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### Researching the history of social work: exposition of a history of the present approach

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# Researching the history of social work: exposition of a history of the present approach

Caroline Skehill

*This paper provides an exposition of Michel Foucault's 'history of the present' in order to make the case for its relevance to the study of social work history. It sets out the general principles underpinning this practice and considers its application to a particular research question relating to history of child welfare and protection social work in the Republic of Ireland. The paper seeks to highlight the challenges involved in its use and illuminate its potential value as an approach for researching the history of social work. It is concluded that this exposition offers one appropriate approach that could be employed within the growing field of social work history research across Europe.*

*Keywords: History; Social Work; Foucault; Archaeology; Genealogy*

## Introduction

My intention in this paper is to provide an exposition of the use of Michel Foucault's 'history of the present' approach as one example of a critical and effective methodology (Dean, 1994) for problematising the nature and form of social work in the present by recourse to its past. The reader's engagement is invited in seeking to uncover an understanding of history which refutes simplistic attempts to offer generalised and myopic explanations of the complex domain of social work in its many forms. This is neither a claim to expertise in relation to Foucault's work or a 'technical' methodological guide. Instead, this article attempts to provide an exposition of use of a history of the present approach from this researcher's experience to date. The discussion is based on research into the history of child protection and welfare social work in the Republic of Ireland. While the process of the historical research is the primary focus of this paper, findings from use of this approach in a history of child protection and welfare in the Republic of Ireland are

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used for illustration. A fuller illumination of the research findings can be found in Skehill (1999, 2003a, 2004, 2005). This paper is structured around the raising of questions, a process consistent with a history of the present.

### Why Foucault?

Foucault's studies were *necessarily* specific; 'I don't speak of societies that have no geography or calendar' (Foucault from 1980, in Faubion, 2002, p. 292). My proposal here is that, in carrying out a range of local studies using such an approach, the possibility for illuminating the constants and the divergences within the complex domains of social work across jurisdictions emerges. I am proposing Foucault's approach to history as one which seems consistent with the study of history of social work for a number of reasons. Firstly, Foucault's historical and philosophical work was focused mostly on the emergence of human sciences. While the history of professional social work was not his specific concern within his broader consideration of medical, penological, psychiatric and psychological discourses, many of the themes especially around the objectification of the subject through professional knowledge, are pertinent for the profession (see Chambon & Irving, 1999). Secondly, the emphasis in Foucault's work on the need for rigour and use of comprehensive empirical data in historical research offers the possibility that history work can be done in a way where the past is not constructed in simplistic terms of progress or decline or misconstrued to the point where history becomes 'at best a piece of fiction, at worst an act of persuasion' (Black & MacRaild, 2000, p. 163). This approach also seeks to avoid the imposition of a 'presentist' analysis on history (Dean, 1994) where individual researchers approach a historical analysis in terms of their own prior assumptions about history; their 'lived history'; or their existing interpretations of events in the past based on memory, nostalgia or particular personal experiences. Thirdly, Foucault's work critiqued the assumptions around reform and humanism while also going beyond social control theories to emphasise the necessity for in-depth empirical studies to illuminate complex and contradictory practices at particular moments in history. It therefore offers an alternative to progress or critical theories (Dean, 1994), the former of which tend to present strategies such as social work as a reform strategy that has evolved, gradually and systematically, over a period of time and the latter of which critiques it in terms of social control. Instead, through use of a history of the present approach, social work can be problematised in terms of its contradictory nature involving vacillation between reform, social control and the multi-faceted dimensions of practice within and around these general themes. That one continuity observable in the strategy of social work across jurisdictions is that it is most often constructed as a contradictory practice, operating along dualisms of care and control; regulation and empowerment; deserving and undeserving; need and risk; redeemable and unredeemable and so on, suggests that it is well suited to studies using a problematisation approach as implicit within a history of the present. Use of the concept of governmentality adds further

impetus to a problematisation approach, enabling discussion beyond generalised conceptions of 'the state' or the 'family'—for example—as unified concepts, which exposes the *practices* of government—'the set of institutions and practices, from administration to education, through which people's conduct is guided' (Foucault from 1980, in Faubion, 2002, p. 295). One final and perhaps most central reason for my argument relates to his concern to use history as a means of critique of taken-for-granted 'truth' in the construction of practices and discourses. In his studies, Foucault sought to illuminate that which was hidden or taken-for-granted. As a social work researcher, his history of the present approach was employed to problematise social work in the present to illuminate its current formations by recourse to the past. In so doing, possibilities and constraints for future developments were exposed.

