

EXAMINING PRACTICE APPROACHES



# Evaluating Alternative Approaches to Social Work: A Critical Review of the Strengths Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides students and practitioners with a framework for assessing new or alternative approaches to social work practice. Drawing on the work of Sibeon (1990), I examine approaches to social work theory, the nature of social work, and the relationship between theory and practice; and present a typology for the assessment of social work theory. I look at the strengths perspective in social work (SPSW) (Saleebey, 1997) as an example of an alternative approach and critique it against Sibeon's (1990) typology and in light of two influential debates that have influenced discussions about the nature of social work, namely, welfarism and post-modernism. The article concludes that a framework for assessment enables critical analysis and reflection of different practice theories. Further, it allows for the review of established theory and practice assumptions and the degree to which alternative assumptions challenge or support existing approaches.

The importance of integrating theory with practice within health and social care has gained increasing currency, particularly with reference to evidence-based practice and the concept of reflective practice—the implication being that student and practitioner need to be able to demonstrate their use of research and theory respectively in practice. However, the increasing reliance on procedures and outcome measures in health and social care may inadvertently lead to *more* routinized practice as they are seen to strip out the “welfare ideals in the process” (Jones, 2001, p. 552). This may lead to practitioners feeling less able to consider alternative approaches to practice as they are seen to lie outside the domain of a prescribed procedure. In other words, it may be *safer* to stick with the routine rather than take a chance on something new as an alternative approach (See Adams, 2002; Jordan, 2001).

Sibeon's (1990) typology acts as a powerful counterforce to this tendency because it can encourage reflective and critical thought about key questions concerning contemporary social work practice. Using the typology as an assessment framework, the student social worker and practitioner are encouraged to think critically about different approaches and the questions they raise and hence begin the process of bridging the gap between theory and practice. The strengths perspective in social work (SPSW) (Saleebey, 1997), is presented as a challenging alternative approach to practice, for as Saleebey asserted, it represents “... a dramatic departure from conventional social work practice ... predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore and exploit clients' strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals ...” (Saleebey, 1997, p. 3). It marks a shift away from

a problem focus to one that is possibility focused and therefore challenges social work's historical overreliance on clients' deficiencies and problems. It is a collaborative process between the service user and the worker, allowing them to work together to determine an outcome that draws on the service user's strengths and assets.

### Assessing the Utility of SPSW

Assessing the validity or utility of any approach or perspective in social work involves a consideration of pivotal interrelated issues and debates concerning inter alia questions about the nature of social work, which in turn gives rise to theories on how to do social work, which then leads to debates about theories of the client world. These three themes draw on the work of Sibeon (1990), who provided a typology that can be used as a beginning guide to assessing theories about the nature of social work. The term theory is used here to describe "a framework of understanding" (Thompson, 1995), and that part of that framework is an attempt to provide an explanation about a particular phenomenon. Used in this context, theory provides, at least in part, an explanation about the nature of social work and the resultant views that stem from different perspectives. To begin the process of assessing the utility of the SPSW, I draw on the themes identified by Sibeon (1990).

### The Nature of Social Work

In Britain and most other parts of the Western world, possibly with the exception of Australia, the development of social work is inextricably linked to the development of welfare, specifically government social welfare policy and social service provision. Therefore, debates about the nature of social work arise first and foremost from the way in which the nature and purpose of welfare is defined. The SPSW proposes that the purpose of welfare is "client enablement" (Saleebey, 1997, p. 3), that is, assisting individuals, families, and communities to achieve their goals. Such an approach has its origins in a concept of welfare that supports liberal, social democratic principles based on individualism and participation. The SPSW, therefore, supports a central value in social work education, namely, the pursuit of social justice or social equality and the promotion of social cohesion. (Social justice therefore supports the development of social equality through developing a sense of equal membership and belonging in society; Jordan, 2001).

### Theories of "How to Do" Social Work

The SPSW concerns itself principally with the quality of the relationship which develops between the worker and the client (whether an individual, group, or community).

How to do social work from a strengths perspective is, therefore, based on reflexive-therapeutic principles of intervention. Thus the emphasis is placed on the social worker to "seek the best possible well-being for individuals, groups and communities, by promoting and facilitating growth and self-fulfilment" (Payne, 1997 p. 4). How to practice from a strengths perspective requires a formal knowledge of the "lexicon of strengths" (Saleebey, 1997, p. 8), based on an appreciation of the individual, family, or community, which translates into key skills necessary for professional intervention.

### Theories of the Client World

Theories (and understanding) of the client world are gleaned first and foremost from the clients themselves. The reflexive-therapeutic relationship allows clients to tell their story and engage in the revelation of their strengths with the support of the worker. Clients (whether individuals, groups, or communities) are assumed experts in their own lives. They are encouraged and supported by the worker to tell their story, which then forms the basis for collaborative work between the client and the worker. Reliance on traditional formal theories of the client world, which are concerned merely with diagnostic categories, such as psychoanalytic perspectives, only serves to perpetuate the myth of the worker as expert and thus stigmatize the client. From the strengths perspective, the client and the social worker become collaborative partners rather than oppositional forces in an unequal power relationship, in which the social worker is presumed to be the expert.

