Please cite the Published Version

Additional Information: This is an open access article which first appeared in The British Journal of Social Work

Contesting Neoliberal Reform of Statutory Social Work in Switzerland and England: Discretionary Spaces, Collective Resistance and Ethico-Political Professionalism

Rich Moth [1],*, Sigrid Schilling[2], Lukas Neuhaus [2], Michael Lavalette[3] and Beat Mürner[2]

[1]Department of Social Care and Social Work, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
[2]Hochschule für Soziale Arbeit, Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, Olten, Switzerland
[3]School of Social Sciences, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

*Correspondence to Dr Rich Moth, Department of Social Care and Social Work, Brooks Building, Manchester Metropolitan University, 53 Bonsall St, Hulme, Manchester M15 6GX, UK. E-mail: R.Moth@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This article reports findings from a qualitative study of the impacts of, and practitioner responses to, neoliberal social work reforms in Switzerland and England. The article highlights commonalities, and contrasts, in how neoliberalism has restructured social work across the two jurisdictions. Social workers responded to neoliberalisation in a variety of ways, often through adaptation but sometimes by challenging reforms. This resistance primarily involved individualised forms of agency promoting social justice in practice, such as carving out discretionary spaces within casework. However, in Switzerland, collective agency also emerged in the form of anti-cuts campaigning alongside service users. The literature tends to counterpose these micro and macro levels of agency, theorising discretion and resistance to the contradictions and value tensions generated by neoliberal reform as largely a product of practitioners' individual ethical dispositions. However, we argue that enduring legacies of social justice values and relationship-based practices within social work institutions are also relevant in shaping how social workers navigate

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

reforms. These enduring features offer institutional and normative resources of solidarity which can strengthen the possibilities for practitioner agency, at both individual *and* collective levels, to resist neoliberal reconfigurations and promote more liberatory and transformative forms of practice. We call this orientation 'ethico-political professionalism'.

Introduction

The article presents findings from a research study that examines social work professionalism in Switzerland and England in the context of neoliberal restructuring over the last three decades. The article begins with a brief definition and description of neoliberalism and then examines the neoliberalisation of social work. Drawing on Harris (2014), we identify three intersecting dimensions of neoliberal reform: marketisation, managerialisation and consumerisation. These top-down modalities of organisational reform have sought to embed principles such as economic efficiency and labour market activation within social work provision. The article considers the particular ways these reform processes have reshaped welfare labour processes and thereby reconfigured contemporary social work practice. Social workers in both contexts have responded to these dynamics in a variety of ways, sometimes through adaptation to neoliberal imperatives but also by challenges to them. This latter dimension is the main focus of the article, which seeks to deepen understanding of social workers' engagements in activities related to their professional role that are informed by ethical and political commitments. We call these tendencies in social work practice 'ethico-political professionalism'. The article also considers tensions and contradictions associated with such forms of ethico-political activity.

Neoliberal reform of social work and the welfare state in Switzerland and England

Since the 1970s across Western Europe, there has been a general shift from a post-war consensus around state intervention and provision of welfare to the emergence of neoliberal welfare state regimes (Ferguson *et al.*, 2002). In England, this policy agenda was first introduced through the programmes of the 1979–1997 Conservative administration but underpinned the orientation of subsequent governments. Whilst Switzerland was an early centre of neoliberal thinking (Walpen, 2004), and there is a long tradition

of private sector involvement in social policy (Bertozzi and Gilardi, 2008), distinctively neoliberal reforms in the Swiss welfare system became prominent from the 1990s (Nadai, 2009; Streckeisen, 2014).

In relation to social work, the neoliberal reform programme has three primary intersecting dimensions: marketisation, managerialisation and consumerisation (Harris, 2014). In the sphere of social work and welfare provision, *marketisation* has tended to take the form of the creation of internal and external markets and contracting out of services. In England, these were initiated through the NHS and Community Care Act 1990, which created a new infrastructure to enable various 'routes to market' for health and social care provision (Clarke, 2004). Subsequent legislation has built upon and deepened these marketisation processes, including provisions to further embed care markets in the Care Act 2014 (Lymbery, 2019) and outsourcing of children services in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (Jones, 2019). In Switzerland, private providers are common in the welfare system (Bertozzi and Gilardi, 2008), though without social care markets comparable to England. However, a core element of neoliberal social policy is its workfare orientation, with a growing preponderance of private social enterprises focused on labour market integration of service users (Adam *et al.*, 2016).

The second dimension of neoliberal reform is *managerialisation*. This involves the introduction of performance management cultures through target regimes aiming to increase productivity and achieve purported efficiency gains through cost containment. These managerialisation strategies thus exert greater control over social work professional practice through increased surveillance and performance monitoring on the one hand and embedding more proceduralist/process-driven approaches to practice that minimise relational interactions and constrain professional discretion on the other (Harris, 2014). In England, this led to social work priorities and objectives being defined at senior management level, with a much greater consciousness of financial and budget considerations to further embed market norms (Harris and White, 2009). In Switzerland, a similar target culture in social work has become particularly visible in areas such as labour market integration of service users (Moachon and Bonvin, 2013).

