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Networks of Power and Counterpower in Social Work with Children and Families in England

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Abstract: This article applies the work of Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells to contemporary children and families' social work in England. Castells' work suggests that the intractability of many of the issues facing the profession is the result of the new type of society that emerged around the turn of the millennium: the network society. Within this society, the interests and values of dominant networks are imposed upon those who are selectively excluded. Several challenges for the social work profession stemming from this analysis are posed, including in relation to challenging networks and promoting transparency. However, it is suggested that the most significant contribution Castells' work has for social work lies in shifting the discussion from an analysis of dominant networks, as has been undertaken elsewhere, and towards an understanding of how social workers can, and do, build networks of counterpower capable of effectively challenging dominant networks in the space they occupy.

Keywords: Manuel Castells, policy networks, network society, counterpower, social work.

Introduction

While social work in England is seemingly always in some form of crisis, the point has been made by Lavalette (2019) that, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, this state of crisis has become more entrenched now than ever. There is no shortage of evidence to back up this perspective. Social workers consistently rate their working conditions as some of the worst in the country (Ravalier, 2017; Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Unison, 2019; Ravalier et al., 2020). These studies also consistently find high numbers

of social workers planning to imminently leave their jobs, anywhere from 38% on the low side (Ravalier et al., 2020) to 56% on the high side (Unison, 2019). At the same time rising poverty levels (Alston, 2019) and persistent inequality (House of Commons Library, 2020) are exacerbating the need for social work services and the complexity of the issues encountered by professionals. Juxtaposed alongside this is growing evidence that social work involvement is highly correlated with deprivation, raising serious concerns about the role of the profession within this increasingly impoverished and unequal society (Bywaters et al., 2020). A decade of austerity has also taken its toll, with a predicted £3 billion funding gap in children's services in England by 2024/2025 (Cromarty et al., 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated all of these issues, including placing more pressure on social workers (British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2021), exacerbating poverty (The Legatum Institute, 2020) and intensifying inequalities (Blundell et al., 2020).

This article applies the work of Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells to social work with children and families in England in order to gain an understanding of why these issues seem so intractable, and to explore pathways to overcome them found in his analysis. Castells' suggests that a new society has emerged since the dawn of the information age: the network society, where the interests, values and logic of dominant networks are imposed upon those who are selectively excluded. The unique contribution of Castells' theory is that it focuses on networks as the key unit of analysis, seeing the increasingly dominant role that they play in society as intrinsically linked to advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Several challenges for the social work profession stemming from this analysis are posed, including in relation to challenging networks and promoting transparency. However, it is suggested that the most significant contribution that Castells' work has for social work lies in shifting the discussion from an analysis of dominant networks, as has been undertaken elsewhere (Tunstall, 2019; Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020), and towards an understanding of how social workers can, and do, build networks of counterpower capable of effectively challenging these networks in the space they occupy.

Network Society

In his trilogy of books *The Information Age*, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) proposes that the information technology revolution that occurred around the turn of the millennium was at least as major an historical event

as the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century in terms of its impact on society. He refers to the resulting society as the Network Society, and his overarching thesis in is that, facilitated through new ICTs, the dominant functions and processes of the information age are now predominantly organised around networks, leading to the phasing out, through competition, of more rigid forms of societal organisation. Being made up of a large number of individuals and organisations, the cultures of networks are almost impossible to identify, and any attempt by a network to formalise their culture or terms of engagement would render it obsolete, as it would lose the flexibility required within the network society (Castells, 2010a). However, all networks do share a common interest: to control the capacity for defining the rules and norms of society in a way that responds to their interests and values (Castells, 2015). Networks specifically identified in Castells' (2010a, 2015) work include financial networks, political networks, cultural networks, military/security networks, criminal networks and science networks.

