

Western societies like Australia have undergone major economic and social change, from the Keynesian regulation of the post war era to neoliberalism, which involves the restructure of the welfare state (Chomsky 2010). Neoliberalism is a political ideology which extends market relations into the social sphere. Neoliberalism has political impact on social work through social policy changes, such as the privatisation and contracting out of services, mutual obligation and sanctioning policies such as welfare to work policies (Savelsberg 2011 p. 153), enacted through the institution of the welfare state (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2010, pp. 101-106; Jamrozik 2009). The practical outcomes of these changes mean that social services often are distributed on the basis of individual need or 'targeted service delivery' (Jamrozik 2009), which is operationalised by social workers. Government funding shapes organisational policies and how social work activity is exercised, through for example, managerial discourses that use the language of key performance indicators (KPIs), contracts, evidence based practice and 'core business' (Ferguson 2008; Garrett 2010; Harris 2003). Therefore, neoliberalism is influencing social work towards individualist approaches that are 'evidenced to be effective', which can impact on social workers' commitment to social action and social justice (Houston 2001; Clark 2006).

Internationally and nationally, social work professional bodies promote universal notions of social justice and human rights as key values and ethics to guide the profession, which advocates for social workers to develop self- reflexivity and culturally competent social work practice (AASW, 2010). The quest for culturally competent social work practice has existed in some form or another throughout social work's history and working with diverse populations is a fundamental knowledge base underpinning social work (Abrams and Moio 2009; Petrovich and Lowe 2005). Despite literature detailing that euro-centric and white knowledge bases have dominated understandings of social work (Dominelli 2008; Payne 2005), the mission for social workers to work in ways that are inclusive of all peoples across the world is a constant theme of critical, feminist and postmodern social work (Payne 2005). People from culturally diverse backgrounds often experience difficulties in accessing basic resources in society due to a number of factors, including poverty, cultural and linguistic barriers and institutional racism (Walter, Taylor and Habibis 2011). The rise of postmodern philosophy and Indigenous epistemologies (Dumbril and Green 2008; Gair, Miles and Thomson 2005), has led to the uncovering of hidden knowledges and understandings about the world, which has led to rich academic discourses. Research and literature indicates that people from culturally diverse backgrounds are more likely to experience systemic injustice and inequality, usually from deeply ingrained Western knowledges and racism that can underpin Australian institutions and social work practice (Walter, Taylor and Habibis 2011). However, despite social work's theoretical progression towards inclusivity, the ability to actually exercise such inclusive theories remains elusive for many social work practitioners (Williams 2006). There are many reasons for this inaction. However, one connection that has not been thoroughly explored within the literature is how the ability of social workers to work in inclusive ways has been affected by neoliberalism (Ferguson 2008).

An exploration of the literature highlights that there is a significant lack of research explicitly exploring the impacts that neoliberalism has had on the cultural competency of human service organisations, which shapes the practice of social workers. Whilst the macro

functioning of organisations is highlighted as presenting tensions for the social worker to exercise culturally competent practice, these observations tend to be associated with the organisational functioning and the 'culture' of the organisation (Hughes and Wearing 2007). A critical analysis of the economic and social environments that contribute to such a 'culture' developing is pertinent, enabling social workers to question the organisations within which they work. Without a critical analysis of the social, economic and political contexts of culturally competent practice, we risk individualising cultural competency to micro interactions between social worker and service user (Abram and Moio 2009). The individualist approach can attribute the inefficacy of a social worker's ability to engage with diverse populations as something pathological within the social worker or pathology in the individual service user (Abram and Moio 2009; Harris, 2004).

