How do Social Workers in Mainstream Organisations Practice Critical Social Work?

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Abstract

This article considers 'how do social workers in mainstream organisations practice critical social work?', utilising a thematic analysis of a semi-structured qualitative interview with a social worker, Sam. In this article I consider the relevant literature including the impact of neo-liberalism and managerialism, the response of mainstream and critical social workers, the methodology used to analyse the data, the results and a discussion of the finding in relation to the literature and data. The results are 'hopeful', with a description on how to position oneself and how to work overtly and covertly to counter the oppression experienced by clients. Turbett (2013) suggests that working radically may extend the working lives of practitioners. The case study of Sam is a good example for new social workers: a practitioner who is still invigorated by his critical frontline work 20 years into his career.

Background

In the 21st century social work is located in a context of marketization and neo-liberalism which shifts focus to the individual, locating responsibility and 'blame' within individuals rather than to structural causes of oppression. This has resulted in severely reduced welfare resources and growing inequality. The impact of new public management and managerialism has led to a focus on risk management, efficiency and outcomes. The autonomy of the social worker is reduced with a reliance on evidence based, standardised tools and greater emphasis on controlling client behaviours (Baines, 2017a; Fine and Teram, 2013; Greenslade, McAuliffe &

Chenowth, 2015; Pease & Nipperess, 2016; Stanford, 2011; Turbett, 2013). Some social workers accept this context as neutral and de-politicised (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Pease & Nipperess, 2016), and "succumb to the invitation to follow the rules and … define practice purely in procedural terms" (Humphries, 2016, p. 158). They may not acknowledge the 'struggles' of clients or the wider social justice causes (Baines, 2017a) in their work.

Critical theories challenge the view that social work practice can be neutral if enacting the core social work value of social justice (Pease & Nipperess 2016). Allan (2009a) identified several critical principles across the literature including working towards greater social justice and equality for marginalised and oppressed people, working alongside, recognition of how power oppresses, questioning assumptions, and emancipatory personal and social change (pp. 40-41). Some critical approaches include 'resistance' to oppressive practice; critical reflexivity in relation to creating or perpetuating oppression, nurturing hope, belief in the possibility of change and addressing people's immediate need as well as acting for longer term social change. (Allan, 2009b; Baines, 2017a; Hosken & Goldingay, 2016; Pease & Nipperess, 2016). Critical social workers draw on theoretical frameworks of social oppression and injustice to inform their work (Baines, 2017a; Stanford, 2011; Turbett, 2013).

The capacity for critical social workers to work 'openly' in mainstream organisations, however, is questioned in the literature. Recent research by Greenslade et al. (2015) "paint[s] a bleak picture" of social work practice in statutory settings with the social workers identifying that the "practice landscape is broken" (p. 427) due to the impact of neoliberal ideology. These social workers identified that they had to act covertly to be able to stay true to the value base of social work. Carey and Foster (2011) describe "deviant social work" which is "minor, hidden, subtle, practical, shrewd or moderate acts" (p. 578). They do not see this as necessarily linked to emancipation but as a response to the control of managerialism and 'receding discretion' forcing frontline social workers to 'bend the rules'. They view social work as a "female dominated quasi profession" (p. 580) lacking the legitimate power of other professions like medicine or law. Pollack and Rossiter (2010) assert that professional judgment and

autonomy of social workers has been "virtually expunged" (p. 160) under neo-liberalism.