Saleebey asserted that the SPSW is a radical departure from social work's long affiliation with client pathology. For Jones (2002) and Powell (2001), social work's association with client pathology goes back to its Victorian roots and the development of Britain's Charity Organisation Society (COS) of 1869 and the establishment of the American COS in 1877. Even though an alternative welfare practice sprang up, based on principles of social reform (i.e., the settlement movement), "social work as a conservative welfare" (Jones, 2002, p. 44) remained a powerful perspective and eventually became the preferred dominant perspective in state welfare. Thus the SPSW seeks to shift away from social work's long reliance on the assessment of what is wrong and instead seeks to shift toward a focus on clients' account of themselves, especially on their strengths, goals, aspirations, hopes, and dreams. If we want to assess the utility of the SPSW, we can begin by examining it in relation to the typology presented earlier (which I have done) and then critically evaluate it in relation to the views we hold about the nature of social work. We can then see how far the SPSW offers an alternative approach to our current practice and theory assumptions. Sibeon's (1990) typology provides a useful template for evaluating

alternative perspectives, because it allows social workers to reengage in critical dialogue about their role and purpose in society.

## Debates About the Nature of Social Work

Debates about the nature of social work have always taken place in a contested arena. As we have seen, such debates inform our view of how to do social work, which in turn informs views about theories and ideas about the client world. Two significant debates that have had an impact on contemporary discussions about the nature of social work have been critiques of welfarism and postmodern analyses on contemporary social work. It is these two issues that I now assess and contrast with the strengths perspective to assess its utility in contemporary social work practice.

## Critiques of Welfarism

I have described the nature of social work from a strengths perspective as located in the domain of “welfarism” (Parton, 1996) or “welfare collectivism” (Howe, 1996), which grew out of the project of modernity and the pursuit for social and economic progress. Welfarism can be described as a belief in the legitimacy of the state to provide welfare for its citizens to curb the worst excesses of 19th-century British industrialization. Hence, social work, along with other social welfare regulators, such as the family, schools, hospitals, and prisons, was supported by the state to “discipline and regulate social life” (Howe, 1996, p. 77). Such concerns were precipitated by a growing awareness “that the impact of an unregulated liberal economic market was producing poverty, degradation and despair on a massive scale” (Howe, 1996, p. 79). The role of the state in welfare was predicated, therefore, on a belief in the legitimacy of capitalism and the prevailing social order. Most crucially, however, the state had an obligation to safeguard the needs of its most vulnerable members and to support them in their pursuit of personal and social well-being. Thus modernists believed that state welfarism was initiated in order to re-embed the individual (back) into the social order and promote social cohesion (i.e., social regulation), while at the same time curb the excesses of unbridled individualism through the concept of discipline or compliance to the dominant social order. Taken together, this would carry the masses through modernity’s quest for social and economic progress for all. Social work, as the chief example of state welfarism, was based on the dual and ambiguous premise of a belief in the social order and the promotion of social justice, through its commitment to the vulnerable.

Attacks against welfarism have been initiated by those on the left and right of the political spectrum. However, I believe that attacks from the right have had the most significant impact on welfare outcomes in British social work,

and that they are, therefore, pivotal to the current context of social work practice in the United Kingdom.

## Antiwelfarism: The New Right perspective

George and Wilding (1985) described the rise of the New Right’s attacks on state welfare as stemming from the ideology of anticollectivism. Based primarily on the thinking of Hayek and Friedman, in Britain anticollectivist ideology was most strongly espoused by the Thatcher-led New Right Conservative government elected in 1979. Anticollectivists do not see the development of social policy as fundamental to the development of capitalism or indeed social stability. In fact, an extended role for the state in welfare is seen as fundamentally threatening to the economic and social well-being of a free market economy. In their view, the welfare state has developed out of the misguided efforts of individuals and groups to remedy particular social problems. Thus anticollectivists are critical of state welfare collectivism because “social services were instituted for benevolent purposes, meeting social needs, compensating socially caused ‘diswelfares’ and promoting social justice” (Parton, 1996, p.8). For anticollectivists, short-term solutions were developed with little consideration for their consequences or supposed long-term benefits. Their antagonism toward state welfare stems from the three core values of liberalism (that is, a belief in an unbridled free market) or anticollectivism, namely, freedom of choice, or liberty; individualism; and inequality.