There are, of course, many arguments for why one should be sceptical about use of Foucault's approach to history. As he addressed fields as diverse as medicine, psychiatry, criminology, economics and natural sciences, he invited critique and debate from different academic circles which must in themselves be considered within the particular historical context within which they occurred, at a time when debates around grand theories of Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and existentialism prevailed. Numerous critiques of the substance of his studies also raise questions about: his anti-humanism and tendency towards control and discipline; his refusal to ascribe to accepted conventions of historical study; his alleged over-emphasis on discontinuity; his concentration on local practices within institutions over broader themes of politics and culture; and his conceptualisations of the self and subjectivities, to name just a few.

It is advisable that, to engage effectively and critically with Foucault's work, one recognises the distinction offered by Chambon and Irving (1999) between 'coming at his work from the outside' and working 'from the inside out', the latter being the case in this article. For those committed to authentic use of Foucault's work, which intentionally seeks to defy conventional forms of theorising and analysis, it is only through reading the original work of Foucault that the researcher will gain a critical appreciation of his intricate approach. As advised by Chambon and Irving (1999), multiple readings of Foucault are necessary for researchers to appreciate this complexity and to use his work to develop their own innovative approaches to the study of history, maintaining an open-mind which is willing to engage in a process of raising questions rather than seeking to find the 'right' answer (Dean, 1994). One can approach a study of Foucault through analyses of his books which demonstrate his processes of writing history (e.g. *Madness and Civilisation*, *Birth of the Clinic*, *Discipline and Punish*, *History of Sexuality* and *Use of Pleasure*) and his approach to method (e.g. *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) complemented with critical engagement with his many articles and interviews from 1954 to 1984. Core themes which are of particular importance to understanding his history of the present approach include: his perspectives on power and discourse; his insights into the nature of governance and surveillance; discourse and the 'power-knowledge'

spiral; and his commentaries on archaeological and genealogical approaches. These are best accessed via *Michel Foucault: Essential Works 1954–1984*, Vols 1–3 (Rabinow, 2000; Faubion, 2000, 2002).

To appreciate the layers of critical debate surrounding Foucault's work, careful and selective engagement with the immense range of secondary commentaries is essential. In order to develop a critical understanding of Foucault for social work in general, the work of Chambon *et al.* (1999) is particularly useful. Two of the most effective and critical explanations of his methodologies are provided by Dean (1994) and Castel (1994) which have been quite heavily relied on by this author as guidance on actually carrying out a history of the present. For an illustration of how other authors have carried out a history of the present, David Garland's trilogy on crime and punishment (1985, 1990, 2001) provides a particularly in-depth critique of Foucault and an illumination of the method of history of the present and the work of Donzelot (1980); Parton (1991) and Skehill (2004) offer studies that are directly relate to the history of philanthropy and social work. The competent introduction to Foucault offered by Gutting (2005) offers an excellent reference source and beginning guide to the core dimensions of Foucault's work as well as providing an overview of its limitations from various perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

Even with such resources, it remains a key challenge to use Foucault's work in a way that avoids over-simplification while at the same time not becoming completely entangled in its complexity. Foucault avoided offering prescription as to how his work should be applied but clearly expressed a concern in his work that historical studies are not merely abstract, but rather useful in some applied manner. Furthermore, given the diversity of his studies, a distinction between the debates around his ideas and concepts and his methodologies is also advisable (although of course they cannot be treated as totally separate). In approaching the original and secondary work, it is best advised that one has the research problem/question in mind. In this research, the initial question/problem posed was: to what extent can one understand the current centrality of social work within the child protection and welfare system in terms of their 'natural' position as 'psy' experts or a 'regime of truth' in the 'social' (Philp, 1979; Donzelot, 1980; Parton, 1991)?

