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THE RE-AWAKENING ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN POLICYMAKING FOLLOWING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: LESSONS FOR EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

Abstract

Social workers have contributed to policy analysis and planning since the rise of the discipline's professional identity. Through lobbying, policy advocacy and macro-practice, responses about human rights and social justice are crafted and integrated into international and transnational social work practice. However, these roles have been diminished over recent years to standardise and confine the profession to the limits of a given nation's legal and social status. Public crises like the recent novel virus SARS-CoV-2 force us to rethink the role of social workers, especially regarding their contribution to the development of social policy and policy practice. This paper considers whether social workers are well prepared to take on these roles again, when historically education and practice have shied away from them, leaving contemporary practitioners in a predicament. There are both challenges and opportunities in social policy arising from COVID-19 and this paper argues the need to re-emphasise social workers' role in social policy in making recommendations for education and practice.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, social policy, policy practice, social work

Introduction

Rogowski (2020) points out that social care has become more punitive in the last decade; neoliberalism and austerity measures have led to heightened managerialism and a focus on performativity – hence, efficiency, rather than effectiveness. This has largely annihilated the altruistic character of social work services and organisations, which require selflessness and concern for the wellbeing of those at the receiving end of the services.

Undoubtedly, organisational competition and funding re-allocations (see Bonner, 2020) have had a countereffect on those values and limit social work capacities in macro-practice. The recent pandemic has shaken up social work, its education

and practice, by re-awakening previously established roles in social policy and policy practice. This paper is a conceptual discussion of this and argues that:

1. Social work in the 21st century, in the UK, has not equipped professionals adequately to exercise policy practice. This left the profession helpless in the face of the demands of COVID-19.
2. Social work education needs to revisit its curriculum and start offering specialist social work training for crises while acknowledging that generic degrees may not be the most effective way forward.

Social Policy, Politics and Social Work

Social work is concerned with the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities, and wider society; it is the accumulation of all efforts to improve and maintain wellbeing. From philanthropic acts that were carried out predominantly by women (Healy, 2008), social work transformed into an organised effort that is professionalised, giving it rigour, and giving practitioners legitimate power to influence change.

Social work's commitment to influencing social policy has been debated among scholars and practitioners since the beginning of the 20th century (Schneider and Netting, 1999; Domanski, 1998). '...many social workers such as Jane Addams, Grace and Edith Abbott, Sophia Breckenridge, Jeanette Rankin, Frances Perkins, Harry Hopkins, Wilbur Cohen, Bertha Reynolds, Richard Cloward, Charles Grosser, Whitney Young, Ron Dellums, Barbara Mikulski, and others, have steadfastly proposed and tried to influence social legislation, policies and ordinances' (Schneider and Netting, 1999, p. 349). Yet, as has been proposed by Thompson (1994, p. 457), the profession of social work has been continuously – to date I would argue – 'at war with itself'. This reflects the tension between the responsibility to respond to social issues and promote social justice, and the obligation to support the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals.

The profession of social work has a Marxist view of human nature – the view that humans are organically led by the principles of altruism and prosociality (Ferguson and Lavalette, 1999). This was initially seen through the activism in the 19th and 20th centuries that surfaced in the profession and lent history to it (Iatridis, 1995). The Poor Law in 1601 emphasised the need to support those in precarious situations, by the parishes, and the Renaissance and the Enlightenment influenced change in the welfare system (Webb and Webb, 2019). Such historical landmarks separated the work of the parishes from more organised activities that were aimed at the welfare of those in most need (also see Rogowski, 2020).

Younghusband (1981) discussed in detail three of the first pioneers of social work, whose activities emphasise how social work is a child born from challenging and opportunistic political ideologies and deformed social policy that represents

structural inequalities and injustice. Younghusband (1981) referred to the Charity Organisation Society (COS), Octavia Hill, and the Toynbee Hall Settlement. All three abovementioned pioneers, starting with the COS in 1869, and continuing with Octavia Hill's work, and then the settlement movement, founded in 1884, had a Christian character and proposed a preconceived ideology of wellbeing and welfare (Younghusband, 1981). To oppose the political theory that aimed for all members of society to loosen their dependency, the work of these pioneers was seen as philanthropic in character. Regardless, such work was tremendously influential in the development of social work, its critical and radical character, and its contribution to social policy and action.

