European social work and their identities

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Abstract

This paper argues that there are many social works and that it is inappropriate to seek to create and defend a single unified identity for it. Personal and social identities are the characteristics that make someone or something recognisable to others and are connected to the social and cultural meanings and values associated with an identity. Europe has multiple countries and national, linguistic and cultural identities; it is logical to assume that these would create multiple social works. An internationalist view proposed a unified social work as part of a professionalisation project in the twentieth century to institutionalise the status and recognition of social work, but differing practices, occupational groups, contributory disciplines, social institutions incorporating social work and objectives mean that multiple potentialities exist for alternative forms of social work. While social work contains many possibilities, distinctive characteristics include its objectives of contributing to social cohesion and development through improving interpersonal social relations, its humanistic values, its multiprofessional engagement and the importance of women in its practice within states offering collective public welfare provision reflecting internationally shared trends in social policy. A continuing process of change takes place in the identities of social works in Europe and internationally.

Key words

Introduction

The title of this paper refers, unconventionally, to 'social works'. My aim, in doing so, is to make the point that it is not necessary or appropriate to claim that there is only one unified social work, but that there are many social works across the world. I argued in my book, *What is Professional Social Work?* (Payne, 2006) that international professional organisations in social work sought, in the second half of the twentieth century, to create social work as a single construct as part of a project to institutionalise its position as an accepted profession. In the *Sage Handbook of International Social Work*, I proposed (Payne, 2012) that there are four groupings of practices which form significantly different social works concentrated in different parts of the world: (clinical) social work in the USA, social assistance or social care as part of broad welfare services in European welfare states, social pedagogy as a form of social work focused on education in mainland Europe and social development allied to economic development in resource-poor countries in Africa and Asia.

My aim in this paper is to analyse the consequences of these positions for social work in Europe. If several social works exist, does this apply also in Europe? And if it does, what are the consequences for an analysis of the identity of social work, or the identities of these social works?

Identity and social work identities

The meaning and implications of the English word 'identity' suggest that defining it is not a simple matter. An identity is a set of characteristics by which someone or something is recognisable to others. People know an identity by referring to those characteristics.

There are two main types of identity: personal identities, the characteristics which define the self of an individual human being, in their own mind and in other people's minds, and social identities, the characteristics which define a collective or group in society, such as a profession like social work. The simplest way of ascribing an identity to an individual or a collective is to name it, as a passport does. This is often not sufficient in human intercourse and relationships. We often have to clarify or represent an identity more fully, therefore, by referring to other characteristics. Often, the further characteristics that define an individual identity are the collective or group identities connected with them. So we would say: 'Ms Joanna Markus is a social worker'. In doing so, we identify her gender, because Joanna is a female name, her family, by referring to her surname, and her profession. We also construct this identity in such a way that by implication we are distinguishing this identity from other similar identities. If we introduced her as Jo, this is a gender-neutral name and could refer to both males and females, so if this were a matter of importance, we would have to include other identifiers to be clear about the gender of the person we are talking about. Thus, this Jo is female if we refer to her as Ms Markus.

Identities are connected in this way with the social and cultural meanings and values that we attach to the characteristics that define collective or group identity. Asking: 'what is the identity of social work?', seeks to find the characteristics that people ascribe to this occupation and that they consider are important in defining it. Identity becomes a dialectic, that is, an internal debate in the person who is asked to define an identity. It also becomes a

dialogue with the people who are an audience for our identification. We cannot mention everything about it, only the most important points: this is the internal dialectic. We also respond to the person who asks and the situation that leads them to ask us the question (the external dialogue). Therefore, we would present this identity in one way to a politician or policy-maker who is deciding what social services should be offered in our city and in a different way to a client who has asked us for our services, or a student who is beginning to learn about social work.

Europe as a context for social work

Analysing the identities of social work in Europe, therefore, requires us to think about what complexities arise from the characteristics of this continent that might affect our internal dialectic and external dialogues.

Among the complexities about the identity of Europe are that it contains many diverse nations, whose boundaries and territory are unclear. The official website of the European Union (Europa, 2014) lists 28 countries who are members, 17 that use the Euro as their currency, 26 that are members of the Schengen customs union, 8 that are in various stages of candidature for membership and 14 'other European countries'. The members include territories that are not part of the European mainland, such as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Mediterranean islands such as Cyprus and Malta, and far away territories that are administrative parts of members, such as French Guyana in south America. The candidates and other European countries include some that are not fully within the continental area of Europe, such as Russia or Turkey, whose territories are partly in Asia. Many of those countries have other nations or ethnic, regilanl and social divisions within their administrative boundaries. For example, some countries have important regions, which are semi-autonomous, such as the *Länder* of Germany or the autonomous regions of Spain. Many countries contain multiple ethnic and language groups: some of these overlap with other countries. For example, Finland contains Finnish and Swedish-speaking citizens and Sami people in the north: Sami also live in other Nordic countries and Russia. Many different languages are spoken across the continent, including languages of migrants from elsewhere in the world.