Other writers do not view the agency of critical social workers as bleakly. Fine and Teram (2013) identified that social workers can act both covertly or overtly to resist. They identified that covert actions do not change systems but can change lives (when the system is harmful). Overt action is more effective in achieving longer term social change but can be risky to reputation depending on the 'logics of the organisation'; they identified that the pluralism of bureaucracies allow the space to act overtly (safely) in some cases. Evan and Harris (2004) refresh the work on 'street level bureaucrats' by Lipsky and question the view that professional discretion has been expunged. They assert that paradoxically the more rules, the more opportunities there are to find 'spaces' to resist. As each individual is different, so too is the application of policy in complex frontline work. Aronson and Smith (2010) identified that managers in the statutory context found ways to 'expand the social' to advance social and disrupt marketization agendas and foster an 'activism streak' in their younger workers. Stanford (2011) in her analysis of risk identities "reinstat[ed] social workers as active and purposive as opposed to powerless and despondent" (p. 1514) when they took the stance to "advocate for and protect clients". Humphries (2016) illustrates how social workers with a "well developed awareness of power and inequality" (p. 158) can exercise their own agency and use their (diminishing) discretion to find the "spaces for resistance". Turbett (2013) recommends locating workplaces 'sympathetic' to resistance, offering support and opportunity.

Method

This article reports the findings from a single case study with 'Sam' (a pseudonym) to explore 'how do social workers in mainstream organisations practice critical social work?'. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore meaning and knowledge production in social work practice. An interview guide was designed with broad, open questions to enlist rich data from the respondent. A one-hour, semi-structured

interview was conducted in the interviewee's workplace at a time and date that was convenient for the participant.

Sam is a 'white', male social worker with 20 years' experience in the public sector, graduating as a mature age student at 30. Sam came to social work when looking for a degree to undertake at University that offered a profession that had a people and a practical focus. He also looked for a degree that had future growth opportunities and settled on social work after "a process of elimination". Sam has worked in a number of social work roles within the NSW public sector.

The data was transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis in a process described by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (p. 79). As recommended, upon transcribing I familiarised myself with the data, generated an initial code list (using a deductive analysis, coded for my research question), sorted and resorted the data manually (looking for the explicit meanings of the data) and finally defined and named three main themes (attempting to theorize the significance and implications of the themes).

Findings

This section reports the findings from the case study. The data from Sam's interview was grouped into three main themes and six sub-themes. The three major themes related to: working with 'marginalised people'; working as a social justice social worker; and working to exert influence or effect change.

'Marginalised People'

This first major theme addresses the context and the ways that critical social workers work with 'marginalised people'. These clients are marginalised by neo-liberal discourses, creating specific challenges for critical social work practice.

'Chaotic lives'

The 'marginalised people' that Sam has worked/works with face a series of complex and intersecting issues including addiction, mental health, relationship, legal issues

and homelessness. Some live "chaotic lives ... in whatever way you know, and [are] homeless or, or don't follow up and keep their care for mental health or drug and alcohol issues, that sort of thing". This affects their capacity to seek or receive services, as 'clients' need to be able to follow a social contract, for example, making and turning up for appointments or following a strict medication regime. People may have more pressing priorities, for example, to "get drugs for their addiction or for their habit or whatever. That priority is more important to them than say using a clean fit."

Layered onto this complex situation is the impact of being a voluntary or involuntary client. Voluntary clients have a choice of service, can opt out and are more in control of their own lives (as much as a neo-liberal society allows). Voluntary service users are also willing to accept the limits of the social worker's role. For example, understanding that if they disclose certain crimes they must be reported; "most people are accepting of that when they are voluntary client, but then there are involuntary clients as well which is a different, a different situation … you have to work differently with those clients". This includes "a lot of inviting … chasing up", but Sam highlights a stark gap in services for involuntary clients: the incapacity of society and current service system to "save … to rescue ... or stop bad things happening" to those people who refuse to engage. The absence of services options for these people can lead to "gaol or death".

'A different voice'

Sam outlined the way that he and others in his service, work critically. For example, on a panel deliberating on those at risk of hurting others, generally unintentionally, because of their 'chaotic lives' (being unable to follow a strict medication regime):

> *social workers bring with them a different type of experience around the social justice issues, around the experience of people, this is really important to be heard and this is a different voice than say, you know, a doctor.*

Sam meets clients 'where they are' and is person centred. For example, working with a person who comes to counselling under the influence of illegal drugs: "there is lots

of types of counselling and if the person's in front of you then, that's the time to provide support/counselling".