Networks and networking are not new forms of organisation. However, Castells' theory helps us to understand how their contemporary dominance has been facilitated through ICTs, which is the starting point for his analysis. He suggests that these technological advances, and in particular light speed communication, mean that networking activities can now take place regardless of the location of the actors involved, allowing dominant networks to selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, regions and even countries to their network, based on the relevance of these actors to the fulfilment of the goals of the network. According to Castells (2010a) contemporary society has thus become constructed around global flows of capital, information, technology and decision making, or what he refers to as the "space of flows" (p.xxxii). While the space of flows is the dominant spatial logic of the network society, being that it is the spatial logic of the dominant interests and functions in society, the majority of people in all countries lack the institutional capacity or agency over the programmes that govern networks. Therefore they continue to, live, work and gain their meaning from what Castells (2010a) refers to as the "space of places", or "a locale whose form, function and meaning are contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity" (p.453). However, because power in the network society is organised in the space of flows, this spatial logic also penetrates the space of places, altering their meaning and dynamics.

Power in the network society is therefore exercised through networks, with Castells (2011) identifying four forms of power:

1. Networking power: the power of the actors included in the network exercised over those excluded.
2. Network power: the power resulting from the standards, codes and rules of networks.
3. Networked power: the power of certain actors over other actors within the network.
4. Network-making power: the power to program specific networks, or to switch between different networks.

Within this model Castells (2011) describes network-making power as the dominant form of power. Network-making power is exercised through *programmers*, who shape the mutable goals and objectives of networks, and *switchers*, who represent the capacity to connect two or more different networks in a way that meets both networks' interests. Examples of switching power being exercised include financial elites bankrolling political elites, and subsequently political elites bailing out financial institutions. The role of switchers joining up various networks is fundamental to power in the network society, because the webs of connections they weave form a formidable repressive machine of intertwined economic, political and personal interests, almost impossible for an opposition to even identify, let alone challenge (Castells, 2015).

However, while network-making power is the dominant form of power and is exercised by dominant networks to exclude and control, it can also be utilised in the service of counterpower. Castells (2015) defines counterpower as "the capacity of social actors to challenge the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests" (p.5). Ultimately, at any given time the configuration of society and societal institutions depends on the constant interaction between power and counterpower. Castells (2015) describes this as fundamentally a battle for minds, because the way people think determines society, and while coercion is effective for imposing someone's will over others, controlling the construction of meaning in people's minds is a substantially more stable and decisive form of power. Therefore, while Castells' analysis of networks provides insight into how dominant networks exercise control within the network society, including social

work with children and families in England, this article argues that his more significant contribution stems from this analysis of counterpower, that can help to facilitate an understanding and analysis of resistance as it exists within contemporary social work, and in particular how the joining up of counterpower within the space of flows and the space of places can be utilised to challenge, and eventually change, embedded systems and institutions.

Network Society and Social Work

There is a growing body of work applying Castells' theory of the network society to social work, showing the increasing resonance and relevance that his work has for the profession. O'Brien (2004) provides an early example, suggesting that the network society can help social workers to better understand the complexity of the contemporary challenges they face, and in particular why old certainties, however limited they were, have seemingly evaporated. Castells' theory of the network society has been applied to analysing a number of specific areas of social work practice, mostly in relation to the influence of technology on practice, including social work call-centres (Coleman and Harris, 2003), technologically mediated interactions (LaMendola, 2010), online social work spaces (Di Rosa, 2018), multi-agency working (Frost, 2017), school exclusions (Ruiz-Roman et al., 2019) and social work blogs (Aguilar-Idanez et al., 2020).

A number of studies also apply Castells' work to examining social exclusion and technology, including around supporting isolated rural communities (Baker et al. 2017, 2018) and working with care experienced children and adults (Ballantyne et al., 2010; Sen, 2016). These studies all highlight that the provision of technology is insufficient for supporting marginalised individuals and communities to fully exercise their rights in the network society, and can even exacerbate the exclusion experienced. While it may seem paradoxical to suggest that ICT can lead to increased disempowerment and exclusion in this way, as Hacker et al. (2009) explain:

once one realizes that new power in network societies is strongly linked to influence over system configuration, position within networks and control over information flows, it is no longer surprising that those with greater connectivity, centrality and interactivity are those in society that will benefit the most (p.861).