Whilst there is a long history of individual-structural debates in social work, literature about neoliberalism and social work in Britain and America argues that neoliberalism negatively impacts on social work practice. This is because neoliberalism promotes individualist discourses that blame service users (and social workers), and managerialist discourses that bureaucratise social work (Ferguson 2004; Ferguson 2007; Ferguson 2008; Ferguson and Lavalette 1999; Ferguson and Lavalette 2006; Ferguson, Lavalette and Whitmore 2005; Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Lavalette 2011). Arguing that social work is being influenced by neoliberal processes and increasingly politically silenced when challenging systemic oppression and inequalities created by social and economic policies (Ferguson 2008). Little research has specifically explored Australian social workers' experiences of such neoliberal restructuring (Wallace and Pease 2011), which was the motivation behind this research.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the findings of a small, qualitative, exploratory pilot study are reported. The study focuses on the impact of neoliberalism on the practices of social workers employed in government and non-government services in Adelaide, South Australia. The main aims of the study were: i) to examine the impact of neoliberalism on social work practice with service users and ii) to document social workers' understandings of the causes of social issues and inequalities (McDonald 2005, p. 276). In particular, the theories and approaches that South Australian social workers used were explored, to highlight if and how critical and structural social work approaches were being used with service users (Mullaly 2007). The study also explored ways that neoliberalism has influenced South Australian human service organisations' approaches to social issues. The sub-questions of this project were:

- What discourses were available to social workers within their organisations to understand the nature of social work and the ontology of social problems?

- How were service users 'problematised' by the discourses used by the social worker, and did this problematisation change, depending on the contexts in which the answer was operationalised?

- How, and in what contexts, were radical/ structural discourses used by the social workers?

This research was approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. Seven social workers employed in government and non-government organisations were interviewed about various aspects of their practice, including their perceptions of why service users accessed services, what approach they as social workers used and the organisational contexts of their work. The social workers were recruited for the semi-structured, face to face interviews by contacting large non-government organisations and government services in Adelaide who employed social workers (Neuman, 2006). An email then was circulated by the researcher within these organisations and social workers responded directly to the researcher, expressing an interest in being interviewed. A time and venue was negotiated for interviews to occur, the study was explained to potential participants, any questions were answered and a consent was obtained. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. It must be acknowledged that these interviews are temporally and spatially located, representing participants' perspectives at one moment in time. The areas of practice that social workers were employed in were diverse, including working with children and families, employment services, mental health, child protection, disability, social policy and drug and alcohol services. The interview criteria included that social workers were currently practitioners and eligible for membership with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2010). The AASW Code of Ethics advocates that the role of social workers is to challenge social inequalities and promote social justice in Australian society (AASW 2010).

For the analysis of interviews, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) was used to explore the language used by the social workers, and to identify how and in what contexts neoliberalism had an impact on the activities of social workers. This analysis examined the language used by the social workers to describe their practice with service users and to see if the language of neoliberalism had influenced social workers' language and practice (Fairclough 2003). Critical discourse analysis is a well-known and evidenced method of analysing what and how discourses are used within language to support or undermine power relations (Fairclough 2003; Van Dijk, 1993). During the analysis process, the authors explored how neoliberalism has shaped social work responses to services users within their employing organisations, which is contrasted to social workers' personal and professional values. An unexpected finding was how social workers experienced difficulty practicing in culturally competent ways with diverse populations within a neoliberal environment.

FINDINGS

The key themes emerging from these findings were: i) that neoliberalism did impact on social work practice; ii)that responding to diversity in a neoliberal environment is a major challenge; and iii) conceptualisations of culture and class are complex. These themes will be discussed in turn below.

The impact of neoliberalism on social work practice

The major findings of the research demonstrated that neoliberal language did impact on the day to day practice with service users, which related to the restrictiveness of KPIs, and funding contracts in non-government organisations and to individualist theories used

within both government and non-government organisations. Whilst social workers had personal and professional commitments to activism and macro change, this was less evident when discussing their everyday practice with service users. For example, one government worker said that social work is about helping service users to 'fit in' with society:

> It's essentially trying to help families to fit in society that we have because there is a whole lot of social difficulties in being a [service user] and it's trying to, not normalize in any way because that's rather trite and nobody can really tell you what normal is, but in the general scheme of things, given the way that society works, it's helping [service users] to actually fit, whichever way they want to, but nonetheless fit.
> (Richard - Government sector social worker).

