



## Neoliberalism and social work identity

Ian Hyslop

Human Services and Social Work Services, School of Counselling, Auckland University, Auckland, New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

This article considers the relationship between the identity of social work and the neoliberal political project. Reference is made to a small but carefully structured quantitative research study in Auckland, New Zealand which examined the knowledge applied and produced in the practice of social work. This study found evidence consistent with Philp's [(1979). Notes on the form of knowledge in social work. *Sociological Review*, 27(1), 83–111] theorisation of a specific 'form of knowledge' for social work which is produced and reproduced as a function of relational engagement between social workers and those who are constructed as 'clients' in an unequal society. This discourse casts the 'failing subject' as socially located and inherently redeemable in direct contrast to populist neoliberal constructions of personal responsibility and moral deficit. With reference to dialectical theory it is suggested that this resilient discourse, embedded in 'every-day' practice, is inevitably a source of resistance to the imposition of neoliberal practice and policy design. This resistance provides hope for the progressive voice of social work in the current contest of ideas in relation to the future development of social work.

### KEYWORDS

Critical perspectives;  
professions; practice/theory/  
methods; sociology/social  
theory

### Introduction

This article contributes to ongoing debate about the future of social work by exploring the impact of neoliberalism on professional identity. Reference is made to a qualitative study in Auckland,<sup>1</sup> New Zealand, which sheds light on the way in which the knowledge generated through social work is shaped by, yet oppositional to, the increasingly entrenched neoliberal practice framework (Hyslop, 2013). This research examined connections between the socio-political location of social work and the knowledge that is generated and applied in practice. The relationship between neoliberalism and social work was not the direct focus of this study. However, findings about the nature of social work practice knowledge are used as a lens through which to consider the trajectory of this relationship. Although the focus of this article is on English-speaking jurisdictions, the argument developed has broader relevance. The identity of social work is faced with a critical challenge in the contemporary political climate (Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014; Ferguson, 2008; Gray & Webb, 2013; Warner, 2013). The emancipatory elements of social work practice may be dismantled in the coming decade. Alternatively social work could become a more powerful voice for social justice. It will be argued that the perspective produced and reproduced in the socially engaged and politically situated 'every-day' practice of social work is inherently resistant to neoliberalism. Conflict is an inevitable outcome of this discursive tension.

There are two central premises to the argument advanced here. Following Philp (1979), it is contended that a socially configured understanding arises from the practice of social work in the space

between the poor and the powerful. Insights are generated and humanist values are applied through dialogical engagement with those who are positioned as clients (Parton & Kirk, 2010). Several commentators have sought to connect a distinctive form of knowledge with this location. It has been variously named as socio-legal (Parton, 1991), socio-technical (Munro, 2010) and socio-political (Gray & Webb, 2013). Second, it will be suggested that this schema of 'knowing' furnishes social work with a constitutive 'identity claim'. This identity is significant for three reasons. First, it is embedded in practice rather than organisational or professional structures. Second, it countermands dominant neoliberal conceptions of choice and self-responsibility. Finally, applying a dialectical lens of analysis, it will be suggested that this insight may contribute to a discourse of dissent within social work despite the apparent hegemony of neoliberalism.

## Neoliberalism

Social work is shaped by developments in the wider political and economic environment. As asserted by Wallace and Pease (2011, p. 133), since social work:

... is a continuous activity, conditioned by and dependent upon the context from which it emerges and with which it engages (Harris, 2008, p. 662), changes in welfare regimes will shape the way in which social work is constituted and practised.

Ascendant neoliberalism has produced a sea change in this context over the last thirty years.<sup>2</sup> Houston (2012, p. 520) asserts the need to understand the influence of neoliberalism as follows:

Neoliberalism is the 'hottest game in town' but it is not the only one. Any attempt to take emancipatory social work seriously has to start with an understanding of the game's rules and deep structures.