Europe may therefore be seen as a continent in which there are many countries, containing different language and ethnic groups, and multiple cultural traditions. Moreover there is a recent history of division: until the later twentieth century there was a major administrative division between Nato and Warsaw Pact countries, which led to significant separation in history, politics and culture. There are wide variations in economic development and social and cultural life. It is likely that social services for the peoples of the continent will reflect that diversity and division. If the social services are diverse, then it is likely that the social work provided within those social services will also be diverse.

To identify a unified social work within this diverse social geography, we need to ask, first, whether there are distinctive shared features that make up a European social work, and, second, whether such a social work, if it exists, can be distinguished from the characteristics of social work in other continents. I argue, first, that the claim that there is a single unified social work derives from particular historical and social circumstances that are no longer

relevant to current European social work. Second, I propose that the identity of complex social phenomena such as social work can never be unified. As a consequence, third, I argue that we should not be concerned to identify and defend a single identity but instead our professional thinking and education should reflect an exploration of the complexities of the varying social works in Europe and elsewhere.

The internationalist view and the professionalisation project

Within social work, certain international organisations pursue what I describe (Payne, 2006) as an internationalist view, which is in turn associated with a professionalisation project (Payne, 2013b). The internationalist view claims that there is one unified social work within which there are variations. This view is historically associated with an elite of social work educators, including Alice Salomon (Germany), Eileen Younghusband (UK) and Katherine Kendall (USA), in their work for the United Nations and the International Association of Schools of Social Work. Working to develop the Association after the first world social work conference in Paris in 1929, Salomon (1937) conducted an international survey of social work education, and after the second world war, Kendall and Younghusband were associated with an international expansion of social work education facilitated as part of post-war social reconstruction by UN agencies, Fulbright Fellowships from the USA, Canadian technical assistance and in Catholic countries by the Catholic International Union for Social Service (Kendall, 1978; Younghusband, 1963). In important element of this in the post-war period was American promotion of casework with individuals and families as a democratic but individualistic mode of social service as a bulwark against communist ideology across Europe (Satka, 1995) and the infiltration of American casework ideas more broadly, for example in Germany (Otte, 1997). These ideas are the basis of the clinical social work form of social work, one of the four 'social works' that I described above. For the International Association, social work is still seen as the 'inclusive and representative title' of the profession (IASSW, 2011), that is, the term includes and represents other forms of similar work.

Claims of a unified social work, based on Western values and models of practice thus arise from a project to claim professional status for social work which developed in the 1920s as social work became a paid occupation in the USA and Europe (Payne, 2006, 2013a). The aims were to achieve occupational closure, in which the organised profession itself controlled access to credentials and qualifications to practice and employment (Parkin, 1979), and also to promote recognition of the value and role of the profession in the developing welfare states of the 1950s and '60s and political and policy influence. This project downplayed and sometimes excluded potential alternatives.

Potential multiple social works

Examining the literature of the profession, however, a number of different elements of social work emerge, which may provide the basis for alternative social works (Payne, 2006, 2012, 2013a, 2014). These include:

> A range of different practices, such as casework or therapeutic work with individuals and families, groupwork, and macro or community work, carried out by…

…different occupational groups, such as social workers, youth workers, community workers and residential care workers, informed by…

…a variety of disciplines, that is, organised bodies of knowledge, research, skills and values in the psychological and social sciences, and carried out within…

…many differing social institutions, including social service, healthcare and education organisations, aiming to meet…

…multiple social objectives.

Among the potential alternative social works are:

models of practice, such as (clinical) social work, social assistance, social pedagogy and social development, the four models described at the outset of this paper

differing modalities (the American term), such as clinical, group, community or management practice or an integrated practice combining some or all of these (Payne, 2014)

major theoretical positions, such as psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural, narrative or solution focused, humanistic or critical practice

major practice locations, such as field or domiciliary work, residential, healthcare, or school social work

client and service specialisms such as children, mental health, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, palliative care, renal care, child and adolescent mental health, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, young or adult offenders

major forms of practice, such as social work, social care that helps people with the activities of daily living, social entrepreneurship, project management and service management.

