

Foucault, Social Theory and Social Work

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Abstract: *The philosopher Michel Foucault's theoretical work provides fertile ground for an analysis of areas of significant concern in researching of social work through his development of the ideas of discourse, power/knowledge, surveillance and governmentality. His development of these concepts allows an insight into the function of policy not always apparent in mainstream and contemporary social policy analysis which has been based on the sociological triumvirate of social class, gender and "race". In this article, we can explore how and why these conceptual gifts from Foucault are pertinent to understanding how service users are constructed as objects of social work, particularly with respect to contemporary discourses of social welfare and social exclusion. The paper argues that the use of these ideas challenges some of the less obvious assumptions permeating current developments in social policy and social work provision, whilst also enabling an ability to respond more contextually to shifting frameworks of power and knowledge. There is an acknowledgement of power and its potential positive impact on subjective sense of self and social work has a part to play in this. At the same time, the paper concludes with a warning of "risk" and professional surveillance and its restriction in facilitating empowerment of vulnerable groups.*

Keywords: Social Work Surveillance; Foucault; Power Relations; Risk; Vulnerability.

Cuvinte-cheie: Supravegherea asistenței sociale; Foucault; relații de putere; risc; vulnerabilitate.

Introduction

Recently, there has been an extraordinary international rise in interest and debate about social work. This article draws upon the work of Michel Foucault in

order to sketch out a possible conceptual "tool-kit" for the critical analysis of social work as it has been characterized in social discourse. More specifically, we suggest that Foucault's ideas can be used to understand the construction of social

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welfare. This article attempts an initial assessment of the relevance of Foucauldian analyses and offers novel insights about the changing influence of social welfare.

Over the past decade, modern social work in the United Kingdom, like elsewhere in Canada, Australia and North America, has experienced an intense process of rationalization and politicization. Social work has constantly had to respond to challenges that reflect dynamics produced by the shifting priorities of government (Gilbert and Powell, 2005). In the UK, most pressing have been concerns identified with the degeneration of the social democratic accord (Powell and Chamberlain, 2012), as it gave way to new priorities produced by the neo-liberal consensus that emerged since the 1980s under Thatcher. This had seen “New Labour” governments under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown that extended the project of restructuring the relationship between the state and its citizens initiated by New Right Conservatives (Jordan, 2005) and now continued in David Cameron’s “Big Society”. Social services, once envisaged as the province of a universal citizenship are now mere supports for the irresponsible (Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Harris, 2002). Despite this, there has been very little Foucauldian analysis of social work and its relationship to power. This leads us to argue that a Foucauldian analysis of power relations needs to explore the forms of governmentality that regulate and manage the everyday lives of citizens. The state, once the principle focus for analysis, now appears as merely one among a range of contextually and historically specific elements within multiple circuits of power (Rose, 1999). Therefore, we need to identify the assemblage of ruling practices, knowledge authorities and moral imperatives, which converge on social work in order to govern the conduct of social workers and those they aim to

support (Rose and Miller, 1992; Rose, 1996, 1999). In this formulation, differences between the government of populations and management of conduct in specific localized spaces are technical rather than ontological. Social policy, enacted via a range of institutions [schools, universities, hospitals, workplaces] aims to act on the “well-being” of the population as a whole promoting social cohesion while simultaneously acting on the innumerable decisions taken by individuals in their everyday lives thus managing their conduct (Rose, 1999).

To this end, we will first explore Foucault’s ideas in relation to power and the concept of “governmentality”. Following which we consider the changing context of contemporary social work and then move on to an application of Foucault’s ideas to professional practice focussing on surveillance and power.

The Power of Michel Foucault

Most of Michel Foucault’s theoretical schemas are posed in oppositional terms. He urges individuals to “refuse what we are” (1977, 216), meaning that we should refuse to remain tied to fixed identities to which people are subjected. He linked his own project with all those who struggle against the ways in which they are individualized, particularized, and objectified by controlling discourses. It is important, at this stage, to map out a number of key Foucauldian concepts that will later be used to address the relationship between identity and changing welfare policies. These key concepts include: genealogy and discourse, power/knowledge, and technologies of self. The point of Foucault’s analysis, called a genealogy because of its emphasis on tracing historical pathways that have contributed to contemporary circumstances, was to identify discourses. His concept of “discourse” is a key term

