**Contemporary dilemmas in social work: the social work degree in England and its implications for practice**

**Abstract**

The social work degree was established in 2002 to improve the status and competency of social workers. However, since then social work education continues to be subject to a series of significant changes. The aim of this study is to identify how the degree can illuminate the dilemmas of contemporary social work practice.

A qualitative case study of a social work degree programme in England was undertaken after obtaining ethical approval. Data were collected at two different points in time by means of interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted with academics (10), practice educators (8) and academics involved in practice learning (2). Two focus groups were undertaken with service users (11) and three focus groups with students (17). A total of 48 participants were involved in the data collection. A thematic analysis approach using versus coding was adopted. The findings indicated that the social work degree contained a number of inherent contradictions which were reflected in social work practice.

The contribution of this study lies in the identification of dichotomies in social work education and practice. Any successful and lasting reform of social work education would have to adopt a critical framework able to address contemporary dilemmas.

Key words: social work degree, social work education, reform, dilemmas

## Introduction

Despite some early debates about whether a university base would be too theoretical (Payne, 2005), since the early twentieth century social work education in England has been linked to universities and further education (Manthorpe et al., 2005). However, until 1971 there remained no single or compulsory type of training (Payne, 2005) rather a “patchwork of initiatives” similar to nursing training at that time (Manthorpe et al., 2005, p. 369). The early courses provided teaching in colleges and universities with academic and professional areas and students spent an equal amount of time on practical work. Issues such as funding and the relationship between the academy and the practicum were very early on part of the debate in social work education as they continue to be today (Lyons, 1999).

The Seebohm (1968) reorganisation in the 1970s resulted in the various training bodies being merged into the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work in 1971 with the training courses being amalgamated into the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work. By now social work was unique in offering a professional qualification at four academic levels (Lyons, 1999; Manthorpe et al., 2005): non-graduate (two years); undergraduate (generally as part of a four-year degree in sociology); postgraduate diploma (one year) or master’s level (two years). There may be a number of reasons for these options: encouraging entry to the profession from a variety of applicants; avoiding conflict with already existing educational establishments and uncertainty about the academic status of social work (Lyons, 1999).

Changes continued to occur in social work education. The newly created social services departments post Seebohm sought to take more control over social work education, which led to the creation of the Certificate in Social Services in 1975 (Lyons, 1999). The Certificate in Social Services was originally for residential workers in social care and it was managed by consortia of local colleges and employers (Payne, 2005) and sought to provide training to the 60% of social care staff who were not trained field social workers holding the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (Lyons, 1999; Payne, 2005).

Lyons (1999) argues this change was symptomatic of a struggle for dominance between academics, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work and employers. The Central Council proposed reform to the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work to make sure training was relevant to the needs of employers. One group of academics at Warwick University contended the consultative documents on proposed changes to the CQSW were evidence of “an underlying contempt for theory…[and] a definite preference for the pragmatic, the technical, the uncritically active”(Barker et al., 1978, p. 17).

In the 1980s following the conflicts in the 1970s there was more emphasis on skills training in social work education (Lyons, 1999; Pithouse and Scourfield, 2002). However, as the 1980s progressed under the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work’s focus shifted to a focus on the quality of training. The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work produced a proposal for a new three year-qualifying programme. However, the Conservative government refused to agree the change. There may be a number of reasons for this decision: to reduce government spending and to reduce the power of a professional group, which was not supported by either the government or the wider public (Lyons, 1999). Another possibility is that it was also the failure of academics to provide convincing models of the connection between theories and practice (Parsloe, 2001). In response to the lack of governmental support for a three-year programme the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work introduced a proposal for the Diploma in Social Work in 1989 and the diploma became fully functional in 1993 (J M Consulting Limited, 1999) replacing the other qualifications (Certificate of Qualification in Social Work and Certificate of Social Care).