'The big grey area'

Often a managerialist location means working "around" or "within" the "fundamental flaws and fundamental barriers" in the system that may not be able to be changed and necessitates to "work under the radar a bit". For example, contracting with clients and explaining "if you told me any specific crimes I need to report back to police." This is raised "very quickly … if something comes up in that area."

However, this does not require abandoning policy, ethical or legal frameworks when working in this "big grey area". Sam identified that social workers cannot breach policy or break law: "if it becomes a black and white thing you can't do it". Sam works critically through dilemmas with colleagues or in supervision, checks what others do, stretches, works in or around but does not breach policy, considers and works through ethical issues. For example, when working with people whom he suspects may be committing crime, should he differentiate between property and violent crime, asking: "when does it become unacceptable?".

'Be good at your job'

The second major theme explores how Sam has actively positioned himself over his 20 year career to be able to work as a social justice, social worker. As outlined by Baines (2017b) it is important to be good at your job to effect change. Several themes identified in the data demonstrated the pro-active ways Sam ensures he is good at his critical social work job.

'Surround yourself with good people'

To sustain hope and to continue to work critically Sam pursues roles where he can "surround [himself] with good people". This includes the importance of fellow team members in creating a "nurturing" environment, to provide support and to assist in processing difficult client stories/issues: "colleagues at work that … can help process that, and move on from it and make sense of that, make meaning of it". Colleagues

also provided a place where Sam can check in around the difficult work 'under the radar': "I have always sought colleague or supervision support and talk it through and find out what other people are doing".

'Work on yourself'

Another important element to be 'good at your job' is the use of self. This includes "taking care of yourself", looking after one's "physical" and "spiritual" self and to meet personal needs as they change over time. The other is to work on yourself in different ways to ensure that your "own personal issues" do not "get in the way". These include:

> *many different types of supervisions … professional counselling yourself. So for your own personal issues that come up, finding ways to deal with that, your own family stuff, all that stuff needs work.*

'Ambassador for social work'

The final element identified in being a critical social worker is the way that Sam has learnt to conduct himself as a social worker over his career and how this enables his work to influence "systems … from a systemic level, to an interpersonal level or service level". This includes keeping the "professional hat on", as there is always an opportunity to have "impact" in "everything you say and do", as well as remaining aware that "you know you are an ambassador for social work and good practice".

'Will I stay or will I go?'

The last theme identifies the active role Sam has taken in steering his career, so that he is able to exert influence or effect change at an individual level and also in the longer term through "luck but a lot of hard work". Sam quickly left social work roles where he was unable to influence, for example, in a "fast", "tick a box type role" in an evidence based program, with no permission to stretch the policy and explore any of clients' complex issues. Another role was "very bureaucratic and very stifling". Each role, however, provided "fantastic learning" that could be used in other roles.

This contrasted with roles of 5-7 years length, where the roles provide the capacity to influence and change and work holistically, for example, in Sam's current position:

> *Yeah your role is to bring people into care and treatment to try and work with them in a holistic way and help, you know, problem solve, that they're dealing with on a frontline level. Yeah but also there's also systemic ways that we influence that as well in this job.*

A workplace culture and environment set by management was also identified as a key factor here. It would be a "struggle" to work in a conservative environment where, for example, he was not permitted to work with people under the influence of drugs.

Discussion

There have been a series of movements over the past 30 years which have sought to push back the encroachment onto social justice practice including radical, critical and anti-oppressive social work. Multiple authors (Evans & Harris, 2004; Humphries, 2016; Pease & Nipperess, 2016; Turbett, 2013) advocate finding the 'space' to resist at the micro-level of practice. For example, Baines (2016, P. xiii) states social workers can:

> *create space for themselves, each other, service users and community members to develop alternate narratives, shared dissident identities and build practices that stop outside management and government control to critically act and act on situations that are harmful and socially unjust.*

Conversely research conducted by Greenslade et al. (2015) and Carey & Foster (2011) found social workers feeling powerless and defeated by the neo-liberal context. The case study confirms mainstream organisations, including NSW Health, have been impacted by neo-liberalism with Sam noting there is "more bureaucracy … a move towards managerialist sort of processes and categorisations, a lot more computer work, a lot more assessments". There are stark service gaps where those with 'chaotic lives' or dogged self-determination prevents them working with services (within current capacity). However, this does not necessarily result in a feeling of powerlessness for the practitioner.

