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Going beyond a tale of two sectors: a reflective career planning toolkit for social work students

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to make the case that social work students would benefit from thinking beyond the binary of statutory sector vs voluntary sector when thinking about their future career. It argues instead that they should think in terms of their own philosophical worldview, their own preferences in terms of the mechanics of day-to-day practice, and the reasons for those preferences. Drawing on reflection literature, Johns' Model of Reflection (2017) and an element of Motivational Interviewing, and informed by a value pluralist perspective, the paper sets out a reflective process for social work students to use. The process supports students firstly to explore their own core values and worldview, then to consider their feelings about more practical aspects of the social work role, and finally to find the connections and possible dissonances between the two. It is hoped that the article and the reflective process here advanced can contribute to students being able to plan for their professional futures in a way that does not depend principally on having to choose between statutory or voluntary sector practice, but on a much wider array of factors and values.

"...So go do what you like, make sure you do it wise
You may find out that your self-doubt
means nothing was ever there
You can't go forcing something if it's just not right"

Green Day: 'When I come around'
Armstrong, Dirnt, and Cool (1995).

This paper is a call to social work students to temporarily put to one side the artificially firm line often constructed between statutory and voluntary sector roles, and to reflect early and often on other facets of their professional trajectory, and the factors informing their post-qualification career plans. Drawing on reflection literature, and informed by a value pluralist perspective, Johns' Model of Reflection (2017) and an element of Motivational Interviewing (2013), the paper aims to encourage and guide students to consider and reflect upon their own views about the world and their preferences about future practice, and to find the connections and possible dissonances between the two.

It sets out a reflective process for social work students to use, firstly to explore their core values and worldview, then consider their feelings about more practical aspects of any given social work role, and finally to examine where the two do or do not presently marry up.

The ideas in this paper may be of use to social work students and either university-based colleagues or practice educators. The more directive aspects of the model are framed in the second person ('you') addressing the student directly, so that educators may make use of them without needing to adapt the phrasing.

A tale of two sectors?

The practice context of UK social work, and particularly social work in England, is diverse, residual and arguably siloed, and spread between a combination of the local authority and health service-associated roles and a variety of voluntary, independent and private provisions. Students and colleagues based internationally may recognize this arrangement in their own countries, or have different situations in terms of which sectors deliver which services. In discussions with colleagues and students, two dominant discourses appear and become sustained. In the first discourse, some opine that more 'real', 'old school' or 'traditional' social work takes place in the voluntary and charity sector. The basis for these views varies. Some draw on the profession's historical roots (Burnham, 2011; Lewis, 1996), others suggest statutory social work is becoming more crisis intervention-orientated and less present for preventative or communitarian work (Hatton, 2008; Macmillan, 2013). The reciprocal discourse professes a statutory role to be 'real' social work, signified by the holding of the job title, as well as the qualification, and by employment in a local authority role. This perceived division has been addressed and questioned by others, including those working in the field (Boafor, 2014; Hughes, 2017).

Because of these discourses, students are at risk of starting to think early and concretely in terms of a voluntary/statutory binary. For some, there is a dichotomy about what constitutes a 'proper' social work job. Statutory for some is seen as official, formal and pedestalled, for others as state-serving, authoritarian and technocratic. Voluntary sector practice is conversely seen as empowering, community-centered and radical by some, yet by others as informal, unempowered and second-order. This dichotomy appears to be unnecessarily stark, particularly for students, and like all dichotomies, it nudges its adherents toward the picking of a side.

There are some expectable and noted differences between roles in the two sectors, particularly in terms of responsibilities, remits, timescales and how the job may feel in daily practice (Anonymous, 2014; Gillen, 2007; Goodall, 2013). There are however numerous other factors that can impact on whether one feels suited to a particular role (Stanley et al., 2013; Sutcliffe, Jasper, Hughes, Abendstern, & Challis, 2016; Word & Park, 2015). Many of these are more closely related to practicalities, organizational matters, or even team eccentricities and value bases than to the sector in which the role sits. The assumption that voluntary sector organizations maintain genuine closeness to the community has been questioned and problematized (Clayton, Donovan, & Merchant, 2015), as has the perception that they deliver empowering rather than punitive interventions for clients (Peters, 2012). Others query the consistency of the relationship between statutory and voluntary

organizations in terms of overlap and welfare pluralism (Dahlberg, 2005), or offer evidence that the perceived differences between sectors are not so stark (Robinson & Masocha, 2017).