Neoliberalism casts unfettered markets as the 'rational' means for the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services. State services should be privatised or at least be subject to market discipline through measures of efficiency and effectiveness, outputs and outcomes. There is a conflation of paid work and self-worth: individual responsibility replaces social citizenship (Garrett, 2013; Gray, Dean, Agllias, Howard, & Schubert, 2015; Harvey, 2005). The consequences for social work have been more pronounced in jurisdictions where this rubric has been most fully embraced. However, as Spolander, Engelbrecht, and Pullen Sansfacon (2015) argue, the pervasive influence of neoliberal politics is being '... felt through much of Europe and North America today'.

Although the concept of beneficent market society has been fiercely contested historically (Polanyi, 1944/1957), a degree of hegemony has developed in recent decades. Part of the ideological appeal lies in its simplicity, particularly the 'common sense' linkages between a minimalist state, personal freedom and economic prosperity (Sugarman, 2015). In reality, the role of the state is far from neutral in neoliberal times. The rhetoric of market primacy conceals two key policy drivers. First, governments service the interests of corporate capitalism through mechanisms such as transnational trade agreements and labour legislation (Ferguson, 2008). This imperative is exemplified in the transfer of public resources from welfare expenditure to financial support for the banking sector in the wake of the 2007/2008 global financial crisis (Spolander et al., 2015). Second, the neoliberal state adopts a punitive approach to those who are pushed to the social margins (Reisch, 2013; Webb, 2006). This orientation has profound implications for the identity of social work.

Much of the following discussion draws on the critical social work literature produced in the UK in recent years. This expansion of critical commentary is unsurprising given the retreat from the ideals of social protection enshrined within the post-depression/post-war welfare state. As the 'fifth social service', the ethos of state sponsored social work became enmeshed with this political project (Ferguson, 2008; Parton, 2014; Townsend, 1970). The welfare state was concerned with the provision of social security: a function that Bourdieu et al. (1999) associates with the permissive 'left hand' of the state. This objective was aligned to social democratic ideals, or at least with the enabling arm of the liberal political tradition, which Garrett (2009, 2013) characterises as 'embedded liberalism'. Social

work aspired to be an emancipatory force, albeit that the focus of intervention was generally directed to individual circumstance (Brodie, Nottingham, & Plunkett, 2008). The shift away from this political consensus is often traced to a global crisis in profitability, which developed from the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). In Marxist terms the subsequent restructuring of the relationship between capital, workers and the state has increased inequality through a '... sustained increase in the rate of exploitation' (Callinicos, 2010, p. 55).

The challenges that the neoliberal turn have posed for social work are well documented (Reisch, 2013; Rogowski, 2012). The Munro Review of Child Protection in England (2010, 2011), for example, identified the way in which a managerial preoccupation with timeliness, recording, procedural compliance, standardised assessment, productivity measurement and risk aversion detracts from quality decision-making informed by a relational approach to knowing and doing in social work practice. Featherstone et al. (2014) have recently associated the contemporary focus on 'troubled families' in a context of production efficiency with 'hollowed out' child protection practice that denies the complexity of social suffering and fails to engage meaningfully with the lived realities of service users. They suggest that an orientation to efficient and effective practice at a distance is associated with demonisation of the working class poor and an increase in the forced adoption of under-privileged children.

This argument connects with the second area where the neoliberal state is said to assume an interventionist role – the governance, discipline and punishment of the poor. Following Wacquant, Cummins (2015) suggests that attention needs to be given to the 'neo' in neoliberalism. In addition to an emphasis on the retraction or privatisation of state services and a Foucauldian concern with the self-governing citizen, Wacquant theorises that regimes of 'prison-fare' and 'work-fare' have replaced welfare systems in regulating marginalised urban populations. In his recent study of the politics of child protection, Parton (2014) also identifies a more authoritarian approach to a specific section of the population and associates this with 'muscular' child protection practice. This development clearly signals a departure from the parameters of post war liberal politics – Garrett's 'embedded liberalism'. However, I am less convinced that the impetus to exclude and punish is strictly 'new'. The roots of neoliberalism can be connected with the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century. Despite the vast differences of place and time in terms of science, technology and geopolitics, historical parallels can be drawn with the infamous Poor Law of 1834 and the associated distinction between the deserving poor and a morally depraved underclass (Ferguson, 2004; Procacci, 1991). Historically, it appears that the demarcation and differential treatment of a social residuum is a recurring motif within the schema of liberal governance (Bauman, 1999; Foucault, 1980).