The values of the Fabian Society (i.e., equality, freedom, and fellowship) (George and Wilding, 1976) were foundational to social work and its contribution to social policy and tackling phenomena affecting wider communities, and to legislation influenced by social work, such as child labour legislation and health programmes (Dolgoft, Feldstein and Skolnik, 1993).

Settlement Houses were paramount in the work of social workers, in the first part of the 20th century, as they balanced the social (promoting social justice in society) and psychological (working directly with individuals to support their wellbeing) aspects of the profession's practice. Specifically, Jane Addams was keen that Settlement Houses were the predominant source of information and data gathering to influence change in legislation (for more on the principal development of the Settlement Houses, see Addams, 1959).

The role of social work and social workers in social policy, across the decades in the 20th century, has been well exemplified in Schneider and Netting (1999). Turning to the 21st century, though, it is important to put some emphasis on the political ideology that shapes social work's influence in this area – or lack thereof.

Strier and Feldman (2018) argued that neoliberalist ideas and neoliberalism have reshaped the landscape of social work. Their argument extends to the marketisation thesis and social entrepreneurship, both of which lead to necessary changes in the infrastructure of social welfare. Neoliberalism, in this sense, has a more hybrid character (Schram, 2015); it necessitates a strong State to regulate markets and behaviours of social actors, but also one that 'passively observes the competition among social claims' (Strier and Feldman, 2018, p. 755). Such trends pose new challenges to social workers and demand a renewed contribution to policy practice (for an analysis of policy practice in social work, see Iatridis, 1995). Examples of social workers' policy action include campaigning to stop cutbacks in services (Carey and Foster, 2011), and challenging neoliberal activity altogether (Dodson, 2009).

On the contrary, Harlow et al. (2013) opine that neoliberalism (as well as managerialism which we discuss in the next section) has also benefited social work,

adding to the reconfiguration of the profession. It is since the end of WWII that such benefits have gradually emerged, yet with negative effects evident only in recent decades. Clarke and Newman (1993) put it best, claiming social work to be a construct of the bureau-professional regime. Indeed, following the devastating post-war state of the UK (i.e., the socio-economical-political impact of WWII) (Clapson and Larkham, 2013), as well as other nations, administrative mechanisms were necessary to help realise policies that would remedy the situation.

Of course, until the late 1980s, before Margaret Thatcher gained power, the blurriness of the boundaries between social work and religious organisations and institutions was profitable for all (Clapson and Larkham, 2013). Religious organisations and institutions maintained their legitimacy in the restoration of the nation, beyond religious practice, and social work preserved its overlapping character of altruism and professionalism. On the other hand, the nation had at its disposal two, and not one, sources of support, ready for action.

In summary, “under neoliberalism welfare and penal policy have seen an ideological and cultural shift which essentially emphasises a ‘War on the Poor’, rather than what should be the case, a ‘War on Poverty’” (Rogowski, 2020, p. 143). This perfectly reflects the inner war of social work, one that is not unquestionably apparent to professionals; social work practice in the last two decades shifted increasingly toward ‘supporting the poor’ but dissociated itself from social action aimed at ‘tackling poverty’. The next section stresses this further with a focus on managerialism and privatisation.

The Standardisation of the Profession

Social work has, in the last three decades, been undergoing a process of standardisation – the constant attempt to regulate practice and decision-making. It is undeniable that such developments help professionalise the discipline in some ways while providing legitimacy to social work services and organisations providing social care (Ponnert and Svensson, 2016). These developments, however, also robbed the profession of its underpinning principles of curiosity and creativity. In other words, the more guidelines that practitioners must follow and the more legislation they should apply through practice, the less space there is for advocacy and challenging injustices, unless this is suggested by the ‘guidelines’. Ponnert and Svensson (2016) argued the standardisation of social work to be an attempt to meet organisational demands, which in the face of neoliberalism, are more important than professional values; given that the former closely match what markets require.

