Neoliberalism and Australian social work: Accommodation or resistance?

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Abstract

● *Summary*: Since the mid-1970s the Australian welfare state has faced a continuing crisis of resourcing and legitimation. Social work as a central entity within the welfare state has been challenged in terms of to its value base and relevance. As with much of the Western world, this challenge has been heightened with the rise of neoliberalism, which has pervaded most aspects of Australian society. Neoliberalism has consequently had a profound effect upon Australian social workers. The challenges to the Australian welfare state and social work are from without and within, by neoliberal ideas and its practices.

● *Findings*: While neoliberalism's relationship to social work as a broad theme is explored in the literature, the complexity of marketization and inclusive aspects have not been considered in any detail in relation to social work. The evidence in the Australian context is even slimmer, and as a consequence the particularity of the Australian welfare state and its relationship to neoliberalism, and the consequences for Australian social work, remains largely untested. Furthermore, while there are some indications of the day to day impact on social work in the context of a post-welfare state regime, little work has been conducted on the capacity of neoliberalism to infiltrate social work through its new institutions of the social and thus become embedded in social work.

● *Application*: This article lays the foundations for a research project to examine the extent to which neoliberalism has become embedded in Australian social work and how social workers and social work educators are responding to these hegemonic influences. What are the ways in which social workers have become complicit in

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neoliberalism? Is Australian social work part of the neoliberal project to the point where neoliberalism has become part of its understandings and everyday activity? It is hoped that through this research, a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of neoliberalism on social work will contribute to the revitalization of critical social work in Australia and forms of resistance to the neoliberal project.

Keywords
globalization, managerialism, marketization, neoliberalism, resistance

Introduction

Neoliberalism has been a dominant and pervasive set of ideas and practices, predominantly in the Western world, for the best part of 30 years. Bourdieu (1998) suggests that at its core, neoliberalism involves the dominance of individualism and the destruction of collectivism. For Alessandrini (2002, p. 20), neoliberalism centers on changing the foundations of what has been considered civil society with a 'serious threat from the market and state sectors'. Bauman (2001) argues that an increased uncertainty is at the core of neoliberal endeavour. He outlines four consequences of neo-liberalism: the loss of state centred institutions; the moral blindness of unfettered market competition; the unbounded freedom given to capitalism; and a new form of interpersonal relationships founded on market individualism.

The hegemonic nature of neoliberalism is a common theme in the literature (George & Wilding, 2002; McDonald & Reisch, 2008; Wacquant, 2005). It is often presented as monolithic, leaving little room for challenge, let alone change. While a hegemonic view of neoliberalism is inviting, others suggest internal tensions exist which highlight its inherent instability. Peck (2002), for example, warns against over-generalized accounts of the supposed monolithic and omnipresent version of neoliberalism on the grounds that it fails to identify the inevitable local variability and complex internal considerations. Some writers are also keen to point out the potential for critical examination and change located within the tensions. Drawing upon Bourdieu (1998), Fitzsimons (2002, p. 2) asks: 'what might now be done as an interruption to neoliberal domination?'

While the welfare state has been under challenge from neoliberal ideas since the 1970s, it is only since the 1990s that the most marked effects have occurred, from trade liberalization, restructuring of labour market and privatization to fundamental challenges to fiscal spending on social provision. As a result of neoliberalism, social work faces particular issues and crises within the context of the political and social framework of the Australian welfare state. Because 'social work is a contingent activity, conditioned by and dependent upon the context from which it emerges and which it engages' (Harris, 2008, p. 662), changes in welfare regimes will shape the way in which social work is constituted and practiced. Thus neoliberalism impacts not only on the structural and organizational context of social work practice but also in terms of how it is enacted.

The particular focus of this article is to explore what the literature has to say about the impact of these processes and ideas on social work and what it says about social workers' accommodation and resistance to these pervasive influences.

