PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CHALLENGING TIMES: DEVELOPING CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL WORK

PROFESSOR ANNA GUPTA
Structure of Presentation

- Social justice and social work – some thoughts
- Influence of structural theories on social work in the UK
- Neoliberalism and social work
- Child protection in England – the paradox of poverty
- The contribution of Nancy Fraser
- The Poverty- aware Paradigm
- Embracing ambiguity – transformative and affirmative change
The **social justice** value base of social work is often seen as a defining feature of the profession and is an integral part of the *Global Definition for Social Work* (IFSW, 2014):

*Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.*

However social justice is a complex and contested term that can represent social change and a progressive perspective; but can also be used by those with conservative viewpoints in ways that are contradictory to the value base of social work.
Equality is not always Justice

This is EQUALITY  This is JUSTICE
Social Justice and Social Work

Everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities to live a life with dignity. However we live in societies and a world deeply riven with structural inequalities.

Social work within a social justice framework locates individual experiences within wider social structures, seeks to challenge power dynamics that perpetuate oppression, domination and exploitation, and further societies that are more equal, humane and peaceful.
The Individual vs The Social

Social work has always been defined by its focus on individuals within their social contexts. However the relationship between an individual and society, and whether personal problems should be understood as a consequence of individual factors, social problems or a combination of the two has been and continues to be highly contested (Pease, 2013).
The influence of structural theories on social work in the UK

1970’s Radical Social Work

1980’s Feminist, anti-racist social work

1990’s Anti-discriminatory practice

2000’s + Anti-oppressive practice Critical Social Work?
Problematising AOP in the UK

- The conceptualisation of power as ‘monolithic, unidirectional and oppressive’ can lead to services users being seen as passive victims of social oppression – resistance and agency under recognised.

- A commitment to AOP can make it difficult to negotiate the ‘grey areas’ of social work practices and recognise local contextual power relations – ‘care & control’ – e.g. child protection work.

- Under-theorizing of influence of political ideology/discourse and influence of Government’s neoliberal economic and morally repressive policies

- Progressive ideas from AOP are being lost as social work, and particularly child protection social work, becomes reconstructed within the hegemonic neoliberal authoritarian project.
Critical Social Work

‘...primarily concerned with practicising in ways which further a society without domination, exploitation and oppression. It will focus both on how structures dominate, but also on how people construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations, recognising that there may be multiple and diverse constructions of ostensibly similar situations. Such an understanding of social relations can be used to disrupt dominant understandings and structures, and as a basis for changing these so that they are more inclusive of different interest groups’. (Fook, 2016)
Neoliberalism and Social Work in the UK

Loic Wacquant argues that neo-liberalism has to be analysed as a political project rather than the application of economic theory, in order to understand the ideological and culture shift that has taken place.

Wacquant’s work demonstrates that far from retreating under neoliberalism the state has actually been reconstructed and re-engineered. As the state withdraws from social welfare provision and systems become increasingly punitive welfare and penal policies have a symbolic role in the demonising of people on poverty.

Individualism is one of if not the key cultural theme of neoliberal ideology. If everything is explained in such terms then offending—like poverty and any number of other social problems—is matter of individual agency.

According to Wacquant, the agencies of the ‘Left hand’ of the State, such as social work, have been colonised by ideas, techniques and rationale of the more punitive and authoritarian ‘Right hand’ of the State.

Very relevant to social work especially within the child protection system in England..................
Challenging times: Poverty and Inequality in neoliberal ‘Austerity’ Britain
The current policy context for CP in England

Local authority budgets cut and family support services and youth services disappearing

High thresholds and large caseloads for social workers – Highly risk averse context

Increasing numbers of children on CP plans and continuing rise in care proceedings (14% increase in 2016/2017 from 2015/2016) and children in out of home care (we have non-consensual adoption promoted as a policy by government)

Social determinants and the social gradient

England Sample LAC rates per 10,000 children by Deprivation Decile
Although we know most of children on CP plans/ in care are from poor backgrounds - poverty is largely invisible in practice and policy

Individualised risk discourses – little attention to social determinants of harm or social contexts of families’ lives

Punitive culture of parental blame & child rescue

‘We are leaving them to endure a life of soiled nappies and scummy baths, chaos and hunger, hopelessness and despair. These children need to be rescued, just as much as the victims of any other natural disaster’. Secretary of State for Education (2013)
Poverty and Parenting – Some assumptions (from CWIP & other research with social workers)

Poor people are responsible for their poverty (feckless, welfare scroungers) – so it must be the individual’s fault

The vast majority of parents living in poverty do not neglect or abuse their children – so it must be the individual’s fault

If you focus on poverty you excuse harmful behaviour and leave children unprotected.

