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The Political Biographies of Social Workers: A Qualitative Study of the Political Lives of Social Workers

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***Abstract*—**This paper will explore the political biographies of social workers in a neoliberal era. The findings are based on a research project for a successfully completed professional doctorate in social work. The methodology deployed for the research is a combination of constructivist grounded theory and biographical inquiry. The paper will present findings from 14 biographical interviews and will focus on one case study of a participant whose life story is richly informed by political social work. The 14 participants reflect different genders, ethnic identities, cultural and linguistic identities, age and length of social work careers. The participants also reflect different forms of political engagement, such as, as political activists and members of political parties, including parliamentarians. The findings demonstrate how deeply ingrained the social work identity is amongst the participants and how their political identity has remained strongly social democratic in nature despite the many changes in the social work profession since the rise of neoliberalism as a thought collective and policy package. The individual case study will explore the early roots of political identity in the childhood and nurturing years and the interface with subsequent social work and political careers. It will also explore the evolution of the participant's political identity in the social work career. The case study will also present findings on how the participant has contributed to the political field with policy involvement and initiatives. The presentation will conclude with a discussion on how this particular group of social workers can best contribute to the future direction of the social work profession.

***Keywords*—**Political social work, political biographies, neoliberal, grounded theory.

I. Introduction

THIS paper examines the political biographies of a group of social workers across their lifetime to date and contextualises their biographies within the events of their own lives and the historical and theoretical developments of the social work profession with a primary focus on the UK. Very little has been published about the political biographies of social workers. While there is extensive literature on social work and politics both from a historical and theoretical perspective, there is very little on understanding how social workers' political biographies have been constructed. There is scarcely any other study specifically looking at the way neoliberalism has interacted with the political biography of social workers. This paper explores social workers known political belief system as well as political activism in the form of membership of a political party, trades union activity and involvement in interest groups. The paper also discusses areas for further research including a qualitative study focussing on what the social work politicians themselves regard as their greatest achievements and challenges in their political roles and how these relate to social work and social policy issues. New research would also need to examine how the social work politicians themselves believe they can make the best contribution to the future of the social work profession in a neoliberal era.

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II. Neoliberal Context

Of particular interest is how the political biographies of social workers reflect the social reformist values of the social work profession and how they relate to neoliberalism in social work from the 1980s to date. Thus, the development of neoliberal policies in Western countries and the effects these changes have had on social work, such as the introduction of business principles [1]-[3] are important considerations in this paper. Neoliberalism is defined as a 'thought collective' incorporating welfare retrenchment and a commitment to the supremacy of the market in the social field [4 p. 43]. It is widely regarded as having its source in the 1980s and has remained a dominant political and economic force ever since - successfully traversing changes of government, such as the election of a Labour Government in the UK (1997-2010), and emerging strongly from the financial crisis that started in 2008 [4]. It has continued to be the main ideological driving force in the political landscape of the UK resulting in a Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010-15) with a strong emphasis on austerity policies and welfare reform leading to significant welfare spending cuts and welfare retrenchment. Informed by a rhetoric of eliminating the UK's national deficit, the Coalition Government and the newly elected Conservative Government of 2015 have presented austerity as in the national interest. The anti-austerity voice in the UK has been limited to the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland, the Welsh National Party, Plaid Cymru in Wales and the UK-wide Labour Party, which currently has low levels of support according to public opinion polls.

It is argued that social work has been historically an inherently political activity with an emphasis on social reform and transformation. It is further contended that social work's best era was during the 1960s and 1970s with the creation of large statutory social work departments in local government

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with social workers having a greater degree of professional autonomy and professional respect than is the case today [5]. But with the advent of neoliberalism and business principles in welfare practice, the political nature of social work has been undermined. Exploring the political roots and the effects of neoliberalism on social work is a prerequisite to understanding the people who occupied that landscape, namely the participants in this research project. It helps to explain why they were attracted into social work as a social reformist profession in the first place and the frustrations that emerged with the hegemony of neoliberalism in welfare and social work. Many commentators [6], [7], agree that neoliberalism has had a major effect on social work not only in the introduction of business principles for welfare practice but also in diluting the nature of social work as a form of political practice. An example of social work as a form of political practice is its longstanding mandate of social justice and human rights [8]. Later-on in their careers, social workers experience career disillusionment as they faced the realities of neoliberalism's austerity measures; the ever-stringent eligibility criteria for services; the demands of social work's ever increasing auditing measures and bureaucratic management; and the frustration of not being able to meet their service users' needs. This situation has led to social workers leaving the profession and taking up employment in other fields.

