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“Life is about choices, but external factors often affect outcomes”:
Social work students’ reasoning about the origins of social problems

Abstract

It has been alleged that the emerging generation of social workers are primarily motivated by a perception of the individual as the locus of ‘social problems’, ignoring the structural factors which shape and constrain the conditions of agency. Questionnaire research with 150 students on a Social Work programme in the North-East of England was conducted to further investigate students’ perspectives. It was found that student discourse operated on the horizon of neoliberal assumptions pervasive in contemporary Britain, but within that frame contested the causal centrality of individual responsibility and noted the impact of inequalities on opportunities and outcomes.

Introduction

The College of Social Work (2012: 2) has prescribed that already at entry to a social work programme, students should be able to ‘recognise the contribution of social work to promoting social justice, inclusion and equality’ and ‘understand the effects of oppression, discrimination and poverty’. Yet O’Brien (2010: 175-6) has noted that ‘literature in recent years has suggested that this dimension of social work is weakening and is much less apparent in both the practice of social workers and in the public voice of social workers and their professional associations and organisations’. Like other scholars including Fram (2004), Strier and Binyamin (2010) and Sturm and Gibson (2012), O’Brien has called for further empirical investigation of the extent to which the emerging generation of social workers

increasingly see the individual as the locus of ‘social problems’ and/or whether they recognise the role of oppressive structural and cultural factors in shaping and constraining the conditions of human agency. An index of such changes would be the espoused views of students on an undergraduate social work programme, as the next generation of practitioners. Previous studies have shown that students’ accounts of their primary motivations to become social workers can be effectively used as an important point of access to their perceptions of social problems, their origins and potential solutions. We will therefore begin by looking at espoused student motivations to study social work, before then exploring deeper using other questions regarding the attribution of social problems.

Several studies have addressed the motivations of students to study Social Work (Parker & Merrylees 2002; D’Cruz et al. 2002, Furness 2007; Daniel 2011; Facchini & Giraldo 2012). Hackett et al. (2003), a representative example, analysed the responses of 163 first-year students from four European social work programmes to a questionnaire which asked about students’ motivations and their perceptions of the social work role. The researchers found that ‘in all groups, the overwhelming majority of students endorsed ‘helping people’ as their primary motivation, with either a commitment to ‘helping others overcome discrimination’ and ‘personal life experiences’ as the second and third most important motivators’ (2003: 170). The desire for a stable job was the most stable response across the four groups of students, and was mentioned around a third of the time. Among studies of social work motivations, Gilligan (2007) is the main study to have used this exploration as a lens on perceptions of agency and social problems.

Gilligan analysed the answers given by 128 applicants to a pre-qualifying Social Work programme in response to a question about the causes of social problems, coding the

responses based on what appeared to be their primary orientation in making meaning of social problems. He describes finding very few applicants with a primary concern with social justice or structural conditions – only 4% of responses. 79% suggested reform of the behaviour of individuals, and 17% suggested authoritarian measures. Gilligan (2007: 755) concludes that though the applicants generally showed a ‘genuine desire to assist individuals and groups’, ‘recruits to British social work appear far less critical of the society in which they live than many in social work practice and education would wish them to be’. Gilligan argues that his findings appear to confirm the view of ‘many older practitioners and social work educators’ who ‘express despair that the next generation of their professional colleagues appears to have little awareness of the need for structural analysis or commitment to collective action for social change’ (2007: 738). However, Gilligan notes that the written test provides a limited source of data and is perhaps more of a performance than a characterisation of applicants’ perceptions. He urges further work to dig deeper into the views of the next generation of social workers regarding the causes of ‘social problems’ and the factors that students consider need addressing in order to tackle these effectively. To address this call for further work, Gilligan (personal communication, 2012) has suggested that successful applicants, i.e. current students on a social work programme, would be a useful sample for further investigating the reasoning of future practitioners.

