The criteria: a 750 - 1000 word assignment with the following title:  
“How can social workers solve austerity?”  

Who could take part: Social Work Students undertaking an Undergraduate or Post Graduate Social Work Degree  

The prize: four grants of £500
How can social workers solve austerity?

Chrissie Beatty - Bournemouth University

The term ‘austerity’ has been widely used in the United Kingdom (UK), since the government introduced deficit reduction policies (Anderson and Minneman 2014). A significant body of evidence would suggest austerity has a detrimental impact on agencies, service users and social workers alike. However, in a profession that prides itself on values of social justice and empowerment, it seems insufficient to merely recognise the effects of austerity. Instead, taking an active role in solving austerity is something social workers can champion and encompass within their wider mission to challenge structures, processes and discourse, that serve to oppress and discriminate.

The current austerity programme was introduced in 2010 by the coalition government, as a response to the financial crash of 2007-08 (Berry 2016). Rubery (2015) says austerity involves reducing the public debt by cutting public expenditure. However, many argue the current austerity measures have gone too far, with cuts being made to crucial services (Corsetti 2012) and Johnson (2017) says these cuts are set to continue.

Since 2010, local authorities have seen an average cut to their budgets of almost 26%, with funding from central government falling by 38% over the same period (Amin-Smith et al. 2016). Hastings et al. (2015) claim that despite the best efforts of local authorities to absorb these cuts without significantly harming levels of service provision, the poorest places and people are bearing the brunt of service reductions. They go further, stating authorities with the most deprived areas have experienced disproportionately higher cuts, with social care funding falling by £68 per head, while less deprived areas have seen an increase of £28 per head. This comes at a time when demand for statutory social care is rising (Institute for Government 2017), with Birtwistle et al. (2017) suggesting this links to the decreasing funding of non-statutory services.

It is not just service users experiencing the effects of austerity; social workers have also been impacted. They are working in an increasingly demanding environment (Parrott 2014) but also, the public sector pay freeze and subsequent pay cap, combined with inflation, means their wages could fall to their lowest level for 15 years by 2020 (Resolution Foundation 2014). Barej (2017) reports that public sector workers are the most likely employees to use payday loans, which demonstrates the hardship they are facing. In fact, over half of the 14 million people living in poverty in the UK, are from families where at least one person is in work. This shows that during austere times, employment is not always a preventive factor for low standards of living (JRF Analysis Unit 2017). Trade unions are actively campaigning for worker’s rights, wages and conditions but Milner (2017) says their ability to influence policy-makers has been adversely affected since the 2007-08 financial crash. However, Kleiner (2013) points out trade unions still have an important role to play in the current economic climate, therefore, by joining trade unions, social workers can amplify the voice of the trade unions in the political arena.

Feminist analysis has found austerity is particularly detrimental to women because women are more reliant on the welfare state than men; on average, benefits and tax credits make up one fifth of women’s income, compared to less than one tenth of men’s (Annesley 2014). Government cut backs have reduced the size of the public-sector work force by approximately 5% and 66% of these workers are female (Cribb et al. 2014). Pease and Nipperess (2016) highlight the importance of social workers understanding wider social and political forces shaping social work practice and the lives of service users. Green and Clarke (2016) claim this enhances their ability to negotiate complex practice situations, in order to improve the outcomes for service users.

Money spent on welfare is under the scrutiny of policy makers, as well as the public, and the media has significantly raised the profile of the issue (van Doorn and Bos 2017). The National Audit Office (2012) found benefit fraud accounts for approximately £1 billion, whereas, there is approximately £16 billion of unclaimed benefits. However, Baillie (2011) says the focus of the public discourse is on fraud, rather than people missing out. He claims the language used in the media portrays benefit claimants as scroungers and cheats and believes this negative media representation gives the government permission to make increasing cuts to the welfare budget.