III. Methodology

The conceptual framework for this research is informed by a social constructionist perspective which identifies the creation of knowledge as a representation of reality rather than viewing knowledge as a body of truth to be discovered [9]. The social constructionist perspective is closely allied to the symbolic interactionist perspective which also views knowledge as a social construction [10]-[12]. Within this conceptual framework, the methodologies of constructivist grounded theory and biographical inquiry sit comfortably and easily together since both methodologies have close affinities to symbolic interactionism and social constructionism [13], [11], [12].

Grounded theory emerged in the 1960s at a time when biographical inquiry was revitalised in the democratic turn in methodology, particularly pertaining to qualitative methodology. The 1960s also advanced values that are important to social work, such as social justice and equality. Thus, the methodology deployed has affinity with social work values, particularly the values of advancing the causes of under-represented groups and minorities. The research justified the use of a constructivist grounded theory and a biographical inquiry approach in examining the political biographies of the participants [13], [11], [12]. Biographical inquiry is used because it captures the life-long nature of political identity formation. Constructivist grounded theory provides a systematic approach particularly in the analysis of biographical interviews. It has a longstanding relationship with social work and social care research. Its emphasis on allowing theory to emerge from data is particularly suited to biographical research since biographies are grounded in and emerge from life experiences. This is a particularly pertinent contrast to neoliberalism in social work which has been, to a large extent, a hegemonic imposition on social workers.

In total, 14 biographical interviews were conducted in 2013 in the UK with one interview conducted in Germany. The German experience of the advance of neoliberalism has been similar to the UK's experience with the main difference being that the process of neoliberalism hegemony started later in Germany, namely after German reunification in 1990. The interviews lasted about two hours and were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The analysis process started after each interview with line-by-line and incident-to-incident coding, followed by focused coding and finally theoretical coding [11], [12]. Ethical approval for the research process was granted by the Ethics Review Panel, Keele University, in March 2013.

IV. Participants

The participant sample chosen for this study were 14 qualified social workers who are no longer in social work practice but work as either a political representative or activist, such as in one of the UK's parliaments and assemblies, as well as local authorities. In the past, the participants had completed a qualifying social work course and had practised as social workers. They had been employed in a range of social work settings, namely children and families, children with disabilities, young offenders, mental health and community work. Although no longer practising as social workers some of the participants are involved in voluntary work and community projects. Eight of the participants were women and six were men. Two came from an ethnic minority background. Their age ranged from early thirties to late sixties, reflecting the number of years they had spent in a social work and political career. The sample was chosen because of an interest in exploring why social workers were leaving the profession and why in particular social workers with a political identity were leaving to pursue their political interests elsewhere.

V. Findings

What has been remarkable about the findings of the research project is the strength and durability of both the participants' social work identity and social democratic values. In this sense their social democratic values have been stable across their life course to date. From early on their social democratic values were formed as a result of various key influences and experiences. High amongst these was the influence of family and significant others, such as teachers. The importance of family nurturing and the significant other cannot be overestimated as important influences on the formation of participants' political biographies. Families nurtured a sense of social conscience and regard for social justice, such as through promoting the importance of education for all and as a means towards social mobility. These values were conveyed by parents but also grandparents who were sometimes able to influence the upbringing of

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participants. One participant remembered her grandparents living in the family home and recalled many political debates happening between her father and grandfather. The importance of the significant other is also recognised by Molly Andrews in her seminal research on the biographies of lifelong socialists [14].

Participants' imaginations were aroused about the world order by teachers who taught about international relations and who challenged the conventional wisdom about the order of things. One participant recalled a primary school head teacher who would address the school assembly in the mornings by reading the headlines from a newspaper – sparking the participants' early interest in current affairs. Another participant recalled a radical teacher who would question assumptions about Britishness and the British state – particularly from a Celtic fringe perspective.

The experiences encountered by participants in their childhood included numerous examples of facing poverty - in some instances this led to resistance to ruling elites who were deemed to be fallible and contemptible. One participant recalled how his working-class father was treated indignantly and viewed as being of no account despite him having served in the army and being a devoted and hard-working employee in a harsh factory environment. He recalled the family poverty and how by the end of the week the food cupboard in the kitchen would be bare. Such vivid experiences and memories had a profound effect on the participant and he devoted his life to fighting injustices.

All participants entered the social work profession with enthusiasm and were passionate about making a difference to the lives of the people they were working with. In the early days, they enjoyed professional autonomy and felt that they were able to make a valuable contribution in helping others. They were particularly suited for and enjoyed community work, which they regarded as a form of political social work. In this regard the participants were examples of what Humphrey describes as the citizen route into social work [15]. In doing community work they organised communities and neighbourhoods to fight and campaign for their own interests and the interests of people and children living next to them. It is a sad reflection that community work within statutory social work is virtually non-existent in the UK today. Its demise is linked to the rise of neoliberalism and its antipathy to any field of social work that seeks to organise working class people into a form of political challenge. It is also the first field of social work practice to be cut back in times of economic recession and austerity with the priority in those challenging times being given to case work practice.

