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Author(s): Gilligan, Philip A.

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## **Well-motivated Reformists or Nascent Radicals: How do applicants to the degree in social work see social problems, their origins and solutions?**

### **Summary**

This article reports ways in which applicants to the degree in social work see ‘social problems’, their origins and possible solutions to them. What is demonstrated is that, whilst applicants are concerned about a range of problems, those which could be broadly classified as ‘anti-social behaviours by individuals or groups’ predominate, in contrast to those which could be defined as ‘aspects of the social structure which have an adverse impact on individuals or groups’. Applicants are much more likely to suggest ‘individual’ rather than ‘social’ causes and are most likely to suggest ‘liberal / reformist’ solutions. It is argued, in the context of frame analysis, that pre-existing views will usually impact strongly on how students respond to the knowledge and challenges offered during training.

The article aims to place discussion within consideration of wider issues. In particular, whether social work in Britain can maintain its historic commitment to social justice and prevent itself becoming an increasingly uncritical tool of the UK government’s social authoritarianism. Finally, it seeks to raise questions about whether social work education can assist qualifying workers to develop and maintain resiliently radical approaches to practice, which are also effective in bringing positive change to vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

**Keywords:** Social Problems, Radical Social Work, Frames.

## **Introduction**

All social work activity is concerned with social problems. ...However, although poverty, mental illness, and deprivation may constitute objective phenomena, the analyses, interpretations, and explanations of these phenomena are subjective. Mullaly (1993), p44.

Proponents of frame analysis (Lippmann, 1921; Goffman, 1975; Snow et al., 1986; Gamson et al., 1992; Snow and Benford, 1992; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Benford, 1993; Gamson, 1995; Fisher 1997; Atherton, 2002; Frameworks Institute, 2005) have frequently noted that responses to a wide variety of issues are determined by the cultural frames which individuals apply to them. As Lippmann (1921, p81) comments “We define first, and then see.” Social work is clearly not exempt from these phenomena, anymore than other activities, such as the research reported in this article. The styles of practice adopted by new practitioners are not only the product of what they are taught, but, also, of how they interpret this teaching through the cultural frames they brought with them and of how successfully these are confirmed or challenged by qualifying training. Equally, decisions made by the author regarding matters such as how to categorise data, what to include in and what to exclude from published material will inevitably be influenced by the frames applied; as will decisions made by interviewers during the selection of students for social work training. In these circumstances, attempts are rightly made to identify and acknowledge the frames applied by individuals and institutions and, through appropriate reflection and review, to minimise potentially negative or

unintended impacts these may have. As in social work practice, is central to the useful application of frame analysis.

A variety of writers have sought to understand and explain how individuals construct 'social problems' by using frame analysis both to examine the different frameworks within which accounts of social problems are told and to locate the tellers in different social categories (ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, class). Others have focused on questions of how specific cultural, religious and other contexts impact on individual and group responses to and views about particular issues and events (Illinois Voter Project, 1993; Sasson, 1995; Weightman and Weightman, 1995; Loader et al., 1998; Mann, 2000; Pain et al, 2000; Bullock and Cuber, 2002; Gilligan, 2003; Gilligan and Furness, 2005; Gilligan with Akhtar, 2005).

Frame analysis suggests that individual views are usually dominated by the mental shortcuts people use to make sense of the world. Unless effectively challenged not to do so, individuals tend to look for ways to process information quickly and rely on cues within new information to tell them how to connect it with the images of the world they already have. Enduring cultural frames provide a 'common sense' pattern that systematically shapes the way they interpret images by drawing attention to some aspects while encouraging them to ignore others. Cognitive cultural models allow individuals to forget certain information and to invent other details, because a 'frame' is in effect. For example, if people believe that adolescents are likely to behave in unacceptable ways, they will tend to emphasise details in accounts of adult/child conflict that reinforce this notion, while tending to disregard those that suggest otherwise. There is a constant

danger that, if the facts do not fit the frame, the facts are more likely to be rejected than the frame. Gamson (1992; 1995), in particular, argues that 'aggregate frames' define issues as social problems, and assign responsibility to people who hear the message of the frame to take action about the problem. He suggests that 'collective action frames' can only form if people perceive an issue through the component frames of 'injustice', 'agency', and 'identity'. Any two social workers are likely to recognize when a parent and their dependent children are living in poverty. However, the degree to which their response emphasizes active campaigning alongside such households for increased state benefits or focuses, instead, on encouraging such individuals to become 'economically active' will depend very much on the frames they apply to the same situation.