I am one of many social workers who, in need of post-qualification employment and, I suspect, validation, applied for and was eventually offered a statutory role. It is not a criticism of the team I joined to say that it was not a comfortable fit for me in terms of the type of work or way of working. I should very possibly never have applied for the post, and if I had done, should have prepared more for what I would and would not find that chimed with my mentality. I left before very long, and shortly after took up employment in a non-statutory team where I felt happy and productive. For some time—too long—I thought that I had found my side of the statutory-voluntary dichotomy, and settled in, having found a team and role in which I was content and fulfilled. This was a simplification of the reality; there were multiple factors at play in my respective relationships with these roles, but I did not reflect on this for several years.

There are students who plan to go into the non-statutory sector, to work for a charity, a community-based organization or a social enterprise, and who have made that choice for a range of reasons, which might be pragmatic or ideological, emotional or intellectual. However, a considerable number of non-statutory-inclined students who have bought into the statutory/voluntary binary may well have skills, contacts, inventiveness and an independence of mind that can benefit the statutory sector. These are people who may have been put off statutory practice, but who could find statutory teams and leaders with whom they could work both effectively and happily. Likewise, there are those who are statutory-focussed because of their perceptions about local authority social work being a gold standard of sorts, who find that the area of practice they intended on joining when they first applied has been outsourced to a charity by the time they graduate. Those who find the voluntary sector appealing because they have an aversion to wielding formal powers may, in fact, be some of the best people to do just that. Similarly, those who aspire to the rigors and frameworks of statutory service may be well-placed contributing that affinity to an area of practice that no longer has a statutory equivalent.

In order to liberate social work students from this binary thinking in term of statutory vs voluntary, and to support them to enter organisations and fields where, irrespective of sector, they feel that they fit, and can thrive, they need to be encouraged and supported along a road of deep, ongoing and somewhat directed reflection. This reflection needs to encompass their professional aspirations in a way that avoids starting with the question of statutory or voluntary, and concentrates on a constellation of different aspects of practices, while also incorporating philosophical beliefs that may never have been explicitly articulated. This paper proposes a reflective process to enable this. Where possible it is good that this starts early in the journey toward qualification, before financial and other constraints potentially entrap one in an unhappy or ill-suited role.

Reflection in social work

Reflection is a well-established part of social work practice and training, and a staple of social work literature (e.g. Constable, 20072016; Gould & Taylor, 1996; Schön, 1983; Thompson & Thompson, 2008). Despite its prevalence, multiple voices have critiqued

the teaching and practice of reflection for being overly focussed on practical and practice-based concerns (Burr, Blyth, Sutcliffe, & King, 2016; Wilson, 2013) or on meeting competency-based frameworks (Lam, Wong, & Leung, 2007), at the expense of increasing self-awareness and self-knowledge, or at the cost of what Grant, Kinman, and Baker (2015, 2351) refer to as an 'emotional curriculum' . However, Burr et al. (2016) and Lam et al. (2007) argue for the value of self-discovery and in-depth self-reflection for social work students. Bay and McFarlane (2011) state that reflection should among other things support students to, recognize their own frame of reference and examine their own taken-for-granted experiences and dominant values. The three-step reflective process advocated in this paper seeks to take a lead from these concerns, and from the aspect of Johns' (2017) reflective model concerned with influencing factors on one's thoughts and actions. The first stage seeks to be a pluralist means by which social work students can interrogate their own values and worldview, and where they feel social work fits with it. The second stage prompts students to actively consider how they feel about different aspects of 'practice mechanics'. By practice mechanics, I mean aspects of social work like referral routes for clients, level of specialization in a role, length of time involved with a given client/family, representation of the client voice and mono/multidisciplinary team makeup, among other things. The third step then asks students to consider why they feel as they do about the practice mechanics questions (step 2), and look for where they can see connections and dissonances between their stated worldview (in step 1). In doing so, it seeks to address the concerns noted about the reflective focus on practice- and competency-based issues, by asking students to think about such practice mechanics as early as possible in their training; to consider not only how they feel about them, but why they feel as they do incorporating them into the same reflective process as their deeper philosophical values. For this to be an open, inclusive and non-prescriptive process, a pluralist attitude to values is helpful.