Despite these examples, there is a notable absence in the literature of engagement with Castells' work on counterpower. The research of Baker et al. (2017, 2018) provides the only existing examples where the concept of counterpower is explored to a significant extent, with the researchers suggesting that while Castells' analysis offers a framework for new forms of technologically informed social work practice, the lack of connectivity experienced by many populations social workers engage with significantly limits their ability to influence systems through counterpower. Smith (2013) also touches on the role that counterpower can play in social work, although his analysis was completed prior to Castells' more extensive work on social movements and counterpower (Castells, 2015, 2019), meaning he was unable to draw on these insights. Furthermore, the examples that Smith (2013) draws on, most notably the resistance that social workers displayed towards the Integrated Children's System, a universal digital recording framework for children's services in England and Wales, suggest the potential existence of networked resistance. However, unlike the examples of networked counterpower that are discussed below, he acknowledges that there was limited evidence at the time of whether this resistance was indeed networked. Therefore, while Smith's (2013) analysis is drawn upon more below, this article is presenting new insights in relation to the challenges for contemporary social work stemming from Castells' theory of the network society, in particular in relation to counterpower.

Policy Networks in Social Work

Before moving on to present an analysis of counterpower as it relates to contemporary social work with children and families in England, it is first necessary to present an analysis of networks of power as they exist within this context. In line with the rise of the network society, there is a growing interest in the networks of individuals and organisations that dominate social work policy making in England, in particular in relation to children's services. For example, Purcell (2020) examined children's services reform in England since 1997, drawing on 45 interviews with prominent individuals in the sector, including seven ministers who were involved in these reforms. With this data he challenges reductionist narratives of policy change, including those that suggest reforms stem directly from high profile child abuse inquiries. Of particular note for this article, he describes the role of networks in influencing policy, and the

increasing role of a small group of advisors working closely with the Department for Education to push their political and financial agendas.

There are a number of additional examples in this growing area of interest. Jones (2019) identifies a small group of “key players” who are regularly involved in advising and working closely with the government on policy making in children’s social care. He highlights the various personal, professional and financial connections that link these individuals and others, and how collectively they have guided policy in directions that fit with their mutual interests and values. Tunstill (2019) also identified this “politically-protected and closed knowledge system” in her analysis of social work policy development in England and Wales, highlighting how this influential group have used the language of “innovation” to implement a range of ideologically driven reforms and projects to extend their reach and promote their interests and ideology. Rogowski (2020) similarly raises concerns about the increasing influence of a small group of often non-social work qualified individuals representing the profession in policy and funding decisions. In his analysis of social work leadership in England, Scourfield (2020) describes those leading social work policy reform as a “fellowship led by politicians, civil servants, entrepreneurs and senior social work figures whose priorities are significantly shaped by the need to implement governmental and managerial agendas” (p.53).

It is notable that in each of these analyses of dominant networks in social work, the authors identify the juxtaposed marginalisation and defunding of charities, professional organisations, academics and researchers willing to challenge dominant policy networks (Tunstill, 2019; Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020; Rogowski, 2020; Scourfield, 2020). It is also notable that within this growing body of research the same prominent figures and organisations are consistently identified as constituting the dominant network, showing a level of congruence amongst those examining these connections and their influence. Examples of commonly identified actors include Isabelle Trowler, the Chief Social Worker (CSW) for Children and Families in England, Josh MacAlister, the chair of the ongoing Children’s Social Care Review in England, and Frontline, the social work training organisation that Josh MacAlister founded with the support of Trowler and others in the network.