### **Social work and social problems: varying views; common values?**

A generation ago, Pearson (1975) offered a threefold categorization of social work and of how British social workers perceive their 'clients'. He suggested: - a *conservative* social work which sees clients "as deviants who are 'against society' and in need of control, disposal or recycling" (p15); a *liberal* or a *reformist socialist* social work which sees deviants "as products of a sick society, or as hapless inadequates who cannot make the pace of 'modern living'" and whose situation requires us to pursue "care, rehabilitation, and reform." (p16); and a *radical* social work, whose ideology strives for "a restructuring, at the roots, of the dominant social order." (p17). Mullaly (1993), meanwhile, writing from a Canadian perspective, suggests that social workers will have very different ideas about social problems, their origins and solutions and that these will be determined by

whichever paradigm dominates their worldview. His and Pearson's analyses find resonance in Payne's suggestion that social workers' visions of their role coalesce around three perspectives. Payne (1996) argues that the practice prevalent in most statutory agencies in Britain is based in 'individualist-reformist' views which see social work as helping individuals with personal problems and in adjusting to the world around them; help being delivered using methods such as task-centred or cognitive-behavioural work. He contrasts this with approaches arising from 'reflexive-therapeutic' or socialist-collectivist' views. The former, Payne suggests, is more concerned with helping individuals to achieve personal growth and power over their situations, while the latter places greater emphasis on the need to change structures that give rise to problems whilst also encouraging collective action to resolve these.

Such varied views indicate different priorities when applied to day-to-day practice. However, none is completely exclusive of the other and there is, arguably, overlap in basic values and objectives. Many writers (Pearson, 1975; Cohen, 1975; Moreau, 1979; Rojek et al., 1998) have argued that would-be radical practitioners need to combine practice which brings immediate benefit to individuals or groups with actions which both increase their clients' awareness of the external origins of and factors which exacerbate their problems and encourage collective action for social change. Pearson (1975) called on 'radicals' and 'liberals' to join together in defending "what is right in social work" and criticising "what is wrong". He urged social work education not only to commit itself to the political education of students (pp42-43), but also suggested that it needed to use

insights offered by the profession's collective experience to demonstrate that not all problems lie in the personal or the psychological sphere and "that many social-work clients *are* emotionally troubled and suffer from an unhappiness which is not washed away simply by the provision of material or economic help" (p19). How far has social work heeded this call during the past 30 years?

### **Radical Social Work: lost dream or constant theme?**

Munday (1972) saw the contribution of social science to social work education, in Britain, as troubling and ominous, because it exposed students to "general attacks on traditional beliefs in society" (p3). In marked contrast, the *Case Con* manifesto (Bailey and Brake, 1975) urged social workers to recognise that clients' problems were rooted in the society in which they lived. Its authors suggested that,

Until this society, based on private ownership, profit and the needs of the minority ruling class, is replaced by a workers' state, based on the interests of the vast majority of the population, the fundamental causes of social problems will remain. (Bailey and Brake, 1975, p147)

At least since the mid-1970s, there has, particularly in Britain, Canada and Australia, been a growing body of literature focused on the development of 'radical social work' (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Moreau, 1979; Marchant, 1986; Rojek et al., 1998; Langan and Lee, 1989; Fook, 1993; Mullaly, 1993; Healy, 1999; Hatton, 2001; Langan, 2002; Jones et al., 2003; Davies and Leonard, 2004; Shearing, 2005). By the 1980s, British social workers had begun to see themselves, and to be seen

by others, as 'radical' professionals and as belonging to an 'ethical' profession. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many older practitioners and social work educators express despair that the next generation of their professional colleagues appears to have little awareness of the need for structural analysis or commitment to collective action for social change. The author has had recent experience both of students asking whether they risked being "marked down" if their assignments criticised what appeared to be unacceptable practice in their placement agency and of students suggesting uncritically that the role of social work is to deliver specific services on behalf of the state. In the first case, prior experiences appeared to have left the student equally uncertain about both the genuineness of agencies' commitments to best practice and of universities' responses to criticisms of agency partners. They were anxious that, however appropriate, 'whistle-blowing' may have potentially negative consequences, such as early termination of the placement or delays in obtaining a qualification and subsequent employment. In the second case, the student queried why they were being asked to discuss the social profile of the community served when their role required only that they manage the offending behaviour of the young people referred? The response echoed Moreau's observation that:

...typically the aims of social agencies are worded in social change terms while much of their actual practice is of a social control nature...