The introduction of the social work degree in England (2002) can be seen as part of this continuous state of “flux” or change in social work education (Parton, 1994, p. 9). The reasons given for the establishment of the degree were (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008):

• Many social work educators were critical of the competency based model of the diploma

• There was a steady decline in student numbers

• A public perception that many social workers were not discharging their professional responsibilities properly

• Concerns about the quality of the teaching and the relevance of some of the curriculum on the Diploma in Social Work

The introduction of the social work degree was part of the aim to address these issues. There was evidence of a successful implementation of the degree including students’ abilities to improve their critical skills over time on the programme (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008). However, the death of Peter Connelly in 2007 and a review of social work education found that many informants felt the degree did not prepare students adequately for practice (Social Work Task Force, 2009). The Social Work Task Force (2009) recommended further significant changes to social work education and practice. Alongside the Munro Review (2011) the recommendations of the Task Force indicated the future of social work education and practice became again uncertain (Dickens, 2011).

The question remains why the social work degree in England continues to undergo radical alterations so soon after it was set up in 2002. It is suggested that the success or otherwise of the social work degree is inevitably linked to the expectations of not only the degree but of social workers and society as a whole. What the degree does must connect to what is expected of social workers (Preston-Shoot, 2012). What we want students to learn depends on what we want them to do in practice (Preston-Shoot, 2012). What social workers do in practice depends partly on what they think they ought to do but, most importantly, what the organisation and wider context expects of them (Preston-Shoot, 2012; Rixon ). The aim of this research was to investigate in what ways the social work degree sheds light on or illuminates the dilemmas of contemporary social work. The study approaches an understanding of contemporary social work within the prism of the social work degree.

## Methodology: developing a versus coding framework

The aim of this paper was to identify how the social work degree in England could illuminate the dilemmas of contemporary social work practice. In choosing a qualitative methodology the researcher must make sure the research questions are a suitable combination. There are a number of features to this study. In this study the questions are mainly how and why; the object of interest is contemporary; the period of investigation is over a number of years; and the researcher is not in control of the organisation and the participants. When these features are present in a research plan a case study inquiry may be appropriate (Yin, 2009). Adopting a case study methodology can be seen to be suitable because it is congruent with the questions and the issue under investigation. It may also be suggested a case study design fits well into a social work perspective (Gilgun, 1994).

A qualitative case study of a social work degree programme in England was undertaken after obtaining ethical approval. Data was collected at two different points in time by means of interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted with academics (10), practice educators (8) and academics involved in practice learning (2). Two focus groups were undertaken with service users (11) and three focus groups with students (17). A total of 48 participants were involved in the data collection.

During the coding of the data it became apparent that the codes created seem to place the participants and concepts in a dichotomous or conceptually antithetical relationship. Versus coding was adopted to explicate this conflicting dualism. Versus codes “*identify in binary terms the individuals, groups, social systems, organisations, phenomena, processes, concepts, etc. in direct conflict with each other”* (Saldana, 2009, p. 94).

Versus codings are utilised in this study because they offer a thematic and intellectually coherent way to make sense of the data. Also, there is a philosophical rationale for their adoption. Versus codings reinforce the existing contradictions which are identified in the findings and can be used to support a philosophical critique of attempts to resolve or dissolve the tensions within contemporary social work practice. They may be understood to be an analytical tool to challenge ‘final vocabularies’ (Rorty, 1989), which aim to produce a univocal conception of social work. Versus codings are similar to notions such as irony and ‘covert’ strategies (Carey and Foster, 2011). They challenge the dominant paradigms of contemporary practice by emphasising the contradictions within such models.

Having identified and analysed the coding, the data appeared to be divisible within three themes. The first theme is the relationship between the university and the placement. It is this theme, which situates the social work degree programme as the initial vantage point or prism within which the primary stakeholders are considered. The second theme extends and develops the competing codings in the degree by exploring how social workers and social work are perceived in daily life in relationship to other professionals and wider society. The final theme brings together the findings of the previous two themes by indicating that the centre or heart of the identified versus codings within the first two themes arise from a competition between two contrasting models of social work (broad versus narrow social work). ‘

Finally, there is the question of generalisability from a single case study. Adopting a case study approach for the research it is accepted that the purpose of the study was not to identify generalisable statements. The aim was to establish ‘analytic generalisation’ (Yin, 2009). In this sense a case study may be seen as a type of experiment from which an analytic conceptual model can be generated. A case study is not a sample. The goal is to provide a comprehensive conceptualisation capable of being tested by continuing and expanding the research. Using versus coding has provided this conceptual approach to social work and social work educations. Testing its relevance internationally may provide opportunities to test its relevance internationally.

