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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

The Roles of Values and Advocacy Approaches in Irish Social Work Practice: Findings From an Attitudinal Survey of Practicing Social Workers

Joe Whelan, Ph.D.
School of Applied Social Studies
University College Cork
joseph.whelan@ucc.ie

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the profession of social work in Ireland. It examines the role of values within the profession and the relationship of the profession to independent advocacy groups, exploring themes of fundamental importance to social work. The findings presented are drawn from a quantitative attitudinal survey of practicing social workers conducted in the Republic of Ireland in 2016. Sampling was conducted across Ireland within a population of approximately 3900 practising social workers and resulted in 128 responses, 111 of which were complete. In relation to values, overall findings suggest a preference for traditional value types, with many respondents indicating that the tasks associated with emancipatory values are best placed with other groups in Irish society. In relation to advocacy, the study found that social workers frequently engage in advocacy tasks. However, despite this, it also found that a majority of social workers feel that such tasks are best placed with other groups in Irish society. The study found that a majority of social workers acknowledge a shared value-base with independent advocacy groups. However, it also suggests that the relationship between social workers and advocacy groups is complex and conflictual. While social workers recognize the importance of advocacy groups, they also acknowledge that advocacy groups do not always complement the social work role. Ultimately this study suggests that to many practitioners, the necessity for advocacy groups in Ireland can be ascribed, in part at least, to the ways in which contemporary social work practice is carried out.

Keywords: social work; values and ethics, advocacy; independent advocacy groups; Ireland.

A Common Base: Values and Ethics in Social Work

Social work values can be viewed as the discourse through which the structure of the profession is maintained, justified, and transmitted, latterly becoming codified and legitimised through formal codes of ethics (Spano & Koenig, 2007). Thompson (2009) defines a value as "something we hold dear, something we see as important and worthy of safeguarding" (p. 126), with Banks (1995) describing social work codes of ethics as "The fundamental moral/ethical principles of social work" (p. 04; see also BASW, 2014; IASW, 2006 for precise examples). These definitions are succinct but their aptness is debatable. In reality, social work values and ethics are abstract and contested concepts and therefore extremely difficult to adequately and satisfactorily define (Banks, 1995; Shardlow, 2002a; Dominelli, 2002). However, along with knowledge and skills, values and ethics are central pillars of the profession and, as such, a heavy feature of generic social work

textbooks (Banks, 1995; Shardlow, 2002b; 2009; Beckett & Maynard, 2005; Reamer, 2006; Higham, 2006; Thompson, 2009; Wilson et al., 2008).

In terms of the development of contemporary values and ethics discourse, Reamer (1980; 1983; 1994; 1998; 2006; 2014; 2015), writing in the United States, has published extensively in the area and provides a useful model for analysis. He has identified four distinct periods through which the genealogy of contemporary social work values and ethics can be traced. It is important to point out that these periods do not denote a linear progression and often overlap, occurring at different times in different jurisdictions. They are detailed as follows:

1. The morality period;
2. The values period;
3. The ethics theory and decision making period;
4. The ethical standards and risk management period.

The "morality period" refers to the late 20th century and posits that social workers were more concerned with the morality of the client rather than with what may have contributed to their need for intervention. This analysis is largely congruent with the Irish example where social work developed in the moral atmosphere of charitable intervention couched in the language of Catholic social teaching (Curry, 1998; Cousins, 2003; Considine & Dukelow, 2009). To further highlight the link between social work values and religious morality, it is interesting to note that Biestek (1961), himself a Catholic priest, is credited with developing what has subsequently been identified as the traditional social work value-base in his foundational work The Case-Work Relationship. In this work, Biestek (1961) developed seven principles of social work. Because of their ongoing importance to social work they are listed as follows:

- Individualization,
- Self-determination,
- Purposeful expression of feelings,
- Controlled emotional involvement,
- Acceptance,
- Confidentially,
- Non-judgemental attitude.

The values espoused by Biestek (1961), while highly individual in nature, remain hugely relevant in social work today.

The period in which Biestek was writing encapsulates what Reamer (1998) referred to as the "values period" and was marked by a focus on developing specific social work values. Further notable contributions from the values period come from Levy (1972; 1973) who attempted to develop a typology of social work values and subsequently went on to help create and develop social work codes of ethics (Chase, 2015). Following this, but preceding Reamer's (1998) third period, we see the development of what have come to be known as emancipatory values (Highman, 2006; Thompson, 2009). These values differ extensively from traditional social work values in that their focus was much more on matters of social justice and structural inequalities (Highman, 2006; Thompson, 2009). Much of the emancipatory movement in social work originated in the US and was perhaps reflective of the turbulence of a period so characterized by struggles for social and civil rights (Reamer, 1998). Academics and practitioners espousing emancipatory values were openly and directly critical of traditional casework approaches (Chase, 2015; Reamer, 1998). Notable entries from this time include Emmet (1962), Lucas (1963), Plant (1970) and Lewis (1972).