One way in which this is exemplified is in managerialism, which arose in the 1990s and continues to dictate practices (Lawler, 2018). In their analysis of the impact of managerialism on human services, Tsui and Cheung (2004, pp. 437-438) argued that ‘managerialism itself reflects the powerful dominance of market capi-

talism over the world'. Specifically, it reflects neoliberal ideologies, or the means to 'neoliberalise' social work. Managerialism turned into a dominant ideology for public policy making (Rogowski, 2020; Tsui and Cheung, 2004) dispossessing social work professionals from the frontline of policy action.

Tsui and Cheung (2004) further highlighted the following realities:

- There are customers; and managers, who are key persons in an organisation, not the frontline staff.
- Frontline staff are viewed as employees, distant from the managers, not as professionals.
- Management knowledge became the highest knowledge – as opposed to professional knowledge.
- The market became the environment – the context in which practice occurs.
- The focus is on efficiency, not effectiveness.
- Fiscal relationships became more important.
- The quality of services is measured with standardisation.

These realities reflect what followed in social work policy and practice during the 21st century – not necessarily at an international level, but largely in Western countries – also summarised in Rogowski's work (2020; 2011).

Rogowski (2011) argued that the changes to the measurement of the successes of social work intervention based on having met managers' targets have resulted in the deformation of the profession. This returns to the discussion about neoliberalism and ideologies that see markets as superior to the entities, above the State, and services as needing tight management. As a result, and according to Rogowski (2011), the potential for progressive social work practice (especially critical and radical social work) is reduced. Following the New Labour Party's embrace of neoliberal ideologies (UK), 'public services, including social work, had to become more like businesses, operate in ways drawn from the private sector, and function in a context that was as market-like as possible', while this 'meant social workers being engrossed in the competitive stimulus of market forces, with managers being the main instrument of effective social policy rather than professionals' (Rogowski, 2011, p. 158).

The deskilling of the professional

Professionalisation, managerialism and privatisation present social work with growing challenges. Harlow et al. (2013) discussed at length the impact of the re-shaping of social welfare, increasing professionalisation in the context of neoliberal ideologies and marketisation, as well as managerialism. Without a doubt, their work is complementary to this paper, as it highlights the fragmentation of social work,

due to all the above; a fragmentation that following the COVID-19 pandemic is more palpable than ever.

Pointedly, Harlow et al. (2013, p. 540) suggested that ‘fragmentation has occurred in at least two different ways: firstly, generic social work has been undermined as work with adult offenders has been removed to a specialist area requiring a different qualification [...] Secondly, fragmentation has also occurred in relation to day-to-day tasks: specialist teams are responsible for initial contact, assessment, and intervention or service provision’. Social work gradually became more technical, defined by prescribed practices that do not allow space for advocacy, unless balanced with the demands of the social service organisation each time.

As mentioned earlier, the standardisation of social work may be beneficial in reducing uncertainty and maximising efficiency in service delivery. Yet it rather deskills professionals and leaves newly qualified practitioners in a precarious position due to the lack of opportunities to develop skills and knowledge in critical and radical social work. Such circumstances can have detrimental effects on social work and social workers, but most importantly for service consumers; professional judgment is no longer the product of the use of best knowledge and evidence, but the use of best managerial knowledge and practice tools as limitations (Ponnert and Svensson, 2016).

Reminiscing Lipsky’s street-level bureaucracy theory, Evans and Harris (2004) asked whether social workers have turned into street-level bureaucrats; administrative or people-processing individuals. Similarly, Ellis (2007) argued that assessing eligibility criteria – an everyday task for social work practitioners – requires street-level bureaucrats, but not policy advocates or radical social workers. These are some examples of the transformation of the place of social workers in practice, within and beyond organisations.

This and the previous sections laid out a concise story of the transformation of social work over the decades of neoliberalism, managerialism, privatisation and standardisation. As a result of these changes over at least 30 years, it is only sensible to consider that we no longer argue that professionals in the field are deskilled, but that new professionals are being registered who lack skills to apply in macro-practice (Reisch, 2016).

Social work education and training have been equally affected by neoliberal agendas and, in the UK, Thatcherism (i.e., the commitment to free enterprise, British nationalism, the strengthening of the nation, and a strong belief in civic responsibility). As a result, professionals in the field, while having experienced the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and associated measures, were shocked and inadequately equipped to respond to the demands for intervention on macro and policy levels, as is discussed later in this paper.