Returning to Castells’ (2011) theory of the network society, these key actors can be considered to be switchers. As discussed, switchers are tasked with setting compatible

goals, facilitating synergy and limiting contradictions between networks that in isolation have very distinct, and often contradictory, interests and values. For example, Frontline, and its founder MacAlister, act as switchers between social work and dominant political and financial networks. Frontline was founded with the support of a number of key political actors, including then Education Secretary Michael Gove, and has since been financed generously by the government despite a mixed performance record (Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020). In turn, Frontline has been accused of helping to shape social work in line with the values of dominant political and financial networks, through splitting the profession, narrowing the pedagogy and facilitating privatisation (Tunstill, 2019; Jones, 2019). The organisation also receives considerable financial and practical support from private firms, including Deloitte, Credit Suisse and Boston Consulting Group (BCG), and in turn Jones (2019) describes the board of Frontline as “replete with bankers and those with professional backgrounds in international finance and consultancy” (Jones, 2019: 77).

Isabelle Trowler could also be considered to be exercising switching power in her role as CSW. Since her appointment in 2013 Trowler has maintained a largely uncritical position towards government policy, perhaps most egregiously demonstrated when she suggested that austerity is not having a substantial impact on service delivery (Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020). She has overseen a number of reforms that have shaped the profession in line with the interests and values of political networks, including the introduction and expansion of Frontline. Trowler’s involvement within projects and policy meetings as a “representative” of the social work profession also acts to marginalise more critical perspectives. Harris and Shergill (2020) identify how Trowler uses the language of “we” in referring to social workers, in a way that signifies that she is speaking for the profession and constructs a consensus, while actually promoting top-down government reforms. Trowler also acts as a switcher between social work and financial networks, consistently supporting increased private sector involvement in social work services (Jones, 2019), and supporting initiatives that have handed hundreds millions of pounds of public funding to private organisations and financial consultancy firms with direct and indirect links to her and others in the dominant network, including Frontline (Tunstill, 2019).

Through analysing networks in this way it is also possible to gain an understanding of why the issues outlined in the introduction persist, and why the policy responses at

times seem so inept, even though those involved display what appears to be sincerity (Tunstall, 2019; Purcell, 2020). Adopting the logic of flows, the dominant network sees the solution to the issues facing social work (and society more broadly) to perpetually be closed discussions and decision making with others from the dominant network, and frequently in partnerships with other dominant networks facilitated through switchers. The exclusionary nature these discussions operates to generate a sense of consensus and legitimacy amongst those involved (Smith, 2013). Many of these discussions are never made public or official, and those that are utilise a variety of terms to lend themselves an air of legitimacy, including committee, inquiry, review, panel, commission and board. Strategies for further increasing legitimacy include adopting the prefix “independent” (Narey, 2014), engaging with carefully chosen community representatives (MacAlister et al., 2019), or undertaking performative public consultations under highly controlled conditions (Social Work England, 2019). However, ultimately shaped by the values and interests of the dominant network and the networks they have partnered with, the decisions made continuously involve the handing over of substantial sums of public money and positions of influence to individuals and organisations within these networks. Castells (2010a) suggests that the closed nature of these discussions remains of practical importance, despite the almost limitless potential for transparency afforded by the information age, in order to conceal the private views expressed, the competitive edges gained and the “marginally illegal” nature of many of the deals struck (p.416).

This disconnect in logic also helps to explain why those involved in policy making often struggle to understand the resistance they face, as this resistance is predominantly coming from those who do not ascribe to their shared network logic and codes (Castells, 2015). Those involved may even see their projects and reforms as a form of resistance, positioning themselves as saviours from the very circumstances they create (McGrath-Brookes et al., 2020). Furthermore, this analysis also helps to understand why social work leadership in England appears to be so disjointed and unclear, shared amongst a growing number of CSWs, regulators, principal social workers, social service directors’ associations, academic organisations, membership organisations and quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (QUANGOS) (Scourfield, 2020). Castells (2011) notes that this more subtle, flexible and negotiated system of power is required under the network society, with switchers acting as the

links between these networks, but ensuring they never become a crude expression of single purpose domination. This also allows social work leaders to consistently make statements and proclamations on key issues like discrimination, while actually supporting reforms that are eroding the ability of the profession to address these issues (Reid, 2020). Within this context any individual or organisation that actually seeks to take the type of decisive action required to address issues of this nature would merely be bypassed by the network, and become an outsider looking in, losing all the advantages that come from inclusion within the network.