Reamer's (1998) third period is referred to as the "ethics theory and decision making period" and is characterised by a renewed focus on applied professional ethics. This period can be viewed as reflective of developments in the field of medical ethics. This period led directly to the fourth period, the "ethical standards and risk management period," which is arguably most reflective of contemporary social work in Ireland today. It is the period of the social worker as the "bureau professional" (Parry & Parry, 1979) who works within a hierarchical structure where ethics and values represent a code for practice, a guide for conduct, and a template for decision making (Spano & Koenig, 2007; Chase;

2015; Banks, 2013; Reamer, 1998). While the discourse of values remains largely intact, located within these codes of ethics, it is uncertain how reflective this discourse is of actual practice.

An Irish Code of Ethics: Competing Forces in the Ethics Space

When it comes to formal codes of ethics in a contemporary Irish context, social workers have traditionally turned to the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) for guidance. The IASW is the professional organization for social workers in Ireland, having been founded in 1971. Membership in the IASW is not compulsory, and members are expected to pay a nominal fee in order to join. The organization currently has approximately 1300 active members (IASW, 2019). The IASW is also a member of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and in terms of the articulation of values and ethics, it is from the IFSW that the IASW draws its own guidance and mandate. In the first instance, the IASW adopts global definition of social work as approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW (International Association of Schools of Social Work) General Assembly in July 2014. The IASW also promotes a values statement and professional code of ethics which greatly mirror those of the IFSW while also adhering to that body's own "Statement of Ethical Principles and Professional Integrity." More recently, and in recognition of the somewhat abstract and, arguably, difficult nature of ethical statements in the context of actual practice, the IASW has issued a code of practice for its members (IASW, 2009). This consists of separate lists of concise statements in the form of "members will…" and "members will not…".

With respect to its code of ethics, while the IASW (2006) states that it expects that "social workers will use this Code of Ethics as a foundation on which to frame procedures guiding day-to-day practice" (p. 02), it must be noted that the code to which this direction pertains has no legal basis or statutory footing. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how this would or could apply to non-members who appear to be the majority of practicing social workers in the Republic of Ireland. In terms of a legislative basis for social work values and ethics, it is the Health and Social Care Professionals Act of 2005 that functions to formalize this space in a legal-rational context. More recently, in 2012, the Act was amended, which led to the establishment of CORU, a regulatory body which includes Health and Social Care Professionals Council and the Registration Boards established under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (as amended). The stated role of CORU is to:

- Set the standards that health and social care professionals must meet
- Ensure that the relevant educational bodies deliver qualifications that prepare professionals to provide safe and appropriate care
- Maintain and publish a register of health and social care professionals who meet established standards
- Ensure that registered professionals keep their skills up to date by promoting continuing professional development
- Run Fitness to Practice hearings into the conduct and competence of registrants

Fundamentally, CORU retains the primary role in governing the profession of social work in Ireland. In the context of values and ethics, CORU (2011) has its own Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics for Social Workers in the Republic of Ireland, which, while not necessarily incongruent with the previously mentioned IASW code, is nevertheless, entirely separate from that entity's articulation of values and ethics. It also very much represents the formal legal basis on which social work in Ireland is expected to be carried out. In terms of a value position, CORU (2011), lists the following values as paramount:

- Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons;
- Pursuit of social justice;
- Integrity of professional practice;

- Confidentiality in professional practice;
- Competence in professional practice. (p. 04)

It then goes on to list the particular duties of practicing social workers, before expanding on the value statements given above.

A close reading of these value positions denotes an overt emphasis on the responsiblization of social workers, particularly in the areas of legal awareness, extensive record-keeping, and continuing professional development. These are arguably less prominent in the codes of ethics articulated by the IASW and others. What is also writ large across the CORU code of ethics, both implicitly and explicitly, is the continuous reiteration of the consequences for non-compliance. Social workers are effectively told that in order to meet the basis for legitimate practice, they must read and understand the code. Failure to do so, they are told, could result in a "complaint of professional misconduct" which the code defines as "any act, omission or pattern of conduct of the registrant which is a breach of the code" (CORU, 2011, p.03). This clearly denotes the more formal level of governance that the CORU code of ethics implies.

The advent of CORU and the implementation of a formal code of ethics as a tool of governance has arguably pushed the profession of social work into a new space in the Republic of Ireland. This new form of regulation and governance has not yet had sufficient time to bed-in and, resultantly, it is difficult assess the overall impact of CORU and the CORU code of ethics in the context of Irish social work practice. It is also difficult to assess where less formal codes of ethics, such as those given by the IASW, sit in relation to codes which exist on a statutory footing. While they may not necessarily be incongruent with one another and social workers could, in that sense, be reasonably expected to observe both, there is no doubt that the code of ethics as given by CORU ultimately articulates the standard at which Irish social work should and indeed must be practiced. Whether or not Irish social workers have caught up to this new paradigm of governance is a question we will return to in the data summary that follows.