In recent years, an authoritarian turn has come to be linked – in state policy and in popular culture – with quasi-Eugenicist ideology that blames problem families for the reproduction of social disadvantage (Fronek & Chester, 2016). The polemic work of Charles Murray is often associated with the theorised connection between 'welfare dependency' and social degeneracy (Cummins, 2015). The threatening spectre of a feral and feckless underclass has been promulgated in tabloid newspaper scandals and reality television (Beddoe, 2014; Warner, 2013). This policy shift is aligned with the broader intent of neoliberal governance to promote the interests of flexible capitalism and further erode the welfare state vision of universal social security (Sugarman, 2015). The troubling question is where, if anywhere, this analysis leaves the emancipatory intent of social work? In the present climate, as Cree (2013, p. 154) suggests '... many social workers, particularly in the developed world are employed by the State in gate-keeping or surveillance roles ... They have little power to manage their own working lives, let alone to give power to others'. In the following discussion, it is proposed that the identity of social work is also influenced by a countervailing force – the knowledge generated and applied in the practice of engagement with the social realities of citizens positioned at the social and moral margins, in New Zealand and in comparable societies.

## Identity

It has been argued above that a renaissance of liberal fundamentalism has been pivotal in shaping our times and that it is vitally important to consider the influence of this political configuration on the present and future identity of social work (Pemberton, Fahmy, Sutton, & Bell, 2016). This is not to suggest that social work was unambiguously progressive in the welfare state era. Social work has constantly confronted tensions in relation to a mandate that aspires to social care and collective emancipation yet entails elements of social control and individual regulation (Epstein, 1999; Lundy, 2011; Pease, 2013). The ethos of social work was, however, accommodated, albeit uncomfortably at times, within the structure of the welfare state (Jones, 1983). As this political settlement has unravelled the public policy relevance of social work and its broader credibility as a moral endeavour have become increasingly contested (Ferguson, 2008; Gray & Webb, 2013). This process has triggered something of an existential crisis and given rise to significant professional and academic interest in defining and asserting a defensible and sustainable identity. In a typically robust contribution to debate about the future of social work within the changing political context of the UK, Jordan (2004) makes the following statement:

The challenge for social work in the UK is to clarify what is distinctive about its values, knowledge and practice methods, and to create strong links between all practitioners committed to these, in a whole range of public, voluntary, and commercial agencies. (p. 7)

This has proved a demanding task. Social work is theoretically and practically diverse. The challenge that Jordan sets out has been further complicated by the rise of science centric 'evidence-based practice' as a measure of effective programmes and efficient social work. It is no coincidence that this call has become an increasingly strident mantra in the neoliberal era of targeted and cost efficient social services (Pease, 2013). Difficulty is also generated by the fact that social work practice is an 'applied' activity that cannot be reduced to a set of quantifiable technical procedures. Aldridge (1996) recognises this social/technical paradigm clash but contends that social work cannot realistically stake an identity claim based on the interactional 'art' of practice. Shaw (2010) goes further in suggesting that delineating a distinct foundation for social work identity is a quixotic endeavour.

Many disciplines embrace a person-in-environment perspective, and many fields are active in the areas of social justice, relieving oppression, and combatting discrimination in its myriad forms. All the professions have intricate codes of ethics, so none of these oft-touted distinctive features are truly unique to our field. There is no particular area of practice – child welfare, probation, domestic violence, human rights, mental health, social policy – whose practitioners are predominantly social workers. And there are no specific interventions – case management, counselling, ombudsmanship, linkage and referral, psychotherapy, behavioural analysis and therapy, agency administration – that are unique domains of social work. (p. 254)

Many of the distinctive elements often claimed for social work are not unique. However, I take issue with Shaw's assertion that pretensions to a discrete identity can be dismissed as '... an old heresy which for many years was prevalent – the belief that social work has a basic value position that has greater merit / human authenticity and is more whole-person orientated, etc. than other professions' (p. 254). Following the foundational work of Philp (1979), it will be suggested that the identity of social work, as shaped in practice, continues to be configured by a critical humanist discourse that focuses on human worth, redemption and the structural barriers that militate against substantive equality.