Liberty and individualism are seen as complementary to one another; neither can exist without the other. “A free society ... will promote individualism, and a strong sense of individualism makes unnecessary or impossible large scale state intervention or coercion” (George and Wilding, 1985, p. 21). Inequality in turn is promoted above social equality since the latter is incompatible with the core value of freedom. Equality is only favored when espoused within civil and political rights, or what Hayek describes as “the general rules of law and conduct” (cited by George and Wilding, 1985, p. 23).

For anticollectivists, freedom of choice refers to the right of the individual to choose his or her lifestyle largely free from state control. However, such choices take place within the existing economic and social order (i.e., capitalism). Due to the nature of capitalism, inequalities are inevitable, but they are also productive because they breed innovation. The lack of (state) coercion promotes individualism, whereby one is free to follow the path of deviance or compliance to the dominant social order. Individuals can thus work hard or otherwise, but should not expect the state to bail them out. In other words, individuals are free to do as they choose, so long as they do not transgress the law. From this perspective, social problems become the result of individual pathology or deviance, rather than located in the structure of an unregulated free society. As George and

Wilding (1985) state, the anticollectivists' adherence to their three core values and their belief in the spontaneous order of a free market economy mean that their attitude toward a developed role for the state in welfare is one of fundamental hostility. In their view, in trying to promote social justice, the welfare state has inadvertently helped to promote conflict of interest and is potentially destabilizing to the social and political order of a free market economy. Welfarism has thus stifled initiative, induced dependency, and demonstrated itself to be inefficient and ineffective in its aims (Allen, 1981; Fischer, 1978).

Parton (1994) saw the rise of New Right ideologies across North America and Britain, and the attacks against state welfarism in particular, as corresponding to economic and social concerns that become increasingly dominant from the mid-1970s onward. He cites the economic difficulties in Britain as encompassing a concern about a slowdown in economic growth, alongside an increase in inflation, rapidly rising unemployment, and spiraling costs of maintaining public services.

The rediscovery of poverty and significant areas of continued and growing social deprivation; the growth of violence in terms of crime, trade union militancy and social indiscipline generally; a decline in individual responsibility and attachments to the traditional nuclear family; and a failure of the various "social sciences" and the various modern experts who operated them to contribute to social well-being. (Parton, 1994, p.23)

Against this backdrop, the attacks against welfarism and its so-called modern experts, particularly social workers, were perhaps unsurprising, since they were seen to personify all that was problematic in welfare (Parton, 1994). Crucially, however, for anticollectivists the economic and the social still remain fused. However, in contrast to welfarism, where state intervention is seen as necessary and desirable for the maintenance and progress of the social order, anticollectivists see the individual as the lynchpin to social and economic progress. The New Right attacks on welfare were a dramatic shift away from social democratic principles based on collective responsibility in favor of individual responsibility, based on self-reliance, traditional family types, and the free market—what can be described as "restructured marketised welfare" (Stepney, 2000, p.9). Furthermore, such attacks on state welfare were based on a fundamental rejection of what had been considered a universal principle in welfare, namely, the pursuit of social justice, or social equality, and the rejection in social work of the reflexive-therapeutic relationship.

Within Britain, local authorities have been the major employers of social workers. Social work has, therefore, increasingly operated under the auspices of anticollectivist ideology and the organizational and practice structures that have developed to ensure its operation. This is evi-

denced by a growing trend of "aggressive" managerialism (Jones, 2001) and the creation of a contract culture in both child care and adult services. "The contract culture commonly displays deep-seated features of self-interest and individualism which are antithetical to mutual help, collaboration and cooperation" (Adams, 2002, p.252). In addition, the structure of social work practice has been increasingly shaped by prescriptive procedures and policies and adherence to performance targets which again undermine the therapeutic relationship. (Stepney, 2000). Educationally, social work has been pushed toward the demonstration of assessed occupational standards, which attracts the same criticisms that competency approaches have aroused. (Adams, 2002). Taken together these approaches are less concerned with process (and therefore the relationship between worker and service user) and more concerned with desired outcomes. Thus practice becomes amenable to performance measurements, which "seek to establish routines, standardised practices and predictable task environments. It is antithetical to depth explanations, professional discretion, creative practice and tolerance of complexity and uncertainty" (Howe, 1996, p. 92). Adams (2002) echoes these concerns with his observations that the current focus on performance indicators may actually undermine "the theory-based and value-driven aspects of critically reflective and progressive practice" (Adams, 2002, p. 250). Nevertheless, the practice of social work continues to remain in an ambiguous position since a basic tenet of its education and training is premised on the value position of promoting social justice.

I have suggested that the New Right attacks on welfarism have had the most significant impact on welfare since they have culminated in a dismantling of the welfare state in favor of alternative forms based on the promotion of individual responsibility and self-discipline, accountability, and the reappraisal of the traditional nuclear family, alongside the promotion of the marketplace as the key site for welfare provision. The nature of contemporary British social work has, therefore, been transformed, particularly over the past decade, thanks to the rise of neoliberal market principles and an educational trend toward anti-intellectualism.

