

Youth Matters? Social Work Responses to the trauma experienced by young people displaced in contemporary community contexts.

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### **Paper Outline**

This paper outlines the importance of the recognition of the new contexts of youth displacement due to socio political change in the international social work community. It recognises youth displacement as a generic concept with a significant potential cause of trauma on any community experiencing socio political change that impacts on young people. This paper argues that social work requires a framework that is reflexive to the variety of causes of youth displacement and trauma in contemporary community contexts, which include family and community conflict, foster or adoption breakdown, refugeeism and migrancy and economic crisis. In particular, it promotes the skills of social work in creating safe places as practice holding places a *holding space* (Gauci, 2017) which potentially creates the framework for therapeutic encounter to support young people in distress. In doing so, it upholds the profession's understanding about "the knowledge of vulnerable groups that society, and systems, exclude" (IFSW Opening Address, Iceland 2017).

### **Themes**

1. Outlining youth displacement as a generic social work concern.
2. Austerity and Youth Displacement in Developed Countries
3. Defining trauma through displacement – and the contribution of relational social work practice.
4. Applying social work's model of groupwork based on the Creation of a Holding Space and 2. Therapeutic Encounter for young people in complex transition.

### **1. Understanding Youth Displacement as a generic social work concern**

Current humanitarian reports increasingly recognise the social impact of unequal economic growth on a UK, European and global level; the "growing polarization between the advantaged and the disadvantaged" (Bynner 2005:377). The increasing divide is felt by vulnerable people in communities; children and young people, the poor, disabled and marginalised. This paper outlines two generic features of the social work profession, the 'relational' (Furlong, 2013; Megele *et al*, 2016) and the 'reflexive' (Adams *et al*, 2011; Bruce, 2013), and explores the potential that these features have in contemporary debates about social work's responses to displaced persons and groups due to causes of community conflict and economic destabilisation.

In these uncertain social climates, social work exists to protect the principles of human compassion, as exemplified by the theme of Social World Social Work Day in 2017 as: "the humanitarian principles of social work are called to address the impact of cultural change and community conflict in the lives of people today. Social work attempts to break these cycles of unresolved trauma and multiple loss".

Our concern is with young people. Schapendonk *et al*'s study ( 2015:52) identifies the unequal effects and excesses of globalisation on the life experiences of young people, and the contrasting realities of power and access ( p.50), highlighting in particular community destabilisation and the

displacement of young people. “European societies are experiencing a paradigm shift due to economic and social crisis” (IFSW Iceland, 2017). Developing into adulthood in a changing work makes the transition points for young people, arguably, more critical. In the specific context of displacement, it can distort the normal securities, nurtures and expectations of young personhood.

The European Schools of Social Work are calling for new practice understandings of how to respond to the changing community conditions affecting young people in Britain, in Europe and across the world. There is, arguably, the need for the International Social Work Community to develop distinct practice strategies which are culturally transferable, reflexive to particular community contexts and reactive to the specific narratives and experiences of today’s young people. Social work has an intrinsic duty to help the young person to “negotiate the world they encounter” (Crouch, 2003:19). Three understandings of social work are therefore relevant:

1. A contemporary concern in social work about current responses to people displaced due to community conflict / environmental crisis / economic and political crisis and division.
2. The heritage of social work practice, knowledge and skills in responding to people experiencing complex transition and loss states (UK / European/ Global context)
3. The reflexive instinct in social work practice which operates, arguably, at a psycho social level – reacting to the social landscape or community context, and to the inner psyche of the person.

## **2. Austerity and Youth Displacement in Developed Countries**

As outlined above, youth displacement not only relates to physical displacement in poor countries, but in more developed countries can also refer to social and economic displacement. This section focusses on the effect of such austerity on young people in the UK. It highlights how austerity has led to the social and economic displacement of young people in the UK, in comparison to other groups, and the impact this has had on them. It also briefly highlights how a social work response focussed on the ‘social’ could be used to overcome this displacement.