Method

We administered a questionnaire to second and third year students on a Social Work Degree Programme in the North-East of England in September 2011, the start of the academic year. The researchers were members of the teaching faculty of the students; this was made known to participants, as was the fact that their answers would be anonymous besides which year of

the programme they were in. It was clarified that the responses they gave to the questionnaire would not impact upon their education. Our research design and subsequent write-up has been informed by the growing literature on ‘insider research’ as an educator in higher education (e.g. Mercer 2007; Kennedy-Lewis 2012), and in social work education in particular (Humphrey 2012). These reflections led us to privilege the anonymity of participants in the research. For example, since the large majority of the two cohorts were white women from the local area between the ages of 19 and 28, we decided not to ask demographic questions in order to help preserve the anonymity of those who did not have this profile and might otherwise be identifiable (Stevens et al. 2012, with a much larger sample, have conducted such demographic analysis; see also D’Cruz et al. 2002). Student responses to the questionnaire were received anonymously in two piles, one for each cohort, and marked with a number to facilitate analysis.

The questionnaire included a 1-10 rating scale to gain a sense of how strongly the student held their view on a topic. Of the 103 students in the second year of the Degree Programme, 87 consented to participate; of the 71 students in the third year, 63 agreed to participate. Students were asked “what were the main reasons why you applied for a social work course?”, “do you consider yourself politically minded”, and asked to give their response if they heard someone say, discussing a service-user, “an adult is responsible for the way their life has turned out.” These questions were designed to elicit student reasoning regarding the origins of social problems and the role of the social worker with respect to them. The university granted permission for this study, and for a parallel study using small-group interviews with 80 first year BSc students – the results of which we have analysed elsewhere using Bakhtinian discourse analysis.

Our first step in the analytical process was to draw upon thematic analysis (Pope et al. 2007) as a means of identifying, analysing, and finding common themes within data. This analysis was guided by our particular interest in the explanatory principles invoked by students in making sense of social problems, their perception of the value of social work, and the meaning of politics to them. Our second step was therefore to look closer at the discursive reasoning provided by students about the origin and possible solutions to social problems, and consider this reasoning in its wider social and political context (Howarth 2000). There are various frames of reference in our society for making meaning of cultural and material inequalities; we were interested in what frame of reference students would elaborate from the repertoire made available by wider discourses. The reliability of the first step of the analysis was confirmed by asking a practicing social worker to code 50 questionnaire responses into the categories that emerged from the thematic analysis; their agreement with our allocations was >90%, and differences were settled in favour of the practitioner rather than the researchers. The second step of our analysis, which interpreted our findings in light of wider social and political discourses, was informed and confirmed by bringing our findings for informal discussion with 27 Local Authority social workers who were attending the University as part of study for post-qualifying awards.

An analysis of student discourses from one study from one University in a UK context is necessarily limited: it should not be regarded as able to be generalised as a prediction of students' perceptions in other countries and contexts. We recognise that, in administering questionnaires at one particular moment in time, we are only gaining a snap-shot of students discourses elicited by our questions, rather than necessarily measuring any more fundamental construct such as 'enduring attitudes' (à la Ajzen 1988). Nonetheless individuals reproduce, elaborate and modify pre-existing patterns of language in responding to the exigencies of the

present circumstances in which the discourse has been elicited. Our analysis of student responses to the survey in terms of the wider social and political context has the potential to be suggestive beyond the particular case to the extent that other contexts are also shaped by neoliberal insistence that individuals are/should be responsible for their outcomes.

Motivations

Students were asked: ‘What were the main reasons why you applied for social work course?’

From their responses, five broad themes of ‘primary motivation’ to study social work were identified (see Table 1), which we categorised as follows:

1. To ‘make a difference’ in people’s lives.
2. Career development, achievement and recognition.
3. Powerful personal experience.
4. Financial stability and/or security of employment.
5. Recognition of social injustice.