As indicated, the identification of a distinct social work identity has not been straight-forward. Over 10 years ago now, against the then-perceived professional crisis, an extensive academic literature review was completed pursuant to the Scottish Executive Review of Social Work in the twenty-first century (2005). The resulting report concluded that ...

... there is no universally accepted idea of valid knowledge, skills, or expertise for social workers. However, there is fairly wide agreement that social work is committed to rights and justice: and that it exists to assist, support, and enable those who suffer the negative effects of social inequalities. (Asquith, Clark, & Waterhouse, 2005, p. 2)

This review also indicated that this mission is increasingly problematic in that '... the "crisis" in social work is seen by many as rooted in the difficulty, under current conditions, of upholding and pursuing the values of social work' (Asquith et al., 2005, p. 2). In other words, the claims made for social work by social workers and academic commentators are out of step with the prevailing political currents.

In linking this 'rights, justice and equality' identity claim to the 'knowledge form' commensurate with practice activity, my recent research (Hyslop, 2013) provides a discursive basis for understanding the resilience of this 'mission'. It lends empirical support to the proposition that critical humanist values are reinforced through social work practice – embedded in respectful relational connection (understanding of 'the other'). In the following discussion, it is suggested that an identifiable form of practice knowledge is produced within this unique architecture of knowing – the confluence of interactional process and socio-political context. This claim to an alternate knowledge form for social work (shaped within the social relations of a class society) is, as Aldridge contends, an inversion of technical or 'scientific' identity markers. Critically, it provides the basis for an understanding of social work practice knowledge as unique and resilient. It also positions this knowledge as foundational to a professional identity that stands in stark contrast to neoliberal conceptions of inter-generational deviance and immorality (Jensen & Tyler, 2015).

### **Research design**

The construction of this research was influenced by a desire to investigate the relationship between two contrasting elements relevant to understanding the nature of social work. Social work is governed through institutions that are embedded in structures of economic and political power, and it is practised through processes of interpersonal social exchange. Social work, and social workers, can be depicted as mediating between the interests of the state and the marginalised, the wealthy and the poor, consumer capitalism and those who are 'left behind' (Ferguson, 2004; Parton & Kirk, 2010). Drawing on the work of Foucault,<sup>3</sup> Philp (1979) theorises a form of knowledge for social work governed by a particular 'regime of truth'. He connects the genesis of this social work discourse with economic changes in the late nineteenth century, particularly a growing political and economic division between the respectable working class and an excluded 'residuum'. He argues that social work advocates for the sociability of all people by investing marginalised individuals with the objective qualities fundamental to collective humanity. In this way, social work seeks to extend the boundaries of the social franchise by advocating for re-inclusion: convincing the powerful that 'the others' are safe.

This research exercise investigated the shape of social work practice knowledge as articulated and exemplified by social workers engaged in 'every-day' social work practice in Auckland, New Zealand. It is acknowledged that social work can be depicted as a broad church which includes various activities directly concerned with social justice and human rights. The collective ethos of community development practice and the concept of social pedagogy within the European tradition (Lorenz, 2008) are cases in point. However, such wide conceptions of social work can devalue the practice experience of most social workers currently engaged in day to day practice (Ferguson, 2013). I was also interested in exploring the practice knowledge of social workers within the tightly targeted, efficiency-driven and procedurally constrained environments that frame practice within a neoliberal political context. The notion of practice knowledge is concerned with the 'knowing' applied in the practice of social work (Morrison, 2010).

Qualitative data were gleaned from in-depth interviews with 21 practitioners with at least 3 years of practice experience. Although the sample was not representative in any statistical sense, the intent was to select a large and varied enough group of informants to generate some diversity of data and to allow for patterns to emerge. The aim was to access the perspective of social workers who had 'enough' practice experience to draw from and reflect upon. The decision to limit participation to social workers with at least three years of experience was influenced by my own practice history. In 15 years as a social work supervisor in the statutory setting, I found that it took approximately 3

years for social workers to comfortably accommodate to the scope of their practice roles and develop confidence in their practice craft. Only social workers currently engaged in practice were selected, given the emphasis on contemporary realities.