Delivering a Discourse: Values in Social Work Education

Imparting a strong and robust discourse denoting social work as a value-led profession must almost certainly form part of any social work educative curriculum (Hugman, 2005; Mackay & Woodward, 2010). Hugman & Smith (1995) echo this sentiment and argue that the teaching and imparting of the profession's value-base is the single most important aspect of training new social workers. However, such a task is not without challenge and this is reflected in the literature. Clifford & Burke (2009) argue that methods relating to the teaching of social work values remain underdeveloped. Allen & Friedman (2010) acknowledge the essentialness of imparting social work values to students but argue that a difficulty arises from the fact that the take-up of these values is incredibly difficult to assess.

Valutis, Ruben, & Bell (2012), using Erikson's stage model as a template, argue that *when* we teach is as important as what we teach and that different students will learn and internalize value-beliefs more thoroughly at different stages of their training. They further argue that age is closely related to self-awareness and identity development and that this has an effect on professional socialization and the ability and readiness of students to take on new value systems and beliefs. Perhaps compounding the difficulties in imparting social work values to students is the question of the types of students being recruited. Gustavsson & MacEachron (2014) assert that there is huge external and economic pressure on social work schools to abandon restrictive ethical gatekeeping in student recruitment policies. Despite such difficulties, the fact remains that values and ethics are core to the social work profession, and this must be reflected in the education of new social workers.

It is possible that there are competing values discourses in social work education and that this is reflective of the conflicted nature of the

profession in general. The literature consistently highlights the divide that exists between these competing discourses in the form of traditional and emancipatory values. Mackay & Woodward (2010), writing in Scotland, have recognized this. They highlight the influence of market-driven, neoliberal ideologies and managerialism in the formation of social work curricula which, they argue, is reflective of governmental influence on modern social work codes of ethics. They further argue that students consistently do not recognize the more structural components of the social work value-base. Furthermore, they suggest that students are often preoccupied with individual approaches to values at the expense of structural analysis and critical reflection. This is a point that they are not alone in making; Price & Simpson (2007) have previously argued that social work education needs to reclaim sociology in order to best meet the needs of the most disadvantaged. In a more general sense these arguments have clear parallels with Ferguson's (2008) call to reclaim social work by challenging the neoliberal agenda through the pursuit of social justice. This all clearly implies the importance of emancipatory values in social work and their continuing importance in social work education. In a follow-up piece concerning the same themes, Mackay & Woodward (2012) conducted a small-scale research project where 22 student social workers answered a qualitative questionnaire relating to values. The results showed that for students, values often remain abstract. Students were also found to have difficulty articulating emancipatory values and many struggled to say how they would apply such values in practice. Sayre & Sar (2015) have argued that social justice is a primary value in social work and that this should be reflected not only in what is taught but in how it is taught, particularly where students themselves may be facing inequality and oppression. In this respect, they argue that by modelling values that promote social justice, instructors may also impart those values to students accordingly.

There can be no doubt about the importance of social work values in all aspects of the education process. However, values themselves are clearly conflicted and this is reflective of the conflicted nature of the profession itself. Individual values are important but are also arguably consistent with the neoliberal agenda which promotes social work as a form of governmentality or as a vehicle for social control as part of a "Bismarckian"-style welfare state (Philp, 1979; Bryson, 1992). Emancipatory values, located in radical approaches, sought to challenge individualistic approaches at the time of their inception and, arguably, remain suitable for doing so now (Fook, 1993; Ferguson, 2008). The process of maintaining and implementing a strong and robust value-framework, which is inclusive of all social work values, must necessarily begin in social work education (Mackay & Woodward, 2010).

Incongruent Discourses: Personal, professional and organizational values

Social work does not take place in a societal vacuum. Social workers come to practice with their own biographies and, despite the socializing effects of the educative process, their own values and belief systems (Abbott, 1988; Landau, 1999; Reamer, 2001; Vanderwoerd, 2002; Cree, 2003; Allen & Friedman, 2010; Chechak, 2015). Of course lived experience can be both powerful and advantageous and may in fact lend beneficial insight to practitioners (Christie & Weeks, 1998). Conversely, an over-reliance on lived experience as a form of practical knowledge may prove to be a barrier to practitioners who find themselves implementing professional values at the expense of personal ones (Gough & Spencer, 2014). In the literature, this phenomenon is referred to as value incongruence (Constable, 1983; Spano & Koenig, 2007; Stewart, 2009; Chechak, 2015). This conflict, or incongruence, naturally leads to the question of how influential personal values are in social work practice. Gough & Spencer (2014), writing in Canada, carried out a study which targeted 1800 registered social workers by way of a questionnaire. Of this group, 300 social workers completed

responses. From these results the researchers were able to show that personal values ranked very highly in the order of importance in social workers' day-to-day practice and in fact ranked higher than the Canadian Association of Social Workers' code of ethics. This is a very real concern for a profession that purports to operate within a strict code of ethics that, ideally, allows no place for personal values to influence professional decision making.