Social Movements of Hope

In his more recent work Castells' (2015, 2019) has shifted his focus of analysis away from networks of power and towards networks of counterpower. While recognising that counterpower can be co-opted by populist movements with the aim of turning populations against each other while dominant networks maintain their power and influence, he writes more extensively about the rise of networked social movements, including the Arab Spring, occupy movements and Black Lives Matter (Castells, 2015, 2019). In doing so he highlights a number of common characteristics within these movements, including rejecting existing political parties/systems, having no formalised leadership/organisational structures, evolving and open-ended aims, and horizontal engagement facilitated largely through ICT. These various features work together effectively to frustrate those within dominant networks who seek to respond to social movements through the traditional means of state repression and co-option. These characteristics also make networked social movements particularly suited to their role as agents of social change within the network society, as they resist based on the same logic as dominant elites control: networks within the space of flows. Crucially though these networked social movements do not just link up in the space of flows, but expand to the space of places, often through the occupation of symbolic public spaces, as well as linking with existing community networks.

For Castells (2015) the actual but unstated goal of networked social movements is to overcome the helplessness that the network society instils, and to generate hope for change. One of the biggest barriers to realising this hope is fear, which Castells (2019) describes as the most powerful human emotion. He suggests that this is why so much political discourse is focused on generating fear about external threats, often associated with a desire for protection from "other people" (p.25). Fear has also been

shown to be a powerful force in governing social workers. Jones (2014) describes the culture of fear that developed following the very public media and political persecution of social workers in England in the wake of the death of Peter Connolly, and how this led social workers to be reluctant to speak out on key issues. Gibson (2019) found that historical incidents of social workers being “named and shamed” continue to encourage professionals to regulate their identities in ways that conform to institutional and government set standards (p.117). Furthermore, there are a number of professional processes that have been identified as instilling fear in social workers in ways that encourage obedience and hamper collective action, including positivist models of risk assessment (Littlechild, 2008), professional regulation (Simpson et al., 2020), service inspections (Gibson, 2019), and fitness to practice proceedings (FTPP) (Kirkham et al., 2019). Many, if not most, social workers will support these various processes, safe in the belief that they are there to protect against problematic social workers, or the aforementioned “other people”. Indeed recent evidence that black and ethnic minority social workers are more likely to be referred to FTPP raises serious questions about how processes of fear and control are designed to focus on certain social workers more than others (Samuel, 2020). Nevertheless, the fear instilled by these measures makes all social workers significantly less likely to call out the dominant network and the injustices they see them perpetuating, as doing so would mark them out as one of these “other people”, and thereby subject to these punitive processes.

However, Castells (2015) also suggests that if enough individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented by dominant networks, they can collectively overcome their fear through sharing their anger at perceived injustices, their enthusiasm for change, and ultimately, their hope. The interactive and self-configurable nature of modern communication networks means that this anger, enthusiasm and hope can be shared in a non-hierarchical way, facilitating more participation in social movements of resistance and counterpower than was previously possible. Castells (2015, 2019) gives numerous examples of the viral diffusion of content and messages across the internet leading to anger, hope and eventually widespread social action, including the particularly inspiring example of a vlog (video blog) produced by a 26 year old female Egyptian student highlighting the self-immolation protests that had been taking place across Egypt and calling for people to

meet in Tahir Square; a vlog that helped spark the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Beyond these anecdotal examples, Slavina and Brym (2020) tested Castells' hypothesis of networked social movements by looking at data from the World Values Survey between 1981 and 2014. They found that predictors of involvement in demonstrations and protests included the regular use of digital communications media alongside unresolved grievances. Therefore, while Castells (2015) suggests that networked social movements necessarily stem from societal injustice and are developed through ICTs, he also proposes that they require more than this, what he refers to as "emotional mobilization" (p.248).