Given the focus on the relationship between professional identity and knowledge application in the context of direct practice, participants were recruited via the Aotearoa-New Zealand Association of Social Workers<sup>4</sup> (ANZASW). Thirty potential participants expressed initial interest in response to an invitation sent to ANZASW members within the greater Auckland area. Ten of these potential participants were excluded from the study on the basis that I either knew them personally, had worked with them professionally, or taught them as students, and the concern that such relationships could distort communication. The remaining respondents were interviewed as part of the research exercise.<sup>5</sup> As it transpired participants were drawn from a wide range of practice fields and organisational settings, including statutory child protection and youth justice, the NGO sector and District Health Boards. Interviews were conducted in the latter half of 2012.

There was also a reasonable cross section of participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and practice experience. Of the 21 practitioners who eventually took part, 6 were Māori, 9 were of Pakeha<sup>6</sup>/European ethnicity, 3 were of Pasefika<sup>7</sup> origin, 2 were Chinese, and 1 participant was of Indian descent. Four male social workers participated in the study and the age range carried from the late twenties to over 60 years of age. The majority of participants were over 30, most falling within the 40–60 years age bracket. This is partly a function of the experience level that was targeted. All of the participants, bar one, had over seven years of practice experience. The majority had over 10 years of practice experience and 9 participants had close to, or in excess of, 20 years of practice behind them. In terms of practice field/location, eight participants were employed as statutory practitioners at the time of interview, eight were working under the District Health Board umbrella and the remaining five were employed in the NGO sector. It should be noted that approximately half of the participants had worked in more than one of these areas during the course of their careers.

### Research process

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore the nature of the knowledge generated and applied in practice and to inform an understanding of the relationship between this knowledge and the context of its production. Following Gilgun (2010), it is recognised that the design of this research was explicitly guided by the theoretical constructs that have been outlined in the foregoing discussion. However, the process of data gathering, assembly and analysis was also influenced by grounded theory in as much as care was taken to structure interview questions so as to capture the voices of practitioner experience rather than being over-determined by pre-existing assumptions. Thematic coding of the transcribed interviews yielded six central themes, which were collated under two major headings as follows:

- (1) knowledge in practice (themes: relational engagement, self in context, advocating/enabling),
- (2) practice knowledge in context (themes: locus of practice, humanising practice, political and economic change).

### Findings

Data analysis yielded significant evidence of a discourse consistent with Philp's hypothesis. Participants clearly identified that the 'clients' of social work are drawn predominantly from individuals and families who are positioned at the margins of capitalist society: Philp's societal 'residuum'. The assembled data also provides empirical support for the proposition that the imperative to engage and communicate effectively with clients both generates and necessitates an elevated awareness of the realities (and subtleties) of social power in a class society. It promotes insight into the material

context which structures the lives of service recipients and entails commitment to the underlying possibility of individuated redemption. Significant evidence consistent with Philp's proposed humanising functions of social work – the creation of subjects, the integration of objective characteristics and speaking on behalf of the disenfranchised – is apparent within the transcribed interview texts. The following examples are instructive.

A very experienced and inter-personally flexible hospital social worker who spoke of working with multiply disadvantaged people so that they are not 'lost', described explaining the need to record social history to a client in terms of humanising individuals within the wider clinical system:

... we're doing this because it's really important in the hospital notes that you're not seen as just a diagnosis or a number – that you're seen as a person who's got kids and that ... It always works, but I do mean it genuinely.

Participants consistently voiced a perspective consistent with Philp's conception of the social work subject as perennially redeemable, as captured in the following excerpt from a Samoan social worker with 20 years of child protection practice experience and an acute awareness of the need to engage constructively with adult clients:

It's about allowing people to believe that they can make changes and I think if you put that early out there with families that you work with ... you give them just that bit of hope. It is interesting what humans can do and I believe that if you've been neglected and been told that you're a loser all your life – and if you're not ... you're starting a family – and someone comes along and says, 'Hey, nah, you're not.' That – just that – reaffirming something positive to that person. I've seen it happen and I still believe that people can change.