However, this is not the only value conflict apparent in contemporary social work practice. Professional social work values and ethics can also conflict with organizational values and standard operating procedures. The Gough & Spencer (2014) study also addressed the issue of value clashes, finding that 82% of respondents reported incidences of conflicts between their individual person values and those of their employing organization. In an earlier study, Levin & Weiss-Gal (2009), writing in Israel, undertook a quantitative content analysis of social work job descriptions to ascertain how much emphasis was placed on the use of social work values. The findings assert that agencies are either not at all or, at best, only partially interested in value-led participatory approaches with service users. Banks (2002; 2013) further encapsulated this argument by highlighting the conflict that exists between personal engagement and professional accountability in social work practice. Personal engagement, she argues, is value-led and is characterized by challenging structural oppression through critical practice. It reflects the discourse of emancipatory values in practice. Professional accountability, she argues, is concerned with standards, justifying decision making, effectiveness, and efficiencies. It reflects the neoliberal political atmosphere in which contemporary social work is constructed and carried out, and it is embedded within the paradigm of managerialism. These arguments are generally reflective of the work of authors such as Ferguson (2004; 2008) and Harlow et al. (2013) and speak to the general conflicted nature of social work.

The Development of the Advocacy Discourse in Social Work

The roots of contemporary advocacy as a practice are to be found particularly in the legal field. Here advocacy is concerned with the processes that lawyers or solicitors engage in on behalf of their clients (Wilks, 2012). Social work-orientated empowerment and advocacy, with an emphasis on achieving social objectives, arguably stems from 1980's and 90's practice approaches (Payne, 1997). However, it can be argued that advocacy has always been implicit within social work; some authors argue that social workers have long been leaders of reform, advocates for social justice, and champions of the many issues facing vulnerable populations (Brawley, 1997; Talbot & McMillin, 2014; Bliss, 2015). It is perhaps useful to separate advocacy as it relates to social objectives from other forms of advocacy. "Social advocacy" is almost always concerned with helping disempowered cohorts to realize rights, and in this way it represents an avenue for empowerment. Leadbetter (2002) helps to define this position by stating that "Empowerment and advocacy are both concerned with a shift of power or emphasis towards meeting the needs and rights of people who otherwise would be marginalized or oppressed" (p. 201). The values inherent in advocacy and empowerment approaches are those that can be characterised as emancipatory and it can be suggested that rights work, empowerment approaches, and advocacy can be viewed as inseparable or interchangeable. Dalrymple (2004) has also made the distinction between two types or levels of advocacy, both of which may be the domain of social workers depending on the context. They are interpreted here as follows:

1. Case level advocacy, which is concerned with working at the level of the individual to help them realize goals, achieve objectives, or exercise their individual rights;
2. Structural level advocacy, which is concerned with advocating for changes at a societal level around matters that may be affecting whole cohorts of a given population.

While there can be no doubt then that advocacy work, whether implicit or explicitly named as such, is deeply embedded in the social work role, it does not represent a social work panacea, and such approaches can be potentially problematic. Payne (1997) has argued that closely related to empowerment and advocacy is the concept of management theory located within a political ideology that emphasizes motivating individuals to take responsibility for meeting their own needs. This point has been echoed in the literature by those who champion service user participation and empowerment but who also realize the potential for such concepts to be degraded to a rationale for the state to provide fewer services and resources to those who actually need them (Beresford, 1991; 2001; Beresford & Croft, 1993; Wright, 2012). Furthermore, Hardwick (2014) has noted that stakeholders, in the form of state-provided social work services, have shown a recent and increasing interest in independent advocacy groups, which they view as a useful resource in times of limited resources. There is a danger then that discourses of advocacy and empowerment can and are being hijacked or manipulated by those with vested interests in preserving state resources. This is perhaps best encapsulated within the wider paradigm of welfare devolution (Sheely, 2012; Bifulco, 2013; Chaney & Wincott, 2014). Advocacy and empowerment approaches can potentially be viewed as the moderate radical in the family of emancipatory approaches—perhaps the less troublesome, less unkempt, and slightly more acceptable first cousin to more radical anti-oppressive practice approaches and the discourses they represent.

Competing Discourses: Advocacy in Social Work or Advocacy versus Social Work?

Brydon (2010), writing in Australia and examining social work advocacy in Singapore, argues that social work is delivered in sociopolitical contexts that allow for varying degrees of tolerance to advocacy approaches and that advocacy, as a function of social work, is constructed and constrained by the context in which the practitioner is working. Of course, Dalrymple (2004) has previously distinguished between advocacy carried out at a case level and that carried out at a structural level. The type of advocacy being carried out then is, arguably, reflective of the context and constraints which Brydon (2010) alludes to. There is no doubt that advocacy work, at whatever level it occurs, does take place in social work settings. In this respect, Brydon (2010) argues that advocacy must necessarily entail collaboration between practitioner and client. This again speaks to the emancipatory nature of advocacy work. Hardwick (2014) makes a similar point by illustrating clear parallels between the purposes of advocacy and the social work value-base. However, for Hardwick (2014) this is where the parallels cease. Hardwick's (2014) study has highlighted the distinction between social work and independent advocacy groups by evaluating a city-wide advocacy hub in the north of England. She notes that the peripheral nature of advocacy in social work is contrary to the profession's espoused principles and values, and argues that social work is fast becoming a resources-led rather than a needs-led activity, with social workers acting as bureau-professional labourers cloaked under the thin veil of managerialism. One result of this, along with current policy trends and the inability of statutory social work to adequately respond to people's needs, is a movement of service users towards independent advocacy groups (Hardwick, 2014). Barnes (2012), in a study conducted in the United Kingdom concerning young people's rights, echoes this point and argues that while social workers do indeed share many common value positions with rights advocates or advocacy workers, advocacy workers operate more closely in line with an ethic of care while social workers are more concerned with management. Furthermore, her study showed that rights workers often find themselves compensating for the limitations of the social work process through simple but effective methods such as being available by phone or ringing to check in with clients to see how they are doing.