Simply listing and exemplifying these possibilities illustrates the variety of ways in which it is possible to understand the focus of social work. As a result, there is a range of possible ways in which we might define potential groups of social workers. In many countries, this is achieved by regulatory legislation, which defines in law who may be described as or practise as social workers (Bibus and Boutté-Queen, 2011). Usually these people are defined by the qualifications and experience. In addition to this, there are usually social care workers who undertake more routine roles, and managers who have responsibility for staff and service provision, but may not have professional qualifications. These groups include paraprofessional staff including residential and home care workers, personal assistants and volunteers and various management groups.

There are also contested occupational groups, such as community workers, groupworkers and community workers who may be social workers or come from another occupational group. Cognate professional groups such as counsellors, clinical psychologists and guidance workers may have overlapping roles based in similar academic disciplines to those influencing social work. Practitioners such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists or community arts workers have a similar status working in related agencies and have overlapping competences. Some people working in other sectors of the economy for example police and prison officers or paralegals working in criminal justice who have many connections and overlapping responsibilities with social workers. The traditional professions, such as medicine, the law

and the churches have clearly established positions but some responsibilities that might be seen as related to social work.

All these either form potential 'social works' or interact or contest territory that might become, or that once was social work. They all operate to some extent within Europe, and in every country in Europe. Social assistance or social care exists in all European countries but is denied equal status with clinical social work perhaps because of it involves practical service-provision rather than theoretically-informed therapeutic work and may thus be considered of lower status. Services described as social pedagogy derive from particular theoretical and service traditions in mainland Europe, but elements of these services and the philosophies that inform them may be found everywhere. Social development is associated with resource-poor countries in Africa or Asia, but is relevant to and used within services in poorer regions of every country, through macro and community work. All these potentialities are, therefore, relevant to European social work.

Approaches to analysis of social work's identity

Social workers need to use multiple approaches in analysing and working on social work's identity, because it is a social phenomenon with complex, multiple and interacting elements of potentialities that may contribute or detract from its identities. Accounts of it will, therefore, necessarily reflect comparisons in social contexts and psychological and social psychological responses to social relations between social workers and the others that they compare themselves with. Possible approaches to exploring social work identities might include the following (Payne, 2013a).

> Examining descriptions from different sources of varying perspectives on how it appears to be.
> Exploring social workers' expressed principles and aspirations.
> Identifying accounts of its essence or its qualities, to identify characteristics that are claimed to be necessary to any activity or profession that is seen as social work.
> Understanding definitions of boundaries to social work, so that we may see what it is not. For example, it may be said that social work is not youth work, not community work, not medicine not education and not nursing.
> Accepting a process-definition, for example agreeing that a person who has undertaken formal exploration, research and education in social work thus enabling them to be engaged in the ongoing discourse that reflects the constant change of development of its nature. The requirements for social work qualifications in England do not define social work but demand engagement in debates about its nature as part of qualifying training (Payne, 2011), and this is a form of process-identity.
> Approaching its identity through an additive principle: a list of potential characteristics is collected and an activity or profession is taken to be more likely to be social work, or more social-work-like, if it contains more of those characteristics. An example of this is attempts at functional analysis of social work tasks or competences, aggregating them to form standards of qualification.

In the following section, I explore definitions of social work from various sources, to illustrate current analyses of social work's identity.

Current definitions of social work

Descriptions of social work from public perceptions may be identified by examining research into public views. For example, a focus group study carried out for the British government (Research Works, 2001) found that public perception of social work was unfavourable for two reasons:

> Social workers dealt with intractable situations involving unpleasant issues and disapproved people, in particular child abuse.
> They were seen as hemmed in by large workloads and bureaucratic procedures.

Public perception of social care was that it consisted of mainly practical tasks caring for elderly people, carried out by women. Both roles were stressful, difficult and unpleasant, requiring a sense of vocation.

A more recent attempt at defining social work in a way that would be understandable to a general public was made the Social Work Task Force, commissioned by the British government to explore future development of social work:

Social work helps adults and children to be safe so they can cope and take control of their lives again. Social workers make life better for people in crisis who are struggling to cope, feel alone and cannot sort out their problems unaided (Social Work Task Force, 2009: 67)

These lay views, or the professional attempts at expressing lay views, present an identity that is different from definitions offered from professional sources. These represent expressed principles and aspirations and accounts of the essence or qualities of social work. For example, the International Federation of Social Workers (2000) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work published a more complex definition, reflecting an identity informed by professional aspirations:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IFSW, 2000).

This definition lists three social objectives, two knowledge bases, a point of intervention and two sets of principles as representing the identity of social work. At the time of writing, a consultation is taking place about revising this definition, and the currently proposed new definition is as follows:

The social work profession facilitates social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2014).

