Editorial: Reclaiming the Ground—Territorialism or Expertise?

The brief but glorious English high summer is moving on: school and university examinations, end-of-term celebrations, home-grown strawberries and Wimbledon have all run their course and we move lazily into summer holidays—still work to be done but shifting down a gear, knowing that all too soon autumn and the new academic year will be upon us. Broadcast during Wimbledon, the popular long-running radio programme Desert Island Discs had as its guest John McEnroe, who has metamorphosed in Wimbledon eyes from the brilliant teen player with an explosive personality into the critical-edge TV commentator of today. Perhaps unsurprisingly, since the programme is about the guest’s relationship with music and its interaction with their life, the most interesting things McEnroe said were not to do with tennis (although he dealt patiently enough with past and recent controversies). Two anecdotes stood out in that they both illustrated the same insight. First, he described how he was practising the guitar in his hotel room when he was surprised by a knock on the door from David Bowie. Bowie invited him up to his room for a drink but added ‘Don’t bring the guitar’. Second, McEnroe, who is married to the singer-songwriter Pattie Smyth, explained that he had this idea of forming a group in which they performed together. Pattie countered this suggestion with her own—that he should enter them both for a mixed-doubles tournament. When McEnroe responded that she was not a tennis player, her reply was suitably dismissive: ‘Exactly.’

We recount this story not simply for the enjoyment of it but because we think it illustrates a trend impacting on social work and, most particularly, social work research. This is that, as fast as other professions and disciplines recognise the importance of the psycho-social approach, social care and the social context, there is a tendency to absorb this into their own domain rather than acknowledging the expertise, experience and different perspective of the profession of social work, whose knowledge base and skills are deeply grounded in ‘the social’ and capable of making a significant, genuinely inter-disciplinary contribution. This cuts both ways. Social work research, eager to gain a respected place at the table, has embraced quantitative methodologies possibly at the expense of demonstrating that
good qualitative research is both difficult and robust; social work practice has coveted the application of science from other fields, sometimes brushing over the critical, contextualised approach which we regard as our strength. We recognise that social work is a great ‘borrower’ and we are not arguing against the incorporation of such approaches, but we are saying that, as a profession and academic discipline, we must not abandon our own knowledge and expertise. More than that, we must fight for it. This involves confidence in what we know and the expertise we have; integrating insights from others with our own so that something better, stronger and more useful emerges; and persuading others that there are some things about investigating social work practice and social care services which require the knowledge and expertise of the social work profession. Ruth Allen, Chief Executive of the British Association of Social Workers, agrees. In an article coinciding with World Social Work Day, she says: ‘Our challenge is to be both rooted and responsive’ (Allen, 2017, p. 27).

This Editorial marks a change in style. We have grouped articles around themes and briefly introduced them in the order in which they appear in the issue. We hope that you will like this approach.

The first group of articles, from Canada, the UK and the USA, illustrates in both research and practice the argument of our opening discussion. Michael Ungar has pioneered the study of resilience theory in social and environmental context and his insights are applicable across the human services. In this article, he turns around the notion of individual differential susceptibility to consider differential impact from the socio-economic environment. This shifts the balance of responsibility in intervention—an approach taken up by Hill and Hart in their study of the use of Resilient Therapy with families experiencing multiple disadvantages in what they term ‘an inequalities-informed conceptualisation’ of resilience research. The next three articles—two theoretical and one situated in mental health practice—look at the challenges to social work’s core identity and value base. Authors variously consider the application of ethics in practice (Wilson), the tension with pluralism (Moon) and the struggle of the social work practitioner isolated in a workplace with an alternative dominant professional ethos (Morriss). Last, Helm and Roesch-Marsh take the well-rehearsed subject of professional judgement and use the notion of ecological systems to break out of linear models of decision-making. Read together, these six articles tease out different facets for contemporary social work of promoting its distinctive contribution whilst enhancing ‘the social work project’ through integration with other disciplines, professions and knowledge bases.

The next block of three articles all examine foster-care from different perspectives and countries. First we have a Danish article (Mertz and Andersen) that provides new evidence about inter-generational transmission of foster-care and tests out the assumption that the children of foster-care alumni are more likely to experience foster-care themselves. In a
contrastive perspective from Ireland (Williams), the next article derived from an interpretivist study looks at the experiences of the biological children of foster-carers, recognising that birth children can play an important role in the success or otherwise of foster-care placements. Running nicely from this article and from Canada, Serbinski and Brown report their qualitative study that examined the inter-personal relationships between social workers and foster parents’ own children, revealing the difficulties that such children experienced in developing relationships with child-welfare workers.

The next group of articles has the common theme of exploring in depth front line social work with children and families. First, a team from the UK (Winter, Cree, Hallett, Hadfield, Ruch, Morrison and Holland) report the first phase of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council which looks at how social workers communicate with children in their everyday practice. This first phase used ethnography to analyse social workers operating in their workplace and while on visits. The following article from Scotland (Jackson, Kelly and Leslie) reflects the trend towards active parental involvement in statutory child protection intervention, the topic of the article from Israel published in the last issue (Alfandari 2017). Two articles also situated in Israel complete this theme. The first, from Ben Shlomo and Ben Haim, describes how Bowlby’s attachment theory was used to provide a conceptual framework to examine the impact on the mother of personal maltreatment in her childhood and the subsequent acceptance–rejection of her children in the present time, emphasising the importance of therapeutic interventions. In the next article, Sinai-Glazer and Peled show from their empirical study how the perceptions female social workers hold about motherhood and mothering are manifested in their interactions with their clients’ mothering practices.

Our last theme addresses the relationship between social work and social policy, in a variety of contexts. Beginning with an issue which has been of much concern in the UK, a team from Belgium (Devlieghere, Bradt and Roose) look at the installation of Electronic Information Systems in social work from a government perspective, suggesting that a rather more nuanced view of their value is held (at least in Belgium) than social work critics contend. The next article, from Robinson and Masocha, focuses on social work with asylum seekers in Scotland, arguing that, irrespective of their statutory or voluntary agency base, the highly politicised nature of the debate in a policy context of austerity is significantly impacting on notions of entitlement and human rights. Looking at another marginalised group—homeless people—Parsell, Petersen and Culhane compared the costs of supporting homeless people with those of tenants in supported housing. They argue that cost-offset evidence should be more widely utilised in social work’s pursuit of evidence-based practice, most particularly across the UK, Europe and Australia, where such evidence is scant compared to the USA. Finally, Einat Lavee looks at how poverty impacts on the
relationships low-income women in Israel have with social services and considers how services could facilitate social inclusion and respectability through these contacts.

We conclude this issue with a Critical Commentary which returns us to our opening discussion. Maynard, Boutwell and Vaughn take as their topic ‘Advancing the science of social work’, arguing that social work should actively engage with biosocial research in order to make a scientific contribution to the further development of the biopsychosocial framework.

References


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