### Progressive Attacks on Welfarism

The term *progressive* is used to refer to those perspectives that are critical of both welfarism and anticollectivism but that express concern about the failure of welfare services and social workers to achieve social justice for service users. Progressive is clearly a value-laden term, suggesting that such a perspective is better than, say, an anticollectivist perspective. However, this term is used widely to support social reform in favor of increasing social equality for marginalized and disadvantaged groups and individuals. The term acknowledges the range of debates concerned about welfare's shortcomings, from those that adopt a

humanistic perspective and attempt to affirm the creativity of actors or people and who place the individual or people above or before the social structure (such as the SPSW), to those that emphasize the power of society in shaping people's lives (such as structuralist and antioppressive practice perspectives). For the sake of simplicity, we can define such debates as progressive, because they are concerned with both individual and social progress. Progressive perspectives, then, encompass not only approaches concerned with piecemeal social reform that favor an individual focus but equally those that focus predominantly on critical and radical structural social analysis.

Thus, neoliberals and anticollectivists are not the only ones who have initiated attacks on welfarism. The attacks have also come from those who would not align themselves with the political Right. Thus critiques of welfarism come from critical and radical perspectives and encompass feminist and antiracist groups and other oppressed group perspectives such as the disabled people's movement and service user groups, as well as those critical of professional elitism. Such perspectives have "challenged the profoundly antidemocratic and unaccountable model of state welfare professionalism which (has) flourished under social democracy" (Jones, 1996, p. 202).

Progressive critiques of state welfarism have pointed to its focus on the individual at the expense of the social structure that continues to perpetuate economic and social inequalities. State social work has stood accused of, at best, patronizing and victimizing people, and, at worst, anthologizing the individual, reflecting the views of dominant interest groups, and maintaining the status quo. In turn, this has resulted in the continued stigmatizing, discrimination, and marginalization of individuals and various groups within society. Thus social work is criticized for failing to address the needs of its varied service users, namely, ethnic minority groups, older people, the poor, women, and people with disabilities. (Ahmad, 1990; Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995; Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Dominelli, 1988; Dominelli & McCleod, 1989; Langan & Day, 1992; Oliver, 1990; 1996). Although progressive attacks encompass a range of strategies to challenge both individual and structural inequality, they are all united in their criticism of state welfarism and social work's failure to promote and achieve social justice for its service users. To fully understand progressive critiques against welfarism,

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it could be argued that they seek to supplant individual-reformist perspectives on the nature of social work with socialist-collectivist perspectives.

### **Individualist-Reformist Perspectives**

We have seen that neoliberal and New Right perspectives are based on principles of anticollectivism that support a theory of the nature of social work based on individualist-reformist principles (Payne, 1997). Such a perspective focuses on the protection of political rights, the promotion of social conduct (i.e., compliance to the dominant social order), and the promotion of forms of self-reliance. It conforms to a neoliberal model of welfare provision to have

individual welfare needs met predominantly within the marketplace, thus allowing for the exercise of freedom of choice. From this perspective, social work interventions, or theories of how to do social work, are focused on the attributes of the individual, and the practice methodology is concerned with "enabling personal adjustment and coping" (Fook, 1993, cited in

Payne, 1997, p. 229). Services are provided on the basis of individual assessed need and provided within the mixed economy of care. The relationship between professional worker and service user shifts from "a therapeutic alliance to one based on a contractual relationship (where) all parties...know who they (are) and the nature of their dealings with one another" (Howe, 1994, p. 528). Self-reliance is promoted by positioning the service user as an equal player in the contractual relationship. There is dual responsibility between worker and service user for the provision of services based on assessed need and a shift away from collective responsibilities toward individual ones. The contractual relationship is further underscored by the promotion of terminology, such as partnership, participation, and empowerment. Such terms are selectively used in the promotion of the core values of individualism and liberty.

From an anticollectivist perspective, theories of the client world fall into two long-standing traditions within social work: the deserving and undeserving client. Methods of intervention for the former rest on adjustment and coping with their changed circumstances, for example, disability and ill health; however, for the latter (i.e., offenders and those deviant to the dominant norms of behavior, for example, young single mothers), the emphasis shifts to

the deviant behavior, or “act” (Cohen, 1895, cited in Howe, 1994, p. 527). Contemporary practice demands the individual change their behavior, “not by curing faulty minds, (i.e., the therapeutic), but by showing obedience (to dominant norms of behaviour). Change ... is to be achieved by external compliance and not by internal insight. The disobedient are required simply to conform” (Howe, 1994, p. 527). The emphasis remains on compliance to the dominant social order and the promotion of self-discipline and reliance. Here the contractual relation is even more important. In contrast to the deserving, where the contract is the key site for promoting the individual’s political rights, the contract for the undeserving serves the purpose of drawing the individual back into compliance with the social order and its tenets.

