

Beyond description and prescription: towards conducive assessment in social work education

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The latent power of social work's position at the centre of welfare services and as a coordinator and definer of social realities can be argued to have led social work to become 'the assessment profession'. Building upon a critique of the key distinction between 'description and prescription', we argue that the conceptualization of assessment needs to be enriched to understand its influence across the different domains of professional education and professional practice in social work. Key perspectives are drawn from the work of two contrasting theorists: the critical social theory of Habermas and the psychological constructivism of George Kelly. Arguments are developed towards a new approach of conducive assessment in social work.

Introduction

The 'assessment debate' in education has had its battle lines clearly drawn for a number of years. Key educational differences between pedagogic and assessment practices seem to have become well established through the live debate between proponents and critics. However, in the field of social work, although social assessment practices have grown over the last 20 years to become a ubiquitous *modus operandi*, their centrality is barely recognized and debates concerning their significance have hardly begun. In this paper we trace the roots of assessment in social work back to the emergence of social policies and regulatory practices from Tudor times. The development of social assessment by the state is drawn upon to critique the continued influences of 'description and prescription' as core principles underlying professional practice and education in social work. This key leitmotif manifests itself in the continued creation of ubiquitous practice frameworks for assessment and competency-based schedules of occupational standards. Over recent years the penetration of

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approaches that emphasize the assessment of 'competence' and 'what works' has had a powerful effect upon the discourses of social work. There are critical arguments about the efficacy and morality of training that is 'directed' through frameworks of imposed 'requirements' as opposed to personal responsibility for self-motivated and self-managed learning. Assessment principles and practices are central to the nature of these very differently conceived educational endeavours. This analysis gives rise to a number of central questions.

The first of these central questions is: are the assessment frameworks and practices of social work education consonant with the espoused principles of higher education and with the vision of the capability literature (O'Reilly *et al.*, 1999)? Are such assessment frameworks also in tune with current arguments for a more connective¹ pedagogy in workplace contexts (Griffiths & Guile, 2004) in which the emphasis is on helping to 'grow' an educated person who can 'play the game' within constitutive rules, a professional who is intrinsically motivated and self-determining, who can set their own development objectives and devise a programme to attain them, who can set their own criteria and standards to assess the work produced and, through self-assessment, be involved in assessing their performance in the light of those criteria? Or is the objective rather to train people to operate efficiently within imposed performance measures and to carry out tasks simply to meet target parameters? These questions and the debate they reflect are central to determining the vision of social work education in the future. They mirror the parallel tension between discourses of lifelong learning and performativity identified by Broadfoot and Pollard (2000).

These core questions form the basis for the theoretical analysis in this paper that questions the continued growth of an instrumentally inspired modernity and attempts to reprioritize the communicative social realities of personal meanings and individual perspectives. The resultant synthesis of macro and micro perspectives is created by drawing upon the reflexive ideas of two contrasting writers. Firstly, we use the critical, macro-social theory of Habermas (1986) through his conceptual framework of 'human interests' and underpinning rationalities as a theoretical framework within which instrumental, communicative and emancipatory assessment practices can be differentially positioned. Secondly, we introduce a complementary micro-psychological perspective through a consideration of the pioneering constructivist ideas of George Kelly (1991). Aspects of Kelly's 'anticipatory reflexivity' are outlined to re-emphasize the primacy of individual 'agency' within the construction of knowledge in social work assessment practices. The paper concludes by outlining the elements of a new theoretical approach of 'conductive assessment' within social work.

According to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 'conductive' can be both an adjective, as commonly used, and it can be a noun: a thing or process which conduces (to). Although this latter usage is rare, it nonetheless provides a lexicographical underpinning to the current tendency within social work to view 'the assessment' as a package or a product. 'Conductive' is therefore a very Kellian 'invitational' word; conducting or tending to ... what? Tending to promote or encourage ... what? This

future-oriented, anticipatory sense of the word is implicitly reflexive in its encouragement to critically examine the construction of situations from the perspective of the assessed as well as the assessor. We would argue that combinations of conducive characteristics offer an opportunity to place a critical focus upon assessment as the basis for social work practice and education.

Conducive assessment thus builds upon critical and constructive perspectives and recognizes the need for social work to reflect the ambiguities of social life. In this paper we argue that a conducive realization of social work's potential could lead it to be recognized as the assessment profession *par excellence*.

Historical foundations

The story of social work's association with assessment can be started in Tudor times. Somewhat incredibly, some believe that a broader conception of social work makes it, if not the oldest occupation, an activity with far greater antiquity. Seed (1973), for example, derided an earlier writer for unequivocally discovering social work in biblical times:

According to one recent writer (Bessel, 1970): 'The earliest social work model that we know, *which is similar to our own*, is described in the Acts of the Apostles. ... The first century manuals for the instructions of the deacons, who were *primarily social workers*, have a very modern flavour. (p. ix) (emphasis added by secondary source)

Despite such differences of definition, it is difficult now to view social work in the UK as distinct from its position in the middle of the interface between the state and private lives. Social work as a discourse in the UK is mainly located within the sector of the economy and the wider polity that is concerned with social policy and social welfare. In recent times this 'embeddedness' within economic and political spheres of influence and operational contexts has been so profound as to lead to arguments that social work 'has virtually no role or identity outside the welfare institutions where it is located' (Yelloly & Henkel, 1995, p. 9). However, the genesis of this current position can be charted back at least 400 years.