The neoliberal managerialisation of practice has been implemented through significant organisational and occupational restructuring of the social work labour process. This has taken three main forms: task fragmentation and deskilling, labour substitution via workforce remodelling and role specialisation (Braverman, 1974; Carter and Stevenson, 2012). These combine in variegated ways across different arenas of social work practice. The first of these is practitioner *deskilling in the context of task fragmentation*. This often takes the form of the social worker assessing the service user's circumstances but then support interventions being contracted out (England) or delegated to other agencies (Switzerland)

for service delivery (Nadai and Canonica, 2012; Harris, 2014). A second is *role specialisation*. For instance, in England, NHS-based mental health social workers may be required to reduce their role in longer-term case management in order to refocus on short-term tasks such as social care assessments to meet specific performance indicators (Lilo and Vose, 2016). Similarly in the Swiss welfare system an expanding focus on employability has led not to a widening role array for social workers but to a retention of existing narrow specialisms (Bieri *et al.*, 2013). A third process is *labour substitution*. In the Swiss system, this is apparent in the outsourcing of the new employment support roles to employment workers (Bieri *et al.*, 2013). In England, this involves recruitment of non-professionally qualified workers to carry out less complex tasks both to reduce staffing costs and increase productivity (Carter and Stevenson, 2012). All three processes are overlapping and interrelated.

A third dimension of neoliberal reform is *consumerisation*. This manifests as a shift in responsibility for provision of care and support from the state towards individual service users (Harris, 2014). In England, assets/strengths-based approaches in legislation and assessment tools are mandated to encourage service users to self-manage care, increase labour market engagement and thereby reduce state liabilities (Edwards and Parkinson, 2023). However, conversely, when service users are unable or unwilling to adapt to such requirements and accountabilities there is an increasing tendency to apportion blame and construct the individual as 'problematic' (Brown and Baker, 2012). In Swiss social policy, the neoliberal 'activation' agenda rose to dominance in the mid-1990s, linking service users' social security benefits to labour market participation (Nadai, 2009; Streckeisen, 2014). There is pressure on social workers to implement activation-oriented policies and enact punitive sanctions for non-achievement of employment goals in ways that construct service users as to blame for their circumstances (Müller de Menezes, 2012; Bonvin and Rosenstein, 2015).

As this suggests, responsibilisation tendencies in current policy agendas are experienced as an imposition on social workers as well as service users. In both Switzerland and England, these processes manifest as a 'new accountability' for the outcomes of social work at the individual practitioner level (Juhila *et al.*, 2017). In practice, this embeds *actuarialism* (audit trails of decisions) and *prudentialism* (defensive practice to manage risks), with blame apportioned to practitioners when adverse events occur (Moth, 2022). This leads to a paradoxical sense amongst social workers that, at a time of reduced control and discretion in relation to professional decision-making, social work organisations hold them more individually accountable than before for outcomes, in particular adverse outcomes (Neuhaus, 2022).

The last decade has seen an amplification and intensification of these neoliberal trends as a result of the austerity agenda implemented

following the financial crisis of 2007–2008. In both England and Switzerland, social workers have been subjected to increasing workloads and administrative duties alongside swingeing cuts to resources and staffing levels (Haupert *et al.*, 2012; Lavalette, 2017; Eser Davolio *et al.*, 2020). In both jurisdictions, targets for financial savings have been pursued via increased levels of conditionality in the benefits system (BASS, 2015; Moth and Lavalette, 2017).

Social work professionalism and spaces of discretion and resistance

However, the reshaping of the social work labour process by neoliberal reform is complex and uneven. Social workers are impacted in different ways. Processes of managerialisation and deskilling of practitioners are in significant tension with the task autonomy and performative discretion of models of professionalism. As a result, social workers retain a certain amount of discretion (Mooney and Law, 2007). Such discretionary spaces offer possibilities for contesting and challenging the constraints associated with neoliberal reform (Harris and White, 2009). Consequently, forms of resistance may emerge at these points of tension between managerial and professional processes. These take a variety of forms, from small-scale 'quiet challenges' to managerialism in everyday practice to more collective campaigning activities (Harris and White, 2009).

Indeed, certain dimensions of professionalism may themselves represent a countervailing tendency in opposition to managerialism (Evetts, 2011). Lavalette (2007) has noted how an ethic of professionalism in social work underpinned by values of social justice has been foregrounded in certain instances of collective resistance to reforms seeking to deskill this professional group. There are affinities here with the notion of democratic or collaborative professionalism (Malin, 2020), which highlights a new potential orientation for public sector professionals as agents of change in the construction of more democratic health and social care systems alongside and in partnership with service users and wider communities. Here, we seek to contribute to this debate by developing and refining the concept of 'ethico-political professionalism' (Moth, 2020, 2022).

Theorising discretion and resistance in the social work profession

Much of the literature on the scope of professional discretion in social work tends to locate its manifestation, or absence, as a function of the individual characteristics of the worker. For instance, Evans (2013) develops a typology of practitioners as outcome-oriented versus

rule-followers, whilst Bertotti (2016) creates a 4-fold typology defined along two axes of 'organisational belonging' and 'critical thinking'. Whilst these models identify some relevant dynamics, we argue that they offer a rather individualised and static conception of social worker professional identity.

