

**Democratising Social Work –  
A Key Element of Innovation:  
From ‘client’ as object, to service user as producer**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this discussion is to put participation in social work in ideological, historical and theoretical context. To do this, it will consider social work in the broader context of social policy and identify the two dominant modern political discourses which initially in the UK, but also beyond have provided the context for this discussion. While the discussion comes primarily from a UK perspective, it has wider ramifications, both for European and international situations more generally. The article outlines the development of counter discourses from social care and welfare service users. It also explores the two key competing ideologies which have underpinned different models and understandings of participation and examine the implications of these different approaches to participation, considering their regressive and liberatory potential. It will begin to examine the possibilities and problems now being highlighted for participation in social work in theory and practice, taking the UK as a case study with wider implications.

**Introduction**

A key aspect of innovation in social care and indeed public policy more generally in recent years has been the desire to involve or engage with ‘the public’, patients and ‘service users. In the UK, for example, the political and policy rhetoric has been of increasing choice and control for service users in social work and social care through service ‘user-led’ and ‘user-focused approaches to support and services which put the service user at the centre of policy, provision and practice. Currently in the UK, major changes are taking place in social care, framed in terms of ‘personalisation’ and ‘self-directed support’ (Poll et al, 2006 and DH, 2005; 2006; Henwood and Hudson, 2007; Leadbeater et al, 2008). This development is being offered as having transformatory potential, enabling service users to have budgetary control over the range of support policies to which they may be eligible, able to put together their own holistic package of support. User involvement is seen as at the core of this development.

Yet social work and social care do not have strong histories of enabling participation in the UK. Participation also remains a highly contested concept, over which there is little consensus. The aim of this discussion is to put participation in social work in ideological, historical and theoretical context. To do this, it will consider social work in the broader context of social policy and identify the two dominant modern political discourses which initially in the UK, but also beyond have provided the context for this discussion. While the discussion comes primarily from a UK perspective, it has wider ramifications, both for European and international situations more generally. The article outlines the development of counter discourses from social care and welfare service users\*. It also explores the two key competing ideologies which have underpinned different models and understandings of participation and examine the implications of these different approaches to participation, considering their regressive and liberatory potential. It will begin to examine the possibilities and problems now being highlighted for participation in social work in theory and practice, taking the UK as a case study with wider implications. The argument here is that unless participation is critiqued in this careful way, innovation based upon it, is likely to be qualified and restricted in its potential and impact.

## **The context of the discussion**

One of the ironies of participation which has so far frequently passed without serious comment, is that while its conceptualisation and practice are ostensibly centrally concerned with involving and including people, in its own modern usage, it has generally tended to be abstracted and treated in isolation. In the UK, for example, there have been some discussions of the socio-economics, politics and ideology of participation, but these have been limited in number and range. (for example, Pateman, 1970; Held, 1987) In contrast a much greater interest has developed in the 'technicalities' of participation, reflected in the production of a large and rapidly growing body of 'how to do it' manuals, courses and consultants. (for example, Hanley et al, 2000; VSO, 2001) The emphasis is on techniques for and the findings from participation. In the UK, there has even been a national competition to identify the most 'successful' initiatives for public involvement run by the Guardian newspaper and Institute for Public Policy Research. (Dean, 2000) This emphasis on empiricism is perhaps hardly surprising, bearing in mind the very limited achievements of provisions for participation to date and also the frequent failure of participatory schemes to challenge dominant discriminations and inequalities, particularly around 'race' and culture and disability in their own operation (Begum, 2006).

However, this phenomenon also raises broader questions and reflects broader issues relating to both participation and its policy/political context. Preoccupation with technicist approaches to policy and practice was first encouraged by the political New Right in public policy, particularly health and welfare policy, as it sought to discredit the value base of public provision and to challenge the power, competence, values and discretion of professionalised workers. In Britain it tried to reduce their roles to bureaucratised 'competencies' and procedures subordinated to financial and state control. But can participation be encouraged, evaluated or even understood simply by reference to the techniques that are used in attempting to undertake it? Can we make sense of the strengths and shortcoming of participation or even particular approaches to participation in this way? Is it intelligible in isolation? This seems unlikely, given the inherently political and ideological nature of participation. Instead the empirical emphasis may better be understood as a flight to safety - a search for a safe option which helps divorce participation from its dangerous relations with power and ideology. Reminders of these relations can be expected to make the undertaking and analysis of participation more threatening and difficult and to challenge the coziness that words like participation, 'user/consumer involvement' and related concepts like 'empowerment' and 'partnership' have come to have in recent times.

Ironically, this frequent failure to connect may also reflect the new significance that participation has in politics and policy in the UK, EC and beyond. Public, particularly social policy has become permeated with requirements (some statutory) for user involvement in policy planning, management and provision. This stands in sharp contrast with the past. Welfare service users have traditionally been excluded both from the construction of social policy and social policy debates. (Oliver, 1996; Oliver and Barnes, 1998; Campbell and Oliver, 1996) Participation has now been put at the heart of health, social care, regeneration, housing and education policies. In England, provisions for participation extend from extensive user involvement in the Commission for Social Care Inspection, established as the regulatory body for social care services, to recent proposals for 'community representation' in 'local protection panels' to manage sex offenders. (BBC TV, 2001) A number of senior social policy commentators have identified participation as a key issue for social policy in the UK. (Becker, 2000) The same emphasis has been placed on

participation by key international and European institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EC Social Fund. This has been coupled with a search for and emphasis on new models of user involvement, like the citizen panels and juries of deliberative approaches and the development of virtual and electronic approaches to participation.

