

Social work professionalism and the politics of knowledge generation, dissemination and implementation: exploring the current contours

Elizabeth Harlow

University of Chester

The international community of social workers has recently been attempting to construct a definition of its practice that is acceptable across a range of regional contexts. In consequence, the topic of social work professionalism may be particularly apposite.

The topic of professionalism draws into focus the question of foundational knowledge. Furthermore, the European economic context of neoliberal austerity may demand the increased justification of social work in the form of 'evidence' of its efficacy.

Social work debates on knowledge and 'evidence' (including its generation and dissemination) have been extensive and developmental (see for example: Glasby and Beresford 2005; Shaw and Lunt 2012; Wilkinson et al. 2012). But despite these developments controversy continues: from the scientific community who reject the value of service user led research (Beresford 2007) or radical dissenters who reject the idea that social work depends upon a specialist body of knowledge (Jordan and Drake 2010). Jordan and Drake (2010) argue for a return of power and responsibility for problem resolution and growth to local groups and communities.

Arguing that social workers perform roles once undertaken by family and community they ask: Can what appeared to be a spontaneous evolution of societies towards larger-scale organisation – the professionalisation of services and the power of bureaucrats and managers – be turned around, to allow greater participation by and accountability to citizens? (Jordan and Drake 2010: 107).

In many countries social work has been consolidated as a profession by means of requirements for graduate education and registration to practice. However, the Frontline initiative in England offers a shortened educational pathway that relies on the increased influence of practice agencies. In consequence, this initiative might be seen as indicating scepticism towards the academic discipline and evidence informed teaching associated with University led education. At addition, Universities that are aiming to compete globally for their share of business, require social work academics to demonstrate adequately the significance, reach and impact of their research activity. In terms of social and organizational politics, what are the implications of these recent developments and in particular the systems of performance management (such as the Research Effectiveness Framework in England) for the profession of social work?

Finally, what might be the consequences for social work knowledge and accountability (if any) of global information and communication technologies and developments such as open access publishing? The proposed workshop aims to identify and explore the competing political influences on the knowledge foundations of social work and their implications for its status as a 'profession'.