Such approaches have affinities with classic 'trait' theories of professionalism, which tend to marginalise considerations of how power shapes the social work labour process (Harris, 1998). Instead, we argue that the immediate organisational setting and wider political contexts in which social workers are positioned both enable and constrain forms of professional activity. This perspective is shared by Weinberg and Taylor (2014) who highlight the contextually situated nature of social workers' use of discretionary action. However, they then go on to counterpose micro level discretionary resistance (which they describe as 'rogue behaviour') to macro level collective forms, suggesting the former often undermines the latter (Weinberg and Taylor, 2014). Similarly, Carey and Foster (2011) separate micro from macro but, unlike Weinberg and Taylor (2014), they distinguish what they consider relatively apolitical individualised acts of recalcitrance ('deviant' social work) from collectivised struggles oriented to social justice (radical social work).

Our argument is that though aspects of individual social worker identity may be pertinent to understanding discretionary acts, Carey and Foster (2011) are mistaken to largely depoliticise the ethical stance taken by practitioners in their study. In doing so, they reproduce an individualising neoliberal logic that seeks to divorce ethical decision-making from its wider political and policy context. Whether or not social workers overtly link particular acts of practice to an underlying radical theory, we concur with Banks (2014) who argues that practitioners' identification with social work values of social justice takes their ethical positioning on to the terrain of the 'ethico-political'. This is because such values-based commitments tend to connect their activity as professionals to wider political and policy concerns with redistributive, egalitarian and anti-oppressive agendas.

We further contend that the fundamental distinction between discretionary action at the micro (individual) and macro (collective) levels proposed in Carey and Foster (2011), and to a lesser degree in Weinberg and Taylor (2014), is also problematic. This is because, as we seek to show later, an ethico-political orientation can be an enabling factor for resistance across these levels (Banks, 2014). For example, the internal contradictions generated by neoliberal reform of social work have the potential to create conditions amenable to *both* individual *and* collective forms of resistance (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006). We argue, therefore, that it is preferable to regard individual and collective forms of discretionary activity as located on a continuum of resistance along which

social workers move according to the organisational and political exigencies of the setting.

We utilise the notion of 'ethico-political professionalism' (Moth, 2020, 2022) as a means of drawing these strands together into a framework for understanding the potentialities and barriers to resistance by social workers at the nexus of neoliberal reform processes and spaces of relative discretion within statutory social work in Switzerland and England. Rather than offering a static account of individual social worker traits, this framework provides a means to explore the particular enabling or constraining conditions within a setting (at micro, meso and macro levels) and how these shape 'directional tendencies' towards certain forms of action (Archer, 1995).

To do so, the data in the Results section below will be used to illustrate emergent features of the setting which facilitate or inhibit forms of individual and collective discretion and resistance. In the Discussion section, we will develop this theoretical framework to illustrate how these features have the potential to generate a directional tendency towards 'ethico-political professionalism' in social work practice. However, we will first provide a concise outline of the study's methodology.

Methods

The main aim of the study was to explore the impact of neoliberal organisational reform on the professional identity and practice orientations of social workers in Switzerland and England. The study met accepted ethical guidelines and received ethical clearance from the relevant university committees.

Due to variation in the organisation of social work across the two jurisdictions, as well as divergences in research culture and pragmatics, there were slight variations in how the Swiss and English research teams selected and recruited participants. Within the framework of the Swiss sub-sample, a total of eleven narrative expert interviews (Meuser and Nagel, 2002) with a topic-centred introductory sequence were conducted with social workers in a German-speaking canton of Switzerland between February 2018 and October 2019. The interviews were conducted in Swiss German and translated by the authors for this article. For the successive selection of interviews, a criterion assumed to be relevant was varied in each case in the sense of theoretical sampling. The criteria were: status within the organisation (four managers, seven front line social workers), gender (eight female, three male) and region (six urban, three rural, two suburban). For the English sub-sample, data were collected via two interviewing techniques: five group interviews and nine individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. The research team selected a purposive sample of social workers from across the three main sectors of statutory social work practice: children and families, adults and mental

health, but also from generic Emergency Duty Teams (EDT). Data were collected between June 2018 and November 2019. The total number of participants included ($n = 21$) was as follows: seven Mental health social workers (four female, three male); six Adults' social workers (five female, one male); three Children and families' social workers (two female, one male); five EDT social workers (three female, two male). Participants with post-qualifying experience of statutory social work practice ranging from long-term to relatively recently qualified were recruited. The participants worked in three different local authorities in North West England.

The interviews in both jurisdictions were conducted in a topic-centred manner and oriented to the study's research aims and objectives. Participants were asked to describe their everyday work practices and any changes over time, how such changes have affected perceptions of their professional role, and how they accommodated, responded to or challenged these processes.

The empirical data were analysed using the methodology of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Oliver, 2012). Both teams transcribed all interviews verbatim and coded data. The analytical procedures followed a qualitative-reconstructive methodology that started from participants' descriptions of their everyday work practices and concerns. However, our approach followed an abductive orientation that locates everyday experiential concerns within wider structural contexts (Scheunpflug *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, to inform theory development, the findings were contextualised at three distinct but interacting levels of scale: the routines and everyday interactions within front line social work, organisational transformations and wider socio-political and welfare systems.