There has never been so much political and policy interest expressed in participation, across so many fields. Yet equally there has probably never been so much ambiguity and uncertainty. Paradoxically now, when there is unprecedented pressure for involvement in UK policy, practice and increasingly, research, community, citizens' and service user organisations seem to be increasingly wary of being involved. The talk has increasingly been of involvement 'overload', consultation 'fatigue' and of being 'all consulted out'. Service users and their organisations have increasingly highlighted the problems posed, at both personal and collective levels by getting involved. (Campbell, 1996: 223; Beresford and Croft, 2001, pp11-12; Branfield et al, 2006) Such concerns also connect with broader debates about the regressive potential of 'participation' highlighted by development policies in the South. (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Beresford, 2002) The gains of participation in many cases also seem limited. Thus, for example, in the UK, there has now long been a strong government emphasis on supporting 'user-led' services and independent social care service users' organisations. However, the two year user controlled national research project initiated by the National Centre for Independent Living and the Centre for Disability Studies at Leeds University reporting on user controlled services, reveals a national picture of inadequately and insecurely funded organisations, greatly valued by their service users but struggling to maintain their activities and facing an uncertain future. (Barnes and Mercer, 2006) Even as government argues the importance of participation, it is reducing long established provision for participation in land-use planning - where much of this discussion started in the 1960s, (Hetherington, 2001; McCarthy, 2001; Vidal, 2001) and introducing ideas like 'user champions' which have been called into question by some service users as unaccountable and without mandate. (Campbell, 2001)

### **The focus of this discussion**

Even the most cursory situation report highlights fundamental and very evident contradictions in participation. As we have seen, there seems to be political interest, but public dissatisfaction; official priority, but very limited achievements and resourcing. While interest in participation has steadily mounted over the last 40 or so years, this has tended to be a recurring scenario, with participatory initiatives conspicuous under-achievers. The aim of this discussion is to try and make more sense of this situation, specifically by considering the ideological, political and economic relations of participation as both conceptual framework and practice, and with particular reference to social policy. The concern here is to explore the role that participation, has played, does play and may play in the future, in relation to the social production and social relations of welfare and social policy. This focus is overdue, both because of the concerns that are increasingly being raised by recipients of social work specifically, and social policy more generally, and their organisations, about the failings of policy and provision which does not involve them and as we have already heard, because of the increased political priority that participation now commands in social policy. The intention is to try and make some connections with participation and to consider the implications broader ideas, values and structures may have for its operation and potential and what part they may play in its limited effectiveness to date. These broader issues may or may not be the reason for participation's qualified progress, but they

are likely to offer some insights into it. The assumption underlying this analysis is that participation cannot helpfully be understood or progressed in isolation and that if we seek to be serious in our examination of involvement and aspirations to advance it, then we will need to consider it in its broader context. The objective is to:

- put discussion of participation in ideological and historical context, taking account of shifts from pre-capitalist, to capitalist and postmodern society;
- briefly consider the two recent dominant political discourses which in the UK specifically and frequently in European and western societies more generally, provide the context for this discussion;
- outline counter developments from social care and welfare service user movements;
- relate these developments to participation and different models and understandings of participation which have emerged;

Clearly only an initial exploration can be offered here, but hopefully this will provide a basis for and encourage further discussion and activity in this area.

As we have seen, the rhetoric of participation is now well advanced in social work and social policy practice. However, so far, social work and social policy as disciplines seems to have been much slower to address issues of participation in either their analysis or process. The signs are that they have yet to prioritise either the perspectives of service users or their involvement and inclusion in their activities. In so far as ‘participation’ has been identified as a focus for social work interest, it has been much more as a subject of study rather than as a source of insight for social work’s own praxis. An important exception in the UK is social work education where user involvement has been established as a requirement (Branfield et al, 2007). Thus the discipline still has fully to address the issues raised by service user organisations and movements, which as we shall see shortly, have played a central role in developing action and discussion on participation. So far limited interest has been shown in these movements of welfare service users, their theories, discussions, proposals and their now large and growing body of published work, particularly in broader social policy discussions. (Beresford, 1997; Beresford, and Holden, 2000) The dominant conception of service users as a data source continues. More recently they have also come to be seen as a form of ‘social capital’ to serve social policy. (Montgomery and Inkeles, 2001)

The signs are, though, that this is going to have to change both because of internal pressures (from interested minorities of the social work/ social policy ‘communities’) and external political pressures. The latter are notably embodied in increasing government interest in participation in social policy and practice and because of the rapidly growing interest of both statutory and non-statutory funding organisations in ‘user involvement’ in research and analysis (Taylor and Balloch, 2005; Lowes and Hulatt, 2005). We should also not forget the impact of welfare service user organisations and movements, of which more later. For this reason, if no other, it is essential that critical discussion of the idea and practice of participation and those agents involved in its development is taken forward within social work (and indeed broader social policy), so that the response to participation can be as well informed and well-judged as possible.

