Social Work, Risk, Power

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Abstract

Contemporary ideas and strategies of both 'risk' and 'power' are significant and dynamic influences in social theory and social action, and they can therefore be expected to have a substantial impact on the ways in which social work is constituted, practiced and evaluated. In this article, I shall articulate distinct conceptualisations and debates about each of these, before considering their inter-relationships and the implications of these for our thinking about what social work is, and what it should be.

Firstly, I will consider social work's contested and problematic place within the broader welfare domain. It is recognised as being a form of activity which inhabits an ambiguous and uncertain position at the interface between the individual and the social, and between the marginalised and the mainstream. Building on this, 'power' will be shown to infuse social work ideas and practices in a number of distinct dimensions, linking and bridging 'personal', 'positional' and 'relational' domains.

This discussion will be juxtaposed with a discussion of 'risk' and the part it has come to play in shaping and infusing social work practices, especially but not exclusively with children. The deconstruction of contemporary understandings and uses of risk as a central and 'authoritative' feature of assessment and decision-making will inform the argument that it can be viewed as a vehicle for the maintenance and legitimation of power relations which disenfranchise and oppress those who are most vulnerable.

In conclusion, I will summarise the ways in which conventional understandings and inter-related material realities of power and risk are often hierarchical, uni-directional and oppressive; and on this basis, how they can be laid open to challenge. The reconceptualisation and remaking of power relations will be shown to have direct consequences for the ways in which risk is defined and addressed as a social work 'problem'.

Contested territory

1.1 It goes almost without saying that the three terms, 'social work', 'risk' and 'power', which form the cornerstones of this discussion are themselves much debated. Indeed, it is the very process of engagement and challenge around such contested meanings which creates the possibility for change and the advancement of progressive ideas and practices. Thus, disagreement is not necessarily problematic in itself. On the other hand, the uncertainties embedded in our search for understanding do create significant challenges which we must address.

1.2 Social work, for example, is often thought of quite narrowly in developed Westernised societies, where it is associated with professionalised practices of assessment, management and resolution of individualised 'problems'. These may, too, be defined and addressed in terms of standardised tools for identifying and quantifying risk 'of harm', in which the individual concerned may be considered as a possible victim (as in child protection) or the potential perpetrator (in mental health and criminal justice settings).

1.3 Much recent discussion of social work in these settings has been concerned with the consequences of routinisation and 'managerialism' (Clarke et al, 2000), and the ways in which this has been seen to narrow and constrain it as a form of professional and (potentially) empowering practice. These developments have been associated explicitly with the 'New Labour' project, and its commitment to objective and value-free

'rational and scientific approaches' to challenges such as the persistence of child abuse, for example (Parton, 2006, p. 90). Empirical support for trends of this kind has also been provided, both in the form of practitioner perspectives (Jones, 2001) and the emergence of a plethora of forms and systems for organising, directing and monitoring practice itself (Garrett, 2008).

1.4 This contemporary conceptualisation of social work may be applicable to formal structures and state sanctioned interventions in certain societies, but it is not prevalent in all settings, nor is it uncontested. In fact, explicit concerns about the assimilation and routinisation of social work as a vehicle of state control have been in evidence for some considerable time (see Simpkin, 1983, for example), finding echoes in earlier functionalist analyses originating from the Left (Althusser, 1977). On the other side of the coin, there has been established an equally longstanding counter-argument to the effect that social work can operate effectively as a vehicle to challenge inequality and oppression, whether it is located as a form of practice within statutory systems, or externally to them (see Corrigan and Leonard, 1978). This position has been sustained and developed in the intervening period, so that we now have in place coherent arguments for social work as a progressive form of practice to the extent that it is able to work with service users to develop 'critical' strategies to address inequality and oppression (Fook, 2002), on the one hand; or, 'structural' interventions which engage with users to challenge institutional forms of discrimination against them (Mulally, 1997), on the other.