The historical antecedents for social work are discoverable in Elizabethan cultural practices and social legislation that continue to influence both attitudes and policy today. Two main strands can be identified. The first concerns the activities of philanthropy and charity, both of which were widespread in Tudor times. The second concerns the development of regulatory government in this period of English history, specifically that focused upon social policy. Corrigan and Corrigan (1979), as part of a larger argument about the development of capitalism in Tudor England, maintained that a main thrust of emerging state policies in this period was a concern to regulate the labour market. This embryonic 'governance' of the population needed to balance two contrasting aims. On the one hand, there was a desire for a policy that encouraged the preservation of the status quo where the 'common people' knew, and remained in, their place. Set against this was a demand for economic growth which needed a relatively mobile labour force. However, people

moving about the country with 'no fixed abode' caused as much suspicion and resentment in Tudor times as 'travellers' and 'gypsies' do today. Such unregulated movement of people seemed to be closely correlated with the phenomena of poverty, and certainly caused both organizational problems of control and dilemmas of response for the authorities.

Social policies, as a response to the problem of the poor, reflected this tension between a desire to control movement and a need to respond to the human casualties of poverty. Corrigan and Corrigan (1979) argued that the 'revolution' (Elton, 1953) in this Tudor period of government is the beginning of what they described as increasing 'central capability' in the state's ability to rule through command and control. As a result, the responses to the problem of controlling and 'relieving the poor' led to increased measures where 'more and more uniform, national (or even imperial) agencies are co-ordinated to bring about adjustment and re-creation of a certain set of social relations' (p. 4).

The 1601 Poor Law Act, for example, was designed to address these problems of poverty and welfare. The social problems giving rise to this Act of Parliament and the solutions proposed through the resulting legislation were so fundamental to emerging state welfare policies that they resulted in a framework of 'Poor Laws'. These persisted on the statute books in various legislative forms and in various structures of community-based institutions for three centuries.

The importance of this early 17th century social legislation for an understanding of assessment is that it introduced a system of classification of the poor, known as the 43rd Elizabeth, through 'description and prescription'. It described those who were destitute through old age or physical or mental impairment as the impotent poor and prescribed poor houses for them. Whereas those described as able-bodied beggars and vagrants, adults and children, were prescribed workhouses in order to engage them in work of some kind. This classificatory approach was built upon systems of social assessment and it still informs the rationale underpinning welfare services, over four hundred years later. As David Howe (1996) has recently pointed out:

Knowledge is used to help social workers collect appropriate information on clients as well as identify and classify them as particular types of service user or problem presenters. Having identified and classified the client, he or she is then eligible to receive a certain prescribed response. This response may be a particular service, a required legal procedure or a certain kind of resource. (p. 91)

The story of social work as a major arm of the state's response to problems of poverty is closely bound up with these increasingly institutionalized attempts to assess through description and prescription. This institutionalization of response and classificatory method has profound epistemological and ethical implications through what Foucault has described as the 'objectification of subjects'. In other words, we can discern the first stages of an objectivist epistemology informing an assessment process within the social realm. The rise of a more contemporary modernism in social policy can be argued to begin here.

Modernity and the 'psy' complex

Howe (1996) drew upon Wagner's (1994) prime distinctions of 'liberty' and 'discipline' to identify a key existential consequence of the modernist project. The inherent promise of modernity for individuals in a social world is one of freedom and autonomy. A person's position in the world need not be fixed through being born into either a divine or an established social order. Modern times, then, begin with this discourse of liberation. However, the capability to act upon and shape the world necessarily entails a responsibility for whatever is created. This dilemma is an existential one through experiencing 'the modern condition of freedom and choice on the one hand and responsibility and insecurity on the other' (Howe, 1996, p. 79). Howe argued that the social transformations brought about through the scientific and commercial revolutions of the Enlightenment inevitably led to modernity's 'first crisis' in the late 19th century. The movements of people in response to the work opportunities provided through industrialization exacerbated existing problems of poverty. These transformations, in an age of increasing public awareness of the social domain, in turn gave rise to dissatisfaction with the realities of relative impoverishment for large numbers of people.

Thus, the rise of the social sciences and a growing welfare state can be seen as a mirrored response to an increasing aspiration to tackle social injustice and inequity. It was believed then that modernity's successes in the physical world could be replicated so that 'solidity and certainty could be re-established into the social fabric'² (Wagner, 1994, p. 59). The price of this attempt to create 'solidity and certainty' in the social realm was 'discipline'. Transgressions from the discipline of a social order would result in 'correction' or 'punishment' through social systems, structures and processes made up of networks of power (Foucault, 1975).