### **Service users and the construction of social work**

In recent years, the fields of social work and social care have been notable for their efforts to involve service users, developing initiatives and exploring approaches in particular aspects of

their activities ahead of many other policy areas. However, this was certainly not the case in the past. While there are significant differences internationally in the nature of social work and role of social workers, there are also common themes. (Midgley, 2001) A number of key and varied influences have shaped the practice of social work over its history; from late nineteenth century utilitarian philanthropy, psycho-analysis and psychiatry, to late twentieth century municipalism, consumerism and managerialism. However, from the days of Octavia Hill in Victorian England, to the 1970s radical social work theoreticians, (Langan and Lee, 1989) social work has been an increasingly professionalised top-down activity, whose main recipients have largely been marginal in its construction. The involvement of service users in social work was largely confined to accidental and incidental overlaps, where social workers either had had experience as service users or at some point have themselves become service users. Such overlaps have generally not been encouraged by state social work recruitment or employment practices.

In one sense, at least, though, the experience and knowledges of the recipients of social work have long been included in its organisation and activities. Their experience and knowledges, reconstructed in the form of case notes, case material and case studies has traditionally been used to legitimate, rationalise and promote social work. Originally in the UK when social work was mainly a charitable activity, they served a primary purpose in social work in both allocating and gaining money; used both in 'client assessment' and organisational fund raising. When social work also became a statutory activity, they were employed more systematically as a data source for management, research and theory building. It is important to remember, however, that this was service users' experience and knowledges as judged, interpreted and understood by social work and its agents. Traditionally in social work as in other social policy areas, the social work profession and its academic associates tended to be the arbiters and interpreters of users' knowledges, at theoretical as well as practice levels. In social work, a distinct area of research developed which came to be called 'client studies', pioneered by the book 'The Client Speaks'. (Meyer and Timms, 1970) While there has been a tendency in social work to equate this development with a new commitment to 'clients'' perspectives, it may better be seen as a renewed focus on them as a data source for professional interpretation. (Beresford and Croft, 1987) Indeed it can be argued that social work analysts and academics have placed an increasing reliance on the experience and knowledges of service users in order to gain support for their authority for their own critiques and theorising.

### **This discussion's perspective**

It is also helpful to locate this discussion itself. It may most accurately be described as coming from a 'service user's' perspective. I write with experience of using mental health services, as someone actively involved in the mental health service users/survivors movement, the broader disabled people's movement and welfare user movements more generally. Traditionally the relation of its commentators to social work did not generally seem to be seen as significant and was often not articulated. From the 1970s, this was challenged by Black, feminist and gay, lesbian and bisexual critiques of social policy, whose proponents argued that their perspectives had tended to be ignored, obscured or misinterpreted by mainstream discussions which reflected dominant identities, interests, understandings and objectives (Williams, 1989). A similar challenge has also emerged from the movements of welfare service users.

By such movements I mean those of people who identify as having been on the receiving end, long term of heavy end social policy practices and provisions and where this has played a central role in shaping their identity and/or their understandings of social care and social work. The movements (and we will come to these shortly) which have developed this discussion, are particularly associated with long term use of health and social care services. In developing their own discourses, they have highlighted the differences that have developed between discussions from service users' perspectives - where direct and explicit experience of such social policies is centrally involved - and those (dominant discussions) where this has not been the case. They therefore argue that people's status and role in relation to use of such services is both relevant and important in understanding the values, beliefs and ideas which they bring to it. This continues to be a contentious issue and one which needs to be addressed in any detailed consideration of participation.

### **Dominant philosophical traditions in social policy**

Two philosophical traditions have dominated the modern history of social policy and social work within it. Indeed it could be said that since social policy as both a discipline and explicit practice had its major beginnings in the nineteenth century that they have dominated all its history. These traditions are those of Fabianism and Marxism. Both are concerned with change and reform (albeit one posits revolutionary change). Both are more or less committed to a planned economy. Both are concerned with societal change, but are also centrally associated with social policy. Popular and expert understandings of social policy have both been fundamentally affected by them. They are both complex multi-faceted and certainly not monolithic, so it is very difficult to do justice to their complexity in a short discussion. Both now tend to be seen as marginal and in retreat. Yet both have significance for our understanding of participation in social policy and for the role (or lack of role) that participation has played in its history so far. It may also be argued that their inheritance continues to be much more powerful than is often acknowledged.