**Poverty is not the ‘core business’ for child protection workers – parenting interventions are**

If poverty is caused by structural factors – what can we as social workers/other professionals do about it?
WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT POVERTY
Nancy Fraser’s *Three Dimensional Theory of Social Justice – Parity of Participation*

- **Redistribution and maldistribution** – economic (in)justice
- **Recognition and misrecognition** – identity/status (in)justice
- **Representation and misrepresentation** – political/legal (in)justice
Social (in)justice in Global World the work of Nancy Fraser

Fraser (2008) views social justice as requiring social arrangements which make it possible for all to participate on an equal footing in social life - she calls this ‘parity of participation’.

All three dimensions are mutually entwined and reciprocally influence and reinforce each other but none are reducible to the other.

Efforts to work towards social justice must thus involve all three of these dimensions – all three conditions are necessary for participatory parity and none alone is sufficient.

Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction.
Frank

Frank is from Liberia. He was brought to the UK as a trafficked child (now he is 24 years old) - has no immigration status in the UK

He has two children (aged 2 & 4) with Sarah (who is British). The children have been taken into foster care because of Sarah’s depression and drinking

Frank was in immigration detention when children were removed – had been sentenced to identity fraud offences related to lack of status.

In the court proceedings the local authority say they are not going to assess Frank as a possible carer for the children, although he has been released from detention but has no recourse to public funds

(Gupta & Featherstone, 2016)

*Did the ‘culture of disbelief’ about irregular migrants and anti-immigration public discourse impact on professionals’ responses?*

*Did the fact that he has no housing or ‘no recourse to public funds’ impact on the decision-making?*

*How were his convictions viewed? Were they seen for what they were – survival offences?*

*Frank was viewed with suspicion, as a ‘non person’ with no rights - due to his immigration status, but may have been compounded by his race and gender.*

*What about his children’s rights under Article 8 of the ECHR (right to family life)?*
Developing a ‘poverty aware lens’

Lister (2013) identifies ‘othering processes’ and describes poverty as:

‘not only being about material disadvantage and economic insecurity but also a ‘shameful social relation, corrosive of human dignity and flourishing, which is experienced in interactions with the wider society and in the way people in poverty are talked about and treated by politicians, officials, professionals, the media, and sometimes academics’.

Poverty is a Human Rights issue
Poverty Aware Paradigm in social work (Krumer-Nevo, 2016)

The PAP requires attention to understandings of:
- the nature of poverty (ontological notions),
- the ways this knowledge is acquired (epistemological notions),
- ethics (axiological notions),

which together shape the way in which practice is conducted, while social work practice itself influences and shapes these components as well.
**POVERTY – THREE PARADIGMS** Krumer Nevo (2016)

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<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong> – what is nature of poverty?</td>
<td>Individual characteristics of poor people</td>
<td>Unequal social structures &amp; institutions</td>
<td>Violation of human rights – agents who resist lack of economic &amp; symbolic capital</td>
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<td><strong>Epistemology</strong> – what forms of knowledge do we need?</td>
<td>Positivist – prof. knowledge objective truth</td>
<td>Largely positivist – prof. knowledge objective truth</td>
<td>Critical-constructivist – r’ships with SU &amp; their knowledge</td>
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<td><strong>Axiology</strong> – what are ethical stances?</td>
<td>Serious deviation from social norms</td>
<td>Injustice – Ethics of redistribution</td>
<td>Ethics of solidarity minimise ‘othering’ – ‘we’</td>
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<td><strong>Practice</strong></td>
<td>Surveillance, re-education</td>
<td>Community empowerment, social policies</td>
<td>+ R’ship, standing by SU, micro-aggressions, mediation &amp; advocacy</td>
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THE POVERTY AWARE PARADIGM

This approach builds upon and extends the structural analysis of poverty, viewing poverty:
- not only as a lack of material and social capital (e.g. adequate housing, education and health),
- but also as a lack of symbolic capital, manifested in stigmatisation, discrimination, ‘Othering’, lack of voice and ignoring the knowledge of poor people.