both in understanding Foucault's work and in explaining facets of social welfare. Foucault identified discourses as historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth. function as sets of rules, and the exercise of these rules and discourses in programs that specify what is or is not the case – what constitutes “old age”, for example. Those who are labeled “old” are in the grip of power. This power would include that operated by professional social workers through institutions and face-to-face interactions with their patients and clients. Power is constituted in discourses, and it is in discourses such as those of “social work” that power lies. Genealogy is concerned, then, with the historical limits and conditions of socially determined discourses, which then direct and distort the personal and institutional narratives that can subsist within them. When a discourse has stabilized historically, it can be referred to as a “discursive formation”, which can come to characterize a particular period of welfare development and the associated possibilities for identity performance that it contains. Foucault (1977) was particularly interested in the limits and possibilities of discourses from “human sciences” because of their attempts to define human subjectivity. His attention shifts to the power of professionals because Foucault found that the conditions of possibility for “true” discourses about human subjects include complex relations between knowledge about people and systems of power. Here Foucault focuses on the techniques of power/knowledge that operate within an institution and that simultaneously create “a whole domain of knowledge and a whole type of power” (1977, 185).

These domains effectively destroy the legitimacy of other, competing, discourses; just as a professional medical opinion might de-legitimize voices arising from folk medicine or informal care. The genealogical work of unclouing these

power relations is characterized, by Foucault (1977), as setting out the political regime of the production of truth. The effects of the reflexive relationship between power and knowledge that is implied here would include the tendency for professional power to be reinforced by the sorts of questions professionals ask and the data they collect. This knowledge then progresses to a certain definition of a problem area that then feeds back to stabilize the original formulation of the “problem” itself. By the same token, different policy positions point professionals to seek out certain forms of knowledge that tend to reinforce the ideological position of that policy and its associated discourses.

As part of this process, certain powerful voices increase their legitimacy, while other, often dissenting, voices become de-legitimized. An effect of the mutually reinforcing relationship between power and knowledge that emerges from the above is to construct individuals simultaneously as subjects and as objects. First, people are seen as objects by someone else, through control and restraint. Second, people are deemed to actively subject their own identity to personal direction through processes such as conscience and mediated self-knowledge. Foucault (1988) refers to this second process as “technologies of self”. Foucault's formulation of “technologies of self” claims that individual lives are never quite complete and finished—that in order to function socially individuals must somehow work on themselves to turn themselves into subjects. The notion of “technologies” offers the scope for an analysis of the sites whereby certain effects on old age are brought about. Foucault (1977) claims both meanings of control and self-conscience suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.

An analysis of power, which follows the Foucauldian pathway as it is outlined above, must examine at least three aspects

of how such power is created and maintained. First, the analysis must examine the genealogy of existing relations, how they have emerged, and the discourses they both reflect and reinforce with respect to aging. Second, attention must be given to the distribution of power and knowledge that these relations imply. Finally, technologies of welfare such as psycho-casework and case management will need to be critically assessed as approaches to the self that hold certain webs of power in place. Each will contribute to the ways in which subjects enmeshed in certain relations apply techniques of identity control to themselves.

For Foucault (1977) power is a concept often discussed as fundamental to the relationship between professionals and the society in which they operate but one rarely conceptualized as both product and producer of such relationships. For example, Michel Foucault's analysis of power offers a set of strategies (Foucault, 1977, 1978) for understanding how discourse produced within a network of disciplinary activities and embedded in social policy constructs social workers' experiences and their identities, as well as the experiences and identities of those with whom they interact. At the same time, the dynamics of these relationships reinforce and modify the discourse that made such meaning possible in the first place.

Powell and Chamberlain (2012) argue that Foucault's contribution to the analysis of power is important in three ways as it provides: (a) analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge; (b) the emergence of the modern self through disciplinary technologies and; (c) analysis of governmentality. Central to Foucauldian analysis is discourse, inseparable combinations of knowledge and power that along with their respective technologies [specific techniques and associated practices i.e. assessment, care planning] operate to subjugate individuals in specific circulations or "regimes of power".

Foucault proposes that since the seventeenth century a particularly modern form of power has developed; "biopolitics", a politics of the population that operates through two modalities, "totalizing" and "individualizing", producing a two-way process between the subject as a private individual and the subject as a public citizen (Powell and Chamberlain, 2012). Foucault rejects claims that any particular group or class have a monopoly over power rather, power circulates via a myriad of social networks penetrating deep into the far corners of social life playing out its effects through the everyday interactions of autonomous individuals. Power and knowledge combine in disciplinary processes that act on the body producing the modern subject as docile, productive and willing to participate in their own management (Foucault, 1977). Through these processes, power operates to differentiate groups of people and individuals from other individuals, finally producing the components of individual subjectivity.