Fielder and Catalano (2017) claim this discourse promotes othering, which Dominelli (2002) defines as, an exclusionary process, whereby, individuals and groups are ascribed a subordinate status by those occupying a dominant position, to exclude and disadvantage them. Scope (2012) found 46% of disabled people feel attitudes towards them have worsened, with 83% blaming the media discourse. Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) say social workers can use critical consciousness to examine stigma and discrimination. This enhances their ability to challenge oppressive systems and empower service users to overcome barriers preventing them from taking control of their lives. This transfers power back into the hands of individuals who have been systematically denied it (Browne 1995).

With austerity measures set to escalate for the foreseeable future, its impact will continue to felt by both service users and social workers. Social workers will be working under increasing pressure
as budgets decrease and demand for services rise, whilst also experiencing the effects of austerity in their own lives. By uniting together with trade unions, they can promote reform by ensuring policy makers are aware of these difficulties. Social workers will need to find ways of increasing their resilience to maintain their well-being, without which, they will not be able to support their service users. By increasing their knowledge of austerity and the impact it can have, social workers can be better prepared to anticipate the difficulties service users may encounter, as well as better understand the discrimination and exclusion that results from the current discourse around benefit claimants. This in turn, enhances the ability of social workers to empower their service users, so they can gain control of their circumstances and overcome the adversity of austerity.

References


How can social workers solve austerity?

Rachel Hopkins - Cardiff University

According to the Rawlsian Theory of Justice, the welfare of a society depends on the welfare of its worst-off member (Rawls, 1971). This has concerning implications for UK society in 2018, where the regressive and harmful policy of austerity has forced many people into immense hardship. Since the Coalition government of 2010, financial cuts have mercilessly targeted the welfare system. Not only does austerity create material poverty, but propagates structural inequalities in healthcare, education, and can even create inequalities in access to services such as child protection (Bywaters et al, 2017). As proponents of equality and social justice, it should be the duty of social workers to take all possible action to alleviate this problem for individual service users, while challenging the socio-political structures that create oppression and inequality. I propose a three-strand approach in tackling austerity. Firstly, we must identify poverty and vocalise our concerns regarding its highly detrimental impact on vulnerable people. Then, we must use practice creatively to negotiate the limited resources available and provide high-quality person-centred support for service users experiencing hardship. Finally, we must embrace radical social work and campaign for government reform in order to alleviate austerity across the UK.

It is not always easy for social workers to acknowledge poverty and austerity in their work. Gupta (2017) asserts that discussions around poverty, inequality, and austerity are often absent from social work discourse. Social workers may be reluctant to suggest that poverty is the fundamental cause of a service user’s issues such as substance misuse or mental ill health. To do so could seem classist and defeatist; essentially denouncing the individual as incapable of progress because of their circumstances. Practitioners tend to avoid tackling the over-arching issue of austerity-induced poverty, preferring to address the immediate needs of the service user, instead of their underlying social causes (Backwith 2015).

However, in austere times, we must face poverty head-on. Through disregarding the huge and oppressive structural factors that create poverty, we are placing the onus entirely on the service user to support themselves through difficult times. This is particularly prevalent in Children’s Services, where there is often the sense that families are blamed for neglecting their children, while simultaneously complex relationships between poverty and neglect are ignored (Drake and Pandey, 1996, Gupta 2017). To combat this, social workers should be unafraid to speak openly—albeit sensitively—about poverty in their practice; talking about its impact with both service users and professionals. We cannot ‘solve’ austerity until we recognise its disruptive and crushing effects for the most vulnerable people in society.

While being able to recognise the damage done by austerity is an important step towards eradicating it, practical measures are also vital in supporting service users through hardship. Social workers should have a detailed knowledge of the welfare system, enabling them to support service users in accessing all possible funding to which they are entitled. Austerity measures have made negotiating the welfare system intimidating and complex, meaning that many vulnerable people struggle to navigate it alone, and now require professional advocacy and support to obtain the most basic of incomes.