Philp's integration of objective 'human' characteristics is also a common theme within the data set. Social workers in this study repeatedly spoke of the 'use of self' to facilitate engagement with and understanding of 'others'. One of the most explicit references to the process of building a personalised narrative that separates human potential from the contaminating influence of social circumstances is captured by an articulate NGO practitioner who focused on working intensively with clients in need of social support:

... at the moment I'm writing a letter for a client who is getting sentenced on Thursday and she has done over a year now – she has done the most unbelievable inspiring journey and so I'm writing to the Judge for her sentencing about this incredible journey that this woman has been on – and why actually, when looking at her sentence, taking into account the fact that most of this work actually she's already done. She's actually already there. That the beginning bit was the catalyst that was needed – and that was all she needed – and she's just done this incredible journey and she's not the same woman that she was.

All research participants made some reference to speaking for their clients. In a typical example, an NGO practitioner who worked 'alongside' families with young children who were perceived as multiply disadvantaged alluded to ensuring that the rights of clients are upheld in dealings with state agencies:

I'm just thinking about when I used to take families to Work and Income.<sup>8</sup> Just that whole – (... pause ...) – If the family would go to the Work and Income I would just sit beside them to begin with rather than talking because I don't think we should be taking our clients every time, because they need to have that ability themselves. But until the worker would know that I was perhaps a social worker they would treat the client quite differently.

This social worker also made the following comment about the way in which practice fosters an appreciation of social injustice and alluded to challenges posed by increasing workload and decreasing resources in the current political environment:

... we stand to lose a voice for those – that with legislation and policies and government systems, whether it's health or education – that are never heard and never will be because the majority are always going to be the ones that are heard.

This analysis was mirrored by a wide range of participants. The weight of commentary suggests that recognition of the validity of the social actions and world-view of those positioned at the 'nether-regions' (Jones, 1983) of society produces a desire to challenge – at least through individuated

practice – the material and ideological contradictions that are revealed through this engagement. A highly experienced social worker within the criminal justice system articulated an understanding of deviance as a rational response to external social circumstance:

One young man a few years ago described New Zealand society as having an underworld and an upper world and he didn't know the rules in the upper world – that's the world that people who go to work and have a house and don't get into trouble inhabit. The underworld was one where coming to Court is a fairly regular thing to do – and if you grow up there and you see a car with keys in, well obviously you were meant to take it. Or the view that allows you to sell some cannabis because you need to make some money. Or the view that allows you to go to the Police and make a false allegation so that somebody will be locked up and then you can feel safe ...

Social workers routinely spoke of mediating the needs of their clients and the demands of 'the system' and of occupying the intermediate space which this function engenders. The following excerpt is from a Māori social worker engaged in child and family social work who demonstrated significant skill in engaging with 'resistant' families through recourse to her own personality and socio-cultural credibility:

I've seen in my experience that what happens in a rural area – or not so much rural like Whangarei or Dargaville – (... pause ...) – they have their own ways of working in their whanau, which doesn't slot into what the system sees as being normal. So that's the barrier I had within my workplace – trying to get the system to understand – this works for the family, this is what a lot of families used to say to me.<sup>9</sup>

In summary the findings of this research can be listed as follows:

- Social work occupies an intermediate location. The stances adopted to facilitate the tasks required in this territory – juggling, balancing, bridging – generate particular kinds of awareness and particular skills/knowledge – flexible presentation, managing uncertainty, tolerating ambiguity, standing in more than one world.
- Social work practice knowledge involves an acute awareness of how relations of institutional and interpersonal power shape processes of communication and understanding.
- It involves the development and application of communication skills that diminish social distance and enhance interpersonal understandings. Knowledge formed through this process of 'relational engagement' is generated in dialogue with those who are constructed as clients.
- Practice knowledge involves an analysis of the influence of social context in structuring the lives of clients. However, it is also cognisant (and respectful) of an underlying 'possibility' that characterises human 'being'. In Philp's terms the social work knowledge form can be described as paradoxical. It resists discourses that deny human potential but simultaneously acknowledges that social circumstances may prevent human potential from being realised.