Foucault uses the idea of "resistance" to describe how the effects of power may be only partially successful in specific social contexts enabling challenges to and changes in existing power relations (Rose, 1999). This occurs in a number of ways but is located with two forms of possibility. First, the re-emergence of "popular knowledges", the historical contents of conflict and struggle that have become submerged under a veneer of functionalist coherence and order; and second "insurrections of subjugated knowledges", knowledges disqualified as inadequate, unscientific or lacking sophistication. In both these possibilities, we can see the possibility of a range of accounts i.e. professionals alienated from practice, oppressed communities, and the disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

In this formulation, Foucault (1977) departs from many conceptualizations of

power by suggesting that power in itself is “relational” (Rose, 1999). Therefore, whilst one social actor may exercise power interacting with other individuals, we also need to be aware that all other individuals also exercise “power” in their social relationships often expressed through “resistance” in its dance with surveillance. The outcome is to produce a dialectical relationship between knowledge, power and action that is productive in the sense of creating particular possibilities but which also maintains a level of uncertainty and unpredictability in terms of actions, providing opportunity for the exercise of discretion.

In relation to the modern self, Foucault (1977) identifies three key processes in the objectification of individuals. Hierarchical observation, the development of ever-sophisticated processes of surveillance (often discussed as “panopticon” or the “gaze”) that are constantly but unobtrusively maintained engulfing all in a web of watching. Normalising judgements, the production of classification systems that enable the identification of “norms” of social functioning that allow ongoing comparison of individuals enabling small transgressions to become the focus of disciplinary attention and; the examination. The latter brings together the two former elements linking specific knowledges with particular practices in the exercise of power while engaging experts [professionals] in a network of writing and documentary accumulation that identifies individuals as deserving or risky, noting individual features, specifying appropriate interventions and recording progress. Documentation fixes the objectification of individuals in writing codifying, calculating difference and drawing comparison and embedding this in discourse i.e. “evidence based practice” which, in turn, disciplines and regulates professional activity (Powell and Chamberlain, 2012).

However, rather than the objectifying processes discussed above, Foucault’s (1977) concept of “subjectification” involves a range of “technologies of the self” where individuals engage with processes Foucault likens to the confessional. Individuals, incited by discourse, engage in reflective processes where they speak the truth about themselves, gain self-knowledge, and then act on that self-knowledge in an ethic of self-formation producing the self-managing individual central to neo-liberal rule (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Turner, 1997; Miller, 1993).

An analysis of Governmentality focuses on the processes, techniques and procedures that produce the moral regulation of the choices of autonomous individuals (Rose, 1999); a feature of the very core of contemporary social policy thus enabling us to identify ways in which discourse constitutes categories of identity, regulating morals and directing life choices. Such processes of ethical self-formation give rise to a core feature of neo-liberal forms of government, the government of the self by the self. Discourse operates through a myriad of social institutions both statutory and non-statutory such as, citizen associations, charities, trade unions, families, schools, hospitals, workplaces that have no direct political affiliations and diverse histories.

Finally, Foucault’s (1978) conceptual tool of “governmentality” is the means through which neo-liberal modes of government afford expertise a key role and function in the management of both individual and collective conduct. However, this role differs markedly from that afforded professionals under former regimes as neo-liberal government: “seeks to detach the substantive authority of expertise from the apparatus of political rule, relocating experts within a market governed by the rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand” (Rose, 1993, 285). Government, rather than being the territory

of direct interventions, becomes instead the structuring and regulation of potential choices of autonomous individuals with expertise operating in a semi-autonomous relationship with the state (Miller, 1993). This has had an impact on the professional changes in social work.

Contemporary Social Work in England

Over the past 5 years, new policy frameworks have emerged in England covering both children and adults, *Every Child Matters* (Department of Health – DH, 2003), *Independence, Well Being and Choice* (DH, 2005b), *Choosing Health* (DH, 2005a) *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say* (DH, 2006) and *Putting People First* (HM Government, 2007), profoundly restructuring the terrain of social work, social care, education and health. At the macro-level, this framework [bio-politics] targets the population with notions of “Well-Being” articulated with discourses of social inclusion and responsibility. At the micro-level its effects work by managing individual conduct inciting individuals to seek “well-being” by balancing choices between the often-contradictory imperatives of the “market” with those of individual and collective obligation (Rose, 1999); this establishing the basis for moral self-regulation mirrored in a myriad of formal and informal social contexts (Miller, 1993).