Value pluralism in social work education

A central argument informing this article and the reflective process set out in it is this; a degree of value pluralism in social work practice and social work education is not only necessary, and frequently unavoidable, it can be a good in itself.

Pluralism, in brief, is the idea that multiple identities, standpoints, and views of how the world is or should be can peacefully co-exist within a system (Housten, 2012; Berlin, 2003 in Houston, 2012, p. 653; Irving & Young, 2002). Two or more people, groups or institutions can view situations differently and disagree about their analyses of them and their preferred solutions without the structures and systems within which these views exist breaking down. Within a profession like social work, a certain amount of value pluralism is not only acceptable, it is broadly a desirable thing for social work practitioners (Houston, 2012), and a necessary prerequisite for maximizing the talents of individual social workers and thereby the experiences and outcomes for clients. It is also unavoidable; social workers, like any other group of people, frame the world in infinitely varied ways, and have different values and positions about how the world is or should be.

The philosophical core and purpose of social work are far from settled in the modern era. The impact of neoliberalism and right-leaning economics is much commented upon, usually critically (e.g. Butler & Drakeford, 2005; Fergusson, 2012; Harris, 2014;

Morely and McFarlane, 2014; van Heugten, 2011), and many social work writers profess an egalitarian, radical, pro-equality or progressive stance, though they differ on how this should manifest (e.g. Solas, 2008; Hugman, 2008, debating the merits of egalitarianism vs equity). The left does not have a monopoly on social work identity however; other voices claim that social work has always had a conservative element to its core (Levin, 1982). Further voices posit (again variably defined, and without necessarily endorsing them) conservative and night-watchman state liberal conceptualizations of social justice (Duffy, 2010; Gasker & Fisher, 2014) and even consider that conservatism may be beneficial in terms of the maintenance of valued institutions (Lee, 2014). Alongside left-right political distinctions, there is also a base of scholarly opinion linking social work with religious and spiritual influence, whether historically (Moffatt & Irving, 2002) or more contemporarily (Adams, 2013).

Given the diverse state of the literature, and the findings of research around the worldviews and (un)cohesive values of social workers, students or groups in general (Adamowich, Kuwee Kumsa, Rego, Stoddart, & Vito, 2014; Hancock, 2008; Meeussen, Schaafsma, & Phalet, 2014), social work educators cannot assume that social work students embody or share values in the cohesive way we might expect or want. Gilligan (2007) categorized the written responses of social work applicants in terms of how they viewed social problems. His categorization grouped the diverse range of responses into conservative-authoritarian, liberal-reformist, and radical-revolutionary viewpoints, based on where they laid the responsibility for social problems, and therefore the focus for action or change—the individual or society as a whole (Gilligan, 2007) .

Beyond the deeper socio-political and philosophical world-views of social work students, this incohesion of values may extend to students' stated reasons for entering the profession. D'Asprix et al (2004) suggested that their student respondents were more focussed on what they would gain from being social workers than on what might be considered altruistic or empowering aims. They conclude that something will or should change, and consider the viable options to be either changing (US) admission standards for social work, accommodating these students' goals in the public sector, or accepting a divergence of goals and the resultant emergence of a new social work.