Austerity also creates a limited and rigid resource structure in social services, reducing funding around lower-level support and preventative services. Despite this, we must make all efforts to support and empower service users before they reach crisis point. Part of this process is recognising the incredible resilience and adaptability that many people have developed through hardship, and not negating them of their own agency (Zipfel et al, 2015). We should therefore strive towards co-production with the service user, initiating a dialogue about their personal needs, while respecting their expertise in their own experiences. Social workers should help to develop creative and non-traditional ways of using what little resources are available to support the individual or family. The ways in which we use resources to create personalised care should be as diverse as people themselves, and designed to maximise welfare for those who are in need.

While maintaining an open dialogue around poverty and working to support individuals are crucial parts of the fight against austerity, there is also a role for radical social work. We must take political action in everyday practice to challenge the systematic factors such as government policy that create oppression (Cardenas, 2017). We must register the unfairness we see daily, and join forces with others in our profession to speak out against the discriminatory voices that come from the highest level of government. In 2013, Conservative politician Michael Gove was quick to attribute poverty to ‘substance abuse, domestic violence and personal irresponsibility’ but failed to mention the link between poverty and lack of money or access to support, demonstrating how unfriendly and critical society is for those living through hardship. We cannot let these uncaring voices have the final say.

Though a radical approach can seem unachievable or idealisitc, it is being enacted by practitioners...
across the UK. For example, Social Workers and Service Users Against Austerity is an alliance of social workers, service users and carers who use their collective voice to speak out against the damage inflicted by government cuts. Furthermore, the Austerity Action Group undertook a 100-mile walk in 2017 in their anti-austerity campaign, and are actively developing a guide to anti-poverty practice. As social workers, we should all hold equality as a fundamental value in our practice, and by joining this shared voice that is unafraid to speak out against oppressive policy, we may be able to initiate real change for the vulnerable people who need it the most.

Social workers cannot be passive in times of austerity. We must use our powers responsibly and sensitively to tread the line between tackling structural unfairness, while empowering the personal agency of the service users with whom we work. Ending austerity is not a simple process, but following this three-part strategy of recognising poverty, supporting people through austerity, and campaigning through radical means, I hope that we can develop a kinder and more certain future for everyone.

How can social workers solve austerity?

Daniel Cornes - Keele University

Neo-liberalist economic austerity, in the context of contemporary social work, must be clearly interpreted and understood as incompatible with the very values which have called so many to social work over the lifespan of the profession; namely those of social justice and anti-oppression. Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016) correctly state that austerity is a political choice aimed at combating perceived economic difficulties. Based upon the value of this statement austerity may seem a sensible and noble choice. However, as we stumble through our tenth year of austerity policy in the UK, the social inequality born of this policy has impacted service users, social care provision, and practice so severely that a response from social care professionals is now overdue; but how to make a mark on this most divisive of issues?

This paper will present the notion that social workers must unite under a reformed and redefined umbrella of anti-oppressive values driven by a collectivist ideal. This strategy will be centred upon a dualistic campaign. Firstly, upon a prolonged media-based public awareness strategy detailing the true impact of austerity on the most vulnerable in our society. Social workers are in a unique position to collate and highlight what Flynn refers to as ‘marginalised voices’, those of the very people social workers strive to aid (Flynn, 2017, p. 190).

The second part of the recommendation sits upon a revision of anti-oppressive practice and, indeed, rhetoric. Radical social work, it seems, died well before the millennium but its prior incarnation cemented one of the key tenets social work holds dear; recognition that the service user must be heard alongside the professional. The context has shifted but the message resounds, the radical phoenix must again rise from the ashes and reinvigorate itself, not with the oppression faced by service users from practitioners but with the oppression felt by both parties from a neoliberal austerity agenda.

Pentaraki (2017) explores how austerity has impacted both the practitioner and the service user collectively through minimisation of resources, complex interrelated anxieties and reduced ability to implement and empower change within an authoritarian, politiced, fiscal environment. The demarcation of select social groups must be met with a strong egalitarian desire to publicly hold responsible those within local and central government who perpetuate such misery (Dominelli, 2002). The split allegiances of social work, as outlined by Bertotti (2016), centre upon state funded support but also accountability to

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the client; making this a troublesome task. However similar services, such as the NHS, regularly publicly hold their political masters to account using social awareness campaigns. The social care sector can learn from this and build inter-service allegiances to lobby for change. Whilst the NHS is far from a ‘happy house’ it is one which has widespread public awareness and ease of accessibility to an often loud and challenging public audience supported by staff who will vote with their feet to demand change (Weaver, 2016). In this manner social care practitioners, neighbouring services, and service users alike must unite under a collectivist banner to publicity demand change.