### **Fabianism, social policy and social work**

Fabianism can be seen as a nineteenth/early twentieth century political philosophy which had its fullest flowering in the UK and other European countries after the second world war with the creation of welfare states. Two strands can be identified in its UK origins, reflecting its competing commitments to socialism and social democracy. These include its indebtedness to the utilitarianism that generated the New Poor Law, through the founding influence of the Charity Organisation Society, and to ethical and Christian socialism, embodied in the Webbs and Tawney. (Tawney, 1931; Sullivan, 1998) Fabianism has become synonymous with state welfare and a commitment to collective provision, but in the UK context it was always actually associated with a mixed economy of welfare, with continuing significant roles played by both voluntary/charitable and private/for profit provision. However there were several principles with which it was strongly and consistently associated. These included commitment to and reliance on:

- 'experts' having the central role in planning and shaping policy, including social policy, located in government - both central and local state - and acting as official advisers;

- specialist administrators who would make possible the better administration of state welfare. The state and its officials were thus seen as the politically neutral administrative arm of government. In this form of collectivism, Fabianism conceived that ‘the rules... would be guaranteed, and if necessary enforced, by (these administrators acting as) a set of neutral umpires’. Thus ‘experts would shape (social policy) and administrators would implement it’. (Sullivan, 1998, p71);
- the use of ‘expert’ and academic knowledge and research on social problems like poverty, to develop policy and to create pressure on the state to introduce welfare reforms through a ‘public’ ‘educated’ by its ‘experts’;
- the development of education for practice (as social services workers); the professionalisation of welfare roles.

The Fabians saw the achievement of social equality and the abolition of poverty as possible within capitalism through social policy measures.

For them the welfare state is built around redistributive taxation and universal benefits in partnership with municipal service delivered by competent professionals and administrators, regulated and financed to ensure an acceptable uniformity across the country. (Ginsburg, 1998, p83)

### **Marxism, social policy and social work**

While for the social democratic Fabians, the welfare state or state welfare represented a solution to the problems of capitalism, for Marxists, particularly early Marxists, it was part of the problem. ‘Social policy decision-making was seen as subordinate to the requirements of capitalism. Social policy decision-making is inevitably limited to a role supporting or helping to legitimise the capitalist order.’ (Hill, 1998, p137) In the Marxist analysis, welfare failed to replace the exploitative relationships of the labour market. Marxists argued that the welfare state failed to resolve the social problems of people experiencing poverty and of the broader working class, and that in reality it operated to support capitalism rather than to challenge it (Ginsburg p79) For such Marxists the state must play the major if not the exclusive role in the provision of social (and indeed economic and other) policy. However, as commentators like Peter Alcock have argued, social policy developments have also transformed capitalist society. (Alcock, 1996, p147) In his discussion of the political economy of the welfare state, Ian Gough highlighted the contradictory nature of welfare states in advanced capitalist societies; that is to say the way in which they can at the same time serve to support capital accumulation and also provide social benefits for ‘those in need’. (Gough, 1979) At the same time, Norman Ginsburg discussed the way in which welfare states controlled and oppressed service users as well as providing for them. (Ginsburg, 1979)

### **Fabianism, Marxism and participation**

During the twentieth century, neither Fabianism nor Marxism seemed to encourage the advancement of either the consideration or practice of participation in mainstream modern social policy. This appears to relate both to some shared characteristics as well as some distinct



differences between the two. Perhaps one thing which distinguished them was that proponents of Fabianism did not seem (certainly during its dominant years) to have given the issue of participation serious consideration, while among Marxists, participation was perhaps taken for granted, but not necessarily with any justification. The effect in both cases was to discourage broad based or popular participation in the analysis, construction and operation of social policy

Both philosophies (despite Fabianism's preoccupation with empiricism) can be seen to be based on grand theories, operating primarily at macro level. Both have a particular interest in the state as planning, implementing and providing agent for welfare. Critics of each philosophy highlight fundamental problems this latter issue may pose. Fabianism's focus on state welfare under capitalism is problematic for all (not only Marxists) who do not see the state's interests as necessarily synonymous with those of welfare service users and other citizens, or the state as necessarily representing or including such interests. Similar problems are posed for those who question assumptions that state socialism or Marxist regimes necessarily embody or provide a basis for embodying the interests and perspectives of all citizens.

Fabian approaches to social policy can be seen as based essentially on notions of elite 'expertise'; committed to empirical investigation to identify need and social policy responses and a model of 'public education', to seek popular support and legitimation for their proposals and reforms. Fabian social policy was essentially 'top-down' in both its approach and process. There was little or no role for people who used or might use welfare services in conceiving, shaping, managing or critiquing its provision or proposals. They were confined to a passive position as data source for its empirical investigation. Interpretation of their experience was seen by Fabians as a task for its experts and researchers. Fabianism can be seen as offering an inherently paternalistic approach to social policy analysis and formation, with its own preset proposals and programmes.

Marxist perspectives have been concerned with the ultimate inclusion and participation of people. Such participation clearly featured in Marxism's founding thinking. (Marx and Engels, 1848/1998; Lenin, 1979) However, unresolved problems remained of how to reconcile state and leader control with control by individuals and collectivities within societies. With its framework of class struggle, Marxism provided a basis by which participation might be understood, but there was frequently a failure to look beyond the need for 'popular' and revolutionary struggles to explore how these might truly be inclusive, anti-discriminatory, participatory and progressive in class terms. Marxism's originating emphasis on people conceived as workers (both within and outside welfare) had important implications for understanding in social policy and highlighted existing divisions. Many of the groups liable to be on the receiving end of welfare, for example, unemployed and casual workers, poor people, disabled people, mental health service users and so on, were among those negatively identified by Marx as 'lumpenproletariat'. Workers in the welfare system have often been experienced as oppressive by welfare service users and their interests and those advanced by their trades unions would by no means be seen as consistent with those of service users. With some important exceptions, (for example, Phillipson, 1982) the neo-Marxist critiques and those framed in terms of political economy of the 1970s and early 1980s, which focused on welfare and social services in general (and significantly on social work specifically), did not address issues of participation or the perspectives of people on the receiving end of welfare. (for example, Corrigan and Leonard, 1978; Gough, 1979; Ginsburg, 1979; Bailey and Brake, 1975)