Some authors argue that we should be somewhat more stringent about the required values of prospective social workers. Clark (2006), for example, expresses concern about a minimalist form of liberalism becoming the profession's dominant value. Clark argues that we should be more specific in the values we seek from our aspiring practitioners. I fully share the concern about a thinning of our values, but my preference would be to start with the values and beliefs a student already has, particularly if they do not know what their own values are, and help them first to recognize and articulate them, and then challenge and evolve them in terms of where they connect with practice-orientated toolbox. This includes helping them identify the sort of team or setting in which they would best work. While not claiming this eventuality is Clark's preference, I am concerned about any potential move, well-intentioned or even unintentional as it may be, towards future practitioners adhering to a granular identikit code, whether of the political left, centre or right, whether centred around care or control, or in terms of any other values concepts. As an example, the English social work Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) has relatively recently been updated to include equality

as a headline component of its second domain (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2018). While this reinforces its importance to the profession, it does not automatically follow that students will take that update to their hearts rather than merely their professional outlooks. Nor, incidentally, does it parse what form of equality —outcome, access, opportunity, equity, egalitarianism (Hugman, 2008; O'Brien, 2010; Solas, 2008)—they should prioritize.

As a counter-balance to this point, it is important to note that pluralist philosophy incorporates a conditionality to the co-existence of different approaches and viewpoints; that a framework of tolerance and respect for the difference must be preserved. Differences must exist within a structure. In social work, that framework and structure are embodied by the Professional Capabilities Framework in England (BASW, 2018), and by corresponding international codes (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2012). It is both reasonable and essential that social workers are governed by broad requirements to behave professionally and lawfully, to keep their practice as defensible and safe as possible, and to be honest, competent and focussed on the welfare of their clients (BASW, 2018; HCPC, 2017). Flouting, ignoring and failing to live up to those standards can have serious consequences for clients, and for workers. The challenge is to consciously draw the connections between these frameworks and one's own views, and to approach the necessary constraints of social work knowing from where one is coming philosophically.

This paper is offering an approach that has some alignment with the second of D'Asprix et al.'s possible solutions (2004) in that it suggests the profession, and particularly its educational wing, should evolve to more consciously start where students are, and support (and indeed require) them to delve truthfully into their own philosophical views of the world and their feelings about elements of practice, which some of them will not have thought about in depth or tried to articulate before. Students can and should be challenged to consider other viewpoints, to import accurate knowledge and evidence in the place of 'common sense' or unsupported presumption, and to develop meaningful empathy for those we disagree with or struggle to understand. For that to have philosophical and practical meaning, a reflective process is needed.

The reflective process

As previously described, this reflective process has three steps—the first focussing on core philosophical beliefs and attitudes, the second asking about personal preferences in terms of practice mechanics, and the third encouraging explanation and articulation of the reasons why the second set of answers are as they are for the individual student, including where they do or do not link to the answers to step 1. This process has the potential to be long and drawn out if done in one go, so it may be advisable if taking oneself through the process, to write down or record some instinctive answers the first time, and to return to the process as an when one notices a change or a clarification in ones thoughts. If facilitating this with a group of students, an educator may wish to dip in and out of the process over several sessions, tying it into the broader content of a module or placement. The important thing is to draw on all three stages and for students to have opportunities to consider and articulate their thoughts on these questions.

This model has evolved from, and draws on, various techniques and approaches that have been successfully used in the classroom at my institution, in particular when looking at reflection generally, at social work ethics, or at planned recall days for year groups on placement, with the support of our Practice Learning Co-ordinator. The form has varied, developed and refined over the last couple of years, but the central theme has always been finding the locus between values preferences and practices.

Step 1: core values questions

Start by asking yourself these questions, and taking some time over the answers.
1. What are your broad instinctive beliefs and values about people and society?
Ask yourself:
  (a) What rights should everybody have, including people you dislike or of whom you disapprove?
  (b) What services should the state either directly provide or at least pay for (irrespective of whether those services currently exist or not)?
  (c) Under what circumstances should the state be able to prevent you, or anyone —including your prospective clients—doing whatever you/they want?
2. What do you think social work's role should be in supporting the worldview you have articulated in these answers?

The choice of the word 'should' here is intentional. This set of questions is designed to promote thinking about how you would like to see the world and society, irrespective (for now) of how it is. This is not novel in terms of being a subject for analysis and scholarly opinion; the idealism of social workers and social work students has been explored in relation to altruism and professional concerns (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997) and to emotional exhaustion (Ngai & Cheung, 2009). The approach advocated here is to ask yourself questions that explore and help articulate the nature and detail of your individual idealism and altruism, as well as other relevant values, to articulate a genuine and idealized worldview. In knowing one's own philosophical standpoint, one can better see how well it fits with an organization or service one might join.