### **2.1 Austerity in an international context**

Global forces in trade and economic investment have led to a widening gap between rich and poor not just between countries, but also within countries including economically rich and highly developed countries, leading to increasing hardship and new contexts of displacement for young people. This type of displacement is different from the types caused by conflict, wherein the displacement is more social rather physical, and so requires different types of responses. This has become evident in the policy response to the severe economic crises that have affected many European countries since 2010, as various governments have enacted a variety of ‘austerity’ policy measures, such as in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and the UK (Rudig and Karyotis, 2013). Busch et al (2013) have identified that these austerity policies are having a significant impact on the European Social Model in terms of causing growing unemployment, falling real wages, cuts in the social security system and privatisation of public property across the EU as a whole. While it is important to note that these austerity measures are affecting different groups in different ways, the impact on young people can be seen as particularly deleterious. For example, according to Antonucci et al (2014: 14), in contrast to previous generations, young people in contemporary Europe are experiencing a fragmented and uncertain reality, meaning that young people in contemporary Europe are perceived as the first generation to do worse than their parents (Hamilton, Antonucci and Roberts, 2014).

### **2.2 Austerity in the UK**

It was the election of the 2010 UK Coalition government which signalled significant austerity measures in public expenditure and specifically social policy expenditure. For example, since 2010

there have been £36 billion (approximately 2.6 trillion ₺) worth of public expenditure cuts to the end of 2014, with another £55 billion (approximately 4 trillion ₺) worth of cuts planned for between 2015-2019 (OBR 2014).

A consistent and totemic slogan from UK Government in relation to its austerity measures is that 'We're all in this together', denoting that the impacts of austerity have been shared (equally) among different groups. However, this claim has been challenged by a number of authors (see for example Bradshaw and Main 2014; O'Hara 2014; Steans and Jenkins 2012). In particular, the counter claim is that austerity in the UK has affected different groups in various ways, and it is young people for whom the cuts have had the most deleterious effect in a number of ways. For instance, according to Blanchflower (2015) it is the young who have been the biggest losers of austerity in the UK, as they often fail to get jobs, and even when they do they are often temporary, low-paid and with fewer hours than they would like. For example, youth unemployment has been at a record high, three times higher than unemployment for older adults (Hills 2015).

The younger generation have also suffered from continuous cuts in terms of social benefits and continual changes in their entitlement to social policy benefits in several ways (Unison, 2015). More recently, the social policy marginalisation of young people has continued, as evident in recent proposals such as removing entitlement to housing benefit from some of those aged 18–21, and the tightening of the system of entitlement to jobseeker's allowance for those aged under 21. Young peoples' benefits have also been cut and made more selective, such as in relation to the Connexions careers advice service, and the Youth Service which as seen up to 2000 jobs lost and around 350 youth centres closed (Unison 2014). But perhaps the most evident social policy change has been the package of changes made since 2011 to higher education, most notably the tripling of Higher Education tuition fees from £3000 to up to £9,000 per year. The estimate of debt from the Institute for Fiscal Studies for students leaving university following these changes is over £44, 000 (approximately 3.5 million ₺). Changes in the November 2015 Budget reinforced this even more, as the Government abolished Student Maintenance Grants and replaced them with a single system of Student Loans. Perhaps not surprisingly in the context of such austerity, young people's subjective experiences suggest that that the current welfare system is failing them in a number of ways (YMCA 2014). As Sealey (2014, 89) observes 'This and other changes [have] eroded young people's social rights in important areas of social welfare, such as employment and housing, [resulting] in a shift for young people away from dependence on the state to a prolonged period of dependence on themselves and/ or their family'.

This has resulted in a weaker social welfare provision, higher dependency of younger individuals on family support, and greater individualism which can lead to further intensified experiences of social exclusion (Sealey, 2014), as 'those on lower incomes and those in younger age groups are now less financially secure than on the eve of the downturn' (Broughton, Kanabar, and Martin 2015, 4). Specific social policies have also widened the intergenerational gap between young people and the older generation, meaning that the younger generation has not been able to secure forms of social, political and economic privileges enjoyed by previous generations. As a result, any kind of austerity measures aiming at a present or future change of social, economic and political circumstances leaves them more exposed compared to older generations, who might (although not necessarily) have had the chance to secure some kind of safety net (through education, employment, pension rights, secured property).