**The findings**

***The university versus the placement***

The social work programme and its relationship with the placement were described as a struggle:

“What we always struggle with in social work is that, you know, we’ve got the practice placement over there and the university’s over here. It’s seen as a very separate entity and the students get their practice experience in one place and the theory in another.” (Academic)

The social work programme and the placement were described as two separate organisations and places. They were different not only by being in different places but also because of the conceptual divisions of these bodies. One academic described the conceptual difference as the programme providing the “theory” and the placement “their practice experience”. The academic course offered something that was essentially intellectual insofar as theory is a mental activity. By contrast, on the placement, the students obtained an experience of practice. The struggle was expressed as a conflict between two fundamentally different organisations with very different focuses for the student. For the most part the role of the academic course tended to be seen as teaching and usually teaching theory. One student said that the programme was the place where theory was taught. Another student explained that the role of the academy was to “inform and teach” students about social work. A student gave the example of the use of case studies in academic teaching. Case studies were used to bring real life into academic teaching, something that has “actually taken place”. The programme itself could not provide that lived experience of concrete practice.

What the programme and the placement were competing or struggling for remained unclear. If the analogy of a sport is used, there is always a prize for the winner. It was not clear whether there was ever a winner or, if there was, what the winner won. The outward expression of this struggle was the rivalrous relationship between the two halves. Evidence of this rivalry occurred when the attitudes and expectations of the students and academics were considered. Students on the degree tended to think that when they were on placement, they had no reason to keep in touch with the tutors on the social work programme:

“Ours go off to placement and I see it in some of the students. They almost think they no longer need any contact with their tutor because they’re out on placement and that’s where the real work is” (Academic)

Students tended to leave their academic learning behind when they came on placement because the placement did not think there was a link between the two. One student reported that:

“When talking to the practice teacher and proposing the intervention, they say: ‘Where will you get all this? Forget about the theory and use exactly the resources you can access at the moment’. Seems unbalanced”.

When students go on placement the message they receive is that what they learnt at university was not relevant to practice. When one student undertook an observation or shadowing of a social work, the practitioner did not see the relevance of theory and practice was viewed as a process which did not need theory:

“I went on my first shadowing of a social worker and asked: ‘What theory are we using?’ and he said: ‘You don’t think of the theory because there are so many reports to write and so many meetings to attend and stuff’.”

An academic involved in practice learning suggested there were different expectations and a lack of understanding between the university and practice agencies:

“Well I just think sometimes the expectations in placement are different to those of the university. I think, again, this bringing the theories into practice is difficult for some. I think a lot of it is around different expectations and not understanding the other.”

The Director of Practice Learning’s position within the social work programme may offer some further understanding on the programme and the placement. The director was responsible for identifying and matching students to placements. They also liaised with practice agencies to develop practice learning placements. Although based within the social work programme, the director did not hold a teaching or academic assessment role and much of the time was involved in liaising with practice agencies around placements. In some sense this role did not connect to the role of the academics. The role was to look outside the programme to establish partnerships for placements. From this semi-detached position the practice learning lead suggested academics were also responsible for the struggle between the social work programme and the placement. Some tutors thought the academic programme was more important than practice. Other tutors did not grasp the importance of practice learning. At times different expectations meant that there was a lack of understanding between the social work programme and placement:

“It’s a shared role, isn’t it? Although I suppose that’s the other thing, it has struck me that when you’ve got a student on placement with you, the interaction and the networking between university and placement is confined to a midway meeting. There isn’t much sense of joining together to oversee the student’s experiences.” (practice educator)