1.5 At the same time, of course, if we are to consider the global dimension, then much broader possibilities come into play, and the term 'social work' becomes susceptible to a range of alternative interpretations (Dominelli, 2004). Once the idea of social work is considered outside of 'advanced industrial (or post-industrial) societies' the organisation and practices of 'welfare' are likely to constitute it as a much more widely-based form of professional practice (Lyons et al, 2006, p. 33). Social workers in other settings are perhaps rather more likely to be located differently, as 'community development or project workers' in non-governmental organisations, rather than predominantly as employees of the state, and this in turn will have direct implications for their day-to-day activities, as well as for the ways in which they constitute their own professional identities.

1.6 At present, there is an umbrella definition in use which appears to have broad international support, drawn up by the International Federation of Social Workers:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (http://www.ifsw.org/f38000138.html, accessed 1st Sept 2009)

1.7 In fact, and helpfully in my view, this represents a very broad frame of reference, and offers practitioners, researchers and theorists of social work a lot of scope for developing their ideas and interventions, bridging a number of significant divides in the process. Importantly, it does not restrict social work to those practices which are formally constituted and legitimised by the authority of the state or any other political or ideological interest. Although it refers to the idea of a 'profession' (see Healy and Meagher, 2004), it offers only very limited indications of how that identity could be constituted, and this, too, might be viewed as liberating rather than constraining.

1.8 In addition, importantly, this definition does not locate 'problems' within the individual but at the interface between 'people' and their social settings. In other words, the purpose of social work is not viewed as being to 'fix' problem people in isolation, but to address the difficulties arising from their relationships and interactions with the social milieu. And, finally, the concluding aspiration of the statement points towards the principles of rights and justice as falling within the scope of social work activities, and being fundamental to their objectives. This helps to underpin key values such as empowerment and anti-oppressive practice, which are almost always relevant to the task of resolving the immediate ('presenting') problems we might encounter as social workers.

1.9 As already noted, we must accept that this definition is aspirational rather than a direct representation of what is achievable or demonstrable in social work as currently practiced. However, it is a helpful starting point to the extent that it locates the activities of the profession within a particular operational frame. It 'suggests that social workers... should draw on human rights perspectives' in formulating their intervention strategies (Lyons et al, 2006, p. 35); and, it underwrites a specifically 'empowering' approach to practice (p. 36).

Social Work and Power: a necessary relationship

2.1 Amongst the consequential implications of the IFSW definition of social work, it is clear that issues of inequality and disadvantage lie at the heart of practice. Indeed, the very incidence of 'problems' of the kind associated with social work suggests the possibility of exclusionary and unfair treatment, which it is the task of practitioners to address. These processes have been associated, in turn, with the unequal dynamics of power at both a global (Midgley, 2007) and interpersonal level (Tew, 2006). Acknowledging this necessitates a concern with the dynamics of power operating at the interface between social workers and the people on whose behalf they intervene, that is, 'service users' (Smith, 2008a). In this sense, then, a clear understanding of and strategy for dealing with power and its consequences are important components of the effective practitioner's 'toolkit'. Issues of power are real and embedded in practice and cannot be sidelined or treated as subordinate questions to be dealt with only if time permits. This position is underpinned by Foucault's depiction of the:

> omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or

rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (Foucault, 1998, p. 93)

It is of course, possible to trace such attributions of the significance of power and power relations much further, to Machiavelli, say, in Europe and to his precursor Ibn Khaldun (2005) in North Africa.

2.2 Foucault has clearly been influential, but his analysis also has a number of interesting parallels. Clegg (1989), for example, has developed a finely detailed account of the fluid nature of power and its networks, arguing that it must be seen as a dynamic phenomenon, emerging from and transformed by 'negotiation, contestation and struggle', grounded in competing and unequal organizational and individual interests (Clegg, 1989, p. 198). Similarly, Castells' (2004) account of the relationships between globalization, social networks and identity also helps us to retain a grasp of the materiality of power, its heterogeneity and the irregularity of its relationships. As one source puts it, these developments help us to modify conceptualisations which are overly simplistic or deterministic:

> because of tendencies to focus only on simple binaries of oppression (such as race or gender), structural relationships of *power over* have sometimes come to appear less relevant to a social world in which people have come to understand themselves in terms of more fluid identities and more subtle patterns of diversity.... (Tew, 2006, p. 37)