Neoliberalism and social work

The crisis of the Australian welfare state, and the resulting crisis of social work reached a zenith with what Bourdieu (1998) describes as 'the neoliberal project'. Concerns over the impact of neoliberalism on social work are evident in various sources, with strong evidence of dismantling, restructuring and fiscal strangling as part of neoliberal ideas and practices (Baines, 2006; Dominelli, 1999; Jones, 2000; Ferguson, Lavalette, & Whitmore, 2005; McDonald & Gray, 2006; Mendes, 2009). There is, however, some conjecture about the nature of the challenges social work faces and its possible responses in the context of neoliberalism (Ferguson, 2004; Leonard, 1997; Mendes, 2003).

Within the literature, the impact of neoliberalism on social workers is developed on a number of fronts. First, there are broad concerns over its impact on the welfare state generally and the flow-on consequences for social work; and second, there are more detailed investigations of the micro-impact of neoliberal ideas and practices on social workers' role, values and function (Baines, 2006, 2008, 2010; Dominelli, 1999; Ferguson et al., 2004; Jones, 2000; McDonald & Gray, 2006; Mendes, 2009).

The literature thus suggests that the impact of neoliberalism ranges across broad structural and organizational frameworks, from policy design and process to consideration of values and constructs of practice. Baines's (2006) research demonstrates that social workers feel strongly impacted by numerous constraints on their work at both the macro-structural level of the policy and organizational context and the micro-interpersonal level. Fundamentally, what the 'social' means is substantively altered in terms of how social workers can fulfil their mandate for the social dimension of public life (Lorenz, 2005).

The structural impact of neoliberalism on social work

Several key themes emerge from the literature on the structural impact of neoliberalism on social work. The first of these themes is the loss of institutional legitimacy and the denial of the need for welfare. For some, social work has become the excluded and oppressed victim of managerialism and globalization (Gray, 2004). Its institutional and organizational legitimacy, traditionally provided by the state, has been usurped (Harris, 2003).

The process by which neoliberalism has impacted on the welfare state and social work has been through the agencies of managerialism and marketization (Ferguson, 2008; Harris, 2003). They are identified as working in concert, but contingent upon individual nation-states' social and political framework. Marketization controls the 'demand side', inserting individualism for collectivism

and consumerism for welfare statism; and managerialism controls the 'supply side', through corporatization and privatization (Harris, 2003). The combination of these market approaches have provided a seemingly universal penetration into welfare states and compromised social work's moral authority (Dominelli, 1999).

Neoliberal cost containment has resulted not only in the cutting of services but has also resulted in what Fabricant and Burghardt (1992, p. 128) describe as 'new managerial practices and structures' which result in workers being exposed to contradictory pressures from structural changes. Carey (2008a) argues that over the past two decades privatization has impacted upon social workers and service users. In Europe, this has meant chaotic, ineffectual and unfair service delivery through 'the rapid transfer from central to local government responsibility; new managerialist roles for social work; the development of hired hands social work using locums and independent and self-employed practitioners' (Carey, 2008a, p. 922). Sewpaul (2006) similarly, in post-apartheid South Africa, documents the impact of the neoliberal framework on the level and forms of social work service delivery.

The research evidence in the Australian context is slimmer. Findley and McCormack's (2005) work highlights several key areas of the impact on social work practitioners: tightened criteria for client eligibility, means testing expanded and used for exclusion, moves to transfer financial responsibility to individuals and families, and active 'flexible' labour market policies.

Jessop (2003) suggests that while the market remains largely unfettered, the public sector of welfare is being increasingly regulated through privatization, fiscal restraint and new processes of accountability and control. This penetration, in Dominelli's (1996) view, has made a radical alteration to both the organization and value base of the welfare state, and social work. For example, in the United Kingdom, 'market' rhetoric has displaced professional discretion with technocratic skills, with a particular form of business thinking (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Jones, 2005). Consequently what is considered essential knowledge has been reconstructed (Harris, 2003).

