

Branches blog – Christian Kerr, North East branch chair

‘Radical social work’ is a term often used but perhaps not always well understood. Often, it’s used in ways that suggest something ‘we used to do’, frequently accompanied by a clichéd vision of political activism as an exercise in mere placard-waving. Certainly, as this [useful and accessible guide](#) states, radical social work has existed since the days of the settlement movement and has taken the form of feminist and anti-racist social work which have shaped the profession – for the better in my view – since the 1970s. The article summarises radical social work as:

‘... a broad approach that connects theory and practice. It is an important analytical tool which helps us work on present situations, while retaining a focus on the structural issues that affect our cases. In this sense, radical social workers borrow various methodological techniques such as group work, arts-based interventions, advocacy, awareness raising and social action.’ (Ioakimidis 2016)

At the BASW North East branch, a frequent question asked is, ‘What is radical social work in the contemporary context?’ With that in mind, it is interesting - indeed necessary - for social workers to view the use of the word ‘radical’ in social work in recent years through the lens of critical reflection. Often ‘radical’ has been used by people with power and influence over the profession to denote something new and ‘innovative’, or to suggest sweeping transformation, or a fundamental reframing of the way we think about something. Some would argue – as I would – that this constitutes deliberate co-option by powerful elites in order to redefine and reframe what ‘radical’ means in the context of contemporary social work.

Ioakimidis’ (2016) piece states that ‘radical social work has earned its recognition through an ability to grasp and utilise the transformative political power of the people we work with’. But what does that mean to the practitioner struggling to conceive of ways to affect change at structural level when increasingly pressed to attend to the individual concerns of people?

Here are two examples of from my own practice, pre- and post-qualification as a social worker.

I was once a community mental health worker in a community mental health resource centre, at which I facilitated a weekly music group. The people involved in that group found strength and confidence in the collective, creative voice. Through that they were better able to advocate for themselves, and I, having gotten to know them better through this shared activity, better able to advocate for them. At a structural level, the resource centre was increasingly threatened through cuts to the local authority's budgets. The music group attracted grant funding and, by its very existence, contributed to a sense of shared purpose, lending weight to the argument that the service had value to the community and helped prevent people becoming unwell and therefore needing more specialist support, and therefore should be kept.

More recently, as a social worker with adults, I have used the Mental Capacity Act alongside [Article 12](#) of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities ('equal recognition before law') to address oppressive, choice limiting processes in respect of people's care and support experiences and options. In short, Article 12-informed social work practice guides us in supporting and upholding the person's will and preference, however expressed, whether the person 'has mental capacity' or not. What more powerful tool for practitioners to wield –radically and anti-oppressively - for the benefit of those we hope and aim to support than the law that underpins our work and the rights which they enshrine and which frame them?

These are, admittedly, small victories in the face of often overwhelming structural oppression. But what is social work but an interconnected series of smaller, incremental victories that amount to something bigger, and of which social work and social workers are just parts, albeit often crucial ones? We all play our parts in our own ways and we *can and do* influence the bigger picture in doing so. Grand gestures and sweeping plans have their parts to play but it is we – social workers with, and for, the people we hope and aim to support – that bring these things to life. Let your practice be your placard.

'I am because we are.'

Ubuntu!