It would be wrong to leave this discussion of Marxist thinking and social policy without taking account of one strand of action and thinking which had strong roots in leftist and Marxist ideology and a concern with advancing participation. Two of the best known UK publications and activities associated with it were *In And Against The State* and *Beyond The Fragments*. (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979; Wainwright et al, 1979) Both initiatives were linked with grassroots campaigning as well as producing best selling pamphlets and books. Both were concerned with reconciling the interests of public service users and workers; of engaging with and involving the perspectives of service users and of advancing participation. Both originated with political and trade union activists. concerned with challenging the controlling and negative aspects of state welfare and committed to working in more participatory and egalitarian ways. We will shortly also return to another key link with Marxist approaches to social policy when we consider the development of the welfare service user movements

### **New Right, ‘Third Way’, social policy and social work**

The failure of traditional dominant political and social philosophies to advance participation can also be seen as the context and starting point for the emergence of two new modern political philosophies, which also have major ramifications for participation. These are the political New Right and the Third Way. Between them, they have fundamentally reshaped social policy in the west and beyond.

The proponents of the New Right or Neo-Liberalism came to political prominence in the US and UK in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They rejected a planned economy and favoured a competitive market economy. They argued that such a market economy was an essential basis for democracy and that the powers of government should be limited by constitutional law. They prioritised monetary policy, fiscal constraint and privatisation. They advocated individual freedom unconstrained by state ‘interference’. At a time when the authority of Fabianism was weakening in both Europe and North America, they attacked state welfare, arguing that it undermined the market economy. They attacked state intervention on grounds of cost, inefficiency and the creation of ‘dependency’. They emphasised instead individual responsibility for welfare, the purchase of health and welfare service and the restriction of the state’s role to the provision of a safety-net service.

The ‘Third Way’, came to prominence with Britain’s New Labour, but also reflects a more general development in modern European and Western politics and social policy. (Giddens, 1998) It has been presented in terms of a changed balance of state and market approaches to public policy and welfare. The Third Way emphasises the benefits of the private sector. Critics raise concerns about its ambiguity about redistribution, (Lister, 2001) possible shift away from universalism and its increased emphasis on managerialism and privatisation, reliance on means-testing and more residual role for state welfare. (Drake, 2001, p158; Lister, 2001) New Labour social policy in the UK has been characterised by ambiguity and contradiction. There is little agreement about it. Some commentators highlight its effectiveness. (for example, Glennerster, 2001; Oppenheim, 2001) Others stress its instrumental populism and narrow pragmatism, (Lister, 2001); its tendencies to authoritarianism and scapegoating (Butler and Drakeford, 2001) and its preoccupation with participation in the labour market. (Levitas, 1998)

Some social policy analysts have highlighted the similarities between the political New Right and Third Way, suggesting that in the UK the latter simply represents Labour's adoption of right wing policies. However the Third Way and Britain's New Labour social policy can also be seen, and present themselves, as different in kind from both New Right and old Labour. Indeed, a more interesting, but less often made connection, that can be made is between Third Way social policy and the shift to the right in Fabian social policy that began to develop in the late 1970s, associated with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) under headings like 'welfare pluralism' and the 'mixed economy of welfare', with a new emphasis on voluntarism, 'informal aid' and the marketplace. (Beresford and Croft, 1984) This shift in Fabian consensus to the right can be seen as Fabianism's attempt at adaptation to meet the crisis then facing it. It may also be seen as laying the foundations for New Labour/Third Way social policy, providing a model which was subsequently developed and embodied by it. To this extent, we should perhaps see Fabianism's influence in the UK and perhaps beyond, as connecting with current government social policy except that the 'expert administrator' and social planning are now replaced by managerialism and 'public private partnerships'. Perhaps what the Third Way comes closest to being is some kind of amalgam of right wing Fabian and New Right social policy.

### **New Right, 'Third Way' and participation**

These two political philosophies, the political New Right and Third Way, do have one other important feature in common, which also distinguishes them from their predecessors. Both place great emphasis on participation. In the UK, both political New Right Conservative administrations and New Labour 'Third Way' (and potentially 'post-third way') governments have prioritised participation and related concepts of 'partnership' and 'empowerment'. Arguably it is in their commitment to a market-led and managerialist rhetoric and terminology of participation that these two political philosophies have come closest together. If anything New Labour has extended interest in participation highlighting it as a necessary feature, not only of policy and practice, but also of politics, with its rhetoric of participatory democracy and commitment to devolution, subsidiarity, parliamentary and local government reform.