Social work, in this analysis, emerges in contemporary social history as at the forefront of the drive to create a modernist social order through state action within the social domain. However, the social realm is characterized by ambiguity and power. The power potential of social work's position emanates from its emergence as the profession through which the state penetrates the world of private relationships. Its locus of application is the 'social' between private and public. Individual acts of social work intervention in the UK, therefore, are carried out within a complex and detailed nexus of legislative duties and obligations. But, as any lawyer will confirm, legal fiats are rarely unequivocal. Social workers operating within this field carry enormous potential power through jurisdictional authority. However, the authority is not clear cut. The social field is one of great indeterminacy. Publicly sanctioned interventions into private and interpersonal arenas require the professional social worker to both judge the actions of others through an implicit or explicit assessment and to seek to treat those actions. As Howe (1996) put it in his analysis of social work's role in the modernist project, 'Social work formed under the double perspective of control *and* cure, as it embraced both the judicial and the therapeutic in single acts of intervention' (p. 81) (original emphasis).

A similar insight was proposed by Satyamurti (1979) 17 years earlier in what has become an enduring explanatory leitmotif for statutory social work with children and families. In this case the double perspective was of both 'care and control'. This juxtaposition of potent yet potentially conflicting professional mandates creates a core ambiguity of purpose and activity. It also renders the power of the professional social worker as essentially latent and ambivalent. The implicit nature of professional social work power that seems both 'virtual' yet manifest is thereby even more influential through its invisibility and apparent negotiability. An explanation of this phenomenon can be reached through a focus upon the relatively underacknowledged psychological aspects of assessment interventions.

Power within the 'social' field is incisively critiqued through the notion of the 'psy' complex (Rose, 1979, 1985; Ingleby, 1985). Ingleby's argument resided within a broader Foucaultian critical attack upon both adult psychiatry and social work interventions with children and their families. It illuminates and highlights both the ambiguity of social interventions and, by clear implication, their potential negotiability. However, this latter potential depends upon an explicit 'anti-oppressive' awareness of the inherent power dynamics within social relationships. But Ingleby offers little hope of this happening. His critique castigated the tendency of professional workers in these social fields to exercise this tacit power and work to defend their assessments and interventions through selective self-vindictory readings of situations, 'For the professional's account is strongly biased in the direction of justifying their own actions: it rationalizes the present and *rearranges the past* into a triumphal perspective leading inexorably toward it' (Ingleby, 1985, p. 80) (emphasis added).

Social assessments based upon rationalizations of the present and interpretative readings of the past are always vulnerable to this subtly powerful abuse of professional power. The covert strategy being targeted by this critique is, of course, that there is 'a truth' to be 'discovered' by the intervention and assessment of the expert professional. This exercise of power, argued Ingleby, is based upon twin notions of paternalism and scientism as 'the psy complex gains its power by representing itself as a parent, by exploiting the same kinds of needs and fantasies which make up the psychic tie between parent and child and by invoking the mystique of science' (Ingleby, 1985, p. 80).

Ingleby identified social field professionals as essentially 'socialisers' exercising power through ambiguous and unspoken cultural assumptions of consent and mystique. In setting this out he explicitly reflected Satyamurti's (1979) 'care/control' double perspective where

the provision of care has become increasingly a matter of socializing people, so that it becomes difficult to think of 'help' as separable from 'control'. If we are hampered by our ambivalence toward the welfare system, I shall suggest that this is because of a fundamental ambiguity in the politics of intervention. (Ingleby, 1985, p. 101)

We would argue that a more foundational critique of 'the politics of intervention' could be unearthed through an examination of its roots in the ambiguities of assessment. An analysis of the power of 'assessment' through the principles of description and prescription enables us to recognize the origin of this power.

Frameworks and schedules: description and prescription revisited

A modernist search to capture and structure 'truth' in the realm of 'the social' manifests itself through a key response to the ambiguities running through both the professional practice and educative domains. The attempt to control this ambiguity is, in each case, codified by the creation and promulgation of 'objective' assessment schedules that seek to describe and prescribe social realities in practice and education. In the case of social assessments it shouldn't be surprising that the last 20 years have witnessed the production of a great many 'frameworks' for assessment in all fields of practice. These have set out to regularize and standardize some of the complexity in order to try and be 'comprehensive' and 'fair' (Department of Health, 1988, 2000, 2003). The benign rationale often seems to be that progress towards these two qualities will constitute incontrovertible guidance for 'best' practice in social work. However, while there can always be 'ideal descriptors' of best practices, these are not necessarily helpful if they are promoted or perceived as an encapsulation of perfection. By exactly the same token, in the case of educational assessments in social work the drive towards description and prescription is built upon a similarly unsustainable epistemology. The drive for objectivity is structured into the language and schedules of competencies, performance requirements and evidence indicators.