***Social workers versus others***

One academic felt social workers had a “bad name” in society. Such was the bad name of social work that when some students were on placement, the teachers recommended they did not refer to themselves as social work students. Social work as a profession was not “fully accepted” compared to other professions (practice educator):

“I do think we’re always going to be in a very difficult position because our beginning, our roots are sort of a bit hybrid and peculiar. And we’re not, you know, we’re never going to be like doctors and we’re never going to have that acceptance like lawyers or whatever. So I think we are in a bit of… we’ve already started off on a difficult kind of footing.” (academic)

Everyone seemed to understand what the roles of other professions but social workers’ role was not clear:

“If you explain you’re a teacher that’s fairly self-explanatory. If you say you’re a lecturer that’s fairly self-explanatory. If you’re nurse. And I think the social worker role, it means so much in lots of ways; and I think that’s hard to grasp for people who are not inside it.” (academic involved in practice learning)

The distinctive peculiarity of social work could serve to reinforce its difference and specialness but there might be a complementary role that social work played within society. Social work addresses issues that are not easily resolvable or simple to “fix”:

“Maybe in a way we make certain things difficult for them because we’re looking at all these aspects and so then they probably just want to stop. Like mental health for example, they just want to solve and fix the problem and we want to look at all these different things and empower the person.” (student)

Social workers had to work with “issues” the rest of society did not want to consider. Society did not want to hear about, for example, child sexual abuse (practice educator). Such concerns were passed over to social workers. The complementary role and expectations of social work was that it would “deal” with whatever society refused to address. Dealing with complex and difficult matters was left to social workers. Perhaps this very expectation and complementary role were the reasons why social work was avoided or misunderstood:

“I don't know why that is. Unless it’s because it touches on people’s ideas about social work, that it’s kind of about pain and trauma and loss, I don't know. Whether it’s too raw, people don’t want to go there or something.” (practice educator)

***Broad social work versus narrow social work***

Broad social work addressed wider social and political contexts such as social justice:

“Thinking about the inequalities and injustice and things, sort of systemic and, I suppose, ecological factors that get in the way of that and how you might be able to challenge those as much as you can in the role that you take on.” (practice learning academic)

Having a “broad” conception of social work meant that social workers were aware they were not working within a “vacuum” (academic). They approached practice with a framework that allowed them to challenge unfairness (student). Challenging injustice might include “social action” and working from a community approach, which historically was part of social work (academic). One service user contrasted the role of social workers with the limitations of the government:

“Social workers are the conscience of government. Where the government has failed, these are the guys who are supposed to sort it out”.

A student gave an example contrasting the broad model of social work taught in the university with a more narrow approach adopted in practice:

“The student was trying to stop them from going back into the office and raising hell. He thought in three ways it would stop him from damaging his own prospects and stop a big issue and he’s going to do things the right way which will empower him in the future. A week later, the social worker tapped him on the shoulder and said ‘We don’t encourage making complaints’. “

The narrow understanding of social work tended to replace or overcome broad social work. Broad social work became “marginalised” by a practice which had a “narrow role”:

“I think it narrows the focus of social work. It focuses on local authority activity. I think social work is an activity that ought to have a broad range of social action and things like community work, for example, which used to be part of the social work agenda are very much marginalised practice.” (academic)

Narrow social work focusses on local authority legal interventions rather than a broader social intervention type of work. This narrow focus on practice or performativity was a “very minimalist, superficial way” because it was:

“Done in a very minimalist, superficial way, which I think it is increasingly, given the timescales people are given to do that work, that dictates a minimalist intervention and approach” (academic)

One academic felt “worried” about the future of social work and it was a “dangerous” approach because the narrow model did not consider the wider context of social work practice. Changing the world no longer seemed to be on the social work agenda because it had been replaced by legal interventions with a focus on “social control” (practice educator) rather than justice and discrimination (student). In particular the dominant practice was now centred on the “micro level really” (practice educator) rather than a wider social and political framework (service user).