### **Socialist-Collectivist Perspectives**

In contrast to the New Right attacks against state welfare, progressive critiques against welfarism emphasize the nature of welfare as based on socialist-collectivist principles, and that social work should be concerned with supporting “the most oppressed and disadvantaged people gain power over their own lives” (Payne, 1997, p. 4). Social work is seen as an activity concerned with the promotion of social justice through “seeking cooperation and mutual support in society” (Payne, 1997, p. 4). Since progressive critiques take in a range of political strategies, the nature of society ranges from a consensual structuralist perspective, which views the nature of social work as based primarily on advocacy, to critical perspectives that adopt a more conflict-orientated analysis of society and promote the role of social work as something more adversarial. Social change is seen as a necessary precursor for social progress.

Theories of how to do social work need to recognize the conflict inherent in contemporary society revealed through structural inequalities and dominant interest groups and their prevailing ideologies. Social conflict is therefore inevitable, but rather than pathologize the individual through the discourse of the *care-control* dichotomy, critical analysis of the social structure reveals this to be the major site for exploration. Methods of intervention, or theories of how to do social work, range from those that stress the importance of the reflexive-therapeutic relationship to those that seek to make links between individuals and their circumstances and the wider social structure. Thus the disabled people’s movement has been instrumental in radicalizing and politicizing the needs of people with disabilities, pointing to the social structures that continue to “dis-able” people with impairments. Social work with people with impairments should adopt the social model of disability, rather than traditional individualized methods of intervention that focus on the person’s disability as the key defining problem. More critical perspectives see social work action as

based on socialist-collectivist strategies, which emphasize the empowerment of people “to take part in a process of learning and cooperation which create institutions which all can own and participate in” (Payne, 1997, p. 4).

Socialist-collectivist perspectives emphasize theories of the client world that draw on critical sociological and psychological texts that highlight structural inequalities and shift the emphasis from commonsense perspectives to critical analysis. Equally, progressive perspectives have constructed their criticisms around antiprofessionalism, and they have called for oppressed user group involvement in the design and delivery of services and for their voice to be used in the construction of theory and practice in social work (Beresford, 2000; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Increasingly, theories of the client world are informed not only by experts (e.g., academics and social workers) but by oppressed user groups themselves. Thus, the ubiquitous concepts of empowerment, partnership, and collaboration rise again, but this time they are used in relation to the pursuit of individual and collective social justice.

### **Where Does the SPSW Lie?**

The SPSW can be said to lie within progressive critiques of welfarism based on antiprofessionalism and social work’s long affiliation and focus on personal pathologies and the victimization of clients. As an alternative to the deficit perspective, the lexicon of the SPSW contains possibilities, resilience, resources, transformation, and hope. It is premised on the belief in collaboration, partnership, and empowerment (Saleebey, 1997). It requires skills in “dialogue and collaboration” and “the suspension of disbelief” (pp. 10–11) of social workers’ persistent negation of clients’ views in favor of “the expert” view, acquired through professional education and training and reliance on traditional formal and informal theories of the client world. Accepting that progressive attacks against welfarism take in a range of perspectives that concentrate more or less on the relationship between the individual and a critical structural analysis, the SPSW can be seen to focus most clearly on the individual as the most potent force for social change. I have already described the nature of social work from a strengths perspective and the resultant views about “how to do” social work and its views about the client world. Before evaluating the validity of the SPSW, I consider the influence of postmodern analyses that has gained increasing ascendancy in debates about the nature of contemporary social work practice.

### **Postmodern Social Work?**

“The over-riding belief in reason and rationality is disappearing as there is a collapse of consensus related to the ‘grand-narratives’ and their articulation of progress, emancipation and perfection and what constitutes the

centres of authority and truth.” (Parton, 2002, p. 240). The rejection of metanarratives and universal claims to truth become “de-centered” and fragmented and increasingly jostle with socially constructed truths, which are seen as relative and contingent and vary according to place, time, and context and the (poststructural) concept of discourse. Such concerns are highlighted as characteristic features of the shift from modernity, as summarized by Parton (2002), to a postmodern analysis. In the last 10 years, postmodern analyses have increasingly been applied to questions about the nature of social work and practice. (Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994; Leonard, 1997; O’Brien & Penna, 1998; Pease & Fook, 1999; Healy, 2000; Parton & O’Byrne, 2000).