The limitations of the study include its relatively small sample size, which has implications for the generalisability of the findings, whilst differences in social work organisational systems across the two jurisdictions created some challenges for direct comparability of professional roles. Though the team used triangulation by observer to improve consistency and reduce researcher bias when analysing data transcripts (Padgett, 2008), the validity of the findings might have been further strengthened through respondent validation/member checking (Buchbinder, 2011).

Results

Discretion and resistance in English and Swiss social work

Our participants described the effects of neoliberal reform in terms of an increasingly desk-bound practice, significant pressure to adhere to managerialist requirements through forms of proceduralism, and the increasing exclusion of frontline social workers from resource-allocation

and decision-making processes. Meanwhile, they described service users as increasingly subject to the devolution of various forms of responsibility from state to individual (e.g. for care, financial support, to secure employment) (Ferguson, 2007).

Discretion and resistance in England

Whilst acknowledging the constraints associated with these policy and organisational dynamics, social workers nonetheless described the strategic deployment of the limited spaces of professional discretion that remained in order to continue to do relational and values-based casework. Phrases such as 'outside the box', 'underground', 'off piste' or 'in tiny corners' were utilised to describe these practices, evoking the transgressive nature of a continued focus on such forms of casework and the challenges encountered in doing so. Some examples of these forms of intervention will be provided, before concluding with a wider discussion of the aspirations towards and contradictions of ethico-political professionalism in contemporary social work in England.

Practitioners sought to carve out spaces for discretionary interventions. For mental health social workers, these commonly involved carrying out relatively mundane tasks alongside or on behalf of service users (e.g. with welfare benefits, housing, activities of daily living) that were regarded as no longer within the scope of statutory services and were ordinarily outsourced to private or third-sector providers.

> *MHSW1*: I suppose there have been times where you just find yourself doing a little bit of work that's maybe off-piste that you maybe should have really directed to a third party but you're that involved with the case, it's sometimes easier and more practical for you actually maybe to do a little bit of support with that person. […]

> *MHSW3*: I think the thing that makes it hard is it's not counted within our workload so we know to do it, it puts more pressure on us but obviously there's reasons why we came into this job, so we're not going to see obvious things that need doing and not do them.

However, as this group interview discussion highlights, the rationale for 'off-piste' practice may go beyond considerations of practicality to encompass the ethical implications of leaving service users without such support in the context of delays or restrictions caused by funding cuts.

Similarly, in adults' services, ADSW1 described decisions to offer support in cases that might not meet the Care Act threshold with the tacit consent of her team manager, even though 'our senior managers … would not have accepted that as work'. ADSW2 used the term 'underground' for such interventions. ADSW2 too described carrying out work with a service user with complex needs who did not meet the criteria for longer-term services. This 'under the radar' work ensured the

person had their needs met and did not fall between the gaps, even though she had been instructed by managers to close the case. She explained,

> [There are] ways that you would … navigate the system. They would say to me, 'you need to put that person on review, you've had them eight months'. Well, I might keep them a little bit longer but not necessarily broadcast that I am, just to make sure that A, B and C is done, because that person would just go on a review list and never to be seen again until, you know, they've fallen on the road and broken their hip. So, you would make decisions like that, which are risky decisions, because if anything happened, they'd say, 'well … we told you to close that case eight months ago'. But you have to because it's a moral position I suppose, isn't it, and a professional position.

These examples illustrate a common theme articulated by practitioners from across the different arenas of practice: the integral nature of social work values of social justice to conceptions of the professional role and identity of this occupational group. This ethical orientation includes features such as foregrounding the rights of service users, recognition of the impact of social and structural inequalities and a readiness to challenge restrictive or oppressive institutional processes and norms. This ethico-political dimension, we argue, constitutes an important latent and, at times, manifest tendency motivating the discretionary activities of social workers.

The centrality of a values-based stance to social work professionalism was illustrated by ADSW1 and ADSW2, who elaborated the difference between social workers and social care assessors (SCA), the non-professionally qualified staff located alongside them within their service. As they noted,

> *ADSW2*: It's the values, isn't it and I mean, you know when you were talking about care packages and I don't know whether we talked about them being reviewed and do you remember one of them [SCA] said, 'I'm known as Edward Scissorhands, 'cause I cut everything' […]
>
> *ADSW1*: I think because they've been trained by the Council, they do exactly what the Council wants, rather than having that kind of objectivity or that scrutiny…
>
> *ADSW2*: [Or that] professionalism

ADSW1 went on to make a contrast between SCAs as 'officers of the council', and social workers as autonomous professionals oriented to an independent value base. The latter, she argued, furnishes social workers with an ethical foundation for resistance to punitive and restrictive aspects of the social care system that is not available to SCAs.

Manifestations of ethico-political professionalism may also take the form of interventions to challenge prevailing ideational constructs.

ADSW1 argued that the strengths/asset-based approaches foregrounded in the Care Act were being deployed as a means to justify reduced access for service users to entitlements and provision. She explained,

> A local authority's idea of strengths based is definitely in the local authority's interests, it's not necessarily a social worker's strength-based approach, it's possibly about batting back resources.

Here she draws a clear distinction between a longstanding social work ethos that rejects 'deficit models', whilst simultaneously recognising how contemporary asset/strengths-based theorisations have mobilised a discourse of welfare dependency and thereby provided justification for austerity-related service retrenchment (Edwards and Parkinson, 2023).