Covid-19 as a Catalyst

Castells (2019) highlights that during periods of crisis, people tend to turn to those who are chosen and paid to represent them for safety, and when these individuals and institutions fail in that role, and promote the interests of dominant networks instead, their legitimacy is called into question in a way that does not happen during calmer times. As an example, Castells (2015) explores the rescue of financial systems following the 2008 financial crisis, and how this led to widespread social action. A similar situation seems to be developing in relation to Covid-19, and Korsgaard et al. (2020) describe how the economic policies that have been implemented by most governments during the pandemic have been tailored primarily towards supporting financial systems and large, well-connected businesses. This has led to a situation whereby the richest people in the world have become considerably more wealthy during the pandemic (Sainato, 2021), while at the same time people living in deprived areas have been substantially more likely to die from Covid-19 (Public Health England, 2020), and poverty and inequality have dramatically increased (Legatum Institute, 2020; Blundell et al., 2020). Similarly, it can be seen that while the working conditions of social workers have deteriorated during the pandemic (BASW, 2021), the professional and financial fortunes of those in the dominant network have continued to improve. This is perhaps most observable in relation to the aforementioned Josh MacAlister, who during the pandemic has both secured substantial public and private funding for his new youth justice venture, *Whatever it Takes* (Simpson, 2021), and in January 2021 was appointed without competition as the "independent" chair of the children's social care review, a role he would seem to be uniquely unqualified for based on his myriad connections to political and financial networks (Hanley, 2021).

Contrasting these developments, networked counterpower amongst social workers has also been on display during the pandemic. As an example, a free, peer-reviewed magazine, *Social Work 2020 under Covid-19* (SW2020), was conceived and developed by a group of UK based academics and social workers in early 2020 (Sen et al., 2020). Six editions of the magazine were published online up to April 2021, including articles from academics, people with lived experience, social workers, collectives and students. The site hosting the magazine received thousands of page views, and those involved utilised established networks, in particular over Twitter, to engage individuals and organisations. Many of the articles in SW2020 raised concerns about contemporary policy directions, promoted grassroots activism and highlighted the oppressive power of those in the dominant network, including Trowler, MacAlister and Frontline. This can therefore be considered an example of building a free community of public deliberation, and a response to the control that dominant networks typically wield over institutionally delegated spaces for discussions (Castells, 2015).

Another particularly prominent example of social work influenced counterpower witnessed during the pandemic was the legal challenge to Statutory Instrument 445 (SI445). Introduced in April 2020 SI445 removed numerous legal safeguards for children in the care system in England (Willow, 2020). A national campaign of resistance was launched by Article 39, a charity – founded by social worker Carolyne Willow – that refuses any government funding, who were able to draw on a network of support from individuals and organisations developed during previous challenges to government policy (Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020). This networked action is most demonstrable through an online petition calling for SI445 to be scrapped, signed by 63 organisations, including many social work organisations, and 488 individuals, 200 of whom included the term “social work” in describing their roles (Article 39, 2020). Interestingly, from the perspectives of networked counterpower, the aforementioned Covid-19 magazine also ran several early articles that were critical of SI445 (Sen et al., 2020). Following several months of campaigning and court appearances, the Department for Education were eventually found to have acted unlawfully in its “confidential” consultation process on SI445, that included some individuals and organisations (Trowler and private service providers), while excluding others (the Children’s Commissioner and children’s rights organisations). Therefore, this can be considered as an exposed example of the “marginally illegal” decision making that

Castells (2010a) states takes place frequently when dominant networks meet behind closed doors. Based on these encouraging examples it is anticipated that, as in previous periods of crisis, the tragedy that has been the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to be fostered in order to promote hope for change within the social work profession and society more broadly.