This formula is not merely rhetorical. Organisational structures across a range of social institutions including personal social services reflect similar logic. The introduction of quasi-markets in social services separated functions previously held within unified departments dividing assessment of need from the provision of support; the latter devolved to an increasing range of semi-autonomous organizations in the third sector (Clarke and Newman, 1997). In

conjunction, government acts indirectly on these autonomous organizations identifying budgets, setting targets and regulating activity while individual organizations act reflexively and demonstrate effective self-management (Rose, 1999). As part of this, the role of social workers are shaped by increasing managerialist demands for information particularly in response to audit and risk assessment (Parrot and Madoc-Jones, 2008) leading to claims of increased articlework with a corresponding demise of face-to-face work (Sheppard, 1995; Lewis and Glennerster, 1996; Pithouse, 1998; Jones, 2001; Postle, 2001).

This new policy framework added another dimension to the increasingly dispersed context of social care by effectively dividing provision for children and families from provision for adults. This has been added to more recently by demands for specialisation in pre-qualifying social work training (Laming, 2009); the former leaving some to comment that developments represent the final nail in the coffin of the unified social work department envisaged by Seebohm (Garrett, 2002). In addition, lead roles, once clearly the province of social services are now set within a complex array of relationships between statutory and non-statutory organizations, including a range of service user and other consumer groups. Such relations often reflect power relationships at a more local level, highlighting Foucault’s emphasis on the importance of micro-politics (Gordon, 1980) which, in the process, produce an increasingly diverse range of roles for social workers operating in the different segments of welfare. In addition, a whole plethora of new roles have emerged e.g. personal advisors in Connexions service, which have chipped away at the traditional bases of the social work role. At the same time, information and communication technologies have provided a new novel spaces for organising meaning (Salvo, 2004), effectively structuring activities

such as assessment, establishing modern opportunities for the surveillance of workers and service users (Garrett, 2002, 2005), while also providing innovative possibilities for representing the disadvantaged.

Notwithstanding clear differences in the power and prestige of so-called “caring professions” (Hugman, 1991), traditional professions such as medicine, as well as newer and less established “quasi-professions” such as social work, have been considered more resistant to, or even immune from, broader economic and political power. Reasons for this assumption have differed, but in general the professions reliance upon knowledge and technical skill for practice, as well as internally restricted access and an extensive period of academic training, have allowed employee discretion and control to prevail (Johnson, 1972). However, critics have challenged this orthodox view noting the extent to which professions have always tended to readily adapt to forces of change, as well as conform to externally dictated organisational policy and procedures (Powell and Chamberlain, 2012; Johnson, 2001). For example, the expansion of managerialism has significantly reduced prior discretions (Jones, 2001; Baines, 2004). Despite this, it is questionable the extent to which professional practice has been seriously challenged by resistance due to resurgence of popular or subjugated knowledges of service users (Chambon, 1999).

Hence, a Foucauldian approach to social work professions (Biggs and Powell, 2001; Fournier, 1999, 2000, 2001) attempts to integrate the micro-political tactics of professionalisation within a broader network of power relations through the analysis of discourse and regimes of power/knowledge. For Foucault, professionalism is in itself “a disciplinary mechanism”; associating specific practices with particular worker identities, knowledge and rules of conduct thus legitimising

professional authority and activity. In turn, these norms act as a form of *discipline* over otherwise autonomous professional power regulating behaviour through self-management (Fournier, 1999). Thus induction into professions, in terms of *both* knowledge *and* conduct, serves to construct a specifically governable subjectivity rooted in self-disciplinary mechanisms such as reflective practice and models of supervision (Grey, 1998; Gilbert, 2001). Therefore, the political proximity of welfare professions to the apparatus of government can be described as follows: “professionals are both the instrument and the subject of government, the governor and the governed” (Fournier, 1999, 285).

Paradoxically, professional autonomy, particularly in areas such as social work, is both the reason why the professions remain necessary, due to their ability to manage complex and unpredictable situations, and the focus for the deployment of a range of disciplinary technologies that produce patterns of accountability that target, limit and control the exercise of autonomy (Rose, 1999). Indeed, Biggs and Powell (2001, 99) warn:

In terms of social welfare, itself a discourse, both clients and social workers would need not simply to follow the rules that legitimise what they can say and do, but also to work on themselves in order to become the sort of person who can be seen and heard within that discourse. If they are not careful, both professionals and users of health and welfare systems become trapped in a dance of mutually maintained positions that serves to sustain a particular view of the world and the remedies, the technologies, that can be brought to bear on it.

