Reflections on a misunderstood profession - Social Work 'Folk Devils and Moral Panic'

A talk by Prof. Graham Ixer, University of Winchester

Graham maintained that Social Work is a misunderstood profession because it lacks a coherent voice that defends it from political and media attack. He referred to Stanley Cohen’s book *Folk Devils and Moral Panic* in which Cohen showed how much the portrayal of youth violence in the 1960s was more theatre than reality. ‘The anti-youth culture of that time demonised the gang culture of ‘Mods’ and ‘Rockers’ creating a mythology about youth’. This is very similar to the way social work has been demonised in our times. Social workers are the folk devils, and the government, through the media, create moral panic as a way to control the profession.

What does history tell us? What lessons have been learned? What do we learn from evidence? There is a great deal of mythology.

Myth 1: All change is new. Social work policy in fact moves in cycles. For example, there is a debate about the way social workers train and which route to qualification is best. The new ‘Frontline’ and ‘Step Up’ initiatives are based on an apprenticeship model of learning on the job which we had in the 1970s with the Certificate of Social Services (CSS).

Myth 2: We always learn from our mistakes. In fact we rarely do learn from our mistakes, and where can recognise the learning we choose not to. An example of this is the privatisation of social care. We have not learned from the experience of the re-organisation of the NHS which the government claimed would bring many benefits including enormous cost savings. In reality the cost to close and re-open new organisations means that it will take many years to recoup the costs of the reorganisation. (The evidence for this is in the Department of Health’s own Financial Impact Assessment to the Health and Social Care Bill 2012.) 4000 NHS workers who were made redundant last year with huge redundancy payments have now all been re-employed by the NHS. In reality this was nothing to do with economics but more to do with political ideology. So why is it we continue to follow a similar path in social care?

Myth 3: People are interested in social work. They are not.

In fact Social Work training and education is more advanced than training within the NHS. Graham has researched the last 50 years of history of the regulation of social work education, and he highlights a number of features. First, the publication by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) in 1976 of the ‘values’ of
social work. These have given the profession an authority to challenge oppression in its many manifestations. However, in the 1980s these values became seen as ‘political correctness gone mad.’ CCETSW bravely stood up against the political tide by publishing its landmark text ‘One Small Step Towards Racial Justice’iv

Another key success has been in the way social work has embraced service user involvement, not as a token gesture but as a good example of collaborative enterprise. This has been much more successful than in health where moves towards patient participation have had only limited impact.

However, social work is still a profession of women in the context of patriarchy. There is another myth that social work is just about ‘caring’ and not a proper profession like medicine which is science based and controlled by men. In fact social work is modern, radical and a profession of highly trained practitioners.

In the 1980s senior politicians such as Virginia Bottomley pointed to a need for a knowledge base. ‘We teach skills too much and not enough on theory.’ This led to social work becoming a degree-level training. Then, post-Climbié, we heard how social workers need a more forensic understanding of family trauma and dysfunction. CCETSW had in fact developed standards for forensic social work but these were never used. Then, after the ‘Baby Peter’ scandal, we heard again that there is a need for more skills-based teaching. This was particularly emphasised in the Narey Report (2014). There is nothing new; we move in cycles. In fact the new government in 2010 even questioned whether social workers needed a qualification at all. The evidence in the demise of professional education for probation officers in England is a good example of why we would not want to go down that route.

**What does the evidence tell us?**

One problem is that there is no distinct authoritative body of evidence that defines what social work is. The attempt to define the ‘roles and tasks’ of social work did not work. The College of Social Work has just published a new version of this. We wait to see its effect.

Even more problematic—do we really know what works best for service users? Do we have the evidence that confirms which training route into practice leads to better social workers? In essence no!

Another myth is that medicine is better regulated than social work. The scandal in Bristol nearly saw the closure of the General Medical Council and as a result it had to make major changes to its regulatory functions. The government saw the GMC as an organisation for the profession run by the profession rather than a modern independent regulator with high public trust. Political interference driven by political ideology is not cheap. Social workers lose their professional sense of worth as a result of constant change and disruption.
International perspective

Can we learn anything from our international experience? It was ‘World Social Work Day’ on 18 March. Over 114 member countries were celebrating this event around the world. Social work is practised in many ways across the globe. For example, because of child exploitation there are social workers placed in some factories. China and Japan are developing social care as traditional families disperse. There is also a multiplicity of models in social work training across countries. Turmoil and war in one part of the globe sees rapid migration to another part. Social workers need training in dealing with the trauma of asylum seekers.

All international experience enriches yet also provides confusion about how we define our profession. Who do we speak with as like-minded professionals across the globe if we cannot recognise similar professional tasks in social work? Whether it is social work as healthcare in India, social pedagogy in Germany, or social welfare in Romania, it is still social work in its different traditions and manifestations.

Folk Devils and Moral Panic

Doctors are loved, highly skilled and trusted. Nurses are ‘angels’. So what are social workers? Misguided, untrained ‘do-gooders’ who get it wrong? Such misconceptions are propagated by the media, politicians and to some extent, the social work profession itself in its silence during times when its voice is most needed.

Society is given populist media stories. Social workers become the folk devils whilst cases like that of Baby Peter create the moral panic, as demonstrated by Ed Balls’ decision to interfere in the sacking of Sharon Shoesmith. Perhaps if we had a strong, independent professional College representing the voice of the profession this would not have happened.

Ministers come and go, but committed and compassionate professionals and academics stay, not because they have to but because they choose to.

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[These notes were compiled by Judith Niechcial of the Social Work History Network Steering Group from Graham Ixer’s notes for his talk, March 2014]