However, the efforts involved in retaining and mobilising spaces within practice for forms of ethico-political professionalism frequently required great efforts in the face of organisational constraints and incurred significant personal costs (as well as risks) for social workers. Working additional unpaid hours in order to practice ethically was a common theme amongst participants. ADSW2 described how her decisions to engage ethically by working 'underground' necessitated working through lunchbreaks or at evenings and weekends. This resulted in her feeling 'completely run down' and developing a stress-related illness.

These examples illustrate a particularly significant tension for practitioner engagement in forms of ethico-political professionalism. Whilst several examples of this stance demonstrate explicit *challenges* to manifestations of social injustice within services, often such strategies oriented towards *repair* of iniquitous institutional arrangements through individual acts of personal sacrifice rather than collective forms of transformational agency.

Nonetheless, the importance of preserving values-based or ethico-political professionalism to give meaning to social work practice was articulated by a number of respondents including EDTSW1:

> To me, social work's always been contradicted, it's always been about control and support. But in the end, [...] it's about trying to work with the people from below, [with] no blame on the people below. It's like some of the teenagers we got for the residential homes, they're causing so much difficulties, but it's not blaming them or just having a tick box, it's about how to work maybe in a group way or work with the families in a neighbourhood way, for youth centres and all that and how we develop a context, an environmental context ... everything comes into that ... I come into social work [for] that.

EDTSW1 notes tensions, such as care/control, by which the profession is riven. However, his perspective positions social work as retaining the discretionary capacity to transcend the punitive and reductive orientations of welfare under neoliberalism and summon a holistic and transformative mode of analysis and intervention.

Discretion and resistance in Switzerland

As with practitioners in England, the Swiss participants regarded an ethico-political stance to be an important dimension of social work professionalism. For the majority of social workers interviewed, the use of discretion for the benefit of service users was a professional imperative. Social worker 8 (SW08), head of a local social services organisation, explained a core disposition towards unconditional advocacy in his team:

> If someone comes to us with a problem of any kind, that person gets an appointment here, without any preconditions. My credo is, and I insist on it rigorously, we pick people up where they are and not where we would like them to be.

SW09 reflected on a situation where she insisted on *not* sanctioning a service user although the guidelines would have ordinarily required it.

> There would have been a hundred reasons why he [a disengaged service user] could have been sanctioned, but at some point you just have to realise that it doesn't work.

Another example was given by SW11, who argued that part of her ethical commitment as a social work professional included a duty to prevent harm to service users. On this basis she felt an obligation to challenge state plans, which emerged in 2016, to revise the Social Assistance Act. These proposals were intended to significantly cut welfare budgets by reducing financial support to service users. As she explained,

> We are employed by the state … but … it is my professional duty to protect my service users [from cuts], and in this I actively oppose the state … Because social work is not a job, it's a profession, … it's … about being committed to those [users] who can't do it themselves right now.

This highlights the perception that, although an employee of the state, professional status confers upon social workers a degree of autonomy and, moreover, a fundamental ethical obligation towards service users. This is underpinned by a conception that social work draws on a broader mandate from society rather than solely from the state.

However, whilst this emphasises social work's value commitments at the level of the individual practitioner, this also, significantly, led to the mobilisation of an ethico-political stance at the collective level. As SW10 and SW11 explained, when the government tried to implement welfare cuts via new legislation, they

> Expected to push it through at a fast pace. It was adopted immediately in Parliament and the idea was to introduce it by mid-2018. But then something interesting happened (laughs) and resistance really did develop. (SW10)

> There have always been small cost-cutting measures […], and everything has been cut back. And I thought to myself: 'Yes, we will just accept that.' And then I noticed a fighting spirit, for the first time. … Suddenly they [the professional association] stood up and said: 'This is the limit'. (SW11)

In response, social work professional associations as well as individual practitioners registered their objections. Under the Swiss constitution, new laws are subject to an optional referendum (Linder and Mueller, 2021), and several cantons include the option to simultaneously submit alternative legislative proposals. Once the number of signatures required to trigger such a referendum on this issue had been collected, social workers and their organisations resolved to actively campaign to safeguard the rights, independence and dignity of service users.

> Starting with social work experts from the professional association A*, there was a group that developed independently, a campaign group, that immediately started to work … [and] integrated the people affected into the campaign from the beginning. There were a lot of people on welfare who got involved. (SW10)

> So [local social services organisation] B* was very active in that [campaign]. As a service, B* informed all clients in a letter about [the reforms] and pointed out that everyone who is able to vote can do so. We also discussed this openly in the casework sessions [with clients], that it is important to express your opinion. It is important that people vote if they want to prevent this and what consequences it has for them. And it actually went quite far and the exchange with the clients was exciting. (SW11)

As this illustrates, the referendum system in Switzerland provided a distinctive political opportunity not only to defend service provision, but also for social workers to jointly develop counter proposals alongside service users and support the latter's political mobilisation (though not all social services centres affected took part in campaigning). Social workers initially reached out to service users by displaying leaflets in their offices and making announcements about the impending cuts. Subsequently a joint campaign was formed in which social workers acted closely alongside service users to develop and publicise the campaign's demands, whilst also engaging in high-profile activities such as demonstrations. The campaign thereby represented an inclusive form of collective agency through the construction of cross-sectional alliances (Moth and McKeown, 2016).