This view of welfare professions as modes of disciplinary control also provides a useful counterbalance to critical perspectives, which reinforce stereotypes of pampered and privileged professionalism. In recasting professionalism as a source of influence and status concomitant with self-

discipline and controlled performance, the Foucauldian position also links professionals with a wider range of control strategies (Dyer and Keller-Cohen, 2000; Fleming, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Whitehead, 1998). This places professional expertise at the heart of disciplinary technologies designed for the management of populations.

Social work and surveillance

In this next section, we aim to extend this Foucauldian analysis by focussing on two contemporary issues faced by social work practitioners both of which involve different technologies of surveillance.

The first concerns systems of knowledge provided by information and communications technologies [ICT], which shape social work activity while the second considers that archetypal proviso for professional autonomy, the exercise of discretion. Together these two pillars of contemporary practice demonstrate all three elements of what Foucault (1977) describes as discipline: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments and the examination. For example, the clients of social work practice as well as social workers' themselves as both object and subject subjugating both to evermore-sophisticated modes of surveillance while paradoxically creating spaces for innovation and resistance. In the case of the former, we explore the objectifying affect of audit and the way this exploits electronic capabilities for surveillance (Garrett, 2005; Rose, 1999), while the latter retains the familiar professional technologies of supervision promoting self-reflexive surveillance (Rose, 1996; 1999; Gilbert, 2001).

Indeed, one of the key issues in health and social care, where a Foucauldian approach illuminates its microphysics of power can be situated within an exemplar of information and communication techno-

logies. Salvo (2004, 43) describes "communication and information systems" as the art, science and business of organizing information so that it makes sense to people who use it while also highlighting its' democratizing potential theoretically promoted by participation. However, in practice, *Data Protection and Freedom of Information legislation* circumscribe these technologies promoting a potentially contradictory position that both enables and restricts access to information. In UK health and social services, this tension demands adherence to the "Caldicott standard" (DH, 2002; Richardson and Asthana, 2006). Salvo also highlights the potential of such technologies as "professional space" promoting what he describes as "critical action" which also opens up the possibility of both innovation and resistance as workers exploit the totalizing effects of such processes. Similarly, Parrot and Madoc-Jones explore the potential of ICT for resistance, the exercise of discretion and the development of new forms of social work practice.

Nevertheless, information and communications technologies increasingly order the practice of a range of professionals including social workers subsuming in the process older article-based standardized assessment and associated needs focused processes. Garrett (2002, 2005) notes the pervasiveness of such technologies across the public sector, thus ensuring that it is impossible to avoid engaging with these technologies at some level. The implication being that adopting a stance of "refusing to participate" is not a serious option (Freenberg, 1991) although, resistance and subversion are always possibilities (Fleming, 2005).

Information and communication technology is a core element of policy and central to strategies for governing social welfare often located within the rhetoric of "joined up government" and influenced by the private sector (Garrett, 2005; Hudson,

2000, 2002; Selwyn, 2002). Parallel rhetoric of “shared assessment processes” recruit both the service user and a range of professionals in both statutory and non-statutory agencies to ‘data sharing’ supported by such technologies. At the same time, a variety of management information systems enable the passing of performance data between localized and centralized levels of government linking the two poles of bio-politics.

The significance of these systems from a Foucauldian perspective is twofold. First, they engulf all in architectural labyrinth of information, a form of panopticon establishing a level of surveillance of both worker and service user, constantly monitored through electronic forms of audit. Second, they institutionalize particular discourses in the very operation of the system through the nature and types of questions asked. Garrett (2005, 453) notes the “narrow, normative and prescriptive view” embedded in a range of assessment tools promoted by government agencies observing that:

...Social work is increasingly being ordered, devised and structured by academics, policy makers and e-technicians far removed from the day-to-day encounters, which practitioners have with the users of services. This is reflected in the emerging software architecture and in the greater use of centrally devised e-assessment templates which attempt to map contours of social work engagements and which construct new ‘workflows’ (Garrett 2005, 545).

In England, guidelines related to community care policy (DHSS, 1990; DH, 2005b, 2006) provide familiar strategies of identification, assessment, care planning, care packages, monitoring and review. However, subtle changes in the rationalized deployment of this technology shifted its focus away from support for clients and toward surveillance and monitoring. A new language of audit concerned with “outcomes” and “risk” shaped social work

activity both in child care and community care producing particular expectations (Rose, 1999; D’Cruz et al., 2009). Monroe (2004) notes both positive and negative consequences of this development but in a similar vein to Garrett (2005), observes the involvement of external inspectorates such as the Audit Commission and the Social Services Inspectorate alongside senior managers in setting goals and an absence of practicing social workers. Positive developments include increased accountability and standardization of social work practice however; this may be at the cost of producing a punitive environment and reducing social work to a simplistic description of practice that operates within a culture of blame and protocolisation.