Step 2: practice mechanics questions

Having interrogated and articulated some answers to the core values questions, ask yourself the following questions, in any order (the question numbers are just for ease of reference when using, though it may be useful to end with question 12). For now, do not worry about the 'Why?' that follows each question, they will be returned to later. This list is far from exhaustive and you should feel free to add to it with similarly structured questions.

(Note for educators—If using this as the basis for a teaching activity or, it may be productive to split a class into pairs and have them ask one another the questions.)

1. What field of social work would you like to go into, or what client group would you like to work with? Why?

2. How, ideally, would you come by your clients; by referral by another agency, by self-referral, by outreach pick-up? Why?
3. Would your clients be under a level of requirement to engage, or would it be entirely by volunteerism? Why?
4. What would be your ideal in terms of how your agency or team consults, includes or takes suggestion from the client group? Through individual person-centered practice, through voluntary groups, with peer mentors, with a mixed or wholly client inclusive/led management committee? Why? (Arnstien's (1969) Ladder of Participation may be of use here)
5. Do you prefer to work with people preventatively, at the point of early intervention, close to or at the point of crisis, or following a crisis at the start of reablement or recovery? Why?
   (a) What sort of physical and organizational environment would you ideally like to work in, and would you prefer to be more center-based, more community-based, mostly working doing outreach, or a mix? Wh

(1) In what ways, and through what structures would you like to work with other professions and groups? Why?
   (1) What sort of approach would you like an organization you work for to have in terms of how it does its job e.g. in terms of assessment tools, standard intervention approaches, individual or group work? Why?
   (2) What kind of timeframes would you ideally like to work in most of the time —short-term crisis orientated interventions, long term or preventative work, or a mix? Why?
   (3) How general or specialized a service would you like to work for, and how general or specialized a role do you want in it? e.g. one of a whole team of mental health workers vs being the mental health lead in a team with a different main focus. Why?
   (4) Do you want to work in a team where everyone, or nearly everyone, is a social worker, or do you want to work in a multi-disciplinary team of some sort? Why?
   (5) What one other question of this sort would you ask someone else who was training in social work? Write it down and ask it of yourself, or ask it of someone else, followed by a corresponding 'why?'

If your answer to one or more of these questions is a genuine 'I don't know' or 'I don't mind' then make a note of it.

By this point, you will hopefully have articulated some philosophical views about how you see society and social work's place in it, and some ideas about your preferences in terms of practice mechanics. The third step in this process is to ask yourself questions that illuminate the reasons for your second set of answers, and the places and ways in which they do or do not cohere with your answers to the first.

Step 3: reasons and (dis) connections

The third stage of the process draws on Johns (2017) emphasis on informing factors as a part of reflection. For each of the questions above that you have answered in step 2, ask yourself the 'why?' that follows it. The question 'why?' follows each of this second set of questions, because the aim of the exercise is not only to identify what your goals are and where you think your abilities and attitudes would fit, but, crucially, why you feel like that.

For example:

- One student wants to go into an older person's team because of experience with older relatives, whilst another wants to avoid such a team for exactly the same reason.
- A person's past employment as a residential care worker may make them more or less likely to want to be in a multi-disciplinary team.
- Individuals may have an affinity with narrative approaches to assessment because of their beliefs about inclusion or holistic assessment, or because they have worked for a long time in a 'tick box' way and want a change, or simply because they like the sound of it.
- One person may want to work in the statutory sector because the title matters to them in terms of professional identity, while another wants to because their political beliefs oppose the commissioning out of services to the private and third sector.

None of these are improper reasons for having a particular preference in and of themselves; what is important is to know why you hold those preferences.