As indicated in the above quote, when talking about their work in their employing organisation, an individualist discourse was used to describe what and how the social worker practiced, what services were delivered by the organisation and how organisations understood the causality of social problems.

When asked about the work conducted within their organisations, all of the social workers stated they were not engaged in interventions that challenged social policy. All of the social workers argued that social work was politically silent when it came to injustices committed by the state, such as defunding important anti-poverty initiatives, as noted by the non-government worker below:

> As far as I am aware, there's no sort of collective action to address [social injustice]…For example, the loss of the Anti-Poverty teams kind of went by without notice and I found that quite shocking at the time. I mean this was critical. If we're not addressing poverty, then forget it. I mean that has to be a key issue. It's something as social workers we should be jumping up and down about and really making a big fuss about, that didn't seem to happen.
> (Mary – NGO Social Worker).

The social workers in this study argued that there was a discursive silence about the use of theories that problematise the social structures and institutions of an unequal society.

This contradiction between social work values related to advocating for social justice and the requirement for public servants not to speak up was mentioned by a government social worker, who stated that this created tensions for her policy practice:

> Another barrier might be that social workers feel that they have been silenced by the organisation in which they work. For example, when you're a social worker that works in government, the question is occasionally asked, that when you're a manager within a government department, your political masters can ask you to change something at the drop of a hat and they do so. I'm a public servant so, when my political masters change, there's also the danger of enacting policies that I don't agree with. So, there becomes this point of conflict, this internal conflict between me as a social worker and the policy.
> (Kirsty – Government Social Worker).

Therefore, the constraints of neoliberal funding policies affected the macro functioning of organisations and introduced pressures for social workers in the micro interactions of everyday social work practices.

However, when references to organisational contexts were removed, for example, when talking about their reasons for becoming a social worker, five out of the seven social workers came into the profession in order to change society, so that it was fairer and more 'just' to those who experience oppression. For example, one government social worker discussed her personal connection to social work as a 'family narrative' based in discourses of 'social justice':

> One of my earliest memories was walking around the streets with my father assisting people who were homeless. So my whole family has come from a base where they were interested in issues of social justice. That was a very strong narrative in my family, and I suppose that was what led me into social work in 1986… so my love for it really came from doing something around the social justice aspects. (Kirsty – Government social worker).

> The above quote highlights how the underpinning values for this social worker may be placed under increasing pressure in a neoliberal environment. However, these social justice values could be revisited as a source of resistance, to challenge neoliberal policies, by promoting an alternative social justice perspective to the dominant language of neoliberalism (Zufferey, 2008).

Responses to diversity in a neoliberal environment

An emerging theme of this study was that responding to diversity was one of the main challenges that social workers faced in their practice within a neoliberal environment. The key issue that social workers raised about working with diversity in a neoliberal environment was the difficulties of organisations in delivering culturally competent services, within a political environment that placed pressures on front-line staff to meet rigid contractual agreements with funding bodies. Social workers experienced difficulty practicing in culturally competent ways with diverse populations, within 'rationalised' resources. For example, a social worker in a non-government organisation (NGO) stated that they were not funded to respond to diversity:

> 'Another challenge is trying to ensure that our services are delivered in ways that are culturally appropriate and that we can reach out to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. It's a resources issue. We do try to keep on top of it to ensure that our services are as culturally accessible as possible in terms of access to interpreters, translation facilities and translated brochures, but that's a constant challenge. I think we're trying to improve on our cultural competency but we're not specifically funded for that. So again, it's down to resources. So I would suspect that it would be the greatest challenge – in both time and financially" (Zoe-NGO Social Worker).

Whilst there are a number of factors that shape perceptions of what does and does not entail 'culturally competent practice', contractual agreements and the pressures of bidding for contracts within a competitive environment can limit access to resources that non-government workers are provided with. According to this social worker, this affects the

efficacy of social work organisations to work in culturally competent ways. That is, time and resource poor organisations that are funded for specific services, with performance indicators not relevant to working with culturally diverse communities, have limited access to resources that can assist them to creatively respond to the complex needs of diverse population groups.