As highlighted by Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, and underpinned ad infinitum by Wilkinson and Pickett’s detailed analysis, inequality is bad for all concerned (Elliott quoting Lagarde, 2013) (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018). It raises stress levels, destabilises economic growth, and erodes social values such as cohesion and trust (Elliott, 2013, p. 1). Nonetheless the present government has persisted with a divide and rule approach to public service provisions and is now seeking to tender social work training programmes away from dedicated university delivery and into a privatised environment (Jordan and Drakeford, 2012). Meanwhile, a procedural and target driven ‘managerialist’ attitude to social care delivery persists (Rogowski, 2011).

The position of the social work profession in many countries adopting austerity is one of a profession marginalised and decimated by focused government intrusion. Similar patterns have been observed in Italy where the social work profession has failed to identify the profession’s true vested origins; that of arbiter between politics, social policy, service provision and champion of social justice (Campanini and Facchini, 2013). This failure of professional realisation has resulted, as is the case in the UK, in service users and professionals alike being isolated and divided amidst reforms and budget cuts without significant reaction from either party. In responding to this crisis, it is imperative that the profession, and the people it aspires to assist, orientate themselves and find common ground to demand recognition. Division of the most vulnerable in our society, and of the profession itself has been systematic, scornful and predominantly media led; so then must be the response. Crowd funded legal challenges, social media campaigns and coordinated activism are all relatively cheap and accessible ways to raise awareness and challenge a corrupt neoliberal system.

A new anti-oppressive framework must hold services accountable to a true relationship-based approach to practice and publicly highlight the dangers of private sector managerialism in a care setting. In doing so it will be vital to build support with service users across intergenerational lines and remove barriers of procedural-based practice which serve to disempower and stultify all concerned (Jordan and Drakeford, 2012). A grassroots movement must also be built with the next generation of social workers to ensure continuity. All of these skills play to the strengths of the social work profession; to enable, educate, challenge, promote humanitarian values and place the service user at the forefront of opposition to austerity. Cameron’s ideal of a so-called ‘Big Society’, whereby the most deprived help themselves for lack of support has failed and austerity is simply a choice to preserve the wealthiest and demote the poorest (Williams, 2011). The clarion call must be ‘unite’, be loud, be proud and spare no detail, children going hungry, people sleeping in shop doorways, utterly needless. Politicians will rebuff and the media scoff but in the darkest of times it should be remembered this is no ordinary job, no common skillset, but a passion.

Governments come and governments go, but people endure.

References


How can social workers solve austerity?
Jessica Hastings - University of Worcester

“The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing” (Einstein, in Nunn, 2009, pp. 22).

Social work strives for positive change and promoting social justice, equality, diversity and human dignity (British Association of Social Work (BASW), 2012). Despite the committed daily practice of social workers, Austerity is threatening the quality, consistency and provision of services across UK communities (Flynn, 2017). This essay defines ‘Austerity’ as the policy of public sector cutbacks introduced to offset the UK government’s financial deficit, which was largely brought about by the banking crisis (Anderson and Minneman, 2014). Furthermore, Austerity is viewed as having been designed ‘to reduce the social insurance and protection that was instituted by the welfare state, by forcing a substantial reduction in the numbers of those receiving financial assistance’ (MacLeavy, 2011, p. 365).

The essay will focus on the enablement of social workers being politically and radically engaged in ways that counter the hegemony of Austerity, and how the ‘fresh voices’ of students can encourage such involvement. As a student, I believe it is important that voices are heard from those new to experiencing Austerity on the front-line and to shout the loudest in search of a better social work future and social justice for the millions our profession supports. The stark choice for social work students is, increasingly, one of conforming to Austerity-led practice (in order to comply with organisational regulations and pass one’s course), or complying with practice which essentially oppresses services users and carers (SUAC). Students who take up an anti-Austerity position might present an ethical alternative to either of these two positions.