Howe (1994) and Parton (1994) take these postmodern characteristics, apply them to contemporary social work, and suggest that social work is increasingly characterized by pluralism, fragmentation, and challenges to its authority, as the concepts of *professional* and *expert* become de-cen-

How to do social work from a strengths perspective is...based on reflexive-therapeutic principles of intervention.

tered. The structure and organization of British social work has been challenged and has become increasingly fragmented by the advance of postmodernism. However, both their accounts have been challenged by the work of Smith and White (1997), who were critical of their analysis and the downplaying of anti-intellectualism and the New Right attacks on British social work. For Smith and White (1997), these changes have less to do with a postmodern emphasis on pluralism and fragmentation and more to do with attacks against social democratic principles in favor of neoliberalism. Such a political position (i.e., neoliberalism) is firmly located in modernist thinking. Drawing on the work of Taylor-Gooby (1994) and Norris (1993), they argued that “post-modernism cannot but fail to recognise the significance of the economic, political and social context in which social work has developed” (Smith & White, 1997, p. 284). The rejection of metanarratives, that is, grand or major theories as a key feature of postmodernism, is further dismissed when one considers the growing trend toward economic liberalism, which Taylor-Gooby expressed as the “nearest approximation to a universal theme in world affairs” (cited in Smith & White, 1997, p. 284). Thus neoliberalism and its attacks against welfare have brought “financial constraint, the privatisation of services ... moves toward the deregulation of labour markets and the increased inequality between population groups that is evident in many countries, especially in the UK” (p. 284). Agreeing with Smith and White (1997), it is difficult to see the challenges to

contemporary social work as most significantly arising from postmodernism.

*Postwelfarism* provides a more useful way of describing the changes that have characterized contemporary social work practice over the past decade (Hugman, 2001). Such a term acknowledges the criticisms that have been leveled against welfarism by the New Right and perhaps more so the concerns of the progressive critiques against state welfarism.

While progressive attacks have emphasized a social justice perspective in social work, and sought ways in which to pursue this (modernist) ideal, the postmodern rejection of metanarratives (or grand theories in favor of pluralism and relativism) may only serve to undermine this ideal. In

a later work, Parton (2002) acknowledged the concerns of Smith and White (1997) and an uncritical acceptance of postmodernism. Drawing on the work of Rosenau (1992), Parton (2002) suggested instead that while postmodernism “cannot offer truth, it is not without content” (p.

242). In other words, a postmodern analysis can still be used in pursuit of the progressive ideals of greater social equality and integration. It is possible to acknowledge progressive critiques of state welfarism and adopt some of its central concepts in pursuit of promoting greater social justice. The concepts of say, partnership, collaboration, and empowerment (which have also been adopted by neoliberalism, but used to bolster a notion of welfare based on anticollectivist principles) are now used progressively as a means of promoting greater involvement for oppressed user groups to define their own needs. Thus the terms *diversity*, *pluralism*, and the *value of relativism* are used progressively in a discourse between worker and service user that acknowledges the power relations enmeshed in their relationship. This demands that social workers engage in a reflexive dynamic with the service user that acknowledges the discourse of professional expertise, their knowledge, and the assessment focus that has most often negated, minimized, or even denied the discourse of the service user or oppressed user group. Allowing service users to name their own needs and ascribe their own identities shifts the focus from just welfare needs to the progressive movement’s wider objective—the promotion of civil rights and citizenship and the pursuit of social justice and equality (see Wilson & Beresford, 2000).

My argument is that it is not postmodernism that has increasingly shaped statutory social services and the role and practice of social work, but the attacks against welfarism. Most significantly in terms of structure, organization,

education, and practice, these changes have been shaped by New Right attacks against state welfare. The profound influence of anticollectivist ideology in British social work has successfully repopularized the concept of common sense (expressed as anti-intellectualism) at the expense of critical analysis and assessment. The confusion and despondency alluded to by Howe (1994) and Parton (1994) have less to do with postmodern intrusion than with the successful implementation of anticollectivist welfare. Social work has always been characterized by uncertainty and contradiction, but the drive for quick fixes and reducing complex social and emotional difficulties down to scapegoats and prescriptions lays bare the emphasis on anticollectivism and the rejection of critical analysis.

However, progressive attacks have also pointed to the importance of the relationship between the worker and *the other* and demonstrated social work to be steeped in traditional concepts of *expert* and *client pathology*, and the overreliance on expert knowledge of the other alongside an uncritical acceptance of the universalizing of client needs. This has resulted in reducing service user identities to essentialist categories such as the disabled, the elderly, and the young offender, which has led to continued stigmatization, labeling, marginalization, and discrimination of the other. Oppressed user groups are critical of the assumed status of the expert and have also pointed to the failure of the expert to promote social justice for service users. Instead, oppressed user groups point to arguments of inclusion rather than exclusion of the other and the need for their participation and empowerment based on their own identified needs. Both New Right and progressive attacks are located in the modernist tradition, and while the latter's critique may share some characteristics commonly associated with postmodernist perspectives, a postmodern analysis of contemporary social work practice is misplaced. As demonstrated, progressive perspectives do not rest on an uncritical belief in universal progress based on commonality of experience but instead locate themselves within a critical discourse of diversity and difference.