The Impact of COVID-19

In December 2019, a novel Coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China, which rapidly spread across the world. The new virus is popularised as COVID-19 (i.e., Coronavirus Disease 2019), and on 11 May 2020, the World Health Organisation (2020) declared it a global pandemic. The virus affected thousands of people and had tremendous socio-politico-economic, psychological, mental health and spiritual impact.

New cases of Coronavirus grew continuously in 2020. On 22 January 2020, 555 new COVID-19 cases were recorded worldwide (Statista, 2020a). This number grew to 126,702 people being infected by 11 March 2020, the day the situation was declared a pandemic, and to the astounding size of 77,364,641 cases by 21 December 2020 (Statista, 2020a). Further, as of 22 December 2020, there had been approximately 1,713,000 coronavirus deaths worldwide, with the USA, Brazil, India and Mexico being the four countries with the most recorded coronavirus deaths by the same date (Statista, 2020b).

COVID-19 caused colossal disruptions to everyday life; socially, economically, spiritually, mentally, and in many other ways. Abiad, et al. (2020) analysed the predictability of the economic impact of COVID-19 across developing Asian countries and drew hypotheses that referred to a worldwide impact. Specifically, their analysis, derived from varied scenarios, suggested a global financial impact of \$77 million to \$347 billion, which was reflective of 0.1 per cent to 0.4 per cent of the global GDP. These estimations, albeit not confirmed, showed a grim picture that showed challenges for developed nations and exacerbated limitations that developing nations face. Further, Ashraf (2020) examined the effect of government responses to COVID-19 (e.g., quarantining measures) on marketing and finance, concluding that there has been a negative direct impact on stock market returns. This indirectly negatively influenced government finance and economic contingency plans. In addition, Maital and Barzani (2020, p. 2) argued that the main financial impact of COVID-19 was ‘on the supply side of the global economy’, and, therefore, it was likely that a global recession would follow. This information merely touches the surface of the vast repercussions of COVID-19, globally and independently in each country. Yet, it stirs some thinking about what the implications might be, especially in the context of poverty, deprivation, social justice and human rights, and what role social work and social workers may play in the future.

COVID-19 and associated measures (e.g., quarantining and social isolation) continue to have a monumental impact on social life. The disruption of daily routines, such as employment, school life, and religious practice, to name a few, has been experienced by everyone, but certainly differently (Pentaris, 2021). For example:

- many individuals working in the healthcare system may experience changes in their routines because of specialist tasks and demands at work following

COVID-19. Others, who may not be essential workers and either work from home or have been furloughed, will have had a different experience; having their routine paused and transformed completely.

- some may have experienced the pandemic and the periodic quarantining measures differently on a financial level (van Dalen and Henkens, 2020)
- some may have been vastly impacted due to their levels of digital poverty and/or digital literacy (Seah, 2020; Watts, 2020; Beaunoyer, Dupéré and Guitton, 2020)
- some may have been impacted due to the lack of access to religious services (Bryson, Andres and Davies, 2020; Hill, Gonzalez and Burdette, 2020)
- others may have been impacted due to lack of contact and connectedness with family and friends (Milne et al., 2020; Cawthon et al., 2020), especially if any were dying of COVID-19 or non-COVID-19 related causes (Pentaris, 2021).

These and many more circumstances have led to increased anxiety (Mazza et al., 2020; Bäuerle et al., 2020; Hyland et al., 2020), mental health challenges and higher suicidality (Shahul-Hameed et al., 2021; Sher, 2020), exacerbation of social inequalities (Witteveen, 2020; Pentaris, 2021), heightened digital poverty and illiteracy (Seah, 2020), as well as decline in physical health (Williams et al., 2020) and high risks of prolonged grief (Doka, 2021; Neimeyer, Milman and Lee, 2021). Of course, different parts of the population experienced these circumstances differently, and this led to more complex situations that social work needs to respond to.