It is clear then that advocacy and empowerment work is not the sole preserve of the social work profession and indeed the advent of independent advocacy groups along with state-sponsored advocacy initiatives means that both are clearly working in the same space. Furthermore, it can be argued that for each social work client group there is a related advocacy group or groups. This can be clearly and easily demonstrated in the Irish context as shown Figure 1 below.

Many of the client groups shown above have more than one related advocacy group. It is worth exploring why this is the case. It could be argued that the values espoused by many of the above-named advocacy groups greatly mirror core social work values (Barnes, 2012; Hardwick, 2014). It is therefore worth asking why social work in Ireland did not naturally assume the roles that such advocacy groups now fulfil. It can be argued that a lack of adherence to the profession's own value base, particularly the emancipatory elements thereof, has ultimately allowed for many of the above-named organizations to become necessary (Barnes, 2012; Hardwick, 2014).

Client Base	**Advocacy Group**
Children in care	EPIC (Empowering people in care)
Care leavers	Care leavers Ireland
Persons with disabilities	NAS (the National Advocacy Service
Adopted persons	Adoption rights alliance
Persons experiencing poor mental health	The Irish advocacy network
Young persons	Youth advocate program
Older persons	Alone
Hospital patients'	Patient focus
Young offenders	Irish penal reform trust

Figure 1: Correlation between social work client base and advocacy groups.

So, despite social work, independent advocacy is clearly necessary in contemporary Irish society. The state, as a concessionary measure, has recognised this and partly or fully funds many advocacy groups. EPIC (see Epic, 2013) and NAS (see CIB, 2012) make good examples of where state funds are being used to support advocacy groups. The Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) also staffs a dedicated advocacy unit to help citizens navigate the health system here, and the Citizens Information Service (CIS) provides a free advocacy service available to all citizens on virtually all issues requiring advocacy.

Having now examined the debates around advocacy as it relates to social work, we see a correlation emerging between the two. There is a link between how contemporary Irish social work practice is constructed and carried out and the formation of and necessity for advocacy groups. The key to understanding this link is undoubtedly in the social work value-base. In this respect, the competing discourses within and between advocacy and social work are largely reflective of the conflicts seen in the values and ethics discourse and the conflicted nature of the profession itself.

Research Design

The study was conducted by way of an attitudinal survey using the web-based survey platform Survey Monkey. Participants were provided with brief explanations of the intent and purpose of the study. Aside from the section seeking participants' profile information, which included questions about current and previous roles and time spent in practice, the survey utilized forced choice attitudinal measurement devices such as the Likert scale throughout (de Vaus, 1999; Bryman, 2012). Estimated to take between five and ten minutes,

the survey was designed to be relatively quick to complete. The purpose of this was to help generate a higher rate of response. Participants were also given the opportunity to comment after each section in an optional comment box.

The sampling process

This study was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, which is where a specific group or cohort are deemed to hold the answers to the questions being asked and so are deliberately and exclusively targeted (de Vaus, 1999; Bryman, 2012; Whittaker, 2012). The cohort in this instance was made up of practicing social workers. A form of snowball sampling was also utilized; initial contact was made with gatekeepers—largely principal social workers who generally oversee social work units in specific regions —who were then encouraged to circulate the survey to other suitable participants (de Vaus, 1999; Bryman; 2012; Whittaker, 2012; Dawson, 2013). A breakdown of the resulting sample is detailed below.

Sampling resulted in 128 responses, 111 of which were complete. Of the 109 who answered fully, 86 or 77.5% identified as female and 25 or 22.5% as male. Age varied highly, with 2 respondents identifying as being under 25; 30 as being between ages 25 and 35; 29 as being between 35 and 45; 27 as being between 45 and 55, and 22 as being between 55 and 65. There was also significant variance in respondent roles, with the majority (60%) of respondents coming from child protection backgrounds. While the response rate to the survey is quite small, it must be nevertheless be borne in mind that the population of practicing social workers in the Republic of Ireland at the time the survey was conducted was relatively small also, standing at approximately 3,900–4,000 (out of an overall population of just under five million) registered social workers. At the current juncture, this figure has risen to 4,756 registered social workers (CORU, 2020). Nevertheless, even with this increase, the response rate comprises a representative sample.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics are those which summarize patterns in participant responses. Inferential statistics seek to identify if the patterns observed are generalizable to the whole of the population from which the sample was drawn. The data being presented here has been analysed using both techniques (de Vaus, 1999). The aim has been to present and describe findings in order to identify trends or patterns that may generate discussion.