(Moreau, 1979, p88)

It also added weight to the impression that social work may, in the words of Butler and Drakeford (2001), be increasingly,

part of an incorporative agenda whereby the function of social work is predominantly to ensure that difficult and troublesome individuals are made to accept prevailing social norms. (p7)

At the same time, there are inherent tensions whenever would-be radicals are financially dependent on the state or its agents for employment or the existence of their service, and there have always been reasons to doubt whether the apparent radicalism of many social workers is characterised more by public posturing than by commitment to action either in professional practice or as citizens. Langan (2002) recently explored the legacy of radical social work. She concluded that, by the 1990s, while the “rhetoric” of radicalism was “ubiquitous”, its spirit “seemed to have long evaporated” (p214). She supports Simpkin’s contention (1989) that much radical rhetoric was, in fact, imposed on social workers by managers and politicians and notes that those who had once been seen as the agents of society’s transformation, i.e. the working class, are now seen by many would-be radicals as people in need of training to eradicate their prejudices. Humphries (2004), meanwhile, demonstrates that, despite its apparent commitment to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice, social work has increasingly been drawn into implementing the government’s ‘racist’ immigration controls. Are social workers trained to *say* the ‘right’ things more effectively than to *do* them? How many have ever been genuinely radical? As will be seen below, very few social work students join courses replete with radical rhetoric.

Around half arrive with explanations for social problems which point primarily to 'individual' causes, while the overwhelming majority are most unlikely to be thinking in terms of 'radical' solutions. Will more than the words they use be changed by their training?

### **Social Policy in Britain: Change and 'Conditionality'**

The policies pursued by governments have direct impacts on what it is possible for social workers to achieve. They are, also, likely to influence the aspirations which individual workers hold for their practice and the frames adopted by those entering professional training. It, therefore, seems relevant to consider the particular social policy context which has impacted on British social work, in recent years. From the perspective of radical social work, this can, perhaps, be characterised as one which has resulted in some substantial, but insufficient, benefits at, often, unnecessary and unjustifiable costs; in particular an increasing acceptance of social authoritarianism and conditionality. Jordan (2000) summarises the approach, as "*caring bigotry, responsible retribution and communal revenge*" (p19).

In the years since it won the general election in May 1997, and especially since 1999/2000, the government led by Tony Blair has substantially increased expenditure on public services. Sefton (2004) reports that children have benefited most from this increase. Public spending per child grew by almost 20 per cent, in real terms, between 1996/97 and 2001/02, compared to increases of two per cent for working age adults and 13 per cent for pensioners.

The prime minister has, also, consistently declared himself committed to reducing social exclusion (Blair, 1997; 2001; 2002; 2005) and to creating a “Britain in which nobody is left behind” (Blair, 2002).

Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of social workers have welcomed, not only these increases in public spending, but also the fact that ‘prevention’ has been to the fore in initiatives around children and families. Many saw initiatives, such as *Sure Start* as positive additions to services in those geographical areas where projects were established. They welcomed the emphasis on 10 year “locally led” projects and on child-centred services and accepted the Treasury’s contention that the programme was at the heart of national policy to tackle child poverty (Glass, 1999). However, whilst welcoming such features, Parton and Pugh (1999) noted, at the outset, that even *Sure Start* was “based on this government’s particular concerns around crime and employment” (p229) and, by 2005, Glass was arguing that his brainchild was already being abolished in all but name and being replaced by a programme increasingly under the control of local authorities and with a new emphasis on providing childcare places to allow parents to work (Glass, 2005).

The emphasis of government policy in its *Every Child Matters* initiatives (See Department for Education and Skills, 2003; 2004a: 2004b) and as embodied in the Children Act 2004, arguably, offers similar reasons for both optimism and concern. The government commits itself to ambitious targets for improving the well-being of children and young people and has finally created a Children’s Commissioner for England.

However, this Commissioner has much less independent power than his counterparts elsewhere in the UK and is seen by many advocates of children's rights as "a government listening officer rather than a powerful champion for children." (NSPCC, 2004).

Sefton (2004), meanwhile, notes that, "outcomes for the poorest children are still very much worse than for children from better-off families"; that "more clearly needs to be done to reduce inequalities in income and in educational, health, and other outcomes"; and that "Arguably, spending is still not sufficiently skewed towards children with the greatest needs". In the particular case of social care, he found substantial local variations in the amount spent per looked-after child, with the result that "some of our most vulnerable children are not receiving the services they need" (p3-4).