PAP sees poverty as a violation of human rights, derived from injustice and unequal socio-economic structures manifested both in the limited opportunities open to poor people for education, employment, health, housing and so on and in the arena of interpersonal relations, through limited opportunities for honour and respect.

People in poverty are perceived in this perspective as resisting poverty in daily decisions, in explicit or implicit ways.
Some key elements of PAP

- Critical reflection – challenging own and other’s assumptions/behaviours (micro-aggressions)
- Relationships - ‘Standing alongside’ families
  - The process enabled the women’s material and emotional needs to be met: ‘because alongside the practical implications of the focus on needs, being visible, having someone to stand by you, and close relationships are, of themselves, emotional needs’ (Saar-Heiman et al, 2017: 1061).
- Working in the real-life contexts of families’ homes and neighbourhoods.
- Active mediation and advocacy – rights based (recognising symbolic capital of professionals)
- Financial / practical support
- Policy practice – giving voice to people’s experiences of poverty
Micro-aggressions? Observations from work in the family courts

The dominance of psychological thinking/individual pathology:

- ‘Mother has led a chaotic lifestyle (reflecting her personality disorder), including many house moves’ – all 3 were because she was in temporary accommodation and moved by the local authority.
- ‘Father showed lack of commitment (because of not attending an appointment with psychiatrist)’ – he is in rent arrears & only gets paid for work he does – the psychiatrist changed the time on the morning of the appointment and he was working on a job.
- ‘Mother could be taking more responsibility for getting her (teenage) daughter to school by giving up work’ – she is in private rented accommodation, on a low income, no savings and has another child.

- Maybe not determinative of outcome but all contributing to narratives of parental deficit and culpability (& compounding internalisation of shame)
Another example...

Recent tweet from a highly respected practitioner who supports families:

*Daily contact (1 hour poss 1.5) when baby arrives. Family Centre is 45 min walk away. No money for bus fares or support from family & friends. #socialworker expects new mum to get there by her own means. How many new mums can walk 4 miles after giving birth?*

**Brief deconstruction:**

Inhumane ‘Othering’ processes – intersecting power relations - poverty, gender and construction of (undeserving) parent in CP system

Complete disregard of material and social circumstances

What about her and her child’s human rights (e.g. Article 8 ECHR right to family life)?

What happens if she cannot do this everyday? How will she be assessed – inconsistent? Unmotivated? Uncaring?
THE QUEST.......... 

The capacity to operationalise our awareness of the relationship between structural inequality and private pain is the unrealised promise of social work practice

(Hyslop, 2018)
Returning to Nancy Fraser – affirmative and transformative strategies

Fraser identifies two ways of dealing with injustices: **affirmative and transformative**.

**Affirmative** strategies deal with the implications of injustices without challenging unequal social relations, with reference to ‘remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them’

On the contrary, **transformative** strategies are about changing the way society (& world) is organised and aim at restructuring the underlying framework. Transformative strategies are therefore ‘remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework’.

**For social work:**

**Affirmative strategies:** Working with individuals and families to address need and impacts of social injustices

**Transformative strategies:** Keeping open the discussion on the structural nature of problems, involvement in social movements/activism,
Embracing Ambiguity

Roose et al. (2012) propose a stance in social work in which social work embraces its ambiguous nature:

This implies that social work needs ‘to simultaneously consider the rights and aspirations of the individual citizen and collective welfare, solidarity and equality in a democratic society’

This tension between the relational and social dimensions of social problems such as poverty requires that social work is prepared to accept its ambiguous mandate and identity, supporting people on an individual level while at the same time highlighting the structural nature of problems.

This awareness that the necessity to use affirmative strategies to mediate in the daily struggles and situations of people experiencing injustice can offer opportunities for structural change when those strategies are brought into the public debate by social work.

Briskman (2013) argues that, as practice ethnographers, social workers are privileged by a proximate relationship in the lives of marginalised people and thus well placed to bear witness to such lives by exposing ‘wicked’ and unjust policies and challenging dominant discourses
Final words....

Social work needs politicized, historical research and practice that is grounded in the lived experiences of people in poverty and in the lived experiences, dilemmas and challenges of practitioners and activists; research and practice that are not afraid of being ‘counter’, committed and personal (Krumer-Nevo, 2009)
References