It is significant that assessment in social work education is fraught with the same tensions and ambiguities that are manifest in social work practice, based as it is on the use of social assessments. On the one hand, the exigencies of practice dilemmas arise from the dynamics of interventions into people's lives. There are persuasive arguments that the 'knowledge' for practice arises within and should be constructed from these real life engagements (Rein & White, 1981; Schon, 1987; Parton, 2000). On the other hand, the same frameworks that attempt to control and codify practice can be found in the educational assessment schedules of occupational standards underpinning both pre- and post-qualification training in social work. Indeed, the regulatory bodies for social work in England have been consistently clear on this point for a number of years. Hence, these standards are claimed to both '*define [...] and describe best practice* for social work staff at post-qualifying level' (Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services, 2000, p. 4) (emphasis added), while at pre-qualifying level 'The national occupational standards *define good practice* by defining the competence required for specific occupational roles'³ (General Social Care Council, 2006) (emphasis added). However, these unequivocal statements notwithstanding, the critiques of competency-based education and training (CBET) are profound. They centre upon the institutional level assumption, exemplified by these two quotes, that competencies 'define good practice'. In other words, the historical basis of social assessment through 'description and prescription' has been imported into professional education and assessment through regulatory occupational standards that lay claim to the codification of what has to be regarded as 'good practice'. The implications of the influence of CBET frameworks and schedules for the direction and quality of education, in social work and other professions in the social field, are significant.

Many of the commonly held criticisms of CBET in professional education programmes centre upon the widely held view that a functional analysis of concrete, observable tasks and behaviours is simply inappropriate for complex 'professional activities', that it ignores the potential for professional judgement, takes no account of group processes and has no regard for the influence of social context or setting (Barnett, 1994; Eraut, 1994). Hager and Gonczi (1996) go so far as to cast 'very serious doubts about its relevance to work at any level' (p. 248). The case against CBET is most tellingly made through the distinction between the prescriptive and descriptive capacities of learning 'outcomes'. The first of these, the prescriptive capacity of outcome statements, accounts for the political and managerial appeal of competency lists and CBET. As argued above, the regulatory imposition of detailed outcome schedules upon the education and continuing professional development (CPD) of the professions is intended to act as a lever upon the direction and priority activities of practitioners towards social policy ends. There are tenable political arguments to be had about the validity of this. However, it is the second, descriptive capacity of outcome statements that is subject to compelling attack.

Lum (1999) drew substantially upon the philosophical work of John Searle (1995) in arguing for a distinction, within objective reality, between the 'brute facts' of the natural sciences and the socially constructed features of an agreed social reality. Competencies, as a putative description of complex social activities, form part of this latter distinction. Thus, the Searlian distinction enables Lum to identify two inter-linked and eminently challengeable core assumptions underlying CBET. The first of these is the assumption that human capabilities are intrinsic, ontologically objective features of the world. Searle's distinction allows for the existence of an objective, natural world that is being analysed and described by modern science in the minutest detail. However, to add human performances to this ontology are to add what Lum (1999) described as 'observer-relative' features that are

entirely dependant upon human agreement; in other words they constitute a reality which is *socially constructed* through processes of which we remain largely unaware. The addition of these observer-relative features does not add any new material objects to the world because the features added are *ontologically subjective* (e.g. a performance is only competent insofar as people regard it as such). (p. 414) (original emphasis)

However, working from the assumption that competence is 'out there' to be discovered, the CBET approach inevitably follows a natural science causality and attempts to 'pin down' the exact nature of the competencies through increasingly reductionist inventories and schedules of criteria and indicators. This approach leads into the second CBET assumption, which is that it is possible for statements to unequivocally, accurately and sufficiently describe ontologically subjective/epistemologically objective features of the world. Searle's account of socially constructed reality relies upon his conception of intentionality (Searle, 1983), which, in essence, is the ability of individuals to conceive of and represent states of affairs in the world and to locate these, with others, within 'networks' of inter-subjective agreements. These, in turn, derive their meaning and significance as set against 'backgrounds' of tacit dispositions or forms of 'know how'.

Thus, it is Searle's notion of a tacit 'background' of knowledge that undermines the second assumption of CBET of sufficiently capturing the world through linguistic statements alone. Lum (1999) provided the simple example of three short sentences: 'Sally cut the cake', 'Bill cut the grass' and 'The tailor cut the cloth'. There is no lexical ambiguity about the use of the word 'cut', but in each case we understand the verb differently according to our background knowledge about knives, lawnmowers, scissors and what it is to cut these different things. There is, as Searle (1995, p. 131) put it, 'a radical underdetermination' within the literality of the sentence of what is actually meant. From this perspective, it can be argued that the background knowledge inherent within complex social situations, such as social work or virtually anything else, is scarcely likely to be conveyed 'unequivocally, accurately and sufficiently'.