Another theme in the literature explores the multi-dimensional nature of neoliberalism and its impact through what is described as 'marketization' and 'inclusive' approaches. Much discussion centres on the examination of 'Third Way' policy approaches in Europe (Graefe, 2005; Jessop, 2003). Opponents of the 'Third Way' in Europe suggest that it has simply sought to maintain neoliberalism's main agenda; the acceptance of a business culture, increased surveillance, and the exclusion of social workers from policy processes (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Green-Pedersen, 2001).

The impact on service delivery to clients as a consequence of neoliberalism is of concern to Strier, Surkis, and Biran (2008), who in the context of Israeli 'welfare to work' programs highlight neoliberalism's heavy impact on individual clients. Welfare to work programs trapped individuals in a cycle of even harsher dependence on financial support from the family or charitable organizations.

Neoliberalism also has a structural impact on social policy. The impact of changed globalized social policy frameworks place social work in an invidious

position to conform to a set of political conditions uncritically in a manner anathema to what have been social work principles. This necessitates the critical importance of renewed policy frameworks to counter neoliberalism (Lorenz, 2005). Fitzsimons (2000), for example, highlights that in New Zealand, neoliberal social policy initiatives have shifted focus from the collective to the individual, and have sought to reinvent the community as issues of social capital and social cohesion, while relocating social welfare to the community as individual responsibility.

The nature of the profession of social work is also shaped by the consumerist dimension of neoliberalism. Harris (1999) demonstrates the structural demise of what he describes as 'bureau-professional' and its replacement with a 'consumer-citizen' identity whereby the professional is bypassed in the consumer relationship, or required to take customer service type roles. His research highlights a more profound development of what constitutes 'social citizenship' under neoliberalism. Singh and Cowden (2009) argue that under neoliberalism, social workers are not there to provide theoretical explanations of poverty, racism and homophobia etcetera. Rather, they are there to provide a service. In this context, theorizing is a luxury that cannot be afforded in a context of the specific demands of practice.

The micro-impact of neoliberalism on social workers

While the literature shows a representation of the structural impact of neoliberalism on social work, several studies highlight the effects of neoliberalism on social workers' vision, practice knowledge, skills and relationships (Baines, 2006, 2008, 2010; Ferguson, 2004; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006).

This volume of work, however, is less than substantial in the Australian context. Findlay and McCormack (2005), in reviewing the literature, point out that while neoliberalism is a prolific topic of research generally, there are few studies that explore the impact upon social work practitioners. From the research that has been done, several main themes emerge: the de-valuing of social workers' skills and knowledge, the transformation of social workers' relationships with clients and compromised professional identity. Challenge to, or loss of, social workers' vision is a common theme in the literature, often depicting a landscape with little opportunity to oppose neoliberalism's hegemonic views.

In examining the intellectual activity within social work under conditions of neoliberalism, Singh and Cowden (2009) found the erosion of what they described as 'bottom-up' social work. Increasingly, front-line social workers felt despair about the capacity to work with clients and communities outside of the managerial and regulatory framework. Hence, at a personal level, the impact of globalization and marketization has resulted in demoralization, alienation and anger among social workers, according to Jones (2005), with particular grievances about funding, restructuring and the overpowering of social work's vision. Baines's (2006) study draws out the dilemmas of practice, the difficulty in resisting and the loss of vision.

In the Australian context, research by McDonald and Chenoweth (2009, p. 144) into welfare reform in Centrelink (an Australian Government statutory agency

providing income security benefits) found that the managerialist framework of institutional change has the capacity to seriously destabilize social work, 'particularly in that they promote values and rationalities at odds with those assumed by the profession'. Given the scale and dimension of the impact, many social workers try and shield themselves from the changes by focusing on therapeutic and clinical work where they can use their professional methods and try and ignore the changing service delivery designs (Lorenz, 2005).