The dominant modern model of participation, the consumerist approach, originates with the New Right. Increasingly overlaid with the goals and techniques of managerialism under New Labour, it might now be best to think of it as a consumerist/managerialist approach to participation. Associated with a retreat from state welfare and increasing emphasis on the market and individual responsibility, this approach to participation is closely linked with the philosophy and rhetoric of consumerism, including purchase of service and ideas of 'consumer/customer choice', 'co-funding', 'voice'/ involvement and 'exit'. (Beresford and Croft, 1986; Winkler, 1987) It reflects the broader interest, associated with the market, of maximising profitability and effectiveness and the tendency to equate the latter with the former. It was originally presented in terms of advancing the 'three Es' in public policy, highlighted by Conservative administrations: efficiency, economy and effectiveness. It highlights all the ambiguities of consumerist approaches, with their emphasis on individual rights and choice coexisting with the imperatives of profitability and the market. Framed mainly in market research terms of improving goods and services through market testing and feedback, the consumerist approach has so far mainly been based on consultative and data collection methods of involvement. These have become increasingly sophisticated and innovative. As the clear equivalent of the market testing and focus groups associated with mainstream commercial goods and services, its role in improving

provision on the basis of ‘consumer’ or ‘customer’ intelligence gathering can be readily understood. Prioritising the perspectives and the interests of the state, market and welfare service system, there is no commitment to the redistribution of power or control.

### **Welfare service user movements and participation**

However, it has not only been these two dominant strands in modern political and social policy ideology, the New Right and Third Way, which have prioritised participation or been influential in its conceptualisation. The same has also been true of the welfare service user movements which have developed and come to prominence over a corresponding period. These movements, of disabled people, psychiatric system survivors, people with learning difficulties, older people and other recipients and users of health, social care and income maintenance services, have become increasingly powerful and influential, with their own democratically constituted local, national and international organisations and groupings. These movements and the organisations operating within them, have developed their own cultures, arts, ways of self-organising, knowledges, theories, principles, strategies and demands. (Campbell, 1996; Campbell and Oliver, 1996; Morris, 1996; Oliver and Barnes, 1998; Barnes et al, 1999; Beresford, 1999; Lindow, 2001) It is also important to note, that Marxist analysis and leftist critiques played a significant part in the development of the thinking of these movements. (see, for example, Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 1998)

The welfare service user movements have developed their own model of participation – an essentially *democratic* model. Service users’ interest in participation has been part of broader political and social philosophies which prioritise people’s inclusion, autonomy, agency, independence and the achievement of their human and civil rights. This approach to participation is primarily concerned with people having more say in political process; institutions, organisations and agencies which impact upon them, and being able to exert more control over their own lives. The democratic model of participation is rooted in people’s lives. and their aspirations to improve the nature and conditions of their lives. Participation has been one expression of a commitment to ‘self-advocacy’; of people being able to speak and act on their own behalf. This has been framed primarily in terms of involvement through collective action in independent disabled people’s and social care service users’ organisations. (Oliver, 1996; Campbell, 1996; Campbell and Oliver, 1996; Newnes, et al, 2001)

The democratic approach to involvement is explicitly political. Unlike the consumerist/managerialist approach, it highlights issues of power and the (re)distribution of power. The disabled people’s movement, for example, bases its approach to participation on the social model of disability, using both parliamentary and direct action to achieve change. It prioritised the introduction of civil rights legislation and the provision of adequate support for organisations controlled by disabled people themselves, establishing the ‘independent living’ movement to ensure that disabled people can maintain control over their personal support through direct payments and self-run personal assistance schemes. The movements’ democratic model of participation is liberational in purpose, committed to social change and personal and political empowerment.

## **The potential of participation**

The development of these two different and in many ways opposed conceptions of participation, highlights the importance of considering participation in its broader ideological, political and socio-economic contexts. Participation may have many meanings and expressions. While there may be overlaps between consumerist/managerialist and democratic approaches to participation, the significant differences between them can be traced to their different origins, values and aims. Both approaches may be concerned with bringing about change. However, in the consumerist approach, the search is for external input which the initiating institution - state, market, service system or policy maker - itself decides what to do with. Control and the distribution of power remain unchanged. The democratic approach is concerned with ensuring that welfare service users and other citizens have the direct capacity and opportunity to make change.

While the logic of the democratic approach is for 'bottom-up' political process and 'user-led' and 'user-controlled' services; a consumerist/managerialist approach is clearly compatible with the retention of a top-down, provider-led approach to politics, policy and provision. While the democratic approach is explicitly political (and can expect to come in for criticism for this reason), the consumerist/managerialist approach tends to be abstracted and treated as if it were unrelated to any broader ideology or philosophy - although it is, of course, implicitly. Perhaps this highlights a more general problem which exists for managerialist/consumerist approaches to participation: the tension which there is when arrangements for participatory or direct democracy exist in a political structure based primarily on a system of representative democracy.

This draws us to two important and related issues which participation raises for social policy. What is its potential for liberation and transformation in social policy? What difference can it actually make and what kind of participation would be required? What impact can it actually have on social policy? Its liberatory potential concerns its capacity to advance people's rights and interests, particularly as subjects of social policy. Its transformatory potential relates to its capacity to support social policy capable of achieving such aims. The capacity of the two approaches to participation which have been discussing: consumerist/managerialist and democratic approaches, to achieve such objectives, seem to be markedly different.