The case study of Sam demonstrates several important elements of 'doing' critical social work practice in mainstream organisations and finding the 'spaces' to work for empowerment and change. Sam actively sought positions where he can relieve oppression at both the individual and systemic level. Sam left positions where his work is prescribed by evidence-based models. Sam stayed in positions where he has access to legitimate power. Two different roles involved counselling work that was short and fast, yet one role was "invigorating" whilst the other was "tick a box". The access to legitimate power and its use in humane ways (Allan, 2009b), the possibility to make systemic changes in systems (trauma informed work), the opportunity to alleviate the pain for some who had never had their distress legitimated, are all examples of critical social work at both the individual and systemic level.

Another element identified is culture. Sam avoids conservative cultures and seeks managers, colleagues and teams who are supportive and workplaces where he can flourish. 'Professionalism' is also identified; not 'status', but being aware of the social work profession, of its power and impact and building and sustaining good relationships (Turbett, 2013).

The next element is critical reflection, a key feature of critical social work practice (Allan 2009b; Greenslade et. al., 2015; Pease & Nipperess, 2016; Stanford, 2011). In this case study 'bad social workers' let their own issues interfere with their work. Strategies to prevent this include self-care, supervision and professional counselling. The use of social work ethical frameworks was also highlighted, so that actions are carefully examined with peers and supervisors if working "under the radar" or when pushing the boundaries of policy (Stanford, 2011).

The final element is being 'good at your job' (Baines, 2017b). This includes developing a deep understanding of client's lives; understanding practice nuances, for example, working with involuntary and voluntary clients; taking learning from all roles (positive and negative); building on experiences and drawing on social work theories. It also includes working covertly at times 'under the radar' in the 'big grey area' in and around complex rules (Evans & Harris, 2004). Using the typology developed by Greenslade et al. (2015) Sam can be classed as a 'Lawful Activist' who

undertakes "forms of activism that do not break the law or cross ethical boundaries … looks for loopholes in policy and procedure to exploit rather than directly breaking rules"(p. 433).

Implications for practice and policy

It is important for new social workers to be aware of the impact of neo-liberal forces and managerialism on practice. However, the data in this case study highlights some of the ways that a social worker can position themselves to find the 'spaces' to relieve or at least resist oppression. This includes learning the context of their work ('chaotic lives'), the barriers in systems, practice complexities (voluntary/involuntary) and the importance of working ethically whilst finding the spaces to work in and stretch policy in a complex regulatory environment. Being highly critically reflective, caring for self, seeking workplaces with cultures, managers, teams where discretion to do creative, anti-oppressive work is allowed (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Turbett 2013) and supported (Stanford 2011) are also recommended. Workplaces that are concerned with the best interests of their clients should consider the creation of safe, supportive cultures that enable social workers to work overtly to achieve social justice for the people they work with, and to strive for longer term change.

Whilst hopeful, this case study has limitations, most notably the sample size. As this is a single interview the findings cannot be generalised. In addition, this paper did not consider how Sam may work to politicise his clients to understand the structural factors causing their oppression. Further research with a wider sample could consider how factors like gender, ethnicity, and experience-level, influence the ways that social workers can work critically in mainstream organisations. This could also provide further insight into the nature of the current practice landscape; broken (Greenslade et al., 2015) or just under siege?

Conclusion

As a social work student moving towards graduation, I found myself asking: "how do social workers in mainstream organisations practice critical social work"? My studies and reading have highlighted the challenges created for social work by a neo-liberal,

marketized and managerialist workplace. This article, drawing on a single case study, provides useful insight for new social workers on the change that can be achieved by a practitioner who positions them self to enable this outcome. It highlights the factors that workplaces could engender to ensure their social workers are enabled and supported to remain hopeful and fight oppression for individuals and longer term change.

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