Editorial: Unprecedented Times? Social Work and Society post-COVID-19

As the sun sets on our editorship of this journal, we in the UK, like many parts of the world, are having to live with the ‘new normal’ of sharing our lives with the potentially deadly virus, COVID-19. Across the globe, countries are adopting variations on how to manage this threat, including serious restrictions on travel, social distancing and lockdowns. As the pendulum swings between severe measures and easing of measures, recording and accounting for death tolls, realising the longer-term health, economic and social consequences and grappling with plans for recovery, reviewing our five years as editors pale in significance. Nevertheless, in our time as Editors, we have sought to draw attention to the social, political, economic and ethical contexts in which social work operates, including the implications of this current pandemic. In recent Editorials, we have focused on the heightened vulnerability of certain groups, many of whom are long-term users of social work and social care services, as well as the impact on those trying to manage without the supports which have previously been their lifeline. Others may be structurally disadvantaged in society or in the workforce; although the virus can be deadly, and there is no vaccine or cure as of yet, not all people are equally threatened. It appears, at least, that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities have a higher mortality rate and significant overcrowded housing makes people vulnerable as does older age and underlying health conditions.

Much is still to be learnt, including for social work practice. The impact of lockdown and social distancing presents, at first sight, a significant threat to the relationship-based skills on which social work has traditionally relied and reasserted the importance of in the last decade. Home visits using visors and other personal protection equipment; the prohibition of reassuring touch with fearful, distressed or confused individuals; online conferencing and meetings replacing more inclusive and potentially supportive multi-professional decision-making fora: these are just some of the changes forced upon us which challenge our preferred modes of interaction. In some specialist fields, such as hospital and hospice social work, social workers have had to cede the mediating and supportive roles they traditionally perform with patients and their families to already overstretched nurses and doctors. Not all is bad, however, as bureaucracy is reduced and more efficient ways of working are also emerging. There is a
new respect for frontline social care workers who are caring for the most vulnerable often at great risk to themselves. One thing that is clear, is that social work, along with allied professions, must adapt and change but do so without losing sight of its core ethos and skills.

In so doing, as classical crisis theory taught us (Caplan, 1964), we must draw on previous experiences of loss and challenge as we seek the way out of this current crisis. Here is where theory and research must play its part and the British Journal of Social Work will, we are confident, prove up to the task of dissemination of emerging responses and critical debate—as it has in the past. In considering the content of this our valedictory Editorial, we returned to the plans for the journal which we had outlined at the outset. Our aims were 3-fold: we wanted to facilitate front line debate between research and practice, embracing ethics, policy and education alongside; we wanted to support the visibility and development of the social work research community and specifically highlighted social work Ph.D.s; we wanted to strengthen and widen the international appeal of the BJSW. All three of these objectives are critical for social work to go forward after what has been termed the greatest threat to human society of modern times. Arguably, however, this is a very first-world perspective. Globally, the poorest and most socially disadvantaged people are also the worst affected by climate change and the developing field of green social work needs to be high on our agenda. The threat of pandemic and climate change are interconnected and economists, for example, are beginning to see green solutions as also the way forward in economic recovery. Recovery of a sense of well-being after the stress, loneliness, isolation and anxiety or fear experienced by many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in our communities, must cause us to consider what resources those of us more fortunate have been able to draw upon—and how to support service users in finding and connecting with these, whether it be accessing a green space, engaging in a therapeutic activity or reconnecting with buried spiritual resources. The literature on spirituality (religious and secular) and especially eco-spirituality may assist here:

There will be moments when the deeply negative aspects of our work, indeed of human existence, threaten to overturn and crack open our carefully constructed world-views as we try to make new sense of it all .... This journey into the relatively unknown territory of social work and spirituality is, we suggest, a new way of ‘knowing’, fit for purpose when facing the challenges of contemporary social work. (Holloway and Moss, 2010, p. 182)

The articles which we publish in this issue each address one or more of our three initial aims. They also show social work striving for new

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1 The Virtual Issue ‘Resilient, steadfast and forward-looking: the story of social work in the UK told through 50 years of the British Journal of Social Work’ (forthcoming), is testament to this.
knowledge, or ‘ways of knowing’ as it grapples with both new challenges and those well-rehearsed ‘wicked problems’.