While participation is generally presented in positive and progressive terms, it also has a regressive potential. Participatory initiatives frequently serve to obstruct rather than increase people's involvement, being used to tokenise and co-opt people, delay decisions and action and to legitimate predetermined agendas and decisions. This seems to have been particularly true of consumerist approaches to participation, where data collection rather than empowerment is the primary aim. To date it has been this approach to participation which has predominated and this may help account for the widespread distrust of and disillusion with participation that has developed. The commitment of the consumerist/managerialist model to exchange relationships, its reliance on hierarchical managerialism and its lack of attention to power relationships, suggest that it is as likely to reinforce the status quo as challenge it. In the UK context, this is highlighted by the extension of relationships with the market (with which this model of participation is most closely associated) through the development of 'private public partnerships' (PPP) and 'private finance initiatives' (PFI). These expose service users' 'voice' to new risks of being subordinated and marginalised by more powerful partners and interests, regardless of the concurrent rhetoric of involvement and empowerment.

In contrast, the democratic approach to participation does offer the promise of liberation and transformation. Indeed, its advocates can argue that the legislation with which it is already associated, like disability discrimination and direct payments legislation, has already begun this process. Its emphasis on the redistribution of power, the personal and political empowerment of people as citizens, workers and service users, the equalisation of relationships in public policy and user controlled support and services all have transformative implications for social policy. So does its commitment to service users' liberation, through the achievement of their human and civil rights and the support it has from grassroots, mass movements as part of their broader ideologies.

While a managerialist/consumerist approach to participation may be written off as a dead end, tied to the status quo, it is difficult to see how any social policy which is committed to advancing the rights and needs of service users can ignore the democratic model. It may offer a basis for transforming social policy. This makes it essential to explore this model more carefully. It also makes it all the more important to be able to distinguish between these two models of participation and not confuse one with the other. Thus it is no longer good enough to offer general arguments for or against participation in social work and social policy. These need to be related both to specific models of participation and the ideologies underpinning social policies. If there is one lesson to be learned from attempting to put participation into context, it is that social policy can no longer be considered in isolation from it or the welfare service user movements which have been centrally involved in its development.

### **Key questions for social work and social policy**

The democratic approach to participation raises and encourages us to address some major issues and questions in analysing and developing social work as part of social policy as both discipline and practice. These include:

- how social work should be produced;
- the nature of knowledge formation and knowledge claims in social work;
- the purpose and nature of social work practice;
- how social (care) workers should be socialised (educated and trained for their roles) and by whom;
- the nature of recruitment and employment policies for social work;
- what and whose knowledge social work should be informed by; (Beresford, 2000)
- who shapes and controls social work and its institutions;
- how it is researched and evaluated and by whom.

These questions apply, of course, to all approaches to and forms of social work and indeed social policy more generally. The democratic model of participation, however, raises them with some intensity because it prioritises the role of service users in all these areas. Its advocates highlight the absence of service users in the past and offer powerful political, moral and practical arguments for their inclusion in social policy formation now. This approach to participation presents a challenge, which social policy as both discipline and practice has yet to address fully and systematically.

However, all approaches to participation still need to be located in two additional contexts. These are the contexts of globalisation and difference.

### **Participation and globalisation**

Globalisation has been described as: the idea that the world has become more integrated, economically, politically and culturally. In economic terms, it refers to the inter-nationalization of production and trade and the increased mobility of capital. Politically this is seen to have placed constraints on national policy making, although it may also lead to new supra-national forms of governance. (Holden, 2000)

The dominant discourse on globalisation presents it as a rationale for accepting that social policies should be subordinated to narrow economic constraints. This discourse, tied initially to the ideology and politics of the New Right, takes as its starting point the freeing of the market from traditional controls and regulation. Social policies which are premised on low tax levels and budget restraint reduce the resources available for social services. Deterministic accounts of globalisation present the state as powerless and therefore imply major constraints on the influence that people can exert through participation in public policy and provision. In fact the state has been a powerful agent of change, playing an important role in the UK, for example, in ‘transmitting the global market discipline throughout the economy, transferring large sums to the private sector through subsidised privatisations and creating an infrastructure for the private sector to trade with through various forms of contracting out. (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996, p48) In the context of participation, the interactions of states with globalisation need to be considered more critically. (Deacon, 1997; Beresford and Holden, 2000) Participation needs to be related to globalisation and globalisation needs to be related to the discourses of welfare service user movements. So far, few attempts have been made to do this, but it is an essential task if the ideas and practice of participation are to be critiqued and developed in social policy with any success. (Beresford and Holden, 2000; Holden and Beresford, 2002)

### **Participation and difference**

Participation implies active involvement in the social sphere and refers to a range of involvements which individuals and groups may have in organisations, institutions and decisions affecting them and others. While participation is generally associated with the public sphere, what is less often discussed, is that it is also affected by people’s circumstances and responsibilities in the personal sphere. These can limit the participation of many groups, notably women and disabled people. The way in which obligations imposed on women as mothers, ‘carers’ and wives/partners inhibit the social spheres of employment and citizenship is well documented (for example, Williams, 1989 and 1997; Lister, 1997). The traditional failure to provide adequate and appropriate support to enable disabled people to live independently and to be included in and integrated into mainstream society on equal terms is equally well established. (for example, Morris, 1993; Oliver, 1996) An approach to participation which does not take account of issues of identity and the operation of such constraints, is likely to mirror dominant discriminations and exclusions. (Mayo, 2000)