The descriptive capacity of CBET, in this analysis, is fatally flawed. However, the politically prescriptive capacities of the approach possess the logic of power and this probably means that it is likely to remain as part of the architecture of professional education. In some recognition of this reality, a substantive argument for an 'educationally sound conception of competence' was made by Hager and Beckett (1995, p. 1). This 'integrated' or 'holistic' approach to CBET is justified through an acceptance that the applicability and use of descriptive standards within professional activities are inevitably relational. In other words, the use of competency statements, in terms of judgements and assessments of task performance, will be affected by individual attributes, on the one hand, and by the influence of different situations and contexts, on the other. This relational stance to competence leads the debate away from the barren behaviourism of CBET's origins and into the rich and fertile territory of 'situatedness' (Brown *et al.*, 1989; Billett, 1994) addressed by the literature on 'capability' for workplace contexts.

Competence to capability

There is a key distinction offered by an approach based upon capability. It is one that moves from the CBET concern with drawing ever more detailed and descriptive maps to an approach that focuses upon the territory itself. In other words, the capability approach recognizes that professional practices are enacted by individual people, as part of social relationships, within complex situated environments. This approach starts from an acceptance of the reciprocal relationships between active individuals as part of an interactive environment. As such, the ideas are rooted in and emanate from socio-cultural approaches to situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The capability literature offers the potential for a more dynamic holism. It sets out to link 'knowing' with 'doing'; the traditional view of expertise, through command of a body of knowledge, with the ability to demonstrate expertise in action. The challenge for professional education and development in the 21st century, according to this view, is

to move beyond considerations of knowledge and competence to helping people develop as capable practitioners equal to the challenges of fluid environments and unpredictable change, taking responsibility for their careers and their learning, and able to exercise the

kind of practical judgement and systemic wisdom needed for a sustainable future. (O'Reilly, 1999, p. 1)

Lester (1999) employed a helpful illustrative metaphor to describe this fundamental change. He described it as moving from 'map-reader to map-maker' and in so doing draws an important distinction between the 'map' or curricula and the 'territory'. Lester argued that it is important not to confuse the two as the former is only a set of externally prescribed criteria designed to establish and institutionally accredit a standard of 'fitness for purpose'. As such, these sets of schedules are vulnerable to attack on at least two fronts. Firstly, they are open to the same reductionist criticisms levelled earlier at competency statements. Secondly, they can be questioned as to fitness for what purpose and who's purpose? In contrast, the 'territory' is where the intervention in a social or interpersonal sphere takes place and the professional has to act within what is an existentially unique set of social circumstances. The ability of practitioners to make the transition from map reader to map maker can help characterize the necessary development between initial qualification training and extended professional development, or 'novice to expert' (Benner, 1984). Whilst it may be minimally important for newly qualified practitioners to demonstrate proficiency in map reading, there is no necessary connection of educational development between this ability and the confident exploration required to 'map uncharted territories and redraw the maps of known ones' (Lester, 1999, pp. 46–47).

Social work practitioners are involved in trying to help find solutions to culturally defined problems of living. As such, 'social work problems' are uniquely complex in their location within the milieu of 'the social' at the boundaries of contested territories between public policy systems and private lifeworlds. The 'problem' itself, as a complex package of competing perspectives, rarely has an uncontested objective reality. Social work interventions, therefore, have to be defined and agreement co-constructed. These processes of problem definition and intervention are achieved through assessment. The alternative to co-constructed assessments, through communication and negotiation, is imposition by explicit judicial power or implicit professional or 'psy'-chological power. In the power-laden ambiguities of this kind of professional activity in these circumstances there can be no pre-drawn map of such territories. Maps of shifting terrains have to be created by social work practitioners through complex and often contested negotiation. This task frequently needs to occur in collaboration with multidisciplinary colleagues and, increasingly, is expected to involve 'service users' or lay members of the public. In order for this process to be 'holistic' and fully involve the necessary range of people it needs to be more participative (Cooper, 2001) within particular territories and situations. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that the necessary conception of such participation

can be neither fully internalized as knowledge structures [within individual minds] nor fully externalised as instrumental artefacts or overarching activity structures. Participation is always based on situated negotiation and re-negotiation of meanings in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction—indeed are mutually constitutive. (p. 51)

Going ‘beyond description and prescription’ requires a model of participative, reflexive knowledge creation and assessment that is conducive of an engaged professionalism. The engaged social work professional, therefore, has to be able to survive, operate and thrive within, amongst and across the boundaries of institutional systems and diverse individual lifeworlds. A conception of reflexivity is required that spans the range of macro- and micro-perspectives. Two contrasting, but nonetheless complementary, approaches to reflexivity are exemplified by the ideas of Habermas and George Kelly.

Human interests and personal constructs: Habermas and Kelly

In *Knowledge and human interests* Habermas (1986) was working from a central concern with ‘scientism’ and the tendency of modern science to be oriented towards not just technical control and mastery of the natural world, but also, as we argued earlier, a similar aim in the social sphere through the social and human sciences. In other words, what is really at issue is a concern with how the rationality of science and technology has come to be such an all pervasive influence upon the boundaries of our conceptions.⁴

Habermas’ theory of ‘human interests’ was interpreted by Ottman (1982), in a literal translation from the German, as the ‘inter-esse’ or the ‘being-in-between’ that mediates between the self and nature. In other words, in rejecting the positivistic duality of a conception of nature existing independently of human subjectivity, Habermas was arguing for the participation of the subject in the constitution of the objective world. In this analysis there is no longer an ontologically separate subject from the natural world in which they exist. The two can be seen as separate, but to do so has implications for the self and its relationship to the world. Thus, the nature of our ways of apprehending the world and our relationship to it, our ‘interest’ in it, will powerfully influence and shape the nature of our participation in it. The distinction is an epistemological one that has profound explanatory consequences for understanding reflexivity, which we discuss below.