Table 1: Primary Orientation towards Social Work

Primary orientation of responses to the question “What were the main reasons why you applied for a social work course?”:

Primary expressed motivation for applying to study social work	Year 2 & 3 Combined N=150	%
To ‘make a difference’ in the lives of individuals.	76	50.66
Career development, responsibility, achievement and recognition.	37	24.66
Personal experience of adversity and/or ‘social care’ services	15	10
Social Justice	5	3.33
Financial stability and/or security of employment).	6	4
*Other reasons	5	3.33
Nil response	6	4
TOTAL	150	98.88

The majority of students said that they wanted to become social workers in order to ‘make a difference’ in the lives of individuals. Just over 50% (n = 150) gave this as the primary reason for their decision to study social work, which matches other research assessing students’ primary motivation to study Social Work (e.g. Furness 2007; Facchini & Giraldo 2012). Career development was given as the primary motivation by 24% of students. The influence of powerful personal experiences of disadvantage or adversity, of being a recipient of social care services, or of having a close family member receive social care services was cited by 10% of respondents. A further 4% specified that their experiences of poverty or financial insecurity had served as the primary motivation for their desire to enter social work as a profession which offered some level of financial security. A small number of students identified their primary motivation was a desire to tackle social injustice (3%). A number of responses (3%) that could not be placed in any of the above categories. Whatever the expressed primary motivation, like other research on student motivations (e.g. Christie and Kruk 1998; Gilligan 2007; Stevens et al. 2012), we found that almost all responses included clear statements about a desire to help others to achieve their potential or to enable people to improve their lives in some way.

1. Making a Difference in the lives of individuals

A common desire across all students – whatever their expressed primary motivation – was to ‘make a difference’ in the lives of particular people. Students wrote of their desire to ‘give people a voice’, ‘empower’ individuals, or ‘enable’ them to achieve their potential. For example:

‘To make a difference in people’s lives/help and support those in difficulties/empower those who have problems to take control of their lives and make informed choices.’

‘I wanted to help support and empower those people in the community who are unable or ill-equipped to do same themselves. Help to give people a “voice”.’

2. Career Development, Achievement and Recognition

For students motivated by the idea of achieving something in their lives, being challenged and being accountable were clearly important factors alongside a desire to achieve some personal recognition. Social work was depicted as holding the potential to be *more* than their previous or alternative jobs. In particular, students specified that the professional role would offer greater responsibility, and greater *dignity*, than their current occupation. Many of those already working in the social care field described how social work represented the opportunity to move beyond the limitations of their current job:

“Work with people. Make a difference. Problem solving. A career. A challenge. To be accountable for my work and not just a replaceable number.”

3. Powerful personal experiences

Living through powerful personal experiences underpinned some students’ motivation towards a decision to study social work (see also Sellers and Hunter 2005). Many expressed a strong desire to ensure that those experiencing similar adversity received the support that they needed. For example:

“I had a happy stable childhood, until my father died (and as he had no life insurance and little capital) we survived on benefits from when I was 11 years old... Finding ourselves in difficult circumstances without a father and income and status, we struggled to enjoy life and life was very hard in many ways. I realise that many people could find themselves in situations that were beyond their control and need help to help themselves move on with life. This is where my motivation to become a social worker comes from.”

“Step daughter of my second husband was a drug addict at the age of 15. Her mum on methadone. The school she was at could not cope with her and her social workers tried all they could. Unfortunately she would not cooperate. Seeing how the work they have done could of helped, I wanted to be able to help people too.”

4. Financial security

A few students (3%), cited previous or current experiences of poverty and disadvantage as the primary motivating factor leading them to apply to study social work. Some students saw social work as an opportunity to achieve future financial security and in some cases students were clear that becoming a social worker would mean they would earn more and thus have a more secure future than did their own parents:

“My mam was a single mother until I was about 10. We lived in a deprived area and were poor. I am ambitious because we did not have much and on my estate many people were on benefits – I did not want this for myself.”

For some, financial motivation was also part of a wider motivation that included powerful early experiences and a desire for personal validation:

“Experiences I had with social services in the past. Experiences I had with previous work in a care home. I wanted a better job where I had to qualify and get a degree, better money and my children and family to be proud of me”

5. Social Justice

A small number of students (3.33%) did indicate that their primary motivation to study social work was the pursuit of social justice, perceiving structural issues to necessarily be at the root cause of social problems:

“To change perceptions and challenge the system as it does not protect or support the most vulnerable people in our society. A society should be judged by how it treats its weakest members.”