The reasons why may connect with any number of aspects of self, personal or professional past, and opinion that are associated with critical reflection in social work. These may include one's own social location (Heron, 2005), the desire to gain knowledge or expertise in a particular area (Basham & Buchanan, 2009), or aspects of one's own life story (Spector- Merself, 2017). Spector-Mersel's own contention is that life story-based reflection encourages a deep level of self-understanding that is professionally and personally beneficial. For the purposes of this approach, I am reverse-engineering the process. Specter-Mersel advocates a three-stage process that starts with the telling of one's own life story, followed by analysis and explanation. In the approach of this paper's process, the starting point is 1) worldview and view of social work vis-à-vis that worldview and 2) one's thoughts and preferences for the practice mechanics within which one would ideally like to work. Aspects of life story may emerge as part of the 'why' for the responses to these questions, or may not. The student, and the educator, must be open to either or both. In thinking about this, the reflector needs to be conscious of the fact that their 'why' may be different, or even the opposite of, the 'why' of a classmate or colleague, and that this is entirely normal. Even if not encompassing your life story or your articulated philosophical beliefs from step 1 in a profound or clear way, there is a strong possibility that emotional reasoning may well be part of why you may lean in a particular professional direction. This is not to be shied away from—an emotional aspect to a social work curriculum is a necessary

component for development as a practitioner (Grant et al., 2015) as is a healthy and safe use of self (Adamowich et al., 2014). It is useful to know consciously what you think and feel about your practice, not just in its own right but so that you can become sufficiently self-aware to notice if those thoughts and feelings change or develop; you find yourself on a professional path that used to fit, but no longer does.

Borrowing somewhat from Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), it is particularly useful to notice not only the connections, but particularly the dissonances and discrepancies between these answers and those you give for the first part of this process. Where do your practical preferences fit with your philosophical beliefs? Where do they not? Have you confirmed and fleshed out your initial views, or prompted some of them to change?

For example:

- Do you see a connection between a stated interest in long-term working and a philosophical belief that the state should provide support for as long as it is needed?
- Do you see a disconnect between wanting to work for a service where client involvement is mandatory, and a belief in a right to privacy?
- Is a preference for working in an exclusively social work team, rather than an MDT, because of a belief in social workers having a specific and privileged role within the caring professions?

These examples and those set out earlier are simply intended to be illustrative – individual students' answers will be very nature be unique. If, by chance, any of either set of examples prompt a strong reaction—positive or negative—then that is worth exploring further for oneself.

If in particular this process is started early in one's social work education, it may well be that there are many answers of 'don't know'. If your answer to one or more of these questions is a genuine 'I don't know' then at this point ask yourself what would help you make up your mind? If your answer to one or more questions is 'I don't mind', then you still need to ask of yourself 'why? (or 'why not?)'. If you remain unsure or still do not mind, look at your answers to the questions in step 1, and see if they point you in a particular direction.

It may be a natural impulse to start to hierarchy your answers in terms of importance to you. If this happens, it is important to ask yourself why, for you, one factor is more important than another. If, for example, you really want to work in mental health, and that is more important in your mind that the sector, the type or urgency of the work or the models you use, that makes it all the more important that you ask yourself those latter three questions in order to get a fuller view of your preferences and instincts.

As a cautionary note, anyone making use of the approach proposed here, or any reflective tool, should take into account Fook and Askeland's (2007) view that reflection needs to be appropriately prepared for, and particularly Yip's (2006) warning to be careful about the potential for traumatic memories or thoughts arising from deep reflection. The focus on 'why' for each of these questions leaves open the possibility that someone's reasons for having a particular preference for their professional future rests in negative or painful experiences in past jobs or earlier life. As should always be

the case with the reflection of this type, care and self-care should be taken, and appropriate support sought if needed. Students and educators are encouraged to use the approach in this paper flexibly and kindly, to never demean their own or their students' reasons for a particular professional interest or direction.