The culture of Austerity is pressing social work to relinquish its long-standing roots of social change and activism (Jemal, 2017), and extends social control, with its consequent inequality and oppression (Windsor, Jemal and Benoit, 2014). Originating from an ecological systems model, which places individual problems within wider systemic lenses (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), social work has traditionally promoted holistic frameworks when working with SUAC. However, holistic frameworks are becoming tokenistic in the face of Austerity pressures, where the focus remains on micro-level deficit analysis, which inevitably pathologises SUACs, and fails to address systemic constructs of social problems (Windsor, Jemal and Alessi, 2015).

Reviewing Austerity and practice, Jemal (2017), emphasises the need to refocus social work on its person-centred roots, through radical and political engagement. Critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1970) can be introduced to teams by student social workers, in order to encourage debate around structural agendas (in this case, Austerity). Such actions provide scope for transformative potential (Jemal, 2016) at two levels - Firstly, by adopting transformative consciousness, practitioners can be made aware that economic Austerity has evidently transitioned to welfare Austerity, focusing on reducing state ‘dependency’, and increasing provision for those deemed ‘more worthy’ (Alschuler, 1986; Yalnizyan, 2005). Secondly, forming this new awareness, would enable practitioners to view their own practice structures and their effects on SUAC and therefore social workers would be encouraged to adopt transformative action, by promoting community action and social activism (Windsor, 2013). Students are in a unique position to bring such fresh perspectives to a workplace where many practitioners may be overwhelmed with increasing managerialism and ever-increasing caseloads (Harris and Unwin, 2009).

Jemal (2017) suggests that considering a radical framework through one’s own practice enables practitioners to better contextualise issues, such as parental neglect and consider the contributing impact of Austerity. Factors in line with Austerity’s inception i.e. increased poverty, reductions in preventive services, and reduced support networks (Yalnizyan, 2005), all need to be brought into decision-making frameworks, if such frameworks are to be person / family centred and are to uphold anti-oppressive principles in the current climate.

Students also have a role in their own education and should not be passive receivers of established Austerity wisdom, within organisations. They might constructively use their course committee structures, to form social work Student Union societies and work alongside BASW’s student initiatives in lobbying for an Austerity profile throughout the curriculum (Black and Stone, 2005). Chambers et al. (2016) state that encouraging students to reflect on the structural factors behind their own culture and values, encourages this to then be developed at a societal level. The political awareness such reflection brings can then activate their acknowledgement of their role, even if outside the workplace (BASW/ SWU / local politics), in seeking solutions for societal wrongs, such as Austerity.

However, it is very difficult for student social workers to challenge the status quo of practice and the dominance of managerialism and performance management over practitioner autonomy, which reduces prospects for social work activism and change (Baines, 2004; Parada, Barnoff and Coleman, 2007). Brown (2005) argues that radical social work, in the face of practice-based stressors, might be one pressure too many. However, historical evidence
highlights the successes of radical social work (Hayes, 2007). Irena Sendler, a social worker in the 1940’s, was a key activist against anti-Semitic policy, going on to protect and rehome 2,500 children against execution (Hayes, 2007). Even as this essay was being written, the potential of social activism has been highlighted - young people in the USA have engaged in social activism by protesting about gun law and utilising powerful statements to get their voices heard i.e. “Protect us and Not guns” (Alter, 2018). Similarly, the contemporary movement ‘Me Too’, against the sexual harassment of women, has become heavily embedded in the discourse of popular culture and the political establishment across the UK and the USA, in ways which would not have been imaginable only a few years ago (Stone, 2017). Such a concerted movement against Austerity by student social workers, whose own careers and future families' welfare depend on decent working conditions and decent public services, could follow suit with such above activism, alongside the anti-Austerity pushes of BASW and SWU.

Returning to the words of Einstein (cited in Gardner, 2013, pp.99) - “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them”.

References