In their public statements, New Labour and Blair make noticeably little specific mention of 'social work'. There appears, at the same time, to be an overlap between the emphases apparent in their rhetoric and the frames which influence the views expressed by many individuals in the study reported below. The Labour Party's manifesto for the General Election in May 2005 uses the word 'crime' 48 times and refers to 'anti-social behaviour' 14 times. The term 'child poverty' appears six times, but 'children's rights' and 'child protection' are never used. The word 'police' is used 29 times, but 'social work' and 'social worker' not at all (Labour Party, 2005).

Meanwhile, the idea of 'conditionality' has dominated the Blair government's approach, particularly to welfare reform. In 1997, Blair defined his goal of a 'modern

civic society' as one which requires "something for something. A society where we play by the rules." (Blair, 1997). Five years later, he, again, emphasised that,

today's welfare state should not be a top-down paternalistic act of charity, a handout. It should be based on mutual responsibility, our rights and our duties: our right to a decent start in life; our duty to make the most of it and in any case to abide by the rules and laws of the society that we live in. (Blair, 2002)

By 2005, such 'conditionality' was being expressed in terms of an aim to "cement a new social contract with rights matched by responsibilities." and as

Going forward ... to power and resources in the hands of the law-abiding majority. A government committed both to abolishing child poverty and to putting the values of individual responsibility and duty at the very heart of policy (Labour Party, 2005, p8.)

From the start, concerns have been expressed that, in the context of such an approach, social work in Britain is in danger, not only of losing its professional autonomy, but also of being robbed of its essential radicalism (Jones and Novak, 1999; Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Jones et al., 2003). It is suggested that, in the absence of effective critique and resistance, social workers will focus more on the dictates of government than the needs of

service users; and that this will result in what Humphries (2004) sees as “a decisive shift to an increasingly narrow and negative practice” (p93).

Like Humphries (2004), Butler and Drakeford (2001) argue that social work is failing to confront New Labour’s particular brand of social authoritarianism, in which, despite a strong belief in the role of government intervention in addressing social problems, receipt of services tends to be conditional on behaviour which demonstrates that recipients will respond in the ways required. They further suggest that, in the translation of ‘ideology’ into ‘values’, of ‘critical capacity’ into ‘competency’ and of ‘collective struggles’ into ‘individualistic anti-oppressive practice’, social work discourse has increasingly accepted the commodification of rights (p10) and, like the Labour party, has abandoned its commitment to collective citizenship rights (Marshall, 1950).

Jones et al. (2003), meanwhile, see fragments of hope in the rise of user groups in spheres such as mental health and disability and in the growth of inclusive and global anti-capitalist and anti-war movements, promoting the same values of democracy, solidarity, accountability, participation, justice, equality, liberty and diversity, which need to underpin practice in social work. How many students start their degree in social work courses with such values? How many graduate with them firmly in place? Does qualifying training provide the current generation of students with the tools to ensure that their apparent commitment to such values is reflected in how they practice as social work professionals and how they behave as citizens? Does it, for example, adequately equip them with the means to resolve disjunctions such as those identified between the

expressed concerns of local communities and the goal of strategic and transformational change which are central to government projects like the New Deal for Communities? (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, 2005).

### **Selecting students: an opportunity to analyse the views of would-be social workers**

To gain a recognised social work qualification in England, students must obtain a degree in social work which has been accredited by the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

The GSCC requires accredited universities to select candidates through interview who:

- are literate and numerate;
- express a commitment to the values of social work: and
- have the potential to develop high-quality professional knowledge and skills that are essential to practise as a social worker. (p21, GSCC, 2002a)

By April 2005, the university supplying data for this article, had interviewed 207 applicants for its three year BA (Hons) in Social Work. As part of the selection process, applicants had also spent 20 minutes writing a response to the instruction:

Identify a social problem which currently affects people in Britain and which particularly interests or concerns you. Discuss what, in your opinion, are the main origins and causes of this problem.

Candidates were advised that the exercise was part of the selection process, designed primarily to assess their ability to write in sufficiently grammatical English.

148 of the answers were subsequently available to the author for analysis. Many were thoughtful and incisive and the overwhelming majority had correctly followed the instruction. They stated clearly what issue they had identified and gave opinions regarding its origins and causes. Many, also, took the opportunity to discuss what they saw as possible solutions to the problem. A very small number offered factually inaccurate information apparently gleaned from irresponsible and sensationalist news media (for example, “(the) crime rate has doubled in Britain due to the increase of population of illegal immigrants”). A similarly small minority wrote about several different issues or about their own qualities, rather than about a social problem.