Another distinctive feature in Switzerland was the license given to social workers by frontline and middle managers to promote the campaign within their agencies and casework. This support seems to indicate the residue of a more collegial bureau-professional social work regime (Harris, 1998) within the Swiss welfare system. This degree of autonomy

from the state, in spite of neoliberal reform, contrasts sharply with the political constraints described by statutory social workers in England under managerialism (Evans, 2011).

The ultimate outcome of the referendum was that the new law was unexpectedly rejected. The campaign thus represented not only a successful intervention to halt the legislation but also an incipient prefiguration of a more egalitarian welfare to which the workers' ethico-political stance aspired.

Discussion

Theorising ethico-political professionalism

The article has highlighted the shift towards desk-bound informational practices in England and Switzerland that marginalise the qualitative and relational aspects of social work. Alongside this, policy imperatives promote user responsibilisation, activation and self-care in the context of reduced state intervention and care (Moth, 2022). These changes in welfare institutions and ideas have been shaped by a logic of competition intrinsic to neoliberal capitalism. As Archer (2012, 2013) notes, such processes of neoliberal organisational reform frequently undermine levels of social solidarity within this institutional context, thereby generating directional tendencies towards practitioner compliance with this 'informational turn' and associated practices of responsibilisation. Nonetheless, as the data suggest, some structural and ideational features of social work and the welfare system, both emergent and enduring, offer possibilities for strengthening forms of social solidarity based on material interests and normative concerns shared by social workers and service users. In this section, we draw on our data to theorise how potential alignments between these features offer possibilities for a countervailing directional tendency in social work practice that challenges neoliberal reform agendas.

The high point of the consensus around the interventionist welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of two highly significant features that fundamentally shaped the contours of the social work profession. The first was the consolidation of the casework model founded on forms of relationship-based and therapeutic practice. The second was the influence of social and labour movements from the 1960s onwards that challenged various forms of oppression (including racial, gender, LGBT and disability) as well as class inequalities (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006; Beresford, 2016). These went on to inform an ethico-political orientation within social work that has emerged in various forms including anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, participatory practice foregrounding co-production alongside service users, and radical and structural social work approaches (Moth, 2022). These two enduring and intersecting

features of professional social work in England and Switzerland, *social-relational approaches* and an *ethico-political orientation*, offered practitioners institutional and normative resources of social solidarity on which to draw as they sought to resist organisational pressures to limit relationship-based practice and promote resource restrictions, activation and self-management by 'consumers'. Our argument is that, amidst the contradictions generated by contemporary welfare state reform, the contingent alignment of these two enduring features constitutes a potential countervailing tendency to strengthen solidarities and resistance to neoliberal reconfigurations of social work practice. We call this countervailing tendency *ethico-political professionalism*.

In England, these two features underpinned social workers' efforts to carve out and maintain discretionary spaces for relational casework in the face of a range of managerial and procedural pressures imposing limits on such practice. The contrast drawn by adults' social workers between their stance and that of social care assessors highlights the perceived role of the ethico-political dimensions of social work professional identity in underpinning the assertion of discretion in the face of organisational constraints. This normative dimension was most frequently articulated as a rights-based and anti-discriminatory orientation, though in some cases liberatory and transformative conceptions of practice were also visible. However, examples of this ethico-political orientation from our data in England remained primarily at the individual level, with engagement often involving significant personal costs to practitioners.

Similarly, social workers in Switzerland articulated a strong identification with relational and client-centred work, and discursively challenged policy orientations such as activation philosophies and punitive sanctioning measures which they considered to conflict with their professional value base. In response to this new policy direction and increasing standardisation and proceduralism in practice, some social workers pragmatically adapted whilst others sought niches in which they could continue to engage in more values-based and relational forms of practice such as by moving from urban to rural social work organisations. Nonetheless, a frequently articulated conception of professional identity foregrounded a sense of duty to protect clients from restrictive policy measures and social injustice. This predominantly manifested within individual casework, but the successful political campaign highlights the potential for such tendencies to emerge and shift from individual towards collective forms of action. This demonstrates the possibility for a politically engaged current within the profession, drawing on its 'radical kernel' ([Ferguson, 2009](#)), to move beyond the limits of mainstream individualised conceptions of social work and contribute to a more collective and transformative reshaping of both practice and the wider welfare state. Moreover, the enduring presence and ongoing renewal of these ethico-political resources of solidarity within contemporary social work institutions highlight both the significance of historical legacies of

social struggle and their role in shaping resistance to neoliberal reforms in the present (Ioakimidis and Wyllie, 2023).

In summary, our findings have highlighted significant commonalities between Switzerland and England in terms of how neoliberal reform has operated to restructure (and constrain) social work professional practice through the imposition from above of an organisational ethos oriented to principles such as economic efficiency and activation. However, we have also noted differentiated political structures and their implications for strategies of mobilisation against these reforms. Social workers in both contexts have responded to neoliberal reconfigurations in a variety of ways, sometimes through adaptation but also by challenges to them in the form of ethico-political professionalism. The latter involves forms of agency ranging from examples, in both jurisdictions, of practitioners carving out discretionary spaces within individual casework to advocate for resources, promote service users' rights and challenge discrimination, to the example from Switzerland of social workers collectively mobilising alongside service users as part of a wider campaign to challenge public sector funding cutbacks.