Furthermore, in the context of child welfare, Tilbury (2004) notes how the values implicit in performance indicators provide a narrow conception of child welfare that overstates regulatory concerns while underplaying the importance of supporting families to provide safe care at home. Likewise, Garrett (2003, 443) observes that the “Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment, Home Office – DH/DfEE/HO, 2000), contains a preoccupation with the ecological approach and the use of questionnaires and scales that produces social work as a reactive activity narrowly focused on child abuse at the expense of proactive family support services”.

This “narrow, normative and prescriptive view” has particular consequences for some targets of policy due to what Booth et al. (2006) describe as “temporal discrimination”. Discussing the experience of child protection procedures by parents with intellectual disabilities they note how the prevailing wisdom in policy and practice over avoiding delays and the tendency for time-limited interventions works against people with poor conceptions of time and

related skills. They argue that “tick box” social work reliant on systems and procedures has replaced analysis and judgment to the detriment of some of the most vulnerable of social workers’ clients. This provides a new tactic for the surveillance of contemporary social work that can best be described as “time discipline” (Garrett, 2003), reflecting Jones’ (2001) observation that tactics first used to constrain the autonomy of radical social workers now targets mainstream practitioners. Processes of protocolization, the time spent on activities such as articlework [or electronic form filling] has particular relevance for a Foucauldian analysis of social work, as power relations embedded in routinization can define a certain pattern of normalization:

“The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power” (Foucault, 1977, 304).

Keenan (2001) observes similar phenomena in the USA related to compulsory documentation and recording for users of mental health services. She describes the constricted, objectifying image of service users provided by the assessment and monitoring processes informed by the normalizing and medicalized discourses of mental health. These discourses are embedded and define healthy behaviours in relation to particular norms and in opposition to unhealthy or forbidden behaviours. At the same time, she uses Foucauldian insights to identify how the “gaze” of diagnosis makes the service user visible while shading the powerful and privileged.

In a similar vein, Scheyett (2006) argues that discourses of evidence based practice effectively silence both the service user and the practitioner. This occurs as the dialogue between service users and practitioners over experiences and

knowledge of the “real world” become subjugated to disciplinary knowledge external to this dialogue which, through its status as truth, discredits alternative conceptions of events and their meanings (Foucault, 1978). As tactics of government, information technologies objectify and render visible but in the same movement silence the targets of policy. As Heffernan (2006) notes, the language of user involvement dispersed throughout social policy, has enabled government to narrow the range of options available.

Social work clients are not the only targets of the discourses carried by this information infrastructure. The rights of carers to have their needs assessed has valorized both caring and carers in a way that “may squeeze out the last remnants of the right not to care” thus reinforcing a particular ethical gaze within objectified and electronic formats (Harris, 2002). Greater visibility of carers is a consequence of their increasing status within tactics of government that have also brought greater levels of surveillance (Heaton, 1999; Henderson and Forbat, 2002) cementing forms of obligation distilled from this “ethic” of care. Together these shifts contribute to the downgrading of holistic and ethical practice.

Foucault (1977) views surveillance as a central technique that renders an individual the object of power/knowledge. Assessment practice, established in relation to normalized standards and roles as in this example, produces an intensification of articlework, protocolization and the expansion of information and communication technologies. Hence, professionals also come under scrutiny as part of the continuous review of the client’s needs. A gaze that is “always receptive” to managerial control catches all (Foucault 1977, 89).

Social Work, Power and Discretion

The exercise of discretion, taken as the archetypal activity that defines professional practice, has provided the focus for a significant amount of debate and analysis concerning the status of professions in general and social work in particular. Discretion provides a paradoxical space for the operation of power both enticing resistance and inviting surveillance. The majority of this debate has focused on the way managerialism, managerial forms of supervision and information technology has apparently undermined professional discretion (Harris, 1998; Evans and Harris, 2004; D'Cruz et al., 2009). Nevertheless, Evans and Harris (2004) provide an interesting discussion of discretion in social work practice drawing on Lipsky's (1980) work on 'street level bureaucracies' which focused on face-to-face encounters of social workers with their clients. Analysis provides evidence that discretion is alive and well in social work practice although micro-politics of the context means that this has been subject to ongoing revision: again the dance of resistance and surveillance.