Thus, as well as providing a tool for assessing individual skills in written English, these documents provided substantial, if limited, data regarding matters such as:-

- What this group of would-be social work professionals viewed as the types of social problems currently affecting people in Britain;
- What they saw as the origins and causes of these problems;
- What they saw as possible solutions to them;
- What frames they used to make sense of the information they encountered about social problems;

- Differences or the lack of difference between identifiable groupings (women and men, applicants from different ethnic communities and different age groups, successful and unsuccessful applicants).

The exercises available had been submitted by applicants with an age range from 17 to 53 years. 123 were female, 22 were male. 122 were 'home' students, 8 were 'overseas'. 2 were African-Caribbean, 33 were African, 28 were Asian. They were aware that some information collected during the selection process might be used for monitoring and research purposes, but had not been specifically alerted to this study. This has imposed some ethical limits on how data can be used. Where individuals are quoted directly, all potentially identifying information has been omitted. Where information about applicants' characteristics was unclear, they have not been included in the aggregated data.

Whilst all individuals were responding to the same instruction, the length and structure of answers varied greatly. Analysis of their content was based on a series of questions. Regarding matters such as the issues identified by individuals as 'social problems', this was a relatively straightforward process. However, applied to questions such as whether the possible solutions suggested emphasised a need for *fundamental structural changes* more than they did a need for *targeted action or specific changes in public policy*, the method inevitably produced categorizations which are more contentious. Representative

statements are, therefore, provided, so that readers can consider whether they would have categorised them differently.

## **Findings**

### *Types of issues identified as social problems*

Table 1 shows the numbers and proportions of candidates identifying different types of issues which they perceived as social problems. Some addressed relatively complex issues such as “the stereotyping of child abuse in deprived areas”, while others were clearly influenced by topical news stories around issues such as the Tsunami disaster or MRSA (Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus Aureus). Some dealt with very broad subjects, such as “discrimination”, while others focused on more specific phenomena, such as the marginalisation of African Caribbean elders. However, there was a clear tendency for more applicants to express concern about issues which could be broadly classified as ‘anti-social behaviours by individuals or groups’ than in those which could be defined as ‘aspects of the social structure which have an adverse impact on individuals or groups’.

*Table 1. About here*

This was an opportunity sample found in a particular context. It is also possible that the wording of the question may have influenced how some individuals answered. However, it is interesting to note both the similarities and differences apparent from comparisons with results from opinion polls amongst the general adult population in Britain both recently and in the past. In 1981, following the Brixton riots, Gallup asked respondents about which were serious social problems in Britain. 83% cited 'crimes of violence', 71% 'juvenile crime', 63% 'drug taking', 58% 'bad housing' and 57% 'immigrants' (Wybrow, 1989). More contemporaneously with the data reported here, YouGov (2004) asked respondents to choose two items from a list of issues which would determine their voting intentions in the next general election. Some chose more obviously party political or economic issues. However, the largest groups in all English regions and in Wales and in all age and gender groupings, chose issues such as 'The state of public services, such as schools, the health service and help for old people' (32%), 'Law and order, crime and anti-social behaviour' (30%) and 'The number of immigrants and asylum seekers coming into the country' (26%).

### *Types of origins and causes suggested*

The ways in which respondents described the causes of the problems they identified were categorized as follows:

Known Individual Causes – Accounts which ascribed the origins and causes of problems largely to the actions and behaviour of individuals, giving less attention to social or external factors. These accounts frequently focused on individual ignorance, responsibilities and culpability or on the origins of behaviours in the behaviour of an individual's carers. They included statements such as:

Some of the reasons for this [Homelessness] could be that they spend their money elsewhere; individuals may suffer from alcoholism or gambling addictions which they spend all their money on.

A child raised in an aggressive home has a greater chance of becoming an aggressor because he/she has learned this and sees it as acceptable. This problem then is passed through each generation.

.....people who over indulge in drinking abuse themselves (and) others and expose themselves to abuse.

There are several reasons ...why a person could suffer from mental health (problems)...it is known to be genetic....

59.0% of classifiable accounts fitted this category.

Known Social Causes – Accounts which ascribed the origins and causes of problems largely to events, the inadequacy of government social policies or the actions of external agencies such as the media, and which presented individuals largely as ‘victims-of-circumstance’. They included statements such as:

.....not enough help is available if you don't have the right amount of points.....there should be more support for people who find themselves homeless. There is a high number of properties that are standing empty, why can't the council give these homes to people to rent....