The impact of COVID-19 has been disproportionate among different ethnic groups. According to Public Health England (2020), members of the Black and Asian minority ethnic (BAME) community were four times more likely to contract the virus and die of it, with men in this group having a higher chance. Similarly, disabled people, especially those with a sensory impairment have been highly disadvantaged as COVID-19 related measures like quarantining, have had a larger impact on them – particularly regarding accessibility using communication and information technologies (Jalali et al., 2020). Others who have been affected disproportionately are those of a religious affiliation and who are practising. Sulkowski and Ignatowski (2020), among others, offered that during social isolation and physical distancing, the shutting of religious institutions left many believers who practise their faith in a precarious situation, wherein they lost an important part of their lives that gives meaning to difficult situations like the recent pandemic.

Moreover, children's education and socialisation were massively affected by responses to COVID-19, with schools being closed for a lengthy period, and periodically as the year 2020 progressed (Viner et al., 2020; Drane, Vernon and O'Shea, 2020). Children had to remain at home, where parents had to home-school them,

while Ministries and Departments of Education across nations were developing the right platforms and training their staff to be able to enhance the input of teachers even further in that period (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Of course, this was questionable at times, primarily given the statistics about digital poverty and digital illiteracy; not only regarding the children in school years, but teachers and educators altogether (van Lancker and Parolin, 2020). For example, in India 50% of the population does not have access to the Internet (World Economic Forum, 2020), while in Germany (König, Jäger-Biela and Glutsch, 2020) gaps were identified in teacher competence in online teaching, and quick responses were attempted.

Another target group that was largely influenced by the COVID circumstances was older people, especially those aged 65 and over with comorbidity (Heid et al., 2020; Pentaris et al., 2020). With older individuals considered one of the most vulnerable cohorts, COVID-19-related measures not only placed restrictions but homogenised this group even further and allowed for structural oppression to be exercised.

This section's purpose is to merely indicate the abundant and intricate implications of COVID-19 and related government responses. Notwithstanding the importance of minimising the spread of the virus, such measures had long-lasting implications. COVID-19 brought an unprecedented and shocking experience to us all, but above all reminded us of social inequalities that have been present all along and have not been adequately and efficiently measured and tackled (also see Pentaris, 2021). Since June/July 2020 –when the knowledge of the virus had increased – careful and sophisticated approaches were employed to respond to COVID-19 and identify social injustices that need political action and policy planning (Pentaris, 2021).

In this call for action, social work, given the skills and underpinning values of the profession, can reclaim its original status in caring for the individual, and the wider community. The current socio-political terrain gives rise to immediate needs for policy practice, and social workers are a perfect fit for this. The lessons from the pandemic can be seen as an opportunity to revisit social work education and re-integrate policy practice and macro-practice in the curricula, to start equipping new professionals with the right skills and knowledge. Of course, this does not assume that internationally, curricula do not consider these areas; yet this paper draws on social work education in the UK. The next section discusses briefly how social work can contribute to the current landscape of the post-COVID-19 social environment.

Social Work, Social Policy and COVID-19

With critical/radical practice 'the focus is on political action and social change while simultaneously addressing the immediate needs of individuals' (Rogowski, 2020, p.164). This may be too ambitious but certainly fits within the scope of the

profession. To better appreciate how social work and social workers can contribute to social policy following crises such as COVID-19, and possibly future disasters of this scope, it is worth drawing on Katz's work (1961) and the social model introduced in the 1970s.

According to Katz (1961, p. 1, emphasis in the original), "if the social worker distinguishes himself from other professions within social welfare by his focus upon 'social relationships', does he have *also* a unique role in his attempt to change social and economic conditions through affecting social policy?" To carry out such roles, nonetheless, social workers ought to be well equipped and willing to engage with policy practice overall. Crises like COVID-19 and their associated impacts on social life may create future circumstances that are new and challenging.

Social work has gradually, as discussed earlier, entered the arena of neoliberal marketplaces, and started transforming from an active stakeholder in society (i.e., taking initiative, being involved in social action and politics, lobbying, and so on) to a reactive mechanism that is the medium to realise legislation and policies (i.e., street-level bureaucracy). In this transformation, skills and knowledge that could assist in macro-practice and intervention on community, national and international levels were deemed unnecessary (Pawar, 2019). The focus remained on working with individuals, families and small groups, which led to a gap in the expertise of the social workers of the 21st century (drawing on the evolvement of the social work curriculum in the UK since 2002 in particular). Perhaps micro and mezzo practice skills have been accommodating to the demands of the State's positioning of social work concerning social services to date, but ultimately situations like the recent pandemic arise that force us to think more widely about the role social workers can play in communities and societies, and how to best engage with policy practice.