## Neoliberal change

Research data also provided evidence of the difficulty of sustaining the social work discourse in the current socio-economic-policy climate. A practitioner with over 20 years in the field of mental health in New Zealand and the UK identified a narrowing of the mainstream political spectrum that is consistent with neoliberalism.

I think that with the current political climate – this particular government and unfortunately the latter Labour government, redistributes the money to fit its own ideology – the money that's available for services, the money that's available for people – we're going to be fighting harder for every single resource that we've got. And so the economic climate and the ideology of the government in power impacts on our day to day work.

A passionate social worker with experience in child protection, family violence and the hospital system described the political climate as essentially hostile to social work.

Economically speaking, we are now living in the monetary sort of world so that's a lot about individual responsibility and that sort of thing which goes in line with the whole neoliberal thing as well. And this government at



the moment, National, is right into that and getting to know the New Right to be extreme and taking all of that – (... pause ...) – It's not about a collective thing at all is it? So that contradicts what we're trying to do I suppose in social work. You're pushing shit uphill half the time really because the overall subliminal message is about 'building walls around your house' because it's a scary world out there.

Various practitioners commented negatively about the tyranny of financial oversight, evidence-based production measurement and an over-arching focus on the minimisation of organisational and political risk, particularly in statutory practice. A Health Board community outreach social worker with over 20 years of experience described the effect of state austerity in terms of reduced capacity to assist clients to have their needs met:

Very much harder – there's been so many changes. Like being in community social work with the hospital in terms of legislation and policies – all the changes with Work and Income, the not wanting to have a DPB<sup>10</sup> for anyone under eighteen, unemployment benefit – you must turn up to the job first regardless of your experience. Housing New Zealand<sup>11</sup> – half of the staff, literally half of them around New Zealand lost their jobs, so all of those that are floundering or haven't got money and that – there's nowhere you can go. We've got people that literally are on the streets ...

Another less experienced health practitioner pin-pointed the irony of social work being blamed for the social breakdown to which it responds:

But I think the social work voice out there is only ever heard negatively at the moment because it's so much – (... pause ...) – like I guess the 'risk society' and the 'blame society'. If something goes wrong the media seizes on it. It is hard I think when we are kind of the 'meat in the middle', sort of thing, and we're really only seen as the 'fixer-upper' of everything that's going wrong in society.

The consistent message was that social workers are being pressurised to move closer to the demands of 'the system' and further from the needs of their 'clients'. The emphasis on risk management and technocratic compliance is captured vividly in the following statement from an analytically minded youth justice practitioner with extensive experience in the field:

... we're all crowded together like sardines because we're all spending such a high proportion of our time sat in front of the computer having to input data – and being controlled by the machine and being told this is the tool that you must use in this situation and once you've used that tool and done that tool upon the client, then thou shalt come back and input it into the almighty machine and if you don't you haven't done social work.

Finally, a senior Māori social worker with wide generic social services experience and a penchant for working in partnership with her clients in order to enhance strengths and bring forward self-confidence, succinctly described the skills associated with relational engagement and advocacy as becoming secondary to a more controlling and punitive stance in contemporary practice.

I think it's getting worse because it's getting very like – (... pause ...) – they may as well be cops.

## Future possibilities

I have argued that the neoliberal political agenda minimises and obscures the complex and exploitative social relations that underpin the 'free' market. Further, a focus on the detection and punishment/exclusion of threatening individuals is identified as a disturbing feature of contemporary practice design (Fronek & Chester, 2016). By contrast the practice of social work appears to sustain a diametrically opposed awareness of the nuances of social suffering within a structurally unjust social world. This research exercise indicates that this resistant and resilient view is sustained in day to day practice despite the growing managerial preoccupation with production efficiency and the competent technical application of assessment and intervention instruments. This study suggests that Philp's theorised imperative to humanise and 'repatriate' those on the social and moral margins persists in the practice discourse of social work. This 'regime of truth' is reinforced by relational engagement between social workers and those who are constructed as their clients.