Britain is a developed country and is considered to be one of the advanced countries of the world. Yet the government still hasn't sorted out the problem of homelessness.....Nobody chooses to live out in the streets.

While some people live in the lap of luxury, buying what they like and having ...concerns about what is the latest mobile phone, others are living in poverty, depression and poor living conditions.

I am regularly informed via the media of cases where failure to implement appropriate professional intervention in case of family breakdown has lead to more serious situations such as abuse and suicide.

37.4 % of classifiable accounts fitted this category.

Unknown Causes – Accounts which, whilst they identified and described social problems offered largely ‘circular’ analyses of their origins and causes or suggested that these were unknown. Such accounts included statements such as:

Material deprivation can stem from many factors such as having poor income or no income. Living in squalid, cramped, damp and unsavoury housing and areas. These causes are all part of the material deprivation cycle.

Only 3.6 % of classifiable accounts fitted this category.

Unclassifiable – Accounts which largely ignored the invitation to discuss the origins and causes of a social problem or which did so too superficially to allow them to be classified. An example of this small group is the piece which raised the issue of “identification cards for British citizens” and briefly described arguments which have been put forward in their favour.

6.1% of accounts fitted this category.

Table 2 summarises the main types of origins and causes of problems suggested by the candidates discussed above.

*Table 2.About here*

### *Types of possible solutions discussed*

Although they were not asked specifically to do so, 100 respondents (67.6%) mentioned possible solutions to the problems they chose to discuss. These were categorized as follows and are summarised in Table 3 below.

Radical / Revolutionary – Accounts which emphasised the need for fundamental structural changes in order to prevent or resolve the problem discussed. Such accounts included statements such as:

If there is no way of dividing the money more equally maybe the idea (of) increased taxes should be thought about.

These accounted for only 4.0% of classifiable responses.

Liberal / Reformist – Accounts which emphasised the need for targeted action or specific changes in public policy to ameliorate or resolve the problem discussed. They included statements such as:

I think a lot more funds should be put in place for back to work projects like New Deal. ....Also better trained advisers to help with rent and mortgage advice.

I think it is up to the government to help these vulnerable people, so that funding is available to help them sort out their lives.

I feel that unless there is an approach where the government introduces some new laws and legislation into coping and combating domestic violence then the Police are working in vain and merely scratching the surface.

As I've already written there are many reasons for mental health problems but it then becomes the job of professionals to try and help the person...

If Britain was more relaxed about sex education as (are) other countries I feel teenage pregnancy would drop.

...professional help should be available and implemented more readily to ease or solve problems quicker.

These accounted for the overwhelming majority (79.0%) of classifiable responses.

Conservative / Authoritarian – Accounts which emphasised the need for punishment or control of the individuals or groups seen as causing the problem discussed. They included statements such as:

To overcome the problem of binge drinking the government could (pass) new legislation which limits the amounts of alcohol bought by an individual in a licensed property e.g. pub, and if a young person (has) health problems due to binge drinking (they) should be made to pay for their health care.

To handle failure people should think rationally and avoid feeling guilty and blaming themselves and having self pity.

....we now have a generation with no morals whatsoever and this is what they will pass on to their on children who will continue the downward spiral.

These accounted for 17.0% of classifiable responses.

Unclassifiable – Accounts which did not discuss possible solutions. These accounted for 32.4% of the total responses.

*Table 3.About here*

## *Identifiable Patterns?*

### Gender

The results shown in Table 4 indicate that gender was not correlated with the particular types of causes suggested, but did appear to have an influence on the types of solutions suggested. Male applicants appeared more likely than females to advocate 'Conservative / Authoritarian' solutions and were much more likely to advocate Radical / Revolutionary solutions. However, given the very small numbers involved, the latter result, in particular, must be treated with great caution.