Previous literature has already identified some unique and invaluable ways in which social workers can engage with policy practice; hence, this paper is not reinventing the wheel but adds to it when exploring those through the current socio-political lens of COVID-19. Figueira-McDonough (1993) recommended the following four ways to policy practice: legislative advocacy; litigation; social action; and policy analysis. All these approaches are noteworthy especially when considering future policies in response to the ever-recognised social issues associated with COVID-19 (e.g., increased prevalence of mental illnesses and widening of the social divide between the digitally wealthy and literate and those poor and illiterate).

Under such circumstances, when poverty, social, health and economic inequalities, injustices and deprivation are exacerbated and while new inequalities also emerge (Pentaris, 2021), legislative advocacy is crucial. Social workers, based on professional deontology and ethics, are best situated to action and influence the introduction, modification and enactment of social policy and legislation that will respond to such challenges.

A simple way of engaging with policy action is through lobbying and involvement with policy decision-making at a local or wider level. Litigation is a more demanding task that, however, can be approached collectively. The Social Work Action Network (SWAN), in the UK, is a current and telling example of how social work can come together to intervene on a macro-level, and how policy practice, inclusive of legislative advocacy and litigation can be realised. Further, SWAN is an example of social action and how social workers can collectively and individually initiate or join social action when advocating for the rights of those who are less privileged in society.

Social action can be beneficial not only in physical communities but within on-line environments as well (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). As the impact of COVID-19 and quarantining measures became more apparent across varied parts of the population (economy and politics aside), social workers could have played an influential role in the restoration of the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities. Social distancing does not allow for physical proximity, but technology in these instances is a medium for virtual social action that can promote social belongingness, comfort and wellbeing, and tackle social isolation, loneliness and increased impact on mental health. Similarly, social action online allows for world-reaching campaigning and advocacy that can find support from people sharing the same values regardless of their geography.

Lastly, Figueira-McDonough (1993) suggested policy analysis as another form of policy practice for social workers. When exploring social policy and social work in unison, Wyers (1991, abstract) identified five policy-practice models: ‘(1) social worker as policy expert, (2) social worker as change agent in external work environments, (3) social worker as change agent in internal work environments, (4) social worker as policy conduit, and (5) social worker as policy itself’. These policy-practice models somewhat justify how social work is the right place for social policy, or one of them.

Social workers, drawing on their expertise in human rights and social justice, can be exceptional agents of policy analysis. Their skills can be invaluable in the varied stages of policy analysis. Specifically, identifying issues and social problems, exploring alternatives, recognising the most suitable alternative, proposing change, and establishing change. Further, policy analysis is a process that demands risk assessments – most popularly those such as a SWOT analysis (Leigh, 2009). Such are processes that social workers are well equipped to comprehend, and post-disaster circumstances ask that we become more prepared to apply those skills in practice. COVID-19, as mentioned earlier and in numerous sources published to date, not only resurfaced already existing social inequalities but introduced new ones, with the most prominent being digital poverty and illiteracy and the social divide between those suffering from poverty and their counterparts (Pentaris et al., 2020).

Policy analysis is a necessity now and into the future while identifying the best solutions for such phenomena.

An interesting query is *how* social work can achieve policy practice. Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015) recommended the following routes: policy practice by proxy, recruitment networks, academia, civil society, and the ‘insider’. In other words, policy practice does not always need to lead to riots, protests, and other public demonstrations. Policy practice can be achieved on multiple levels, including the highest levels of parliamentary influence. Yet, the simplest route to policy practice for social workers in the UK, reaching out to Members of Parliament (MPs) of local and wider areas, is a form of advocacy and social action that not only professionals but also students as well as professional associations can exercise. This is, of course, not suggesting that such actions are not taking place, but surely, they are happening on a much smaller scale than social work has the potential to accomplish.