Comparing these two forms of the definition allows us to explore the issues that raise concern for protagonists in a current debate about social work's identity. Among the changes are the following:

> Carrying out social work objectives is framed as facilitation rather than promotion
> Social change is allied to social development
> Problem-solving as an action is displaced by addressing life challenges
> The enhancing well-being is displaced as an objective to refer to how social work methods, although empowerment and liberation are retained as objectives
> The sets of principles are broadened by the addition of collective responsibility and respect for diversities
> The two knowledge bases are collapsed into one phrase, social sciences and broadened by the addition of theories of social work, humanities and indigenous knowledges (reflecting the discourse about Western hegemony mentioned above)
> The focus of interventions is displaced by engagement with people and structures
> Reference to social systems and environments is displaced by references to engaging people and structures.

It is possible to interpret these changes in a number of ways, reflecting changing aspirations and professional discourses. For example, the terminology reflects the jargon of a later decade, such as the references to challenges rather than problems and facilitation and engagement rather than promotion and interaction. It may also be seen as more European and less American, replacing psychology, social systems and environments which are more commonplace in American professional discourse, with acknowledgement of the social cohesion objectives of social work, and mention of the structures and broader social sciences of European and Australasian critical theory discourses (Payne, 2014). It also reflects cultural sensitivity and anti-discrimination discourses, in referring to respect for diversities and indigenous knowledges.

In this way, professional definitions of this kind reflect current professional discourses, rather than a settled identity. In a comprehensive literature review of the identity of social work written for a Scottish government review of the future of the social work profession, Asquith, Clark and Waterhouse (2005) note that such shifts in professional discourse reflect changes in philosophies of service provision which in turn affect how the profession is perceived, rather than changes in identity of the profession. Their analysis suggests that five service philosophies have interacted to influence the identity of social work:

> Welfarism expresses a policy informed by social democratic paternalism.
> Professionalism stresses the expertise and authority of the professional.
> Consumerism focuses on the power and understanding of the service user as a consumer.
> Managerialism privileges management and economic concerns.
> Participationism stresses a more equal partnership between service provider and service user.

Distinctive characteristics of social work

Although this discussion shows that many different aspects of social work exist and are relevant to understanding its identity in different contexts, there are also some distinctive characteristics of social work that are widespread, even universal, which also apply in Europe. These are as follows:

> All social work involves seeking to improve interpersonal social relations in a society, using interpersonal interactions and usually building relationships between the practitioner, clients and other people involved in the situation.

This characteristic distinguishes social work from criminal justice, education and healthcare, and other services which are focused on other public welfare provision focused on specific areas of human need such as employment, housing and poverty. Those areas of need, and justice educational and health needs often interact with the discontinuities in interpersonal social relations that social work is concerned with, and the social work role often supports criminal justice, education, employment, health, housing and social security objectives. The objective of securing improved social relations and the methodology of interpersonal interactions and relationships distinguishes social work from these other services. Counselling and psychological help is similar, but is focused in individual problems, and focuses on an individual client, rather than having the interpersonal and social relations focus of social work.

> All social work is based on humanistic values, respect for and implementation of human rights and a concern for social justice between individuals and between groups in the population.

Humanistic values include a belief that human knowledge and understanding through investigation, observation and research underlie the human capacity to manage human lives and the environment to survive and improve human and social life. So, human beings can use their capacity to explore and understand the world to improve it, themselves and their relationships. Consequently, we should preserve and enhance human lives and relationships; all human lives and relationships, not just some. Social work incorporates all these assumptions into its practice: you could not engage in social work if you did not believe in the human capacity to improve itself through intervention, and the right of people to attempt to do so.

> Social work is usually undertaken as part of multiprofessional services involved healthcare, education and other public service professions.

The focus on social relations and the method of interpersonal interaction and relationship means that social work does not have the expertise and focus on specific needs in other areas of people's lives to resolve problems of justice, education, health, housing and poverty. It therefore needs to work in alliance with other services and profession, but it claims that those professions cannot do their work fully without engaging the social work focus on improving human interaction and social relations.

In most countries, and in most kinds of social work, women practitioners are in the majority, and the people that they work with are usually also the female members of the family.

The emphasis on female participation recognises that, in most cultures, women take the responsibility for maintaining and developing social relations and respond to that responsibility: more women are interested in doing the work, and more women are the focus of these concerns. This recognition has a price, however. First, it reflects the exclusion or avoidance of responsibility for social relations among many men in many cultures. Thus, women are forced or expected to take more of this responsibility and bear more of the burden of failures in social relations. They also bear more of the burden of economic failure or war. Second, it may be a weakness of the emphasis in social work on women bearing the main burden of responsibility in social relations in many cultures, that women mainly continue to work with women, and do not take up the possibility of engaging men appropriately in these issues.