### **What is a history of the present?**

That punishment in general and the prison in particular belong to a political technology of the body is a lesson that I have learnt not so much from history as from the present . . . I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if that means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present. (Foucault, 1977, pp. 30–31)

A history of the present is underpinned by the assumption that history is a broad practice rather than a method. It is based on the practice of problematisation of the present by recourse to its past:

Problematisation is not the presentation of a pre-existing object or the creation through discourse of an object that does not exist. It is the totality of discursive and non-discursive practices that brings something into play of truth and falsehood and sets it up as an object for the mind. (Foucault, 1984, p. 18)

A history of the present poses a question in the present and works backwards through particular historical moments which allows for non-linear and multi-lateral layers of analysis. Rather than seeking to provide the right answer, the final explanation, a history of the present involves a process of 'raising questions where others had found answers' (Dean, 1994, p. 4). As Parton argues, use of history of the present can be understood in terms of a general ethos which involves a process of 'permanent questioning' (1999, p. 103). In his work, Foucault raised questions about the contemporary scheme of processes such as discipline and control in order to seek ways to see and respond to them differently. Foucault's work was concerned less with periods and more with a certain problem as it is posed in the present. Rather than seeking to find the origin or beginning of an idea, he explored the 'conditions of possibility' that make it possible for that idea to exist.

A history of the present resists a progressivist approach to history (Dean, 1994). It refutes the assumption that what comes 'after' in time is necessarily 'progress' from what went before. It calls for caution in the use of chronological historical approaches apart from as a mapping exercise of key events and moments to help guide one's study. Consistent with this resistance to progress theories, a history of the present avoids making claims to being a generalised history; rather it is concerned with the problematisation of a particular problem identified in the present by recourse to the past. To criticise *Discipline and Punish*, for example, for failing to provide a complete history of the prison is to deny the very nature of this form of analysis; Foucault never set out to or made claims to offer such generalisation from his study. Garland (2001) recognises the 'unavoidable tension' that exists between the generalisable and the specific and advises that the researcher has to 'go back and forth between the general and the particular, the big picture and the local detail, until alighting upon a level of analysis to offer the optimal vantage point' (2001, p. vii). This is an apt snapshot of the nature of a history of the present approach.

In taking this approach, one can observe where practices of social work experienced reversals of historical pathway within certain socio-political conditions. And it is not just about major ruptures or reversals in historical pathways. A history of the present approach encourages the researcher to 'dig deep' to uncover the complex range of influences which affects the nature and form of a strategy such as social work within any particular temporal and spatial context; '(t)he archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable. It emerges in

fragments, regions, and levels, more fully, no doubt, and with greater sharpness, the greater the time that separates us from it' (Foucault, 1972, p. 147).

Analysis of history outside of the constraints of assumptions about evolution and progress has enabled an insight into social work in the Republic of Ireland which requires us to accept that social work as it is today is a product of a complex and contradictory history, entwined with the ever-changing local context. Research findings refute the simple assumption that what we have now is merely 'progress' or that what went before is no longer relevant (Skehill, 2004). However, a history of the present, rather than debunking existing histories, offers a different perspective on current understandings and new possibilities not previously considered. This critical theme resonates throughout Foucault's studies. For example, with specific reference to the response of social workers in the prison, to the emphasis on discipline and regulation in *Discipline and Punish* which was felt as an anaesthetic effect on their capacity for reform with little room for initiative, Foucault argued that the contrary was his aim. He argued that his work was intended to enable practitioners to look at what was happening in a different way and from this, develop a more critical perspective which should 'be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is ... it's a challenge directed to what is' (Foucault from 1980, in Faubion, 2002, p. 236).