Lastly, Pawar (2019, p. 19) introduced the three Ps model “consisting of ‘personal being’, ‘people’ and ‘paper’ to promote effective policy practice by social workers”. Initially, Pawar argued that social workers cannot engage effectively in policy practice unless they first engage with themselves – increase their self-understanding and develop expert knowledge and skills. Examples of this are found in Jansson (2018), who suggests that social workers should be reasonable with the risks taken, apply flexibility, be assertive and persistent and tolerate uncertainty, among others. The second P in Pawar’s model suggests that social workers need to engage with people at the levels of community, bureaucracy, politics and organisation. In other words, they need extensive skills, beyond interpersonal, to be applied in direct practice and work with various groups. Lobbying and networking, for example, are important skills in social work and provide social workers with the capacity to work with politicians and in parliament, as well as policy planning. The third P – paper – refers to policy analysis; social workers have potentially the skills and knowledge to engage effectively with policy analysis and contribute to the planning of legislation and organisational guidelines that facilitate the responses to social phenomena relating to social injustices and human rights.

Some Thoughts for Education and Practice

The recent global pandemic highlights areas of concern that have been there before (e.g., social inequalities, ethnic disparities, and so on), as well as new ones. In either case, social work’s engagement with social policy and policy practice can successfully contribute to positive change and outcomes. Yet, as indicated earlier, social work education, training and practice have been exclusive of specialist skills in macro and policy practice. If we are to return to those areas, certain actions are necessary both in education and practice.

First, social work education can be revisited to examine the extent to which policy practice (inclusive of advocacy, macro practice, networking, lobbying, and other skills) is integrated into the curriculum. Skills required for policy analysis can be applied to conduct a curriculum analysis that allows the recognition of gaps and the suggestion of alternatives. Social work education in the UK perhaps can explore the possibilities of learning from international partners, especially in Sub-Saharan African regions where community work and social action are thriving.

Changing societies and their identified needs (for instance needs following COVID-19) mean that social work education needs to adequately adapt to them and equip future professionals effectively. This principle led to the independent review of social work education by David Croisdale-Appleby (2014), wherein he identified the need for ongoing improvements in the education of professionals to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in practice. Under the recent circumstances, it is almost certain that adaptations will be made (and have already been made) regarding the use of technology and enhancement of interpersonal skills when working with individuals, families and groups affected by the recent circumstances. Yet, this does not add value to the need for macro practice skills. Perhaps we have reached the time when we ought to recognise that the division of practice between ‘children and families’ and ‘adults’ is no longer reflecting reality (not that it ever did, in my argument). Social work practice and education need to work together to bring change and improvement.

Practice informs education, and in this case, social workers are in demand with community social work and policy practice. We may have reached a moment when education needs to provide specialist training to social workers interested in policy practice, community work, and international work, as well as specialist training to those interested in gerontological social work, hospice social work, social work with children, and so on. For decades, education has attempted to compress all aspects of a single profession into a single programme of studies, resulting in professionals with a lot of generic knowledge but little capacity to apply their knowledge in practice or situate such knowledge culturally and in the context.

My suggestions here are more reflections, truly. Yet, they are narrowing things down to one recommendation: social work education may need to consider dividing its training into specialist areas to prepare professionals who are skilled and have integrity, who will respond to social needs associated with COVID-19, as these may continue showing their effects for more than a decade to come (also see Pentaris, 2021).

Conclusion

The 2019 pandemic and coronavirus disease have had a colossal impact on human life altogether, while they exemplify the tensions in society following a disas-

ter of such scope. The effects are tremendous and not yet measurable or tangible. The impact on economies and employment is more vivid at the start, yet still too complicated to grasp. However, the impact on human rights and social justice is a more opaque area to explore and will take many more years before long-term effects are identified.

The trauma and loss experienced during COVID-19 are unique in that people had to experience them in isolation and others had to simply die alone and had no opportunity to say goodbyes or attend loved ones' burial services. COVID-19 is a disaster and when thinking of social work in disasters (Alston, Hazeleger & Hargreaves, 2019), social policy and policy practice are essential in the recovery process. Social work is one of the most suitable disciplines, underpinned with the principles of integrity, human rights and social justice, to respond on a macro level to the social inequalities and injustices, as well as the trauma experienced by millions of people. These inequalities are largely not new, but the recent pandemic has been a loud reminder of them and the need to respond more effectively and engage in collective actions.

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