Challenges for Social Work

This penultimate section outlines four specific challenges for the social work profession stemming from the analysis presented here. While these challenges, and the analysis outlined in this article more generally, are aimed specifically at the context of social work with children and families in England, it is hoped that the implications will resonant further afield, and, as in the case of networked social movements such as Black Lives Matter, encourage cross-national collaboration and sharing of hope. The increasingly global nature of many of the issues social workers are required to respond to further emphasises the importance of this cross-national approach (Smith, 2013).

Challenge 1. Identify and Challenge Dominant Networks: As discussed above, one of the main reasons dominant networks persevere and are resistant to challenge is that they are flexible, fluid and indeterminate. Therefore, Castells (2011) suggests that “power relationships at the network level have to be identified and understood in terms specific to each network” (p.776). In line with this, a growing body of literature has focused on identifying the networks that currently dominate social work in England. Social workers everywhere should be seeking to build on these examples, and actively identify and challenge dominant networks within their specific context. For any individual or organisation that currently directs critique or resistance towards these dominant networks, this analysis provides vindication and theoretical justification to persist. For any individual or organisation unable or unwilling to publically challenge dominant networks, this analysis suggests they may need to reflect on why that is, and their own potential role within these networks.

Challenge 2. Transparency: Within the context of the information age, and in particular for a profession that should be fighting for the rights of excluded individuals and communities, there is no adequate excuse for the level of opaque decision making we regularly see in social work policy making, except in the service of maintaining and

extending networking and network-making power. Social workers should refuse to engage in discussions behind closed doors in ways that obscure decision making processes and marginalise alternative perspectives.

Challenge 3. Networks of Hope: A third challenge for the profession is that social workers interested in changing dominant institutions and systems should be actively networking, both within the space of places and the space of flows. There is increasing evidence that social workers are making use of the multi-modal networking opportunities that the information age affords, including through podcasting (Singer, 2019), Twitter (Hitchcock and Young, 2016), Facebook (de Mesa and Jacinton, 2020), blogs (Aguilar-Idanez et al., 2020), YouTube (Di Rosa, 2018), and TikTok (Yuan et al., 2020), as well as the example of SW2020 described above (Sen et al., 2020). These networking activities should not be considered fringe to the profession, but are key sites where power and counterpower are played out and negotiated. They extend resistance beyond the space of places to the space of flows, meeting networks of power in the space they occupy. As outrage understandably grows around the sustained failure of dominant networks and the institutions and systems they shape to improve the circumstances of social workers and those they support in any meaningful way, social workers should be increasingly seeking to break away from these networks and institutions. It is important that those who wish to take this leap, knowing the personal, professional and financial cost it will incur, see that there are supportive networks of counterpower available to share their struggle. If these networks are not present it substantially increases the likelihood that they will instead have their outrage co-opted by populist messaging and those pushing divisions and fear (Castells, 2019).

Challenge 4. Utilising Network-making Power: Smith (2013) suggests that if we are to accept that networks are now the dominant means by which societal systems and relationships are organised, then social workers must accept their network-making power and their responsibilities for interrupting established processes of exclusion that often dominate the lives of those they support. Therefore a final challenge for social workers is to build the networking capacity of individuals and communities who are marginalised and excluded within the network society. As was outlined above, there are a number of studies and articles that have already considered the potential for Castells' work to inform social workers' work with excluded populations (Ballantyne et al., 2010; Sen, 2016; Baker et al., 2017, 2018). Social workers should seek to build on

these examples, supporting the development of networked counterpower with service users and communities. The development of these networks of counterpower should be considered as a vital professional activity in itself, and it is important to resist the urge towards a “productivist vision of social action” whereby goals and objectives become pre-determined and limited (Castells, 2015: 146).