*Table 4. About here*

### Age

As will be seen from Table 5, age appeared to have a greater influence than gender on the particular types of causes or possible solutions suggested. Some of the patterns indicated suggest complexities which this sample is, perhaps, too small to explain with certainty. However, the two oldest groups and the very youngest group were the most likely to suggest 'social' causes, whereas those aged between 20 to 34 years were the most likely to suggest 'individual' causes. Those aged 20-24 years and 30-34 years were also noticeably more likely to suggest possible 'authoritarian/conservative' solutions. In this context it is interesting, although speculative, to note that the oldest group (born 1952-

1965) fall into an age-range which not only mirrors that of the youngest group's parents, but also that of many social work teachers and academics. All will have reached their adolescence before Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, while the youngest group (born 1985-1987) were reaching 'adulthood' during a period when the actuality of Tony Blair's 'New Britain' was becoming clearer. The contrasting group (born 1969-1984), meanwhile, are from an age-group which has frequently been described as 'Thatcher's children' (Guardian, 2004) and which proved itself slightly more likely than its counterparts to be amongst the 21.6% of the electorate who voted Labour in the 2005 British general election (MORI, 2005: BBC, 2005).

*Table 5. About here*

### Ethnicity

Table 6 shows that applicants with African ethnicity were by far the most likely to suggest 'individual' causes, whilst White applicants were the least likely to do so. Applicants with African or Asian ethnicity were, also, less likely than their White counterparts to suggest liberal/reformist solutions, while applicants with African ethnicity were less likely to do so than their Asian counterparts. However, such solutions were suggested by a majority from all ethnic groups. Applicants with African or Asian ethnicity were, also, much more likely than their White counterparts to suggest conservative/authoritarian solutions.

*Table 6. About here*

Successful / Unsuccessful applicants

As will be seen in Table 7, large numbers of applicants who suggested each type of cause and each type of possible solution were subsequently offered a place. However, it is also clear that those who suggested ‘social’ causes for problems and those who suggested ‘reformist’ and ‘radical’ solutions were more likely to be amongst those offered places than were those who suggested ‘individual’ causes or ‘conservative’ solutions. Those whose suggestions could not be categorized were also less likely to be amongst those offered places.

*Table 7. About here*

**Discussion**

The individuals responding clearly expressed their understanding from within unique frames of reference and further work is needed to focus on the impact of particular personal constructs on students’ developing analysis of issues and their future practice. However, the data presented here also suggests that there is considerable overlap between the frames used by many of them and that similar individual agendas have, probably, been influenced, if not set, by media coverage of issues. For example, it seems reasonable

to speculate that a large proportion were applying frames supplied by the popular media and by government when they identified as 'social problems' what can be defined as 'anti-social behaviours by individuals or groups' rather than 'aspects of the social structure which have an adverse impact on individuals or groups'.

For those who wish to promote and preserve a 'radical' approach within social work, the data offers, perhaps, both challenges and encouragement. A clear majority (59%) tended to see social problems through frames which emphasise 'individual' causes, but an even greater majority (79%) favoured 'liberal / reformist' solutions. It is, of course, not unexpected that would-be social workers tend to believe that interventions by professionals or changes in social policy will mitigate or resolve social problems and, despite the fact that most discussed the origins of problems in terms of the characteristics and behaviour of individuals, they also appeared very ready to acknowledge the obligations of the state and its institutions in ameliorating difficulties and distress. At the same time, there was very little emphasis on the need to change any aspect of the existing social structure in any fundamental way. The data confirmed that applicants were aware of relevant issues and were committed to finding solutions which would assist disadvantaged individuals or groups. However, most appeared relatively unaware of the 'social' origins of the issues which caused them concern and very few appeared to have any commitment to or confidence in radical change.

The data may, also, indicate that, at this stage, in their careers, some applicants simply had insufficient knowledge to allow them to analyse issues, in depth, in which case such gaps can, hopefully, be filled relatively easily by appropriate learning and teaching.

Equally, some applicants may lack the confidence to depart from messages about individual pathology which are increasingly promoted by sections of the popular media and some politicians, while, in the context and pressures of a time-limited selection exercise, they may well have had a reduced capacity to articulate complex ideas. Again, such gaps can, hopefully, be filled relatively easily by appropriate teaching and encouragement.

However, identifying the dominant frames of reference that drive students' reasoning on such issues is clearly of major importance, particularly where educators perceive a need to deconstruct those frames in order to stimulate reconsideration of the views and values which will underpin social work practice. If we are to help students to reframe issues and to change "the context of the message exchange" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p98), we shall also need to use elements of strategic frame analysis developed in arenas such as social and environmental campaigning (See Frameworks Institute, 2005). For example, we need to anticipate attitudinal barriers and communicate ideas in ways which can be understood. We need to understand students' existing frames and to offer alternatives which are seen as relevant by them.