Values in General: Key Findings

One of the key objectives of this paper has been to explore social work values and ethics discourse in professional practice. In order to first gather a general sense of the importance of social workers' values, the survey asked participants to respond to the statement that social work values represented an important feature of their day-to-day practice. Of the 111 who answered, an overwhelming majority either agreed (52.7%) or strongly agreed (43.64%) with this statement.

A hierarchy of values

In order to then begin differentiating between different types of values and their respective importance to social work, participants were asked about the importance they place on traditional values and emancipatory values respectively. When asked if traditional values played an important role in practice, a strong majority said yes, with 54.86% agreeing and 26.55% strongly agreeing. However, when participants were asked the same question in relation to emancipatory values, a marked difference was apparent. An overall majority of 52.25 % still agreed that emancipatory values were important in practice; however, this reflects a much smaller majority than that seen in the question about traditional values. The question relating to emancipatory values also received more neutral responses, at 41.44%. Taken together, these findings lend credence to the notion of competing discourses within the overall field of social work values and ethics (Chase, 2015; Reamer,

1998). These findings also, arguably, indicate the existence of ambiguity surrounding the espousal and articulation of emancipatory values (Mackay & Woodward, 2010, 2012).

In order to further understand the place of values in social work practice, researchers provided participants with a list of specific values, both traditional and emancipatory, and asked them to identify which 3 values they felt featured most in their day-to-day practice. A "non-judgemental attitude" and "empathy" represented the two most popular values from the list, at 56.52% and 52.17% respectively. These values can undoubtedly be characterised as traditional and individual in nature (Thompson, 2009), with their formal origins traceable to the work of Biestek (1961). These two were closely followed in popularity by the values of "partnership" (45.22%) and "empowerment" (45.22%) which, conversely, can be characterized as emancipatory (Thompson, 2009). However, while "partnership" and "empowerment" are considered emancipatory or radical values, they are, arguably the more individual of this type. They can be associated with advocacy and empowerment approaches (Leadbetter, 2002) or with strengths perspective approaches (Saleeby, 1997), each of which have been criticized for being overly individual and ignoring the wider structural problems in clients' lives (Payne, 1997; Gray, 2011). Moreover, it is noticeable that other important emancipatory values, namely "social justice" and "equality," scored quite low in perceived importance, with "equality" representing the overall lowest scoring value—only identified by 15.65% of respondents—despite social work's overt commitment to its realization in society. Again, this is arguably reflective of competing value discourses and an apparent trend of apathy in relation to emancipatory values (Reamer, 1998; Mackay & Woodward, 2010, 2012; Chase, 2015).

However further findings lend more complexity, nuance and ambiguity, particularly in the context of social justice, which eschews the notion of apathy as a baseline sentiment. As noted above, when respondents were asked to rank values in order of importance, "social justice" scored quite low. Yet when respondents were asked in a separate question to respond to the statement that social justice was a key practice value, a strong majority of 80.7% agreed that it was. Further complexity is added on the basis that a majority (40.35%) of respondents felt that matters relating to social justice are best pursued by other groups in Irish society a majority of respondents (40.35%) with many others choosing to remain neutral (32.46%) on this question. Taken together, this demonstrates an ambiguous relationship to the value and pursuit of social justice at best on the part of respondents. There is a sense that it is important, yes, yet it ranks far less highly than other more individual values. There is also the sense that while it is important, in many cases in is perhaps best pursued elsewhere. Demonstrating that this ambiguity in responses happened more than once, we see that when it came to the question of addressing structural inequalities a slight majority of respondents (38.05%) felt that this was in fact a key feature in everyday practice. However, the findings also show that a majority of respondents (51.33%) agreed that there are other groups in Irish society better placed to address structural inequalities. Again, this demonstrates complexity and ambiguity relating to these themes and this would necessarily need to be unpacked through a more qualitative approach.

Taken together, these findings amply demonstrate a perceived hierarchy of values in day-to-day social work practice, allowing us to begin identifying which values social workers feel are most realistic and implementable in their day-to-day practice. Arguably, these findings also reveal an incongruity between many of social work's espoused values and the reality of practice on the ground. These findings also reveal something about how those working in the profession view their role. Despite social work espousing an overt commitment to pursuing social justice and addressing structural inequalities, many practitioners who took part in this study feel that these tasks are best taken up elsewhere, and this view mirrors several arguments from the literature (Reamer, 1998; Mackay &

Woodward, 2010; 2012; Chase, 2015). It can therefore be argued that social work values in Ireland are firmly within the "maturation of ethical standards and risk management period" (Reamer, 1998) of articulation.