2.3 Whilst this observation introduces elements of complexity to our understanding, it also generates an awareness of the inevitability of change. Power relationships are not 'monolithic' or fixed (Tew, 2006, p. 37). The insights of 'network analysis' (Castells, 2004, p. 424) effectively focus our attention on contemporary, practical tasks to be addressed by those engaged in social work. That is to say, we must have at our disposal concepts and strategies for making sense of and questioning complex and multi-faceted power relations as they are played out, in the first place. And subsequently, we need to have a range of intervention strategies available which lay the groundwork for challenging these; offering transformative possibilities and building resources to tackle the oppressions experienced by those who use 'welfare' services, in their broadest sense (Lyons et al, 2006).

Analysing power relations; some possibilities

3.1 I have made some tentative attempts to suggest possible ways in which social work can develop conceptual and practical frameworks for addressing the tasks of making sense of and reframing power relationships (Smith, 2008a), which I will sketch out again here. In my earlier work, I suggested that there were three formulations of power which could helpfully be drawn upon in order to provide us with this kind of practical tool for addressing the challenges of social work. These are:

- i). Representations of power
- ii). Modes of power; and
- iii). Sites of power.

i). Representations of power

3.2 Under this heading, I think it is possible to distinguish between four ways in which power is conceptualised as a material force, but not necessarily as a fixed quantity. It can be viewed as potential; possession; process; and product (Smith, 2008a, p. 23).

3.3 Power as potential implies the immanent capacity to realise change or influence outcomes, which only becomes substantive as it is realised. Parsons (1969) equated power with money in the sense that he viewed it as a form of currency which could be used to achieve (to 'purchase') a desired outcome. In a positive and developmental sense, the idea of power as possibility can also be associated with contemporary ideas about 'social capital' (O'Neill, 2004) and the capacity for individuals, groups and communities to act on the basis of shared commitment to achieve change.

3.4 Power as possession implies a much more fixed and one-sided view of the phenomenon; power is identified with particular interests, often representing dominant social institutions, which are able to exercise it to secure social order and discipline, but also, importantly, to offer safeguards and protection to vulnerable groups. So, for instance, the legal instruments available to state social workers exemplify this form of power; thus, for example, child protection practice is often infused with persistent concerns to do with legal authority and evidential robustness.

3.5 Others have tried to argue that power is more appropriately conceptualised in fluid form, as something which flows between social entities, rather than being held by or located with any one of them. In this respect, Bourdieu's (1991) notion of 'habitus' or Foucault's (1998) ideas about the impersonal and mobile nature of power relations can be seen as attempts to portray this as a moving and essentially external force operating on and within human interactions but without being consciously instigated by human agency. Family Group Conferences have been identified as one form of social work practice which pursues a creative and dynamic approach to enhancing service users' ability to make decisions and control processes of intervention (Smith, 2008).

3.6 The final category I want to introduce here is the idea of power as 'product'. Giddens (1984) is one source who has tried to develop a theory of power which sees it not as the instigator or determinant of social relations, but as the outcome of these processes. This approach to the subject can also be recognised in the work of Arendt (1970) who also viewed power as the product of group dynamics and as something which could only be said to be 'in existence only so long as the group keeps together' (p. 44). The Duluth Model designed to facilitate and support community-wide responses to domestic violence can be identified as a form of 'social work' practice which reflects such aspirations to generate sources of

'power' through collective action.

3.7 For social work, these alternative models of power may necessitate a re-evaluation of 'power as a *thing*' (Tew, 2006, p. 39), which is held and used to the extent that one has access to it; instead, we may need to view it more as a 'multi-dimensional' (p. 48) and emergent quality of lived relationships in their specific material contexts.

ii). Modes of power

3.8 Although it is possible to categorise power in a number of ways, such as the five-fold typology offered by French and Raven (1968), for present purposes I will focus on only three 'modes' by means of which it is exercised: personal, positional and relational. Using these three categories represents an attempt to capture what I believe to be the three essential dimensions of the 'power relationship' in social work. However, whilst it is possible to distinguish between them analytically, it will remain important to acknowledge their essentially intertwined and interactive character.