### How does one begin to carry out a history of the present?

I start with a problem in terms of how it is currently posed and attempt to establish a genealogy: genealogy means that I conduct an analysis starting from the present position. (Foucault, 1984, p. 18)

In this researcher's work, the problem as it appeared in the present was that it was not possible to find an adequate explanation for why social workers within the child protection and welfare system in Ireland had come to occupy a central space within the statutory system from 1991 onwards. Existing accounts of child welfare and protection offered progressive histories which mapped the development of professional social work as a gradual evolution from its establishment within the statutory welfare system following the Health Act 1970 up to the implementation of the Child Care Act 1991. In the aftermath of this Act, social workers became centrally placed within the child protection and welfare services which resulted in increased professional recognition through salary increase and expansion of professional teams. However, given the lack of discursive space they occupied prior to this time, it was difficult to conceptualise social work in Ireland in terms of a medico-social and socio-legal expertise as was the case in the history of social work in Britain (Parton, 1991). In previous histories of child welfare social work, the forerunner to statutory social work was mostly conceptualised within the context of the dominance of institutional care provided by the Catholic Church and the work of the National/Irish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children up to 1970 [see Skehill (2004) for a critical overview].

The questions which the evolutionary accounts left unanswered included: why are social workers central within the child protection and welfare system? Was it due to a recognition of the natural expertise of social work in this field? Was it more the result of broader genealogical conditions? Or was it due to other hidden ad hoc events? Is 1970 the defining moment as suggested in existing histories? And if so, what discursive possibilities existed prior to this time to make this possible?

Raising questions in a circular and consistent manner is central to this approach. In order to understand how to begin to 'answer' these questions, key methodological questions, derived from Dean (1994) and Castel (1994), were raised and are considered below. They are constructed around the most challenging aspects of using this approach as experienced by this researcher which were: coping with the insecurity a move away from grand theorising and chronological thinking can create; determining at what point one had sufficient data to offer effective history given that one cannot search indefinitely; and understanding how to implement a genealogical and archaeological analysis.

*How does one avoid falling into periodisation?*

Many histories document developments chronologically and within key epochs and most jurisdictions share a 'received history' which maps key periods within which 'master shifts' (Cohen, 1985) in the nature of society and welfare can be understood. A history of the present approach does not require that one denies that major shifts in the nature and form of governance happen, but rather encourages us to be critical and questioning about their transformative significance. While abandoning a traditional approach to working in 'periods' can be unsettling, constructive parameters can be used in a history of the present as a guide. For example, in Skehill (1999, 2000), four key periods were identified which represented the emergence of social work from a philanthropic to a professional activity. However, when reconsidered more systematically from a history of the present perspective, this periodisation was found to only offer a basic working framework and was re-conceptualised in Skehill (2004). In a history of the present, general periodisation is replaced by two related processes. Firstly, the research process must involve a search through history for 'key moments' around which we can understand aspects of the problem raised in the present (for a useful illustration, see the final chapter of *Discipline and Punish*). The second process involves an examination of the complex range of continuities *and* discontinuities which have underpinned the construction of a discourse such as social work.

*Given that one cannot go back through history indefinitely, how far back does one go?*

Most simply put, one goes back to the moment which helps to address the problem in the present; the point which marks the forerunner to the question as it is currently formulated. For example, in *History of Sexuality* (1979), Foucault examined how the

'confession' emerged in seventeenth century monastic tradition as a means of putting sex into words because he is interested in problematising 'the technologies of confession as important components of the exercise of power today' (in Castel, 1994, p. 241). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault went back as far as the ordinance of 1670 which 'regulated the general forms of penal practices up to the Revolution' (Foucault, 1977, p. 32). In the research referred to here, 1862 was identified as the furthest moment back to return to. The year 1862 signified a forerunner to the problem posed in the present in that this date represented the first attempt to develop a statutory child welfare service through the establishment of boarding out (fostering) of children from the workhouses. Archival research into the development of this system led to the conclusion that a continuity could be identified with the practices of Inspectors of Boarded Out Children appointed in 1902 and present day statutory social work. Various moments were focused on between this time and the present in order to examine the problem posed. These moments included: 1973, when specific statutory child welfare duties were assigned to the new social work community care teams; and 1945, when explicit recommendations were made by the Inspectors of Boarded Out Children for employment of professional social workers as experts in child welfare.