Habermas (1986) referred to the subject–object divide in the rather obscure terms of an assumptive position where ‘the facts relevant to the empirical sciences are first constituted through an a priori organization of experience in the behavioural system of instrumental action’ (p. 309). In other words, a world view that is strongly influenced by a ‘technical interest’ would construct the world in objectivist, instrumental terms. Such a world view, he argued, would work from the assumption of an *a priori* separation of self from other and a likely persuasion to devise systems, such as assessment frameworks and competency schedules, which are strategically functionalist.⁵

If the technical interest arises from the imperatives of work, the practical interest is founded in the equal need for social interaction within socio-cultural life. The ‘practical’ interest, as a presupposition of being and acting (or ‘practicing’) in the world, is a recognition that people are constituted socially. We exist and develop within a network of communicative relations. It is the nature of these relations that will impact upon, influence and to a large measure constitute our sense of ‘self’. Our intersubjective

understanding with others sustains us to such an extent that 'disturbances to communication in the form of non-agreement of reciprocal expectations is no less a threat to the reproduction of social life than the failure of purposive-rational action on nature' (McCarthy, 1978, pp. 55–56). The existential importance of this hermeneutic perspective speaks to the essential difference involved in human inquiry, as opposed to that of natural science.

Human beings require a method of inquiry that recognizes their humanity. Anything less can be criticized as a devaluation of the integrity of the individual and of processes of self-formation. The historical processes of social and individual evolution can be seen as integral aspects of the need (or 'interest') to define ourselves socially and individually through acting within the natural and social worlds. It is this dual combination of human interests in being free from both the forces of nature and from historical, social determinants that led Habermas to posit a third form of rationality. This third form, exemplified through the critical sciences, is oriented to a human interest in autonomy and responsibility or 'self-formation'. The emancipatory interest, suggested as a third *a priori* perspective within human existence, is a form of the yearning for 'freedom from' what Habermas (1986) described as 'ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed' (p. 310). This 'critical promise' continues to underpin the espoused values of social work in the UK and internationally (International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2001) and is based upon the integrity of Habermas' notion of the 'lifeworld'.

Habermas proposed that societies are conceived simultaneously as systems and lifeworlds (Habermas, 1987, p. 118). The Habermasian conception of the lifeworld is the source of 'tacit' knowledge, interactively created and maintained, as 'a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns' (p. 142). The two ideations of society need to be reciprocally linked to sustain the cohesion of both as they become increasingly complex and differentiated. However, the Habermas critique is that social systems, and the lifeworlds that created and sustain them, have become uncoupled from each other. It is this deterioration of what should be key connections that, Habermas argued, leads to the domination of one form of rationality over the other. The relationship between social systems and social lifeworlds should, it is argued, be based upon a balanced reciprocity. However, although all organizations rely upon informal communicative processes, Habermas argued that these have become no more than the 'environment' of the system. The system has effectively 'colonized' and taken over as the prevailing rationality and *modus operandi*. Where societies and the public service agencies that support them become fundamentally unbalanced to this extent, the meanings and understandings of actions are perceived through the functionalist roles and tasks of the system; the subjective meanings of actors within the lifeworld perspective become peripheral and of secondary status (p. 311).

Habermas' analysis offers a framework of social theory within which many of the profound cultural changes affecting public services, such as social work (Skerrett, 2000; Lovelock & Powell, 2004) and education (Blake & Masschelein, 2003), can be understood. However, this 'macro-critical' social theory lacks a compelling

'micro-interpersonal' counterpoint. The individualization thesis of Beck (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) offers a set of sociological perspectives that focus upon the importance of people as active negotiators. However, it is the long-standing reflexive ideas of George Kelly (Kelly, 1991) that offer a psychological constructivist philosophy, theory and methodology to reprioritize the personal 'meanings and understandings' of actors within systems of professional practice and education.

Personal construct psychology (PCP) has provided a productive theoretical framework and set of methodological tools for investigating individuals' perceptions, both of themselves and their construction of social reality. The meanings that individuals construct for themselves by learning through engagement and interaction with their environment are central to the PCP approach. This approach has been applied to illuminate the processes of human learning in a variety of educational, clinical and occupational contexts (Fransella & Bannister, 1977; Beail, 1985; Fransella & Thomas, 1988; Kalekin-Fishman & Walker, 1996; Fransella, 2003). It is the focus upon individual agency within processes of learning and change that indicates the relevance of a PCP perspective and its applicability to arguments for a new conception of social work assessment.