The spaces within which social workers "translate nebulous policy into practical action" (Evans and Harris, 2004, 882) resonate with the analysis of governmentality and the persistence of professional authority in complex situations where actions cannot be pre-prescribed. Persistence of spaces between rules requires judgments by professionals over which "rules" apply in contexts that contain multiple possibilities. Practitioners also use discretion when deciding to "apply the rules" in this instance effectively closing down space. This leads to the proposition that discretion is a political activity that occurs in the context of uncertainty and complexity necessitating negotiation while highlighting localized and relational aspects of power.

This localized and relational aspect is also evident in power relations between practitioners and managers where enabling discretion has advantages for managers and organizations as it allows "innovation" to be claimed for the organization when things work well while directing blame at front line practitioners when things go wrong i.e. "failed to follow procedures". In addition, discretion allows managers to distance themselves from difficult day-to-day consequences of organizational goals such as gaps between actions and resources. Discretion therefore operates in spaces governed by uncertainty that involve bargaining and negotiation over responsibility (Evans and Harris, 2004). Indeed, networks of power relations operating via the most mundane interactions between managers, social workers, service users and carers enable the formation and shifting of alliances between political and non-political authorities where experts [professionals] and expertise are crucial to operations (Parton, 1994; D'Cruz et al., 2009). "Micro-politics" is the localized context where policy decisions are given meaning through practical application and the identities of participants are produced in the reciprocal relations of power or "performativity". Performance is always relational, drawing others into the act: managers, other professionals, clients and so on constructing both meanings associated with performances and mutually dependent subject positions (Wetherell, 2001).

Such specific and localized contexts are typically complex with multiple demands providing circumstances where social workers can adopt different roles depending on their function and client group. There is always some degree of fluidity and uncertainty around expectations and therefore the space for discretion and thus innovation and resistance. In addition, social workers carry a range of discourses into these spaces. Face-to-face contact

enables different forms of interaction from that characterized in routinized and objectified practice. It also allows social workers to ‘reclaim the language’ to re-establish holistic and ethical practice:

Deconstructing the language of performance indicators and quality outcomes implies that rather than turning a conversation with a service user about how they think and feel about their situation into easily measurable service inputs, the social worker strives to reflect that conversation in the framing of objectives driven by the service user’s internalized understanding of “quality” (Gregory and Holloway, 2005, 50).

However, it is not sufficient to assume that all face-to-face encounters are in themselves holistic and ethical and by that alone avoid the oppressive nature of objectifying discourses and routinized practice. For example, discourses of anti-oppressive practice developed from a radical critique of social work causing the profession to reflect and review practice with major benefits at that time however; this discourse is now the nucleus of social work activity. Language and meaning associated with anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice are historically specific while discourse is dynamic allowing re-articulation of radical elements with more conservative positions that colonize and neutralize the discourse institutionalizing it in a range of organizational contexts:

Indeed anti-oppressive practice has allowed the state to reposition itself as a benign arbiter between competing identity claims. Perversely, given its aim to make the personal political, it has allowed the problems of society to be recast as due to the moral failings of individuals who need censure and correction from the anti-oppressive social worker (McLaughlin, 2005, 300).

Similar contradictions arise in relation to the discourse of “empowerment”, which has become a theory of professional prac-

tice providing professionals with a central role in defining needs and designing interventions (Pease, 2002). Rose (1996), takes this criticism a stage further suggesting that discourses of empowerment translate as the “role of experts in the coaxing of others who lack the cognitive, emotional, practical and ethical skills to take personal responsibility and engage in self-management”. Disciplinary techniques embedded in discourses of empowerment located in initiatives such as “Sure Start” (DH, 2003), “community development projects”, and public health projects target “damaged individuals” in an attempt to reform and normalize their conduct, encouraging them to take personal responsibility and engage in self-forming activities, self-care and self-help (Rose, 1999; Jordan, 2000).

Nevertheless, a number of writers (Beresford, 2001; Butler, 2005; Harris, 1998; Evans and Harris, 2004; Gregory and Holloway, 2005; Hodge, 2005; Scheyett, 2006; Pease, 2002) emphasize, in different ways, social workers’ potential for resistance in their practice with marginalized individuals and groups. Under such circumstances social workers resist prevailing discourse defining individuals i.e. refugees and asylum seekers as a problem and undeserving. Instead, they provide space for the service users’ to develop and express their perspective on needs and priorities. Here, discretion provides space for the renegotiation of events making resistance possible through the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”.