Diversity (or managing diverse needs) has been seen largely as unproblematic by welfare organizations and has tended to be used to promote individual need to allow minorities to reach the status of the majority (Williams, 1996). Such an uncritical stance has rightly been criticized by progressives as representing universalism and relying on essentialist or reductionist categories of the other, as well as presenting a consensual view of majorities. Instead, the concept of *difference* more readily acknowledges the multidimensional effects of discrimination and marginalization and recognizes the differential impact of discrimination. However, it must not be assumed that this represents a slide into a postmodern discourse.

Modernity has always provoked criticism, both reactionary (as a wish to maintain the status quo) and critical. As an example, Williams (1996) cites feminism as arising

out of the Enlightenment and women's attempts to be seen as *equal* to men (i.e., universalizing of women's and men's experience) and their claims for political and civil rights to be *included*. At the same time, feminism also provided a powerful critique of modernity's assertion of *truth* and pointed to the *social* construction of knowledge, which from a feminist perspective, was literally *man* made. Like Wagner (1994), the progressive social movements may represent instead the third crisis in modernity, as society is challenged to critically pursue one of its central aims: the pursuit of social justice. Social work is clearly implicated in this crisis.

The dominance of world capitalism and hence its globalization have seen progressive attacks against welfarism linked with broader social movements (Hugman, 2001). Together, these have pointed to the uneven and unequal nature of globalization, which has not resulted in a significant improvement in a vast number of people's lives. Thus criticisms of modernity do not lead to an automatic stance of postmodernism, but can instead provide fertile ground for critical and progressive debate concerned with addressing persistent and deep-rooted inequalities. Thus, like Giddens (1990; 1991), postmodernity may be more accurately expressed as late or high modernity.

### Evaluating the SPSW—How Different Is It?

Saleebey (1997) described the SPSW as a rejection of the disease paradigm that has plagued the helping professions, a shift away from social work's long preoccupation with human failing. In this respect, it can be described as a paradigmatic shift, since it rejects a long-standing tradition within social work—the emphasis on deficits as the defining feature of the client.

As identified, the SPSW is part of the progressive movement against welfarism, which takes in a range of perspectives and political strategies designed to promote greater social equality for its protagonists. Within Britain, however, such debates have also been long established as part of the critical debate about social work theory and practice, and they go back more than four decades (see Adams, 2002, p. 255). Such approaches have not only focused on a critical structural analysis but have also acknowledged process as part of the dynamic. (See Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995; Dalrymple & Burke, 1995; and Adams, 2003.) The debate about social work and social exclusion and poverty (Barry & Hallet, 1998; Percy-Smith, 2002; Powell, 2001) also demonstrates a progressive commitment to challenging the traditional overreliance on the individual as the main site for political intervention and change. Research and development perspectives (Cheetham, Fuller, McIvor, & Petch, (1992); Everitt & Hardiker, 1996) have also looked toward participatory approaches with service users and their involvement in service planning and delivery, as has the progressive movement (Beresford & Croft, 1993; 1995).

Challenges to traditional approaches to social work education and surface learning are also exemplified by the work of Howe (1996) and Jones (1996). So, how far does the SPSW challenge our views about the nature of contemporary of social work? Does it add anything more to progressive debates about the nature of social work and challenges to traditional and commonsense perspectives in social work theory and practice, or is it an example of the emperor's new clothes?

The SPSW demonstrates itself best in the development of practice skills that shift the focus from client deficits and pathologies to strengths and the articulation of the individual's or community's goals. The case study below highlights an example of the use of the strengths perspective undertaken by a student social worker while on placement and discussed in the classroom as an aid to group learning.

One student presented a case based on the experience of working with an 85-year-old white English man, with a chronic illness. The service user was identified as experiencing ageism and disabilism, as forms of discrimination that rendered him a burden and in need of long-term residential care. An antiageist and social model of disability (an antidiscriminatory practice perspective) helped the student construct a different view of the service user that was less individually and pathologically biased and instead rooted the challenges of old age and disability as one located in the social structures of society. The strengths perspective was used to counteract a patronizing view of the service user as a victim of ageism and disabilism, and instead the student worked in partnership with the service user to identify his needs and the best way of meeting these. In this example, the service user was able to identify the risk or areas of concerns that were accumulating in his life and thus adding to a concern that he needed to be admitted to long-term care. Instead, the service user identified what resources he needed to maintain an independent lifestyle, where he felt he was in control. His determination to maintain his independence was identified as a strength and a source of resilience that he had developed over time, enhancing his repertoire of coping strategies. These supported and affirmed the service user as competent and able, rather than undermining his self-confidence by focusing on his difficulties. Rather than assuming a traditional view as 'expert' and service provider, the student acted as an advocate for the service user in supporting his needs and advocating for services that allowed the service user to remain at home.