Acknowledgements

Funding

References

Adam, S., Avilés, G., Ferrari, D., Amstutz, J., Crivelli, L., Cavedon, E., Gafner, A., Greppi, S., Schmitz, D., Wüthrich, B. and Zoebeli, D. (2016) 'Work integration social enterprises in Switzerland', *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, **7**(4), pp. 509–39.

Archer, M. (1995) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. (2012) *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. (2013) 'Solidarity and governance', in Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (PASS) (ed), *Governance in a Changing World* (Extra Series 14), Vatican City, PASS.

Banks, S. (Ed.) (2014) *Ethics*, Bristol, Policy Press.

BASS (Büro für Arbeits- und Sozialpolitische Studien). (2015) *Evaluation Der Leistungen Mit Anreizcharakter Gemäss SKOS-Richtlinien [Evaluation of Incentivised Benefits in accordance with SKOS Guidelines]*, Bern, CH, SKOS.

Beresford, P. (2016) *All Our Welfare: Towards Participatory Social Policy*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Bertotti, T. (2016) 'Resources reduction and welfare changes: Tensions between social workers and organisations', *European Journal of Social Work*, **19**(6), pp. 963–76.

Bertozzi, F. and Gilardi, F. (2008) 'The Swiss welfare state: A changing public-private mix', in Béland, D. and Gran, B. (eds), *Public and Private Social Policy*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 207–27.

Bieri, O., Itin, A., Nadai, E., Canonica, A., Flamand, E. and Pluess, S. (2013) *Formen Interinstitutioneller Zusammenarbeit in der Schweiz [Forms of Inter-institutional Co-operation in Switzerland]*, Bern, Bundesamt für Sozialversicherungen.

Bonvin, J. M. and Rosenstein, É. (2015) 'Contractualising social policies: A way towards more active social citizenship and enhanced capabilities', in Ervik, R., Kildal, N., and Nilssen, E. (eds), *New Contractualism in European Welfare State Policies*, Aldershot, Ashgate, pp. 47–72

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, New York, NY, Monthly Review Press.

Brown, B. and Baker, S. (2012) *Responsible Citizens: Individuals, Health and Policy under Neoliberalism*, Bath, England, Anthem.

Buchbinder, E. (2011) 'Beyond checking: Experiences of the validation interview', *Qualitative Social Work*, **10**(1), pp. 106–22.

Carey, M. and Foster, V. (2011) 'Introducing 'deviant' social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, **41**(3), pp. 576–93.

Carter, B. and Stevenson, H. (2012) 'Teachers, workforce remodelling and the challenge to labour process analysis', *Work, Employment and Society*, **26**(3), pp. 481–96.

Clarke, J. (2004) 'Dissolving the public realm? The logics and limits of neo-liberalism', *Journal of Social Policy*, **33**(1), pp. 27–48.

Edwards, D. and Parkinson, K. (2023) *Applying Strengths-Based Approaches in Social Work*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Eser Davolio, M., Strohmeier Navarro Smith, R., Gehrig, M. and Steiner, I. (2020) 'Auswirkungen der falllastreduktion in der sozialhilfe auf ablösequote und fallkosten' [Effects of case load reduction in social welfare on success rate and case costs]', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift Für Soziale Arbeit*, **25**(1), pp. 31–51.

Evans, T. (2011) 'Professionals, managers and discretion: Critiquing street-level bureaucracy', *British Journal of Social Work*, **41**(2), pp. 368–86.

Evans, T. (2013) 'Organisational rules and discretion in adult social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, **43**(4), pp. 739–58.

Evetts, J. (2011) 'A new professionalism', *Current Sociology*, **59**(4), pp. 406–22.

Ferguson, I. (2007) 'Increasing user choice or privatizing risk? The antinomies of personalization', *British Journal of Social Work*, **37**(3), pp. 387–403.

Ferguson, I. (2009) 'Another social work is possible!" reclaiming the radical tradition', in Leskošek, V. (ed), *Theories and Methods of Social Work*, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia, pp. 81–98

Ferguson, I. and Lavalette, M. (2006) 'Globalization and Global Justice: Towards a Social Work of Resistance', *International Social Work*, **49**(3), pp. 309–18.

Ferguson, I., Lavalette, M. and Mooney, G. (2002) *Rethinking Welfare: A Critical Perspective*, London, Sage.

Harris, J. (1998) 'Scientific management, bureau-professionalism, new managerialism: The labour process of state social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, **28**(6), pp. 839–62.

Harris, J. (2014) '(Against) neoliberal social work', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, **2**(1), pp. 7–22.

Harris, J. and White, V. (Eds.) (2009) *Modernising Social Work: Critical Considerations*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Haupert, B., Maurer, S., Schilling, S. and Schultheis, F. (Eds.) (2012) *Soziale Arbeit in Gesellschaft. Teil Der Lösung—Teil Des Problems? [Social Work in Society. Part of the Solution—Part of the Problem]*, Lausanne, Peter Lang.