A key theme that is prominent in the literature is the devaluation of social workers' knowledge and skills. What had been assumed as the essential knowledge and skills of social workers has been challenged. Ritzer (2000) interprets the reconstruction of skills and knowledge through the prism of 'McDonaldization'. This process, whereby conventional skills and knowledge are replaced with requirements for efficiency, calculability, predictability and control through non-human technology, has a synergy with social workers' circumstances (Dustin, 2007).

Consistent with the impact of neoliberalism on social workers' knowledge and skills, is a deleterious impact on job role, occupations and professional identity (McDonald & Jones, 2000). For many social workers, this has been predicated upon a new consumerist model of social service delivery and consequent transformation of the accepted beliefs of social work (Carey, 2008a).

Research on the impact of neoliberalism on frontline social workers in local authorities in England (Jones, 2001, 2005) uncovered high levels of demoralization and alienation among social workers predicated on a shift described as a move from 'depth' to 'surface' social work (Howe, 1996). Similarly, Ferguson (2004) identifies a simplified neoliberal social work of 'what works' becoming a dominant practice philosophy, while hiding its essentialist behaviourism.

Various writers have conceptualized this shift in social work practice in different ways. For Harris (2003), it reflects the emergence of 'the social work business'. For Jones (2005), it is about the dominance of 'neoliberal social work'. For Healy and Meagher (2004, p. 257), social work has to deal with 'increasing fiscal constraint and rapidly changing modes of public administration in the sector, and with the entrenched cultural devaluation of caring work'. For Carey (2008a), neoliberalism has created a matrix of administrative minutiae, contract management, assessment protocols, case plans and an impenetrable regulatory framework.

Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie (2009, p. 113) confirm that 'it has become increasingly clear that the emancipatory capacity of social work has been eroded'. Similarly, Baines's (2006) study demonstrated an erosion of social workers' traditional professional knowledge and skills. Parton (2008, p. 253) notes that social work skills and practices have been transformed over the past 30 years, whereby 'social work now operates less on the terrain of the ''social'' and more on the terrain of the ''informational'''. As Singh and Cowden (2009, p. 12) point out, neoliberalism 'attempts to de-intellectualise social work and characterise it simply as a set of competencies'. It also attempts to destroy the emancipatory and critical potential within the social work.

Other studies focus more specifically upon social workers' relationships. Harlow (2003) offers the view that the organizational practices of managerialsim has replaced other approaches to social service and the philosophies that underpin them, resulting in a loss of emotional content for social work practice. For many social workers, the impact of neoliberalism on practice relationships often required them to clothe it 'within the language of consumerist managerialism, epitomised by the obsession with performance management and targets, preoccupations which undercut the capacity of social workers to critically address and support people who are their clients' (Singh & Cowden, 2009, p. 11). Neoliberalism has meant, in Harris's (1999, p. 932), view the replacement of the 'dominance of bureau-professional regimes in the social democratic welfare state in the interests of "customers" rooted in the marketization and managerialization of welfare'.

This reconstruction of professional relationships in social work is one concern raised in McDonald's (2005) study which found evidence of the displacement of feminist models with neoliberal models of service delivery in domestic violence services. The reconstruction of the relationship has been the pathologizing and individualizing of issues and the replacement of social and political rights with clinical case management.

While the literature identifies broad concerns about the impact of neoliberalism in organizational and structural terms; and provides detailed interpretation of the micro-impact on social workers, less prominent is the literature that explores the infiltration of social work by neoliberalism and social work's contribution to the new neoliberal social institutions.

This body of literature suggests that not only are social workers victims of neoliberal globalization but they also appear very adaptable and perhaps amenable to its influence as well. Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie (2009, p. 113) in providing a critical analysis, suggest that in the context of youth justice, 'social work has not only been the victim of recent changes, but that it has also withdrawn from the debate on youth justice'. Lorenz (2005) similarly expresses the view that social workers exhibit an ambiguous role in relation to neoliberalism.