*How does one actually study the archaeological construction of a discourse and its genealogical context?*

If we were to characterise it in two terms, then 'archaeology' would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursivities, and 'genealogy' would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play. (Foucault, 1980a, p. 86)

Foucault's studies of archaeology and genealogy are complex not least because they were applied and developed over a 30 year period and have been subject to much debate and critique in terms of the relationship between archaeology and the particular meaning and significance of genealogy. Foucault focused on archaeology mostly in his earlier writings, and over the 1970s, his emphasis shifted to genealogy. Kendall and Wickham offer a succinct explanation; archaeology can be viewed as 'a slice through the discursive nexus' while genealogy helps us to understand its 'ongoing character' (1999, p. 30). However, as Dean (1994) argues, both concepts are best understood in relation to each other, under the third term, 'history of the present'.

In carrying out a history of the present, the implication is that one should seek to find, as far as is possible, all that is said about the particular moment in question; including the unusual and that which seems out of the ordinary to our generalised understandings; 'one ought to read everything, study everything . . . (i)n other words, one must have at one's disposal the general archive of a period at a given moment . . .

archaeology is, in a strict sense, the science of this archive' (Foucault from 1966, in Faubion, 2000, p. 263). Foucault referred to the search for 'domains' and 'layers' in organising historical work in a quest to achieve the depth required for 'illumination' in the present. According to Foucault (1972), this analysis of discursive formations involves examining: the formation of objects (e.g. the 'delinquent child'; the 'unmarried mother'); concepts (e.g. 'maternal deprivation'); strategies (e.g. 'social work'; 'psy experts'); and the relationship that exists between these various discursive levels. It seems that this latter concern with 'relationships' lies at the heart of genealogy as Foucault developed it over the 1970s and 1980s.

The challenge to use a history of the present approach in one's own work is further complicated by the fact that Foucault explicitly avoided prescription of a method: 'What I have written is never prescriptive either for me or others—at most it's instrumental and tentative' (from 1980c, in Faubion, 2002, p. 240). He also makes clear that as his work progressed, he continually revised both his ideas and his methods. When attempting to apply a history of the present, it was easy to relate to Kendall and Wickham's statement from one of their students: 'my head is spinning: doesn't history have to be more orderly than this?' (1999, p. 22). The disorder such an approach creates seems inevitable and indeed necessary if we are to accept that the past is at least as complex as the present. To help with this 'disorder', Foucault himself is instructive where he advised that:

Whoever ... wishes to study a *problem* that has emerged in a given time must follow other rules: the choice of material as a function of the givens of a problem; the focus of the analysis on those elements likely to resolve it; the establishment of relationships that permit this solution. (Foucault, 1980b, p. 32)

The inference taken from Foucault's statement is that each researcher must bring with them a sophisticated research strategy which enables the operationalisation of an approach influenced by the principles of a history of the present as a method of critique which can open up taken-for-granted assumptions and offer possibilities for alternative ways of seeing and doing. The rules referred to above, imply that the *problem*, the *theoretical perspective* and the *methodology* must be made explicit from the start. Foucault's approach to history reflects a meticulous style which relies on detailed critical empirical inquiry and production of 'evidence' from archives and other sources in a manner which minimises the reliance of the reader on the researcher's interpretations and maximises the possibilities to allow the findings to 'speak for themselves', thus the significance of the term 'illumination' as an explanatory guide to the nature of a history of the present. It requires that research is specific implying, as Foucault emphasises about his own work, that one project will raise further questions and no one project should seek to provide a complete and definitive 'answer'. In general, Foucault's approach invites critical engagement with his ideas rather than passively attempting to apply them. As I will attempt to demonstrate in the remainder of this section, following this approach enabled this researcher to: illuminate the present via an alternative lens; offer new ways of

critically understanding the position of Irish social work; and contribute to an understanding of the complex and contradictory nature of the strategy within its surrounding conditions of possibility. The focus was limited to an understanding of the discursive construction of social work as a strategy within its surrounding conditions of possibility and left un-researched, to a large extent, practices of resistance, creation of subjectivities and practices of bio-power. It inevitably has led to the identification of further more specific research questions. Also, the methodology described here is best considered as a 'work in progress', which to date has tested the application of a history of the present approach to social work in one jurisdiction but requires further development in terms of demonstrating further its practical use in research in different temporal and spatial contexts.