These factors highlight the significant changes which austerity social policies have disproportionately had on young people in the UK, which has led to the creation of the social displacement of young

people. It also suggests that the social, economic and psychological development of young people in the UK are less of a priority than for other groups, hence the question of whether youth matters in the UK. In the longer term, this transformation of prolonged austerity measures and policies into a youth displacement will have implications for the prospect for prosperity for the UK, as a consequence of its effect of limiting the younger generation's ability to shape and plan its own future.

In this context, the question is what should the social work response to this situation be? What is evident from the displacement of young people in the context of EU and UK is the way in which the notion of the 'social' appears to have been taken out of social policy discourse (Porter, 2000). This is evident in the way in which the intergenerational gap between young and old has been made apparent in policy, meaning that changing patterns of identity are deemed more significant to policy than forms of collectivity, leading to more individually tailored welfare service (Page, 2007a; 2007b). Thus, an emphasis on the importance of the social as argued above, rather than individual, is necessary to capture the inescapably 'social' essence of the displacement, and should move policy and theory away from the evidently flawed emphasis on its displacement towards the creation of a safe place for young people to flourish and thrive. This means that there is a need for greater emphasis towards co-ordinated activity to counter young people's social displacement, and this calls for greater state involvement to counter some of the deleterious effects of such austerity in general. To some, this might seem counterintuitive as such failure of institutions in the creation of displacement suggests a need for greater emphasis on individual actions, however, as Bauman (2008:3) observes:

*A state is 'social' when it promotes the principle of the communally endorsed, collective insurance against individual misfortune and its consequences. It is that principle ... that lifts the abstract 'society' to the level of 'real', tangible, felt-and-lived community, and thereby replaces (to deploy John Dunn's terms) the mistrust-and-suspicion-generating 'order of egoism' with the confidence and solidarity-inspiring 'order of equality'. And it is the same principle which lifts members of society to the status of citizens.*

### **3. The contribution of relational social work practice to youth displacement**

Having considered the universal economic changes which are causing generic concerns for young people across cultures, this article now concentrates on the young people who are most vulnerable due to the psychological impact of displacement hence have a reduced sense of their citizenship, and potentially, their self-worth. The conventional models which influenced social work's heritage are still relevant in understanding the psychological needs of young people facing displacement today. Bowlby's theory of a "secure base" (1988) lay the foundation for realising the importance of interpersonal relationships as a foundation for belonging, security and well-being; Bion's work (1965) on understanding the matrix of human experience laid the premise for his work on space, place and position in relation to the importance of constancy in the early state of identity, feeling and being. These positions developed a psychological instinct in social work practice, which engaged with the young person in a way which recognised the impact of displacement on their sense of security, composure and worth. In contemporary practice, the forces causing displacement can create greater disturbance for young people as they challenge and potentially damage family and community infrastructure. Hence the need for distinct models of therapeutic relational practice which engage with the young person in a way which can transform their sense of self at times of adversity and engage with their spirit of hope and resourcefulness

Social work, as a profession, has always held a protective instinct for young people who are particularly exposed to hardship due to the socio-economic infrastructure, for example, young people who are looked after, excluded from education, or in the youth justice system. It uses a

relationship based approach to engage with the young person and “hold” them emotionally during their adverse circumstances. Young people experiencing trauma reactions to displacement are likely to require a deeper relational approach based on therapeutic understanding. Trevithick (2012) identifies the “relational” as an equal partnership where both participants have an emotional influence on each other. Although this principle is claimed in all holistic models which have a person-centred focus, the risk with vulnerable / emotionally distressed young people is that their behaviours, in reacting to complex life circumstances, risk practice approaches which are more directive, structural, universal and pragmatic rather than deeply holistic.

However, in circumstances of forced displacement, the young person is likely to be deeply challenged and disorientated. In contemporary conference debates and literature on therapeutic understandings of refugeeism and migrancy, the primary focus on pragmatic and crisis relief needs to be combined with models which focus on therapeutic engagement; models of practice which can step into a destabilised community context and provide effective emotional engagement. This first wave of pragmatic relief is recognised in Papadopoulos (2002); his editorial of a collection of essays by the Tavistock Clinic social work practitioners, London UK collectively claims the importance of “therapeutic care” for refugees. Megele, Rees and Morley (2016) argue for the importance of emotional resilience as a holistic strategy which aids the ability to develop the psychological, emotional and cognitive abilities of young people. Resilience has been described as a “*dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity*” (Luther, 2003).