Supporting social work research

Although all articles published in the BJSW are, of course, evidence of social work research, the five grouped together at the start of this issue show some of the new directions being taken as well as providing evidence of the growing strength of the social work research community at all levels. First, an Australian team (Waling, Lyons, Alba, Minichiello, Barrett, Hughes, Fredriksen-Goldsen and Edmonds) presents their qualitative study of older trans women’s perceptions of residential care. Their findings show how past experiences of discrimination and abuse had fuelled fears about institutional care in the future, including that they might not have appropriate health care and treatment options available, to the extent that many were actively putting in place alternative care plans. This study was funded by the Australian Research Council and has the potential to influence health and social care services for the trans community not only in Australia but also wider. Next, a UK team (Wilberforce, Abendstern, Batool, Boland, Challis, Christian, Hughes, Kinder, Lake-Jones, Mistry, Pitts and Roberts) looks at what service users want from mental health social work. Pointing out that most studies of mental health social work present the views of social workers, this research was co-produced with services users. Funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) School for Social Care Research, this research also makes an important contribution to the inter-professional literature by distinguishing the hallmarks (as rated by service users) of good social work practice in mental health. A single-authored ethnographic study follows, from Mira Sörmark. Located in Sweden, this study nevertheless looks at an issue of growing international concern, intimate partner violence perpetrated by men towards female partners. Interestingly, Sörmark also suggests that the only way to understand these men’s accounts (and hence to develop effective social work interventions) is through a rich appreciation of their lived experience, which incorporates both internal individual worlds and external structural explanations. This research is representative of the social work tradition of small, theory-driven qualitative studies conducted by a single researcher. The next article comes from Ireland and is an example of a growing trend in social work research—the longitudinal qualitative study. Burns, Christie and O’Sullivan looked at the problem of retention amongst child protection and child welfare social workers, identified as an issue in a number of European countries. However, whilst much attention has been given to turnover, particularly in the early years post-qualification, this study found that those social workers who stayed the course beyond five years became progressively more embedded and committed to this specialism. This has
important implications for the duty and motivation of employers to offer a supportive environment in which social workers may develop confidence and expertise. The critical effect of the work environment is emphasised by Astvik, Welander and Larsson, who also looked at worker retention in another longitudinal study, this time of Swedish social services. Their focus was on the impact of the new public management style on social workers’ levels of stress and burnout, rather than the content of the work per se, but the overriding conclusions mirror that of the Irish study.

International agenda

In this section, we have selected articles which illustrate the range of issues and location of authors across the globe which find their way into the pages of the BJSW. First, Hassan, Siddiqui and Friedman analyse through a quantitative study the impact of infertility on women in Pakistan. The authors show how an issue which in the west might seem to belong primarily to health care not social work, becomes very much social work’s concern in a context in which infertility is critically bound up with stigma, marginalisation, oppression, intimate partner violence and consequent negative effects on women’s health and well-being. Next, a Chinese-American team (Wang, Victor, Hong, Wu, Huang, Luan and Perron) applied a systematic review of empirical intervention studies to explore the care of children left behind in mainland China whilst their parents seek employment abroad. Funded by the National Social Science Fund of China, the authors suggest that the sheer scale of the problem of children made vulnerable and at-risk by this practice, demands priority attention from the still new profession of social work in China. Again, although not unknown in countries with well-developed child welfare systems, this research shines a light on a practice little studied to date.

Moving to Australasia, Petersen and Parsel examine a problem common in developed countries—homelessness—looking specifically at the plight of homeless older people. Although their conclusion that housing, older people’s care and health services must intersect to tackle this problem is not new, their placing this into the context of troubled family relationships as a cause of older people’s homelessness highlights an angle, central to social work, which is not usually the first consideration. From New Zealand, Raewyn Tudor looks at an increasingly important field for social work in the twenty-first century in an article looking at how social workers responded to natural disaster in the aftermath of the 2011 Earthquake in Christchurch. Tudor used a positive critique to examine the practice accounts of school social workers, putting them alongside the main features of recovery policies which provide for individual assistance for vulnerable groups who are unlikely to access community self-help initiatives. The
social workers used therapeutically inclined relational work with their clients to encourage their well-being. The increasing involvement of social workers in post-disaster work will be returned to in a forthcoming special issue of this journal.