However, solution-focused and brief therapies have long advocated similar principles to those of the strengths perspective. They, too, emphasize the importance of individual resilience and the avoidance of client dependency. Like

all perspectives, then, the SPSW adopts a value position. It is seen as part of good reflective practice, and thus it makes appeals to the supposed integrity of the worker. Saleebey (1997) believed that the shift from a deficit model to an enabling, strengths-based one "will probably not be difficult for many social workers. We are of good heart, after all" (p. 236). Such an uncritical assertion represents what has been termed as social work's "in-house appreciation of itself" (Jones, 2002, p. 42) and has provoked strong criticism, not least from service users who point out, particularly in terms of social workers' professional judgments, that social workers are sometimes far from exemplary in their practice or value orientation.

Notwithstanding, Saleebey's assertion is misplaced on a number of points and leads to some faulty assumptions. First, his comment suggests commonality of perspective and altruistic motives among all social workers—that we are all committed to the same ideals. However, social work is a highly conceptualized activity and, as I have demonstrated, is driven by competing and conflicting debates about its role and purpose. The assumption that there is universal agreement on the role and purpose of social work sets the SPSW as a practice value on which we must all agree and runs the risk of reducing the perspective to the status of dogma. It becomes increasingly difficult to critique and problematize the perspective. Those that do stand in danger of accusations of siding with the oppressor, being part of the problem, and thus rejecting a sacred value. This is, of course, a position that antioppressive practice has been accused of within Britain (see Wilson & Beresford, 2000).

Second, following from this point there is little or no evidence of critical discussion about the nature of strengths. Again, the concept is presented as unproblematic. Strengths are viewed as positive characteristics, forged in adversity and buried under the individual's troubles. Ironically, this does present the individual as a victim, albeit in transition to the status of survivor as their strengths are rediscovered, acknowledged, and developed. Again, there is the assumption that all strengths are positive, uncontroversial, and uncontested. What of those strengths that develop to avoid detection, such as successful offending, that is, not getting caught? Here I am not advocating a position of pure relativism, for clearly social work is concerned with social regulation, and therefore certain value positions will inevitably affect the process. In such cases, social workers will invariably be involved in a conflict of interest about the value of a particular strength, and in the case of statutory social work, the agency perspective will be valued more highly. Furthermore, users of social services, whether through self-referral or third party referral, become users of the service precisely because of a problem, however so defined. Social workers, particularly those employed within local authority agencies, engage in problem-focused work. A focus on the problem does not, however, negate an examination of strengths but perhaps

more so does not lead automatically to an assumption of deficit that reinforces poor or negative self-image or perpetuates the stigmatizing of individuals.

Finally, Saleebey's comments ignore the shameful record of malpractice among social work practitioners, whether they have been overzealous in the exercise of their statutory powers or too reluctant to use them, and the public inquiries into the physical and sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults by social workers. This is surely a salutary reminder that we cannot *assume* a shared and committed value base among social workers, even though this may be an ideal. Values are based on assumptions about how we ought to behave, but the *context* in which values are acted out are not fixed but vary over time and place. In assessing the utility of a value, it is imperative that the concept, in this case, *strengths*, is considered in relation to context and the ideology or beliefs which inform such a concept.

## Conclusion

Drawing on the work of Sibeon (1990), I have demonstrated the importance of a framework for assessing alternative approaches to practice. In this case I have used the strengths perspective in social work, exemplified by the work of Saleebey (1997) as an example that claims a dramatic shift away from a focus on problems and deficits to one that is possibility focused and draws on the service user's identified goals and aspirations. Adopting Sibeon's typology as a framework for assessment allows for critical analysis of alternative approaches and how much they can be included in or challenge established practice and theory repertoire and the assumptions on which they are based. This still makes demands at a value base, but it does not rely on emotional blackmail to convince practitioners to change their practice theory; instead, it relies on critical analysis and reflective practice. Educationally, the framework presented demonstrates the importance of theory to informing practice. The introduction of the 3-year social work degree in the United Kingdom (begun in September 2003) provides a real opportunity for all stakeholders, particularly service users, social workers, and their managers, as well as academics and employers, to reject the anti-intellectual model of education and training that has dominated British social work education for more than a decade. Instead, it provides an opportunity to acknowledge the progressive attacks against welfarism and to start working alongside service users to reflect a practice that acknowledges the conflictual and contextual nature of contemporary social work. We need to engage in political debate about social problems and not just search for quick fixes. The strengths perspective is a laudable one that belongs to an empowerment perspective within social work. It aligns itself with progressive critiques against welfarism and seeks to reinforce principles of social justice and service user involvement in the provision of welfare

based on their identified needs. My main criticism rests on the perspective's overreliance on assumed commonality of values among social workers as a means of generating a commitment to the SPSW. However, the use of Sibeon's (1990) typology as a framework for assessing theories about the nature of social work and resulting practice outcomes allows for a critical consideration of alternative theories and approaches to social work. I have used the example of the SPSW in the hope that this allows and encourages practitioners and students to actively involve themselves in the long-standing debate about the role and nature of contemporary social work provision.

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