Formalized codes of ethics

In order to examine the use of formalized value systems, such as codes of ethics, the survey asked participants to indicate how often they referred to social work codes of ethics in their work. The vast majority (55.26%) indicated "occasionally," along with a small number of participants indicating "quite often" (15.65%) and a smaller group indicating "very often" (13.04%). Participants were also asked about which formal set of standards or codes took precedence in how they reached decisions. A majority, at 55.26%, indicated that "Agency Policy and Standard Operating Procedures" took precedence in their decision-making processes. This was followed by "Social Work Values and Codes of Ethics" at 35.96%. with "CORU Standards and Proficiencies" referred to by only 6.14% of participants. These findings appear to indicate that professional codes of ethics do feature somewhat in social workers' day-to-day practice. However, they are referred to only occasionally and are not as prominent in practice as might be expected, with agency policies and standard operating procedures taking precedence among a more sizeable majority of practitioners making ethical decisions. This mirrors the findings of Gough & Spencer (2014) who also found that in Canada, professional codes of ethics were not entirely prominent. It is also notable that the option of CORU's standards and proficiencies scored very low, even though these are maintained by the body which oversees social work in the Republic of Ireland and with which all practicing Irish social workers must register. The CORU standards appear to be little used, despite the fact that, as the state-sanctioned regulatory body, CORU now effectively controls official values and ethics discourse in Irish social work practice. This suggests that Irish social workers are not yet fully aware of CORU's role of governance over the profession. Overall, it is possible to suggest that broader, nationwide discourses of values and ethics are not necessarily congruent with the reality of day-to-day practice, yet still remain dominant forms in legitimizing the activities of professional social work structures (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

Personal and professional values

A further objective of this study was to explore relationships between personal and professional values. In this respect, participants were first asked to address the statement that personal values play a role in practice. A clear majority (76.99%) agreed that they did. Participants were then asked to address the role of personal values in their decision-making processes. Again, a clear majority (55.75%) indicated that personal values played a role in their decision-making, with only 23% disagreeing and many others preferring to remain neutral (21.24%). Participants were then asked to indicate how often they felt their personal values clashed with professional values. Of the 111 that responded, an 80.18% majority indicated "occasionally." Taken together, these findings suggest personal values feature prominently in Irish social work practice. Again, this mirrors Gough & Spencer's (2014) study which collected responses from 300 practitioners and highlighted the prominence of personal values in practice. Gough & Spencer (2014) also found that 82% of the practitioners surveyed reported occasional clashes between personal and professional values. The prominence of personal values in these responses, along with the clashes and conflicts they may cause, reflects much of the literature around the concept of value incongruence (Constable, 1983; Spano & Koenig, 2007; Stewart, 2009; Chechak, 2015). However, it should be acknowledged that this incongruence may not necessarily be negative; practitioners' personal values may in fact mirror core social work values. More research in this area would need to be conducted to establish this.

Advocacy Approaches in Social Work Practice: Key Findings

This section explores the relationship of social work to the practice of advocacy, as well as to independent advocacy groups. In order to first gain an appreciation of the prevalence of advocacy approaches in social work practice, participants were asked about their own engagement in this type of work. A considerable majority (85.97%) of respondents indicated that performing advocacy tasks does form part of their day-to-day practice. However, of those who took a position, a small majority (36.53%) also felt that there are other groups in Irish society who are better placed to carry out advocacy work. Notably, many respondents preferred to remain neutral (35.65%) and a considerable number of respondents (27.83%) did disagree that this was the case. Taken together, these findings suggest that while advocacy work certainly makes up a part of day-to-day social work practice, many workers feel these tasks are best carried out by other groups. Of course, no distinction was made within the survey between the different levels of advocacy that social workers may be engaged in. Neither were the socio-political contexts or constraints under which individual workers answering the survey may be operating taken into account. However, these findings nevertheless indicate the ceding of the advocacy role from social work to other groups, and this greatly mirrors arguments found in the literature (Barnes, 2012; Hardwick, 2014).

Social work and independent advocacy groups

A further key objective of this study has been to explore the relationship between the profession of social work and independent advocacy groups in Ireland. In order to first get a general sense of how advocacy groups are perceived within social work, participants were asked to indicate their level of awareness of such groups. A clear overall majority (74.11%) indicated a high level of awareness of advocacy groups and their roles and functions. This question was then followed by questions that aimed to explore the nature of the relationship that social work has with independent advocacy groups. In this respect, when participants were asked if they agreed that advocacy groups provide a vital service to social work clients, a strong majority (65.77%) agreed that they did. An overall majority (54.06%) of respondents agreed that advocacy groups largely compliment the social work process. However, a good number of respondents also preferred to remain neutral (30.63%) on this point. A majority (42.2%) of respondents also agreed that advocacy groups share a similar value-base to social work. However, it is notable that many respondents (17.43%) disagreed and a large number chose to remain neutral (40.37%) on this point. Finally, a strong majority of respondents (89.1%) were in agreement that they would have no hesitation in directing a service user towards an advocacy group.