Contemporary writers highlight the need for new types of practice which are “reflexive” to current contexts and concerns, (Bruce, 2013; Megele, Rees and Morley, 2016) , calling for social work to develop the skills and knowledge to react to the diverse and different circumstances causing distress for today’s young people. Betts’ (2010: 52) study of youth migrants indicates the need for diversity of understanding due to the “multiple mobilities” of people and the caution against “common analytical frameworks...suggesting a new way of both understanding, and forming practice approaches. This is a move away from conventional models, due to the importance of the “use of strategies to handle risk and uncertainty”, highlighted by Schapendonk et al, 2015:52. The experience of marginalisation and displacement challenges the conventional rights and expectations of people, and for young people, this denial of need comes at a point of vulnerable life transition and psychological change. In studies of human displacement, (Maoz 2005) identifies the “inversion of the normal” and the isolation of the YP from any sense of “family project” (Apley 2011). Children and young people who are exposed to trauma are more susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (Ursano, McCaughy, and Fullerton, 2008). Rae’s work (2013) highlights internal and external predisposing risks for young people which impact on their mental health and sense of well-being.

Schapendonk *et al*’s study (2015) emphasizes the “transformative capacity” of the young person, observing that the emotional intensity of the transition can be “more than the young person can handle or prepare for” yet equally a passage towards resettlement and restoration (2015:55). Focusing on capacity and the motivation to change could be important mechanisms for young people who are marginalised and disadvantaged in terms of building their resilience and restoring their sense of self-worth. Schapendonk *et al*’s study connects the journey of the young person to the “rites of passage” from youth into adulthood (Noy & Cohen, 2005); It holds the potential for deep personal change and transformation, building strategies to prevent risks, establish reorientation and even find *tranquillities* ( 2015; 62). It is equally important to recognise the experience also holds the potential to create positive transformation. The need for flexible responses to diverse circumstances is a challenge for any universal service engaged in community practice, yet social work has always held an interest in “street corner” practice which responds to need as it presents. Current literature on community service responses to displaced young people recognises the

importance of understanding the trauma caused by displacement for young people who are less likely to access structural services in community contexts (Wood & Hine, 2009). The therapeutic instinct of the practitioner is therefore crucial to recognise symptoms of distress and trauma and to respond in a flexible individual way drawing on resources from the community infrastructure and the capacities of the young person.

#### **4. The formation of a practice model as a “holding space” for “therapeutic encounter”**

Pascal (2010) highlights the importance of space, place and psycho-social well-being for the young person. The importance of a *holding space*, therefore, is as a therapeutic practice forum to specifically treat symptoms of trauma in the displaced young person. This can be achieved by adopting a relational approach which builds their emotional resilience (Luther, 2008), develops their sense of belonging and actualisation (Pople and Rees, 2016), and secures their sense of legitimacy and worth (Chenoweth et al, 2005). The search for a relevant practice model rests on the importance of the creation of *holding spaces*; practice spaces which allow young people to meet and exchange experiences to make sense of the journey through displacement. These practice spaces allow individuals to be supported to express their sense of loss and grief, inviting insights which build new resilience to combat pain and loss, strengthen the capacity for attachment and relationships of trust, and regain a sense of belonging and hope (Lindenfield, 2006: 5). The groupwork principle, combined with a social work relational instinct, addresses the emotional grief carried in the experience of displacement; creating a safe place as a meeting point with others framed by shared understandings and held by therapeutic insight. Echoing the concept of retreat, the holding space allows the young person to step out of the place of trauma or conflict and potentially find a sense of safety. This safe space will hold the potential to build a “therapeutic alliance” (Baylis, 2011:79) or “therapeutic engagement” (Di Croce *et al*, 2016:259) with the young person. Using the therapeutic social work instinct, this can then form a practice space for responding to expressions of emotional distress, grief and uncertainty.

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