“I feel passionate about social justice”

Our questionnaire gave students freedom to write open qualitative responses, which were then thematically coded for primary motivation, as opposed to most other studies which presented students with a list of options regarding their various motivations to study social work. Though one difference found by our open-response method compared to previous studies was that a significant minority of our participants emphasised the importance of a feeling of professional responsibility and recognition as their primary motivation to enter

social work, overall the distribution of responses regarding primary motivation are in line with those of previous research, including the research of Gilligan with applicants to a social work degree. This would suggest that, with a different sample, our results would support Gilligan's conclusion that future practitioners are not primarily motivated by a concern with the role of structural factors.

Beliefs about the origins and solutions to social problems

If we were to draw conclusions on the basis of student accounts of their motivations alone, it would appear that students primarily viewed the social work role as helping individuals to deal with problems within existing social contexts. This would dovetail with a wider paradigm, analysed by Garrett (2003), that sees practice as a matter of adjusting individuals to the world around them rather than addressing underlying structural conditions that impact on individuals and groups. Yet the reasoning our participants offered in considering the origins and solutions to social problems in response to other questions suggests a more complex picture, in which 'helping others' did not preclude awareness of structural constraints and the need to address them. Students generally recognised that individuals are not wholly accountable for the way their lives turn out and indicated in their reasoning a range of factors that they believe can affect people's life chances - such as access to educational opportunities and employment, the effects of poor parenting or parental ill health. We are led to conclude that the majority of the students are not only 'individualists' and hold a more complex understanding about the nature of the relationship between personal factors and structural issues than the taxonomy deployed by Gilligan would allow. Students' desire to 'help others' does not preclude, but is rather generally organised by, awareness of inequality and structural constraints. In this regard our findings align with those of Stevens et

al. (2012). Surveying 3000 current social work students using six online surveys, and conducting 26 focus group interviews. The researchers found that “‘Helping individuals to improve the quality of their own lives’ was the most popular answer [around 88%] and ‘Interesting, stimulating work’ was the second [around 75%].” (2012: 20). A ‘wish to tackle injustice and inequalities in society’ ranked fourth, mentioned by 70% of students.

In our research, only 9 students (6%) agreed with the statement “An adult is responsible for the way their life has turned out”, whereas almost *all* students (90%, N=150) either wholly, or partially disagreed with the statement.

Table 2: Responses to the statement: “An adult is responsible for the way their life has turned out.”

Response	Yr 2 & 3 Combined N=150	%	Yr 2 N=87	%	Yr 3 N=63	%
Wholly agree	9	6	6	6.89	3	4.76
Partially disagree	85	56.66	60	68.96	25	39.68
Wholly disagree	51	34	20	22.98	31	49.20
No response	5	3.33	1	1.14	4	6.34
Totals	150	99.99	87	99.97	63	99.98

Most students therefore appeared to believe that whilst adults can make good or bad choices, external factors beyond a person’s control can also influence both life opportunities and life outcomes:

“Sometimes they may be responsible, but it may be external factors or they may have had no choice e.g. disability, mental health, family, unemployment, debt etc.”

“I believe that people make life choices and that these choices are influenced by socialisation and social stratification as well as perhaps the media. However, I believe that

material wealth and life chances play a huge part in determining and achieving full adult potential.”

Some students drew links between both structural *and* individual characteristics - seeing both as having an impact on life chances:

“Life is about choices, but external factors often affect outcomes. Wealth in childhood, education, can all affect a child and lead onto disadvantages in later life. Abuse can lead to M. H. Problems.”

“A person’s upbringing has a great effect on the way they will act as an adult. However a person can alter the way they live turns out, either by themselves with the help of others.”

Factors cited by students as having an influence on the way an adult’s life turns out.