Taken collectively these findings suggest that social workers have an adequate awareness of independent advocacy groups, generally view them favorably, and are willing to involve them in the social work process if needed. This suggests that societal discourses surrounding social work and the need for independent advocacy groups are relatively complementary. However, the argument that state-sponsored social work services have a vested interested in independent advocacy groups, which they view as useful in times of limited resources (Hardwick, 2014), must also be taken into account.

Advocacy versus social work: Competing discourses

Despite the findings above, which suggest independent advocacy groups and social work professionals have a relatively harmonious relationship, other aspects of this study's findings suggest something different. As well as being asked about negative aspects of advocacy group involvement, respondents were also asked about the necessity of advocacy groups in light of contemporary social work processes. In the first instance, a majority of the social workers surveyed (55.46%) felt that advocacy groups can sometimes stall or interfere with the social worker's role.

However, despite this strong assertion, a majority of respondents (47.71%) also acknowledged that advocacy groups fulfil a role for service users that contemporary social work does not. When asked if advocacy groups were less restricted and therefore better able to uphold core social work values, a slight majority (36.7%) disagreed. However, there was almost as much agreement (24.77%), with some respondents strongly agreeing (3.67%). Perhaps the most telling of all the findings in this respect revolves around the statement that advocacy groups have become necessary, in part, because of the ways in which contemporary social work is constructed and carried out. A sizable majority of respondents agreed that this was the case (53.58%) with many others preferring to remain neutral (28.57%).

When taken together, these findings suggest that social work practitioners are aware of the competing discourses representing social work and independent advocacy groups. Barnes (2012) and Hardwick (2014) have both separately acknowledged the overt similarities that exist between the values of social work and those of independent advocacy groups. Many participants in this study seemed to struggle with this notion. However, the general attitude of practitioners towards independent advocacy groups was clearly measured as favorable and this was despite the fact that a majority also felt that such groups could sometimes negatively impact social work processes. Participants seemed to possess a clear awareness of the need for advocacy groups; a clear majority acknowledged that this need is at least partly because of how contemporary social work is constructed and carried out, which in turn can be linked to agency policy and wider sociopolitical contexts (Brydon, 2010).

Discussion

This study proposed to explore the notion that there is a relationship between the values and practice of contemporary Irish social work and the formation of and necessity for advocacy groups. Exploring this relationship has involved conducting an extensive literature review and an attitudinal survey of practicing social workers. In deciding whether a relationship is in fact present, a number of key factors became relevant. Firstly, there are clearly competing threads of discourse within the overall discourse of values and ethics in social work. Many aspects of these competing discourses do not necessarily match the realities of day-to-day practice. The dominant discourses are controlled and espoused by those with a vested interest in presenting social work in a particular light. While social workers clearly recognize the importance of advocacy groups, they also acknowledge that advocacy groups do not always complement the social work role. However, a majority of social workers surveyed agreed that advocacy groups have become necessary, in part, because of the ways in which contemporary social work is constructed and carried out. Taking the above key findings and all of the wider findings of this study into full consideration, there is a relationship between the practice of contemporary Irish social work and the formation of and necessity for advocacy groups.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this study has been ambitious and unlike any carried out in the Republic of Ireland before. Questions of fundamental importance to the profession of social work were placed squarely on the agenda. This research scrutinized how the social work value-base is articulated by practitioners and collected data on perceptions of social work's relationships with other groups in society. The findings produced have been rich, varied, and at times surprising. In the context of previous studies and arguments from the literature, these findings reiterate many key arguments. Social work values are elusive and contested entities containing competing discourses, which are in turn reflective of wider sociopolitical discourses (Banks, 1995; Shardlow; 2002b; 2009; Beckett & Maynard, 2005; Reamer, 2006; Higham, 2006; Thompson, 2009; Mackay & Woodward, 2010; Chase, 2015). Social workers see themselves as engaging in advocacy work and also as sharing a similar value-base with independent advocacy

groups. However, each can be viewed as presenting conflicting discourse on social values (Brawley, 1997; Payne, 1997; Leadbetter, 2002; Barnes, 2012; Wilks, 2012; Talbot, 2014; Hardwick, 2014; Bliss, 2015). These positions have all been reiterated and reintroduced by the findings of this study. However, the study has also produced findings that go towards developing new understandings of social work in an Irish context. These findings show which values social workers view as realistic and implementable, and these perspectives, in turn, reflect a marked preference for traditional value types. We also see a current lack of prominence ascribed to CORU standards and proficiencies by practicing social workers. Furthermore, a majority of social workers acknowledge that the necessity for advocacy groups can be ascribed to the way in which contemporary social work practice is constructed and carried out.

These new contexts, coupled with pre-existing contexts that this study has reiterated, produce a picture of a profession in a constant state of change and flux and, as a result, the findings are both broad and revealing. Social work is a profession with the potential to affect a multitude of people. Therefore, how we define our collective profession, the values we espouse, and the effects that social work has on society are fundamentally important issues that must be continuously examined and re-examined.

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