As well, the imposition of narrow 'performance indicators' by funding bodies was conceptualised as a hindrance to empowering ways of working with service users. For example, an NGO worker interviewed explained that the indicators used to determine the "effectiveness" of the service measured secondary priorities, such as employment:

> So the service is trying to get people back into employment. In a family where one or more persons have experienced long term unemployment the goal is that we must address this issue. It's very tricky, because often it's not the presenting issue – there's so many other factors operating there. Instability in their housing, chronic poverty that has impacted on them that actually suggests that getting a job is not the first step, there's other issues there. Accumulative stresses has done damage to that person, it's affected them and their families. So that goal [getting employment] is imposed. So it's difficult to actually promote or highlight these issues. I don't think it's part of any of our funding agreements to actually start talking about these issues, to talk about unemployment, talk about poverty, to look at the bigger issues that are impacting on families. (Mary – NGO Social Worker).

> Whilst responding to 'employment' can act as proxy for discussing other areas of disadvantage such as unemployment, poverty and housing, this non-government service was 'outcome-based funded' on the basis that workers assist service users to access employment. This social worker explained that the families she was working with were experiencing high levels of stress, disadvantage, poverty and inequality in their lives. The funding parameters that her service was working within did not allow for her service to start addressing the major issues that these families were experiencing because 'the services that we deliver are quite specific in their [employment] outcomes' (Mary – NGO Social Worker).

However, diverse social justice issues of disadvantage particularly affect individuals, families and communities from culturally diverse backgrounds and an organisation has to commit time, resources and to promote an organisational culture that supports cultural competence and meaningful change for disadvantaged groups (Harrison and Turner, 2011). The social workers in this study felt that culturally competent practice is hindered within a service that is required to meet performance indicators that have little or no relevance to the material problems experienced by families.

Despite this, social workers were personally and professionally committed to engaging in practices that challenged b roader issues such as racism. As a government social worker said, he wanted to broaden his understanding of social work, to challenging oppression in different cultural contexts:

> Part of my also working overseas meant that I was also engaged in with lots of different cultures and different cultural backgrounds. It was quite evident that I had a significant interest in the, well essentially the social element of the different cultures and the different

peoples… Essentially it came down to a lot of issues around poverty, mental health, gender issues, racism and all the nasty things that go along with that. All parts and parcel with the people that I worked with in outback Australia. (Richard – Government social worker)

However, despite the interest expressed by social workers in being culturally competent, when discussing their organisational practices and policies, there was a noticeable lack of theories used by the social workers that engaged in the macro levels of society, for example, which challenged systemic injustices such as racism. This raises important questions about how social workers can practice in culturally competent ways within neoliberal policies that promote individualist approaches. The theories and approaches used by the social workers interviewed were related to case-management, the strengths perspective and client centred approaches, which were individualist because they were designed to work primarily with the individual service user and their immediate family. Theories that placed causality of social problems within the systemic functioning of the structures and inequalities generated by a neoliberal capitalist social order were noticeable by their absence (Chomsky 2010; Harvey 2006; Ferguson and Woodward 2009). This raises concerns about the cultural competency of social workers whose organisational frameworks restricted macro interventions for systemic social problems.

Furthermore, in a neoliberal environment and in contemporary 'culture of poverty' discourses, 'culture' and 'diversity' can become signifiers that pathologise service users who are experiencing oppression (Fairclough, 2003). Organisations and social workers risk viewing 'culture' through a 'raced based' perspective that pathologises culturally and linguistically diverse groups who may experience structural oppression. 'Culturally competent' practice can become reduced to a psychological phenomenon of the social worker and their ability to be self-reflective, which makes invisible the structural inequalities experienced in the lives of service users (Harrison and Turner, 2011). In particular, radical social work activity aimed at challenging systemic injustices was invisible in all of the interviews, as interventions were geared towards working with individuals or families, and helping them to cope or 'fit in' better with their social environments. Nonetheless, social workers' definitions of 'culture' were broader than 'race' and 'ethnicity' and included class-based analyses.