Responding to the statement about individual responsibility, student beliefs about the particular factors they consider have an actual or potential impact on individual life outcomes fell into two main categories. The first category, ‘*childhood experiences*’ reflects statements about the impact of issues such as family background, parenting, upbringing and early formative experiences. The second category, ‘*societal and structural factors*’ reflects statements on a range of issues such as access to education, employment, housing, health, wealth and issues of poverty. The latter category also includes some comments on the impact of social class, ethnicity and cultural factors. Interestingly, combined responses from year two and year three students show that 52% of students identified societal and structural factors as influencing adult life outcomes compared to 34% who identified childhood

experiences as being the primary influence. 5% identified a combination of these two categories. In total therefore, almost 58% of students identified structural factors as having at least some influence on the way an adult’s life turns out.

If we add together the small number of students from each year who believe life outcomes are influenced by a combination of childhood experiences together with structural and societal factors, with those students who identify primarily structural factors as influencing outcomes, a difference in perspectives between year two and year three becomes apparent. The combined categories – both of which include references to the impact of structural factors show that 52.86% (N=87) of students commencing year two indicate structural factors in their responses whereas 65.07% (N=63) of students commencing year three do so. Our data may therefore provide some evidence to support a tentative conclusion that as they progress through the Social Work programme, students develop a somewhat greater understanding of the ways in which structural and societal factors can impact on life opportunities and life outcomes (Table 3).

Table 3: Breakdown of responses citing either *primarily* ‘childhood experiences’ or *primarily* ‘societal and structural factors’ in the response to the question “An adult is responsible for the way their life has turned out.”

Factors cited	Yr 2 & 3 Combined N=150	%	Yr 2 N=87	%	Yr 3 N=63	%
Childhood experiences	49	32.66	34	39.08	15	23.80
Societal and structural factors	79	52.66	45	51.72	34	53.96
A combination of childhood and societal factors	8	5.33	1	1.14	7	11.11
Agree with statement	9	6	6	6.89	3	4.76
No response	5	3.33	1	1.14	4	6.34
Totals	150	99.98	87	99.97	63	99.97

Political Awareness

Whilst in general students tended to express their opinions through appeal to a personal rather than political frame of reference, the majority clearly recognised that external factors *outside a person's control* can impact on individual life outcomes. This appears to suggest that students have a greater awareness of social injustice and related structural and political issues than might at first appear to be the case. Although their views were not well developed, it appeared to us that increasingly by year three students had *political potential*, in that they were drawing connections between structural issues and individual life outcomes. Many expressed a desire for a more equal society although these views were not typically expressed in an overtly 'political' way. These views were clearly apparent even amongst those students who expressly stated they had no interest in politics! For example, many students rated themselves very low on 'political mindedness', yet expressed strong views about a range of political matters and clearly were making links between private troubles and public issues in reasoning about the nature of society, the impact of government decisions and effect of structural issues on individuals and communities. In response to the question "do you consider yourself politically minded":

"Definitely not. Although I have strong views on certain pieces of legislation etc and our current benefit system, MP's expenses etc. Can't see how this Big Society approach will work."

A key finding from our research is that students who classed themselves as primarily motivated by a desire to help individuals nonetheless elsewhere showed clear views about a range of structural and political issues – for example, strongly held beliefs about political

decisions such as the level of investment by government in the North East or views about the impact of structural issues such as access to education and employment. Students were also concerned about the need to *address* inequalities in order to improve outcomes for service users. Might this be indicative of a more complex set of beliefs informing their perceptions about the origins of social problems than at first appears to be the case? Gilligan states that ‘recruits to British Social Work appear far less critical of the society in which they live than many in social work practice would wish them to be’ (2007:17) and he may in fact be correct – but perhaps only in the sense that this *appears* to be the case. Since we have a different sample to Gilligan, we do not contest his findings; our results do, however, present reason to reconsider his interpretation. Our study agrees with the results of Stevens et al. (2012), suggesting that in their desire to ‘help others’, students appear to engage structural forms of reasoning in understanding of origins of social problems.

From Year 2 to Year 3

The College of Social Work (2012b: 3) has set out an expectation that graduates from social work programmes should be able to ‘understand, identify and apply in practice the principles of social justice, inclusion and equality’. Our data suggests that many students do have a political potential which can be quickened by their experiences on a social work programme. This fits with Hughes’ (2011) qualitative observations of the development of structural awareness among five students on a social work programme. One form of evidence of this quickening has been highlighted above i.e. the identification of societal and structural factors, sometimes combined with childhood experiences that many students believed have an impact on life outcomes. More students beginning year 3 (65%, N=63) used structural forms of

reasoning in considering factors that impact on outcomes in adult life, compared to students beginning year 2 (53%, N=87).