These aims can now hopefully be informed by a better understanding of what one thinks, feels and wants from professional practice. As a result, one may be confidently reconfirmed in one's pre-existing professional aims, or one might just have made connections that open up a previously rejected potential career path vis-a-vis choice of sector, among other things. By way of example, I offer the following vignettes. They are aggregates of social workers I have encountered, but with all identifying details removed. In different ways, each illustrates a case of a practitioner who reflects on the role they have entered and the reasons they did so, including their values, and arrives at a previously unanticipated way of thinking about where they might be suited. These are tales from practice, but raise questions that it is well worth thinking about as a student.

a) A voluntary sector social worker has avoided posts in statutory child safeguarding because of personal discomfort with the family crisis. In their present role, they develop and realize a talent for managing critical and tense situations, where the resources and powers available to them are minimal, and they have to rely on informal and non-statutory support networks to resolve many issues. That worker could well become a formidable, calmly assertive and effective initial response statutory worker.

b) A mental health social worker and qualified AMHP finds the therapeutic skills that brought them into this field are being utilized less frequently than their emergency assessment abilities. In their work, they continuously encounter situations where they feel they can see the stages at which a client's situation had got to the point of urgent intervention or MHA assessment, but they only become involved at that point. They eventually opt to move into the voluntary sector to work with people at an earlier stage in their issues, whilst retaining their developed urgent assessment skills for those circumstances where it is helpful.

c) A practitioner has joined a team where almost all clients come from self-referral, but where there is also an active outreach element. She has joined this organization because she felt voluntary engagement fitted better with her anti-oppressive values than a mandatory third-party referral. However, she finds the most fulfillment in the active outreach, working with people who are skeptical about seeking support. She develops her natural skills at putting people at ease, and decides eventually to move into a team where referral is not voluntary, and a degree of engagement is required. Her values have not changed, but despite her initial views, she can now deploy those values and skills to reduce the oppressive potential for clients who are required to engage with social workers, rather than choosing to do so.

Concluding thoughts: reflection and personal development

This paper has sought to suggest to social work students, and their educators, that when considering their practice careers, it is useful to think beyond questions of the sector. It has argued that a level of value pluralism is both unavoidable and desirable, and can be capitalized upon. It has offered a flexible but in-depth reflective process for students to

consider their own philosophical world view; the way they feel about different practice mechanics, and why and how those two things do or do not connect.

In considering vignettes like those presented, and the broader point of thinking critically about where one best fits, it should be said clearly that there is no social work role, in any sector or field, where one will be able to keep entirely within one's philosophical, practical or operational preferences. Most roles have a duty component where a worker could be asked to deal with a range of situations outside their regular caseload. Even if not, no substantive role could be tailored to fit the exact preferences of the practitioner, and few, if any social workers, will ever find a role or post in which all the possible variables fit perfectly. The purpose of this exercise is to encourage students to look more closely at the minutiae of their own thoughts about practice, and of roles they might seek, rather than make the assumption that the sector or main client group of a role entirely determines its parameters.

Another reason for carrying out this self-audit of your own approach and mentality is, in part, to take the opportunity to identify, explicitly and consciously, not only what the less desirable models and sites of practice are for you, but, crucially, why. It is incumbent upon every social worker to own their own development as a professional (BASW, 2018), and an essential and recurring theme of social work education is the requirement to identify and plan for your own ongoing development. Tools such as these will hopefully allow students to better develop their skills, and to accommodate and manage discomfort when dealing with uncomfortable situations. Knowing the aspects of practice where you do not fit so naturally is helpful, and arguably reflectively crucial, in being actively prepared to develop your skills for when those situations occur. Jacquet and Rao Hermon (2018, p. 42) argue that 'realistic job previews might moderate high expectations for new workers and reduce unmet expectations for experienced workers'. This is true, but by the same token, realistic job expectations that draw on considered and articulated self-knowledge and self-expectations, may further reduce the pain of unmet expectations.

I have my own perspectives and beliefs about the world and the social work task, and, in part consequentially, my own particular skills and the milieus in which I prefer to work. In order to use that perspective and those abilities in the way I would like to as often as possible, I need to know what they are and where their strengths and flaws are, but crucially I also need people with other skills, other experiences and indeed other outlooks to help me serve my clients and, now, my students.

There are a range of ways that students and educators can use the ideas offered here. In one form or another though, there is very little to be lost from knowing and articulating one's own mind better early in a social work career—perhaps in any career—and potentially very much to be gained.

Disclosure statement

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