CPAG and Social Work: a critical friendship

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‘Neat accounting’ of influence is complex

• Distinguishing the impact of CPAG on interlinked legislation, policy & social work practice: both ‘direct’ - e.g. lobbying; ‘indirect’ - e.g. influence on research questions → policy design (virtuous circle)

• Traditional dominance of statutory agency employment of UK social workers makes this more tricky

• Context variables such as Seebohm re-organisation; HEI expansion; women’s movement; demographic trends.

• Radical social work movement in 1960s-70s.

• Genericism + professional optimism led to creation of BASW

• So CPAG early history coexisted with a robust debate in social work as to its role and ethos ...............tbc!
Highs and lows of changing relationship // social work and ‘material circumstance’

“There can be no doubt that the poverty of the working classes of England is due, not to their circumstances....but to their improvident habits and thrift-lessness. If they are ever to be more prosperous it must be through self denial and forethought”

(Charity Organisation Review 1881, quoted in Mooney 1998)
“When Jane learns that reform comes from within and not without, she will do very good work.”

(Placement supervisor report by psychiatric social worker, northern England local authority. 1964)
(in the late 1950s) the social work profession was trying to lift ‘the problem family’ out of the sterile field of biological determinism by rephrasing ‘the problem’ in psychiatric terms .......I questioned the assumption (eg Elizabeth Irvine et al....) that poor people are poor because they are immature. I suggested we should alter the environment in the first place before trying to treat the condition of ‘immaturity’.

Harriet Wilson, How the Child Poverty Action Group Came into Being. 1993
The **radical social work** position: Pearson 1973

Social workers’ choice of career ‘can be most usefully understood as an attempted solution to central cultural problems in advanced capitalist societies….while the choice of social work represents for some a sort of primitive political rebellion, the implications of this rebellion are not grasped and it becomes the privatised solution of a privileged minority’
Stevenson (2004) —as ever reasonable— sees argues an enduring necessary tension in social work, between an emphasis on the immediate well-being of the individual child and an emphasis on improvement of society in which child lives ............

She argues some arguments were simplistic and unfair: “what Clare Winnicott was hitting up against was a vision for social change which involved radical and fundamental alterations to the social structure and power relations within it. To proponents of this ideology, Clare and others like her appeared to stand for psychic conservatism, for a world view which urged people to adjust to the status quo and which used psychoanalytic theory to that end. Put baldly and simplistically, the charge was—new style social workers think only about relationships and not about poverty. This was profoundly unfair”
CPAG’s contribution to social work: key areas

- Consciousness raising – highlighted link // poverty, inequality & ‘intervention’ inc. reception into care
- Knowledge transfer & skills building
- Reframing the knowledge base by reframing the research questions
- Advocacy & rights advice
- A new organisation - FRG
Consciousness raising
re: link // poverty,
inequality, reception
into care etc.
Direct response to
1975 Act.
The argument in this paper is that inequality exists in child care. Certain children are unequal in that they and their families lack access to resources which are available to the majority. In response, the state has awarded greater emphasis to ‘rescue’ services, which remove children from their environments, rather than to reforms and services which provide the resources to enable more families to stay together’ (Holman 1976)
Reframing the knowledge base by reframing the questions
• Initiated era of more complex professional debate about the impact of poverty & structural adversity on parenting activity.

• Highlighted link // poverty and child outcomes.

• Facilitated a focus on services to mitigate effects; welfare rights role for s/w; expert welfare rights colleagues ; Sure Start menu
Legitimated a professional s/w focus on poverty and generated strategic wider alliances, e.g. in lobbying activities....links
‘an informal alliance of organisations concerned with legislation and policies affecting families & children, eg:

- Income maintenance and redistribution, particularly to benefit the person with primary responsibility for childcare
- Local and central govt. services for families and children, inc. day care education, health, housing, social work.
CPAG impacted on degree of poverty awareness in child care perspectives adopted by social work: tbc....

- Laissez faire & patriarchy
- state paternalism & child protection
- **kinship defenders**
- children’s rights & liberation

( Fox Harding 1982;1991)
Current, inter-related challenges to a progressive, poverty aware model of social work

- Legally binding targets on child poverty to be scrapped
- Uncertain role for s/w in this? Troubled Families – high stigma/low service threshold.....
- Privatised child protection services (MLA)
- Changes to social work education - move away from university, research based courses – e.g. Frontline

PLUS Abandonment by govt. of internationally accepted system of – structural - definitions of child poverty (income) to individual -life style / chances: eg addiction; family breakdown; debt; addiction - back to where we came in?