Conclusion

There is a high level of congruence between the challenges and implications discussed in this article and the work of others who have explored ways out of the mire that the social work profession seems to be stuck in. Garrett’s (2021) recent work on “dissenting social work” draws on a range of writers and theories in developing a new analytical framework for social workers focused on, amongst other things, collective approaches to dissent and building bridges with social movements. For example, he highlights the concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony as articulated by Antonio Gramsci and Frantz Fanon, and how dominant classes influence perceptions of common sense in order to subjugate, but also how it is possible to form sustainable counter-hegemony in order to create revolutionary change. These concepts are similar to those expressed by Castells in relation to the battle for minds between power and counterpower that was discussed above (Castells, 2015). However, Castell’s analysis adds a critical perspective more specifically focused on networks and their interaction with ICTS, that could be particularly valuable to social work in relation to interpreting the growing body of literature in social work focused on networks.

There are some limitations to Castells’ theory of the network society that are important to raise before concluding. Van Dijk (1999), who has also written about networks and their increasing influence over society, is particularly critical of Castells work, suggesting that much of it is based on casual connections and unverifiable concepts. Indeed much of what Castells proposes about the network society is unverifiable in the empirical sense. In one of the few attempts to verify aspects of Castells theory, looking specifically at counterpower and the influence of ICTs on protest, Slavina and Brym (2020) found evidence in favour, in that those with access to ICTs and who had significant grievances were more likely to protest. However, they also found that contrary to Castells view of networked social movements, the global nature of contemporary activism may be overstated, with most activism remaining moderated by national contexts to a large degree. Furthermore, they found that protest in the

information age continues to be strongly associated with traditional markers of social privilege, thereby raising serious questions about the ability of ICTs to eliminate social barriers to activism (although this could also be seen to correlate with the research presented above on social exclusion that suggested that the provision of ICTs alone are insufficient to reduce exclusion within the network society).

It is also important to re-iterate at this stage that, setting aside their potential value as a space for promoting counterpower, so far new ICTs have been far more effectively used by dominant networks to entrench and expand their power within the network society. Dominant networks are highly active on new media platforms, for example Twitter, and in conjunction with their networked access to traditional media sources, use these to disseminate their message, trivialise opposition, and intimidate dissenters, often using highly sophisticated means (Lee, 2015; Watson, 2020). Slavina and Brym (2020) suggest that because digital communications media are ultimately controlled, surveilled and marketised by people in dominant networks, they are actually highly effective in thwarting any progressive activism that relies on these modes of communication.

Nevertheless, there is hope in the examples of counterpower and resistance that have been described by Castells (2015, 2019) and that have been outlined in this article in relation to social work. The success and spirit of social movements in one place has been shown to have the potential to act as a conduit for hope to spread, in particular through the sharing of images and experiences across ICT (Castells, 2015). Ferguson (2017) explores a number of contemporary examples of movements to inspire hope in social work, including the setting up of the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) in the UK, a network founded on radical principles that now has supporters from multiple countries. Social work in England may seem an unlikely place for hope to galvanise, given the poor state of affairs outlined in the introduction, and the historical media and political persecution of the profession (Jones, 2014; Lavalette, 2019). However, Castells (2019) stresses that it is often from the depths of oppression and desperation that resistance and hope emerge. Therefore, while social workers in England could look to identify and share examples of successful resistance and social change elsewhere in order to foment hope, they should not be content to patiently await another profession or jurisdiction to trigger them to action, and should instead seek to act as a beacon of hope for others, building on a history of professional resistance to

develop networks of counterpower amongst social workers, service users and everyone with a stake in a better society. This will ultimately take social workers who are willing and able to challenge dominant networks, overcome their fear, and unite in their shared hope.

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