Kelly's PCP is based upon a core and fundamental assumption that individuals have the ability to construct themselves and that they attempt to control their world view through variously viable systems of predictions and working hypotheses. This notion of 'life as an ongoing experiment' is a core theme of how PCP views our interactions with the world. As such, individuals construct hypotheses about themselves and others that substantially influence and anticipate how they expect these experiments are going to turn out. Kelly wanted to be clear that in psychological terms what is predicted is not a fully fleshed out event, but the common intersect of a certain set of properties. These 'properties' are abstractions which we select from reality and form into differentiated constructs. The theory's proposed system of constructs both determines and offers potential for change. In other words, the 'anticipation' aspect of our constructs will both determine the way in which we approach the world in terms of expectations and offer constant potential for construing it differently. This key idea is contained within the theory's 'fundamental postulate': 'A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which they anticipate events'.

The word 'channelize' was chosen deliberately in the 1950s to avoid any confusion with the common need of mainstream psychology to posit forms of dynamics or theories of motivation to explain human behaviour. PCP has no need to explain change as it works from the tacit acknowledgement that life is ever changing and moving. The only question to determine is about direction. From this presumption of movement are developed sets of hypotheses or assumptions that 'psychologically channelize' our expectations about ourselves, our direction into the future and the way that we expect the world to respond to our interactions with it.

The idea that we can place different constructions upon the same set of events or interactions and thereby attribute different meanings to these events has clear implications for the ways in which we conceive of differentiated forms of enquiry, such as social assessments. It suggests that our understanding of others, or the meaning of

events, is not entirely 'revealed' as residing within the events themselves. In other words, the naive realist approach that underpins frameworks and schedules will lead either to futile description or covert prescription. A more sophisticated, constructive-realist approach recognizes that we will only develop a full understanding of what is happening through a concomitant, reflexive awareness of our own as well as others' constructions of meaning. The PCP emphasis upon the individual, psychological aspects of constructivism has been described as 'the other side of the coin' of social constructionist approaches to cultural and discourse formations. Paris and Epting (2004) put it like this:

How we experience what we call reality is isomorphic with how we go about making sense of our lives and ourselves and with what sense we make of the world. The terms we use to describe ourselves and others (and that others use to describe us) come loaded with definitions, implications, and connotations, around which we spin stories that we live by. In this way, these descriptive terms are standing *invitations to construe others and ourselves in ways that are consistent with them.* (p. 17) (emphasis added)

This quotation could hardly be more germane to social work. Its reflexive relevance connects and applies to both practice and educative contexts. The emphasis in the quote is added to highlight the implicit reflexivity of 'these descriptive terms', or personal constructs, as 'invitations' to construe one's self and others in ways that are consistent with them. In other words, we utilize a psychological mechanism of 'feed-forward'.⁶ The power of this view arises from recognizing the extent to which our psychological processes filter and abstract from perceptions to ensure a 'fit' with preconceptions. The PCP insistence upon an individual's central role thus provides a necessary mirror to reflect the obvious; the strangely missing link of a psychological perspective upon reflexivity.

A recent paper focusing upon and arguing for 'new and more promising potentials for assessment in social work' (Iversen *et al.*, 2005) confirmed the tendency of some social constructionists to 'throw the individual baby out with the individualist bath-water' (p. 689). They perpetuate the erroneous assumption that constructivism is based upon a 'mind/world dualism' (p. 690) as part of an argument that attempts to privilege social relations over an acceptance of the individual. The authors make a number of important arguments in pursuit of more reflexive and relational modes of assessment. However, they do so by ignoring the implications of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) individualization thesis. There is, in the paper by Iverson *et al.* (2005), a strange reluctance to accept the implications of individualization as an emerging and defining aspect of social relations. As a result, the balance becomes tilted to the extent that 'Relationships replace single individuals as the centre of attention' (p. 700). Thus, instead of the meaning of individual perspectives being centre stage in a process of co-construction, the focus becomes subtly shifted to the social processes created through the use of assessment tools and devices. The shift appears imperceptible and easily missed within the larger scale differentiation between traditional notions of what Iverson *et al.* described as, 'evaluative' assessment and constructive assessment. However, it is indicative of how the individual perspective, exemplified by PCP, can become misplaced and effectively lost within the families of

constructionist theoretical arguments. This, in turn, feeds into the struggle to effectively maintain conducive perspectives within professional practices.

Coda: towards conducive assessment

Why conducive assessment? It is an apt descriptor for a renewed conception of assessment in social work. 'Conducive' derives from the Latin verb *conducere*: to lead, to bring together. This is a significant derivation for the descriptor of a process that arguably defines social work in current times. Historically, the first recorded use of the word 'conducive' is located by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary between 1630 and 1669. This mid-17th century dating places it firmly within the period that, as argued earlier, social assessments were emerging within UK social policies as part of the Poor Laws. Echoes of these historical attitudes and social policy principles remain clearly discernable today. We would argue that these combinations of 'conducive' characteristics—leading, bringing together and invitational reflexivity—offer an opportunity to place a critical focus upon assessment as the basis for social work practice and social work education.