Notwithstanding the early career enthusiasm, later-on in their careers the early career passion had turned to career disillusionment. The transition from one to the other is remarkable and poses a challenge to the social work profession, not least in retaining social work practitioners who might be tempted to leave the profession. Many of the participants encountered an uncaring social work machine that had been fostered by neoliberalism and its close ally of managerialism. In recent years, social work had seen the materialization of a bullying culture, high turn-over of staff, and the promotion of unqualified managers. A culture of keeping everyone down and poor social work practises were encountered. Reflecting on the social work profession from the vantage point of the present day one participant expressed dismay at the erosion of social work services and an organisational culture of doing only the bare statutory minimum.

In their political careers as council and parliamentary representatives and activists, participants found the social work skills they had acquired an enormous advantage in doing their political work, especially constituency work with constituents who had similar vulnerabilities to social work clients. In these instances, the participants felt that the skills of empathy and listening which they had acquired in social work enabled them to communicate effectively with constituents and maintain proper professional boundaries particularly concerning time-keeping. Other social work skills that were of particular benefit in the political role was the skill of team working and also for those who had been in social work management, the skill of managing people and a busy constituency office.

In their various roles participants fought against austerity measures introduced in the UK from 2010, and in particularly the arbitrary top-slicing of budgets which reduced services for vulnerable children. Participants also fought for human rights, such as the rights of refugees and the rights of children to be heard by service providers. Their social democratic identity endured strongly throughout their political careers to date. It is impressive how the participants' social work identity was their master identity throughout their political careers. Even many years after leaving the social work profession the participants strongly identified with social work and regarded themselves as social workers. Thus, this group has much to offer the future of the social work profession as consultants and sympathetic supporters in positions of power and influence.

VI. Case Study

Gareth Davies (pseudonym) has been a member of one of the UK's parliaments for over a decade. During his childhood, he recalled being affected by what were known as 'the events'. This was the rise in social movements and world-wide protests for social justice and civil rights during the 1960s. He also recalled being frightened by the thought of a nuclear war at a time when the Cold War was at its pinnacle. He developed a sympathy for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and joined Amnesty International. His brother had been a student in Paris in 1968 and an eye-witness to the riots that occurred there. Among his other memories was viewing political satire programmes on television in the 1960s, such as the famous British programme, *That Was The Week That Was.* These experiences contributed to the development of his political identity and by the time he entered university he has become involved with linguistic minority rights.

Before becoming a parliamentarian, Gareth had qualified as a social worker and worked as a statutory social worker within local authorities in the UK. Amongst his foremost memories

was encountering for the first time the poverty experienced by social work service users and sensing the injustice of the economic system. He then became a social work academic and contributed to the social work literature and wrote a book for social work practitioners. During his parliamentary career, Gareth has continued to develop his involvement in social work through participating in social work committees and taking an interest in legislation relating to social work and welfare. His parliamentary interests include social policy and international development. He has campaigned against austerity cuts in the UK, such as against the elimination of the Disability Living Allowance benefit (DLA). He has also campaigned for minority rights, particularly linguistic rights. Gareth has established a reputation as an anti-war campaigner, opposing the Iraq War and the bombing of Syria in 2013.

VII. Conclusion

Gareth is an example of a social work politician, namely qualified social workers who have developed political careers, and in his case (and of others), as full-time elected politicians in one of the parliaments and local authorities in the UK. In their political roles, the social workers have demonstrated an enduring commitment to the social work profession and to the people who use social work services. They are uniquely placed to campaign and advocate on behalf of the social work profession. The social work profession could make more use of their skills, talents and positions of influence. Such support in high places is important as the social work profession responds to the continued hegemony of neoliberalism and the weakening of social work's social reformist and social justice mandate.

This paper has argued that the construction of political biographies of social workers is a life-long process influenced by the neoliberal landscape of social work which has had a bearing on their social work and political trajectories. The implications for the social work profession are that this group of social work politicians are a potential important bridge between the profession and policy makers. This will help the profession develop in its own way and safeguard the profession's social justice mandate. Further research needs to be done with this group of social work politicians to identify from their perspective what their greatest achievements are and what challenges they face as politicians advocating on behalf of the social work profession. Moreover, how they view their future contribution and achieving a positive impact on behalf of the social work profession.

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