Any serious discussion of participation must address and take into account difference and related social divisions and discriminations, which may impose restrictions of the capacity of and

opportunities available to groups to participate in the social sphere. Two components are essential if people to have a realistic chance of participating and all groups are to have equal opportunities to participate. These are access and support. These reflect the need for both the personal and structural conditions for participation. They are set out in detail elsewhere. (Beresford and Croft, 1993; Croft and Beresford, 1993) Both are essential. The concern of welfare service user movements with both personal and political empowerment is consistent with this requirement. Experience indicates that without suitable support only the most confident, well resourced and advantaged people and groups are likely to become involved, while without access, efforts to become involved are likely to be arduous and ineffective. Access include equal access to the political structure at both central and local state levels and to the decision-making process of other organisations and institutions which affect people's lives. Support includes increasing people's expectations and confidence; extending their skills; offering practical support like child care, information, advocacy and transport; enabling people to get together in groups, and ensuring that minority ethnic groups and others facing discrimination can get involved on equal terms.

### **Conclusion: Reconnecting social policy, social work and participation**

This is an important time to explore the role of service user involvement in, and its implications for, social work and social policy. Social policy and participation are both at complex and difficult times in their histories. Both face doubt and uncertainty. Participation is no longer necessarily seen simply as 'a good thing'. Welfare service users no longer receive offers of participation as a gift. There is a growing sense from citizens' and service users' organisations that those inviting participation should either 'put up' or 'shut up'. Low levels of political participation - in terms of turn out for the UK general elections and for local and regional mayoral elections, as well as declining membership of major political parties - suggest broader distrust and disillusion. This is happening even as governments seek to 'modernise' voting systems and increase provisions for political participation. (Ashley, 2002) As for social work, social care and social policy, New Labour's shift to the market has not generally been welcomed by the public. Its whole approach to social policy was based on radical reform, but now New Labour has itself been driven to 'think the unthinkable' and suggest that raising taxation - may be the only way to 'save' the National Health Service. (Elliott and White, 2001)

Both participation and social policy urgently require review. But what is perhaps most important now is for their relationship to be subjected to critical consideration and development.

There is no doubt that there are strong political and organisational pressures to limit the effectiveness of welfare service users' participation; to co-opt and incorporate it. But current developments in the UK suggest that existing ambiguities and contradictions may also offer opportunities. The interventions of the welfare service user movements (rather than the consumerist participation they have been offered) have made a difference. They have resulted in changes in legislation, policy and in some cases even the ideological basis of practice and provision. For example, while both the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Rights Commission (now replaced by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission) have fallen short of the demands of the UK disabled people's movement, they have provided some framework for highlighting and protecting the rights of disabled people. Service users are represented in the new bodies and structures established by government to regulate and monitor social care, like the



Commission for Social Care Inspection and the General Social Care Council. A disability activist was appointed the first Chair of the Social Care Institute for Excellence, which was established with the remit of developing the knowledge base of social care.

In a complex situation of ambiguity and uncertainty, a democratic model of participation does seem to offer the potential for change in social policy. There is now a need for systematic examination of what:

- the pressures for and against such participation in social policy are in the UK and other settings
- policy provisions need to be in place to support it;
- requirements there are for participation to be effective (for example, support for service user organisations, developmental, outreach and capacity building work);
- implications participation may have for the process and focus of social policy as both discipline and practice.

These are issues which the social work and social policy communities must now address seriously. If this is to be done, then it should be in a way which is consistent with the liberatory ethos of participation. Such an initiative should reflect a commitment to real and effective participation in its own construction and operation. This must mean that it is developed in close and equal partnership with user controlled organisations and service user analysts and researchers. Then perhaps people's participation may become a key constituent for transforming social work, instead of, as now, an increasingly suspect and devalued by-way in policy discussion and development. This is a further reason for being clear about what model of participation informs any innovation that is contemplated. This is a particularly timely issue now in the UK, where as has been stated, the government plan is to mainstream personalization both in social care and beyond. If this is to be a truly progressive development, then the model and philosophy of participation underpinning it will need to be one consistent with the empowering and liberatory rhetoric that has predominated. Otherwise there are likely to be real risks of it having very different meanings and ramifications for service users.

## **Note**

\* The term 'service user' and 'welfare service user' is used in this discussion to describe people who receive or are eligible to receive social care, health and welfare services, particularly over a longer period. This embraces people included in a wide range of categories, including mental health service users/survivors, lone parents, people living with HIV/AIDS, children and young people in state 'care' or who are fostered or adopted, disabled people, older people, people living on low income, low wages and/or receiving or entitled to state benefits or tax credits, people with learning difficulties, people with addictions to alcohol and proscribed drugs, etc.. People may receive welfare and social care services voluntarily or involuntarily. The term 'service users' is problematic, because it conceives of people primarily in terms of their use of services, which may well not be how they would define themselves. However, there is no other umbrella term which can helpfully be used to include all these overlapping groups. For example, some may include themselves as and be included as disabled, but others would not. Therefore the term 'service user' is used here, recognising its inadequacies, as a shorthand to describe the subjects of welfare and social care, without seeking to impose any other meanings or interpretations upon it or them.

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