Christie and Kruk (1998) reviewed previous research into why individuals choose to become social workers over a twenty year period (Pearson, 1973; Holme and Maizels, 1978; Uttley, 1981; O'Connor et al.; 1984; Solas, 1994), as well as analysing data from two new groups of students. They warn against "false polarisations" (p24) and emphasise the need to recognise that motives are both complex and changeable. Attitudes and beliefs about social problems are likely to be similarly complex, but it remains uncertain

how far they are changeable and perhaps, more importantly, how far they are changed by social work education. It is clear that the data presented here reinforces the observation that individual views and attitudes are likely to be dynamic and will not always fit tidily into categories fixed by researchers. However, many questions remain unanswered. Will exposure to research and knowledge demonstrating that particular social problems have origins both in 'social' causes and in 'individual' causes, actually, change the views of students who start with the view that they originate in one or the other? If it is essential that qualified social workers need to be able to recognise that both types of causes are relevant, do new recruits to the profession need to demonstrate that they recognise this from the outset?

Pearson (1975) noted the inaccuracy of suggestions that:

social-work apprentices are all radical activists, whereas their master tradesmen are all downright conservatives and psychoanalytical bullies. (p44)

Nevertheless, he asserted that recruits to social work had different ambitions for their profession than their teachers. Indeed, he suggested that their very choice of work was “a criticism of the society in which they live with their clients.” (p23). In the intervening decades, radical views within social work, as elsewhere, have been besieged by ideologies which have variously asserted that “there is no such thing as society” (Keay, 1987, p8.) and that social policy must be underpinned by notions of ‘conditionality’ (Blair, 1997; 2002; 2005).

The data reported here, perhaps reinforces the impression that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, recruits to British social work appear far less critical of the society in which they live than many in social work practice and education would wish them to be. Hence there is a clear danger that the profession's approach to the government's social policies will become increasingly uncritical and that even more social workers will come to see their role as little more than management of 'unacceptable' behaviour by individuals and groups.

However, there is, equally, no reason to doubt that, as in previous decades, the vast majority of recruits to British social work are motivated by a genuine desire to assist individuals and groups. It is perhaps the frames and language used to express this desire that have changed more than the substance of their commitment or potential to analyse what actually needs to be done.

## **Conclusion**

Adams et al. (2002) remind us that social work is "a perpetually changing and unfinished project" (pxix). If social work is to make an ongoing contribution to social justice, it needs to constantly renew not only its supply of qualifying practitioners who will do more than pay lip-service to this goal, but also to ensure that they have the knowledge and confidence to do so. We need to be both competent in and confident of our abilities "to join organizational and political action to individual action" (Moreau, 1979, p80) and to know that we have the collective support of our profession in doing so.

Very few would disagree with the view that the purpose of social work is to improve the lives of the disadvantaged or that the role of social work education is to produce practitioners who can effectively contribute to this goal in 'real life' situations. At the same time, many would, perhaps, argue that it is the role of neither to politicise. However, social work cannot be value free and those engaged within it need to be clear what values and ethics underpin their practice. Indeed, codes of practice, in the UK, require this of registered practitioners (GSCC, 2002b).

At the same time, when the knowledge base tells us clearly that the disadvantages facing individuals and groups arise, in large part, from 'social' causes, it is imperative that these issues are emphasised in the training of social workers. When it also suggests that effective improvements require fundamental changes in the society in which we live and in the social policies pursued by governments, then it is equally important that students develop their analysis of existing policies and institutions. This will require encouragement of critical thought beyond reflections on individual day-to-day practice to encompass a greater emphasis on how social structures and social policies aggravate or ameliorate social problems. To cite one particular example, social work students could be challenged to consider the view that being 'non-judgemental' is about respecting the essential worth and potential of each individual, regardless of their background and behaviour, rather than an opportunity to abrogate responsibility for making judgements. Such challenges may be contentious, but effective and relevant practice requires the recognition of injustice, oppression and exploitation, whether this is found in the behaviour of an abusive carer or partner or in government policies on asylum seekers or Incapacity Benefit.

This may not justify 'politicisation' in the sense of promoting particular political programmes. However, at a time when many politicians appear intent on turning citizens into passive consumers of party products 'sold' to them through a medium of 'spin' (See Pitcher, 2002), it requires, at least, the strengthening and defence of social work's role as an autonomous profession prepared to criticise or welcome government policy from a perspective based in evidence and actuality. Thus, while New Labour pursues its agenda for a 'something for something' society, British social workers may need reminding that it is sometimes necessary to follow the advice of the Claimants' Union and 'bite the hand that feeds you'.

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