**Discussion**

Literature on the experience of newly qualified social workers tended to confirm the findings of this study that the focus in practice was narrow rather than broad. The focus on newly qualified professionals in not new in social work (J M Consulting, 1999). On qualification social workers in England found that their expectations of social work did not fit into the actual daily work of practice. In one study social workers discussed the “reality shock” between their ideals and the realities of practice (Jack and Donnellan, 2010, p. 309) and in another study a newly qualified social worker described the first year of practice as a “baptism of fire” (Bates et al., 2010, p. 162). Of course there are inevitably tensions between ideals and realities of practice (Author, 2009; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Preston-Shoot, 2012). The findings in this study however, supported suggestions from literature on newly qualified social workers that the emphasis was on their skills (Author, 2009) and the ability to complete work within timescales rather than the quality of the work (Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Studies tended to find that employers were interested in newly qualified workers’ ability to perform within relatively clear boundaries of skills and knowledge rather than employers’ requiring a broader or more reflective approach to social work practice in England (Lyons and Mannion, 2004; Author, 2009; Bates et al., 2010; Jack and Donellan, 2010; Sharpe et al., 2011; Author, 2012). Even when participants all emphasised the importance of sound communication skills, for managers this mainly referred to verbal and written skills. In contrast service users and carers related good communication skills to empathy (Author, 2009; Sharpe et al., 2011).

Munro (2011) explicitly addressed the narrow remit of social work practice in England and binaries centred on narrow versus broad approaches can be identified from her report (Author, 2012). In particular Munro contrasts a compliance culture in current social work with a more open learning and relationship building culture. One of Munro’s main recommendations is the need to move from a compliance or narrow model of practice to a more open, flexible (Author, 2012) or broad approach.

Definitions of social work such as those of the International Federation of Social Work (2014) emphasise a model of social work, which is similar to a broad approach identified in the findings. A number of studies have explored the importance of theory and ethical values in social work (Banks, 2005; Clarke, 2005; Singh and Cowden, 2009; Doel et al., 2010; Baldwin, 2011).

Contrasted with this ideal of social work is the reality of statutory or legal social work in England (Bates et al., 2010: Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Studies on recently qualified social workers tend to indicate that in reality the newly qualified social workers find it difficult to put their ideals into practice (Bates et al., 2010; Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Such issues existed prior to the introduction of the social work degree (Marsh and Triseliotis; 1996; Bradley, 2008). The issue of whistleblowing may be offered as an example of the problematic relationship of social work ideals with the realities of contemporary practice (Banks, 2005; Doel and Shardlow, 2005; Rodie, 2008; Mansbach and Bachler, 2009; Preston-Shoot, 2012).

There are clearly issues of power and vulnerability for students who complain when in their placements (Banks, 2005; Rodie, 2008). Where there is a culture of blame rather than learning students may find it particularly difficult to challenge poor practice (Skinner and Whyte, 2004; Preston-Shoot, 2012). One study identified the most common dilemma for students was challenging the practice of colleagues and a few them described situations where they failed to challenge bad practice (Banks, 2005). Many students found it difficult to challenge their practice educators (Preston-Shoot and McMinn, 2012).

Even where students express a readiness to challenge bad practice (Mansbach and Buchner, 2009), attitudes or intentions are not equivalent to what people will actually do (Ajzen, 1988). Where employees are confronted with competing and contradictory expectations such as those identified in this coding they are inclined to focus on the requirements of their managers (Rizzo et al., 1977). It may be suggested this is likely to apply to social work students. Socialisation tends to encourage adoption of an identity akin to the students’ mentors (Goldstein, 2001; Hudson, 2002).