As a basic guide for the research referred to here, the understanding of the relationship between archaeology and genealogy was as follows: archaeology was taken to refer to the way in which a discourse is constructed in its own right; for example, the ideas, the theories, the practices and the beliefs that underpin social work discourse in its particular temporal and spatial context. And genealogy related to an analysis of the surrounding 'conditions of possibility' of social work which create space for discourses to be accepted as 'true'. In terms of exploring the discursive construction of social work, archives and running records relating to: professional social work organisations; social work training; unions representing social work; social work practice within particular institutions; and personal records of those discovered to be influential in constructing social work discourses, were analysed. Garland's (1992) broad themes were used to guide the genealogical analysis which involved discovery of key complexities within the inter-related institutional (e.g. statutory/voluntary child welfare services), intellectual (e.g. ideas about how to intervene with 'unmarried mothers'/'delinquent'/'deprived children'), political (e.g. non-interventionist/residual state), cultural (e.g. dominance of Catholicism) and social (e.g. Catholic morality) discourses which were identifiable from the content of the specific archival documents. From the analysis, of particular note was the way in which the profession appeared to struggle for discursive space at various moments up to 1970. This was problematised in the context of the symbiotic and complex inter-relationship which existed between a dominant Catholic Church and a mostly non-interventionist state in terms of understanding the potentials and constraints surrounding the emergence of social work as an 'expert discourse' [see Skehill (2003a) for full exposition].

Seeking to problematise both the archaeological construction and genealogical conditions of possibility, engagement with the data was guided by the constant raising of questions so that with each set of data consulted, further questions were raised. In carrying out research in this manner, it becomes possible to move beyond

the dominant or obvious discourses to discover influential minority discourses (see Skehill, 2003b). As Foucault argued

if we want to pose a question in a rigorous, exact way that's likely to allow serious investigations, shouldn't we look for these problems precisely in their most singular and concrete forms? ... (i)t seems to me that none of the grand discourses that have been pronounced on the subject of society is convincing enough for us to rely on. (Foucault from 1980c, in Faubion, 2002, p. 285)

Thus it was illuminated in the research described here which confirmed prior findings that the Catholic Church dominated in the sphere of child welfare over the early to mid-twentieth century operating mostly via 'socio-spiritual' discourses but also found that professional social work discourse developed predominantly as an area of 'secular' expertise, influenced by training in Britain and the USA, mostly *outside* of the dominant socio-spiritual realm. This helped to explain why social work struggled for discursive space within its genealogical context in terms of the power-knowledge spiral. And, while the dominant discourses of child and family interventions emerged from the voluntary religious sector, it was actually in the history of statutory child welfare that we find the most notable continuity with the present day child welfare and protection system.

Throughout the research, a range of archival and discourse analysis tools were used to analyse the emergence of the complex set of themes and sub-themes in a manner which reflects the principle of a history of the present approach—moving across, back and forward between different archival sources often changing direction and usually finding some new insight into the question posed while at the same time discovering new questions which must be asked. As argued in Skehill (2003b), recovery history was necessary whereby 'official' archives alone, i.e. those stored in central accessible collections, were insufficient, thus requiring a form of 'detective' work to discover the hidden and undiscovered history of social work in child welfare prior to 1973. In using this empirical approach, a simultaneous process of theory testing and theory building was made possible. In relation to the Republic of Ireland, the beginning assumptions about social work's expertise, as aforementioned, were constructed in terms of mediating in the 'social' via medico-social and socio-legal discourses at various moments in the past. From here, the analysis and relationship building which followed incorporated a critique of this assumption from an Irish perspective and alternative theoretical postulations were made possible from this starting point. Most notably, the research exposed a different type of 'social' within the genealogical conditions of the Irish context—which was described as the 'socio-spiritual'—and challenged the assumption that this positioning was necessarily a 'regime of truth' (Philp, 1979) for social work as a professional strategy. In revisiting the assumptions about the positioning of social work within the statutory child welfare system from 1973 onwards, the research