Ioakimidis, V. and Wyllie, A. (Eds.) (2023) *Social Work's Histories of Complicity and Resistance: A Tale of Two Professions*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Jones, R. (2019) *In Whose Interests? The Privatisation of Child Protection and Social Work*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Juhila, K., Raitakari, S. and Hall, C. (Eds.) (2017) *Responsibilisation at the Margins of Welfare Services*, London, Routledge.

Lavalette, M. (2007) 'Social work: A profession worth fighting for', in Mooney, G. and Law, A. (eds), *New Labour/Hard Labour: Restructuring and Resistance Inside the Welfare Industry*, Bristol, Policy Press, pp. 189–208.

Lavalette, M. (2017) 'Austerity, inequality and the context of contemporary social work', *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, **19**(1), pp. 31–9.

Lilo, E. and Vose, C. (2016) *Mental Health Integration Past, Present and Future: Report of National Survey into Mental Health Integration in England*, Liverpool, Merseycare Foundation Trust/Health Education NorthWest.

Linder, W. and Mueller, S. (2021) *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan.

Lymbery, M. (2019) 'The slow death of social work with older people', in Lavalette, M. (ed), *What is the Future of Social Work*, Bristol, Policy Press, pp. 39–56.

Malin, N. (2020) *De-Professionalism and Austerity: Challenges for the Public Sector*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Meuser, M. and Nagel, U. (2002) 'Das experteninterview—vielfach erprobt, wenig bedacht [The expert interview—tried and tested, but little considered]', in Bogner, A., Littig, B., and Menz, W. (eds), *Das Experteninterview [The Expert Interview]*, Berlin, VS Verlag, pp. 71–93.

Moachon, E. and Bonvin, J. M. (2013) 'Les nouveaux modes de gestion du travail social et la marge discrétionnaire des travailleurs sociaux [New ways of managing social work and the discretionary power of social workers]', in Bellot, C., Bresson, M., and Jetté, C. (eds), *Le Travail Social et la Nouvelle Gestion Publique [Social Work and New Public Management]*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, pp. 205–20.

Mooney, G. and Law, A. (Eds.) (2007) *New Labour/Hard Labour: Restructuring and Resistance Inside the Welfare Industry*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Moth, R. (2020) 'The business end': Neoliberal policy reforms and biomedical residualism in frontline community mental health practice in England', *Competition & Change*, **24**(2), pp. 133–53.

Moth, R. (2022) *Understanding Mental Distress: Knowledge, Practice and Neoliberal Reform in Community Mental Health Services*, Bristol, Policy Press.

Moth, R. and Lavalette, M. (2017) *Social Protection and Labour Market Policies for Vulnerable Groups from a Social Investment Perspective: The Case of Welfare Recipients with Mental Health Needs in England*, Brussels, Liverpool Hope University/HIVA-KU Leuven.

Moth, R. and McKeown, M. (2016) 'Realising Sedgwick's vision: Theorising strategies of resistance to neoliberal mental health and welfare policy', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, **4**(3), pp. 375–90.

Müller de Menezes, R. (2012) *Soziale Arbeit in Der Sozialhilfe [Social Work in Social Welfare]*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS.

Nadai, E. (2009) 'Das Problem mit den Bodensatzrosinen. Interinstitutionelle Kooperation und die forcierte Inklusion von Erwerbslosen' [The problem with the sediment sultanas. Inter-institutional co-operation and the forced inclusion of the unemployed]', *Sozialer Sinn*, **10**(1), pp. 55–72.

Nadai, E. and Canonica, A. (2012) 'Arbeitsmarktintegration als neu entstehendes Berufsfeld: Zur Formierung von professionellen Zuständigkeiten' [Labor Market Integration as a New Occupational Field: Professional Jurisdiction in the Making]', *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, **38**(1), pp. 23–37.

Neuhaus, L. (2022) 'Profession, Organisation und 'Fallsteuerung'. Rekonstruktion eines amtlichen Konzepts' [Profession, organisation and case monitoring. Reconstruction of an administrative concept]', *Sozialer Sinn*, **23**(1), pp. 167–98.

Oliver, C. (2012) 'Critical realist grounded theory: A new approach for social work research', *British Journal of Social Work*, **42**(2), pp. 371–87.

Padgett, D. (2008) *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research*, Los Angeles, CA, Sage Publications.

Scheunpflug, A., Franz, J. and Krogull, S. (2016) 'Understanding learning in world society: Qualitative reconstructive research in global learning and learning for sustainability', *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning*, **7**(3), pp. 6–23.

Strauss, A. L. and Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, London, Sage.

Streckeisen, P. (2014) 'Private affairs: The welfare state, gender relations, and the Swiss road to neoliberalism', in Reddy, V., Meyer, S., Shefer, T., and Meyiwa, T. (eds), *Care in Context*, Human Sciences Research Council, pp. 190–206.

Walpen, B. (2004) 'Die Schweiz—Kaderschmiede des neoliberalismus' [Switzerland—Elite training centre of neo-liberalism]', *Widerspruch*, **46**, pp. 141–51.

Weinberg, M. and Taylor, S. (2014) 'Rogue' social workers: The problem with rules for ethical behaviour', *Critical Social Work*, **15**(1), pp. 74–86.