Personal power

4.1 The aspect of personal power stems, as might be inferred, from the character and qualities of the individual. We might see parallels between this and the Weberian notion of 'charisma', for example, whereby the capacity to get things done depends on immanent or innate individual attributes:

> The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he (sic) is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. (Weber, 1978, p. 241)

In this sense, then, the ability to exercise control over others originates in attributes and capacities which occur more or less naturally in particular human subjects.

4.2 Personal 'power' of this kind depends not just on the characteristics of an individual, though, but is also derived from the attributions we apply to ourselves and others. As Dominelli (2004) has also observed, power at the personal level is closely bound up with questions of identity. This process of self (and other) identification is significant in itself, but it also acts as the fulcrum for direct manifestations of power, as for example, in the case of domestic violence which is clearly linked to gender differentiation and a persistent sense of male superiority. In this way, what may be recognised as individual characteristics or experienced as personal power relationships are also connected to and (partly) derived from social processes of categorisation and group identification. Tew (2002, p. 131) agrees that it is helpful to be able to reflect on the ways in which 'personal subjectivity, and its constituent identities, may be constructed within historically and culturally bound social arrangements', which themselves incorporate established processes of domination and 'subordination'.

4.3 For social work, which is predominantly conducted in the form of transactions between individuals, this type of attribution may have far-reaching and damaging consequences for service users:

> Unitary conceptualizations of identity are extremely powerful and deeply embedded in social work. All women, black people, older people are treated as if they were like all others in their particular category. (Dominelli, 2004, p. 76)

What appears and is experienced as a personal quality may thus reflect and derive from external and generalised meanings and classificatory systems.

Positional power

5.1 The second 'mode' by which power is transmitted I have termed 'positional'. This, again, appears to be more or less self-explanatory, with authority and legitimacy concentrated in particular formal social roles. Here, too, Weber's (1978, p. 217) analysis is helpful, because it draws attention to the way in which bureaucracies bestow authority on institutional functions rather than on the individuals occupying those positions. This is clearly in contrast to the personal dimension of power:

> A super-individual power - state, church, school, family or military organization - clothes a person with a reputation, a dignity, a power of ultimate decision, which would never flow from his individuality. (Simmel, 1986, p. 205)

To the extent that they are conventionally located within statutory agencies, and vested with formal legal authority, social workers may be viewed as deriving 'power' in this way.

5.2 However, the availability of alternative sources of authority also indicates the possibility of conflict, given that neither their underlying belief systems nor their processes and mechanisms for bestowing legitimacy may coincide. They may, of course, act in complementary fashion, as Althusser (1970), for example, has argued. But, they may equally generate competing claims to legitimacy (Poulantzas, 1973), as, for example, may occur between religious bodies and state organisations. Social workers sometimes have to confront the problem of meeting the child's best interests according to their statutory roles, whilst others, such as the child's or young person's parents, may place more reliance on the pronouncements of religious leaders, as, for example in the case of arranged marriages (Gangoli et al, 2006; Werbner, 2007).

Relational power

6.1 The third mode of power I want to introduce here is what I have termed 'relational power'. It differs from,

and to an extent extends the previous depictions in so far as it introduces an interactive dimension to power relations. In particular, this formulation helps to make sense of and account for the 'indeterminacy' of the current era, where competing belief systems and claims to legitimacy meet and have to be resolved. For Bauman (1992, p. 193) this is a distinctive feature of what have been characterised as postmodern societies. Importantly, too, this formulation seeks to articulate a notion of 'power' as a dynamic and emergent phenomenon rather then something which is predetermined and 'fixed', in the way that Parsons (1969), for example, conceives of it. This is not to suggest that power is ahistorical or does not have distinct and situated material qualities; it is rather to suggest that it should be seen as the outcome or consequence of the forces which these constitute, rather than simply in deterministic terms as a factor which shapes but is not shaped by human interactions and relationships.