Year 3 student: *“Some people are disadvantaged by society and therefore have been unable to achieve their ambitions. Also, people come from different backgrounds and may not have had support.”*

Year 3 student: *“Adults have a major impact on the development of the child, that adults are responsible for how a child is brought up. It can be difficult for adults raising children when government policy and capitalism impact on working class communities.”*

Another form of evidence is that we found a greater proportion of year two students (39%) emphasised childhood experiences as the primary reason why individual responsibility might not be a sufficient explanation for social and economic outcomes in contrast to those in year three identifying this explanation (23.80%). Finally, evidence also came from the statements of the students themselves. Several third year students explicitly stated in their responses to the questionnaire that being on a social work programme had led them to develop a deeper understanding about the nature of social problems and the impact of structural and social policy issues on the day to day lives of individuals and groups in society. Some specifically stated that being on the course had led them to become more politically aware:

Year 3 student: *“I was not politically minded before starting the course but studying social work gave me the desire or passion to become involved and aware of political issues.”*

Year 3 student: *“In the past I was not interested in politics. Through progression on this course I have come to realise that politics impacts greatly on the social work profession, therefore I have a greater interest.”*

Discussion

Social problems are defined, articulated and constructed within particular social and cultural contexts. How students talk about and describe both the origins and solutions to social problems must be recognised as a dynamic process of elaboration, set within a horizon and set of foundational assumptions established by contemporary social and political discourses. The dominant narrative regarding social problems in our society has become one in which individualistic, often pathologising constructions of social problems have come to shape both the political and personal landscape as a way of explaining social problems and in developing solutions to those problems. The emphasis of much discourse about social problems tends to focus on individuals and their characteristics rather than placing individuals within a context that includes the wider structural factors that impact on and may limit their opportunities to address problems or achieve ambitions. Gilligan’s article goes some way to diagnosing this situation.

However, we worry that it also in some ways repeats the individualising tendency about which it expresses concern, through its focus on classifying the responses of applicants without reference to the wider structural and social context which shapes the way in which student responses are both formed and expressed. It may therefore be overemphasising the problems for the profession posed by future professionals with ‘individualising’ views. By contrast, attention to the wider context can suggest a different interpretation in accordance

with our data: that whilst students remain within a depoliticised and individualising horizon, they depart in significant ways from hegemonic discourses which interpret social problems in terms of individual responsibility for social and economic outcomes.

Dorling (2011) has argued that such a dominant individualistic narrative regarding social problems in society is now prevalent in all of the world's richest countries; supported by a set of beliefs that uphold social injustice and which makes it hard for those who hold these beliefs to see any possibility for change. He argues that these beliefs have seeped into everyday thinking with a pervasive effect on individual and organisational beliefs about, and explanations for, social problems and their solutions, leading many to feel 'disenfranchised, to think they can make no difference, to feel that they are powerless' (Dorling 2011: 307).

Marston and McDonald (2012) state that the hegemonic individualistic understanding of social relations that have emerged over the last twenty to thirty years, has cast doubt on the knowledge and actions of social workers as political actors. One impact of this has been 'the de-politicisation of issues such as unemployment, homelessness, and household poverty - both within society and within the organisational settings where most social workers practise' (Marston & McDonald 2012: 1023). They fear also, that 'heroic claims' about what social work can achieve in the name of social justice and empowerment has led to disillusionment regarding the meaning of social justice 'in the context of twenty-first century social work practice', in which the landscape that social work occupies has come to be shaped by a mechanised and routinized approach (2012: 1024; see Hawkins et al. 2001; Munro 2011).