Social work is often part of a welfare state, that is, a nation state that makes a substantial commitment to the individual and interpersonal welfare of its citizens, as part of a responsibility for social cohesion, as opposed simply to public security, policing, defence, interstate relations and economic development.

Historically, social work emerged alongside other social provision as states took on more responsibility for personal and collective welfare of their populations. In some countries where there are fewer economic resources for this purpose or there is no cultural assumption that states will accept this responsibility, social work is less prominent. It is not clear that it is a necessary part of human societies. Although all societies have charities, or cultural assumptions about the social responsibilities of families and communities for personal and social relations, social work is not always present or apparently necessary as part of such provision. This was true in formerly communist regimes in Europe, which assumed that among other things workplace welfare and broad social services would play a major role in supporting families and communities rather than the interpersonal help of social work.

Social work is usually part of a public welfare provision that involves aspirations for collective social development integrated with and pursued through concern and care for individuals in difficulties or requiring personal development, as opposed to education aimed primarily at supporting the economy.

In some societies, development work is primarily focused on economic development rather than broad social and human development allied with individual help.

Social work is part of internationally shared trends in social policy in responding to social problems.

At times of major social and political change and where there is political and social violence, individual welfare needs have often generated forms of social work (Ramon, 2008; Lavalette and Ioakimidis, 2011). For example, former soviet states moved quickly to develop social work after the collapse of communist regimes in the 1990s.

Conclusion: defending and contributing to social work's identity

I have argued that the identity of social work is complex, comprising different elements. Its diverse characteristics are part of a continuing discourse within the social work profession and more broadly within the societies in which it operates. It is an oversimplification to demand a single unified identity, even though there are significant shared elements of social work. Saying that there is a single social work denies real diversities and means that we fail to learn from these diversities. Public perceptions in different countries and cultures and varying perceptions among the many professions that social work interacts and overlaps with mean that in practice and in our professional discourses we should acknowledge, value, research and work on our diversities, rather than seek an unrealistic security in a single identity.

There are difficulties for any social group in just seeking to defend a single, uncomplicated identity. In changing societies it is inevitable that the identity of a complex social entity will also change. If we simply seek to defend a past or existing singular identity, social workers will increasingly face rising distortions of the reality of change by trying to maintain unchanging identities (Mattelart, Delcourt, and Mattelart, 1984). It is better to seek, through interaction with other interests, to guide the direction of change that is inevitable.

Trying to defend existing aspirations without reference to service ideologies or social realities means that we cannot interact with and influence external realities. It means that we may defend an existing cultural style that is being displaced in society, in the way that paternalistic welfarism is being changed by managerialism and participationism. We can continue to adapt welfarism by seeking effective management and participation: developing welfare in this way does not reject it, but improves it, and allows welfare concerns to influence management and participation. Trying to defend an existing identity may also mask advantages that other interests may gain from that identity. For example, if we claim that social work aims to promote family relationships through positive welfare services, we make it more difficult for social work also to act to remove children from abusing families. Instead of advancing the welfare credentials of social work, we strengthen critics of social work 'softness' in the face of the obvious need to act to defend children by robust action. Defending a current perception of social work may allow an alternative tyranny to the one we are concerned about. So if we defend a family-focused social work to avoid too much focus on removing children from families, we create a dysfunctional child protection system which then leads to an unsatisfactory risk-averse bureaucracy. It is always better to recognise the realities of the social requirements of social work, and create through our discourse an identity that recognises that reality.

The social work profession, and particularly within it those concerned with social work education can make an important contribution to generating an effective discourse about social work's identity. We need to recognise and transfer into the mainstream specialist knowledges, so that they can influence the overall identity of social work. For example, we can learn things for all social work from the human skills developed in palliative care social work that helps people to cope with a death in a family. Similarly, we can adapt specialist languages so that they inform all of social work, not just the professional expertise in which they arise. We can value the locally and culturally distinct, so that they can be taken account

of in our practice, rather than being dismissed in an inappropriately limited universal model of knowledge. Through research and education, we can explore how multiple identities may interact and generate a more reflexive and progressive practice. In doing so, we can present the reality of our practice and our professional aspirations in ways that the public, our clients and decision- and policy-makers can understand and incorporate into social expectations of our profession and our services.

Social work in Europe does not need to defend *an* identity, it needs to work to create a range of identities relevant to the social circumstances that we face, and social work education and research is needed to contribute to that work.

Acknowledgement

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