6.2 In social work, as in many other fields, we have experienced an increasing tendency to question our claims to professional authority or expertise. This may be associated with the emergence of a 'consumer culture', but it simultaneously represents a move away from assumptions of a natural order of things, and established hierarchies of knowledge and standing. As we have already noted, too, social work is peculiarly located at the confluence of a number of hugely significant dualities: state-citizen; care-control; expert-service user; individual-social; oppressor-oppressed; and, of course, powerful-powerless. Power in practice has thus become less closely associated with prior assumptions or conventional mechanisms of control, but has to be realised through the development of effective, interactive and democratic relationships. For social workers, this means not just taking their professional and legal authority as given when engaging with people who use services, but seeking to gain the authority to act through establishing collaborative and 'empowering' mutual relationships (Folgheraiter, 2004).

6.3 The legitimacy of practitioners' interventions will therefore depend on the extent to which they establish credibility and trust. Social work practice needs to be based on the principles of partnership with service users and 'exchange', rather than control (Smith, 2008a, p. 56).

iii). Sites of power

6.4 To inform our activities as social workers, we need also to recognise that power relations are not uniform or all-pervasive, and their content and forms of enactment will vary according to the setting. Formal settings such as courtrooms constitute interactions and shape what happens in a quite specific way, for example, in terms of their impact on social work practice. This is not just a question of the physical context, of course, but also derives from the character and meaning ascribed to social settings, a point recognised a very long time ago (Ibn Khaldun, 2005). Social workers and the people who use services are simultaneously located in personal, familial, communal, institutional and global milieus which both interact and have a cumulative impact at the level of practice.

6.5 For example, Donzelot (1979) has offered a persuasive case in support of the argument that the family operates as a 'pivotal' setting for organizing and transmitting social expectations and norms. In his view, parents are a highly effective vehicle for instilling conformity in the younger generations. Whilst this account has its attractions, its functionalist tendencies render it rather less helpful in providing insights into the variations in family dynamics and structures which are widely visible. Featherstone (2004), on the other hand, categorises different aspects of family life according to alternative formulations of the concept of power. She distinguishes between 'debilitative power' which could be experienced by women as a denial of personal autonomy and 'situational power' which relates more to the attribution of roles and functions within the family. These different elements might, on different occasions, conflict with or complement each other, possibly creating a cumulative sense of oppression and constraint, or offering a domain for the assertion of personal competence, authority and even control.

6.6 Communities, too, incorporate quite nuanced power dynamics. For many, the availability of local networks and resources is an important source of affirmation and recognition, although these commonalities of interest and identification may be as much a source of difference and possible conflict as of harmony and solidarity. Certain categories become problematised within the wider 'community', and exclusionary influences come into play. We have witnessed in recent years in the UK a growth in concern about and legislative provision for 'anti-social behaviour' which has largely concentrated its gaze on the 'unacceptable' behaviour of the young. Indeed, some statutory provisions (such as dispersal orders) enable coercive interventions to take place simply on the grounds of age. Despite these divisive tendencies, social work must also recognise and engage with the positive opportunities provided by communities for collective engagement and mutually empowering responses, such as the Duluth Model for addressing domestic violence (Pence and Paymar, 1993).

The complexities of power

7.1 Perhaps unsurprisingly, the multi-faceted nature of state power means that it is commonly viewed as problematic by social work practitioners who are often uncomfortable with the repressive aspects of their role, such as determining the immigration status of new arrivals (see Humphries, 2004), rationing resources and denying need, or imposing coercive measures on those whose behaviour is viewed as problematic in the contexts of criminal justice or mental health. On the other hand, the authority of the state is recognised as a legitimate source of protection for vulnerable people in many cases, such as in the protection of children from harm. Social work's place as a mediating force between the state and the individual thus constitutes a source of ambiguity and uncertainty for practitioners:

> The dual mandate defines the role and task of social work as promoting the interests both of the state and of the service user whom they are intended to help. This dual mandate makes social work by definition a politicised activity. (Powell, 2001, p. 127)

7.2 Power is variously situated and contextual, multi-faceted, complex and dynamic. Its impact on social

work practice is not fixed and determinate but changeable depending on the circumstances and the relationships in play. These phenomena are, furthermore, interconnected and unpredictable, so the tasks of social work require practitioners to make connections and act simultaneously on different levels, from the global to the personal, as already observed.