Social work is still seen as the lead profession in carrying out social assessments within an increasingly complex and fragmented welfare network. It is required to do so by bringing together perspectives from different services across multidisciplinary, professional and voluntary contexts whilst intervening within the social relationships and cultures of individuals, families and communities. This multi-agency mode of response to an increasing social complexity carries with it both pitfalls and potential. The danger for complex, multiprofessional practices is that a tendency may arise for a 'technical system' rationality to dominate social assessments through an emphasis upon risk management. In these approaches human relationships and individual human responses can be devalued and their insights discounted. The alternative, and much more challenging, potential is for the system rationality to be led by a communicative rationality through the authentic engagement of what Harris (2005) described as 'learning partnerships'. The modernist drive for efficiency at all costs inevitably prioritizes a deceptively attractive simplicity of process, when the reality is that social assessments involve ethical decisions and moral judgements where, as Harris (2005) rightly pointed out, 'learning is always difficult and deliberation always difficult' (p. 83).

Professional education should arguably develop and critically question the direction of professional practice. For this it needs to balance the power of political realities with the potential of professional values through individual perspectives. Professional learners who have themselves been empowered by experiencing an assessment regime that emphasizes the importance of the individual, their perspectives, feelings and meanings, along with the development of critical awareness, are much more likely to become 'conducive professionals' who engage with their clients in ways that embody the principles of 'emancipatory rationality'. The pursuit of this agenda has enormous implications for future definitions of both professional practice and approaches to education. It offers the possibility of a genuinely post-modernist approach to

assessment that goes beyond 'description and prediction'—hitherto the defining motives of virtually all social assessment.

Conducive assessment both empowers individuality and recognizes the social and commonality dimensions of an existential intervention into another's life. PCP offers a radical, and extensively tested (Neimeyer *et al.*, 1990), theory and methodology for reflexive investigation of individuals' professional practices and their continuing professional development and education (Pope & Denicolo, 2001a, b). A conducive professionalism thereby balances the realities of an instrumental system with a reflexive, individualized, communicative approach to assessments. This degree of reflexive awareness transcends the boundaries between practice and education. It is founded on the recognition that it is the 'quality' (Pirsig, 1974) of the engagement, between social worker and client or between social worker and teacher, that is the touchstone of effective continuing professional development in social work. Moreover, it is the nature of the assessment process, involving complex demands of the highest order, upon which such quality depends.

However, conceptions of social work have rarely reflected its complexities or its pivotal public policy position. In this paper we have argued that there is a need to promote the importance of conducive professionalism within social work. Social work operates on the boundaries of assessment ambiguities and as such is, or we would argue should be, the post-modern profession *par excellence*. Barnett (1997) made the conducive case when he asserted that the

[post]modern professional faces the challenge of the management of incoherence. The self is the crucial and underplayed aspect of this as the professional needs to engage in a continuing process of 'ontological reconstruction' to define, defend and redefine the professional self within a professional peer culture and professional selves within multiple discourses. (p. 143) (emphasis added)

It is the 'self' in professional social work that requires an urgent rehabilitation to not just 'manage incoherence' but actively create or co-construct coherence. Within reconceived assessment practices a conducive approach is offered as the core cohering principle.

Notes

1. A 'connective' model of pedagogy and learning in work-based contexts recognizes that, increasingly, professional workers are expected to act as 'boundary crossers' between 'activity systems'. As such, they are expected to possess the ability to contribute to the development of new forms of social practice and to produce new forms of knowledge. This 'connectivity' entails a core reflexivity of learning how to contribute to the transformation of work contexts.
2. It can be argued that this belief has not diminished but has strengthened with the current UK government's enthusiasm for its 'modernization agenda' and its desire for public services to be more effective in realizing social policy objectives.
3. Devolution will likely augur some differences between nations in the UK. The Care Council in Wales, for example, currently takes a very detailed approach to specific requirements within the national occupational standards. The system in Scotland is differently structured from England or Wales.

4. It should be remembered, however, that this is a western industrialized 'euro-centric' notion of current human conceptions in a state of modernity. There still exist significant cultural and psychological differences of outlook and hence 'rationalities' across the globe.
5. The paradox of reflexivity highlighted by this analysis is that the power of an objectivist world view tends to be self-fulfilling. The self, allied strongly to a social system that is constructed through a technical interest, recognizes that they are working on the world, but not that their view of the world is working on them! The reciprocity of a participative relational system is denied by the apparent 'successes' of the technical interest. To this extent, within a Habermasian analysis a position that is strongly influenced by an instrumental rationality is almost delusional.
6. This notion's twin sibling, 'feedback', is far more commonly understood. The lack of awareness of feedforward seems to reflect an academic reluctance, firstly, to acknowledge such radical psychological perspectives and, secondly, to move the focus of analysis from retrospectivism to a future orientation. Kelly's contribution remains seminal in this regard.

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