However, such possibilities may already be constrained regardless of the values of individual social workers. Social workers’ carry into their interactions “icons” representing the collective experience of society concerning particular types of event (Kitzinger, 2000). These “icons” are produced over time as a consequence of similar types of events e.g. child abuse cases, homicides perpetrated by

users of mental health services, neglect and deaths of people subject to community care. Such events provoke intense media discussion while icons provide rhetorical shorthand for journalists and the public, which include interpretive frameworks that embed distortion and inaccuracy and provide templates for future events. As such, they have particular qualities; appear fixed and authoritative, and resist renegotiation. Discursively, they provide a backdrop for social work activity disciplining discretion through ghost-like media surveillance.

Surveillance in this world of face-to-face encounters takes more subtle forms than those produced by objectifying processes of routinized work, and information and communication technologies. Nevertheless, the dual aspect of bio-politics remains evident. At the macro-level, governance of professional activity requires professions to regulate the activity of practitioners by ensuring their commitment to professional development as a prerequisite to retaining a licence to practice. At the micro-level, discourse concerning the complexity of the social work task incites individual practitioners to adopt a position of reflexivity to their work (Taylor and White, 2000). Such reflexivity, achieved via confessional practices includes, among others, techniques of reflection and supervision (Rose, 1999; Gilbert, 2001). In turn, organizations require practitioners to engage in supervision as surveillance of individual practice; thus promoting processes that enable managers to maintain “the gaze” on both individual social workers and the exercise of discretion in relation to their caseload. Managers themselves are also subject to supervision entangling all in an ever-extending web of surveillance.

Such subjectifying technologies operating alongside the objectifying technologies discussed earlier, exemplified by the use of information and communication technologies, reproduce the panopticon in a

contemporary form no longer constrained by the physical limits of the hospital, school, prison or barracks; enabling the surveillance of social work activity across an increasingly complex and dispersed landscape. For Foucault (1977), the panopticon integrates power and knowledge, the control of the “body” and the control of space into a technology of discipline. To this, as noted earlier, we can also add a temporal dimension. It is both efficient, since surveillance is everywhere and constant, and effective, because it is “discreet”, functioning “permanently and in silence” (1977, 177). It also provides the scope for the supervision of those entrusted with the surveillance of others.

Conclusion

The advancing of the neo-liberal project initiated by New Right Conservatives and extended by New Labour has seen a radical restructuring of the terrain of welfare. In parallel with these changes, new relations of power and knowledge emerge providing different forms of oppression and different possibilities for those reliant on welfare services. Adopting a Foucauldian approach enables a critical approach to the dynamics of knowledge and power that lays open the implications and the possibilities of practices promoted by social policy and enacted by social workers. In addition, this perspective, by moving beyond conceptions of power as domination to consider power as relational poses a different range of questions over how particular subjects are formed e.g. asylum seekers. Moreover, it raises questions over how that identity relates to the formation of other subjects on which subjectivity is dependent.

Furthermore, exploring power as relational exposes many of the principles that have guided social work activity such as empowerment and anti-oppressive to a critical stance, identifying how relations of

power have seen such commitments detached from their original radical and humanitarian moorings to feature now as components of oppressive discourses they might once have challenged. Nevertheless, by identifying the effects of power as partial a Foucauldian perspective provides the possibility of resistance enabling analysis of those many incidences, many mundane, some striking, where service users may come together with carers and social workers to establish alternatives to prevailing discourse and social practices. To contribute to this possibility in conceptually unpacking social work, a Foucauldian theory of power relations is pertinent. Clarification takes place through an examination of the presuppositions that are embedded in world-views of social workers. However, these developments in social work have their shadow side, and the ethics of using such technologies to “help” clients such as older people through complex power relations have been subject

to less scrutiny. Indeed, it is perhaps emblematic of contemporary western culture that social work offers the promise of escape from, rather than a deepened understanding of identity. For example, those who do not conform to the utopian dream appear to have been shunted into a non-participative discourse, bounded by professional surveillance, or the more palatable yet closely related discourse of “monitoring”. In both cases, it could be suggested that a discourse on dependency has been supplemented, and in some cases replaced by, a discourse on risk. The risk of giving in to an aging body, the risk of thereby being excluded from one’s retirement community, the risk of being too poor to maintain a consumer lifestyle, the risk of being excluded from participation through incapacity that has been externally assessed, the risk of being abused, the risk of control being taken out of one’s hands and the risk of tokenism in partnership.

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Primit la redactie: ianuarie, 2012