Risk

8.1 Alongside the challenges represented by the conceptualisations and dynamics of power, another major recurrent theme in the world of social work is that of 'risk'. Indeed, in the contemporary era, risk and its representations are central to the practice of social work in the form of modes and mechanisms by virtue of which power relations themselves are realised and mediated. As such, a closer examination of this concept and its material consequences will be a powerful exemplar of the dynamics and consequences of power relationships in social work.

8.2 As the profession develops, it finds itself increasingly encumbered with a range of socially-determined expectations about the assessment and management of the threat of harm, directed both from and towards those with whom it works. Once again, this is not an isolated phenomenon, but one which reflects a number of modernising trends in the wider world. As both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) have observed, ideas and practices of risk have become significant organising principles of social systems in contemporary societies. The origins of these developments have been associated with the changing organisation of market economies and the logic of scientific rationality. 'Actuarial' principles have infused thinking and practice in the business world, whilst science has been repeatedly confronted with its own failure to achieve certainty and predictability, especially in the face of perceived global threats (such as 'bird flu' or 'swine flu') and major disasters (famine in parts of Africa or the tsunami in southern Asia, for instance). The current global economic crisis in 2009 provides further reinforcement for the perception that 'risk' is a major social issue, and at the same time, that we should redouble our efforts to improve our capacity to control it. It becomes, effectively, a fundamental organising principle of social life. The 'paradoxical' consequence (Beck, 1998, p. 18) is that societies are simultaneously characterised by more and greater evidence of social, environmental and economic breakdown, whilst their machinery for predicting, identifying and controlling the sources of these problems expands massively in parallel.

8.3 The urgency of the situation prompts additional 'political' considerations which relate to the capacity, expertise and authority necessary to define and then act to manage the risks which are everywhere. In other words, the means of addressing the threats we face are intricately bound up with the question of who has the 'power' and the means to define them and then act to limit the damage caused.

8.4 This problem poses acute difficulties to social work, which is imbued variously with authority and expertise by virtue of its position as a profession sanctioned by the state and thereby entitled to carry out a range of diagnostic and intervention functions in the intimate spheres of personal and family lives. At the same time, as noted earlier, the basis for this purported expertise is by no means certain; whilst the state itself (and its political representatives) demonstrates a considerable degree of ambivalence about the extent of the legitimacy of the social worker's role.

8.5 We encounter a further analytical paradox here, in light of the contemporaneous calls for greater knowledge and improved expertise on the subjects of concern and the possibility of future harm, at the very point where our conventional sources of expertise (whether financial, economic or social) are called into question, precisely because they have been unable to predict the nature of the threats we face, on the one hand; whilst, on the other, they have been unable to offer us reliable tools for responding to these dangers.

8.6 In some ways, aspects of social work practice offer almost a 'natural' site for these concerns to be played out; 'risk' and 'danger' are endemic features of the field of practice, given its primary concerns with disadvantage and oppression and its specific responsibilities in areas such as child protection, mental health and youth offending (see Feeley and Simon, 1994; Webb, 2005). Parton (2006) has written persuasively of the relationship between contemporary fears and the new technologies of surveillance and control which have permeated the project of safeguarding children in the UK, and which may well have a cumulatively 'debilitative' effect on conventional sources of authority and respect within the family (Featherstone, 2004).

8.7 We require both symbolic reassurance that our children will be safe, and practical evidence that steps are being taken to deal with identified threats to them. This, in turn, implies a need for authoritative sources of knowledge and the capacity to act decisively to deal with the risks thereby enumerated. Social work is expected to demonstrate forensic expertise, and to be able to act with certainty in response to the concerns it uncovers, being able to specify the nature and the extent of the threat offered from a particular source, and the most appropriate means of taking action to eliminate it. This, though, tends to place the emphasis on 'positional' power, attributed to practitioners by external sources of legitimacy, at the expense of 'relational' power, which is more likely to be generated through a collaborative process of engagement with service users.