To round up this focus on international social work, the next two articles (from Norway and Belgium, respectively) examine how social workers respond to the intractable social problem of poverty and suggest that poverty-aware social work requires a critical and sustained commitment to move beyond individual self-reflection towards critical analysis of the political, economic and social policy contexts in which we work. Throughout Europe, there has been a trend towards increased levels of child poverty; although this is greater in Southern and Eastern countries, no country has challenged this trend. Malmberg-Heimoneen and Tøge used a cluster-randomised design to examine government and family interventions in Norway and their impact upon child poverty. Roets, Van Bevern, Saar-Heiman, Degerickx and Vandekerken focus on students’ understandings of poverty in a study conducted in Flanders, Belgium. Building on the central notion that social workers need to be able to understand poverty in a conceptual framework embracing individual, cultural and structural explanations of poverty in order that they can adopt a way of working that is both critical and reflexive, their article offers a qualitative analysis of the reflections that students made about the learning process in a post-academic course and suggest ways in which teaching can help social workers better understand social issues. Both these studies emphasise the need for structural explanations and a social work practice that is rooted in the community.

Research and social work practice

This final group of articles all provide examples of research directly informing social work practice in different ways. The first article (Mendes and Rogers) examines young people who are moving from Out-of-Home Care and looks at what lessons Australian social work practice can learn from the extended care programmes in the USA and England. They examine public evaluations of extended care programmes and make recommendations for future Australian programmes for care leavers. The next article (Talbot, Fuggle, Foyston and Lawson) has an interconnected theme of care services and provides an evaluation over ten years of the Adolescent Multi-Agency Specialist Service, an edge of care service provided in Islington, England. It also represents effective co-working between academics and practitioners. It is generally agreed that late entry to the care system often has poorer outcomes for the individual and if care can be prevented for adolescents then this would be beneficial. The complex needs of
the adolescent and family provide significant challenges for social work services and other agencies. Continuing the theme of children in care, Shaw and Greenhow report on recent research that examined the perceptions of professionals about the sexual and criminal exploitation of children in care. Based in the north-west of England and using focus groups and semi-structured interviews they provide further evidence of the vulnerability of children who are ‘looked after’ and how this can be exploited. Significantly they raise the issue of an approach that is all too often prosecution-led rather than seeing children as a vulnerable group open to exploitation.

Few could doubt that at the present time many countries have to work out how to respond to the arrival at their borders of large numbers of asylum seekers. So, the article by Larkin and Lefevre is timely in that they examine the complex inter-subjective encounters of unaccompanied minors (under age eighteen years) who usually have little understanding of the role of social workers. These are a diverse group of young people who are generally underrepresented in the literature and this article helps to shed light on the many challenges they face.

Niamh Flanagan, in a single-authored article, takes a step back from the notion of research informing practice to consider the wide range of sources which practitioners use to inform their practice. She suggests that social workers adopt a pragmatic approach to the gathering of information that includes, but by no means is limited to, research. One such example is provided in the next article in which an academic researcher and a researcher-practitioner based in Seville, Spain, evaluate a project utilising the role of theatre in social work. The article by Muñoz-Bellerín and Cordero-Ramos covers a decade of working alongside homeless individuals in which theatre is used as a tool to promote capacity within the group with consequent empowerment. With echoes of community social work in the UK and the powerful writing of Boal (1979), the article makes for informative reading demonstrating how it might be possible to create informal spaces where marginalised people can interact meaningfully with mainstream society.

This seems an appropriate note on which to conclude our final Editorial. We wish the new editors and future writers in the BJSW good courage and good fortune as they take up the reins and look forward to seeing the journal go from strength to strength.

References

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