The following discussion is based on my own reading of the consequences of the disjunction between practice generated discourse and neoliberalism. Social workers in this study were not asked to address this challenge. Marxist dialectical theory may provide some insight into future development in the face of current challenges to this discursive 'identity claim'. A key message from dialectical thought is that contradiction is productive – generating change, often when hegemonic ideological forces seem to be unassailable (Jameson, 2008; Ollman & Smith, 2008). The question that this paper now raises is whether (dialectically speaking) the key to a radicalisation of social work theory and practice may be concealed within these (apparently) most counter-revolutionary of times. One source of opposition may (paradoxically) be fuelled by the demanding, mundane and constrained practice context that Cree (2013) so evocatively describes. As the forces of neoliberal ideology intensify it may be that this discourse is extinguished. It will also mean that resistance will grow (Beddoe & Keddell, 2016).

The unique location of social work affords us the privilege of access to the wisdom and aspirations of socially marginalised citizens. It is the nature of this engagement with the underclass poor that gives social work its insight into – and its intent to remedy – the individuated consequences of structural injustice (Jordan, 2004). Gray and Webb (2013) have recently asserted that new forms of politicised social work are emerging in response to the neoliberal denial of the world view which the engaged practice of social work facilitates.

After abandoning 'class struggle essentialism' for the plurality of anti-racist, feminist, and, postmodern resistances, 'capitalism' is now clearly emerging as the *name* of the problem (Zizek, 2012). As a consequence we are witnessing today the return of a new theory and practice of resistance. (p. 5)

It may be that consciousness of the threat that the neoliberal turn poses to the social work voice will produce more politically aware and active opposition from within the social work community, locally and globally. I have argued here that we live in pivotal times for the social work voice. If the social work discourse is inscribed and ingrained in the way that Philp suggests, and if this way of 'knowing the world' in practice is threatened by the ascendant neoliberal world view as it so patently appears to be, it seems that productive conflict is inevitable. Discursive challenge and contested change is the order of the day for both academic and professional practitioners in Anglophone countries. It follows that neutrality is unlikely to be possible for those of us who are involved in this process.

## Notes

1. Located in the North Island of New Zealand, Auckland is New Zealand's largest city with a socially and ethnically diverse population of approximately 1.5 million.
2. Spolander et al. (2015) recognise the significant variations within Western welfare regimes such as German 'ordoliberalism' – a state-centred variant of neoliberalism which seeks to establish a framework for perfect competition; seeking to rescue capitalism from some of its more destructive contradictions.
3. Philp (1979) credits the fundamental insight that knowledge is a social product arising within a set of social relations to Marx but goes on to apply a Foucauldian analytical framework in theorising a particular discursive form of knowing for social work.
4. 'Aotearoa' is the Māori language name for New Zealand; the name coined by the 'tangata whenua' – the first/indigenous people of the land.
5. In the interests of clarity the final number of participants was 21, as one of the interviewees requested that a colleague join in with her interview. This was appropriate in the circumstances given Māori social conventions.
6. 'Pakeha' is the Māori term for non-Māori people/s. It tends to be associated with people of European descent, as opposed to other non-indigenous New Zealanders, because of the historical colonial relationship.
7. The term 'Pasefika' is a generic reference to people(s) whose ethnic identity is linked with the numerous Pacific island nation states which stretch across the South Pacific region.
8. Work and Income New Zealand is the state agency responsible for the administration of benefits and pensions.
9. Whangarei is the northern-most provincial city in New Zealand. Dargaville is a relatively large town centre situated on the west coast of the northern North Island. 'Whanau' is the Māori language term for the concept of extended family/kin group.

10. The domestic purposes benefit (DPB) refers to a state allowance for single parents. The name of this benefit has recently been altered and entitlement restricted significantly.
11. Housing New Zealand is the state agency responsible for public housing.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

Dr *Ian Hyslop* is a lecturer in social work and social policy with the School of Counselling Human Services in Auckland, New Zealand. He worked for 20 years as a social worker and team leader in statutory child protection social work and has an abiding interest in the relationship between the craft of social work practice and the social context within which it operates.

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