8.8 It may appear in the contemporary world that we have ready access to some of the means for achieving the levels of certainty required to shape practice, for instance through the pervasive development of technologies of measurement and information gathering. In this sense, expertise becomes almost 'impersonal', residing in perfectible technical instruments rather than fallible humans (see Parton, 2006, p. 177). In the present context, however, these systemic solutions to our creeping uncertainties are problematic for several reasons. Notably, they predetermine critical questions such as the source of the power to define a situation or a person as problematic or a source of potential harm. Furthermore, the 'knowledge' that these systems generate is self-justifying, conferring the authority to take action without further question, and without engaging in any form of dialogue with the objects of investigation.

8.9 We can also see that the kind of uniformity imposed by these processes and assessment tools may also fail to take account of social differences, diversity or inequality, thereby reinforcing existing imbalances in power relations, and the associated capacity to define just what the 'problem' is. Power exercised in this manner takes the form of a 'possession', held by one party to the transaction and imposed one-sidedly. We know, for example, that state-sanctioned assessment and decision-making procedures applied by practitioners in the English youth justice system have been found to result in massive disparities in the ethnic composition of those sent to custody; and yet, the very impartiality of these procedures have led researchers to conclude that there is no evidence of racism in the ways that it operates (see, for instance, Feilzer and Hood, 2004, p. 20). Legitimate and authoritative processes grounded in certain types of 'expert' knowledge and administered consistently by responsible professionals nonetheless result in persistent and oppressive manifestations of oppression and disadvantage. What is clear in the outcomes, though, is that one manifestation of 'risk', that is the possibility of further offending carries more weight than another, namely the potential for discriminatory and oppressive treatment. It is equally clear that such forms of risk assessment and risk management depend on certain assumptions and practices which represent a hierarchical model of power.

8.10 For social work, such considerations are potentially highly problematic. The ways in which it engages with professional responsibilities such as assessment, planning and intervention in people's lives are closely intertwined with the machinery for determining what constitutes a problem at the interface between the individual and society and how it is addressed. The language and logic of risk seem to have resulted in tendencies in late modern societies to seek to refine and regularise the mechanisms for managing and addressing the possibilities of social harm. Terms such as 'managerialism' have been coined in part to encapsulate these developments (Parton, 2006, p. 89; Smith, 2008a, p. 111). The power relations that infuse this sort of technical-rational approach to practice coincide much more closely with Foucault's (1979) formulation than with the complex and nuanced approach suggested by our earlier analysis of the phenomenon. The exercise of power is grounded in the disciplinary 'gaze', which constitutes its own objects, diagnoses the problem and prescribes the form of intervention to be undertaken. The development of new machinery and techniques of monitoring and surveillance to safeguard children under the *Every Child Matters* initiative is one recent example of the operationalisation of this king of logic (Smith, 2008b).

Risk, power and social work

9.1 Despite these problematic tendencies in contemporary social practices, we should not allow ourselves to become overly pessimistic or defeatist in the search for positive approaches to dealing with 'risk' and what it represents. As already noted, Beck has shown that the very rationality of scientific expertise produces evidence of its own shortcomings. Not only are claims to be able to achieve empirical 'certainty' suspect, but scientific techniques themselves are prone to producing unpredictable and unwelcome 'side effects' (Beck, 1992, p. 170). Recognition of this inherent problematic, both from within and outside, has led to increasing levels of scepticism about what 'scientific' methods can achieve:

> Scientists are becoming lay persons. They do not know what will happen before they begin their research. (p. 14)

9.2 In line with these trends, in a number of significant cases such as in Cleveland during the 1980s (Parton, 2006, p. 34), and more recently the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Baby 'P', social work's claims to expertise have indeed come into question directly. In the midst of some largely unhelpful scapegoating of practitioners, the shortcomings of 'actuarial' techniques are exposed here. Social workers cannot lay claim to perfect knowledge; and, thus, the source of their legitimacy and authority to act *cannot* simply be their purported ability to diagnose problems accurately and prescribe precise and detailed solutions (power as 'possession'). As Houston and Griffiths (2000) have demonstrated, inappropriate reliance on an 'objectivist' paradigm will in the end undermine as opposed to enhancing the profession's claims to credibility and expertise. But, even more importantly, this *should not* be its prime claim to legitimacy and authority. If social work does not take a different approach to the production and use of power, it is likely to fall victim to a cyclical process of defensive but ineffective realignment in the face of recurrent shock and outrage at periodic, high profile and tragic failures.