Carey (2008b) argues that neoliberalism has penetrated the mind of social workers at both conscious and unconscious levels to the extent that they are often unable to recognize forms of social work that are outside of the neoliberal agenda. Some social workers are unable to step outside of a neoliberal consciousness to critically reflect on the impact of managerialist discourses on their practice. However, Harris and White (2009) argue that while all social workers are subjected to neoliberal discourses, they do have the capacity to resist.

Resistance to neoliberalism by social workers

Resistance by social workers to neoliberalism is evidenced in a number of sources; however, it remains a relatively under researched topic, particularly in the Australian context. Resistance is often depicted as a forlorn act of anti-social

behaviour, whereas Turiel (2003, p. 115) identifies that resistance and subversion are part of everyday life and 'integral to the process of development'.

Baines's (2006) research exploring the nature of and resistance by social workers to neoliberalism in Canada and Australia, shows evidence of resistance to aspects of organizational and work practice, but reflects that social workers were less likely to draw broader connections with globalization processes. Similarly, Findley and McCormack (2005) report that, while there is evidence of social workers' awareness of global issues, research suggests that they show less insight into the structural issues of globalization surrounding them (Findley & McCormack, 2005).

The centrality of the role of resistance in social work is proffered by Singh and Cowden (2009) who suggest that using power to uncover, confront and resist are key conceptions of the job of social workers. Similarly, according to Jordan (1990), resistance forms part of a process for social workers where even if they cannot resolve citizenship issues, 'social work can at least bear witness to injustice and refuse to collude with the exclusion or coercion of service users that would not be practised on members of more advantaged groups' (cited in Harris, 1999, p. 933). Singh and Cowden (2009) extend this, citing the importance of identifying social workers as intellectuals as a necessary key to development of mechanisms of resistance and resilience. They suggest that this may form a revitalized professionalism.

For Harris (1999, p. 933), resistance is tied up with the development of new alliances where 'social workers are committed to learning from citizens, and to working within and against the quasi-market'. This is a view supported by Beresford and Croft (2004), who argue that the ambiguity and uncertainty of social work's position require it to develop lines of resistance through alliances with service users and their organizations and movements to overcome the new hegemony of individualism.

White (2009) suggests that there are spaces for resistance to the neoliberal agenda within the existing frameworks of power. Neoliberalism can be interrupted and disturbed through the possibilities provided by professional discretion. It does not require resistance on the grand scale through anti-capitalist and anti-globalization protests but rather acts of rebellion by individual workers who challenge and reinterpret managerialist discourses and procedures. This involves being in and against neoliberalism in social work.

Conclusion

While neoliberalism's relationship to social work as a broad theme is explored in the literature, the complexity of marketization and inclusive aspects have not been considered in any detail in relation to social work. The evidence in the Australian context is even slimmer, and as a consequence the particularity of the Australian welfare state and its relationship to neoliberalism, and the consequences for Australian social work, remains largely untested. Furthermore, while there are some indications of the day-to-day impact on social work in the context of

a post-welfare state regime, little work has been conducted on the capacity of neoliberalism to infiltrate social work through its new institutions of the social and thus become embedded in social work.

The literature shows strong evidence of exploration of the micro-issues facing social workers within organizations and to some degree the impact on their conceptions of social work practice. Less evidence is available regarding the embedded impact of neoliberalism on social workers in the Australian welfare state context, or the tensions between this embedding and resistance by social workers.

This literature review forms the basis of an empirical project which aims to explore the extent to which neoliberalism has become embedded in Australian social work and how social workers and social work educators are responding to these hegemonic influences. What are the ways in which social workers have become complicit in neoliberalism? Is Australian social work part of the neoliberal project to the point where neoliberalism has become part of its understandings and everyday activity? It is hoped that through this research, a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of neoliberalism on social work will contribute to the revitalization of critical social work in Australia and forms of resistance to the neoliberal project.

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