Difficulties in whistleblowing for students are only one example of the conflict of expectations between those of the ideals of social work and the reality of contemporary practice. When students become qualified, it may be argued that their idealism is tempered by a more relativistic approach as they become more experienced (Doel et al., 2010). Employed social workers should adjust to the culture of their organisations (Landau, 1999; Doel et al., 2010). Perhaps they become less concerned about the ideals of social work and deem it prudent to avoid challenging bad practice (Preston-Shoot, 2012). It may be argued that the exclusion of the ideals of social work from the contemporary practice of social work in England has resulted in social workers being at risk of “losing their moral compass” (Preston-Shoot, 2012, p. 30). Social workers are in danger of losing their professional identity to a practice that is both indifferent and inimical to the ideals of the profession (Humphries, 2004).

This conflict between the ideals of a profession and its reality in practice is not confined to social work in England. The importance of challenging bad practice and the professional duty to whistle blow were considered in the Mid Staffordshire Inquiry (Francis, 2013). The conflicts identified in these findings between competing paradigms may well be relevant to other professions such as nursing.

The social work degree in England is generic. However, in qualified practice newly qualified social workers are required to specialise in either adults or children and families social work. Within that overall focus social workers will also have to develop a sub-specialism e.g. adoption and fostering. Thus, the social work degree educates students to be fit for (generic) qualified practice. It is only when newly qualified social workers start their first qualified post that they learn to become fit for purpose within their areas of specialist practice. This may account for the ‘culture’ shock of moving from a generic understanding to a specialist practice.

It is thus understandable employers expect newly qualified workers to focus on specific types of work. However, the findings in this study indicate that employers were interested in a particularly narrow approach that went beyond simply developing specialist knowledge. Newly qualified workers were not, for example, encouraged to develop a reflective analysis of their practice (Bates et al., 2010; Jack and Donellan, 2010). Even when participants emphasised the importance of sound communication skills, for managers this mainly referred to verbal and written skills. In contrast service users and carers related good communication skills to empathy (Author, 2009; Sharpe et al., 2011).

**Conclusion**

The social work degree in England was the starting point of the study. The use and development of versus codes arising from the findings identified a binary model (Wolcott, 2003; Saldana, 2009) of competing systems, people and values in social work education, which were connected to the contradictory nature of social work. The application of versus coding to social work in England offers a different framework within which to make sense of social work. Versus coding provided not only a thematic and explanatory model for the findings but also a critical and analytical way to approach the underlying tensions in contemporary social work. They challenged and undermined attempts at providing unifying and narrow conceptions of social work education and practice. Versus coding can be understood to highlight the debates about and struggle (Singh and Cowden, 2009) for the nature of the social work profession in England.

To some extent the approach in this study was a structural one in the sense that social work education and social work in England were understood in relationship to competing binaries identified as: university versus placement, social work versus others, broad versus narrow social work. However, this structural connection of opposing conceptualisations was a dynamic relationship because there was a conflict or debate between the binaries about ultimately the nature and purpose of contemporary social work within the existing perplexities of late modernity.

As a structural model focussed on the contradictory relationships within it, this perspective provided a distinct systematic conception of social work education and social work in England (Henkel, 1994). It is the case that social work has often been understood as having ‘tensions’ or ‘dilemmas’ as a profession (Tsang, 2000; Delaney, 2007). What distinguishes this study is that it is argued that these binaries are related structurally and, to that extent, dependent on each other. Elsewhere in the social work literature, when contradictions or “paradoxical nature” (Singh and Cowden, 2009, p. 13) were explored, attempts tended to be made to resolve them by talking, for example, of integrating theory and practice (Sheldon, 1978; Singh and Cowden, 2009) or reconciling dilemmas or dichotomies (Delaney, 2007). The findings of this research suggested that the identified binaries were located throughout the social work profession from qualifying education to professional practice and conceptualisations of social work as a profession.

The aim of this study was to identify how the degree in England can illuminate the dilemmas of contemporary social work practice .The key contention of this study is that the dilemmas of social work education reflect or illuminate contemporary social work because their dichotomies are linked to contradictions in social work. The conceptual antitheses of social work education are linked to the rival identities of social work practice and the struggle between different models of social work in England. The underlying tension or dilemma is a debate about the nature of the profession within the context of differing views of the academy and the practicum, contrasting understandings of social work, and competing models of the social work profession in England.

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