9.3 The values (and expertise) of social work are grounded in principles of 'empowerment' and self-determination of those with and for whom it intervenes (power as 'process'), and these must surely extend to the point of problem definition as well as the content and organisation of any form of intervention.

9.4 Thus, in the face of repeated evidence of the shortcomings of 'objectivist', externally-imposed risk assessment models, Houston and Griffiths (2000, p. 6) argue that we should 'reinstate the subject in child protection'. This, they argue, is also a conclusion supported by empirical evidence (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995), where a collaborative approach is more likely to be associated with positive outcomes for children.

9.5 The suggestion here is that even in situations where there is a possibility of harm, the priority for social work, not just at practitioner level, but in its institutional and procedural arrangements is to develop forms of intervention which seek to generate and support 'relational power'; that is, to work towards mutual understandings, and mutual problem solving strategies, and to follow these principles through, even where there is a possibility of conflict or coercive action. So, as Parton concludes, we need to focus on those who have the least status and are the most vulnerable:

> If we are serious about wanting to ensure that children feel safe, it seems that it is not simply that the voices of children and young people have to be heard but that they have to be given more control about what happens to them once they have raised their voice. (Parton, 2006, p. 186)

Defining and managing risk: towards a relational model of practice

10.1 What then are the implications of these thoughts for the organisation and delivery of practice in the context of 'risk'? What constitutes good and effective social work practice in this respect?

10.2 To take the example of safeguarding children, from a UK perspective the way in which children define and experience risk (Allard et al, 1995, for example) is quite different from the way in which it is constituted as an 'objective' problem by the machinery of child protection and statutory social work. Many children are bullied at school (Children's Commissioner, 2006), for instance, and yet this is not routinely considered to fall within the remit of social work as an activity. (Why not?) Equally, as I have argued elsewhere (Smith, 2008a, p. 8), the machinery put in place to coordinate and oversee child protection services has been defined rather narrowly to concentrate on the victimisation of children within families, 'excluding wider issues of child safety and a secure environment from consideration'. In other words, the 'sites' which are prioritised in determining children's risk of harm appear to be unduly restricted to those which are determined by conventional power relations, and decision-making models.

10.3 Arguably, these developments are largely to do with the dominance of certain individualised and pathologising models of 'risk' and the power flows which underlie these. If children took the lead, it is likely that these definitions would be significantly altered, as would the strategies and practices to address the difficulties they experience from their viewpoint (Parton, 2006). Social work and its power relations might thus be substantially reconfigured. There is some evidence in place so far of children's emerging involvement in decision-making about the organisation and delivery of provisions to met their needs (Gunn, 2005; Morris and Burford, 2007), but this is limited and may be more aspirational than evident in practice outcomes.

10.4 Social work has the capacity, though, to act as a conduit for this kind of reordering, by responding collaboratively to those who are identified as being 'at risk' in some way. Is this the way they see the problem? What is the nature of the 'risk'? What would they change to address the issues identified? In addition to this approach to deconstructing and 'reframing' the initial problem (Fook, 2000), practitioners may wish to develop a more proactive role, working with 'networks' of service users at the design stage, to develop shared understandings of 'risk' and from this basis to articulate common strategies for resolving the emergent problems, grounded in 'relational' and 'situated' models of power. In the case of 'street children', for example, this would represent a very different model of practice from that which is concerned with the 'risk' they present to conventional society.

10.5 Social work, then, has a key role, not just as a vehicle for the articulation of power relations, but as a focal point for identifying their contradictory dynamics, and proposing more egalitarian solutions, rooted as always, in principles of social justice. Whoever is most 'powerless' should always be considered first.

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