Conceptualisations of culture and class

Another key theme of this study was related to social workers' conceptualisation of the term 'culture'. Four out of the seven social workers viewed 'culture' not as 'racial difference' but as a complex notion that also included experiences of class based oppression and exploitation. Social workers' understandings of culture included discourses of structural disadvantage and injustice. For example, when asked about the skills needed by social workers, one social worker highlighted the need to view service users within the structural contexts of Australian society and how a person's experiences in life are affected by such structures:

I think a value base that comes from the perspective that there by the grace of god, it could be any of us, and you know, life can throw you into certain social situations, where anybody could fall foul of structures and processes that support persons who actually have got resources and opportunities, to maintain themselves in a way that they can manage themselves without

needing to access, of coming to the attention of social work authorities, or social work agencies. So I think skills that recognise core structural factors that impact on persons. So I think you have to have an understanding that we're [the social worker] no different from anybody else, no different from anybody we're working with.... you must come from that correct value base. I think that also the ability to listen really carefully and to take on board what's been said to you, but (also) an ability to look at the social and structural contexts, and how that person is experiencing disadvantages (Mary - NGO Social Work).

This quote highlights that when understandings of culture are separated from the structures of society that oppress and marginalise people from diverse groups, social workers could unintentionally 'blame' service users for the social injustices that they experience. Thus, to consider class and structural disadvantage as a defining feature of diverse service users' lives would mean acknowledging that the social functioning of Australian society is based upon inequality between the rich and the poor, the working and upper classes. The evidence of the class divide is overwhelming, when 20% of the Australian population holds about 60% of the wealth (ABS 2007). When working with diversity, it is pertinent for social workers to take into account all forms of structural oppression.

CONCLUSION

The constraints social workers experience when practicing within a neoliberal environment and the neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state, places pressures on organisations and frontline staff to deliver services within prescribed performance targets and funding budgets. When examining the discourses that were available to social workers within their organisations to understand the nature of social work and the ontology of social problems, these discourses and approaches primarily focused on individualist approaches to social problems. Within a neoliberal organisational context, social problems can therefore become individualised and pathologised, focusing on addressing particular service user's behaviour, whilst structural disadvantage and inequality are often ignored. This differed to the social workers' personal and professional commitment to social work values that promote social justice and structural approaches to working with service users, creating some tensions and possibilities for resistance to the dominant neoliberal environment of their practice. Social work's stated commitments to activism and social justice as well as 'cultural competency' (AASW, 2010; Harrison and Turner, 2011) provide a platform for the continuing analysis of the influence of neoliberalism on social work practice and the implications for developing culturally competent social work practice.

However, there are limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the study did not initially aim to examine culturally competent practice but this theme did emerge as a significant one. Second, it is likely that the practitioners who volunteered to become involved in the study have a particular interest in the topic of social work and neoliberalism, which means that their views are not necessarily representative of the broader population of social workers. Third, this is an exploratory study with a limited sample size and therefore it is not possible to generalise the findings. This study aimed to examine the influence of neoliberalism on social work from practitioner perspectives, opening new grounds for exploring social work in a neoliberal context and the impact of organisational barriers in responding to diversity.

The implications of this study for social work practitioners relate to findings ways to resist the neoliberal impact on social work practice within their employing organisations. Social work educators also could examine social work curriculum, to explore if and how structural and activist approaches are being taught across social work programs. South Australian social workers could benefit from a collective radical or anti-neoliberal contextual space (such as the Radical Social Work Group in the US or the Social Work Action Network in the UK), in which structural discourses that interrogate and challenge the neoliberal restructuring of social work can be debated and operationalised. This is to ensure that the neoliberal restructuring of social work and the re-contextualisation of organisational discourses that exclude and ignore structural inequalities does not become 'common sense' social work in South Australia (Wallace and Pease 2011). Further research would be required to explore how such a 'radical' space can be created, where social injustices can be resisted and activism operationalised, either within or outside the institutional structures of South Australian social work.

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