confirmed to some extent the theory of social work as a 'psy expert' in the social, but also raised questions about the extent to which social workers held and exercised power within their archaeological context. Certain reformulation of Foucault's assumptions around power and knowledge were required, resulting in the proposal that a 'powerlessness/knowledge' thesis could be offered whereby social workers in 1973 occupied minimal power within its genealogical conditions but so too did the discourse of child welfare; thus offering the opportunity for social work to assert itself as a 'psy expert' within this domain. Social workers were found to be, on the one hand, the 'only available discipline at the time to offer such a service', while on the other hand, 'being a profession desperately in need of some expert space by 1970' (Skehill, 2004, p. 340). This led to the conclusion that while challenges continue to prevail for child protection and welfare social workers in their present genealogical context, they currently hold greater 'discursive rights, and thus certain power, by virtue of their positioning in the social' than is evident from their past (2004, p. 341). However, this position in the present was found to be neither inevitable nor 'taken-for-granted' thus indicating the need for more effective analyses of the potentials and limitations of social work archeologically, within its genealogical conditions.

The overall findings from the research illustrated how complex and contradictory the construction of social work discourse was and emphasised the importance of seeking out, not just the 'radical ruptures' but also the many chance and ad hoc events, often seemingly minute in themselves, which were influential. For example, while 'received' histories present the establishment of social work under the Health Act 1970 within the child protection and welfare system in rather unproblematic terms within the context of the emergence of the welfare system, the findings in Skehill (2004) starkly challenge this on the basis that professional social work was not even included in the first draft for the new services and that it was a small number of key advocates, amongst them, two Inspectors of Boarded Out Children, who seemed most instrumental in making the case for their child welfare expertise. The openness to reversals of historical pathways and avoidance of being lured into periodisation led to the research moving between times and across discursive contexts which often caused confusion but always helped to move the questioning process forward, most often by producing further, and more specific questions. Through this process, continuities were discovered between the core principles of child welfare practice identified by the inspectors in the early twentieth century and current day 'progressive' discourses (such as the maintenance of permanence and security for boarded out children and the placement of children with relatives, to maintain kinship ties, where possible). Discontinuities were discovered in terms of the assumption of social work as a 'natural expert' in child welfare as, even after the statutory developments in 1973, confusion and disagreement persisted within the archaeological construction of social work from 1973 to the mid-1980s as to its central role and purpose (Skehill, 2004).

**Conclusion: so what?**

The value of having a critical understanding of the history of social work across Europe is gaining priority in recent times, not least reflected by this journal's series of historical portraits in 2001/2 and the work of the Network for Historical Studies of Gender and Social Work in Europe (see Hering & Waaldijk, 2005). Studies of the history of social work within different political and social contexts throughout Europe provide fascinating insights into both the possibilities and constraints which impacted on the nature of social work and related social welfare practices (see for example, Schilde & Schulte, 2005; Hering & Waaldijk, 2006).<sup>2</sup> When one considers the biographies of individuals such as Alice Solomon in Germany (Kuhlmann, 2001, 2003) or Isle Arlt in Austria (Simon, 2002; Staub-Bernasconi, 2003), the complex manner in which social work has been influenced by, not only the 'great forces' in society at a particular time, but also by committed individuals or organisations who propounded a certain view of what social work was and how it should be constructed, is engrossing. To know that social work took on so many shapes and forms in the past, helps us to realise the potential for a range of horizons of understanding and possibilities to emerge in the present. It unlocks the constraints of operating within a certain temporal and spatial context and emphasises the possibilities for constructive transformations and change within social work, whatever its present context may look like from our own local perspective. An exposition of Michel Foucault's history of the present in this article has sought to make a modest contribution to this ongoing project which may, one hopes, contribute to the raising of further questions relating to how we problematise the present nature and form of social work, whatever context it operates within, by recourse to its past.

**Notes**

- [1] See also: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/> and <http://www.foucault.qut.edu.au/>.  
 [2] See also: <http://www.sweep.uni-siegen.de> for histories of eight Eastern European countries 1900–1960.

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