Hence the articulation of social work values does not occur in isolation of dominant discourses in society. Indeed, as Banks (2011) and Reich (2013) have insightfully documented, values discourse takes its meaning in part from the way in which commonly-

held assumptions about the causes of social problems are engaged, navigated and reformulated. Banks and Reich notes that practitioners face a context in which neoliberal discourses are hegemonic – they do not determine what we can do, say or think, but they provide a horizon upon which we operate and negotiate. Neoliberal discourses presume that the natural state of citizens is as autonomous, responsible consumers and entrepreneurs. Based on the plausibility of the idea that we make ‘choices’ about what to do, neoliberal discourses take adult subjects (in the absence of special exceptions e.g. disability) to be fully responsible for their decisions and their socio-economic fate (Turner 2008; Harkins 2012). This hegemonic ideology threatens to render alternative discourses which identify the significance of structural factors not simply as wrong but as wilful denials of the capacity of individuals to make choices:

‘We talk about people being ‘at risk of obesity’ instead of talking about people who eat too much and take too little exercise. We talk about people being at risk of poverty, or social exclusion: it’s as if these things — obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction — are purely external events like a plague or bad weather. Of course, circumstances — where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school and the choices your parents make — have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices people make.’ (David Cameron, cited in Elliot 2008).

Students live in contemporary society and to be fully intelligible when speaking to others – let alone socially acceptable – they are likely to have been oriented over time by the neoliberal insistence that social problems are a consequence of poor individual choices. It will have been at least a backdrop to their reflections on social causality, and may have even

constructed the staging and much of the dialogue. Students come onto social work programmes with views of social problems and solutions formed within, though not determined by, this pervasive context. When this context is considered, the fact that student responses offered little in the way of overtly structural explanatory discourse or appeals to social justice as a guiding value becomes more understandable. So too does their decided tendency to ground their identification of structural factors in the authority of personal experience: the discourse of these students makes use of the truth that ‘the personal is the political’ to advance claims within an individualist horizon which nonetheless exceed it. Without considering the context therefore we may be in danger of applying the same individualistic interpretation of student perspectives and understanding of structural origins of social problems for which we are in turn criticising them for adopting.

Limitations

Our study used a question about student motivations as a path into a further exploration of responses to prompts relating to politics and responsibility. Yet the discourses produced, which have served as the data for this study, must be understood as taken from a sample of students on one UK social work programme, at one time. We therefore need to emphasise that our goal was not to present findings generalisable as information about the attitudes of all social work students. Student answers to the survey will likely have been informed by their convictions prior to entering the programme, the changes in knowledge and perception which have occurred on the programme, and the kinds of response that students have been conditioned to produce within the university context (we have addressed this dynamic intersection of factors in another context). Rather than aiming to produce a generalisable study of ‘enduring attitudes’, our research set out to explore the distribution of forms of reasoning given by students about the origin and possible solutions to social problems in

terms of tension between awareness of structural inequality and neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility. Beyond our case, researchers have observed that actors face precise parallels to this tension in the field of European social work and social welfare more widely (e.g. Harlow et al. 2012; Soldatic & Meekosha 2012; Briskman 2013).

Conclusion

Interpreting our data in the context of wider social and political discourses, we observed that a majority of students entering the second and third year of a social work BSc departed from neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility for social and economic outcomes, and showed awareness of the potential impact of disadvantage such as physical disability, poor health and mental health, unemployment and low income. Most, however, operated upon an individualising discursive horizon and do not make overt statements suggesting that structural issues need addressing except where they can ground these claims in the authority of personal experience. While students discussed the need to improve the lives of disadvantaged individuals and communities, few students made overt statements suggesting a need to address structural factors as part of the social work role – despite the fact that many students demonstrated awareness of the impact that structural factors have on the opportunities and outcomes of individuals and groups in society. Few framed their reasoning regarding their motivations or the origins of social problems in political terms. We considered that students may feel disenfranchised or disillusioned with the possibility of structural or even policy change, or may lack confidence in their ability to engage in political discourse, including the lack of a developed vocabulary to engage in the debate. However, we were encouraged by the observation that students entering the third year of the Social Work Degree Programme in

general had a more acute and explicit concern with the role played by structural factors in the lives of service-users.

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